

Meeting of the Association of European Jewish Museums in Prague



Between 26 and 28 March the Jewish Museum in Prague hosted this year's meeting of the Association of European Jewish Museums. This event which brought together specialists from over twenty different countries was organized by the Jood Historich Museum in Amsterdam. It was no coincidence that Prague was chosen as the venue for the association's tenth anniversary meeting. For although the association has significantly

increased its membership in the last few years, the Jewish Museum in Prague still holds a prominent position within it. Delegates in Prague for the first time were surprised to see such a wealth of exhibitions and major sights, such as the synagogues and the Old Jewish Cemetery, which are in the care of the Jewish Museum in Prague. The Prague museum is also unique on account of the range and the comprehensive nature of its collections. The Association of European Jewish Museums was established as an organization that promotes the study of European Jewish history and seeks to protect and preserve Jewish sights and the Jewish cultural heritage in Europe. Rather than providing funds, the association helps its members by exchanging information and know-how, preparing group exhibitions and projects and providing professional assistance to newly established institutions. Several dozen museums of various types and sizes are now affiliated with the association - from Dublin and Toledo to Warsaw and Budapest, including newly established museums in Eastern Europe. All kinds of institutions are brought together, from traditional museums that have their own collections through to study and information centres that are equipped with state-of-the-art information and media technologies. The bedrock of the association remains Jewish museums in major European cities which have been re-established or significantly modernized during the last decade. Of these, the most important role is played by the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, the Museum of Jewish Art and History in Paris (opened in 1998) and the revived Jewish museums in Frankfurt and Vienna, the oldest in the word. In the last few years these institutions have been joined by the Jewish Museum in London, the Centre for Jewish Studies in Cracow, the Sephardic Museum in Toledo and the Jewish Museum in Athens. The meeting in Prague was attended by 40 representatives of Jewish museums, mostly from West and Central Europe: Brussels, Dublin, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Basle, Vienna, Eisenstadt, Munich, Trondheim, Bratislava, Warsaw and Athens. There were also representatives of recently opened Jewish museums in Hohenems, Furth, Trieste and Bologna and of Jewish museums that are currently being established in Berlin and Istanbul.

Hardly any of the new Jewish museums from Eastern Europe which took part in last year's meeting in St. Petersburg were represented this year. The exception was the Jewish Museum of Vilnius, which is involved in protecting a number of Jewish sights but, as is the case with most other new museums, faces a considerable lack of funds. As in previous years, the meeting involved a number of specialist lectures and discussions on current issues concerning museum activities.



The Jewish Museum in Prague prepared a group of lectures dealing with research into Jewish sights, conservation of tombstones in Jewish cemeteries, museum registration and digital documentation of collections. Presentations by museum staff covered the Genizah Project (Olga Sixtová and Arno Pařík), conservation of tombstones (external restorer Petr Justa), documentation methods (Magda Veselská) and the digitization of collections (Petr Kliment). The conference participants had the opportunity to exchange experience and gain new insights into various areas of museum work. Each museum representative talked about current activities and plans, major exhibitions, publications and important acquisitions. Of particular interest was the discussion on the educational activities of museums and untraditional methods of work with children. 3rd September was fixed for the annual Jewish Cultural Heritage Day, which most Jewish museums will mark by holding special events and opening up their exhibitions and collections to as wide a public as possible. The Prague museum's exhibition of Old Jewish postcards in the Spanish Synagogue received considerable praise. Meetings of the association are always connected with a tour of local Jewish sights, which provide a practical illustration as to how typical conservation problems are dealt with. This year, specialist staff at the Jewish Museum in Prague conducted a tour not only around all the museum's historical sights but also around the newly constructed silver and textile depositories both in and outside Prague. In the evening, a performance of Sephardic songs by Jana Lewitová and Vladimír Merta was held in the Spanish Synagogue. The meeting and lectures took place in the Museum's Educational and Cultural Centre. The new Jewish Museum in Bologna was selected as the venue for the association's next meeting in September 2001. As this museum is based primarily on multimedia presentations, the main theme of the conference and seminars will be the use of new information and media technology in museum work and new systems of documenting museum collections.

Exhibition reopening in the Rychnov Synagogue



16 May saw the reopening of the Jewish Museum of Podorlicko and of the Karel Poláček Memorial in the Rychnov nad Kněžnou Synagogue. Newsletter 3/98 focused on the history of this synagogue and on a new exhibition being prepared in co-operation with the Jewish Museum in Prague. The synagogue suffered damage during last year's floods, as a result of which the west part had to be re-rendered. Five years

after its opening in May 1995, a number of new panels highlighting Jewish festivals and religious customs have been added to the exhibition dedicated to Jewish sights and the history of Jewish communities in the region. The most important festivals of the year are documented by early engravings, illustrations and postcards, paintings by naive artists Robert Guttman and Robert Ehrmann, and graphic art by Marc Chagall and the contemporary illustrator Mark Podwal. As before, the exhibition features a number of ritual objects on loan from the Jewish Museum in Prague.

