

New Exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Prague



March 2000 saw the opening in the Prayer Hall of the Spanish Synagogue of the exhibition Yamim mikedem - Old Jewish Postcards. This was arranged by the Jewish Museum in Prague in collaboration with František Bányai, a private collector of Jewish postcards. The exhibits have been selected from what is one of the most extensive collections of postcards featuring Czech Jewish subject matter from the period between 1895 and 1930. Such a cross-section offers a remarkable testimony to pre-war Jewish life in the Czech Lands, Slovakia and Ruthenia. These unique documents have never before been exhibited, either in Prague or abroad.

The exhibition features about 500 original postcards, which depict various Jewish themes: synagogues, Jewish streets and quarters, Jewish figures, festivals (New Year, Pesach), religious customs and traditions (wedding, bar mitzvah, birth) and Jewish anecdotes. The exhibits have been arranged into a number of thematic groups and are accompanied by explanatory texts in Czech and English. A catalogue has also been published in Czech and English, with numerous examples of postcards from the exhibition. The curator of the exhibition and author of the catalogue is Dr. Arno Pařík from the Jewish Museum.

Restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel

In February 2000 the Jewish Museum in Prague marked the 10th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel, which were broken after the Six-Day War of 1967. To celebrate this important event, the Museum's Cultural and Educational Centre held a gala evening, which was attended by a host of celebrities and political figures. Speeches were delivered by Dr. Leo Pavlát, Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, who in 1990 was Second Secretary at the Czechoslovak Embassy in Israel and Erella Hadar, Israeli Ambassador to the Czech Republic. After the screening of a documentary film Czechs for Israel there was an interesting discussion, which symbolically involved the participation of the following prominent figures: Prof. Eduard Goldstücker, the first Czechoslovak envoy to the newly established State of Israel, Dr. Miloš Pojar, the first Czechoslovak Ambassador to Israel after 23 years (and current director of the Jewish Museum in Prague's Cultural and Educational Centre), and Jiří Schneider, the former Czech Ambassador to Israel who succeeded Dr. Pojar.

Historical sights of the Jewish Museum - The Ceremonial Hall

The Ceremonial Hall is one of seven properties in the care of the Jewish Museum in Prague. The building is situated by the exit to the Old Jewish Cemetery and in close proximity to the Klausen Synagogue.

The Ceremonial Hall of the Prague Burial Society was designed in a pseudo-Romanesque style by J. Gerstl and built in 1906-08 on the site of a former mortuary. The main hall on the upper floor originally featured a mosaic floor and marble wall cladding and was decorated with murals, some of which were renovated during the Jewish Museum's refurbishment of the building in early 1998.



The former Ceremonial Hall, connected to a mortuary and a room for the ritual purification of the dead, belonged to the Prague Burial Society (Hevrah Kaddishah), which was established in Prague in 1564. Its founders included such prominent Jewish figures as Eliezer Ashkenazy, Prague Rabbi, scholar and author of a commentary on historical passages from the Torah entitled Maase ha-Shem, and the teacher and scholar Rabbi Jehuda Liwa ben Becalel - the famous Rabbi Loew. The 1759 statutes (takanot) of the Burial Society, which contain a transcription of the original statutes from 1564, can be seen in an exhibition housed in the Ceremonial Hall.

The Ceremonial Hall did not serve its original purpose for long. In 1926 it was leased to the Jewish Museum, which until 1941 used it as an exhibition space for its collections. During the Second World War, i.e., while the Central Jewish Museum was in existence, there was talk of establishing a Prague Ghetto Museum in the Ceremonial Hall. It should be pointed out, however, that during the Nazi occupation the Jewish Museum was essentially a place for storing objects of historical value that had been confiscated from Jewish religious communities. Naturally, it was closed to the public. As with the short-term exhibitions in the Old-New Synagogue (architecture of ancient synagogue), the High Synagogue (Hebrew manuscripts and prints) and the Klausen Synagogue (Jewish Customs and Traditions), the uncompleted exhibitions on the Prague Ghetto always bore traces of the circumstances under which they arose. The attempts of Jewish museologists to present the values of Jewish culture were always blocked by the Nazi authorities.

After the Second World War, the Ceremonial Hall housed an exhibition that was devoted to the history and sights of the Prague Ghetto. Between 1978 and 1998 it featured a display of drawings by Jewish children and artists from the Terezín concentration camp. (The exhibition of children's drawings is now housed on the upper floor of the Pinkas Synagogue - the Memorial to the Victims of the Shoah in Bohemia and Moravia.) In March 1998, after refurbishment of the building, a permanent exhibition was opened in the Ceremonial Hall devoted to Jewish customs and traditions, in connection with the Klausen Synagogue exhibition. Visitors therefore have the opportunity to become acquainted with the Jewish customs and objects associated with illness, treatment, death, burial and the activities of the Prague Burial Society. In addition, a well-known series of

paintings of the Prague Burial Society by an unknown artist in the late 18th century is once again on public display.

Regional exhibitions on Jewish themes - Holešov (*the end*)



Our regular exploration of prominent regional exhibitions and Jewish sights in Bohemia and Moravia now focuses on Holešov. This town is closely connected with the history of Czech Jews and boasts a number of major Jewish sights. Situated in Eastern Moravia approximately 240 km from Prague, it was granted town status as early as the 15th century. The first Jewish families settled here around 1450; the earliest record of the existence of a Jewish community in Holešov, however, dates from the second half of the 16th century. This was because the local Jewish community's archive was destroyed by fire in 1560, along with all documents testifying to the presence of the Jewish community in the region. In the 18th and 19th centuries the

Jewish community of Holešov was one of the most prominent communities in Moravia. According to existing records, 1,032 Jews (25% of the population) were living here in 1794, a number that had risen to 1,694 (32% of the population) by 1848. Demographic data show that the Jewish population went into gradual decline in the subsequent period. In 1900 there were 695 Jews living here and in 1930 a mere 273. The Jewish community was revived for only a short period after the Second World War.

