

NEWSLETTER 1998/4

Reopening of the Spanish Synagogue

In the second half of November 1998 the Spanish Synagogue was reopened on the 130th anniversary of its establishment. Closed for almost twenty years, its re-opening provides an opportunity for the public to revisit another notable Prague synagogue. This event was linked to the opening of the second part of the historical exhibition on the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia. The opening of the exhibition was inaugurated by the Budapest soprano Dagmar Wanke-Szendrey, who performed traditional Yiddish and Sephardic songs with accompaniment by organist Prof. Michal Novenko. Thus, after many years of silence, the synagogue once again resounded to the sound of the organ. The introductory speech was delivered by the Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Dr. Leo Pavlát. Those present were also addressed by the First deputy minister of Culture, Ing. Zdeněk Novák. To mark the importance of the occasion, there was a world premiere of "The Rosenberger Variations", a work by the contemporary American composer Heyden Wayn, which was performed by the Czech Wallinger Quartet. The Jewish Museum would like to express its thanks to the Czech institutions that helped fund the successful renovation of the Spanish Synagogue and the installation of the historical exhibitions. Prague City Hall, Komerční banka and Transgas a.s. provided financial support for roof and facade repairs. Prague City Hall also provided financial support for the restoration of the interior and the exhibition project.

History of the building

The Spanish Synagogue is situated in Dušní street, in an area that was once the heart of the Jewish Town and the core of Prague's oldest community of Jews of eastern Byzantine origin. Its spiritual centre was the Old School/Synagogue, a house of prayer dating from around the 11th or 12th century, which was demolished in the 19th century. It was on this site that the synagogue was built. The building forms part of a protected area that is listed by UNESCO as a world heritage sight.

The Spanish Synagogue was designed by Vojtěch Ignátz Ullmann (the building) and Josef Niklas (the interior) in a Moorish-influenced Neo-Renaissance style and completed in 1868. The interior decoration was designed by A. Baum and B. Münzberg and completed in the years 1882–93. It consists of a stucco arabesque with richly gilt and polychrome oriental motifs. Similar decorative features were also applied in the adornment of the doors, organ, gallery balustrades and ground-floor wall-panelling. In 1882–83 the windows were glazed with coloured panes.

The synagogue was used for religious purposes from the time of its founding to the Nazi occupation. It was closed during the Second World War and in 1942 was converted into a storehouse for items confiscated from Czech Jews by the Nazis. After the war the synagogue once again served its original purpose, but only until 1948. In the 1950s, during the Communist dictatorship, the Jewish Museum's collections and historic buildings (including the Spanish Synagogue) were transferred to state ownership. The synagogue was initially used as a textile depository, synagogue textiles being exhibited here in the years 1960-79. The building was later closed as a result of its poor technical state, although none of the essential repairs were carried out. The Spanish Synagogue became

increasingly dilapidated until October 1994, when the newly-founded Jewish Museum in Prague prioritised its complete refurbishment.

Spanish Synagogue refurbishment

Prior to the planned complete refurbishment, the Jewish Museum carried out essential repairs to the roof and the building was re-plastered. The complete refurbishment was begun by the Museum at the end of 1997 and completed in July 1998. The building work was preceded by an archaeological survey which, apart from the remains of mediaeval masonry, revealed nothing of any significance. The extensive building work included, inter alia, complete restoration and conservation of the original flooring, installation of a heating system, renovation of electrical installations, painting of all surfaces, installation of a special lift for disabled access, and installation of a security system and fire alarms. Restoration work proved to be a particularly demanding task. The rich and spectacular painted surfaces of the main nave were restored and renovated. The walls and ceilings were gilded, the latter being decorated in various colours. The same amount of care was applied to the restoration of the windows and window panes, which had to be removed and treated in a special workshop, and all the wooden features: ground floor and gallery doors, wall panels and balustrades. Restoration work also highlighted the qualities of the stone Torah Ark (aron) and the organ. The photograph to the left shows candelabras that have been restored and candlesticks that have been repaired. From this brief account it is clear just how demanding the work was, in terms of expertise, organisation, time and financing.

After being reopened, the Spanish Synagogue is now to be mainly used as an exhibition hall. Concerts can also be held in the synagogue, which has a capacity of 140 seats and which can boast very fine acoustics and an excellent late 19th century organ, whose quality is highly praised by specialists. In addition to the main nave and gallery of the Spanish Synagogue, the Winter Synagogue has also been refurbished. This is to be used for temporary exhibitions.

New exhibition

The exhibition History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from Emancipation to the Present, which has been installed in the Spanish Synagogue, deals with the emancipation of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia and the incorporation of the Jewish population into the economic, political and cultural life of society from the 18th to the 20th century. On the ground floor, visitors may become acquainted with the History of the Old School/Synagogue, the house of prayer that once stood on the site of the existing building, and of the Spanish Synagogue. This is followed by the Enlightenment and Emancipation (1780–1867), with documentation on, inter alia, the professional activities of Jews, Jewish settlements in Bohemia and Moravia, and the reforms of Joseph II. Focus is on the revolutionary year of 1848 and the completion of the emancipation process in 1867. It is possible to trace the development of Jewish culture and education in the sections on the Enlightenment, Wissenschaft des Judentums (the scientific study of Judaism), education and conservative/reform currents in Judaism. Development during the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918) is

covered by exhibits relating to the topics of Czech and German assimilation, the Zionist movement, the contribution of the Jews to political and economic life, and anti-Semitism in the 19th century.

In the synagogue gallery visitors can find out about the historical development of the Jewish population from the establishment of independent Czechoslovakia up until 1938. This section deals mainly with the status of Jews in the field of politics, economy and culture up until the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. References to Jewish figures active in the world of theatre, art, music and literature highlight the significance of the Jewish community in this period. The remaining sections of the exhibition are dedicated to Jewish memorials in Bohemia and Moravia, the Prague Ghetto, the clearance of Prague's Jewish Town at the turn of the 20th century, and the history of the Jewish Museum. The latter section covers the following: the establishment of the Jewish Museum in 1906 and its activities up until the German occupation, the Central Jewish Museum during the Second World War (1942–1945), the State Jewish Museum (1950–1994) and the present Jewish Museum in Prague (established in 1994). Connected to the history of the Jews in pre-war Czechoslovakia is the section dealing with the fate of the Jewish population in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945). The key topics, which are covered with great detail in the exhibition, are the Munich Agreement, the Nuremberg Laws, deportation preparations, confiscation of Jewish property, the Terezín Ghetto, transports to the East, and liberation. The final section concentrates on the post-war period from 1945 to the present. The exhibited documents and objects recall the return of the deported Jews to their homeland and the revival of the activities of the Jewish religious communities, in addition to the emigration of Jews and the cultural activities and personalities of Jewish religious communities. The curator of the exhibition is Dr. Vlastimila Hamáčková.

The opening of a temporary exhibition in the Winter Synagogue

On the same day as the opening of the Spanish Synagogue, a temporary exhibition that focuses on its refurbishment and restoration was opened in the Winter Synagogue. This includes photographic documentation of the whole project, covering building work and the restoration of the interior. The curator of the exhibition is Dr. Arno Pařík .

Souvenir shop

After visiting the Spanish Synagogue visitors can go to the small shop located in the entrance hall. This retail area is rented out by the Jewish Museum in Prague to the Czech firm "Relax-group". In addition to souvenirs related to Jewish topics, the shop also sells public transport tickets, telephone cards and meal tickets for the kosher restaurants Shalom and Massada. Visitors can also come here to find out about Jewish Museum activities and the programmes of its Educational and Cultural Centre, as well as to arrange accommodation in Prague.