

# Rescue / Ransom / Restitution: The Struggle to Preserve the Collective Memory of Bohemian and Moravian Jews<sup>1</sup>

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It is well known that the Jewish Museum in Prague houses one of the largest collections of Judaica in the world, making it a primary tourist destination in the UNESCO-listed historical center of Prague. Yet in addition to the riches in its depositories and the integrity of its historical sites, the Museum also represents an unparalleled example of Jewish defiance against Nazi genocide and cultural plunder. This bold initiative, organized long before the Monuments Men set their feet on European soil, became one of the most successful self-help rescue missions to preserve an endangered cultural heritage and perhaps the only mission of this kind and scale organized by a Jewish community facing imminent liquidation.

In today's discourse on finding just and fair solutions to lingering problems from the systematic cultural plunder during the period of the Shoah and WWII, museums and other memory institutions are often portrayed in a rather unflattering light. They are viewed by some as receptacles of objects deprived of their broader historical, social, and cultural context (including ownership history), by others as safe havens for cultural assets with gaps in provenance that occasionally engage in loot laundering through their permissive acquisition policies, and by many as treasuries whose staff and boards of directors jealously protect what they call the "integrity of collections" by purposefully overlooking or concealing provenance clues and records that could shed more light on where the objects came from and if they should be returned to their rightful owners.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an alternative look at a museum as an institution that rather than blurring the truth by providing insufficiently researched or highly selective narratives, helps to keep memory alive and actively seeks to fill gaps by reestablishing long-lost connections. In order to do so, I would like to use the exceptional example of the Prague Jewish Museum that, since its inception, has played a pivotal role in

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was presented at the international conference *From Refugees to Restitution: The History of Nazi-Looted Art in the UK in Transnational Perspective* held at University of Cambridge (Newham College, Cambridge, U.K., March 23-24, 2017).

preserving the identity of Bohemian and Moravian Jews notwithstanding the cultural countercurrents of the liberalized, industrial society at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, more importantly, notwithstanding the threats of two totalitarian regimes: the Nazi genocide and the subsequent Communist rule.

In the following presentation, I would like to focus on two closely interconnected aspects of collecting efforts and its results: (1) collecting as a strategy to prevent material losses and (2) collection as a material substrate indispensable for the preservation of collective identity of a nearly decimated and dispersed ethnic group. As to the “triple R” in the title of my paper, I should add that whereas the first “R” implies rescue at the cost of ransoming material legacy with physical lives, the latter represents a reconstitution of the past for the sake of the future in which ransoming is replaced by restitution. In more specific terms, I will first briefly outline the original motives for establishing the Prague Judaica collection and the process of how historical circumstances shaped the further development of curatorial work, including the most dramatic period of the five strenuous years under Nazi occupation and the subsequent years of postwar reconstruction of Jewish life in what was then Czechoslovakia. Believing in the power of examples as the best form of illustration, I will conclude with a brief description of a restitution claim that was jointly filed by the Jewish Museum in Prague and the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic against a private possessor in the United States nearly six and a half years ago and which remains unresolved to date.

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Despite having been described in several publications,<sup>2</sup> to this day the prewar history of the Prague Jewish Museum remains a relatively little known chapter in the otherwise famous narrative of the world’s third oldest Jewish Museum after Vienna (1895) and New

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<sup>2</sup> An attempt to reconstruct the original collection of the prewar Jewish Museum in Prague (JMP) was undertaken by the museum’s chief registrar Magda Veselská in an exhibition *Bestii navzdory / Defying the Beast* (JMP, Robert Guttmann Gallery, 2006). The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with a detailed historical survey of the Museum’s history from its founding to the first months of the Nazi-proclaimed Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia: Veselská, Magda (ed.), *Defying the Beast: The Jewish Museum in Prague 1906-1940*, Prague: The Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006. The prewar history of the JMP is further discussed in the following publications (in chronological order): Volavková, Hana: *A Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague*, Prague: Artia, 1968; Veselská, Magda: “Jewish Museums in the Former Czechoslovakia” in: Cohen, Julie-Marthe and Heimann-Jelinek, Felicitas (ed.), *Neglected Witnesses: The Fate of Jewish Ceremonial Objects During the Second World War and After*, Amsterdam: Jewish Historical Museum, 2011, pp. 103-128; Veselská, Magda: *Archa paměti: Cesta pražského židovského muzea pohnutým 20. stoletím*, Praha: Academia, 2012.

