

NEWSLETTER 1996/1

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM

1906 Foundation of the Association for the Establishment of the Jewish Museum. Among the founders were Dr Salomon Hugo Lieben, a historian, and Dr Augustus Stein, Chairman of the Prague Jewish Community in Bohemia and Moravia.

1942 The Nazis establish a Central Jewish Museum which was not open to the public.

1945 The Museum administration returned to the Federation of Jewish Communities.

1950 The Museum becomes the property of the state. Establishment of the State Jewish Museum in Prague.

1994 The Museum buildings and collections returned to the Federation of Jewish Communities and the Jewish Museum in Prague established.

THE MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

The collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague comprise some 35,000 artistic items (synagogue textiles dating back to the 16th century, silver liturgical objects, glass, paintings, items documenting Jewish customs and traditions and relics from time of the Nazi occupation, especially drawings made at the Terezin concentration camp) and 100,000 books including several valuable manuscripts and prints.

HISTORICAL SITES

The Jewish Museum is in charge of the Old Jewish Cemetery (since 1995 a national historical monument), the Pinkas Synagogue, the Ceremonial Hall, the Klaus Synagogue, the Maisel Synagogue and the Spanish Synagogue (currently closed for technical reasons).

FOUNDATIONS

There are two major foundations associated with the Jewish Museum in Prague. The Foundation for the Renewal of the Pinkas Synagogue Memorial (donations to this foundation may be sent to account number 01067-004 / 2700, address: Creditanstalt a.s., Široká 5, 110 00 Praha 1), and the Foundation of the Jewish Museum. Its object is to promote the Museum and to restore objects of cultural value. Donations to this foundation may be sent to account number 1669452-038 / 0800, address: Česká spořitelna a.s., Rytířská 29, 110 00 Praha 1.

FOREIGN VISITORS TO THE MUSEUM

A number of prominent political personalities visited the Museum in 1995. They included the President of Portugal, Mario Soares; Luigi Scalfaro, the President of Italy; the Mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert; Israel's Minister of Education,

Culture and Sport, Amnon Rubinstein; Israel's Minister of the Environment Yossi Sarid; the Director of Aliyah ha-no'ar, Yehiel Leket; the new Israeli Ambassador to the Czech Republic, Raphael Gvir; the German Minister of Transport, Matthias Wissmann and President Clinton's special advisor Morton Halperin.

ACTIVITIES OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM SINCE 1994

Structure of the Museum

The Jewish Museum is headed by a Director, appointed by a five-member board (two representatives of the Prague Jewish Community, one representative of the Ministry of Culture). Apart from a Secretariat the Museum has five major departments: a department of collections which includes restorers of textiles and metal, and a photo archive; a department of Judaism and the holocaust, including a library; a public relations department which also looks after commercial publicity work ; an economics department and a reservation centre. The last-mentioned department is also responsible for the computer-based sale of tickets, especially on the basis of previous reservations.

Collection Fund

In connection with transfer of the collections to the Federation of the Jewish Communities, stocktaking is now in the final stage, where, for the first time since the war, an independent auditor compares the actual inventory of objects with wartime and pre-war catalogues. Certain measures were taken immediately after the collapse of the communist regime in the autumn of 1989 towards making the protection of the collections safer. The Museum is, moreover, making every effort to hasten the completion of the projects started earlier. All pictures have been transferred to new depositories. A textiles depository has been established in a repaired historical synagogue outside Prague. An inventory is in progress of the book collection which is mainly situated in the Spanish Synagogue. There the books are being cleaned and stored in special metal compact shelves. The systematic restoration of precious items and manuscripts is a significant aspect of the museum's care for its collections. This requires an annual investment of 22,250 USD.

Appropriate technical equipment has been installed in the Museum to protect the Museum against burglars or possible attacks. There is also a 24-hour guard on duty. The standard of security will be greatly improved between 1996 and 1998 when a new system, amounting to 230,000 USD, will be installed.

Prepared expositions

The Klaus Synagogue was closed in November 1995 and a new permanent exhibition devoted to Jewish traditions and customs will open there next May following repairs and reconstruction. The planned cost of the reconstruction of the synagogue amounts to 190,000 USD. Following the projected repair and reconstruction of the Spanish Synagogue by the end of 1998, incurring a cost of 1,5 million USD, an exhibition will open there devoted to the history of Czech and Moravian Jews between the late 18th century and the end of World War II.

Further projects of the Museum

Two further projects will increase the quality of the Museum's work ; the establishment of a standard database network (at a cost of 60,000 USD) and the introduction of a library programme (at a cost of 41,000 USD). In addition to

these investment it is planned to establish an educational and cultural centre which is due to start functioning in September 1996. The estimated cost is 165,000 USD.

RESTORATION OF THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY

The Old Jewish Cemetery was founded in the middle of the 15th century and is a unique, historically priceless site. There are 12,000 tombstones, including those belonging to some of the most eminent Jewish figures, such as Rabbi Loew, Mordecai Maisel, Mayor of the Prague Jewish Community, and the historian and astronomer David Gans. However, the badly polluted atmosphere is causing increasing damage to the tombstones. In order to combat this a commission of restorers was formed in 1993 and has since developed a project for the restoration of the cemetery. As a result some 100 tombstones are being totally restored every year. At the same time, more than 4,000 stones are being conserved annually in order to slow down their gradual decay. The cost of the cemetery's restoration amounts to approximately 38 000 USD a year.

THE MEMORIAL IN THE PINKAS SYNAGOGUE

The Memorial to the victims of Nazi genocide of the Jews from the war-time Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia at the Pinkas Synagogue was first opened in the late 1950's but was closed down in 1968. The necessary reconstruction was being deliberately delayed throughout the 1970's and 1980's due to the reluctance of the communist regime to re-open the Memorial.

It was only after the collapse of the totalitarian regime in November 1989 that work was properly got under way. Following essential construction work a team of artists began the calligraphic work in earnest in 1992. The inscriptions of the roughly 80,000 Jewish victims of Nazism are placed in groups according to the victim's last place of residence prior to his or her arrest or deportation in a transport. Individual persons or ascertained members of their families are then listed in alphabetical order. The main nave contains the names of victims from Prague, the names of murdered Jews from other Bohemian and Moravian towns and communities are inscribed on the walls of the entrance hall and the galleries on the ground floor. The cost of renewing the Memorial which is to be re-opened in the spring of 1996 will be 120,000 USD.

THE 'PROJECT CONTEMPORARIES'

Ever since the end of World War II the Jewish Museum in Prague has been collecting reminiscences of the Holocaust period. These, however, were in the form of written recollections and were compiled on an ad hoc basis. During the communist regime those working in the Museum were not permitted to take any initiative in this respect. In 1990 efforts were made to find contemporaries who were still alive. Our external collaborators, specialists in the history of the Holocaust as well as former inmates of Nazi concentration camps, have been locating former Jewish prisoners and former fighters in the resistance movement, as well as those who helped their Jewish fellow citizens. Interviews are recorded on tape which are then transcribed and, together with photographs

and other acquired documentation, are stored and clearly arranged in the Jewish Museum. At the moment, more than 500 such recollections have been compiled and the work continues. In this project the Jewish Museum collaborates also with foreign institutions.

These archives are mainly for the use of researchers. A minor section has been published and some of them have been used for other purposes (e.g. for the Memorial at Bergen-Belsen, for historical conferences at Hannover and Terezin and others). One of the major tasks in the future will be to store all gathered information on computer.

RESTORING COLLECTIONS OF BOOKS

Alongside restoring real estate, memorials and collections of the Jewish Museum, work has been going on for several years to restore Hebrew manuscripts which are among the precious collections at the Museum library. This includes, first and foremost, the cleaning and conservation of paper and parchment, flattening out sheets and binding. Between 1994 and 1995 external collaborators have thus treated 33 manuscripts, works of traditional rabbinical literature. Furthermore, facsimiles of Hebrew manuscripts and ancient prints are being gradually prepared for exhibitions. This work is done by leading specialists who, using original material, are creating exact copies of valuable written relics dating back to the 14th to 19th centuries. As of 1982 when the Jewish Museum began to produce facsimiles, 33 reproductions of Hebrew manuscripts and ancient Prague prints have been made; five copies of manuscripts were made in the course of last year.

The latest exhibition of the Museum, opened at the Maisel Synagogue in May, includes a total of 15 facsimiles of prints and manuscripts of which eight were produced especially for this exhibition.

PERMANENT EXHIBITION IN THE MAISEL SYNAGOGUE

The current permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum, inaugurated on May 29th, 1995, shows a cross-section of the history of Bohemian and Moravian Jews between the 10th and the late 18th centuries. Main emphasis is placed on the Renaissance period, described as the Golden Age of Bohemian and Moravian Jews and as the climax of the social and cultural advancement of local Jewish communities. The exhibition characterises this era by relics and documents connected with the actual construction of the synagogue and with the personality of its founder, the Mayor of the Prague Jewish Community, Mordecai Maisel. Traditional Jewish culture and education are represented by works by two eminent scholars, including Rabbi Loew, whose printed works also exemplify the production of Prague Hebrew book printers.

This is the first exhibition on such a scale since the establishment of the Jewish Museum in 1906. The few long-term exhibitions devoted to historical themes which were staged between the 1950's to 1970's related either only to the Prague ghetto or to a more limited theme of Jewish culture with special emphasis on literature and its major protagonists. The permanent exhibition now installed in the main nave and the two side naves of the Maisel Synagogue provides a wider but also deeper image of the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia.

INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS

An international symposium was held in Prague on September 4th to 14th, 1995 on the theme of Jewish Art in Bohemia and Moravia. It was arranged by the Centre for Jewish Culture of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in collaboration with the Jewish Museum in Prague and the Charles University in Prague. From the 2nd to the 7th of July, 1995 representatives of the Jewish Museum attended an international conference in Prague on the subject of Planning the Future of European Jewry, organized by the Institute for Jewish Affairs in London.