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‘THE MUSEUM OF AN EXTINCT RACE’ – FACT VS. LEGEND: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE TOPIC OF THE SO-CALLED JEWISH COUNCILS IN CENTRAL EUROPE¹

One of Prague’s most important tourist attractions is, without a doubt, the local Jewish museum, which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Most of the visitors know about its existence from tourist guides or from friends or relatives who have already been to Prague; alternatively, they have come across the collections of the Prague Jewish Museum at their displays abroad. Aside from the well-preserved monuments in the former Jewish ghetto, the synagogues that house the museum’s exhibitions, and the museum’s diverse collections, what also may inspire some tourists to visit the museum is the legend surrounding the genesis of its collections during the Second World War. A general idea still prevails that the museum was founded at the behest of the Nazis who intended to create a ‘museum of an extinct race’ in Prague for propaganda purposes and cynically compelled the Jews of Prague themselves to carry out their goal; as if the Nazi authorities had not concealed their plans from the Jews during the war and as if the employees of the Prague Jewish community – who were entrusted with this task – were already aware of the result and the extent of the tragedy that befell European Jewry.

When we talk about the Prague Jewish Museum in the period of the Second World War, we talk not only about its collections and exhibitions, but also about the activity of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Prague community’)² and its staff. There are two main views that we come across in regard to this: According to one view, which is now the more widespread and, having been constantly repeated, perceived to be true, in August 1942 the Prague community received, from out of the blue, an order from the Nazi *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* to create a ‘museum of an extinct race’. In this sense, the Prague community is perceived as a victim of the *Zentralstelle* and, at the same time, as its accomplice. According to the other view, which is not as popular but is based on historical research and archival sources, the war-time Prague

1) This paper is a revised and condensed version of the chapter ‘Oddělení K. Válečné osudy pražského židovského muzea aneb Téměř neuvěřitelný příběh’ [Department C: The Wartime Fate of the Prague Jewish Museum, or an Almost Unbelievable Story], in: Magda Veselská, *Archa paměti. Cesta pražského židovského muzea pohnutým 20. stoletím* [Ark of Memory: The Jewish Museum in Prague’s Journey through the Turbulent Twentieth Century], Praha 2012, pp. 53–119.

2) For a long time during the war, the Jewish Religious Community of Prague worked under its pre-war name, even though its scope was much broader from 1939. It was not until 8 February 1943 that the religious Jewish community, as referred to under Act No. 57 of 1890, was renamed *Ältestenrat der Juden*; see Bericht über das Jahr 1943, Ältestenrat der Juden in Prag, Yad Vashem Archives, Collection O7.cz (Archives and Collection hereinafter YVA), box 63. For the sake of simplicity, I shall be referring to the Jewish Religious Community of Prague as the ‘Prague community’ throughout the text.

community employees are seen as the prime movers of the plan, acting in the community's interests and, in this specific case, seeking to protect Jewish communal property with the post-war period in mind.

It was because of the efforts of the community employees that the Prague Jewish Museum was in such a good condition after the end of the Second World War; its collections had expanded and a number of quality exhibitions had been put together. What happened at the museum during the war, then, cannot be described without the context of the work done by the Prague community, and vice versa. Although the museum occupied a small place in the work agenda of the Prague community, it was of great importance for the latter's relations with its superior authority, the *Zentralstelle*, and even more with the *Zentralstelle*'s head, *SS-Sturm-bannführer* Hans Günther (1910–1945).³ On the other hand, the work of the Prague community during the war is usually assessed through the prism of its discussed influence on the existence and form of the Jewish museum – as if it had done nothing else during the war. This, too, is a highly distorted view.

In the first part of this paper, therefore, I shall show how the war-time collections of the Prague Jewish Museum were actually put together, how the museum worked during the war and, above all, what role the employees of the Prague Jewish community played in the creation of the museum. I shall also deal with the way the Prague community staff interacted with the *Zentralstelle*. In the second part of this paper, I will be examining how and when the idea of a 'museum of an extinct race' emerged – an idea that is still often considered to be a historical fact – and which authors had an influence over its formation and dissemination.

THE PRAGUE MUSEUM

The Jewish Museum in Prague, or, more specifically, the Association for the Founding and Maintenance of a Jewish Museum in Prague was founded in 1906, which makes it the third oldest Jewish museum in Europe. The immediate impulse for creating the museum was the clearance of the Prague Jewish ghetto and the adjoining areas, which had led to the destruction of a number of synagogues and prayer houses. The association's main aim was to gather together a representative collection of artefacts documenting the life of Jews in Prague and, more broadly, in Bohemia, and to make it available to the general public. From 1926 the collection was exhibited in the former Ceremonial Hall of the Prague Burial Society by the entrance to the Old Jewish Cemetery. It contained several hundred artefacts – primarily small liturgical silver objects, but also Hebrew documents, prints and books, textiles and visual art. The collection was overseen by a custodian, who also

3) Günther came to Prague from the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* in Vienna, where he worked with his brother Rolf, who was Adolf Eichmann's right-hand man and deputy in the department IVB4 at the Berlin Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA). For more details, see Jan Björn Potthast, *Das jüdische Zentralmuseum der SS in Prag. Gegnerforschung und Völkermord im Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, pp. 77–82; Anna Hájková, *Prisoner Society in the Terezin Ghetto, 1941–1945*, dissertation, University of Toronto (Graduate Department of History) 2013, pp. 45–48.

acted as an exhibition guide, and was displayed in its entirety. The exhibition was dominated by ritual spice boxes and Hanukkah lamps in large display cases; it also included a stylized prayer hall and a treasure chest with the most interesting artefacts.⁴

A dramatic change for all of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia – and, by extension, their communities and associations – came with the occupation of the Czech rump state by Nazi Germany in March 1939.⁵ Facing an uncertain future, Jewish communities – particularly the one in Prague – sought to deal with the influx of refugees from the Sudetenland and to tackle the increased interest in emigration, re-training and social assistance for those in need. In July 1939, the Nazi *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*⁶ was founded in Prague. It was modelled after the equivalent office in Vienna and included some of its staff. The main task of the *Zentralstelle* at this time was to see to the forced emigration of Protectorate Jews and to the confiscation of their property. In order to implement its goals, however, it required a counterpart on the Jewish side, to which end it selected the Prague Jewish community. The latter, in co-operation with the Palestine Office, was capable of operatively building up a necessary apparatus, of initially providing funds for its operations, and of dealing with the relevant authorities. There was actually no alternative; although the Supreme Council of Federations of Religious Jewish Communities in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia was eager to act as an umbrella organization for the Czech Jewish community, it was not too successful in this endeavour.⁷

The Prague community was given the responsibility of dealing not only with all those affected by the Nuremberg race laws in the Protectorate, but also with their

4) For more details, see Magda Veselská, ‘Přes překážky ke hvězdám. Židovské muzeum v Praze před druhou světovou válkou’ [Over Obstacles to the Stars: The Jewish Museum in Prague before the Second World War], in: M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 9–51. For the complete catalogue of the museum’s pre-war collection, see Magda Veselská, ed., *Defying the Beast. The Jewish Museum in Prague, 1906–1940*, Praha 2006.

5) This study focuses on the events surrounding the creation of the Central Jewish Museum as one of the many activities of the Prague community during the war, which is, moreover, a fairly isolated phenomenon. This is why it does not refer to the broader issues in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, including the restrictions on Jews, if they had no influence on them.

6) For more on the founding of the *Zentralstelle*, which was an extended arm of Eichmann’s department IVB4 at the RSHA in Berlin, see Jaroslava Mílotová, ‘Die Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung in Prag. Genesis und Tätigkeit bis zum Anfang des Jahres 1940’, in: Miroslav Kárný – Margita Kárná, eds., *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 1997*, Praha 1998, pp. 7–30; Gabriele Anderl, ‘Die “Zentralstellen für jüdische Auswanderung” in Wien, Berlin und Prag – ein Vergleich’, *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, 23 (1994), pp. 275–299; J. B. Pothast, *op. cit.* Under a regulation issued by the Reichsprotektor on 12 August 1942, the *Zentralstelle* was renamed the *Zentralamt für die/zur Regelung der Judenfrage*. For the sake of simplicity, the term *Zentralstelle* is used throughout this paper, except for citations from the work of Jiří Weil.

7) For more details, see Magda Veselská, “‘Sie müssen sich als Jude dessen bewusst sein, welche Opfer zu tragen sind...’ Handlungsspielräume der jüdischen Kultusgemeinden im Protektorat bis zum Ende der großen Deportationen’, in: Andrea Löw – Doris Bergen – Anna Hájková, eds., *Alltag im Holocaust. Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941–1945*, Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte, Band 106, München 2013, pp. 151–166.

organizations, i.e. Jewish communities and associations. At the outset this occurred unofficially, but from the spring of 1940 – shortly after the powers of the *Zentralstelle* had been extended to cover the entire territory of the Protectorate – it was official.⁸ From March 1942 the Prague community monitored the affairs of the other Jewish communities even more keenly; this was because the communities had been deprived of their apparent independence as a result of reorganization and had become branches of the Prague community with a single, centralized budget.⁹

With regards to the Jewish associations, the Prague community received its first orders from the *Zentralstelle* at the end of the summer of 1939. Initially, the associations were prohibited from asking the Jewish public for financial support for their activities; subsequently, they were merged according to their areas of activity (culture, education, etc.); and finally, in the autumn of 1939, they were brought to an end – provisionally at the behest only of the *Zentralstelle* – and their property was to be used for funding emigration. Officially, it was, for the time being, only “*hinterlegt*” (deposited) at the *Zentralstelle*, but the associations were actually deprived of it.¹⁰

The museum association was discontinued too, but the Prague Jewish Museum’s collection remained open to the public. This is rather surprising given the fact that the Jewish museums in Vienna and Frankfurt am Main, for example – which were founded shortly before the Prague museum – were destroyed immediately in 1938. It may be assumed, therefore, that both the Prague community and the *Zentralstelle* were interested in the preservation of the museum collection at this time, i.e. in the autumn of 1939, when they led a debate resulting in a Jewish museum that was open to the public during the Second World War.

The reasons for the Prague community were clear to see – the museum’s collection served as an anchor for its own identity in unsettled times and a reminder of its roots, but also represented its connection with the Czech milieu. The line of reasoning for preserving the museum’s collection that was used by the Prague community in its dealings with the *Zentralstelle* is evident from an unofficial, typewritten guidebook that has been preserved in two copies.¹¹ The community interpreted the collection as a group of artworks and referred to the collection objects as Jewish artistic objects, rather than liturgical items.

“Jewish artistic objects were sought in synagogues and religious communities from throughout Bohemia, and those of artistic value but no longer in

8) The Protectorate Jewish communities were subject to the Prague community on the basis of the *Verordnung des Reichsprotectors in Böhmen und Mähren über die Betreuung der Juden und jüdischer Organisationen* of 5 March 1940, see *Wochenbericht der jüdischen Kultusgemeinde Prag über die Zeit vom* (hereinafter *Wochenbericht*) 10. Februar bis 16. Februar 1940, YVA, box 54; *Wochenbericht* 2 – 8 March 1940, *ibidem*. For more on the extension of the *Zentralstelle*’s powers, see, for example, *Wochenbericht* 10 – 16 February 1940, YVA, box 54.

9) *Wochenbericht* 28 March – 3 April 1942, YVA, box 60.

10) *Wochenbericht* 27 August – 1 September 1939, YVA, box 53, *Wochenbericht* 28 October – 2 November 1939 et seq., and, with regard to the museum association, in particular *Wochenbericht* 7 – 13 October 1939.

use in synagogues were acquired for the museum. [...] Advantageous purchases from near and far later supplemented the Jewish artistic collection, the largest part of which comes from Bohemia, with items made by Jewish art specialists and Jewish craftsmen.”¹²

The description of the items selected for the guidebook, which mainly included silver, also emphasized their aesthetic and artistic quality – an interpretation that was further underlined by the way the collection was installed, particularly by the above-mentioned display cases full of individual silver objects.

There may have been several reasons for *Zentralstelle* agreeing to the Jewish museum’s collection being preserved and open to the public. It is debatable whether such a collection could have been sold at this time and the proceeds used in support of emigration. The existence of the Jewish museum’s small and not overly visited exhibition, which was attractively installed in a charming building, may have struck Hans Günther in 1939 as an aesthetic and basically harmless curiosity or a distinctive souvenir whose preservation in no way threatened or influenced the plans of the Nazi authorities, which at the time were directed towards expelling the Jews from the Protectorate and obtaining their property. Describing the collection as artistic and, hence, valuable, and drawing attention to its attractive content may have resonated well with the evident interest in Jewish property that was shown by the representatives of all the occupation authorities – the *Zentralstelle* being no exception. From the latter’s perspective, Hebraica was a sought-after article and silver was of undisputed value. A role in their decision-making process with regard to the fate of the museum, however, was evidently also played by the fact that, in the Protectorate, the Nazis had for the first time found themselves in a completely hostile ground that retained its apparent autonomy, and their status and, hence, behaviour here differed to a certain extent from what was the case in other territories. It is debatable whether as early as the autumn of 1939 the representatives of the *Zentralstelle* dealt with the consideration of what to do with the collection in the future, for they could not have anticipated the development of events. For the time being, they let things run their own course.

It is not surprising that the Prague community was interested in the Prague Jewish Museum. The duties of its employees were of immense scope and thematic range; they looked after the interests of every individual person affected by the

11) Das jüdische Museum, [1939/1940], Archiv Židovského muzea v Praze [Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague] (hereinafter AJMP), fonds Židovské muzeum v Praze [Jewish Museum in Prague] (hereinafter ŽMP), Inv. Nos. 89 and 89a, box 11. The guidebook has no date, but it was probably written for the purpose of providing basic information about the museum collection in support of its preservation in the autumn of 1939. It may also have been used in the spring of 1940, when the Prague community negotiated an exception from the Reichsprotektor’s order for the handover of items made of precious metals. It is absolutely certain, however, that it dates from before the end of 1941, as it describes the collection as it was prior to several thefts and before the preventative removal of a collection of coins and medals in January 1942; for more on this, see M. Veselská, *Defying the Beast*, pp. 24f. There is a pendant with a description of the Old Jewish Cemetery for the guidebook: Der Alte Jüdische Friedhof, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 90, box 11.

