

NEWSLETTER 1998/3

The Genizah Project

As mentioned in an earlier Newsletter (2/97), Jewish Museum staff are carrying out a systematic survey of genizot in Bohemian and Moravian synagogues. The most valuable find to date is the genizah that was discovered in Luže, a Czech town lying 115km south-east of Prague. The Jewish settlement in Luže dates back to the second half of the 16th century. There was never, however, a sizeable local community – about 300 Jews lived here in the 19th century and around 320 in 1930. The Jewish Community was not restored after the Second World War.

A number of interesting items were discovered in the Luže genizah – manuscripts, prints, textiles, wooden decorations of the Holy Ark (aron) and phylacteries.

The written material comprises religious literature, scholarly writings, literary (poetry and theatre) handbooks and manuals in Hebrew and Yiddish dating from the period of the Jewish Enlightenment. These are mainly fragments of synagogue prayer books from around the 17th century, fragments of parchment Torah scrolls wound on rollers, scrolls of the Book of Esther, transcriptions of mediaeval literary works, fragments of official community records from the 18th and 19th centuries, private correspondence, commercial records, records of scholars' lectures and interestingly designed community notices from the 1790s. Also of interest are the graphic tablets with liturgical texts, which served as synagogue ornamentation, and the paper cut-outs with blessings dating from 1793. More extensive is the more or less preserved print fragments that mostly originate from Czech, German and Dutch Hebrew printing offices. The majority of them are prayer books and books of the Bible and the Talmud from the 18th and 19th centuries. More valuable are the printed mizrachim adorned with coloured woodcuts and a printed amulet from the second half of the 18th century. Also found in the genizah were remains of Prague Hebrew prints from the 17th century, wood prints and decorated editions of various religious texts (Tse'enah Ure'enah, Haggadah).

Among the most valuable finds in Luže are the calendars and coloured traditional prints of decorative tablets used for festive occasions. As they were designed for frequent use and not durability, however, there are only few left in households and museums. Among the textiles, the most remarkable are the Torah mantles from the late 17th century (i.e. from the early period of the local Jewish community's existence), prayer shawls and clothing (children's caps). After classifying and charting the material, work began in the Museum on the conservation and restoration of selected written, pictorial and textile items. In this way we can prevent any further deterioration in quality and preserve their original state. At the same time, the material is being successively catalogued and documented.

Regional Exhibitions on Jewish themes

Regional museums in Bohemia and Moravia have recently been turning their attention to the history and culture of local Jewish communities. In many instances, museums are installing either temporary or permanent exhibitions on such themes in buildings of former Jewish communities, especially in synagogues, that are still standing. At present, the Jewish Museum in Prague is

working very closely with a number of regional institutions throughout the Czech Republic, providing specialist help and lending items from its collections. A number of areas where Jewish communities are no longer in existence are now at least seeing the return of some of the surviving liturgical objects which were confiscated and moved to Prague by the Nazis during the Second World War. Future Newsletter issues will introduce readers to selected museums in Bohemia and Moravia, where similar exhibitions have been installed, and to certain Jewish monuments outside Prague.

One of the regional museums with which the Jewish Museum in Prague is co-operating is that of Rychnov nad Kněžnou. A Jewish settlement is recorded as being founded in the first half of the 16th century in this Bohemian county town, which lies 130km to the east of Prague. 216 Jews lived here at the end of the 19th century, and by 1930 this number had dropped to 71. As in many other areas, the Jewish community in Rychnov was not restored after the Second World War. A Jewish cemetery, mortuary, and synagogue (since 1995 used for exhibition purposes) have all been preserved in this town. The synagogue was built in a Baroque Classicism in 1787. In the Second World War it was closed and its liturgical objects, textiles and Torah scroll were moved to the Central Jewish Museum, which was set up by the Nazis in 1942. From the 1950s the synagogue was used as a storehouse and a coal gas store. It was only thanks to the efforts of the local preservation board that the building escaped demolition during the communist regime.

The synagogue is currently in state ownership. Following complete reconstruction and refurbishment, it was opened to the public three years ago and the Jewish Museum of Podorlicko and a Memorial to Karel Poláček were established here. Poláček, a native of Rychnov, is a popular Czech Jewish writer and journalist who died at the end of the Second World War. The current exhibition is devoted to the history and monuments of six Jewish communities in the region. Among the exhibits are the following objects from the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague: Torah mantles, an original curtain for the Torah Ark (aron), and a large Hanukkah menorah, which is one of the most valuable objects that have been preserved. All these exhibits were restored by specialists in Prague before being loaned.

