

Preserving and Shaping Jewish Culture at the Jewish Museum in Prague

by Leo Pavlát

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Although the discussion on Jewish museums is only one of many topics covered by this meeting, the activities of the Jewish Museum in Prague basically cut across all the topics to be addressed here.

Our museum cares for five synagogues of prime historical importance in Prague and two other synagogues outside the capital. Aside from the museum's office building, we also oversee another historic protected Jewish building—the Ceremonial Hall—and two Jewish cemeteries of immense historical value. During the past ten years of repairing and reconstructing these sites, we have gained great experience with this kind of activity, as well as with the protection, preservation, and documentation of cemeteries—and not only in Prague. Our collection of Judaica comprises tens of thousands of items, so we have something to say about their restoration and presentation to the public. Part of our museum is a Jewish archive for the whole of the Czech Republic. Our expert staff is involved in research activities, and we are also active as the most important Jewish educational and cultural institution serving the public in this country. We work in close association with Jewish communities and organizations, as well as with schools and state institutions; among others, we are visited by, for example, teachers and police officers.

I am sure that this meeting would like to hear about more detailed information on each of these activities. However, I shall be addressing only two issues that I find of particular importance for the future.

The activities of our museum can clearly be divided into two basic areas. Above all, the museum is involved in the protection of the movable and immovable Jewish cultural assets with which it has been entrusted, as well as their documentation and research. In addition, it deals with issues connected with the presentation and use of the huge wealth of its collections and documents for educational purposes and, at the same time, it organises independent public awareness and educational projects based around its collections.

As far as the repair and reconstruction of heritage sites and the care of Jewish memorial objects and the museum's holdings are concerned, we are, in my view, clearly successful—and it should be stressed that we receive no regular state support for our activities. On the other hand, our exhibition and educational projects need to be developed further and improved. The reasons are obvious. The objectives and principles of the protection of movable and immovable Jewish cultural assets are generally well-known. We are able to carry out these activities to a high standard thanks to a generally favourable cultural climate, good heritage legislation, and an abundance of technically skilled workers. The scope and success of these projects are basically determined solely by the available financial resources that are necessary for their implementation—and not by problems concerning project concepts or realization. Having enough money is of course necessary also for the development of exhibition and educational projects. However, as regards starting points for these activities and evaluation of their results,

there are, in my opinion, far more open questions than there are in relation to heritage or documentation projects.

The first major topic is the Jewish museum's standing in society. The natural autonomy of the Jewish museum should not, in our view, mean that the museum should be regarded as an ethnographic institution. In relation to Jewish communities and organizations, we can certainly serve as a place that enables people to understand their own history and values. In the specific case of our museum, it is possible, via the Reference Centre and the Education and Culture Centre, to gain a basic grounding in Judaism and to draw on Jewish sources of information.

The subtext of these activities is actually the need to formulate the role of the Jewish museum in the context of shaping Jewish identity. The question of Jewish identity means something a little different in post-Communist countries than is the case in countries with a long tradition of uninterrupted democratic development. This is evident in the way the idea of 'Jewish identity' in the former Communist countries is related to the concept of culture. In the West it is common to talk about 'promoting Jewish identity through culture'. In contrast, in the Czech Republic—as in Russia, the Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary—it is not just a question of promoting Jewish identity in the sense of its accentuation and development. Through Jewish cultural institutions it is both possible, and desirable, to help form Jewish identity: i.e., to shape and emphasise this aspect of life for those who, through no fault of their own, have become distanced from Jewish tradition and culture. Jewish values—the basis for the creation of Jewish identity—can also be impressed upon those with an interest in the Jewish religion and the Jewish fate. Finally, it is also possible to present Jewish identity through cultural projects

as reflecting a self-confident and proud stance that can be confronted with other concepts relating to different values and cultures in the world of today without feeling threatened.

These three possible ways of perceiving Jewish identity in relation to cultural activities are also expressed in the activities of the Jewish Museum in Prague. I believe that from whatever point of view we approach the Jewish phenomenon the very existence of our museum has a strong impact on all our visitors—particularly in view of the unique character of its collections that serve as a permanent reminder of the Nazi Genocide of Bohemian and Moravian Jews. The Jewish Museum in Prague is not essentially a museum based on a narrative, as is, for example, the Museum of the Diaspora in Israel or the Washington Holocaust Museum. It does not express, in conceptual terms, the history of the Jewish nation or the annihilation of European Jewry during the Second World War. It does, however, embody this history. Such history is real, as real as only life can be. The permanent exhibitions of the Jewish Museum in Prague are so unique because nearly all the exhibits bear witness to the people to whom they belonged shortly before their deaths. Our museum is basically a memorial in the true sense of the word. The emotionally charged nature of all the exhibits—objects that were looted from synagogues and homes—is something that we stress to all our visitors. From talking to our Jewish visitors and hearing what they have to say, it is clear that they strongly identify with the fate of the Jewish nation. Seeing these exhibitions encourages many Czech Jews, who have previously known nothing about their origin, to become further interested in Jewish culture and history.

Since the State returned the Jewish Museum to the Jewish Community in October 1994, we have been systematically changing the form of the permanent exhibitions with a

view to making them more informative and underlining their emotional impact. Unlike earlier exhibition concepts which placed items together on the basis of the materials used in their manufacture, as though they were mere historical craft artefacts, we emphasise both the historical and the spiritual context. Accordingly, we present exhibitions that cover the history of the Jews and Jewish customs and traditions in Bohemia and Moravia. In this way, visitors gain a valuable insight into the Jewish way of life and the historical context that influenced it. In a figurative sense, the objects that were once silenced, along with their owners, can now be heard once again.

Of no less importance for us, however, is the relationship to the non-Jewish milieu. We always present the Jewish legacy in Bohemia and Moravia in close connection with the general development of the Czech lands, and we try to place Jewish culture within the context of the general cultural development in this geographical region. We seek to shape encounters with Jewish culture as encounters with people who are 'different' and in many ways distinct, but not alien. In our educational projects, we place emphasis on an individual approach that varies for each visitor. What I have in mind here is not just the prioritising of interactive projects before the holding of lectures. In terms of our programmes, we focus on individual human fates and individual human experiences. Accordingly, we acquaint people with the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War mainly on the basis of encounters with individual persons who became the victims of Nazi hatred. This does not involve only encounters with witnesses to the events of the war. We also encourage young people, on the basis of their research methods, to discover people's fates. Our projects help them not only to take pleasure out

of the process of searching and discovery, but also to be able to identify with people who are 'different'.

Jewish visitors should leave our programmes with a stronger awareness of their Jewishness, while other visitors should become aware of how enriching an encounter with 'otherness' can be. Fear of 'otherness' leads to hatred, while acceptance of 'otherness' leads to an enrichment and strengthening of one's experience of humanity. This may sound somewhat exalted, but it is certainly a natural lesson that can be drawn from the Jewish experience. In a country that has experienced, almost consecutively, Nazi occupation and more than forty years of Communist rule, there is yet one more task to be carried out by a Jewish public institution. By contributing, in a major and significant, way to the preservation of the Jewish phenomenon in post-Communist countries, the Jewish Museum in Prague is helping to shape a multicultural society; a democratic system of plurality and variety which acts as a counterbalance to the nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, autocratic tendencies which, unfortunately, are nothing exceptional in post-Communist countries.