York (1904). Without going into too much detail, however interesting, for the sake of this presentation I would only like to mention that by the end of the 1930s the Prague Jewish Museum's collection reached a size of approximately 800 objects, the majority of which were received as a donation or purchased from private sources, either individual members of important Jewish families or congregations, mostly from Prague.

The situation changed dramatically during the Nazi occupation, especially in the period of the so-called Central Jewish Museum (CJM, August 1942 – May 1945).<sup>3</sup> During this time, the number of objects in the collection increased from the original fewer than 1,000 to approximately 40,000.<sup>4</sup> From the outset the CJM operated under the strict supervision of the *Zentralamt für Regelung der Judenfrage* (Central Office for the Regulation of the Jewish Question)<sup>5</sup>, though it was formally administered by the Prague Jewish Community (PJC).<sup>6</sup> It was the Community's staff that drafted the comprehensive plans for the CJM as “a repository for the assets of all Jewish communities in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (such as liturgical objects, books, and archival documents), so that these could be kept safe throughout the war while their owners and users were being deported to Terezín.”<sup>7</sup> The Central Office approved this plan, leaving its implementation entirely to the PJC, which entrusted the task to the former Community's chief librarian, Dr. Tobias Jakobovits (1887-1944). Under his leadership, a team of experts, which included the former director of the Museum of Eastern Slovakia in Košice and founder of the Jewish Museum in Prešov, Dr. Josef Polák (1886-1945), founder of the Prague Jewish Museum, Dr. Hugo Salomon Lieben (1881-1942), curator of the Central Jewish Museum for Moravia and Silesia (CJMMS) in Mikulov, Dr. Alfred Engel (1881-1944), and Dr. Hana Volavková (1904-

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history of the Prague Jewish Museum during the Second World War (or, as it was called, the Central Jewish Museum), see the publications mentioned in the previous footnote as well as Rupnow, Dirk: *Täter – Gedächtnis – Opfer: Das 'Jüdische Zentralmuseum' in Prag 1942-1945*, Vienna: Picus Verlag, 2000 and Potthast, Jan Björn: *Das jüdische Zentralmuseum der SS in Prag: Gegenforschung und Völkermord im Nazionalsozialismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> This paper deals exclusively with the collection of objects, i.e., textiles, silver and other 3D items, paintings, prints and drawings, sculptures, photography, manuscripts, select old prints and archival documents. It does not take into consideration the extensive library that only became part of the Museum's holdings after the war and whose core comprised the original library of the Prague Jewish Community.

<sup>5</sup> Following the example of its predecessor in Vienna, the office was originally known as the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* (Central Office for Jewish Emigration) and it was only renamed on August 20, 1942.

<sup>6</sup> The Prague Jewish Community was the only one of the original 136 Bohemian and Moravian Jewish religious communities that was left in operation so as to administer the registration and the subsequent liquidation of Jewish-owned property and the deportation of its members. In 1943 it was officially renamed the Jewish Council of Elders, at which point the CJM was called the Central Jewish Museum of the Council of Elders.

<sup>7</sup> Veselská (2011), p. 121

1985), a distinguished art historian who joined the CJM in the spring of 1943, carried out the unparalleled task of rescuing the endangered cultural heritage.

In short order, the first objects from abolished congregations in Prague came into the CJM collection, then followed by the collections of other prewar Jewish museums in Mladá Boleslav (Jung Bunzlau) and the Central Jewish Museum for Moravia and Silesia (CJMMS) in Mikulov (Nikolsburg). While the latter collection had been shipped to Prague even before the CJM was officially established in August 1942, the other shipments from the abolished Jewish communities only started arriving in the fall of 1942. Working long hours and under very uncertain conditions, the team of curators and their colleagues continuously processed the incoming objects, including their photographic documentation, which was handled by the PJC photographic studio. At some point in 1943 there was a major shift in curatorial strategy and the initiative that had been primarily conceived to rescue communal property became an attempt to create a collection that would document the full range of social and cultural history of Jews in the Czech lands, including their most recent tragic experience. It was at this time that the CJM curators also turned their attention to objects confiscated from individual owners deported from Prague and its immediate surroundings. Under the pretext of building a sub-collection of “Degenerate Art,” the curators managed to include (and thereby save) at least a small fraction of paintings, prints, and drawings from private collectors. Likewise, the collection was enriched by other types of objects from private possessions, predominantly those of visual arts and culture, such as family portraits or photo albums. Apart from the fact that these particular objects reclaimed for the collection from the Prague *Treuhandstelle* warehouses documented the evolution of collecting activities, taste, and lifestyle of Jews in the Czech lands throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, inclusion of these artworks and personal ephemera into the CJM collection was also a good opportunity to safeguard these assets until such time when their legitimate owners could reclaim them after the war ended.