The Spanish Synagogue

Restoration work in the Spanish Synagogue was completed at the end of June, which means that one of the key goals of the Jewish Museum has now been fulfilled, i.e. the reconstruction of all the historical buildings under its management. Since 1994, the Maisel, Pinkas, Klausen and Spanish Synagogues and the former Ceremonial Hall have all undergone complete and systematic reconstruction and renovation. The Museum will naturally continue to take care of these buildings, ensuring that they remain in a good state of repair.

The Spanish Synagogue now has a completely renovated interior, i.e. main nave, gallery and winter synagogue, in addition to a new facade, new heating and electricity mains. The valuable historical window-panes, murals, wooden panels and lighting fixtures have also been restored. The original tiles have been repaired and treated with a special preparation to increase their wear resistance. During building alterations, attention was paid to the needs of people with disabilities, to whom both the main nave and the synagogue gallery are now accessible.

At present, work is being completed on the restoration of the original organ and Museum staff are preparing an exhibition to be housed in the main nave and gallery of the synagogue. The Jewish Museum in Prague would welcome any kind of financial assistance to ensure the successful reopening of the Spanish Synagogue. Contributions may be sent to the following address:
The Jewish Museum in Prague, bank account no. 195420830257/0100, Komerční banka a.s., Spálená 51, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic.

Maisel Synagogue

The reopening of the Spanish Synagogue at the end of this year will mark the completion of the Museum's historical exhibition project. Its goal is to present a comprehensive and clear survey that will introduce the public to the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from the first settlements in this region (i.e. from the beginning of the 10th century) to the present day. The first stop on the journey through the history of the Jews of this region is the Maisel Synagogue, where the first part of the exhibition (covering the period up to the end of the 18th century) was opened in May 1995. Below is a brief history of the Maisel Synagogue, a significant monument in the care of the Jewish Museum (for information on the permanent exhibition housed here see Newsletter 1/96). The Maisel Synagogue stands in Maisel Street, in the centre of the original historical Jewish Town. The street was named "Maisel" in 1901, when new houses were developed here as part of the ghetto clearance programme. The synagogue was built by Juda Goldschmied-Coref de Herz and Josef Wahl and completed in 1592. In the 16th century it became one of the most prominent synagogues of the Jewish Town in the Renaissance period. The construction of the synagogue was financed by Mordechaj Maisel, the Mayor of the Jewish Town, who received special permission from Emperor Rudolf II as an exception to the ban on the building of private houses of prayer. The synagogue was destroyed by fire in 1689 and was renovated in Baroque style in the early 1690s. The synagogue underwent further reconstruction in the second half of the 19th century (by architect J. M. Müller) and in the years 1892 – 1905 in connection with the ghetto clearance of the Jewish Town (by architect Alfred Grotte). It was this final and extensive reconstruction that gave the synagogue its present Neo-Gothic appearance. All that remained of the original Renaissance layout was the tripartite nave and the upper-storey gallery for women.

Part of the permanent exhibition in the Maisel Synagogue is dedicated to Mordechaj Maisel. This prominent Jewish personage, who is buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery, is commemorated by a number of exhibits, such as the curtain for the Torah Ark (aron) and a Torah mantle from 1592 which was donated by Mordechaj Maisel and his wife Frumet on the occasion of the ceremonial inauguration of the synagogue.

During the Nazi occupation, the synagogue was used as a storehouse for the confiscated property of Prague Jewish communities. A depository was set up here in 1956 and an exhibition of synagogue silverware opened in 1965. After its foundation in October 1994, the Jewish Museum in Prague set to work on the extensive renovation of the synagogue, including repairs to the roof, main nave and heating system, renovation of the tiles and restoration of the historical interior features (e.g. balustrades, windows, gallery). As part of the building work, alterations were also made to ensure more effective use of the non-exhibition space of the synagogue. The loft space was extended to produce a

depository of synagogue textiles and metal artefacts. There is now a gift shop in the entrance area of the synagogue as well as a ticket-office.

The pictures (p. 5) highlight the differences between the past and present appearance of the synagogue.

Prominent Visits

July 1998 - As part of his official visit to the Czech Republic, the Israeli Minister of Justice, Tzachi Hanegbi, was a guest of the Jewish Museum in Prague. He was accompanied by his wife Randy, in addition to Tamar Gaulan, the director of the Department for Foreign Relations, Orly Ben-Shamai, ministerial assistant and Yoram Karshi, ministerial advisor.

Museum publications

The Jewish Museum is currently preparing a catalogue for the exhibition Jewish Customs and Traditions, which is on display in the Klaus Synagogue and Ceremonial Hall. The catalogue contains brief texts on separate exhibition themes and are accompanied by over 80 colour reproductions of selected exhibits.

For information on how to purchase the publication contact:

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