12) Das jüdische Museum, [1939/1940], AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 89, box 11, pp. 1f.

Nuremberg race laws in the Protectorate, dealt with strategic, financial and social matters, and negotiated with the Czech and the German occupation authorities.¹³ Despite all this, the protection of the Prague Jewish Museum and of Jewish monuments in general was permanently on their mind too. Their efforts were informed by an awareness of the considerable extent to which Czech Jews had assimilated before the war, but also by what was happening at the time, in particular the declining influence of the Jewish population on its own fate. By taking gradual steps and taking advantage of a concrete state of affairs, the Prague community staff were doing well in this area.

First great success was achieved in the spring of 1940 by the representative of the Prague community for financial and legal matters, František Friedmann (1897–1945),¹⁴ who managed to negotiate an exception from the order for the handover of items made of precious metals at the *Amt des Reichsprotectors in Böhmen und Mähren*.¹⁵ This exception originally applied only to liturgical objects, which – as Friedmann claimed – were still necessary for religious worship in synagogues. With initiative, however, he extended the exception to include the collections of Jewish museums in the territory of the Protectorate, which he designated as Jewish community property, a risky move that worked out well. As a result, the collections of the Jewish museums in Prague, Mikulov and Mladá Boleslav remained intact even after the confiscation order, as did the contents of synagogues, which was an exception within the European context.¹⁶

Another important step was taken by the Prague community a few weeks later when Jewish associations were definitively ended on the basis of a decree of the *Reichsprotector* in Bohemia and Moravia on the care of Jews and Jewish organizations, dated 5 March 1940. In reaction to the liquidation of the Prague Jewish Museum Association, the Prague community decided to take over its agenda in the area of heritage protection. Already at the end of the 1920s, the museum association was connected – in the person of its founder and managing director Salomon Hugo Lieben (1881–1942)¹⁷ – with the Supreme Council of Associations of Jewish

13) For more details, see M. Veselská, ‘Handlungsspielräume’.

14) Magda Veselská, ‘František Friedmann’, in: Marie Makariusová et al., eds., *Biografický slovník českých zemí* [A Biographical Dictionary of the Bohemian Lands], Vol. 18, Praha 2015, pp. 425f.

15) 5. Durchführungserlass zur Verordnung des Reichsprotectors in Böhmen und Mähren über das jüdische Vermögen vom 21. Juni 1939.

16) Aktenvermerk über die Vorsprache beim Reichsprotector Gruppe Wirtschaft, Herrn Schmerling, recorded by Franz Friedmann, 4 April 1940, AJMP, fonds ŽNO Praha za okupace [Jewish Religious Community of Prague during the Occupation], Inv. No. 16, box 2; letter from Herbert Schmerling to Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag, 6 May 1940, *ibidem*; Circular letter V/40 from the Rural Department of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, 5 April 1940, AJMP, fonds ŽNO Slaný [Jewish Religious Community of Slaný], 102886B; Rundschreiben XXIX/40 Abteilung für Provinzangelegenheiten, Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag, 10 October 1940, *ibidem*. See also Wochenbericht 16–22 March 1940, YVA, box 54; Monatsbericht der jüdischen Kultusgemeinde Prag (hereinafter Monatsbericht) über die Zeit vom 1. bis 29. Feber 1940, *ibidem*; Wochenbericht 27 April – 3 May 1940, YVA, box 55. For more details, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, p. 58.

17) Magda Veselská, ‘Salomon Hugo Lieben (1881–1942)’, in: Michal Bušek, ed., ‘*Hope is on the Next Page*’. 100 Years of the Library of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Praha 2007, pp. 7–14.

Religious Communities in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia and with the Society for the History of the Jews in Czechoslovakia and planned a joint project for the thorough documentation of all the Jewish monuments in the Bohemian lands. The findings of this project were to have been brought together in a single institution – the Central Jewish Museum. Although the project as such was not carried out before the Second World War, it was still something that was known about.¹⁸

After the liquidation of the museum association in the spring of 1940, Hugo Richter (1887–1943), an employee of the Culture and Education Department, came up with a proposal to set up a heritage commission in the Prague community. Although the community already had a separate heritage section that saw to the protection of Prague Jewish monuments, it accepted Richter’s proposal, evidently considering it to be important. The proposal basically overlapped with earlier plans from before the war; the Jewish cultural heritage was to be comprehensively recorded in four areas – immovable monuments such as synagogues, community buildings and cemeteries as well as liturgical and cultural objects (including artworks and literature) were to be documented, an archive of photography and plans was to be set up, and a music department was to be established.¹⁹ The only difference to the pre-war plans was that the documentation was now to be carried out by Jewish communities in the Protectorate themselves. With a view to creating a historical picture of Czech Jewry, however, the results were to have been gathered together in a single, centralized institution in Prague. A priority at the time was to transfer the museum collection of the Jewish community in Mladá Boleslav to Prague, most likely in response to the fact that Jews from Mladá Boleslav had been recently ordered to move to the old castle there; yet the transfer did not happen until a later date.²⁰

As for the collection of the pre-war Prague Jewish Museum, it remained open to the public. It was visited, for example, by Zionist instructors (*madrikhim*) and Jewish youth.²¹ It was not until the autumn of 1941 that the situation changed. First of all, in September, religious services were banned, as a result of which liturgical objects were no longer in use. Later on, in November, the German authorities began to deport the Jewish population to the east and to newly established ghetto in Terezín. The Prague community was compelled to set up a *Treuhandstelle* for overseeing the confiscated assets of Jewish deportees from Prague and the surrounding area. These assets were to be stored in Prague synagogues,²² the contents of which

18) For more details, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 34–36.

19) Heritage protection strategy from Hugo Richter as background material for a meeting of the heritage commission, 4 July 1940, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 17, box 3, and related documents, *ibidem*.

20) Record of a meeting held by the Heritage Section /K 9/ on 9 July 1940, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 17, box 3.

21) Wochenbericht 1 – 7 December 1939, YVA, box 53; Wochenbericht 9 – 15 March 1940, *ibidem*; diary entry of 28 September 1941, in: Eva Mändl Roubíčková, “*Langsam gewöhnen wir uns an das Ghettoleben.*” *Ein Tagebuch aus Theresienstadt*, herausgegeben von Veronika Springmann, Hamburg 2007, p. 49. The last record in the museum’s visitor book, which has not been preserved, is dated 24 November 1941; see the registration record for the object with Inv. No. JMP 012.790, ŽMP, Úsek dokumentace a evidence sbírek [Collections Management Department].

had to be removed. Due to lack of space elsewhere, the synagogues objects ended up in the Prague Jewish Museum building at the beginning of December 1941.²³ It was at this moment that tours of the museum no longer became possible. The Prague community's Culture and Education Department, which oversaw the museum, protested against this and requested that the items of Judaica be stored elsewhere. In the end, after several weeks of negotiations, the objects from synagogues in Prague were transferred to the Pinkas Synagogue, where they were overseen by the Religion and Registry Department with competence for the matter; still perceived as liturgical objects, they were even conserved, as they were evidently to be kept in the best possible condition for the future, their original purpose being retained.²⁴

As soon as the museum building was returned to its original use and once again housed only the Prague museum's collection, the Culture and Education Department initiated proceedings to ensure that the museum would reopen to the public. In April 1942 it arranged for the broken display cases to be repaired, for the exhibits to be numbered and provided with captions, for the paintings to be rehung on the walls, and for a screen to be built for the custodian. In the meantime, there had been several thefts from the collection, which is why the collection objects had to be re-insured.²⁵ No other changes to the composition of the collection or to the exhibition concept occurred, nor were they planned; after a forced hiatus, then, everything was to have returned to its original pre-war condition. In the spring of 1942, however, the course of events was unexpectedly impacted by an incident in Brno, which subsequently set off a chain reaction.

22) See, for example, the reports on the activities of the Treuhandstelle, in: Helena Krejčová – Jana Svobodová – Anna Hyndráková, eds., *Židé v Protektorátu. Hlášení Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942. Dokumenty* [Jews in the Protectorate. Reports of the Jewish Religious Community in 1942. Documents], Praha 1997, pp. 199–205 and 345–349.

23) Letter from the Economic Administration (Property Management) to the [Culture and] Education Department, 4 December 1941, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; letter from the Property Management to the [Culture and] Education Department, 18 December 1941, *ibidem*. For more details, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, p. 60.

24) For example, a letter from the Culture and Education Department (Pollak) to the Economic Administration, 10 December 1941, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4, and a letter from the Culture and Education Department to the Technical Office (Zelenka), 21 December 1941, *ibidem*; a letter from the Economic Administration (Property Management, Zelenka) to the Culture and Education Department, 20 February 1942, *ibidem*; a memorandum from the Museum Administration to the Religion [and Registry] Department, stating that objects belonging to the museum's collection have been identified in the Pinkas Synagogue by the museum custodian Leopold Glanzberg, 1 May 1942, *ibidem*; and related correspondence, *ibidem*.

25) Letter from the Culture and Education Department to the Economic Administration, 13 January 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 17, box 3; letter from the Economic Administration to the Culture and Education Department, 16 April 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 27, box 4, and related correspondence between the individual departments of the Prague community, *ibidem*; M. Veselská, *Defying the Beast*, pp. 24f.; Bericht vom 10. 6. 1943 über die Einholung der im Alten Jüdischen Museum entwendeten Gegenstände, 10 June 1943, and related correspondence, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 26, box 3. For more on the re-opening of the museum, see the letter from the museum (ing. Richter) to Josef Pollak (Culture and Education Department), 19 April 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 27, box 4.

A SELECT MUSEUM

The collection of the Jewish museum in the border town of Mikulov – which the local association representatives had moved inland for safety reasons in May 1938 – was stored in a building belonging to the Jewish Religious Community of Brno.²⁶ Despite all efforts, it was never put on display again in Brno and it remained in storage crates. In the course of 1941, the collection was inspected by the German *Zollfahndungsstelle*, which found out that it was subject to the exception for objects made of precious metals that was negotiated at the *Amt des Reichsprotectors in Böhmen und Mähren* in the spring of 1940 and, hence, that nothing could be done with it. In November 1941 the collection was discovered by the Gestapo during a house search at the Brno Jewish community building and it was seized, along with other objects. The Gestapo immediately asked the employee of the Brno branch of the *Zentralstelle* whether he knew about the objects and how the *Zentralstelle* was going to proceed. In Prague, however, it was not until March 1942, after several urgent reminders from the Brno Gestapo, that they found out about the entire matter. The *Zentralstelle* then decided to take away the objects, but did not make any explicit statement regarding the Mikulov museum collection. The Brno Gestapo therefore contacted the *Zollfahndungsstelle*, which announced that it would be opposing the above-described exception, because, as of September 1941 the reason for which it had been granted (for liturgical purposes) no longer applied.²⁷

What occurred then was basically a dispute over competence among the Nazi authorities with regard to Jewish property. At the end of April 1942 the dispute was to be decided by the *Amt des Reichsprotectors in Böhmen und Mähren*, which granted the above exception. In the end, the proceedings went well for the *Zentralstelle* – its competences were confirmed because, among other reasons, the administration of the property of Jewish communities had already been taken over by the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren*, which was affiliated to the *Zentralstelle*. As for the Mikulov collection, it was to be transferred to Prague and merged with the collection of the Prague Jewish Museum, which is what happened at the end of May 1942.²⁸

This did not, however, bring the entire matter to an end. For at this moment, at the latest, the *Zentralstelle* discovered that its Brno branch was lax and that it did not have the situation in Moravia under control. Moreover, in competition with the other occupation authorities, its status in this region was from the outset weak. Im-

26) Magda Veselská, ‘Židovské ústřední museum pro Moravsko-Slezsko v Mikulově’ [The Central Jewish Museum for Moravia-Silesia in Mikulov], *RegioM. Sborník regionálního muzea v Mikulově 2005*, pp. 80–87.

