

Restitutions of missing items from the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague

The preservation and development of the collections at the Jewish Museum in Prague is an absolute exception in the context of the devastation of the Jewish culture in the Shoah and the Second World War. Elsewhere in Europe, the vast majority of Judaica from the property of decimated Jewish communities, associations and educational/cultural institutions became targets of mass looting, after which their provenance history was almost completely lost. In Prague, however, the representatives of the local Jewish community – in collaboration with art history and Jewish studies experts – managed to save most of the movable assets of the disbanded Jewish communities, congregations and associations in what was then the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia by having them shipped to the Jewish Museum in Prague and gradually incorporated into its collections. Although the entire project of the so-called “Central Jewish Museum” was under the strict supervision of the SS-Central Office for the Settlement of the Jewish Question and was tolerated by the Nazi authorities solely for material and propaganda reasons, it very quickly became an effective rescue mission as conceived by the community staff and, above all, by the members of the museum’s curatorial team. It is thanks to the efforts of these people – most of whom did not manage to survive – that a central collecting point was already set up during the war, similar to the ones that were later established by the Allies in the occupied zones of Germany immediately after the war. Unlike many of the European objects of Judaica that were collected, for example, in the Offenbach Archival Depot (one of the central collecting points for the temporary storage of cultural objects that had been looted by the Nazis and subsequently recovered by the Allies), however, tens of thousands of Bohemian and Moravian Judaica that had been saved during the war at the Central Jewish Museum in Prague were precisely documented and catalogued – their provenance was known and, due to the systematic nature of the wartime shipments of these objects, they in fact never ceased to be part of the organic wholes to which they naturally belonged.

The Council of Jewish Religious Communities – later renamed the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic – became the legal successor of the disbanded Jewish communities, congregations and associations. In the first post-war years (1945–1948), this body provided objects of Judaica on loan to Jewish religious communities that had been reestablished after the war. A number of these communities, however, later disbanded again, and most of the ritual objects that had been loaned were not returned to the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague. This has led to the present situation where objects of Judaica are now appearing for sale on the art market, mostly devoid of context and provenance history. These objects provide unique evidence of the existence of the once-flourishing Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia that were decimated during the Shoah. In connection with the increasing number of attempts at dealing in these objects, 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, will be provided with a free consultation by the Jewish Museum in Prague, which will check to see whether or not the item in question comes from its collection.

Successful restitutions from the recent years

January 2016 – Pinkas of Gaya Returns to Prague

Measures taken by the Israeli Police, the Czech Police and Interpol led to the successful completion of the process of returning a fragment of a rare Hebrew manuscript – the Pinkas of the Kyjov/Gaya Jewish Community, dating from 1654-1854, which was stolen from the archive

collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague on the 30th of January 2007. The fragment of the rare manuscript was personally handed over to the museum's director Mr Leo Pavlát by the Czech ambassador to the State of Israel Mr Ivo Schwarz. Pinkas (also called Pinkas ha-kehilot, pl. Pinkasei ha-kehilot) is a Hebrew term for a handwritten volume with information on Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Europe. Such community books usually contain official records and are an irreplaceable source for the study of individual Jewish communities and their demographic development. In its entirety, the Pinkas in question is a unique source of information on the development and life of the Jewish community in Kyjov/Gaya and its environs in the two hundred-year period between 1654 and 1854. For this reason, its value is incalculable. More information at https://c.jewishmuseum.cz/files/documents/TZ/PR_PinkasofGayareturnstoPrague_22012016.pdf

May 2015 - The Jewish Museum in Prague retrieves a 1901 Torah Mantle

In spring 2015, the museum managed to trace another object that earlier disappeared from its collections – a Torah mantle from 1901, which came to the museum in a shipment of ritual objects from the Jewish religious community of Holešov during the Second World War. Made of red velvet and cream silk atlas, adorned with paillettes and embellished with embroidery in gold metal thread, the item was identified as being offered for sale by the Kedem Auction House in Jerusalem in January 2015. As is customary in such cases, the Jewish Museum in Prague immediately asked the auction house to withdraw the item from sale while providing historical documents that prove its provenance and outline what may have happened to it: either it was taken out of the museum's collections under unclear yet undoubtedly illegal circumstances after the war, or – more likely – it was illegally taken out of the former Czechoslovakia from one of the Jewish communities that had borrowed ritual objects from the Jewish Museum after the war. The person selling the item was informed of the museum's claim by the auction house and, on the basis of personal negotiations, finally agreed to return the item to its rightful place at the Jewish Museum, from where it had been missing for decades. More information at https://c.jewishmuseum.cz/files/documents/TZ/PR_Torahmantle.pdf

March 2014 - A Missing Item of Czech Judaica Is Returned from the U.S.A.

