

The Jewish Museum in Prague retrieves a 1901 Torah Mantle



Some long-missing items from the museum collection have been turning up for sale Prague, May 28, 2015 — The Jewish Museum in Prague (JMP) has traced another object that disappeared from its collections, a Torah mantle from 1901, which came to the JMP in a shipment of ritual objects from the Jewish religious community of Holešov during World War II.

The Torah mantle in question, made of red velvet and cream silk atlas, is adorned with paillettes and embellished with embroidery in gold metal thread. The inscription bears the names Hindl and Hayyim Beer, who donated the mantle to a synagogue in or near Holešov in 1901.

This item was being offered for sale by the Kedem Auction House in Jerusalem in January of this year. The Jewish Museum in Prague immediately asked the auction house to withdraw the item from sale while providing historical documents that prove its provenance and outline what may have happened to it.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 museum said in a statement.

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.

It is not known when and how the mantle got to Israel. According to the memoirs of the Israeli collector Dani Schlesinger, who is in possession of the mantle, it has been possible to trace the fate of the mantle only to a limited extent. Its theft and illegal export probably occurred at the end of the 1940s or the start of the 1950s. This rather small inconspicuous textile, which was not likely to have attracted much attention at the time, later turned up in a warehouse where “non-restitutable” objects of Judaica were kept.

After the war, these objects were sent from Europe to Israel and to North America, which at the time had the largest active Jewish congregations and was the destination of large numbers of Jewish refugees from Europe.

Schlesinger later acquired the mantle from this source and for many years kept it in a frame on his study wall as a curio of unknown origin.

The Jewish Museum in Prague said that it appreciates the support it has received from the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem and the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Tel Aviv in bringing the Torah mantle back to the Czech Republic.

The preservation and development of the collections at the Jewish Museum in Prague is an exception in the context of the devastation of the Jewish culture in World War II. Elsewhere in Europe, the vast majority of Judaica from Jewish communities, associations and educational/cultural institutions became targets of mass looting.

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 “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. . . . 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 museum states.

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 (1945–48), this body provided objects of Judaica on loan to Jewish religious communities that had been re-established 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.

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