Despite this positive outlook that was never entirely suppressed, the reality turned out to be tragically different. It soon became clear after the war that only a fraction of those who had not been fortunate enough to find a refuge either in the Americas, the United Kingdom, Mandatory Palestine, or even on the distant shores of the East China Sea survived the Nazi genocide. The CJM was overflowing with objects that for the most part would never be reclaimed by their original owners, and so the Museum’s new team, led by Hana Volavková, the only surviving specialist who had participated in the CJM project, was confronted with a whole set of new tasks. The most urgent were to secure the

collection, which became virtually abandoned after the last members of the CJM curatorial team had been deported to the Terezín ghetto at the beginning of 1945, to resume the documentation of yet unprocessed objects, and, at the same time, to initiate restitution wherever possible. Within a short three-year period of material scarcity and general chaos, which was, however, also a period of relative freedom that was brought to an end by the Communist takeover in 1948, many objects from the gradually consolidated Prague Jewish Museum were restituted to their original owners or their surviving relatives.<sup>8</sup>

The effort to reconstruct Jewish life in postwar Czechoslovakia also presented new challenges. Given the small number of those who returned from the Nazi death camps and exile (and even a smaller number of those who intended to stay in the country where very little, if anything, had remained from their prewar lives), only a tiny fraction of the original number of Jewish communities could be restored. The Prague Jewish Museum together with the Council of Jewish Communities, the newly established umbrella organization for all the Jewish communities in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, was nevertheless doing their best to ensure that any community wishing to recreate traditional life and renew services in the community's synagogues had everything it needed to do so. Thus, many ceremonial objects and books amassed in the CJM collection during the war were redistributed to communities all across the country. Unfortunately, the reconstruction process was as short-lived as the democracy of the reestablished Republic. Of the original 136 Jewish religious communities on the territory of the historical Czech lands only 53 were renewed in the immediate postwar years, and this number quickly dwindled again due to massive waves of emigration on the heels of the Communist coup of Czechoslovakia and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and, only twenty years later, with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, that tragically brought an abrupt end to the so-called Prague Spring. These events together with the overall political situation in the country, which was overtly hostile toward Jews as well as to anything that Communist authorities and their propaganda viewed as a dangerous

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<sup>8</sup> This first wave of restitution, which preceded the first Restitution Act No. 128/1946 Coll. that only entered into effect on June 17, 1946, was interrupted by the forty-year long Communist rule of Czechoslovakia. It was resumed, however, right after the denationalization of the Jewish Museum in October 1994. Since then, 257 objects have been restituted from the Museum's Visual Arts Collection and five books from the Museum's library were returned to the family of their original owner. Detailed information about resolved restitution claims are available on the Museum's website: <http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/collection-research/provenance-research-restitution/what-has-been-restituted/> The same website contains detailed information concerning the Museum's provenance research and restitution policy, including a summary of the history of the collection and its structure: <http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/collection-research/provenance-research-restitution/>.

deviation from official ideological doctrine, including the interpretation of history, among other things, generated a new phenomenon: the illegal appropriation and exportation of communal cultural assets that were rather opportunistically interpreted as a form of rescue, regardless of the fact that some of the Jewish communities were still in existence, as were the Council of Jewish Communities and the Prague Jewish Museum to whose care these assets should have been returned if they were no longer to be used for ceremonial purposes.

I would now like to turn to one case that could be considered a *pars pro toto* for all restitution claims concerning the lost tangible cultural heritage of the Czech Jewish community, the recovery of which is critical for the preservation of its collective memory and spiritual survival.

