

## FLOODS HIT PRAGUE'S JEWISH CULTURAL TREASURES

In the middle of August 2002, devastating floods hit the bulk of the Czech Republic, including Prague's Jewish monuments and the majority of the historic sites of the Jewish Museum in Prague. From 13 August, as a result of the damage caused by the flood waters, the Museum was forced to close its permanent exhibitions in all its synagogues, as well as the Old Jewish Cemetery, for several months. The planned opening of the exhibition "Adolf Kohn - Painter of the Prague Ghetto", which was originally scheduled for 15 August 2002, has had to be postponed. This grim event is covered in the following summary by the Museum director Leo Pavlát, together with photo documentation.



## FLOOD DAMAGE IN THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE, AUGUST 2002



As part of the Museum's preventative measures taken before the floods, the ground-floor sections of the permanent exhibitions in the Spanish, Maisel and Klausen synagogues were closed and hundreds of the Museum's artefacts were deposited in a safe place. The Museum complex, which is situated in an area that was completely evacuated during the floods, was not accessible to Museum staff for two days (13 and 14 August). Although this area of Prague was not flooded on the outside, a huge

increase in the level of groundwater and the flooding of the sewage system had a devastating impact. During the floods in Prague not a single object or book in the Museum's collection was destroyed or seriously damaged. It was the Museum's buildings that suffered the damage; preliminary estimates put the extent of this damage together with indirect financial losses incurred by the Museum during the floods

at hundreds of thousands of US\$. As the Museum is insured, it is expected that part of the damage will be covered.

Pinkas Synagogue (built in 1535)

Groundwater reached a height of 1.5 metres, flooding the nave and vestibule of the synagogue. The water covered some of the hand-written inscriptions on the walls which commemorate the 80,000 victims of the Shoah from Bohemia and Moravia. According to an expert assessment, the inscriptions are seriously damaged and moisture is rising on the walls even where the water did not reach. Also damaged are the historic stone bimah (platform) in the centre of the synagogue and the aron ha-kodesh (holy ark) on the east side. The water destroyed the banisters (which also served as a source of lighting for the synagogue) and the underfloor heating system. The building also shows signs of structural damage, which is something that needs to be assessed in detail.



Once the water was removed from the synagogue, work began on drying out the area, the building was disinfected and rescue work commenced on the wall inscriptions on the recommendation of external experts and Museum specialists. In view of the varied nature and extent of the damage, an expert team is being set up which, in a short while, will lay down a detailed procedure for further rescue work. At this stage, it is not yet known whether the damaged part of the memorial (hand-written wall inscriptions) - and, in the event of overall structural damage, perhaps even a significant part - can be saved. The reopening of the memorial is envisaged within 18 months, and, if necessary, inscriptions may be restored while the synagogue is open to visitors.





Specialist and administrative centre of the Museum, U staré školy Street, 1,3

The two-building complex which houses the Museum's administrative and specialist workplaces, security centre, book depositories, restoration workshops, library, study, reference centre, gallery and café was established following the extensive reconstruction and refurbishment of a former hospital. The Museum began to use the property in February 2001. During the floods, the basement areas were completely inundated. The water destroyed the transformer station, boiler room, cooling ventilation and elevator rooms, the vast majority of the Museum's visitor information publications, postcards and guidebooks, packing room, security staff cloakroom,

maintenance workshops and café stores. As the electricity supply has been cut off for a prolonged period of time and the air-conditioning is completely out of order, the depositories of books, rare printed works and manuscripts, in particular, are also at risk .

Since returning to work , Museum staff have, with the help of generators, been making constant efforts to dehumidify the depositories in order to prevent any damage to the books. After drawing water out of the basement areas of the building, all destroyed items were carried away to a dump. Plasterboard partitions which divide the basement rooms were taken down and the whole area was repeatedly disinfected. The partitions will be reinstalled once the basement has dried out. Ongoing work is being carried out on repairs to the technological facilities. The building will not be restored to its former state earlier than the spring of 2003.



Klausen Synagogue (built in 1573)

The basement was completely flooded and the boiler was destroyed. The flooding of basement areas also led to increased dampness in the nave. Once the water was drawn away, the basement areas were disinfected and dried out. The repair or replacement of the boiler may be envisaged in the course of October.





#### Maisel Synagogue (built in 1592)

Structural damage in the wake of the floods is suspected near the Maisel Synagogue, which is why the building's structure has to be monitored. In the vicinity of the synagogue, several pavements caved in and a symbolic 19th century tombstone in the front garden partly collapsed and broke in two. The basement area was completely covered with water, which - as with the Klausen Synagogue - led to increased dampness in the nave; the exhibition here cannot be renewed until the dampness falls to an acceptable level. The flooded areas were disinfected and dried out.

#### Spanish Synagogue (built in 1868)



The synagogue forms a connected complex with the specialist and administrative centre of the Museum. Its basement was covered with water, which destroyed the vast majority of the chairs in storage (used in concerts and services of the conservative congregation Beith Praha). The flooded areas were disinfected and dried out.