In spring 2014, the Jewish Museum in Prague and the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic obtained the restitution of a missing Jewish ritual object of Czech origin located in the United States. The Torah Ark curtain resurfaced in April 2013 in connection with a Judaica auction at Sotheby's in New York. After nearly sixty years, it returned home to the Czech Republic. This silk and velvet brocade curtain, donated to the Jewish community by Moses and Chayele Lifschitz in 1855, came to the Prague Jewish Museum in 1943 from Mladá Vožice in South Bohemia, which was annihilated during World War II. The curtain was catalogued and deposited at the Jewish Museum along with other objects from similarly destroyed communities. After it went missing in 1956, the curtain resurfaced in a Judaica auction scheduled at Sotheby's in April 2013. After the curtain was identified by the museum's curators and subsequently withdrawn from the auction, the Czech Jewish community reached an agreement with the consignor for its restitution and return to Prague. The restitution of the Torah Ark curtain from Mladá Vožice was the first successful repatriation to the Czech Jewish community from abroad. More information at https://c.jewishmuseum.cz/files/documents/TZ/PR_Curtain_JMPandFJC_26032014.pdf

A case that remains open - *Kizur ma'avar Yabbok*

In September 2010, the Jewish Museum in Prague received an email from a private possessor who wanted to learn more about the value of an illuminated Hebrew manuscript that, as he claimed, was a family heirloom. The email contained photos of lavishly illuminated folios, which upon examination by the Museum's curator of Manuscripts and Rare Prints Collection turned out to have once been a treasured manuscript belonging to the *chevra kadisha* (burial society) of the Jewish Community in Nikolsburg (Mikulov). It had been published several times during the prewar

period as one of the most important manuscripts of the Nikolsburg community and one of the more interesting examples of the so-called Moravian school of Hebrew illumination.

According to the possessor's personal account, the manuscript belonged to a rabbi, one Albert Schön, who happened to be the brother-in-law of the possessor's grandmother, a Holocaust survivor originally from a small village in Moravia, however, the story researched by the Museum's specialists is much more accurate and provides many more important details. The manuscript originated in the Jewish Community of Nikolsburg, where it was written in 1748 by the Community's scribe and illuminator Shmuel Dreznitz

Conceived for the chevra kaddisha of the Nikolsburg Community and financed by community members, the manuscript was from the very outset communal property. As such, it was held by the Community and, when no longer in use, it was consigned to the Community's treasury (a small museum dedicated to the Community's history, containing the most precious objects it owned). When the Central Jewish Museum for Moravia and Silesia (CJMMS) was established in 1935 and opened its doors to the public for the first time in May 1936, the manuscript was transferred to its collection on a long-term loan, yet still the exclusive property of the Nikolsburg Community. In May 1938, only two months after the Anschluss of Austria, the situation on the Czechoslovak-Austrian border worsened to such extent that it was decided to evacuate the valuable CJMMS collection. It was carefully packed up and taken to the Jewish Community in Brno, where it was stored until transferred to Prague in late April 1942. This time between May 1938 and March 1942 must have been when Rabbi Albert Schön took possession of the *Kitzur ma'avar Yabbok* manuscript. We will never know why he did so and why he would select precisely this book and not any other volume or object from the Nikolsburg collection. The only thing that can be said for certain is that he did this deliberately and without having any right, much less legal title, to do so. Whether he had the manuscript on him when deported to the Terezín ghetto with his young wife and his parents in March 1942, or whether he gave it to someone for safekeeping prior to being deported remains unclear. It is also certain that the manuscript was somehow preserved and given to Rabbi Schön's sister-in-law, one of the few surviving members of the entire extended family, after she repatriated back to Czechoslovakia in 1945.

Despite the fact that the manuscript's pages make clear that it was the exclusive property of the chevra kaddisha of Nikolsburg, the new possessor never attempted to return it to the rightful owners. Instead, she kept it the entire time until the moment she and her family emigrated to the United States in or shortly after 1968. Based on all available evidence, the manuscript was illegally taken out of Czechoslovakia, and we can only assume that when it was brought into the United States it went undeclared as well. The manuscript was kept by its possessor, and after her death her children and grandchildren attempted to sell it via Sotheby's New York a short time after they got in touch with the Jewish Museum in Prague in September 2010. Since then the Federation of Jewish Communities, the exclusive legal successor to all abolished Jewish communities in present-day Czech Republic, jointly with the Jewish Museum in Prague have made efforts to get the manuscript restituted to the collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague.