



### **New Headquarters**

In February 2001 the Jewish Museum in Prague relocated to two newly refurbished buildings next door to the Spanish Synagogue on the site of the former Old Shul. The history of these buildings stretches far back into the past.

In 1834 the Ritual Reform Society in Prague acquired the use of the Old Shul and the two adjoining buildings which came into the synagogue's hands after 1726. The Old Shul was

modernized in 1836 and regular services were introduced on 19 April 1837. As there was insufficient room for its rapidly growing congregation, however, a decision was taken in 1866 to build a new synagogue. The Old Shul was pulled down the following year and replaced by a new house of worship (with 500 seats for men and 300 for women). This was dedicated on 26 May 1868 and became known as the Spanish Synagogue.

In 1892 the congregation arranged to buy three small adjoining buildings on the south-facing side of the synagogue. These were pulled down and a new congregation building was erected on the site. The ground floor of this building housed a caretaker's room, a congregation room and archive and a winter prayer hall. It was probably around this time that the Reform Society bought a house on the north-facing side of the synagogue. This house was demolished during the clearance of the Prague ghetto at the beginning of the 20th century; it was

replaced in 1925 by a larger building whose design (by Lampl and Fuchs) conformed to a Moorish style in line with the requirements of the heritage department. The ground floor housed a winter prayer hall, conference hall and office; the rest of the building was let out to community members. The building on the south-facing side of the synagogue remained intact until 1935 when it was demolished and replaced, despite opposition from the heritage department, by a modern Functionalist building (designed by Karel Pečánek ) which included a new entrance hall, gallery staircase and winter prayer hall on the upper level.



There were originally shops and rented rooms in the south-facing annex. In 1940 the building was converted by František Zelenka into a Jewish hospital, which was the only place where Jews could receive medical treatment at the time. After the war the buildings around the Spanish Synagogue housed a youth hostel and a Jewish children's centre. In the 1950s the buildings came under the administration of the nearby St. Francis Hospital; geriatric wards were installed

and utilized until the mid-1990s. In 1994 the two hospital buildings along with the Spanish Synagogue were returned to the Prague Jewish Community, which later handed them over to the Jewish Museum in Prague. The Museum had them reconstructed in 1999-2000.

The reconstruction project was prepared by the Czech architectural practice *Znamení Čtyř* (Martin Bambas, Juraj Matula, Richard Sidej). The brief involved changing the function of the buildings in order to meet the specific operational requirements of the Museum. This was achieved by enlarging and fully utilizing the interior spaces and connecting the two buildings on all floors. Another ambitious task was to install depositories and restoration workshops. This was done in close collaboration with the architects and an environmental control specialist (Jan Červenák) who addressed all interior and exterior risk factors (i.e., placing archive spaces on the north-facing side improving the thermal insulation of outer walls, etc.). The new facilities include the very latest in technology and fulfil all the conditions necessary for the operations of these specialist units.

The synagogue entrance and a new café run along the facade of the functionalist building which is oriented onto an open space. On the shaded north-facing side of the other building are situated the new archive and library storage rooms, metal restoration workshops and a ground-floor exhibition hall. The main architectural adaptations on the ground floor include the café and main entrance. The latter has been extended into a stylish entrance hall with cladding in high quality materials. Another important detail of the interior design is the



generous lighting through the stained window of the main rosette above the Ark in the Spanish Synagogue.

On the ground floor of the newly reconstructed building are situated the Robert Guttmann Gallery (for temporary exhibitions of modern art) and a new information and reference centre, which is equipped with the latest in computer technology. The public areas are located on the ground and first floors, including the library and study, collection department study, photo studio, photo archive and

curators' offices. On the second and third floors are facilities with limited public access - textile and metal restoration workshops, a new paper restoration workshop, depositories and offices of the Judaic Studies and Holocaust departments. On the top floor are situated the economic department, exhibition and public relations department, computer network section and the director's office. A lift has been installed in each building. The Museum's technical facilities and stores are located in the basement and the security office is on the ground floor.

Future Newsletter issues will include more detailed information on the facilities and operations of the Museum's departments, depositories and restoration workshops.

### Vavro Oravec - A Painter of Soul

In mid-January 2001 a temporary exhibition of paintings by Vavro Oravec opened in the winter prayer hall of the Spanish Synagogue. This show, entitled A Painter of Soul, features 34 paintings from 1969-99 which were donated to the Jewish Museum in 2000. The curator is Arno Pařík . It is the most recent in a series of exhibitions held by the Jewish Museum which intend to bring the work of completely unknown or almost forgotten Jewish artists of the 20th century to the attention of the general public. In 1998 there was a display of naive paintings by Viktor Munk and two years later a display of paper works by the little known artist Chava Pressburger (born in Prague and living in Israel).

Vavro Oravec was born in the Slovakian town of Tvrdošín (1915), studied medicine in Bratislava (1933-38) and worked in hospitals in Bardějov and Nitra. After the establishment of the State of Slovakia (March 1938) he continued his hospital work for a while and then helped out in the Jewish Council's offices in Bratislava and gave lessons to Jewish children who had been expelled from school. The only art education he received at this time was a three-month retraining course in the ceramics studio of J. Horová and S. Fischerová in Bratislava (which he attended after being banned from practising medicine). He was arrested in Autumn 1944 and deported to Auschwitz, from where he was sent to the Gross Rosen Camp and Blechhammer.

After the end of the war Vavro Oravec went to Prague where he studied stomatology at Charles University and in 1948 began to practice dentistry. In his free time he tried his hand at painting, visited exhibitions, attended a course of art lessons and studied the art of the nude under Jan Bauch. He later turned for artistic advice to his painter friends from the May 57 group (R. Fremund, R. Piesen, J. Kolínská, J. Balcar, Z. Sekal, J. Švankmajer and others). He first exhibited his work together with a group of doctor painters in 1955. Helped on by a natural talent, he was soon to master the basics of painting, without ever losing his original naiveté, unique sensibility and distinctness of expression.