#### Old Jewish cemetery (oldest tombstone from 1439)

The cemetery was not flooded, but the raised level of groundwater threatened the stability of the trees and pathways. On the basis of an expert assessment, certain trees will have to be cut down in the interest of safety. In view of repairs to the Pinkas Synagogue, which borders the cemetery, it will not be possible to use the former visitor route on a long-term basis; it will therefore be necessary to prepare an alternative route.



### Jáchymova Street 3

The Museum's spare bookshelves were damaged in the flooded basement. No books, however, were stored here at the time of the floods.



### Smíchov Synagogue (built in 1863)

In no way did the floods damage the ongoing preparatory work connected with the repair and reconstruction of this synagogue, which is to serve as a Jewish archive and a depository for artworks. According to the original plan, the main building works were to have been launched at the end of this year and completed in 2003. The time frame for repairs and reconstruction will not be decided until all damage has been assessed and the insurance settled.

Prague, 27 August 2002

Leo Pavlát

Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Jewish Museum in Prague would like to thank all those who helped and are continuing to help us deal with the effects of the devastating floods. Our thanks go to the many volunteers (over 80) and institutions which helped the Museum immediately after the floods: the fire fighters from Znojmo, the Jewish Community in Brno, the Brno Railway Construction Company, the Mahler Hotel from Jihlava, Johnson&Johnson s.r.o. Praha, PSJ Holding a.s. from Jihlava and Hotel Marriot.

## HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT US

The Jewish Museum in Prague would appreciate any support for the renovation of Jewish monuments damaged by the devastating floods. Financial donations may be sent to the Museum's account at Komerční banka in Prague 1: no. 195420830257/0100 for \$ and other foreign currencies (except euro), no. 510091870297/0100 for the euro, no. 1954114380237/0100 for the Czech crown. The use of all funds will be publicized and, with prior consent, the donors will be mentioned in the Museum's newsletter and on its website. You can find out about other damaged Jewish sites at [www.jewishpragueflood.cz](http://www.jewishpragueflood.cz)

THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE FOUNDATIONS has set up a special account for financial contributions towards the renovation of the flood-damaged Pinkas Synagogue  
1718684223/0800 (abroad)  
35 - 1930175389 (Czech Republic).



## "TEXTILE TREASURES OF BOHEMIAN AND MORAVIAN SYNAGOGUES"

The Jewish Museum in Prague is preparing a unique exhibition of synagogue textiles with the sub-title "May the Work of My Hands be Praised". The exhibition is to take place from 26 March 2003 to 22 June 2002 in the Imperial Stables of Prague Castle. This comprehensive exhibition of synagogue textiles, which features over 150 items from the Museum's collections, is without parallel in terms of scale and concept, as it will be presenting an extraordinary group of textiles from the late 16th to the early 20th centuries. The collection itself has had an eventful history: like the vast majority of the Museum's

artefacts, it was established during World War II in connection with the shipment of confiscated Jewish property from over 150 Bohemian and Moravian communities. This gave rise to a quite unique set of textiles which is without parallel in any other specialised museum. To date, it has never been researched in any systematic way and only minor studies have been published (in the Museum's journal *Judaica Bohemiae* and for smaller thematic exhibitions). The aim of the exhibition is to acquaint the professional and general public as fully as possible with the whole range of the Museum's textiles, focusing on the period in question and on the techniques of textile fabrication employed. The exhibition will be accompanied by a beautifully designed catalogue in English, which will highlight all the exhibits in texts and reproductions and include other selected objects amounting to one thousand catalogue items. The



catalogue will comprise a total of 500 full-colour reproductions, which will provide a comprehensive illustration of the riches of the collection. The accompanying essays are by a group of authors, scholars and experts. We will keep you informed about the exhibition preparations in the next newsletter and on the Museum's website.

### **EDUCATION AND CULTURE CENTRE (ECC) - PLANNED PROJECTS**

A series of evening lectures entitled The Jewish Minority in the Czechoslovak Republic in the 1920s will be launched in October 2002 at the ECC, and the lecture series of the Chief Rabbi Karol Sidon and Rabbi Saši Pečarić will be continuing. A volume of lectures from the series American Jewish Literature will be published at the end of 2002.

In the 2002/03 school year, the ECC's educational programmes will be expanded to include the Noah's Ark workshop (connected with a tour of the Old Jewish Cemetery and the Klausen Synagogue), which is intended mainly for 6 to 11-year-old school children.

17 September saw the opening in Klatovy of the travelling exhibition Anna Frank Legacy for the Present, which has been organized by the ECC in association with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. From 7 October the exhibition will be installed in Jičín. The exhibition is complemented by a panel display entitled The Story of Children Drawings from the Terezín Ghetto and, in Klatovy, by the Lost Neighbours exhibition (as mentioned in Newsletter 1/2002). In November it will form part of the seminar How to Teach about the Holocaust, which will be held in Terezín.

### **PROMINENT VISITS**

July 2002

- Alan Gill, The American Joint Distribution Committee
- Steve Hoffman, Director of the United Jewish Communities
- Iveta Šulca, Latvian Ambassador to the Czech Republic

August 2002

- Günther Verheugen, European Commissioner for EU Expansion
- President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel and the First Lady Dagmar Havlová
- Serge Cwajgenbaum, Secretary General of the European Jewish Congress
- Rabbi Aba Dunner, President of the Conference of European Rabbis