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.<sup>9</sup> In postwar period, it was also mentioned in various publications about Nikolsburg and Moravian Hebrew manuscripts, although by then it was referred to as "missing."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Schwarz, Arthur Zacharias: "Nikolsburger hebräische Handschriften," in: *Studies in Jewish Bibliography and Related Subjects in Memoriam of Abraham Salomon Freidus (1867-1923), Late Chief of the Jewish Division, New York Public Library*, New York: The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1929, pp. 170-181. Flesch, Heinrich: "Aus jüdischen Handschriften in Mähren," in: Steinherz, Samuel (ed.): *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Juden in der Cechoslov. Republik*, II. Jahrgang, Prague, 1930, pp. 287-288, Pl. 4. Levy, Ludwig: "Zwei alter jüdische Friedhofsgebräuche," in: Alfred Engel (ed.), *Sefer zikharon le-ptichat ha-muzeon ha-yehudi be-kehilah kadoshah Nikolsburg / Památník Židovského ústředního musea pro Moravsko-Slezsko / Gedenkbuch im Auftrage des Kuratoriums herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Alfred Engel*, Mikulov/Nikolsburg, 1936 (N" S 696), pp. 45-50.

<sup>10</sup> Kahana, Yitzchak Zev: "Takanot ha-chevra kadisha d'k"l Nikolsburg", in: *Sinai: Yarchon le-torah, mada'a ve-sifrut*, Jerusalem: Weiss, 1945, p. 182, note 6. Flinker, D. (ed.), *Arim ve-imahot be-yisrael: matsevet kodesh le-kehilot yisrael she nehrevu biyedei artisim u-tmeim be-milhemet ha-olam ha-acharona*, Jerusalem: Mosad ha-rav Kuk [The Rabbi Kook Institute], 1950, vol. 4, pp. 245 and 309 [2 plates]. Scheiber, Alexander, "Shmuel b"r Zvi Hirsh Dreznitz, sofer ve-ceir mi-Nikolsburg", in: *Asheret*, I, 1958, pp. 254-259 [particularly p. 256 under. No. 6 of the list of works by Dreznitz]. Fishof, Iris: "Signed Work by Samuel Dreznitz at the Israel Museum," in: Dán, Robert: *Occident and Orient: A Tribute to the Memory of Alexander Schreiber*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó / Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988, pp. 133-136.

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, who signed his work in the colophon with the typical formula:

*I am a humble scribe and a painter, son of the deceased scholar MHVR"R [our teacher, master, and rabbi] Zvi Hirsh Dresnitz ZC"L [blessed be the memory of the righteous], a butcher here at the holy community of Nikolsburg.*

The completion of the manuscript with its precious illuminations was financed by several members of the Nikolsburg chevra kadisha whose names appear in the text of a dedication on the title page of the manuscript, which in English translation reads as follows:

*The book of Kizur ma'avar Yabbok [abbreviated version of Crossing the Yabbok] completed on commission by the honorable gabbayim of the DG"H [(chevra kadisha) d'gmilut chasadim = burial society] HT"O MH"R [learned rabbi] Mordechai Lamlish, M [our teacher] Margaliof Yaffe, HR"R [learned rabbi] Hirsh, the son of Gabriel SG"L, HR"R [our rabbi] Simchah Zaks, HR"R [our rabbi] Aharon, the son of Shimon Halitsch and among them also the new gabbai HR"R [our rabbi] David, the son of Sofer SG"L. Written here in the holy community of Nikolsburg in the year of 508 lp"k [according to the small count = 1748; the date appears in an chronogram, a quotation from Isaiah 25:8, that in English translation reads "He will destroy death forever"]. Cum licentia superiorum.*

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, where, considered unique not only for its rare iconography but also for its direct link to the history of the Nikolsburg community, it will be eventually displayed and comparatively studied with other objects of the same provenance as well as the most pertinent archival records.

## **Conclusion**

The Jewish Museum in Prague is a unique example of a memory institution in its truest sense. It literally represents the layers of memory of a community that was nearly wiped out by two totalitarian regimes but nevertheless was capable of rescuing its own material legacy in an irrepressible, defiant belief in its own posterity. It is a place where the integrity of the collection is a moral imperative to its custodians, since almost every single



object represents a life and a name that would be forgotten should the object be lost or divorced from its context.



Abbildung 4.

Flesch, Heinrich: "Aus jüdischen Handschriften in Mähren," in: Steinherz, Samuel (ed.): *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Juden in der Czechoslov. Republik*, II. Jahrgang, Prague, 1930, pp. 287-288, Pl. 4



Schwarz, Arthur Zacharias: "Nikolsburger hebräische Handschriften," in: *Studies in Jewish Bibliography and Related Subjects in Memoriam of Abraham Salomon Freidus (1867-1923), Late Chief of the Jewish Division, New York Public Library, New York: The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1929, pp. 170-181.*