27) Brno Gestapo record, dated 7 November 1941, NA, fonds Okupační vězeňské spisy (Okupační vězeňské spisy / Koncentrační tábory) [Occupation Prison Files (Occupation Prison Files / Concentration Camps)], AMV 101, hereinafter OVS/KT-OVS, AMV 101), sg. 101-653-4; Brno Gestapo record, dated 27 January 1942, *ibidem*, and related correspondence from February – March 1942 between the Brno Gestapo, the Brno office of the *Zentralstelle* and the *Zollfahndungsstelle*, *ibidem*.

mediately after its founding, which did not occur until the summer of 1939, i.e. several months after the occupation, the *Zentralstelle* was competent only for the area of Prague and its surroundings. Although it established a branch in Moravská Ostrava for a brief period in the autumn of 1939, this served only for the dispatching of transports to Nisko. It was only in February 1940 that the powers of the *Zentralstelle* were extended to include the entire territory of the Protectorate. A branch of the *Zentralstelle* was set up in the Moravian metropolis of Brno at the end of 1940, but its competence was limited to the Brno *Oberlandrat*;²⁹ the remaining area of Moravia still fell under the authority of Prague. In this situation, the Brno *Gestapo-Leitstelle* for Moravia – which reported not to Prague, but directly to Berlin – usurped control over the Jewish communities of Moravia for itself.³⁰

The *Zentralstelle* responded promptly to this discovery: only a few days after the meeting at the *Amt des Reichsprotectors*, it arranged for all of the objects owned by Jewish communities in the area of the Brno *Oberlandrat* to be transferred to Brno. Its decision was understandable, for the deportations from the *Oberlandrat* had almost come to an end at the beginning of May 1942, making it the first large administrative area in Moravia to be, as it were, ‘without Jews’. The synagogues were abandoned and the management of the property that had been left behind was problematic; it was simpler to transfer it to a single warehouse, along the lines of the tried-and-tested *Treuhandstelle*. Shortly afterwards, the Prague community decided that it would transfer the objects from Brno to Prague.³¹

The Prague community’s initiative in this matter was probably derived from the fact that it could protect liturgical objects and, in particular, the closely followed silver *Judaica*, on its home ground in a better way than it could in Brno. It carried out the orders that it received from the *Zentralstelle*, but, at the same time, it also focused on its own heritage protection activity in keeping with the programme that was formulated by Hugo Richter in July 1940. In February 1942, for example, it

28) Aktenvermerk über die Vorsprache beim Reichsprotector in Böhmen und Mähren, Gruppe Wirtschaft II/1-3 F, am 24. April 1942, 27 April 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; copy of a letter from the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag to the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag, Aussenstelle Brünn, 28 April 1942, NA, OVS/KT-OVS, AMV 101, 101-653-4, and related correspondence from May 1942 between the Brno Gestapo, the Zollfahndungsstelle and the Brno Jewish Community, *ibidem*; record drawn up on 29 May 1942 in the presence of Hugo Richter as a member of the heritage commission of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, Leopold Glanzberg as a custodian at the museum and Dr. Josef Schwarz as an official at the Department for Rural Affairs, dated 29 May 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 43, box 6.

29) The *Oberlandrat* was a unit of the occupation authority’s administrative system in the territory of the Protectorate and was directly under the *Reichsprotectorsamt*. See, for example, Stanislav Šisler, ‘Příspěvek k vývoji a organizaci okupační správy v českých zemích v letech 1939–1945’ [Paper on the Development and Organization of the Occupation Administration in Bohemia and Moravia, 1939–1945], *Sborník archivních prací* (hereinafter *SAP*), 1963, 2, pp. 46–95; *idem*, ‘Studie o organizaci a působnosti nacistické okupační správy v českých zemích v letech 1939–1945’ [Study on the Organization and Scope of the Nazi Occupation Administration in Bohemia and Moravia, 1939–1945], *SAP*, 1972, 1, pp. 183–219.

30) For more details, see M. Veselská, ‘Handlungsspielräume’, p. 155.

31) Wochenbericht 2 – 8 May 1942, YVA, box 61; Extract from a record of a meeting held by the Secretariat on 29 April 1942, 4 May 1942, in German, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4.

ascertained, by means of a circular letter, how the liturgical objects were stored in the communities and whether they were insured.³² At the end of April 1942, it appealed to the Heritage Commission to continue its documentation of all of the Jewish monuments.³³ At the same time, it once again emphatically pointed out to all the Jewish communities that they should keep all of the objects from synagogues and burial society buildings that they oversee in a dignified manner and in a safe place, or – if this was not possible – send them to Prague; in this case, too, priority was given to silver.³⁴

During negotiations over the collection of the Mikulov Jewish Museum, however, the *Zentralstelle* also found out that interesting objects and museum artefacts had been preserved not only in Prague, but also in other Jewish communities in the Protectorate. This was an opportunity that it did not pass over. On 26 May 1942 the deputy head of the *Zentralstelle*, *SS-Untersturmbannführer* Karl Rahm (1907–1947)³⁵ gave an instruction for books on science and cultural history in the possession of Protectorate Jewish communities to be sent to Prague and stored in the Prague community’s premises. In addition, all of the historic and historically valuable objects from rural areas were to be transferred to Prague and kept in the Prague Museum building.³⁶

The attention paid in particular to books is in no way surprising; they were collected in bulk by national socialists, among other reasons, as a source for ‘studying the enemy’ (in German: *Gegnerforschung*). Books were also of considerable interest to the *Zentralstelle*; as early as March 1941, for example, it ordered the Prague community to prepare a report on the libraries of Jewish communities and organizations, and subsequently made other similar demands.³⁷ With regards to objects, only the “*historic and historically valuable*” items were to be selected, i.e. those that were of the same quality and value as those in the collections of the Prague and Mikulov museums, to which they were to be attached.³⁸ Rahm’s order was carried out by the Prague community by means of a circular letter, which was sent by the

32) Circular letter III/42 from the Department for Rural Affairs of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, 17 February 1942, AJMP, ŽNO Slaný, 102875.

33) Extract from a record of a meeting held by the Secretariat on 29 April 1942, 4 May 1942, in German, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4.

34) See, for example, a letter from the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag, Aussenstelle Kladno to the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag, Ortsstelle Slaný, 18 April 1942, AJMP, ŽNO Slaný, no number; Circular letter III/42 from the Department for Rural Affairs of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, 17 February 1942, *ibidem*, 102875.

35) Karl Rahm also began at the Vienna *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*; in Prague he was Hans Günther’s deputy. In February 1944 he became the third and last commandant of the ghetto in Terezín. For more details, see J. B. Potthast, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–84; A. Hájková, *Prisoner Society*, pp. 50f.

36) Extract from an Aktennotiz (memorandum) of 26 May 1942, no date, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 29, box 4.

37) Wochenbericht 1 – 7 March 1941, YVA, box 57, see also Karel Poláček, *Úvahy. Korespondence. Deník z roku 1943* [Reflections. Correspondence. 1943 Diary], Praha 2001, various references in letters sent to Dora Vaňáková, pp. 255–328. Similar reports on the sorting of objects other than books are not available.

38) Extract from an Aktennotiz of 26 May 1942, no date, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 29, box 4.

Department for Rural Affairs to all of the Jewish communities in the Protectorate on 28 May 1942.³⁹

In the context of the above-described dispute over competence, however, the *Zentralstelle* wanted to be certain that it had not overlooked any of the property owned by Jewish communities. Rahm therefore ordered the Prague community to let him know immediately whether any books or objects had been seized by another component of the occupation administration.⁴⁰ The Prague community did not find any historic or historically valuable objects to have been confiscated or seized. With regards to books, however, the suspicions of the *Zentralstelle* were confirmed: the Brno Gestapo had been particularly active in this area from mid-March 1939 through to the autumn of 1941, having confiscated the libraries of Moravian Jewish communities in Brno, Jihlava, Moravská Ostrava, Olomouc and Prostějov.⁴¹

The impact of the circular letter sent in May could not have been anticipated in advance.⁴² The majority of Jewish communities reacted in accordance with its instructions and sent to Prague individual items that may have been deemed to be suitable for a museum collection. The Jewish community of Klatovy, for example, selected only two items: a letter that it had once received from the philanthropist Moses Montefiore (1784–1885) and a commemorative medal from 1860. Yet some Jewish communities, particularly in areas where deportations to Terezín had already been completed or were nearing completion, proceeded in a different manner: taking advantage of the opportunity, they sent all their property to Prague for safe keeping. After all, the Prague community had already made several offers to look after these objects.⁴³

The Prague community did not receive any instructions for subsequent handling of the objects that had been brought together and stored in the Ceremonial Hall and the Pinkas Synagogue in accordance with the May circular. The *Zentralstelle* apparently was of the view that there would be a limited amount of objects

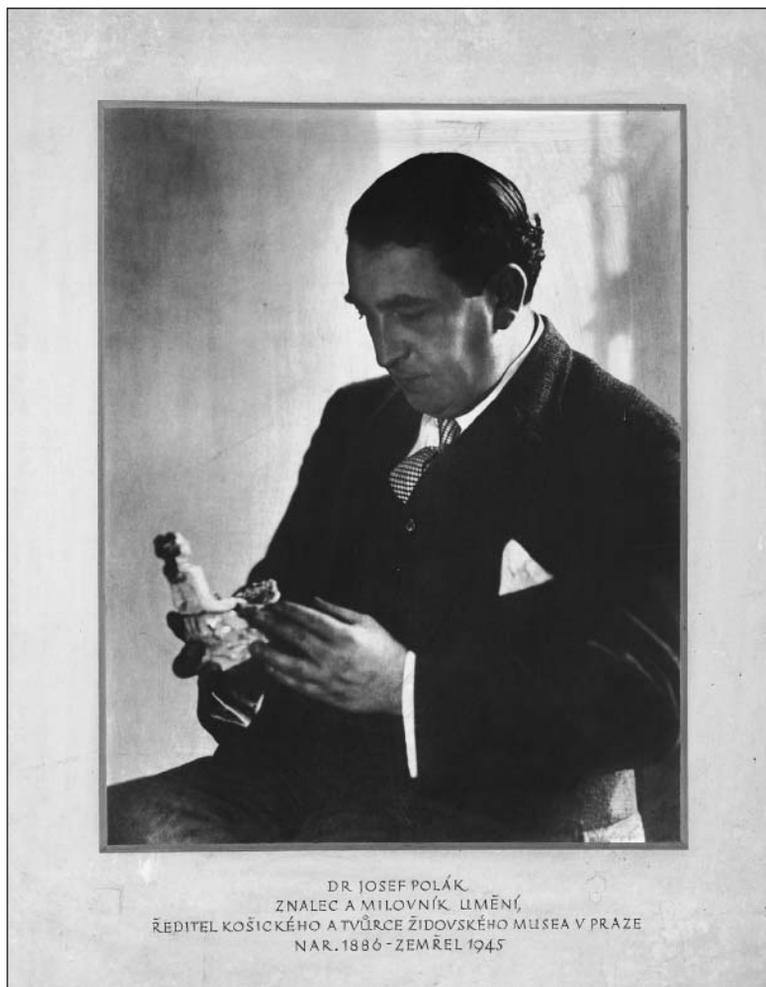
39) Circular letter from the Jewish Religious Community of Prague (Department for Rural Affairs) to all of the branches and local offices with regard to the transfer of historic and historically valuable objects to Prague, 28 May 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4.

40) For example, an extract from an Aktennotiz of 26 May 1942, no date, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 29, box 4. The query regarding the objects is headed 'Jüdisches Museum'.

41) Report from the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde Prag to the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung, 26 May 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 29, box 4. The sole exception related to the library of the Jewish community in Pilsen, which had been confiscated by the Regierungspolizei der Stadt Pilsen.

42) The Prague community made use of it for the transfer of the Mladá Boleslav Jewish Museum's collection to Prague; letter from the Culture and Education Department to Dr. Weidmann, Dr. Lieben and Dr. Stein (Department for Rural Affairs), 10 June 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; letter from the Department for Rural Affairs to the Mladá Boleslav branch [of the Prague community], 16 June 1942, *ibidem*; list of consignments received, 27 May 1942 – 4 August 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 43, box 6.

43) List of consignments received, 27 May 1942 – 4 August 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 43, box 6; record drawn up on 11 June 1942 at the Jewish Religious Community of Prague in the presence of Hugo Richter as a representative of the heritage department and of the Jewish Museum manager, Leopold Glanzberg as the custodian of the Jewish Museum and Dr. Jan Friedmann as a representative of the Department for Rural Affairs, *ibidem*.



Josef Polák (1886–1945), before the Second World War served as the director of the East Slovak Museum in Košice and was the co-founder of the Jewish Museum in Prešov. During the war he was the chief curator of the Central Jewish Museum in Prague. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague

and that they would be simply incorporated into the Prague museum's collection; with this, the entire matter was to have been closed. However, more than a hundred crates arrived from Brno alone, which was why the Prague community had to take the initiative itself – if it wanted to bring some kind of order and system to the entire matter.⁴⁴

44) Extract from a record of a meeting held by the Secretariat on 29 April 1942, 4 May 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; letter from the Culture and Education Department to František Friedmann (?), 28 May 1942, *ibidem*.

Shortly after issuing the May circular, the Prague community leadership began to consider how to process the contents of the consignments and, above all, how to preserve the information about the provenance of the objects. Even though there were several members of community staff who regarded themselves as being competent to manage the expanding collection, the task fell to the experienced museum curator Josef Polák (1886–1945).⁴⁵ At the end of May 1942 the Prague community asked Polák to prepare a proposal for a “*programme and procedure for documenting the objects from Prague and the objects that had been sent to Prague from Jewish museums and communities*”. This task required the same treatment for all the objects that had been gathered together in Prague so far. At the same time, however, it is clear that the Prague community continued to subconsciously differentiate between the Prague Jewish Museum’s collection – as a basis for what was happening at the time – and the other objects. The current form of the Prague museum constituted an intellectual model with which to handle the other objects; there is no reason to assume that either the Prague community or, even more improbably, the *Zentralstelle* had any desire to digress from the idea of putting together a simple installation of visually interesting artefacts and to create an exhibition that should have some kind of a theme or should place the ceremonial objects in a particular context.

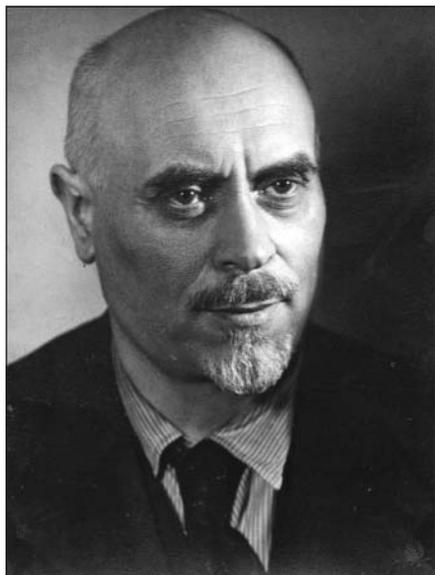
Josef Polák responded to the request forthwith. Impressed by the quality of his proposal, the Prague community leadership offered him the opportunity to participate in the museum’s work, but as this move sparked a degree of controversy, Polák was engaged only as an external associate with the task of helping to install the expanded collection, selecting exhibits, describing the objects and, where necessary, providing advice in connection with the planning and installation of the museum that was being formed.⁴⁶

Apart from registering the objects, the Prague community also considered what the expanded Prague Museum was to look like, as it had not received any orders from the *Zentralstelle* even with regard to this matter. To this end it put together a working team, which was led by the then head of the Prague community, František Weidmann (1910–1944), which means that the matter of the museum was of great importance for the mutual relations between the Prague community and the *Zentralstelle*. The members of the team included the founders of the pre-war Jewish museums of Prague (S. H. Lieben) and Mikulov (Alfred Engel,

45) Magda Veselská, ‘Der Mann, der niemals aufgab. Die Geschichte des Josef Polák, Hauptkurator des Jüdischen Zentralmuseums in Prag zur Zeit des Zweiten Weltkrieges’, in: Jaroslava Milotová – Michael Wögerbauer – Anna Hájková, eds., *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 2006*, Praha 2007, pp. 14–83.