Concerts in the Spanish Synagogue

Evening concerts have been held in the Spanish Synagogue since April of this year. A greater number of agencies are now involved in the organization of concerts, which is something that adds to the variety of the overall repertoire. So far we have been able to hear ensembles playing on period instruments

(Ritornello and Kvinterna) and recitals dedicated to Sephardic songs and classical songs by Jewish composers. A memorable highlight was the concert of 30 May, which was organized by the "Prague Spring" International Music Festival and performed by the cantor of New York s



prestigious 5th Avenue Synagogue, Joseph Malovany, with accompaniment by Jaroslav Šaroun. A deeply-felt performance and superb interpretation of synagogue chants made the almost three-hour concert an experience to remember.

Art as "Strategies for Survival"

10 February saw the opening in the Moravian College (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, U.S.) of an exhibition dedicated to the Terezín Ghetto and centred around children's drawings and the work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeisová. The Jewish Museum in Prague was closely involved in the preparation of the exhibition and loaned copies of children's drawings and original art work by Friedl Dicker-Brandeisová. A special two-day conference was held to mark the opening of the exhibition by the Czech and Slovak ambassadors to the U.S. This was attended by the curator of the collection of paintings and graphic art at the Jewish Museum in Prague, Michaela Hájková, who gave a presentation on Friedl Dicker-Brandeisová, outlining the work of this prominent representative of the inter-war avant-garde and touching upon her educational activities in the pre-war period and in Terezín.

New acquisitions

The Jewish Museum in Prague purchased the following items in the first quarter of the year.

Haroset spoon

Fine Russian-style silver filigree. The bowl of the spoon consists of a stylized palm-leaf with the Star of David on the neck which is composed of a spiral flat band. The handle is surmounted by a moulded filigree flower and the base of bowl is engraved with the Hebrew inscription "Bezalel" from soldered silver wire. The spoon is marked as an Austro-Hungarian import from 1902-1921. It is an interesting illustration of the work of the Bezalel movement, highlighting the broad range of its activities.

Torah pointer

Silver, quite solid form in the shape of a thin cone. The middle ring and the back of the handle are decorated with finely chased foliage, corresponding to the Viennese style of the mid-19th century. The pointer is typical of the work of Thomas Regscheck and differs from the others in our collection with regards the finer quality of the chasing.

Torah shield

Typical form, made in Vienna in the second half of 19th century, originally partially gilt. Chased with foliage above, surmounted by winged griffin heads. The volutes of the foliage show lions holding the Ten Commandments, above

which there is a crown. An opening for exchangeable plaques with the names of festivals contains five plaques (probably originals). On the back of the shield is affixed an oval indented plaque which is engraved with a dedication in German: "Gewidmet dem Cultus Vereine in Gablonz von Emmanuel Lederer von dem Ertrage der Matrikenfuehrung 1885" and the equivalent year in Hebrew. The shield is equipped with a small chain (probably an original). The shield was hand-made by chasing as can be seen from its fine asymmetry. It has been preserved intact, including the plaques with the names of festivals and the chain. Its historical value is increased by the dedicational tablet bearing the name of the donor and the place of origin.

New publications

CD-ROM - The History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia

The Museum's first CD-ROM is divided into four sections based on subject matter. The first two outline, respectively, the historical development of the local Jewish population and Jewish sights in Bohemia and Moravia. The third section, entitled "Customs and Traditions" provides insights into the nature of Judaism, by dealing with festivals and the Jewish calendar, as well as referring to basic texts of the Jewish religion. The last part is a multimedia reference section (with illustrations and music excerpts) which explains the basic terms of Judaism. All four sections are accompanied by hypertext references, and a search programme is provided. A unique seminar project entitled "How to Teach about the Holocaust" was launched by the Museum's Cultural and Educational Centre in co-operation with the Terežín Memorial, the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno and the Czech Ministry of Education. The latter has supported the seminars (intended for primary and secondary school teachers) by covering part of the cost and distributing copies of the above CD-ROM to teachers as a way of increasing the accessibility of the information.

Jewish authors in European literature

A collection of lectures from the Museum's Educational and Cultural Centre has been put together in a volume prepared by Jiří Franěk and Miloš Pojar. This volume is the first of its kind in Czech literary science to address the contribution of Jewish authors to European national literatures. The lectures deal with Roma literature and literature from the former Yugoslavia, Denmark, Hungary, Poland and Latvia. The material is in the Czech language.

The Hilsner Affair and Czech Society, 1899-1999

A collection of lectures from last year's conference at the Charles University has been prepared by Miloš Pojar. It contains 29 lectures by Czech historians and philosophers, such as Prof. Milan Machovec, Jiří Kovtun, Eduard Goldstücker, Jaroslav Opat and others. The texts are in the Czech language. Copies of historical documents are included in the appendices.

Judaica Bohemiae XXXV

The 1999 edition of the journal dealing with the history of the Jewish community in Bohemia and Moravia has been prepared by Alexandr Putík. It includes the

following articles: Alexandr Putík : The Prague Jewish community in the late 17th and early 18th centuries; Lenka Matušíková: Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Judensiedlungen in Böhmen in den Jahren 1650 und 1674; Ivan Kalmar: The Origins of the Spanish Synagogue of Prague; Kateřina Čapková: Pillsudski or Masaryk ? Zionists revisionism in Czechoslovakia 1925-1940; Anna Hyndráková - Anna Lorenzová: A collection of memories organized by the Jewish Museum in Prague; Leo Pavlát: The Jewish Museum in Prague - 1999 Annual Report. The above publications can be ordered from the Jewish Museum in Prague.