Three one-man shows in 1959, 1962 and 1965 reflected a significant development in his art and his outlook . He never acquired the technical proficiency and skill of a professional painter, but he turned this weakness to an advantage. He had to explore and discover everything for himself, reflecting with humility and a keen awareness of life. Prof. Jaromír Pečírka said of Vavro Oravec's work in 1959: "There is something mysterious in his pictures... as if the remnants or echoes of some ancient culture were hidden inside ... the patina of something that is not new, something that was experienced and cherished not only by the artist but by his ancestors ...".

With the exception of a few landscapes and figures, Oravec's work was for a long time almost exclusively centred around portraits. These are imaginary pictures, based on a deep affinity and close relationship. The faces of children and young girls reflect war-time experiences and are steeped in sadness.

After the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 Oravec emigrated to Berne. His work in exile was marked by new motifs that recall extreme experiences from Auschwitz and the death marches. His portraits of his

ancestors, parents, relatives and friends as well as his stylized self-portraits tend to depict states of the mind rather than external features. From the outset, however, a series of portraits of his kindred spirit Franz Kafka predominated. These were later followed by portraits of other authors, such as Marcel Proust, Robert Walser, Hermann Hesse and Ernst Toller, as well as his favourite artists Amedeo Modigliani, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee and Karel Černý.

Vavro Oravec's pictures all radiate an ineffable sense of magic, evoking a dreamlike atmosphere and depicting a world that is either long since past or existing on another level of consciousness. Through his art he seeks a pathway to himself, to forgotten events, people and objects, to their hidden meanings and to a sense that is hopelessly eluding the rest of us in the course of life.

The exhibition runs until 30 April 2001 (daily: 9.00 am - 6 pm, Saturdays and Jewish holidays: closed).

### **Jewish Moravia, Jewish Brno**

An exhibition entitled *Jewish Moravia, Jewish Brno* was held in the Brno House of Art between 17 December 2000 and 18 February 2001. Organized by k 2001 (a company concerned with culture and dialogue) this show brought together



over 500 exhibits and documents from the thousand year history of the Jews in Moravia and Silesia. Many of the ritual objects displayed were loaned from the Jewish Museum in Prague (78 exhibits). Among the finest synagogue textiles on loan were a Torah curtain from Brno (1697), which is decorated with striking embroidery, and one of the oldest surviving Torah mantles from Moravia (Loštice, 1735). Loaned metal artefacts of note included an alms box from Brno (1763), a Torah crown from Miroslav (1816), a Torah shield from Mikulov (1799), a Kiddush cup from Jihlava (pre-1623) and an

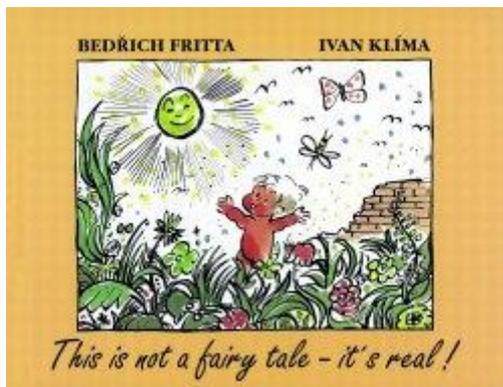
18th century Hanukkah lamp from Northern Bohemia. The Jewish Museum's art collection was represented by 8 portraits from the 19th century. 6 prints and manuscripts from the 17th century were restored for the purposes of the exhibition.

### **Purim Reflections in the Spanish Synagogue**

A special event, entitled *Purim Reflections*, took place in the Spanish synagogue on Monday 5 March. This was prepared by the Jazz Phonic Agency in association with the Jewish Museum. Leo Pavlát opened the proceedings with reflections on the subject of Purim. In the evening Vida Neuwirthová and Peter Rose performed excerpts from *The Song of Songs*, the Secretary of the Federation of Jewish Communities Tomáš Kraus read a letter from the famous Czech actor Jan Werich on the



festival of Purim, and Oren Anolik from the Israeli Embassy in Prague talked about Purim celebrations in Israel. Musical highlights included *Purim Tunes* performed by Michal Fořt, Vida Neuwirthová and Yizzband, flute variations from Bizet's *Carmen* performed by Markéta Stivínová and guitarist Tomáš Illy and *Fantasia on a Persian Dance* performed by Vaselius a Larisa Pomelnik . The event was compered by the actress Táňa Fischerová and musical accompaniment was by Debora Dostá-lová. The successful *Purim Reflections* followed on from the Hanukkah *Meeting-Reflections*, a tradition that is set to continue in the Spanish Synagogue.



### New publication

*Bedřich Fritta, Ivan Klíma: This is not a fairy tale - it's real!*

The Jewish Museum has just published the first English translation of a short story by Ivan Klíma with unique pictures by the Prague artist and caricaturist Bedřich Fritta. These pictures were created in the Terezín concentration camp. The artist compiled them for a book which he gave to his son Tommy on his third birthday. Bedřich Fritta died in 1944 shortly after being deported to Auschwitz. His son, then aged four, was the

only member of his family to survive. He has preserved this book as his father's legacy. An older boy called Ivan Klíma was living at Terezín at the same time as Tommy. It was here that his first literary efforts took shape. The two boys met each other many years after the war. To accompany Tommy Fritta's picture book , Ivan Klíma wrote a story about a boy who didn't become a number. (English, 108 pages, 51 colour reproductions)

### Prominent visits

*February*

A delegation of the American Jewish Committee from the U.S.