46) Letter from Josef Polák to ŽNOP, 4 June 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 17, box 3; letter from František Weidmann to Josef Polák, 11 June 1942, and related correspondence, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 27, box 4; Commemorative record drawn up on the date below in front of the undersigned witnesses to the verbal agreement between the Culture Department of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, representing this community, and Dr. Josef Polák, Praha XVIII., Říšská 99 with regard to the founding of the central museum, 1 August 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 38, box 5. For more details, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, p. 67.

1881–1944) and other experts, such as the Prague community librarian Tobias Jakobovits (1887–1944). The involvement of the architect and set designer František Zelenka (1904–1944) suggests that the effective installation of the museum’s collection and its artefacts – i.e. aesthetic criteria – continued to be regarded as key.⁴⁷



Tobias Jakobovits (1887–1944), before the Second World War served as the librarian of the Prague Jewish Community. During the war he was the specialist head of the Central Jewish Museum team. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague



František Zelenka (1904–1944), a prominent architect and set designer who designed most of the exhibitions of the Central Jewish Museum. He was deported to Terezín in July 1943, where, among other things, he directed the children’s opera *Brundibár*. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague

The amount of consignments that flowed to Prague on the basis of the May circular was clearly larger than had been anticipated, which was why the Prague community, at the end of June 1942, had to inform the *Zentralstelle* that the specialist processing of objects and books would take a longer time.⁴⁸ Yet the *Zentralstelle* took a livelier interest only in the books: in response to the Prague community’s in-

47) Magda Veselská, ‘Alfred Engel’, in: Pavla Vošahlíková et al., ed., *Biografický slovník českých zemí* [A Biographical Dictionary of the Bohemian Lands], Vol. 15, Praha 2012, p. 593; Ondřej Čihák, ‘Tobias Jakobovits (1887–1944)’, in: M. Bušek, ed., ‘*Hope is on the Next Page*’, pp. 24–27; Oliva Pechová, ‘František Zelenka a jeho dílo’ [František Zelenka and his Work], *Židovská ročenka 5749*, 1988/1989, pp. 101–107. František Zelenka was a core employee of the Property Management of the Prague community; see H. Krejčová – J. Svobodová – A. Hyndráková, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

48) Letter from the Jüdische Kultusgemeinde in Prag to the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung, 30 June 1942, Archiv Národního muzea [Archives of the National Museum] (hereinafter ANM), fonds Hana Volavková (hereinafter Volavková), Inv. No. 744.

terim report from the end of June 1942, the *Zentralstelle* demanded a list of the valuable books that were being kept in Prague for the time being; several days later, it again demanded a list of the items that had already been sent to Prague from the libraries of Jewish communities and of what had remained in the rural areas.⁴⁹ Among the books that had recently been transferred to the metropolis were some of those that had previously been confiscated by the Brno Gestapo; so the *Zentralstelle* had retained its competence.⁵⁰

At the end of June 1942 the Prague community began to think about splitting up the exhibition into several parts, as it was clear that the Prague Jewish Museum building was not big enough to display the objects that had been amassed. In accordance with the new plan, the Prague museum was to remain in the Ceremonial Hall in its current form or with slight additions. The adjacent Klausen Synagogue was selected for the display of the best items from the rural communities. The two exhibition spaces were to be supplemented by the Old-New Synagogue; objects relating to this unique building were to be displayed in the women's gallery. On the opposite side, the exhibition space was to be enclosed by another prominent Jewish site, the Old Jewish Cemetery.⁵¹

As the plans became more specific, the Prague community took more and more initiative in the development of the museum, evidently having decided to approach the project in a professional and ambitious manner. The *Zentralstelle* in no way limited the Prague community, probably because it was incapable of seeing where or how the entire matter would play out. It continued to let things run their own course and, without additional comments or reminders, issued the necessary orders for vacating buildings for the museum's purposes or for expanding the collections from the warehouses of the *Treuhandstelle*. Neither the *Zentralstelle*'s chief Hans Günther, nor his deputy Karl Rahm interfered in the museum's preparations by making demands of their own. Prague community staff, however, noted that the *Zentralstelle* was particularly interested in the books, which was why the High Synagogue was set aside for the storage of books from the libraries of Protectorate Jewish communities.⁵²

At the beginning of July 1942 discussions began about the form of the future exhibitions, although still without any kind of demands or orders from the *Zentral-*

49) Record of the Heritage Section (ing. Richter), 30 June 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; memorandum from the Department for Rural Affairs to the Culture and Education Department, 9 July 1942, *ibidem*.

50) For example, the library of the Jewish community in Moravská Ostrava; see the memorandum from the Department for Rural Affairs to the Culture and Education Department, 9 July 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4, and the memorandum from the Department for Rural Affairs to the Heritage Section, 31 July 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 43, box 6.

51) Letter from the Culture and Education Department to the Management and Office of the Central Secretariat, 29 June 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; Extract from an Aktennotiz of 7 July 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 29, box 4.

52) Letter from the Kultur- und Schulabteilung to the Leitung, 8 July 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 29, box 4; record from the [Culture and] Education Department (Heritage Section, Dr. Pollak) to the Central Secretariat, 1 June 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 27, box 4. For the High Synagogue, see extract from Aktennotiz of 7 July 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 29, box 4.

stelle. František Weidmann, therefore, authorized the Heritage Section of the Culture and Education Department to draw up a proposal showing how the exhibitions in the Ceremonial Hall, Klausen Synagogue and Old-New Synagogue were to look, what the museum’s task was to be and how it was to be carried out. The visual and aesthetic form of the future exhibitions remained a key issue, because Weidmann required that the proposal should also include “*nice sketches showing what the arrangement of the artefacts in the museum will look like, as well as appropriate approximate ground plans*” by the architect František Zelenka. To this end, a list of the ‘artistic’ – although actually liturgical – types of objects that could be considered for inclusion in the exhibitions was drawn up.⁵³

It was not until the end of July 1942 that Karl Rahm and *SS-Untersturm-bannführer* Richard Buchholz from the *Zentralstelle* came to see the Prague Jewish Museum in the Ceremonial Hall and other synagogues that were earmarked as spaces for the museum’s exhibitions. During their visit, they dealt with specific operational matters, such as funding activities, insuring the properties to be used as exhibition spaces, supplying workers to unpack and sort the consignments, and selecting specialist employees. In the meantime, the entire project for a select museum developed into a much larger goal – the museum, which was to be launched on 1 August 1942, now had at its disposal buildings for exhibitions and a technical and administrative base in the Pinkas Synagogue and in the former Jewish school in Regnartova Street (now Jáchymova Street). From now on, admission to the museum buildings was to be permitted only “*to the men from the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*” and to selected employees of the Prague community, although to the latter only for business matters. As for the structure of the planned exhibitions, there was a fundamental last-minute change that reflected the interests of the *Zentralstelle*: the High Synagogue was now to serve as a separate ‘museum of the book’, instead of being used as a warehouse. This produced the enclosed area of the Jewish Museum, which was bounded by a single street.⁵⁴

THE CENTRAL MUSEUM

Even though it appeared that the definitive form and structure of the select museum of historic artefacts from Protectorate communities was taking shape over the course of July 1942, the Prague community did not cease being active. Its staff came up with a new idea at the start of August 1942. The initiative, however, was taken not by the Culture and Education Department, which took care of the Prague Museum and the acquisitions that had been made so far, but by another department – the Department for Rural Affairs; the new goal apparently had a different background. This is because the museum institution, which the *Zentralstelle* liked and

53) Letter from the Heritage Section to František Zelenka, 8 July 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4.

54) For Richard Buchholz, see J. B. Potthast, *op. cit.*, pp. 84f.; Bericht Nr. 2, betrifft Zentralmuseum. Ueber den 22. VII. 1942, 23 July 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 27, box 4; Hausordnung für die Arbeitsstätten des Jüdischen Zentralmuseums in Prag, 1 August 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 18, box 3.

with whose existence it had no problem, had given the department head Karel Stein (1906–1961)⁵⁵ the idea that the museum could provide an ideal cover for dealing with a problem with which his department was most beset at that time – namely, how to look after the abandoned property of Jewish communities in rural areas, where deportations to Terezín were in full swing.



Karel Stein (1906–1961), before the Second World War was active as a lawyer. During the war he headed the Prague Jewish Community's Department for Rural Affairs. It was his proposal to found the Central Jewish Museum. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague

Stein was well aware of the situation outside Prague, and his concerns for the fate of the abandoned property of Jewish communities were well-founded. The deportations to Terezín were at their highest levels and the number of areas that no longer had any Jewish inhabitants was increasing.⁵⁶ In rural areas, moreover, there

55) Karel Stein was born in Světlá nad Sázavou and from early childhood lived with his widowed mother and five siblings in Prague. Before the war he was active as a lawyer and sympathized with Zionism. He was keenly interested in history and was an expert on Prague monuments. From 1940 he worked for the Prague community as head of the Department for Rural Affairs. Unlike his wife and daughter, he survived the war. After returning to Prague he became the chairman of the Prague community and contributed to the revival of Jewish life. In the middle of 1949 he emigrated to Israel with his new family. He was to have appeared as a witness in the Adolf Eichmann trial, but he died shortly before the beginning of the trial. Information obtained from correspondence with Yitzhak Stein, Judith Shaked and Magdalena Čapková.

56) Deportations from the regions of Brno, Pilsen, Kladno, České Budějovice, Třebíč, Kolín and Olomouc basically ended by the start of August 1942; there remained Pardubice, Ostrava, Tábor, Klatovy and Hradec Králové by the end of 1942, followed by Mladá Boleslav and Uherský Brod in 1943.

remained a number of objects that had not been evaluated as historic or historically valuable by Jewish communities in May 1942, and these included a large amount of silver items. The path for Stein was then shown by the response of several communities that had sent all their objects to Prague in May without having made any selection.⁵⁷ The comprehensively focused documentation projects from the late 1920s and the early 1940s, as mentioned above, were a further source of inspiration. This is confirmed by measures that were taken as a direct follow-up to Stein’s activity and by several later requests from the Prague community for sending other types of objects or documents and for photographic documentation of synagogues etc. for the museum’s purposes.⁵⁸

At the start of August 1942, then, Karel Stein suggested to the *Zentralstelle* that all the movable assets of Protectorate Jewish communities should be brought together in Prague for the museum’s requirements. No further details are known of the circumstances of the relevant negotiations, but Stein is said to have consistently adhered to the interpretation of the objects as artefacts and implicitly emphasized the suitability of the museum institution as a place for their storage.⁵⁹ Stein himself recalled this matter after the war:

“It led me to the idea of saving what could still be saved in the Jewish Museum, before it would be destroyed on the basis of an order. What contributed to this was that the synagogues that had been closed down in rural areas were being burgled, desecrated and also burned down. If I originally planned to keep all the ritual objects, memorial books and commemorative items of the communities in their synagogues and community buildings in order to save something at least here and there, it now seemed important to me to bring everything together in one place. I made a submission to the Zentralstelle, pointed out that a museum for Jewish affairs had been set up in the Reich, and recommended that such a museum also be created in the Protectorate, so that it could present important illustrative material to future generations if there were no longer any Jews here.”⁶⁰

57) Record drawn up on 11 June 1942 at the Jewish Religious Community of Prague in the presence of Hugo Richter as a representative of the heritage department and of the Jewish Museum manager, Leopold Glanzberg as the custodian of the Jewish Museum and Dr. Jan Friedmann as a representative of the Department for Rural Affairs, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 43, box 6; a memorandum from the Department for Rural Affairs to the Culture and Education Department, 12 June 1942, *ibidem*, and a memorandum from the Religion and Registry Department to the Department for Rural Affairs, 17 June 1942, *ibidem*.

58) See, for example, Circular letter XV/42 from the Department for Rural Affairs of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, 16 August 1942, AJMP, ŽNO Slaný, 102875. Photographic documentation of the exteriors of synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish sites (monuments, etc.) with a recommendation also to photograph interiors at the behest of the Prague community, had been carried out from as early as 1941; see Circular letter XXVII/41 from the Department for Rural Affairs to the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, 11 September 1941, AJMP, ŽNO Holešov, 62618.

59) Interview with Yitzhak Stein in Jerusalem, 3 November 2008. Based on an agreement, no audio recording was made of the interview.

The *Zentralstelle* agreed to Stein's proposal, which took the Prague community staff unawares, as it had apparently not counted on success.⁶¹ The proposal appealed to the *Zentralstelle* evidently for two main reasons. The *Zentralstelle* appreciated the idea that all the movable assets of Jewish communities would be concentrated in Prague along the lines of the tried-and-tested *Treuhandstelle*, and was enticed by two attractive bonuses: a large amount of Hebraica and carefully monitored silver. Keeping the property safe in a single place would give the *Zentralstelle* an overview of its actual extent, would keep it out of reach from its rivals in Moravia, and would facilitate the work of the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren*, which was set up at the *Zentralstelle* for the purpose of managing the movable and immovable assets of Jewish communities and of the real estate of individual persons.⁶² At the same time, the *Zentralstelle* may also have been enticed by the fact that a museum with the most interesting objects from the Protectorate would be able to supplement its collection. Not even at this point, however, did the *Zentralstelle* give the Prague community any instructions concerning the content or concept of the museum. Its only requirement was the museum should be created as soon as possible.⁶³

On 3 August 1942 the Prague community's Department for Rural Affairs, therefore, sent another circular letter to the Jewish communities. Unlike the May circular, which was focused on selecting historic and historically valuable objects, this one required the communities to send to Prague all their items that were not fixed or otherwise attached to something – namely, ritual objects, archival material and files, books, music scores and objects from synagogues apart from those items that were still necessary for use (for example, items used for the ritual washing of the dead). The purpose of this transfer was to inspect the objects and, if possible, to incorporate them into the Rural Area Department of the Prague Jewish Museum, which from then on was known as the Central Jewish Museum.⁶⁴ Apart from the requirement to send all the objects to Prague, the August letter also differed from the May letter in one important respect: the May letter was sent at the 'behest' of

60) Karel Stein, 'Die Juden zur Zeit des Protektorates in Böhmen und Mähren-Schlesien' (record of an interview with Friedrich Thieberger), Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, CS 62 (hereinafter CAHJP, Karel Stein), pp. 4f. Post-war interpretations of the purpose and mission of the Prague Jewish Museum worked with the Frankfurt Institute for Research on the Jewish Question (Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage in Frankfurt am Main), although it is not clear whether Stein also had this institute in mind. In any case, Stein was inspired only by the existence of that institution, rather than its purpose. The founding of the museum he related only to the Protectorate and did not envisage any overlaps in terms of content or concept. Moreover, Stein considered 'if', rather than 'when' there would no longer be any Jews in the Protectorate. Last but not least, he did not specify for whom the museum was to be informative.

61) Hana Volavková, 'Ústřední židovské museum v Praze' [Central Jewish Museum in Prague], no date [1946], manuscript, AJMP, Documentation, H 15. This is a draft of a text that was subsequently edited several times, with all personal judgements and sensitive information removed.

62) Central Jewish Museum, 9 July 1945, Ref. No. 22/45, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 4, box 35.

63) As early as the autumn of 1942, the head of the *Zentralstelle*, Hans Günther, complained about the slow pace at which the museum was being created and threatened to give the Prague community a deadline for its completion; extract from an Aktennotiz of 19 November 1942, ANM, Volavková 744.

the *Zentralstelle*, while the August letter was issued with the ‘consent’ of the *Zentralstelle*. In accordance with the accompanying instructions, it was a priority to transfer the most valuable items, namely silver, for which there continued to apply a special policy. The other objects were to be packed, stored and later sent to Prague at the prompting of the Department for Rural Affairs, which thereby clearly sought to ensure that the museum received, by way of priority, artefacts from areas where de-



Prague Jewish Community employees unpacking and sorting consignments of liturgical objects from rural Jewish communities. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague

64) Circular letter from the Department for Rural Affairs of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague to all the branches and local offices with regard to the Central Jewish Museum in Prague – Rural Area Department – the transfer of various objects to Prague, 3 August 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 42, box 6.

portations were coming to an end, and also to co-ordinate the flow of consignments and their documentation in Prague.⁶⁵

The current state of affairs was summarized in the middle of September 1942 in the Statutes of the Central Jewish Museum of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague. According to this document, the museum was founded on the basis of an instruction (*Weisung*) from the *Zentralstelle* and its task was to register Jewish heritage objects in the broadest sense of the word from the territory of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The objects were to be acquired from the Protectorate Jewish communities, from the *Treuhandstelle* and from other institutions, as well as from donations, purchases and deposits.⁶⁶ The task of the new museum was to organize, process and exhibit its collection in the existing Prague Jewish Museum on the basis of its original objects and of memorabilia from Prague synagogues, and to establish a museum of rural Jewish religious communities in the Klausen Synagogue. The women's gallery of the Old-New Synagogue was to house an exhibition of objects relating to this site; the High Synagogue was set aside for an exhibition of Hebrew books, prints and manuscripts.⁶⁷

The central museum team comprised experts (Hebraist and historians, etc.), as well as auxiliary and administrative staff. The experts included the specialist head of the museum T. Jakobovits, S. H. Lieben, A. Engel, F. Zelenka, H. Richter and, later on, the art historian Hana Volavková (1904–1985).⁶⁸ J. Polák continued to work with the museum as an external associate and is referred to in documents as “*our museum expert*”.⁶⁹ The Prague community saw the main aim of the central museum as being to protect the property of communities for the time after the war with the conviction that it would once again be used by the original owners for its original purpose. Polák, however, was the person who was to give the emerging institution the proposed character of a museum and to see to it that its goals would be carried out at the highest professional level. The meetings of the museum team were always also attended by a member of the Prague community leadership, which reflects how important the museum was for its relations with the *Zentralstelle*.⁷⁰

65) In the latter half of 1942, the situation in rural areas was co-ordinated by employees of the Department for Rural Affairs; see the Prague community's weekly and monthly reports, YVA, box 62. The objects were secured and dispatched to Prague also in 1943; see, for example, a report (with addenda) on the liquidation of ritual objects in a synagogue in Humpolec, 29 September 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 51, box 6.

66) The collections were expanded with the addition not only of objects from the *Treuhandstelle* warehouses, but also of items that were sent directly from Jewish homes on the basis of an appeal from the Prague community; for more details, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 79 and 82.

67) Statut für das Jüdische Zentralmuseum der JKG in Prag, 10 September 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 19, box 3; accompanying letter from T. Jakobovits to F. Weidmann, 11 September 1942, *ibidem*.

68) Magda Veselská, ‘The Story of Hana Volavková (1904–1985)’, *Judaica Bohemiae*, 45 (2010), 2, pp. 5–39.

69) Letter from the Zentralmuseum (Jakobovits) to the *Treuhandstelle* (Krämer), 27 October 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 88, box 11.

70) Extract from a record of a meeting held by the Jewish Council of Elders on 27 October 1943, ANM, Volavková 744.

Work at the museum was carried out under stress and under great pressure, in an atmosphere of constant deportations and in fear that the *Zentralstelle* would lose interest in the museum. The team’s performance is best shown by statistics, specifically the volume of documented collection objects (i.e. liturgical items, books, archive documents etc.) and related catalogue cards. As of 1 January 1943 – after five months in operation – the museum team had processed 38,714 objects and 17,965 catalogue cards. As of 1 January 1944 it had processed a further 146,905 objects and 69,729 catalogue cards, and during 1944, under very difficult conditions, it processed a further 65,685 objects under 37,412 registration numbers.⁷¹

However important the registration of all these objects was for the museum team and for the Prague community as their overseer, its only purpose for the *Zentralstelle* was to exert pressure on the team’s performance and to bully the community staff. The *Zentralstelle* was more interested in the exhibitions that were to be installed, even though it is clear that there was only one exhibition that was actually worth anything to it.⁷² The latter display, which was included in the museum team’s plan at the very last moment, was, however, the very first to be installed. This was an exhibition of Hebraica in the High Synagogue. Alterations to the synagogue building began immediately in August 1942 and the exhibition’s content was presented by its curators, S. H. Lieben and T. Jakobovits, to their colleagues at the beginning of November 1942. The *Zentralstelle* gave them free rein and did not interfere with the content; as a result, they were able to ensure that the exhibition would have the “*required imposing character*”, as they stated. Not for the first time, we can see here the professional honour and inner ambition of the members of the museum team and the Prague community to present the wealth of Jewish spiritual and material culture in its entirety and to carry out the task they had been set as well as possible, i.e. to create a Jewish museum of the highest quality, making use of the immensely unique opportunity that arose for this purpose.⁷³

The *Zentralstelle* had no idea what was involved in the preparation of the exhibition and did not know why it was taking so long; the first complaint about the slow pace of work came from Günther as early as the middle of November 1942. The exhibition was ready at the end of the month (but new acquisitions from other consignments were also added to it later), so that it could be presented to Rahm, who expressed his satisfaction.⁷⁴ In addition, a room equipped with armchairs was

71) Monatsbericht, December 1942, YVA, box 62; another document gives a different number (18,296 cards), Wochenbericht 26 December 1942 – 1 January 1943, *ibidem*; Jahresbericht für das Jahr 1943, 30 November 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 22, box 3; Bericht fuer das II. Halbjahr 1943, 29 December 1943, *ibidem*; Jahresbericht für das Jahr 1944, 30 November 1944, *ibidem*.

72) For more details on the exhibitions of the wartime museum, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 80–93.

73) Wochenbericht 8 – 17 August 1942, YVA, box 62; Protokoll Aw 2 über die Arbeitssitzung vom 5. Oktober 1942, ANM, Volavková 746; Protokoll Aw 3 über die Besprechung vom 6. November 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 21, box 3.

74) Extract from an Aktennotiz of 19 November 1942, ANM, Volavková 744; Aktenvermerk über die Vorsprache von Direktor V. Schiff /Zentralmatrik/ und dr. Jakobowitz /Zentralmuseum/ bei Herr [sic] SS Obersturmführer RAHM am 26. November, *ibidem*.

set up in the High Synagogue for *Zentralstelle* staff to study Hebraica in the event of interest.⁷⁵

The other exhibitions at the wartime museum, however, arose from the initiative of the museum team, who sought to utilize the potential of the diverse collections in order to create an integrated historical picture of the life of Jews in the territory of the Protectorate, rather than on the basis of the *Zentralstelle*'s requirements. In accordance with the plan made in August 1942, other exhibitions were to be installed in the Ceremonial Hall, the Klausen Synagogue and the Old-New Synagogue. The climate conditions of the limited exhibit space of the Ceremonial Hall, however, were not favourable, which is why the re-installation of the Prague Museum was postponed indefinitely. Instead, attention focused on the Klausen Synagogue, where, in place of a museum of rural Jewish communities, a contextual exhibition on Jewish life events and the liturgical year was ultimately installed.⁷⁶ Not even in this case did the *Zentralstelle* interfere with the exhibition concept, even though it was informed of its structure in advance; it was content, so to speak, to let it be a surprise. The museum team, therefore, prepared the exhibition as it wished, but did not include topics that could have seemed provocative: with regards to the Jewish holidays, they left out Purim (the story of Queen Esther and the evil Haman, who wanted to have the Jews murdered and was hanged in the end) and Shavuot (the story of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai to the Jews as God's chosen people).⁷⁷

The exhibition in the Klausen Synagogue was ready in the middle of March 1943.⁷⁸ The head of the *Zentralstelle*, Hans Günther, came to see it at the beginning of April 1943. He was accompanied by the then head of the Prague community, Salo Krämer (1899–1944) and his deputy, Herbert Langer (1914–1943), rather than by the exhibition curators. Günther had no objections to the fact that the exhibition presented Jewish holidays and life events without ideological distortions, in a serious way and from the perspective of the Jewish curators with their respect for their own traditions, culture and religion. He made only a few demands, which reflected the most common antisemitic clichés. He wanted to add the topic of kosher

75) Jüdisches Zentralmuseum in Prag (guidebook), no date [1943/1944], AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 91, box 11; Jahresbericht für die Zeit vom 3. 8. – 31. 12. 1942, 28. 12. 1942, draft with hand-written notes, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 38, box 5.

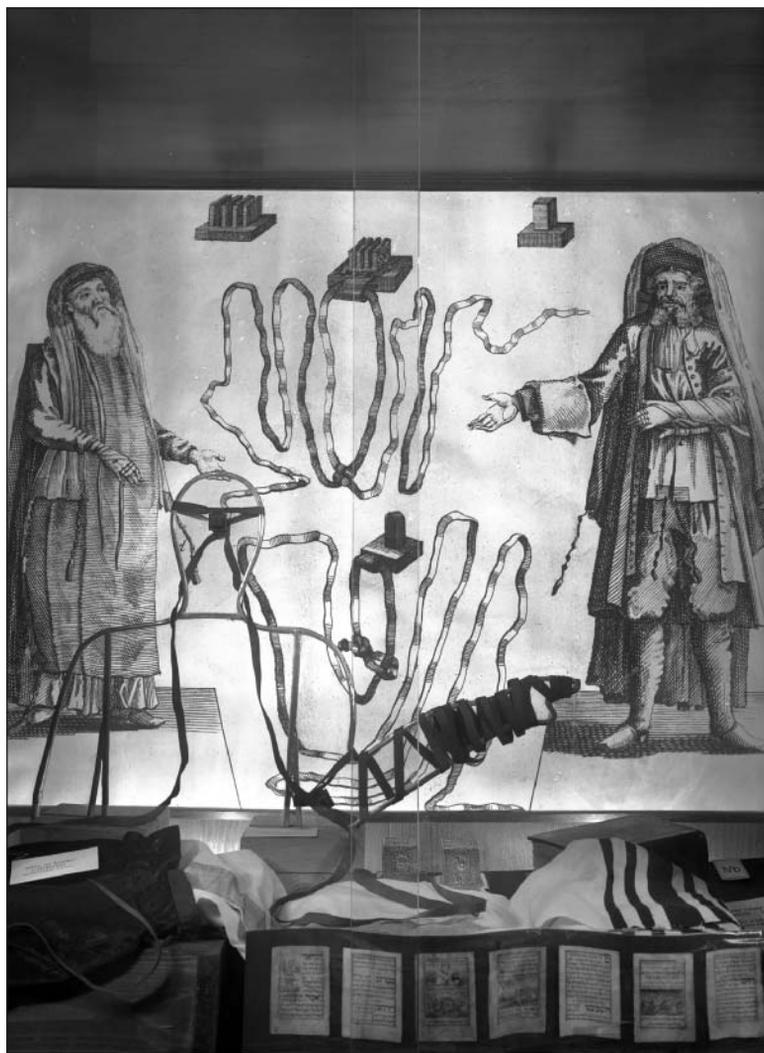
76) Jahresbericht für die Zeit vom 3. 8. – 31. 12. 1942, 28. 12. 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 38, box 5.

