

NEWSLETTER 1997/3

Depository for the collection of synagogal textiles

The Jewish Museum this year has successfully brought to completion one of its important on-going projects, the purpose of which was to insure optimal conditions for the storing of the synagogal textiles: synagogal curtains, Torah mantles, valances and synagogal covers. In the framework of the project special equipment was designed and constructed "tailor-made" to meet the needs of this part of the museum's holdings. The work on the equipment's development was initiated in May 1995, and after testing and specific modifications in the production of the prototype its full installation was put into effect in February 1997 with a total cost in excess of 152,000 USD. The equipment consists of an electrically controlled mobile cart and ten containers with fourteen drawers, each of which has a 4.60m² capacity. With respect to the given parameters, the equipment guarantees maximally favorable conditions for the careful handling of rare textiles, for the curtains are deposited in a horizontal position and in single drawers. For the largest curtains, for which these spacious drawers are insufficient, two separate tables are being constructed. At the same time a solution was found for storing the Torah mantles: they were hung in metal stands in two rows, one above the other. Placed in each stand are 200 mantles. Over a period of five months (February - June) this year a work team in the depository under the direction of Ing. Petr Novák placed in storage more than 6,000 pieces of textile (2,360 curtains and 4,000 Torah mantles). At the present time a special case is being prepared for valance storage. Given the extent of the textile collection placed in the depository a separate computer program was developed that not only allows for a continuous record of the textiles deposited, but also gives the location of a piece in the depository. In this way the program enables one to quickly and more easily locate an individual curtain or mantle should the need arise, and physically search for, if need be determine, its actual utilization (e.g., loan, restoration).

The depository is located outside of Prague in a synagogue that was constructed in oriental style during the year 1870-71. It served religious purposes until the Second World War. After the war it remained closed, and in 1977 the former State Jewish Museum began to make use of the space as a depository for the collection of synagogal textiles. Since 1993 extensive repairs of the actual structure of the synagogue have been underway and they will be completed this year with a cost of approximately 60,610 USD. In connection with the repairs, a fire protection and security system was installed. A component of the interior equipment is a system of instruments that consistently measure the humidity and temperature of the depository.

The unveiling of a commemorative plaque to Dr. Tobiáš Jakobovits

This year marked the 110th year since the birth of Dr. Tobiáš Jakobovits, prominent scholar and librarian of the Prague Jewish community. On the occasion of this anniversary in May 1997 a commemorative plaque was unveiled to Dr. Jakobovits and his wife Berta in the administrative building of the Jewish Museum in Prague on Jáchymova Street.

Dr. Jakobovits was one of the most accomplished Judaists in Europe of his generation. Through his activity in Prague he markedly influenced the level of Prague Jewish studies. In his scholarly work he dedicated himself primarily to old Hebrew prints and manuscripts and to the history of Jews in the Czech

lands, particularly in Prague. Besides these studies Dr. Jakobovits directed his attention to modernizing and enlarging the Prague Jewish Community's library. He began working in the Prague Jewish Community's library, which has served the public since 1874, as an assistant in 1912. In 1922 he took over the function of librarian from Prof. Isidore Pollak . The success of his work connects him to his prominent predecessors, who before Prof. Pollak were Koppelman Lieben and Dr. Nathan Grün. At the same time Dr. Jakobovits acted as a teacher of the religion and a rabbi.

Dr. Jakobovits was one of the initiators for creating the wartime Central Jewish Museum that was established by the occupation government of Nazi Germany in 1942. Thanks to having this idea put into effect a number of valuable Jewish art objects, which came to Prague from the liquidated synagogues and communities in Bohemia and Moravia, were concentrated in the museums depositories, and because of this saved. As a generally recognized expert, Dr. Jakobovits became the museum's director. He acted in this function until autumn 1944 when he was deported along with his wife Berta to Auschwitz where he perished. By unveiling this commemorative plaque the Jewish Museum in Prague is repaying a historical debt that it could not before. The solemn event was attended by, in addition to representatives of the Jewish Community in Prague, Dr. Jakobovits's son, Moshe Jakobovits, and his wife. They currently live in Israel.

The moving of the Jewish Museum's library holdings to a new depository

As we have already informed readers of the Newsletter in previous issues, this year the Jewish Museum has begun general repairs of the Spanish Synagogue, which is an architectural cultural landmark from the second half of the 19th century. The realization of this project has also brought an answer to the question of where to locate several tens of thousands of books that due to insufficient availability of space have been concentrated in the gallery of the Spanish Synagogue. The milieu and the method of storing the library's holdings was not, as is indicated by the archival photograph of the synagogue, very suitable. In addition, the books deposited here were not accessible to readers. The only solution envisaged building an entirely new depository, and this in the structure directly adjacent to the Spanish Synagogue. Therefore at the beginning of 1996 a project was drawn up for the construction of a new modern depository outfitted with compact shelving like those of the library depository in the administrative building of the Jewish Museum on Jáchymova Street. The installation of the technical equipment and the moving of the library's holdings preceded the necessary modifications of the new rooms which were completed by the beginning of 1997 with a cost of approximately 12,125 USD.

The library's holdings were moved to the newly created depository from February to the end of June 1997. The physical relocation of the books was undertaken by an external firm and at the same time the library's holdings were newly filed. During this operation library employees under the direction of Alena Jelínková arranged the call-numbers (in numerical order) and simultaneously carried out a review. The review brought to light the necessity for greater accuracy in a succession of cases, respectively, corrections of the call-numbers and supplementing them with new call-numbers. The extent and exacting nature of this work is best described by the following datum:

20,000 volumes were transferred in February and March 1997. From April to June 1997 further sections of the library's holdings were moved – 12,000 volumes – that had been deposited in the administrative building of the Jewish

Museum on Jáchymova Street. The entire expense for the construction of the new depository reached 54,000 USD. Its opening in June 1997 marked the completion of an important, but in no way the final, stage in the reconstruction of the Jewish Museum's library. In September 1997 the moving will begin of the enormously valuable pre-war holdings of the Prague Jewish Community's former library, which in the meantime are deposited in the administrative building of the museum.

The exhibition in the Klaus Synagogue

Running from June to August 1997 in the Jewish Museum was the exhibition *The Architecture of Destroyed Synagogues*, the curator of which was Dr. Arno Pařík. It was the first comprehensive treatment of the theme of synagogal architecture on the grounds of the Jewish Museum since 1986, when the then State Jewish Museum organized the exhibition *Prague Synagogues*. Considering the breadth of information and the extent of the documents displayed the exhibition was unique. The preserved material: architectural designs, plans, period engravings, pictures, old photographs of the edifices in the time of their flourishing and shots of their doleful fate during Nazi Germany's occupation and then the communist regime provided visitors with a glimpse into the rich history of synagogues in the lands of Bohemia and Moravia.

At the end of the last century there were still close to 400 synagogues in Czech territory. From November 1938 until the end of the war the Nazis set fire to or destroyed by other means about sixty synagogues, and under the communist regime a further ninety synagogues were demolished, for the most part needlessly. At the beginning of the 1990s there existed in the Czech Republic 200 synagogues which served a variety of uses – they served as apartments, houses of worship for other religions, storehouses, exhibition halls, or depositories for the local museums. Only four were employed for religious services: the Old-New Synagogue, Jeruzalémská Synagogue, and High Synagogue in Prague and a synagogue in Brno, South Moravia.

The synagogal architecture in Bohemia and Moravia, despite being an interesting chapter in the history of Jewish culture, had not been treated from the discipline of Art History until now. Therefore the Jewish Museum is planning a publication devoted to this theme, which will contain in addition to the text a wealth of documentation material.

The Torah Scrolls from Czechoslovakia

In the Newsletter 2/1996 we referred to the fate of Torah Scrolls which had been moved from Czechoslovakia to London in the early 1960s and stored in the Westminsters Synagogue. The Czech Memorial Scrolls Committee was set up for the purpose of caring for the Scrolls. We would like to introduce Mrs. Ruth Shaffer who played a major role in the activities of this Committee almost from the very beginning and nowadays she has been involved in the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust.

I. Mrs. Shaffer, what was the main purpose of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Committee and what was your function in this Committee?

The Czech Memorial Scrolls Committee was set up to care for the Torah scrolls that arrived here from Czechoslovakia in 1964 and to establish a set of conditions under which we would be able to allocate the scrolls to the very many establishments that had written to us when the scrolls arrived. When the scrolls arrived I was asked to become Honorary Secretary of the committee. When the

Trust was formed I became one of the four Trustees and a co-chairman with Miss Constance Stuart. We gave an undertaking that the project would be of a non-commercial nature and we have upheld this undertaking. The scrolls are allocated on permanent loan only. We keep trace of each scroll that has been sent. We have a card index of all the information about each scroll and where it eventually found a home. Most of the scrolls have gone to congregations but also to Holocaust Museums, Libraries, Universities and Institutions of Learning. No scroll goes to a private individual.

