

TORAH SHIELD THAT WAS TO HAVE BEEN SOLD AT SOTHEBY'S IS RETURNED TO THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE

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The item in question is a rare silver Torah shield that was stolen in the post-war period and subsequently exported from the former Czechoslovakia. The Jewish Museum in Prague identified the missing item in the Sotheby's New York Auction Catalogue. It has now been returned to the museum's collections.

The shield was made as part of a pair of very similar items commissioned by Leopold and Rosalie Schmolka in 1886. It was donated to the synagogue in the small town of Dolní Kralovice in Central Bohemia, which was probably built on the site of an earlier building dating from 1717.

The donors of the shield came from the nearby village of Zahrádka, where a Jewish settlement was established in the 17th century. Zahrádka had fewer than a thousand inhabitants, but had an interesting history. The parish priest Josef Toufar was active there in the 1940s. The local Jewish inhabitants were members of the Jewish religious community of Dolní Kralovice.

Jaroslav Kuntoš, the curator of the Jewish Museum's collection of metal and three-dimensional objects, said: "Leopold Schmolka is referred to in some sources as *Kaufmann* (merchant) and elsewhere as *Getreidehändler* (grain merchant), so his family was probably wealthy enough to make gifts to the synagogue. The exact purpose of the donation cannot be ascertained from the dedicatory inscription, but such gifts were usually made on the occasion of an important family event. In this case, it may have been to commemorate the birth of the donors' grandson Zdeněk Schmolka".

The shield was saved from loss or destruction by being placed in the collection of the Prague Central Jewish Museum (the present-day Jewish Museum in Prague) in early December 1942, along with other items from the synagogue in Dolní Kralovice. Between 1942 and 1945, the Jewish Museum (founded in 1906) operated under the name "Central Jewish Museum" as a special project that the Nazis intended to exploit as part of their propaganda.

Working with great commitment, the Jewish curators at the museum during the war took advantage of this extraordinary opportunity to save a considerable amount of Judaica from the entire Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In the early post-war years, as part of the restoration of some of the pre-war Jewish communities, the museum provided the Torah shield to an unspecified synagogue for ceremonial use. For a long time, however, there was no trace of the object. It was only discovered at the end of last year – on the international auction market.



The area from which the Torah shield came also suffered a dramatic fate. In 1963 the decision was made to build the Švihov Dam (Želivka Reservoir) there. As a result, the old town of Dolní Kralovice, including the Jewish cemetery, was gradually flooded to make way for the dam's construction. The synagogue building, which at the time was being used by the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, was demolished in 1969 prior to the flooding. Present-day Dolní Kralovice is located to the south-east of the original town and dates from the 1970s. The village of Zahrádka also disappeared under the water, with only the church and the cemetery remaining on the bank.

The Jewish Museum in Prague identified the Torah shield when it was put on sale at a Sotheby's auction of items from the prestigious Halpern Judaica Collection (<https://www.sothebys.com/en/series/the-halpern-judaica-collection-tradition-and-treasure>) at the beginning of December last year. As in similar cases in the past, the museum contacted the auction house with a request to withdraw the item in question from sale and to return it to the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic – the sole legitimate owner of stolen, and mostly illegally exported, ceremonial objects from the property of defunct Jewish communities in what is now the Czech Republic. Pavla Niklová, the director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, said the following: "This is another case of exemplary cooperation with Sotheby's Auction House and with the current possessor of Judaica that has been identified in this way. Sotheby's has cooperated with our museum from the very outset, as it has in the past when dealing with other cases. Many thanks are also due to the owners of the auctioned collection for not hesitating to do the right thing and for returning the object to where it truly belongs – to the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague."

Torah shield

The Torah shield, or Torah breastplate, is one of the adornments of the Torah scroll. It is hung by a chain from the protruding staves (wooden rollers) of the scroll. The Torah is the foundation of Judaism; in its physical form as a hand-written parchment scroll, it is treated with the utmost reverence, which involves both protection and decoration. The present form of the shield evolved from the practical need to indicate the passage to which the unfurled scroll is turned. A plaque hung in front of the scroll was used for this purpose, later becoming a purely decorative feature.

The shield that has just been returned to the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague was probably crafted in a Prague silversmith's workshop. The purity of the silver is 800/1000. Judging by the date in the dedicatory inscription, it was made in, or shortly before, 1886.

Somewhat unusually, the shield is decorated with the figures of Moses and the high priest Aaron holding the central tablets of the Ten Commandments. This motif was relatively rare for the period in which the shield was made; it appears more frequently on earlier shields from Silesia and Moravia. Also of interest are the very small dimensions of the shield, which was probably due to an attempt to save precious metal rather than to adapt the shield to the size of the Torah scroll.

Media contact:

Michaela Klofcová, communications manager

michaela.klofcova@jewishmuseum.cz +420 734 775 044

Židovské muzeum v Praze – Jewish Museum in Prague

U staré školy 141/1, 110 00 Praha 1, Česká republika

Tel./Phone: (420) 222 749 211

E-mail: office@jewishmuseum.cz

www.jewishmuseum.cz