77) Although Hana Volavková, in her book *A Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague*, Prague 1968, on p. 137, vividly recounts that they were part of the installation, neither of the holidays are included in the exhibition plan for the Klausen Synagogue, which had been elaborated and approved by the *Zentralstelle*; see Protokoll über die Besprechung vom 25. Jänner 1942 [sic], ANM, Volavková 746, where Purim appears only in the introductory overview and with a question mark; Shavuot and Purim are also not included in the guide to the Jüdisches Zentralmuseum in Prag, no date [1943/1944], AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 91, box 11.

78) Wochenbericht 14 – 20 November 1942, YVA, box 62; Protokoll über die Besprechung vom 25. Jänner 1942 [sic], ANM, Volavková 746; record of a meeting held by the Planning Commission of the Central Jewish Museum (hereinafter Planning Commission) on 15 March 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 21, box 3; an undated file record with a request to vacate the Maisel Synagogue [January 1943], ANM, Volavková, 744.



View of the wartime exhibition in the Klausen Synagogue (1943). The main nave was divided into compartments, each dealing with a separate topic. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague



View of a display case showing how to attach phylacteries (*tefillin*) to the head and arm – installed at the behest of the head of the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*, Hans Günther. Photo Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague

slaughtering, with which the blood motif was associated, and was interested in how to put on phylacteries. Günther's other comments reflected his fascination with Hebrew: he demanded that the most important Hebrew texts be translated into German and he wanted to know more about Jewish education.⁷⁹ With regard to the other exhibition under preparation, however, in his view it should not show “only

⁷⁹⁾ Aktennotiz über die Besichtigung der Klaus- und Pinkas-Synagoge am 6. April 1943, No. 4422, no date, ANM, Volavková 744.

what was ritual and nice”, as he put it, but also the “real life” of Jews in the Middle Ages and before 1848, as well as unspecified “interesting things” from before the emancipation period.⁸⁰ The level of his knowledge was reflected by his demand that the descriptions of the objects in the exhibition catalogue should be understandable even to the layman.⁸¹

The creation of the other planned exhibitions, however, was beset by problems. The content of the exhibition in the Pinkas Synagogue – where the Prague Museum was to be relocated – was considered for a fairly long time during 1943. The museum team came up with many different ideas and also required an archaeological survey of the building and its history to be carried out, but in the end Günther refused and ordered the synagogue to be returned to the *Treuhandstelle*.⁸² Work was done simultaneously on the installation in the Old-New Synagogue, but not even here did everything go to plan. The situation with regards to supplies had deteriorated during the war and the Prague community did not have enough staff or technical resources to carry out Josef Polák’s requirements to the full. In 1943, moreover, the museum team was depleted of many of its members, having been deported to Terezín, and it was never restored to its previous capacity. This is why it was not until the spring of 1944, after much rigmarole, that the exhibition in the Old-New Synagogue was finally completed, albeit in a curtailed form.⁸³

With only one last exhibition under preparation in the autumn of 1943, it was now a fight against time for the museum team. The longer the delay in completing the museum in its reported form, the longer the time it could justify its existence; at the same time, the delay provided scope to prepare things as well as possible. Yet this was a struggle against an unpredictable partner. The museum constituted an island of relatively creative freedom amid deportations, coercion, a sense of responsibility and fear that Günther would lose interest in it. Günther’s impatience grew, as he felt that the creation of the museum was taking too long; the latter required time, staff and funding, and there were only few visible results as yet. Aware that the cataloguing of objects was of no interest to the *Zentralstelle*, the museum team, revised the concept for the reinstallation of the Prague museum Ceremonial Hall in November 1943.⁸⁴ Günther, however, hesitated over whether to permit prepara-

80) Auftrag der Leitung No. 4734, 29 April 1943, ANM Volavková 744.

81) Auftrag des SS-Sturmbannführer Günther vom 27. 4. 1943, No. 4678, ANM, Volavková 744; Auftrag des SS-Sturmbannführer Günther vom 29. 4. 1943, No. 4734, *ibidem*.

82) Planning Commission, 15 March 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 21, box 3; Planning Commission, 30 April 1943, ANM, Volavková 746; Planning Commission No. 13, 3 May 1943, *ibidem*; Planning Commission No. 20, 10 June 1943, *ibidem*; Auftrag der Leitung No. 7895, 22 November 1943, ANM, Volavková 744; Uebergabe-Protokoll, 26 November 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 33, box 4.

83) Josef Polák, Program expozice v Staronové synagoze a způsob její instalace [Programme for the Exhibition in the Old-New Synagogue and How to Install it], 10 April 1943, ANM, Volavková 746; Memorandum from Josef Polák to Mr. Popper, 31 May 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 88, box 11; Auftrag der Leitung No. 6935, 8 September 1943, ANM, Volavková 744; Halbjahresbericht für 1944, 30 June 1944, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 22, box 3.

84) Planning Commission No. 31, 14 September 1943, ANM, Volavková 746; Planning Commission No. 33, 24 November 1943, *ibidem*; Entwurf zur Einrichtung eines Museums für die Vergangenheit der Prager Juden, 4 November 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 92, box 11.

tions of another exhibition and also demanded that it should not involve any financial costs. The museum team, therefore, put together a trial exhibition, which they first presented to Karl Rahm. He was evidently satisfied with it, because work on it continued in 1944.⁸⁵

In 1944, however, contact between the *Zentralstelle* and the museum team was more sporadic, particularly after Rahm's posting to Terezín in February 1944. Although the team continued its work on exhibitions, it did so at a slower pace and devoted more time to the objects at the museum, which it catalogued and protected from air raids, among other things. The team was still aware that the objects from the property of Jewish communities were being stored at the museum for safekeeping.⁸⁶ In August 1944 J. Polák was arrested for being involved in the resistance, and at the end of October 1944 T. Jakobovits was deported directly to Auschwitz, along with several other colleagues from the Prague community staff.⁸⁷ Although Günther, in January 1945, demanded the appointment of a new guide to the Jewish Museum sites and arranged for additional tours, by then there was little happening at the museum as such.⁸⁸ After the final transports in the middle of February 1945 – which deported H. Volavková and other members of the museum team – all that remained at the museum were warehousemen and security guards.⁸⁹

‘THE MUSEUM OF AN EXTINCT RACE’ LEGEND

The story of the Prague Jewish Museum during the Second World War is the story of a museum that was not supposed to be a museum, but a safe repository. It did not become a museum in the true sense of the word until after the war, when the full scale of the tragedy that had befallen the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia came to light. The founding of the museum was initiated by the Prague community, which was disproportionately more active than its counterpart throughout its entire story. It deliberately sought to protect the property of Protectorate Jewish communities and the Jewish cultural heritage and proceeded gradually, step by step. It basically had a free hand in putting together the museum and took advantage of an opportunity to create an institution of high quality during the war.

85) Auftrag der Leitung No. 7899, 22 November 1943, ANM, Volavková 744; Auftrag der Leitung No. 7949, 26 November 1943, *ibidem*.

86) Jahresbericht für das Jahr 1943, 30 November 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 22, box 3; Bericht fuer das II. Halbjahr 1943, 29 December 1943, *ibidem*; Planning Commission No. 36, 5 January 1944, ANM, Volavková 746; record of a meeting held by the commissions of the Central Jewish Museum on 6 January 1944, *ibidem*; Memorandum from Tobias Jakobovits with regard to the sorting of museum objects, 25 May 1944, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 30, box 4; Bericht über das I. Quartal des Jahres 1944, 20 March 1944, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 22, box 3; Halbjahresbericht für 1944, 30 June 1944, *ibidem*.

87) For more details, see M. Veselská, ‘Der Mann, der niemals aufgab’, pp. 59f.

88) Aktenvermerk über die Vorsprache bei Herrn SS- Obersturmführer Günnel, in Anwesenheit des Herrn SS-Sturmbannführer Günther, am 19. I. 1945, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 30, box 4.

89) Memorandum on the staffing and tasks of Department C, 3 April 1945, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 30, box 4.

One can only conjecture what led the head of the Prague *Zentralstelle*, Hans Günther, to agree to the proposals made by the Prague community. It is likely that he would have been satisfied with the preservation of the Prague museum’s collection; he did not have any greater ambitions for the museum at the outset and only rarely did he become involved in the setting up of the central museum by giving specific instructions. Pragmatic reasons and private interests probably played a role in his decision making, particularly with regard to the systematic documentation of the property of Protectorate Jewish communities, including the large amount of Hebraica and silver. He closed the museum to the public as soon as the project had taken on a larger scope. He did not speak much about its existence and only showed it to a very limited number of people as his very own kingdom of Prague. The visits that he led to the museum were purely of private nature; the preserved sources contain no records of any official visits to the exhibitions by proponents of the Nazi regime from the Reich, which would have been major events in Prague or on the premises of the Prague community.

The claim put forward by post-war authors that the museum was to be used for propaganda purposes is unlikely for several reasons. The museum exhibitions were created by Prague community staff from their own perspective; the interventions by the *Zentralstelle* were insignificant. It is also debatable whether the founding of such a museum would have been entrusted to the head of the Prague *Zentralstelle*, rather than to propaganda experts in the Reich; moreover, no documents have yet been found that show that Günther’s superiors in Berlin even knew about the museum.⁹⁰ It is difficult to imagine that a propaganda museum would have needed to amass such a large amount of objects of similar type that were of individual interest ‘only’ for their variety of material or technique, or for their age or place of origin; only a small proportion of them could have been used for portraying antisemitic clichés.

As a result, the ‘museum of an extinct race’ label can be seen more as a post-war construct by which its authors and subsequent users tried to surmise the motivation of the Prague *Zentralstelle* for approving the existence and activity of the Prague museum, without knowing or taking into regard the events that had preceded its founding. This metaphorical designation, however, characterizes more the result than the goal of what happened during the war. The designation cannot be regarded as authentic, as it has no basis in the relevant documents that have been preserved. Even if the *Zentralstelle* had a specific intention of what to do with the museum and its collections after the war, it is evident that no such goal was fulfilled during the war; the museum was everything else than a potential tool for Nazi propaganda. But where did this metaphor come from?

90) Hana Volavková, Central Jewish Museum in Prague (manuscript), no date [1946], AJMP, Documentation, H 15. The non-public character of the museum is obvious from its internal rules; see Hausordnung für die Arbeitsstätten des Jüdischen Zentralmuseums in Prag, 1 August 1942, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 18, box 3. Its non-public character is also mentioned in records of meetings held by the museum team, e.g. Planning Commission No. 30, 11 September 1943, ANM, Volavková 746. For Günther and Rahm’s other activities of a private nature in the Protectorate, including the Terezín ghetto, see also A. Hájková, *Prisoner Society*, pp. 47f.

It appears that the form of this metaphor was influenced by several authors. The texts from which it emerged, however, were not part of the genre of scholarly literature, but of fiction and journalism. The foundations were laid immediately after the end of the Second World War and became definitively established in the 1960s. At that time, it gelled well with the issues of the day, which added to its credibility, since when it has on the whole been reiterated mechanically. The first detailed analysis of the metaphor has come about only with this study.

The first testimony about the work that was done at the Jewish Museum during the war was provided by Hana Volavková, who became the museum director after the war, as well as the guardian of the specialist and moral legacy of her former colleagues. Volavková devoted several brief texts to this topic, some of which remained unpublished, as well as an extensive monograph at a later date. She herself was not involved in what was going on at the museum until the middle of April 1943, by which time the work was in full swing. Volavková was an assistant to the chief curator, Josef Polák and, like him, was also employed as an external associate, which meant that her interaction with the *Zentralstelle* was evidently limited. It was not until after the deportation of Tobias Jakobovits in October 1944 that Volavková took charge of the museum team.⁹¹ After the war she worked closely with Karel Stein, who had negotiated the founding of the central museum in August 1942. Volavková's publications, then, drew partly on information gleaned from her colleagues, which is why they should be viewed from a critical distance. Moreover, her perspective was informed by a feeling of responsibility for commemorating the memory of her colleagues who had not survived the war, as well as the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia who had left behind nothing but the objects that were now in the museum's collections. After the war, also in confrontation with other texts on this topic, in particular journalism, Volavková felt the need to avoid misleading interpretations that credited the Nazis with creating the museum,⁹² which is why she formulated her own explanation for what had actually happened: she regarded the museum and its exhibitions in the Prague synagogues as evidence of the powerful spirit and active intellectual resistance of the museum creators against Nazi persecution.

After the war, Volavková only briefly commented on the museum's starting points, but set out several of the key motives in the literature. In July 1945 she wrote that the museum "*was founded in 1941–1942 as a side product of the strict centralization of all of the property owned by Jews, whether private or public*". In 1948 she described the activity of Karel Stein and, in a draft version of another text, wrote that the museum was founded on the secret orders of Günther: "*The entire*

91) Planning Commission, 12 April 1943, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 21, box 3, and Statutes of the Central Jewish Museum of the Jewish Religious Community of Prague, 10 September 1942, *ibidem*, Inv. No. 19, box 3. For more on Volavková's relationship to the museum, see the chapter on the immediate post-war events at the museum (1945–1950), entitled 'Muzeum vymknuté z kloubů. Úsilí o poválečnou stabilizaci a další rozvoj' [A Dislocated Museum: The Struggle for Post-war Stability and Further Development], in: M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 121–160.

92) For example, 'Fine Jewish Museum in Prague Owes Existence to Nazi Fury', *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 July 1948.



