

The legacy of those murdered deserves our support – The Jewish Museum in Prague in the pandemic

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<https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66881400-dedictvi-po-zavrazdenych-si-zaslouzi-podporu-zidovske-muzeum-v-praze-v-case-pandemie>

Since 15 March of last year, the Jewish Museum in Prague (JMP) has been forced to remain closed intermittently for 151 days. Its last receipts were received last December – CZK 41,000 (USD 1,925). In December of 2019, its income amounted to CZK 15,248,000 (USD 715,869). Compared to 2019, the JMP's visitor numbers decreased by 81.37% last year, and its receipts from ticket sales were down by 84.09%. A larger decline was only prevented by the fact that January and February 2019 did not differ from previous years in terms of income.

The JMP is thus one of the many institutions to have suffered from a dramatic decline in tourism in the Czech Republic as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

An unauthorized applicant

I welcome the fact that the state's "Antivirus" programme partially compensates the salaries of those who, as a result of government measures, are unable to carry out their work. For 2020, the amount of compensation provided to the JMP amounted to approximately 3% of its total annual costs. Apart from a contribution of CZK 344,570 (USD 16,177) made by the Ministry of Culture last November as part of a programme to mitigate operating losses due to the pandemic – for which we are of course grateful – there has, however, been no further support.

Under the given conditions, the JMP was not an eligible applicant for the "Covid Culture I/II" programmes, and more recently it is not eligible for the "Covid Culture III" programme either. The JMP has also remained ineligible for the "Covid Rent" (Calls I/II/III) and "Covid Gastro" programmes, even though the last call explicitly provides for museums. Furthermore, the JMP was not included in the Ministry of Culture's "Sustainability Programme for Museums Founded by Non-State Actors".

The reason? There are several explanatory factors, each with a different reference point. The JMP is closely associated with its landlord, although this was no obstacle when applying for a previous subsidy programme. Another programme was specifically intended only for one-off performing arts events that had to be cancelled or postponed. At other times, the JMP has been excluded in advance. This is despite the fact that, as a cultural institution, it operates under the Act on the Protection of Museum Collections. The JMP does so, however, as an interest association of legal persons, which is an inadmissible legal entity under the terms of the call. The fact that the Ministry of Culture, together with the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, is one of the two founders of this association does not change anything. Moreover, the JMP cannot claim support from the state budget, as it was not established by the state or by a local authority.

A unique memory institution

The JMP's *a priori* exclusion from the most substantial government support is unfair. This is all the more so as the JMP's collections – which are internationally unique in terms of their scope and profile – are listed in the Ministry of Culture's Central Register of Collections, for which there are a number of internal and public responsibilities. What's more, its collections contain 13 items that have been declared cultural heritage assets. The JMP is also required by

special laws to carry out numerous activities relating to archival work and librarianship, both internally and externally. Every year it has to submit, among other things, a research and development report to the Czech Statistical Office. It is also required to provide the Ministry of Culture with a specific report on its annual activities. Furthermore, the JMP is mandated by the Ministry of Justice to provide expertise within its area of activity.

From the above, it is clear that the JMP is not a marginal cultural institution. Moreover, it has five permanent exhibitions, a gallery, and a number of specialized depositories that require special modes of operation and protective measures. The JMP is also a respected research institution that collaborates with dozens of other organizations in the Czech Republic and abroad. Among other publications, it publishes the impacted journal *Judaica Bohemiae*, which is included in prestigious international citation databases. The JMP organizes broad-ranging lectures and cultural events in Prague and in Brno, where it also has an office. It has remained a major partner to schools in connection with providing education against racism and xenophobia. Last but not least, its members of staff represent the Czech Republic in international organizations and in various specialized forums and discussion groups.

Given the nature and scope of its activities, there is no doubt that the JMP is one of our most important memory institutions, unique even on a global scale. Under normal circumstances, it attracts between 600,000 and 700,000 visitors each year, mostly from other countries. As such, the results of its activities undoubtedly contribute to the prestige of the Czech Republic. It is appropriate to draw attention to this at a time when it is facing difficulties.

Unfair conditions set by the Ministry of Industry and Trade

I know that, first and foremost, we have to take care of our existence ourselves. We did so during the floods in 2002, when we repaired considerable damage without any outside support. The current crisis, however, is not a one-off, and we have also responded responsibly to it: last spring, we immediately revised our budget, curtailed our activities, made organizational changes, and reduced staff numbers. The salaries of all remaining staff fell significantly year on year. Internal cost-cutting has its limits, however, if the JMP is not to give up on the unique potential of its expert staff, its historical mission, and the fulfilment of its legal obligations.

I hope that all those affected by the pandemic receive the broadest possible support from the state. However, it is difficult to come to terms with the glaring inequality regarding this support, especially from the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Why did it launch its “Covid Rent” and “Covid Gastro” programmes only for those who have a registered business license? The conditions set out in this way specifically exclude entities whose main activity pursuant to their founding documents is not a business venture. This is despite the fact that such organizations, including the JMP, are also impacted by the government’s restrictive regulations; they have had to close down their operations while still having to pay rent, no less than those who are included in the business register. Moreover, business tax and natural person tax on income from operating activities are basically the same, except for some minor differences. Since its denationalization, the JMP has paid almost CZK 233 million (USD 11 million) in taxes. Despite this, and unlike business entities, it is excluded from support aimed at mitigating the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the given circumstances, the JMP is limiting its operations and is able to meet its liabilities only on account of its long-term resources that have been put aside for future projects. Any further development of the JMP’s activities is now a long way off. It is clear that, given the current state of the pandemic, the JMP will ultimately have no resources left to

draw upon. The JMP was founded in 1906 and currently has more than a hundred employees. Should it now end up in insolvency?

Critical impact on the entire Jewish community

The current dire situation facing the JMP has another downside. The fact that the JMP is still able to fulfil its legal obligations and its staff commitments is also on account of the generous rent discounts provided by the Jewish Community of Prague. As a result of reduced rental income, however, the local Jewish community is now significantly lacking funds for financing its social care facility for Shoah survivors (currently 62 clients) and for financing a local Jewish school, which is the only one of its kind to have been established in the Czech Republic since the Second World War. The Prague Jewish Community and the U.S.-based Ronald S. Lauder Foundation both contribute to the funding of the school, which is named after Mr. Lauder. If the Jewish community is unable to meet its financial commitments to the school, however, it is inconceivable that the school – which has almost 390 pupils and students – will be able to continue in operation. Furthermore, due to the current situation, the JMP can no longer provide sufficient care for the Jewish cultural heritage in the Czech Republic, as it did in previous years in cooperation with the Federation of Jewish Communities. As a consequence, the JMP's formidable drop in income has a severe impact on the entire Jewish community in our country and poses a serious threat to its future.

The items in the JMP's collections are, for the most part, tragically unique in that they are all we have to remember the Czech Jews who perished during the Second World War. At the end of January, on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, we heard clear words from leading political figures about the need to protect the memory of the murdered Jews of the Czech lands, and about the need to do everything possible to ensure that the atrocities committed against them do not fade into oblivion.

I would like to believe that the Czech Republic will not allow the memory of these innocent victims and their legacy – which is cared for by the Jewish Museum in Prague – to become a thing of the past.

Leo Pavlát

Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague