

NEWSLETTER 1997/4

The last temporary exhibition in the Klaus Synagogue

Running from September to November 1997 in the gallery of the Klaus Synagogue was the exhibition Jewish Dreams which featured drawings and water-colours by the prominent contemporary American graphic artist and illustrator Mark Podwal. In his work Podwal mainly draws inspiration from Jewish traditions. He is the author of numerous books, including a Book of Hebrew Letters (1978), A Jewish Bestiary (1985), and Golem: A Giant Made of Mud (1995). He has also illustrated a number of books by other authors, such as Paul Simon's New Songs (1975), F. Klagsbrun's Voices of Wisdom (1979), and F. Prose's Dybbuk : A Story Made in Heaven (1996) and The Angel's Mistake: Stories of Chelm (1997). His work has been exhibited in various countries – the US (New York , Washington), Israel (Jerusalem, Haifa) and Sweden (Stockholm). The exhibition in the Klaus Synagogue was his first in Prague, many of the 61 drawings also being displayed for the first time. These were inspired by M. Podwal's visit to Prague in 1996 and were created precisely for this Jewish Museum exhibition. The preview was attended by both M. Podwal and the writer Elie Wiesel who delivered the opening speech. One of the first visitors to the exhibition was the former Israeli premier Shimon Peres who was in Prague as a guest of the Forum 2000 international symposium. The curator of the exhibition was Dr. Arno Pařík . The exhibition was made possible thanks to the kind support of Tabák a.s./Philip Morris.

During his short stay in Prague M. Podwal also took part in a debate organised by the Educational and Cultural Centre of the Jewish Museum on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition.

The Podwal exhibition was the last of a series of successful temporary exhibitions held in the gallery of the Klaus Synagogue following its reopening in 1996. The gallery has now been closed but in March 1998 will house, along with the former Ceremonial Hall of the Burial Society, the second part of the permanent exhibition Jewish Customs and Traditions. This exhibition will focus on the daily life of the Jewish family and will cover the entire course of life from birth through to death. It will also include the unique cycle of pictures from the late 18th century documenting the activities of the Burial Society.

Library relocation completed

October 1997 saw the completion of an important project aimed at the relocation of a large part of the Museum's book collection to new depositories designed to provide optimal storage conditions. A total of 62,000 books were moved over a six-month period. The last books to be moved were a set of 16,000 volumes comprising the „historical library“ of the Museum. This collection of great historical and scholastic value was originally part of the former library of the Prague Jewish Community and mostly consists of Judaic and Hebrew works. As with other Jewish memorial property, the „historical library“ also suffered certain losses as a result of World War II. The core of the library consists of gifts from and collections of a number of prominent Jewish personages, such as the Prague printer and publisher Moshe Israel Landau (1788 - 1852), the Chief Rabbi of Prague Shelomo Yehuda Rapoport (1790 – 1867), the Secretary to the Prague Burial Society Koppelman Lieben (1811 – 1892) and the Enlightenment scholar Baruch Yeiteles (1762 – 1813).

The original library of the Prague Burial Society was opened to the public in 1874 and after several relocations was eventually housed in the building of the Prague Jewish Community. It remained here until World War II, subsequently becoming part of the Central Jewish Museum. Along with other collections of the Museum it was transferred over to the State Jewish Museum in 1950 and, in connection with the return of collections to the Federation of Jewish communities of the Czech Republic, was transferred to the newly established Jewish Museum in Prague in October 1994.

New Director of the Educational and Cultural Centre

On 1 November 1997 Dr. Miloš Pojar became the new director of the Educational and Cultural Centre. He is a graduate of Charles University, where he studied oriental languages and Greek. He also studied English at the Columbia University in the US. At a time when he was unable for political reasons to work in his chosen field, he was employed at the Czech Academy of Science publishing house. On the collapse of Communism he worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1990 and as the Czech Ambassador to Israel from April of the same year to August 1994. On returning from Israel he became head of the Asia Department at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On-line debate

A unique event was prepared in October 1997 by Anna Gedrich, the manager of the ORT computer laboratory – a discussion on the Internet. This was the first event of its kind to have taken place at the Educational and Cultural Centre of the Jewish Museum. The main personage to whom online participants directed their questions was Avraham Burg, the chief representative of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization in Israel. Via the Internet in Israel, A. Burg received questions from an audience that had gathered in the Educational and Cultural Center in Prague. Questions and answers that appeared on the computer monitor were screened onto the wall to enable full audience participation. Various topics were covered leading to many interesting exchanges of views, such as on the current role of the World Zionist Organization in the area of compensation for Czech victims of the Holocaust.

Spanish Synagogue update

The archaeological survey in the Spanish Synagogue was completed in September 1997. A team from the archaeological institute of the Czech Academy of Science marked out several areas for excavation and subsequently uncovered the remains of brickwork which according to preliminary estimates dates from the Middle Ages. The results of the survey are currently being assessed and the findings are to be made known early next year. It can already be said, however, that there have not been any extraordinary or unexpected archaeological finds. A detailed study was subsequently carried out in collaboration with the Prague Institute of Monument Protection to assess which interior elements require restoration. On the basis of the findings it will be necessary to restore the display cases, wooden components (wall cladding, railings), wall paintings and

lights. The cost of reconstruction (excluding actual construction work and exhibition preparation) will amount to 303,050 USD. As this is such a costly project, the Jewish Museum would welcome any kind of financial assistance. Donations may be sent to our account no. 195 450 830 257/0100, address: Komerční banka a.s., Spálená 51, 110 00 Praha 1.

Preservation of rare manuscripts and prints from the collections of the Jewish Museum

The Jewish Museum's library collection includes a number of rare Hebrew manuscripts from the 13th to the 19th century in addition to Prague prints dating from the 16th to the first half of the 19th century. A detailed analysis of around 600 rare prints and manuscripts was recently carried out in collaboration with an external team of professional restorers. A list was then drawn up of works that require restoration. At present, museum specialists have selected the most seriously damaged manuscripts and prints which need immediate treatment. As such work is extremely costly, the Jewish Museum would welcome any financial contribution to sustain the efforts being made to preserve these artistically and historically unique memorial scripts for future generations.

Machzor for Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur according to German liturgy (Ashkenazi, 13th – 14th Century, 138 folios, parchment, ink , 30 x 22.5 cm, modern binding)

The Hebrew manuscript originates from the original library of the Prague Jewish Community. It contains prayers for the New Year and the Day of Atonement following Ashkenazi liturgy, often with diversions from the printed edition and interesting marginal notes. It is written in square Hebrew letters of the Ashkenazi style. The colophon (manuscript imprint) is missing and the name of the scribe is unknown. On folio 114b there is preserved an entry of the vocaliser, who was Chaim B'R (ben ha-rav) Yitzhak (see also folio 36a) – in Hebrew scribal tradition this distribution of work between the scribe of the unvocalised text and the vocaliser was customary. Present condition: The manuscript is greatly damaged, both mechanically and chemically – the parchment is warping and the ink is coming off. The overall condition is unstable and requires comprehensive restoration work , the cost of which is estimated at approximately 3,050 USD.

Midrash Shochoer Tov, Midrash Mishle, Midrash Samuel, with annotations by Yitzhak ben Shimshon

(Prague, Jacob ben Gershom Bak , 1613, 2o, 86 folios, leather binding with a blind embossing)

This Prague print from the property of the Prague Jewish Community originates from the second oldest Prague Hebrew printing house, that of the Bak family, which was established in 1605. It consists of midrashim (commentaries) to the biblical books Psalms, Proverbs, and Samuel. The publication is provided with annotations by Yitzhak ben Shimshon, who was a native of Prague and son-in-law of Maharal (Rabbi Löw). Among other things, Yitzhak ben Shimshon was the Rabbi in Vienna and Mikulov. He was an esteemed Talmudist and philanthropist. He had published the work of older men of learning – among others, the lectures of his father-in-law (Derush al ha-Torah, Poznan, 1592) – and is considered the author of the first Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch (Basle, 1583), or at least the commentary to it (Prague, 1610). In 1592 he accompanied his father-in-law, Rabbi Löw, to an audience with Emperor Rudolf II, an account of which he also

recorded. Yitzhak ben Shimshon died in 1624 and is buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague. Present condition: The book is primarily chemically damaged – from the effects of many years of mildew and paper acidification. The necessary restoration work requires approximately 3,050 USD.

Visitors to the Jewish Museum

In August 1997 the Jewish Museum welcomed to its historic sites the Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, who was in the Czech Republic on an official visit. **In October 1997** the Jewish Museum welcomed a prominent guest from Great Britain – the Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks. In November the Jewish Museum was visited by the Israeli Minister of transport Yitzhak Levy.

Jewish history textbook In 1997 the Jewish Museum in Prague published, with financial support from the European Union's PHARE programme, a new textbook entitled *Jews – History and Culture*. The book expands upon the various publications devoted to Jewish history and culture which started to appear after the fall of Communism in 1989. It is intended for use in history, civics and literature lessons at school. In the foreword, Dr. L. Pavlát, the director of the Jewish Museum, explains the need for such a book : „Although, after many years of neglect, Jewish topics are now covered by the school curriculum, the new textbooks still lack the depth that is required to interpret all the relevant historical connections.“ Contributors to the textbook include Dr. Pavlát (Anti-Semitism – the most persistent hatred in the history of mankind) and the following prominent Czech specialists in Judaism and Jewish history: Prof. Vladimír Sadek (Jewish history and thinking from biblical times to the present), Dr. Jiřina Šedinová (Jews in Bohemia and Moravia), Miroslav Kárný and Dr. Anita Franková (Persecution and annihilation of the Jews during World War II), Dr. Alexandr Putík , Dr. Leo Pavlát and Jiří Fiedler (Jewish traditions and customs). The topics are dealt with in a way that can provide even people completely unfamiliar with Jewish issues with a basic understanding of Jewish culture and its historical and spiritual connections.

Jewish Museum material

On the occasion of the Mark Podwal exhibition and with the financial support of Tabák a.s./Philip Morris, the Jewish Museum in Prague produced a poster and a series of six postcards of drawings by the artist and published a highly successful catalogue.

The Jewish Museum also produced a poster of rare silver artefacts from the collection of the Jewish Museum.

If you would like to purchase any of these items you can contact Mrs. Kateřina Závadová, fax: 00420 22310681