Hana Volavková (1904–1985), art historian. During the Second World War she was an assistant to the chief curator Josef Polák. After the war she defended the existence of the Prague Jewish Museum and, in 1950–1961, she was its director. Anna Herbenová Archives

project had to remain in complete secrecy. Perhaps he was afraid of his superior authorities who were not in favour of his idea, and perhaps he had personal reasons, I don't know, but the order was strictly maintained." With regard to the motives of the German authorities, Volavková wrote that they wanted "to make use of the museum after the destruction of the Jews, in part for their own defence, in part for the anti-Jewish propaganda that reaches out beyond the grave". Volavková did not, however, know the details of how or in what form this was to have occurred; she only surmised the *Zentralstelle*'s reasons. In addition, she stated that the museum should be seen "not only factually, but also reverentially as a unique posthumous memorial that its creators built for themselves".⁹³

Volavková's texts refer to two fundamental motives, which – albeit in a variously adapted form – also appear in other interpretations: one being the vaguely mentioned topic of anti-Jewish propaganda, although without it being known how the museum was actually to be made use of in this way; the other being the topic of a memorial or monument. According to Volavková, however, the latter was built by the creators of the museum themselves as they had conceived it. In 1951 Volavková wrote that the bringing together of the relics of an annihilated race was the result – and not the goal – of what occurred at the museum during the war. She also reiterated that from the contact with the representatives of the Prague *Zentralstelle* during the war it was possible to see that they had a goal in mind for the museum, although she did not know precisely what kind of a goal.⁹⁴

Shortly after the war, two other texts brought forth the first expanded interpretation and a view from the outside. Aside from the creative contribution of the authors of these texts, they both reflected the fact that the causes and extent of the destruction of European Jewry unfolded gradually and presented other information about the wartime period that had circulated among the museum staff.

The first of these texts – although not necessarily chronologically the first – was a lecture by the writer Hans Günther Adler (1910–1988), which was given after his arrival in England in March 1947; it was not published, however, until 2011. Adler knowledgeably described the post-war work of the museum and its collections, having worked at the museum from October 1945 until February 1947. With regard to the wartime museum, he identified with some of the views put forward by Volavková. According to Adler, the museum was a "testimony to the size and depth of the Jewish spirit, Jewish history and, namely, the activities and creative

93) Central Jewish Museum, 9 July 1945, Ref. No. 22/45, AJMP, ŽMP, Inv. No. 4, box 35; Hana Volavková – Otto Muneles, eds., *Židovské museum v Praze. Průvodce sbírkami (Klausová synagoga)* [The Jewish Museum in Prague: A Guide to the Collections (the Klausen Synagogue)], Praha 1948, p. 6; in a book published a year later that was intended for a foreign readership, Volavková stated that the Germans had set up special warehouses for objects from synagogues, which then formed the core of the museum as a result of the efforts of the Prague community: Hana Volavková, *Synagogue Treasures of Bohemia and Moravia*, Prague 1949, p. 7; Hana Volavková, Central Jewish Museum in Prague (manuscript), no date [1946], AJMP, Documentation, H 15.

94) Hana Frankensteinová [Volavková], ed., *Zpráva o činnosti Státního židovského musea za léta 1945–1950* [Report on the Activity of the State Jewish Museum in the Years 1945–1950], Praha [1951], p. 6.

work of the Jews of Bohemia”, even though it was supposed to “serve to defame this nation and to justify the destructive wartime campaign. It was founded with the eagerness with which a group of scholars work, for example, on the preparation of a special ethnological museum of a long-since extinct or exotic nation”.

Adler thus reiterated that the museum was supposed to serve as a defence (justification) of the Germans and for anti-Jewish propaganda (defamation); moreover, he added a reference to an extinct or exotic nation, although only as a comparison, rather than in direct relation to the fate of the Jews during the Second World War. Here he may have drawn inspiration from the pre-war ethnological museums that documented cultures outside Europe – hence exotic. A new piece of information from Adler stated the creation of the museum was made possible for Prague Jews “by exploiting the ‘scholarly’ interest of these modern, semi-educated barbarians who wished to preserve a memorial/monument to this nation, whose annihilation was their goal, which they regarded as a useful and genuinely praiseworthy work”.⁹⁵ Adler used the motive of a memorial/monument that had been suggested by Volavková, although, unlike the latter, he did not see it as the unwitting result of the work of the museum team, which served to honour it, but as a goal of the *Zentralstelle* or, in a broader sense, of the Nazis in general; in this context, the term ‘memorial/monument’ for Adler was more of a synonym for the word ‘museum’. Adler also assumed that the museum would have a negative, i.e. anti-Jewish, purpose.

In addition, Adler referred to another key motive, which was reiterated in the literature later – namely, the ‘scholarly’ aspect. Nonetheless, according to Adler, this goal was thwarted; the original explanation that he gave was that the Germans were too lazy to build a museum themselves, so they entrusted the task to Jewish experts, giving them almost complete freedom and a set of vague instructions. The claim that the museum staff were given creative freedom was accurate, but Adler’s statement as such is, in fact, contradictory – without specific instructions relating to content, it would have been difficult for Jewish specialists to have built a museum in accordance with the Nazis’ scholarly purpose. There is no need to emphasize that Adler’s claim was not backed up by references to any specific sources of information.

The alleged academic nature or, more loosely, scholarly purpose of the Nazis was also pointed out by Egon Erwin Kisch (1885–1948), who wrote a report on the museum some time between his return to Prague in March 1946 and his death there in March 1948. Kisch was more expressive than the moderate Adler in his use of words and in his reflections, which he took much further. Although he focused mainly on the museum’s exhibitions, having been shown round by Otto Muneles (1894–1967) who joined the museum staff only after the war, the introduction of his text emphasized, among other things, the personal scholarly/academic ambitions of the head of the *Zentralstelle*, Hans Günther:

95) Hans Günther Adler, ‘Die Geschichte des Prager Jüdischen Museums’, *Monatshefte* (University of Wisconsin Press), 103 (2011), No. 2, pp. 161–172, with an introduction by Franz Hocheneder, *ibidem*, pp. 159f.

*“The plan was the following: wipe out a nation of a million people and show in a museum, which was to be created by the murderers, how fanatical and dangerous an enemy the murdered, i.e. Jews were to the thousand-year Reich. The richer we make the museum, calculated the Nazis, the more convincingly it will prove to future generations how much we changed the world and created history. But I, thought the Obersturmbannführer, who carried out the plan, will become a private scholar as a result of this.”*⁹⁶

Kisch, then, did not share the opinion of Volavková and Adler that the Nazis would have had to justify themselves and their actions by means of the Prague museum after the war; he identified only with the motive of its propaganda use. Like Adler, he stated that the museum was to have been built by the Nazis themselves; furthermore, he added that they had such a plan, which, as we have seen, was not true. In addition, he mentioned that he had spoken about the museum with witnesses to the wartime events. However, he rejected their view of the situation, which allegedly involved believing in the miracle that the amassed objects would change the opinions and approach of Günther in a positive way. He put forward his own interpretation of what had happened, according to which the museum was to have been some kind of a basis or starting point for a giant monument of denigration, or – as Adler put it – defamation (Kisch used the German term *Verleumdung*), which was not to have been erected until after the war, and for which the Nazis would no longer have needed the Jews. In other words, then, material was to have been accumulated for anti-Jewish propaganda, although it is not entirely clear why, according to Kisch, there was to have been a memorial/monument; it is likely, that this was again another rough synonym for the word ‘museum’.

Evidently aware of the wealth of the Prague collections, Kisch tried to find an explanation for why such a large amount of objects and books had been collected. He was similarly aware that it would have been difficult to exploit the result of the Prague community’s efforts during the war for propaganda purposes or to illustrate the danger of the Jews. His explanation for this was that the museum was only supposed to accumulate material that would be interpreted in a suitable way only after the war. The question though is why it was necessary to install museum exhibitions during the war; according to Kisch’s view, as described above, it would have been enough to accumulate the objects.

Carried away in his description of the exhibition in the Klausen Synagogue, the frenzied reporter came out with other subjectively-tinged and considerably suggestive statements: he referred to it as a pendant for the museum of the Prague Jews in the Ceremonial Hall and as an exhibition devoted to “*world Jewry*” (in German: *Weltjudentum*), which was a term used by national socialists. These claims did not correspond to reality. Of all the afore-mentioned authors, Kisch took the considerations about whether and how the museum was to have been used for propaganda purposes the furthest; with regards to the collection objects, he stated that they had

96) Egon Ervin Kisch, ‘Mörder bauten dem zu Ermordenden ein Mausoleum’, in: idem, *Prager Pitaval. Späte Reportagen*, Berlin 1952, pp. 287–300.

been entrusted “to a Prague museum of victory” as part of an institution that actually existed during the war, namely the Institute for Research on the Jewish Question (*Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage*) in Frankfurt am Main, which was supposed to focus on “studying the enemy” (in German: *Gegnerforschung*), in particular on the basis of the amassed books, files and archive documents. The Prague Museum apparently appeared to Kisch to be a suitable and logical addition to this institution, as it also contained a remarkable collection of three-dimensional liturgical and artistic objects, as well as extensive book and archive collections. According to the state of knowledge so far attained, however, this claim is not substantiated by archive documents and hence, like the rest of Kisch’s text, remains on the level of interpretation.⁹⁷

Adler and Kisch’s consensus as to the Nazis’ goal of wiping out the Jewish nation and of erecting a kind of negative Jewish memorial, mausoleum, or museum, and their emphasis on the Nazis’ alleged scholarly ambitions that would provide a theoretical basis for the assumption that the Prague *Zentralstelle*’s agreement to the founding of the museum concealed a specific aim, are not too surprising. This view corresponds to how the scale of the Jewish tragedy and the objectives of the Nazis were gradually uncovered after the war, as well as to the convictions of the members of the museum team during the war. Hana Volavková assumed that the head of the Prague *Zentralstelle*, Hans Günther, was the son of the well-known Nazi race researcher Hans F. K. Günther (1891–1968). If this had been the case, it would have been possible to credit him with academic, scholarly or research ambitions. Hans Günther, however, had no relation to his namesake and, as for his education, he had trained as a shop assistant (Karl Rahm had trained as a machine fitter). However, as Volavková writes elsewhere – he was also characterized by an excellent memory:

“The announced visit was enough to clear the streets of the new ghetto, which at other times was so lively, and left behind only the shabby figure of Dr. Jakobovits – in front of the entrance to the Old Jewish Cemetery, which forms the core of all of the museum’s exhibitions – who, as an authority on Jewish rituals, was condemned and entrusted to show round an entourage with Günt.[her] in the background. Poor Dr. Jakobovits had a good knowledge of Hebrew and, to some extent, of the history of Jewry, but he was unfamiliar with art history and Günther had a good educational basis and an excellent memory. Alas, if Dr. Jakobovits were to somewhat change his interpretation. Günther behaved decently in front of the guests, but he then plainly reproached our renowned director – whom in the end he also sent to his death – as if he were a little boy who can’t do his homework well.”

97) For more details, see J. B. Potthast, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–192. When the afore-mentioned institute wanted to collect material in Łódź in 1942, a notice for this purpose appeared in the local newspaper, which also referred to the founding of its office there; see ‘Institut für Judenforschung in Litzmannstadt’, *Litzmannstädter Zeitung*, 29 July 1942, <http://bc.wbp.lodz.pl/dlibra/publication?id=29977&tab=3> (accessed 16/10/2016). No such report concerning Prague has been found.

However exaggerated, the assumptions about Günther's level of education fit well with the attempts of the museum's employees in some way to explain the background to what happened there during the war.⁹⁸

While the German-language texts of Adler and Kisch may have influenced more the foreign public, as they were not published in Czech for the time being, the greatest influence on the Czech milieu was probably made by Jiří Weil's novel *Na střeše je Mendelssohn* [Mendelssohn is on the Roof]. Jiří Weil (1900–1959) worked at the museum from July 1943 until January 1945 in a not particularly high-profile position, which he did not take seriously in any way. While at the museum, where he also found refuge after the war, he devoted his time more to observing his surroundings and his colleagues. He included his impressions and the information he had gathered in several literary works.⁹⁹ His description of the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War is highly praised for its effectiveness, but it is utterly literary in nature, rather than non-fiction. As a result, it makes no sense to analyze Weil's novel from a factual point of view: the author treats the fate of his figures, events and timelines in a completely loose way, and he combines, supplements and imagines them as he sees fit. The suggestiveness of his narrative (the inner monologues of the protagonists), the evident inspiration by living persons and the fact that the author worked at the museum, however, explain why the novel is often perceived as Weil's personal testimony, artfully concealed behind indicative names of the characters, and also as a source for interpreting what happened at that time. In the epilogue to Weil's novel, Jiří Opelík characterized it as follows:

“As he did in his entire work, Weil also drew on true events and real people here, although he did not give an account of them. He incorporated events into a succession of hidden causes and consequences, and condensed them into effective juxtapositions, gave the characters a three-dimensional quality, and considered their fate. He himself created new lives where he needed

98) Hana Volavková, Central Jewish Museum in Prague (manuscript), no date [1946], AJMP, Documentation, H 15. Others believed that Hans Günther and his brother Rolf had studied Oriental or Jewish studies before the war; see Jiří Weil, *Na střeše je Mendelssohn* [Mendelssohn is on the Roof], Praha 1965, p. 65. In Weil's case, however, it is difficult to judge whether this was not a mere artistic licence, which fit in better with the constructed figure of the head of the Zentralamt (Zentralstelle). See also J. B. Potthast, *op. cit.*, pp. 79f. In the Prague milieu, there also appeared a hypothesis that Hans Günther might have been regarded as a relative of the psychology professor Hans Richard Gerhard Günther (1898–1981), who taught at the German Charles University in Prague in 1941–1945.

