

CELEBRATIONS FOR THE 90TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE

At the end of August 1996 the Jewish Museum in Prague commemorated 90 years of its existence. Among those who attended the celebrations of this significant anniversary were the President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, members of the Czech government, representatives of the diplomatic corps and other prominent Czech and foreign personalities from the political and cultural world. The two-day programme was launched on 29 August with the unveiling of the memorial plaque on the administrative building in Jáchymova street. The inscription on the plaque (in Czech, English and Hebrew) recalls the dramatic history of this building. In 1920 a Jewish primary school was opened here, the foundation of which had the support of such personalities as Max Brod and Franz Kafka. The school was to become prominent after the signing of the Munich Agreement by which Czechoslovakia was forced to surrender the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany. 1939 marked the beginning of an influx of émigrés from the Sudetenland to Prague, which led to an increase both in the number of pupils and of highly qualified teachers at the school. This trend intensified after the occupation of the Czech Lands in March 1939. The school had its highest attendance in the years 1940-1941, i.e., after the expulsion of Jewish children from all schools. The number of pupils started to decline in 1942, after the first transportation to Terezín, and the school was closed in June of the same year. Throughout the course of its existence almost a thousand pupils had gone through the school. Most of the pupils and teachers at the school perished during the war. A similar fate was to befall the staff of the Central Jewish Museum which was based in this building from its inception in 1942. During the existence of the Central Jewish Museum the building also served as a storehouse for the most valuable collections of synagogal objects from the Jewish communities liquidated by the Nazis. From the end of the second world war up until the present time the building has been used for museum administration.

It is worth noting that after the war the museum was returned to the Council of Jewish Communities for a short while. In 1950 the building together with the entire collections became the property of the state. The process of restituting the museum collections to the Federation of Jewish Communities in Prague began in October 1994. The Jewish Museum in Prague was established at the same time, acquiring the status of a non-governmental institution.

29 August saw the official inauguration of the activities of the Museum's Educational and Cultural Centre, this being one of the major long-term projects of the Jewish Museum. The significance of the project was underlined by the presence of President Václav Havel, who viewed the centre's lecture room with great interest and learned of its principal aims.

As the organisational section of the Jewish Museum, the Centre provides those interested, both from the Czech Republic and abroad, with a detailed interpretation of Judaism, anti-Semitism and the history of the Jews, with particular emphasis on the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia. The Jewish Museum considers one of its principal tasks to be to broaden the knowledge of the Czech public, particularly of the young generation. The aim is to renew awareness of the Jewish presence in the Czech Republic, a presence that was fully suppressed for more than forty years under the communist regime. This is why the Centre regards as fundamental its co-operation with the Czech Ministry of

Education, Youth and Physical Training. The Museum has already started to work with the Ministry on particular projects, especially for the training of teachers. For this purpose it acquired the status of a teacher training institution from the Ministry. Among the Jewish Museum's major projects is the publication of textbook focusing on Jewish culture and an international seminar on the methodology of the instruction of Jewish themes. 10,000 ECUs have been set aside for this purpose as part of the European Community's PHARE programme. The Centre is also planning special theology seminars, the aim of which is to broaden the knowledge of the Jewish and non-Jewish world and to support a dialogue between Jews and Christians.

In addition to the lectures and one or several-day seminars the Centre will organise tours around Jewish Prague and visits to selected Jewish monuments in Bohemia and Moravia. Together with educational projects the Centre is also organising various cultural events, literary soirées, lectures and film screenings open to a wide circle of people interested.

The concept for the Centre's educational activities was worked out by the guest director from Israel, Shalmi Barmore, in co-operation with Czech and foreign institutions, experienced lecturers, Judaists and teachers. Essential to the Centre's foundation and continuing existence is also its financial security. The Jewish Museum received considerable financial support from several Jewish organisations - the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, The Rich Foundation, The American Joint Distribution Committee and the Lauder S. Foundation. The activities of the Centre are being supported by the Israeli Foundation for the support of Jewish educational and cultural centres.

On the same day the Centre started functioning, the Information Technology Centre was also opened on its premises as a branch of the prominent non-governmental educational institution, World ORT Union. This organisation, represented at the opening by the director of the ORT educational programme Dr. Gideon Meyer, supplied the Centre with computers and, together with JOINT, provided further financial resources for equipment. This means that through the Jewish Museum the Czech Republic has become one of the more than 60 countries in which ORT operates.

A one-day international seminar was held in the Centre on 30 August, the second day of the 90th anniversary celebrations. Both the lay and the scientific public welcomed with great interest the presentations of Dr. Falk Wiesemann from the University of Dusseldorf, Professor Vladimír Sadek and Dr. Jiřina Šedinová, both from the Philosophy Department of the Charles University in Prague, Dr. Eva Kosáková and Dr. Arno Pařík from the Jewish Museum in Prague and the guest director of the Centre, Shalmi Barmore from Israel.

HISTORICISM IN SYNAGOGAL TEXTILES FROM THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

A current exhibition in the gallery of the Klaus Synagogue, running from September to the end of November 1996, offers visitors to the Jewish Museum the possibility of viewing a set of Torah curtains and mantles from the rich collection of the Jewish Museum. The textiles, remarkable for their interesting ornamental decoration, were produced to a high standard in professional workshops both in Vienna and in the Czech Lands.

The Museum contains over 2,400 Torah curtains and 4,200 Torah mantles, including rare textiles dating from the end of the 16th century. The largest part

of the collection consists of textiles from the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. These have been selected to form the present exhibition which includes synagogal textiles previously shown very rarely to the public.

COLLECTIONS OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM ABROAD

The Jewish Museum would like to continue with its previously successful travelling exhibitions based on its collections, e.g., *Precious Legacy*, which was held at the end of the eighties in the US. A team of curators and other museum staff are presently intensively working on a selection of items from the collection, thus enabling museum visitors in New Zealand, Australia and Sweden to learn of the history of the Jewish community in the Czech Lands from the 16th to the early 20th century. The travelling exhibitions will include works of synagogal art - Torah curtains and mantles, various silver artefacts (Torah crowns and shields), rare manuscripts, items connected with the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays, objects documenting the everyday life of Jewish families. Among the exhibits are also included objects recalling the fate of Czech Jews during the second world war – e.g., drawings by Jewish artists and children imprisoned in the Terezín ghetto.

A smaller set of items (from the latter half of the 19th to first half of the 20th centuries) are also being prepared by the Jewish Museum in Prague for the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York .

THE JEWISH MUSEUM SEEKS SPONSORS

The Jewish Museum welcomes any financial donations to enable the purchase of scanning equipment (at a cost of 93,000 USD). This equipment is necessary for realising one of the aims of the project to computerise the collections - the creation of a comprehensive pictorial databank . With the help of the scanner the museum also intends to prepare a CD ROM of selected children's drawings (about 500 drawings). The CD ROM will not only serve as a pictorial publication but above all will facilitate both the selection of drawings when preparing exhibitions abroad and also scholarly research.

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