

NEWSLETTER 1999/4

New exhibition in the Winter prayer hall of the Spanish Synagogue

The beginning of November saw the opening of the exhibition *Genizot - Findings from Bohemian and Moravian Synagogues* in the winter prayer hall of the Spanish Synagogue. The exhibition presents a selection of results from research carried out by Museum staff in Bohemian and Moravian synagogues from 1996. It documents findings from five localities (Luže, Březnice, Zalužany, Rychnov nad Kněžnou and Holešov) and highlights one of the lesser known aspects of Jewish tradition - the preservation of sacred articles that have been damaged or are no longer usable. In order to prevent the desecration of sacred books and ritual objects (such as synagogue textiles, phylacteries and tallitot), they were traditionally stored in a place known as the *genizah* - those featured in this exhibition were all found in synagogue attics.

The exhibits (curtains, mantles, binders, tallitot, tefillin bags, prayer sheets etc.) not only highlight the kind of objects stored in *genizot* but, as examples of Jewish popular arts and crafts, provide us with insights into the standards of living, customs and interests of the rural Jewish population from the late 17th century to the second half of the 19th century. Fragments of manuscripts and printed material reveal the strength of faith and of traditional fields of study and scholarship and show how they changed under the influence of Jewish enlightenment and related trends.

The exhibition was prepared by *Olga Sixtová*, curator of rare prints and manuscripts at the Jewish Museum, and runs until 30 January 2000.

Live broadcast from the Pinkas Synagogue

A special broadcast was prepared by Czech Radio in co-operation with the Jewish Museum on 16 September 1999. Marking the culmination of the Days of Jewish Culture on Czech radio, this was a live broadcast from the Pinkas Synagogue of a memorial service for Bohemian and Moravian Jews who died in the Holocaust. From 6 to 10 in the evening, 300 invited guests read out the names of 3,000 Czech Jews - some of the nearly 80,000 who died during the war. A broadcast of this kind is without parallel both in the Czech Republic and abroad. Among those who took part were *President Václav Havel*, members of the Czech Government and Parliament, representatives of foreign embassies, celebrities and prominent figures from the world of culture, survivors of the concentration camps, and numerous other Czech citizens. It was a very solemn and moving occasion, with prayers delivered by the cantor of the Jewish Museum in Prague, *Viktor Feuerlicht*. The reciting of names was interlaced with talks by the Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, *Dr. Leo Pavlát*, the Head of the Jewish Museum, *Dr. Anita Franková*, and the Chief Rabbi of the Czech



Republic, *Karol Sidon*, on the theme of the Shoah and its meaning for the present.

A cultural programme entitled *Every person has their own name* took place in the Jewish Museum's Educational and Cultural Centre, concurrently with the reciting of names in the Pinkas Synagogue. This programme involved the participation of prominent historians in a panel discussion (on the themes *Why didn't they defend themselves?* and *Art in extreme circumstances*) and the screening of films dealing with Jewish topics.

Regional exhibitions on Jewish themes - Velké Meziříčí



Velké Meziříčí is situated in Moravia, 135km to the south-east of Prague. There are no records of the first Jewish settlement in the town, as the Jewish community's archives were destroyed in a ghetto fire in the 19th century. The Jewish community was evidently in existence from as early as the 16th century. Many prominent rabbis officiated here and there was also an established yeshiva (traditional Jewish school).

In 1790 there were 888 people of Jewish origin (26% of the local population) living in Velké Meziříčí. The Jewish population was at its largest here in 1857 (1,116 Jews) and then went into gradual decline; in 1930 there were only 76. The local Jewish community was not restored after the war.

The only prominent buildings to have survived in Velké Meziříčí include the Old and New synagogues. The Old Synagogue is a valuable Gothic-Renaissance building, probably dating from the beginning of the 16th century. Services were held up to 1867, after which the building was used as a retail area and warehouse. The interior furnishings have not been preserved. The synagogue currently houses a regional exhibition on the history of the local Jewish community entitled *Magen David*. The exhibition was installed by the local Motorway Museum with specialist assistance from the Jewish Museum in Prague, which loaned over 30 synagogue articles from the mid-18th and, in particular, 19th centuries. Apart from a few exceptions, all the exhibits originate from Velké Meziříčí.



The New Synagogue was built in 1867 in a Neo-Gothic style. Services were held up to the outbreak of the Second World War. During the Nazi occupation the interior furnishings were destroyed and the space was used as a warehouse for the German army. The synagogue was refurbished in 1995 and now includes a retail area.

Another important surviving Jewish site in Velké Meziříčí is the Jewish cemetery. Burials took place here until the Second World War. The oldest tombstone dates from 1677.

Origin of the Jewish Museum library holdings *(conclusion)*

Below is the final part of the report on the origin of the Jewish Museum's book holdings, covering the post-war period.

Restituted books and books published in 1945-1949

As has already been pointed out, not all the books that were sent to the Jewish Museum in Prague after the Second World War were kept here. In the years 1945-1950 the Jewish Museum permanently loaned out liturgical objects and books to the restored Jewish religious communities of Bohemia and Moravia. (52 such communities were restored in 1945). In 1950 the loaned items were withdrawn from the Museum's inventory and approximately 20,000 other objects and books were set aside for the *Council of Jewish Religious Communities*. In addition to loans to Jewish communities, some books were earmarked for JOINT, JNUL and UNRRU, while others were either restituted or sold on the basis of a ruling of the then Ministry of Social Affairs. A total of 158,132 books were withdrawn from the Museum's library holdings in this way.

