

## NEWSLETTER 1996/4

### THE SPANISH SYNAGOGUE

After major refurbishment work carried out on the Maisel Synagogue (May 1995), the Pinkas Synagogue (March 1996) and the Klaus Synagogue (May 1996), the Jewish Museum is now engaged in its most extensive project so far, as concerns the cost and the construction – the repair of the Spanish Synagogue in Dušní street in Prague. Its opening together with a new permanent exhibition is expected in 1998 – the 130th anniversary of its establishment.

The Spanish Synagogue is situated in the place where the oldest house of prayer in the Jewish Town of Prague, the so-called “Old School”, had once stood. The latter was many dozens of years older than the Old-New Synagogue, having been in existence, according to the preserved records, as early as the 11th or 12th centuries. Several houses of prayer later emerged here until today’s Spanish Synagogue was built in 1868. It was so named as a result of its interior decoration designed in the Moorish style. During the occupation the synagogue became a storehouse of items stolen from the Jews, and after the war up until 1948 it served as a house of prayer. In the years 1960 – 1979 synagogical textiles from the museum collections were exhibited in the synagogue. The building was later closed because of the poor technical state it was in, but none of the necessary repairs were carried out. The building’s neglect worsened in the following years, its damage reaching a critical point where its very existence was in danger.

The total cost of repairs to the Spanish Synagogue amounts to about 1,500,000 USD (it will be necessary to restore the valuable interior decoration greatly damaged by the building’s dampness). At the turn of 1995 and 1996 the museum carried out essential general repairs to the roof at a cost of 120,000 USD. This was made possible thanks to the financial assistance provided by the City Hall of Prague, Komerční banka and Transgas.

After the completion of the building work the Jewish Museum plans to install a new permanent exhibition in the Spanish Synagogue dedicated to the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from the 18th century to the end of World War II. This is to coincide with an exhibition in the Maisel Synagogue documenting the history of Czech Jews from the 10th century through to their emancipation (at the end of the 18th century). The opening of the exhibition in the Spanish Synagogue will provide its visitors with a comprehensive view of the history of Czech Jews in this particular region.

With regard to the considerable financial requirements for the restoration of the Spanish Synagogue the Jewish Museum is unable to cover all the expenses. This is why we would like to address individuals and institutions who could provide the Museum with financial or other assistance. Such support would enable the Spanish Synagogue to be opened in 1998 in a form that reflects the importance of this architecturally, historically and spiritually significant monument. Donations may be sent either – through the American Friends of the Jewish Museum in Prague – address : Project Judaica Foundation, 900 Second Street, NE, Suite 205, Washington D. C. 20002, telephone : 001/202/0882, Fax : 001/202/371 0898 – or to Nadace Židovského muzea, account number : 1669452-038, Česká spořitelna, a.s. Rytířská 29, Praha 1, Česká republika.

### **PROMINENT VISITS**

In June the historical buildings of the museum were visited by ten East Asian ambassadors to the Czech Republic who, through meeting with the director of the museum, learned of the history and the present situation of the Czech Jewish community. In July the museum was visited by Hillary Clinton, the wife of the American President.

In September the museum was honoured by the visit of a series of prominent personalities – the wife of the Finnish president, Eeva Ahtisaari, the former prime minister of Israel, Jicchak Šamir and his wife, and the president of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Professor Gerd Langguth.

### **CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS FROM TEREZÍN**

The Jewish Museum in Prague is responsible for the care of more than 4,000 children's drawings. Most of these arose in the years 1942–45 in the unimaginably difficult conditions of the concentration camp. The artistic activity of the children was made possible by the efforts of the imprisoned Jewish artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis who provided drawing lessons. The children's drawings present a unique collection and pay witness to a cruel chapter in Jewish history and in most cases are all that remains that can recall the lives of those who did not survive.