A number of prominent rabbis were active in Holešov, the most famous being Shabtai ben Meir ha-Kohen, known as Shakh, from the Hebrew initials of his work *Sifsei ha-kohen* (literally "Priest's Lips"). Rabbi Shakh came from Vilnius and lived in Holešov until his death in 1663. He was buried in the local Jewish cemetery, his gravestone becoming a place of pilgrimage for devout Jews from across the world.



The Jewish quarter in Holešov covered a very large area and had a turbulent history.

During the several centuries of its existence it was afflicted by a number of fires, military invasions and even pogroms (the last violent anti-Jewish disturbance occurred here in 1918).

Although certain insensitive constructional changes were made to the Jewish quarter in the 1970s, part of the area remained intact. Besides the Jewish cemetery, other sights of particular interest include the Shakh Synagogue, which was built after an earlier synagogue was destroyed by fire in 1560. The synagogue was refurbished in the 1960s, the aim being to restore as much as possible of the original interior. The interior is richly decorated with ornamental folk-style paintings on the walls and ceiling with numerous Hebrew inscriptions.

Another eye-catching feature is the almemar (platform), located in the centre of the synagogue and characterized by finely-wrought work from the mid-18th century. The almemar does not originate from Holešov, having been brought to the synagogue from the nearby hamlet of Dřevohostice after the dissolution of the local Jewish community. The local cultural centre in Holešov installed an exhibition in the synagogue gallery which focuses on the local Jewish community. The Jewish Museum in Prague loaned a number of interesting items for this exhibition - such as Hanukkah lamps, shields, Torah pointers, Torah scrolls, mantle and a synagogue curtain, as well as other ritual objects. Many of these originate either directly from Holešov or from elsewhere in Moravia. The exhibition in the Shakh Synagogue runs until the end of 2000.

Note: This issue includes a map highlighting the areas of Jewish sights that have been featured in this and earlier Newsletters. Prague is indicated on the map so as to provide a clearer picture as to the location of individual areas.

Jewish Museum acquisitions



The Jewish Museum extended its collection last year with the acquisition of several extremely valuable art works. One of these is a drawing by the Czech artist, Bedřich Havránek, entitled Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague (pencil drawing on paper, ca. 1858). It is one of the few drawings by Havránek to be signed.

B. Havránek was born in 1821 in Prague, where he lived until his death in 1899. After graduating from the Prague Academy of Fine Art, he made a series of study trips across Europe, staying in England, France, Switzerland and Germany, where his work was displayed in several exhibitions (Munich, Berlin, Bremen). From the outset he focused on the depiction of nature; his romantic landscapes are characterized by great accuracy and an eye for detail. Between 1850 and 1870 he made numerous monumental paintings of nature and the Czech landscape, in addition to a number of works featuring urban scenes and castle views. With his drawings and paintings from 1847 to 1867, B. Havránek ranks among the most prominent artists to have portrayed the Old Jewish Cemetery.

Havránek's Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague depicts the path leading to the Pinkas Synagogue on the right with the tomb of Meir Fischl, a leading Jewish scholar and teacher of the 18th century. This is one of the most prominent pictures of the Old Jewish Cemetery and, at the same time, may serve as a key to the larger series of Havránek's studies and work dealing with this subject matter. It is a significant addition to the Museum's collection of topographic work on the Old Jewish Cemetery.

Another valuable acquisition of 1999 is a filigree gold wedding ring which bears the Hebrew inscription Mazal tov. Although the precise place and date of manufacture cannot be specified, it is most likely to have been made in eastern Europe in the first half of the 19th century.

Exhibition in Třebíč

The exhibition Sights of the Třebíč Jewish Community opened in the Rear Synagogue in Třebíč, Moravia this January. It was organized by the Třebíč Local Authority with specialist assistance from the Jewish Museum in Prague, which provided a large amount of synagogue objects. These include curtains, Torah mantles, pointers, ritual objects connected to individual Jewish holidays, as well as items of a personal nature, such as prayer books, tallitot and skullcaps. Thanks to the care taken by the Jewish Museum, it was possible to display here a number of items which originate from this region of Moravia. For more information on the Rear Synagogue and other Jewish sights in Třebíč, see Newsletter 3/99.



Prominent visits



The Jewish Museum in Prague was visited by the following prominent figures in January:

- David Levy, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs
- The Israeli Ambassadors to Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Albania, and the Israeli Chargé d'affaires in Georgia, Armenia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia
- Fernando de Trazegnies Granda, the Peruvian Minister of Foreign Affairs

Jewish Museum publications

The Jewish Museum in Prague published two catalogues in 1999, which are highly attractive both with regards both form and content. The first catalogue accompanies the exhibition Jewish Customs and Traditions, which is housed in the Klausen Synagogue and Ceremonial Hall, while the second is connected to the Spanish Synagogue exhibition The History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia - from Emancipation to the Present. Both publications are in English and are available in retail areas located in the Spanish, Maisel and Klausen Synagogues. They can also be ordered by contacting the Jewish Museum in Prague at Jáchymova 3, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic, fax: 00420 2 310 681, e-mail: zmp@ecn.cz.