Nationalisation of the Jewish Museum in 1950

As part of the preparations for the nationalisation of the Jewish Museum in 1950 an administrative reorganisation was carried out, which also had a significant influence on the collections. In a certificate of donation from 28 November 1949 (enforced by the Communist authorities) the Council of Jewish Religious Communities in Bohemia and Moravia withdrew its ownership rights to the Museum's collections. The State took charge of the collections of the Jewish Museum, which itself was transferred to State ownership and management. In connection with nationalisation, it was necessary to meet the legal requirements of the National Renewal Fund (an institution operating between 1945-1951, which provided temporary management and distribution of confiscated enemy property), which involved financial compensation and the sorting of around 90,000 books from the Jewish Museum's holdings.

To sum up, it can be said that around 190,000 volumes were transferred to the Jewish Museum in Prague during the Second World War, 158,000 of which were returned. This meant that around 32,000 volumes were added to the approximately 15,000 volumes of the Jewish Religious Community Library. Part of the collection was included in the Museum's holdings and part remained outside (the Judaica Collection and humanistic works). The present number of 100,000 volumes includes these books as well as post-war acquisitions (purchases, donations, bequests). (Material prepared by *Andrea Braunová*)

Conference to mark the centenary of the Hilsner Affair



The centenary of the Hilsner Affair was marked by a conference on *The Hilsner Affair and Czech Society, 1899-1999*. This was prepared by the Educational and Cultural Centre of the Jewish Museum in co-operation with the Charles University and held under the auspices of the Rector of the Charles University, Prof. Karel Malý. The seminar, which tied in with the exhibition in the winter prayer hall of the Spanish Synagogue, was divided into two sections: *T.G.Masaryk -The Hilsner Affair-Czech Society* and *Problems of Anti-Semitism*. The conference involved the participation of a number of prominent Czech historians, political scientists, and other social science specialists. One of the contributions was from Prof. Jiří Kotvun, the American author of "Mysterious Murder", a wide-ranging publication dealing with the Hilsner Affair.

History of Jewish Museum exhibits

In 1850 the Jewish ghetto became linked to the other towns of Prague and was named Josefov to commemorate a visit by the Austrian emperor. After 1849 Jews from the Czech Lands were free to move around and settle in any part of the Austrian Empire. As a result, wealthy Jews left the Prague ghetto for better areas in the Old and New Town, while poorer non-Jews from other Prague districts moved into the ghetto. The number of Jews in the former ghetto went into gradual decline, and by 1880 Jews constituted less than half of the total population.

Buildings in the ghetto were dilapidated and the area overpopulated, with poor drainage, frequent floods, epidemics and inevitably high mortality rates. The public health problems associated with Josefov prompted the city council to carry out a radical rebuilding project, which was to drastically change the appearance of this part of Prague. The Slum Clearance Act was passed on 11 February 1893 on the basis of a project drawn up by architect Alfred Hurtig (which he called *Finis Ghetto*). The act covered the whole of Josefov and an adjacent part of the Old Town. Demolition work began in 1896 and continued throughout the Jewish Quarter until 1907. The construction of new houses was completed in 1912.

Czech public figures from the world of culture protested against the clearance project and demanded a revision of its key goals. This led to the establishment of the *Committee for a Listing of Architectural, Artistic and Historic Sites in the Royal City of Prague*. Despite all its efforts, this failed to bring about any fundamental changes, although it did manage to take thorough photographic documentation of a part of Prague that was soon to dis-appear for ever.



The implementation of the clearance project led to the demolition of a number of buildings, including synagogues, in an area demarcated by today's Široká,

Maisel and Dušní streets. The major ghetto sites that survived were the Old Jewish Cemetery, the Jewish Town Hall and six synagogues.

It was the demolition of synagogues that prompted the creation of the *Association for the Founding and Maintenance of the Jewish Museum in Prague* (1906), the aim of which was to save valuable synagogue articles. Among those demolished was the early Baroque *Zigeuner Synagogue*, which was established in about 1613 by *Solomon Salkid-Zigeuner* on the site of what is now Bilkova Street. The building was destroyed by fire and rebuilt several times during its lifetime. 1883 saw the introduction of reform services and a choir. After demolition in 1906, articles from the synagogue, including part of the bimah grille, were moved to the newly founded Jewish Museum. In May 1995 the above exhibit became incorporated into the historical exhibition in the Maisel Synagogue.

Prominent visits to the Jewish Museum



In Autumn 1999 the Jewish Museum was visited by the following prominent figures from the world of culture and politics:

September

- grandson of the famous Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem, *Sherwin Kaufman*, with his wife and

Sidney Gluck, the President of the Sholom Aleichem Memorial Foundation

- Swedish Prime Minister *Göran Persson*

October

- representative of the Patriarch of the oldest Buddhist School in Japan *Kakuhan Enami*
- Israeli humorist *Efraim Kishon*