This year the Jewish Museum launched a long-term project, for the preservation of the collections of children's drawings from Terezín. The aim of the first phase of the project to be financed by the private television station Nova TV, is to preserve the drawings through an optimal storage in a depository which the museum intends to build for this purpose. The cost for this part of the project will amount to approximately 30,000 USD. In the next phase a database of children's drawings will be established, to which will be connected a pictorial CD ROM database. The linking to INTERNET, made possible by the opening of the ORT computer laboratory in the Educational and Cultural Centre of the museum, gave rise to the idea of putting a gallery of children's drawings on the INTERNET. The impressive children's drawings from Terezín, or rather their high quality Xerox copies, have already been seen in many museums and galleries across the world. During the period from the founding of the Jewish Museum in Prague in October 1994 to the present, nine exhibitions of children's drawings have been held in various states (in France, Netherlands, Ireland, Japan, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, and 2 exhibitions in Germany). At present an exhibition is being organised for the South African Republic and for B'nai B'rith in Canada, and the children's drawings are to be exhibited for the first time in South America. The presentation in South America is ensured by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **Inventories completed of the Jewish Museum collections**

Almost a year and a half (October 1994–1996) has gone by since inventories were begun on the collections of the State Jewish Museum which were returned to the Federation of Jewish Communities. During this time the Collections Department of the Museum has gone through 39,000 items by hand – an extremely time-consuming task – comparing the wartime and pre-war catalogues with the current state of the collection. Following the inventories the Museum

has been able to concentrate on further measures vital not only for the complex and systematic care of this extensive collection but also for research and finally a higher standard of presentation both at home and abroad. Primarily, this means the photodocumentation of all the items, their appropriate storage ensuring the maximum degree of safety, and the continual restoration of damaged items. These measures are all of a long-term character. At the same time preparatory work has begun on compiling text and picture databases which will make it possible to obtain comprehensive and up-to-date details on individual items and their condition.

The process of storing the collection items began immediately after the inventories were completed. The Museum had already begun to prepare for this following its foundation in October 1994. After creating a depositary in the Maisel Synagogue in the first half of 1995 such items as silver, porcelain, glass, smaller textiles (Torah binders, covers etc.) and clothes were placed there. In 1996 a newly adapted depositary with air-conditioning was prepared in the Pinkas Synagogue for the storage of pictures, drawings and graphic works. The Museum has also worked intensively on storing the large textile collection (particularly synagogue curtains and Tora screens) in a depositary outside Prague. Within this depositary, which already holds around 3,500 Torah mantles, electronically controlled equipment is being installed which has been specially constructed for the storage of the curtains. Despite the large financial demands of this project (estimated costs amount to 150,000 USD) the Museum decided upon this step as the best way to ensure not only the simpler but also more careful handling of the curtains. Apart from the above depositary the Museum also intends to build (at a cost of 68,500 USD) a suitable space in the Maisel Synagogue for the storage of the oldest and most precious of the synagogue textiles (synagogue curtains and Torah mantles).

The Jewish Museum is well aware of the historical and cultural importance of the collection which has been entrusted to it. For this reason it is taking great care over the preservation of those items which are in some way endangered and spending considerable sums in so doing. In 1995, for example, the cost of restoring collection items (textiles, silver, pictures, children's drawings from Terezin, graphic works) came to approx. 58,000 USD and in 1996 68,500 USD. For 1997 the Museum has decided to put aside 107,000 USD for those items in most serious danger. As well as the financial means this work requires a high level of expertise on the part of the restorers. The Museum is using external experts as well as its own team of textile and metal restorers. Proof of the exacting nature of the work, and also of the ability of the restorers, can be seen in the example of the synagogue curtain of 1609. It was necessary to restore an inscription embroidered in minute pearls. Thanks to the successful restoration work the curtain is now ready to be included in the exhibition currently in preparation dedicated to the time of Emperor Rudolph II.

### **SOUVENIRS OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE**

The Jewish Museum in Prague offers the following souvenirs:

- a poster showing synagogue curtains from the museum collection (cost – 2.50 USD),
- a commemorative medal bearing the portrait of the founder of the museum, S. H. Lieben (cost – 20 USD)
- a publication Jewish Traditions and Customs (in Czech, English and German)



(cost – 15 USD)

– the publication I have not seen a butterfly around here (children's drawings and poems from Terezín, in Czech, English, German, Spanish) (cost – 10 USD)

Contact: Katerina Zavadová, Phone: 0042/2/24810099