

Prague, 10 January 2018

## Press release

# Missing Rare Print Returns to the Jewish Museum in Prague

The Jewish Museum in Prague and the NYC based auction house Kestenbaum & Co. are pleased to announce that measures taken jointly by the museum and the auctioneers led to the successful restitution of a rare print dating from 16th century which had been missing from the library collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

On Tuesday, January 16, 2017 at 3 p.m. in the Auditorium of the Education and Culture Centre of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Maiselova Street 15, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, a restitution ceremony will take place. Mr. Daniel E. Kestenbaum of Kestenbaum & Company, a specialist auction house based in New York City specializing in the sale of Western and Oriental books, manuscripts and fine Judaica, will return to Mr. Leo Pavlat, Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, a rare book printed almost 500 years ago belonging to the Jewish Community of Prague.

The book had previously been in the possession of Professor Ze'ev Ben-Haim, President of the Academy of the Hebrew Language and winner of the Israel Prize, and after him of a younger Israeli scholar who wishes to remain anonymous.

The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) are assisting the restitution. Dr. Wesley A. Fisher, Head of Claims Conference-WJRO Looted Art stated, "Facilitating restitution on Judaica plundered during the Holocaust is a priority for the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (the Claims Conference) and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO). Where institutions such as the Jewish Museum in Prague and the Jewish Community of Prague existed before World War II and then immediately after the Shoah, items that were plundered from them should be returned to them. Items that were plundered from communities and institutions that ceased to exist after the Shoah – the heirless property handled by Jewish Cultural Reconstruction – are a different matter, and their fate may be subject to discussion. But the restitution to the Jewish Museum in Prague that has been brokered by Mr. Kestenbaum is a praiseworthy act by him and by the consignor of the book."

## Description of the print

BALMES, ABRAHAM DE: *Mikneh Avram-Peculium Abrae*. Venice: Daniel Bomberg, 1523. First edition. (Call. no. JMP 2.634)

Abraham ben Meir de Balmes (c. 1460–1523) was a Jewish physician, grammarian, philosopher and translator from Lecce, southern Italy. Towards the end of his life he served as a physician to cardinal Domenico Grimani of Venice. De Balmes translated numerous Hebrew works on philosophy and astronomy into Latin, earning himself a following of Christian pupils. He also compiled a book on Hebrew grammar in which he attempted a philosophical analysis of the construction of the Hebrew language and discussed syntax as a special element of grammar. The book was published in Hebrew and Latin under the title *Mikneh Avram–Peculium Abrae* by the printer Daniel Bomberg in Venice in 1523.

## **Provenance**

- Library of the Prague Jewish Community (Library reference number 2.634 and the stamp of the Library are on the title page as well as the opening blank pages of the book)
- Ze'ev Ben-Haim, subsequently a possessor of the book (his ex libris and signature are on the opening blank pages of the book), was born in Mościska, Galicia in 1907 in what was then Austria-Hungary, was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau in 1933 before immigrating at the end of that year to Palestine. In Israel he had an illustrious career as a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and subsequently President of the Academy of Hebrew Language, and was awarded both the Israel Prize and the Rothschild Prize for Jewish Studies. It is not known whether Professor Ben-Haim brought the book with him to Israel in 1933 or acquired it later.
- After Professor Ben-Haim's death in 2013 at the age of 105, the book was purchased by a younger Israeli scholar who wishes to remain anonymous. This scholar subsequently consigned the book to Kestenbaum & Company to be sold at auction.
- Kestenbaum & Company listed the book to be auctioned on March 16, 2017 as Lot 60. The Jewish Museum in Prague saw that the book had come from the pre-war Library of the Prague Jewish Community, which it had acquired following the Holocaust, and claimed the book as its own.
- Kestenbaum & Company withdrew the book from the auction and reached agreement with the consignor, the young Israeli scholar, to reconstitute the book to the Jewish Museum in Prague.

## **Identification of the book as belonging to the Jewish Museum in Prague**

A museum librarian spotted the lot in the online catalogue of the auction house Kestenbaum & Company during a routine check before the auction. Lot 60 was subsequently identified as a missing item from the original collection of the Prague Jewish Community's library, part of the historical book collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague. Photos accompanying Lot 60 in the online catalogue showed the German stamp of the Prague Jewish Community's library (Prager Israelitische Cultus-gemeinde Bibliothek, see below) and the library's call number 2.634, both clear indications of the origin of the item which were verified by cross-checking against entries in the preserved pre-WWII catalogues by the librarian at the time Tobias Jakobovits.

## **Agreement on the restitution of the rare print**

The Jewish Museum in Prague contacted the auction house Kestenbaum & Company immediately with an urgent plea for the withdrawal of the print in question from the scheduled auction and its restitution to the museum. Mr. Daniel E. Kestenbaum responded promptly and withdrew the item from auction, assuring the museum of his co-operation over the matter. In the weeks that followed, he negotiated with the consignor of the print, reaching an agreement on repatriating the print to the Jewish Museum in Prague. Mr. Kestenbaum has kindly proposed to repatriate the print personally in January 2018, demonstrating that returning, where possible, to the appropriate parties, looted cultural heritage, is a matter of importance to him personally and to Kestenbaum & Company as a whole. The Jewish Museum in Prague greatly appreciates the helpful approach taken by Kestenbaum & Company.

## **Looted Jewish cultural heritage**

Considering the historical circumstances under which the Jewish Museum's collections came into being – nearly all of the movable cultural property of Jewish communities, associations and corporations in what was then the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was shipped to the museum between 1942 and 1945 – it is likely that pieces of Judaica of Bohemian provenance that are currently available in the current art market may actually be missing items that rightfully belong to the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic as the only legal successor to all no longer existing Jewish entities in the territory of today's Czech Republic, which is represented by the Jewish Museum in Prague. Anyone who owns or is considering to purchase a piece of Judaica from Bohemia or Moravia, or who is to receive such an item as a gift or bequest, should therefore be very cautious and ensure through all possible means that the item in question is not missing from one of the Jewish Museum's collections. The Jewish Museum in Prague is willing, free of charge, to check the provenance of any piece of Judaica originating from Bohemia or Moravia. This will relieve any prospective vendor or buyer of unnecessary worries and risks.

**Photographs for download:**

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=10sNyqbcTFmn\\_6pJL-RXjVY4tEFBIOGdz](https://drive.google.com/open?id=10sNyqbcTFmn_6pJL-RXjVY4tEFBIOGdz)

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