II. What measures were immediately taken after the Torah scrolls were stored in Westminster Synagogue?

We have undertaken the massive responsibility of caring for 1564 scrolls from Bohemia and Moravia, probably the largest consignment of its kind in the world. Many of which were in a desperate and terrible condition after lying for so many years in a damp basement of a then un-used synagogue (now a Hussite church) outside Prague. To have evolved a program of housing, examining and classifying each scroll on a card index and then to have organised their distribution was in itself a daunting undertaking. The work of classification was done by three student scribes under the supervision of Rabbi Harold Reinhart and Rabbi Toledano and took some eighteen months to accomplish. The miraculous arrival of Mr. Brand, our scribe from Jerusalem, heralded a working relationship of over twenty-four years. Little did he or we think, when he so innocently rang our bell so many years ago asking if we had any Torahs to fix, that he would be with us for so many years.

III. How many Torah scrolls remain in the Czech Memorial Scrolls Centre's care?

After thirty-three years we are now left with approximately 100–125 scrolls in a desperate and tragic condition. Yet quite a few organisations would like to have one of these scrolls as a Memorial to the Holocaust.

IV. What is the purpose of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Centre?

The Centre has an exhibition about the Czech scrolls and the history of the Czech Jews. The Centre is open every Tuesday and Thursday from 10 am to 4 pm. Visitors come to see the Centre from all over the world including schools of every religious denomination.

V. Over the course of your work in the Centre certainly you have experienced a number of touching stories

There was a truly remarkable story of a scroll from Nachod. We sent a scroll to a congregation in Staten Island, N.Y. The Rabbi in Staten Island heard that there was a Rabbi in Manhattan who originally came from Náchod. This rabbi was a spiritual advisor to another congregation. His very first congregation was in Náchod. After leaving Czechoslovakia in 1936 he came to London and then to New Zealand and Australia. From there he went to the United States and in the last twenty years his home was in the upper reaches of Manhattan. And in October 1975 the Torah and the Rabbi were reunited.

Thank you for speaking with us.

The Jewish Museum has in its holdings an array of synagogal objects from the Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia that were abolished by the Nazi occupation. Many of them came from the same location, like the Torah scrolls, which through the mediation of the above mentioned Centre have found their way to Jewish communities or other institutions practically throughout the entire world. We would be very pleased to correspond with all organizations with whom these scrolls have found a new home. If interested, please contact us at the



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Visits to the Jewish Museum

June 1997:

The Jewish Museum welcomed to its historic sites academic representatives, professors, and sponsors from Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv. The group of guests was led by the President of Bar-Ilan University, Prof. Moshe Kaveh and its rector Prof. Yehuda Friedlender. Bar-Ilan University is the third largest university in Israel, and it offers studies in Judaism, the social and the natural sciences, law, mathematics, and in many other fields. At the same time it is a renowned scientific and research institute. On the occasion of this visit the Jewish Museum and the Jewish Community in Prague signed with Bar-Ilan University a declaration on mutual cooperation and assistance in disseminating and deepening the knowledge of Judaism and Jewish history amongst the members of the Jewish Community and other interested parties from the Czech general public.

July: a group of thirty-five prominent members of the executive committee of the American Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture visited the museum led by their president Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler and vice-president Dr. Jerry Hochbaum. Among the guests were a number of distinguished personages of Jewish organizations and political figures from the United States, Europe, and Israel. The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture intensively cooperates with the Jewish Museum in Prague, an example of which is their financial support for the activities of the Educational and Cultural Center. Also in July the Jewish Museum welcomed still one more particularly meaningful visit. Immediately after a meeting with representatives from NATO, which took place in Madrid at the beginning of the month, Madeline Albright, the American Secretary of State, came to Prague. Her first steps after her arrival led to the Jewish Museum in Prague where while being accompanied by the museum's director, Dr. Leo Pavlát, and secretary of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, Dr. Tomáš Kraus, she visited the memorial to Jewish victims of the holocaust in the Pinkas Synagogue. Among the almost 80,000 names of Czech Jews who did not survive the holocaust listed here are also the names of two grandparents of Secretary of State Albright. During her short visit Mrs. Albright also took a walk through the Old Jewish Cemetery.