99) For example, Jiří Weil, *Život s hvězdou* [Life with a Star], first published in Prague, 1949; idem, *Žalozpěv za 77297 obětí* [Elegy for the 77,297 Victims], first published in Prague, 1958; idem, *Na střeše je Mendelssohn*, first published in Prague, 1960. Weil's most authentic text in terms of documenting the work of the museum team is a fragment entitled *Maskir*, in which the characters appear under their actual names and part of the narration is in the Ich-form: Jiří Weil, From the memoirs 'Maskir', Literary Archive of the Czech Museum of Literature, Jiří Weil Fonds, Acc. No. 70/70, Inv. No. 810. However, this is only a draft text that Weil decided not to publish.

them for his suggestive and how else than biased depiction of genocide, which is absurdly comic and brutally ironic.”¹⁰⁰

As an example, one can consider the task that one of the characters, František Schönbaum – modelled after František Zelenka – is given after being deported to Terezín: to design a gallows. Yet this does not correspond to what happened to Zelenka, nor is it accurate in terms of time frame (the gallows was used in Terezín only once, in the winter 1941/1942). If we were to look for signs of an explanation for the museum’s existence in Weil’s novel, we could read the following in the characterization of Dr. Rabinovič, who was to conceal Tobias Jakobovits:

“His office was the museum, which was founded on the wishes of the Zentralamt and also perhaps from the efforts of skilful people from the Jewish community. [...] It was to be a warehouse of trophies of the Reich, victorious over the enemy. [...] The museum was to be a memorial to victory, as it exhibited the objects of a nation condemned to extermination, of whom all that was left were these dead items.”¹⁰¹

Hana Volavková returned to the topic once again in the middle of the 1960s. After leaving the post of director of the then State Jewish Museum in Prague, she bid farewell to the museum in an emotionally charged and a forcefully written book that was conceived as an elegy, titled *The Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague*. In this book, she openly referred to the museum several times as a mere company name that concealed the real purpose of the amassed collection, i.e. the protection of its objects, and as a simulated museum. Volavková also reiterated that the museum had become a memorial to those who had perished, which, according to her, was not the goal but the result of what happened during the war: “*Mass murder lies in the background of the museum and its collections are not only a symbol, but also a very real memorial to those who were murdered.*”¹⁰²

The notional changing of the guards – not only for the post of museum director, but also in the interpretation of the wartime museum and also the style of its future presentation – was indicated in the epilogue to a Czech edition of Volavková’s book. Its author was Volavková’s successor as museum director, Vítězslav Benda (1916–1978), a confirmed and engaged communist who, when promoting the unique Prague collection, adopted a militant and expressive rhetoric that was replete with the clichés of the day. Benda devoted himself to promoting the Prague Jewish Museum for the entire ten years that he served as director there (1962–1972). He mainly targeted foreign tourists, who were a large group among the visitors to the museum already in the 1960s. He also tried to get the museum at-

100) Cited from the epilogue to the second edition of the novel *Na střeše je Mendelssohn*, Praha 1965, p. 202.

101) *Ibidem*, p. 63.

102) H. Volavková, *Příběh Židovského muzea v Praze* [A Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague], Praha 1966, p. 125.

tention that, according to him, it deserved; he deliberately adapted the information at his disposal and sought to present it in an effective way.¹⁰³ He held back in the epilogue to Hana Volavková's book, perhaps out of respect for the author as a direct witness to the wartime events and for the way she saw the situation. Moreover, he referred to the museum here mainly from the perspective of its post-war renovation and in defence of its compulsory nationalization in 1950. Some of the above-mentioned motives appear in the text, but when Benda uses the term 'liquidated', this relates to the Nazi plan for the disbanded Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia, but not to European Jewry or to the category of race:

*"After all, among the few [survivors] there were people who realized that the Nazis' intended plan – to create a central anti-Jewish museum in Prague on the basis of the liquidated 153 Jewish communities – has to disappear from history, just as Nazism itself. Among the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia there remained a handful of people who welcomed the idea of restoring the Prague Jewish Museum not as the triumph of Nazism, but as a warning to all who have not learned from the defeat."*¹⁰⁴

Already a year earlier (1965), however, Benda had published an introductory article – which was utterly propagandistic and different in many ways from the above-cited epilogue – in the very first issue of the foreign-language journal of the State Jewish Museum in Prague, *Judaica Bohemiae*. His text was a mixture of information drawn from pre-war archive documents, oral history and published texts, combined with the author's own reflections in an attempt to arouse interest in the museum abroad. Benda characterized the concealed goal behind the founding of the wartime museum here – in general and in inverted commas – as the creation of a 'museum of a liquidated race' even though, as a possible and perhaps more likely starting point for its prospective propagandistic use, he emphasized the museum's collections, which also included so-called degenerate art.¹⁰⁵ In accord with his predecessors, he stated that it was not until after the war the museum was to serve as an instrument of propaganda, albeit without there being a specific plan in existence:

"The Gestapo accepted the proposal from the Prague Jews because, on the one hand, it saw that the museum provided an opportunity to promote its race politics, and, on the other hand, it wanted to document the degenerate nature of Jewish art on the basis of the artefacts in the museum's collection. The greatest effect anticipated by the Nazis, however, was the future triumphant victory of the German 'superman' after winning the war, when the

103) For more details on Vilém Benda's activity at the State Jewish Museum and the circumstances of his work, see the chapter 'Státní muzeum pro problematiku ideologicky konfliktní aneb Židovské muzeum nežidovské' [The State Museum for Ideologically Conflicting Problems, or the Non-Jewish Jewish Museum], in: M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 161–244, esp. 192–207.

104) H. Volavková, *Příběh Židovského muzea*, p. 331.

105) For more details, see M. Veselská, *Archa paměti*, pp. 79, 88f.

‘museum of a liquidated race’ was to serve in some way as some kind of a school for Nazi education.”

Despite his apparent concreteness (a school intended for Nazi education), Benda immediately diluted the meaning of his claim as a result of a lack of reliable information (“*in some way*” [...] “*some kind of*”). The use of inverted commas with regard to the ‘museum of a liquidated race’ was probably supposed to lend the designation a certain metaphorical quality, because otherwise Benda was not afraid to use forceful and effective formulations. It is also possible, however, that he was inspired by another author in this regard, and the use of the inverted commas was to indicate a citation or, better still, a paraphrase of a foreign statement. For in one passage of Weil’s novel *Na střeše je Mendelsohn*, Dr. Rabinovič says that he was entrusted to “*create a memorial to the victory of the Reich, a museum of an extinct nation.*”¹⁰⁶ Unlike Weil and the other cited authors, however, Benda was not embarrassed to use the word ‘race’ in his agitprop text.

Benda’s certainty and determination rose with the time he spent at the museum, as is indicated in another article on the history of the Prague Jewish Museum, which was aimed at the Czech public in 1968. Benda drew on his previous text, but went further in thinking things through. He described the Prague community’s activity aimed at protecting objects for the period after the war and strongly rejected any kind of ‘merit’ on the part of the Nazis. He added that the proposal to set up a museum was approved in Berlin. Nevertheless, the statement about the ‘museum of a liquidated race’ remained in inverted commas:

“The fact is that the highest Nazi political authorities discussed the proposals in the middle of the war at the beginning of 1942. [...] As already mentioned, the proposal was discussed in Berlin and was understood, above all politically, as ‘important to the war’. It thereby received the highest consecration and approval for implementation. Not only approval, but an order. The Nazis, whose only ideological support was the anti-Jewish struggle, racial hatred and an awareness of racial superiority, needed illustratively educational material for justifying its policy when training new adolescent cadres. Where else, in the opinion of Nazi ideologists, would be better for young national socialists to learn about the Jewish enemy than in a museum ‘of a liquidated race’, as they have become accustomed among themselves to call it? The idea of the created museum has aroused in them the prospect of a permanent memorial to the expected victory. A number of the Nazi officials at the Prague Zentralstelle saw in the creation of the museum a guarantee of being spared from the possibility of being sent to the Front.”¹⁰⁷

106) Vilém Benda, ‘Das staatliche jüdische Museum in Prag’, *Judaica Bohemiae*, 1 (1965), pp. 4–8; J. Weil, *Na střeše je Mendelsohn*, pp. 175f.

107) Vilém Benda, ‘Státní židovské muzeum v Praze (Vznik, osudy a perspektivy muzea, jež nemá obdoby)’ [The State Jewish Museum in Prague (The Founding, Fate and Perspectives of an Unparalleled Museum)], *Židovská ročenka 5729*, 1968/1969, pp. 45–51.

Not even in this case did Benda cite the sources of his information, although his formulations suggest a familiarity with the published texts and the oral tradition that had spread among the museum staff.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, unlike Weil and Volavková, who had a limited knowledge of the occupation apparatus and assumed that the Prague community and the museum team answered to the Gestapo, Benda in time discovered that their superior authority was the *Zentralstelle*. It is debatable, however, whether Hans Günther – who spent the entire war in the quiet shelter of Prague without showing any apparent ambition to move up in his career – really had to fear being transferred to the Front, especially since his brother worked in close proximity to Adolf Eichmann. Although the career and tasks of Karl Rahm were marked by other characteristics, the end of the war found him in the Protectorate – in Terezín – rather than on the Front. The likely explanation is that these were Benda's own reflections, which, on the basis of his experience of politics and his active membership in the Communist Party and its apparatus, were developed into further details, which is indicated by the arguments and style employed. Moreover, at the time when Benda was director of the museum, it was fairly commonplace to expressively emphasize the barbarity of Nazism, even with the use of metaphors.

Benda's article in *Judaica Bohemiae*, which was written in German and intended for a foreign readership, is the earliest text to have been found so far that includes a statement, albeit in inverted commas, that most recalls, in structure and meaning, the 'museum of an extinct race' slogan. It is, therefore, possible that this is the source that was used as a starting point by a number of later authors, particularly abroad. After all, it was written at the museum, which added to its credibility – where else should they know about their own history. Moreover, it was published at a time when the influence of Hannah Arendt's theses set forth in her book on the Eichmann trial were still resonating abroad – propositions that were very critical of the so-called Jewish councils, i.e. Jewish organizations that were in charge of Jewish affairs in Nazi-occupied European countries.¹⁰⁹ Even though Benda presented the efforts of the Prague community in a positive light, it had, after all, worked on the realization of its proposals with the enemy, hence a certain amount of suspicion must have clung to it. If we place the above-mentioned texts on the Prague Jewish Museum during the Second World War in chronological order, it is possible to trace a chain of motives, from which the current narrative has gradually been developed. Through subsequent reiteration, the interpretations and assumptions became transformed into deep convictions and absolute claims: the result of what happened during the war became its goal, the museum that collected the objects from the liquidated Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia became a museum of all the murdered Jews, the image of the Jewish nation became a caricature

108) At least indirect witnesses to the wartime events (e.g., Josef Hráský, whose wife Marta was employed as a typist at the Central Jewish Museum in Prague) were still working at the museum under Benda's era.

109) The first Czech edition (translated by Martin Palouš) was published in 1995: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann v Jeruzalémě. Zpráva o banalitě zla* [Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil], Praha 1995.

of an ‘extinct race’, the memorial that was built unwittingly by the museum staff due to the quality of their work became a memorial to the victory of the Nazis, and the expectation or assumption of the propagandistic use of the museum became a deep certainty. In any case, however, the present-day visitors to the Prague Jewish Museum come to see the first – i.e. a museum that documents the material and spiritual culture of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia in an almost complete way.

Subsequent texts that were written on this topic, in particular abroad, did not contribute any substantially different views of the situation. In the 1970s, under the pressure of the Communist regime during the period of so-called normalization, the museum itself hardly ever communicated with the public and had neither the space nor the possibility to focus on serious research into archival sources. In 1980, Vladimír Sadek briefly described the conflict between the goals of the Nazis aiming at “*a curiosity museum of an ‘extinct race’*” and of the museum staff in a short essay in *Judaica Bohemiae*.¹¹⁰ The first more extensive work that was written on this topic at the museum dates from as late as 1988; this was the final postgraduate dissertation in museology by Markéta Petrášová. Petrášová’s research, however, does not contain any new findings, as it focused on an assessment of the management of the collections during the war.¹¹¹ Benda’s propositions together with Weil’s works, thus, had a long-term influence on this topic in the Czech milieu; to this day, they can still be encountered especially among the older generation. Considering the losses suffered by the Jewish community of Bohemia and Moravia in the Shoah, and in view of the difficulties facing its renewal after the Second World War and the revival of Jewish life after 1989, it is understandable why they appeared credible to those who made further use of them.

In other countries, authors writing about this topic were mostly unable to set aside the afore-mentioned propositions, as they found them so plausible and convincing. A few random examples may be cited here. Although there was no explicit reference to a ‘museum of an extinct race’ in the introductory essay in *The Precious Legacy* – a prestigious and influential book accompanying one of the most important exhibitions of the then State Jewish Museum in Prague in North America (1984–1986), which was written in co-operation with the museum staff – it was replaced by such terms as ‘Hitler’s Central Jewish Museum’ and was put in the context of the above-mentioned Frankfurt Institute for Research on the Jewish Question.¹¹² In German-language texts, the term ‘museum of an extinct race’ (*Museum der untergegangenen Rasse*) appeared.¹¹³ Not even the authors of recent

110) Vladimír Sadek, ‘From the Documents Related to the War-Time Central Jewish Museum in Prague’, *Judaica Bohemiae*, 16 (1980), 1, pp. 5–8, esp. 5.

111) Markéta Petrášová, *Židovské ústřední muzeum (1942–1945)* [The Central Jewish Museum (1942–1945)], final postgraduate dissertation in museology, Faculty of Arts, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University (now Masaryk University) in Brno, Department of Archaeology and Museology, Brno 1988.

112) David Altshuler, ed., *The Precious Legacy. Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections*, New York 1983, pp. 24–30. The introductory text was written by Linda A. Altshuler and Anna R. Cohn.

scholarly essays on the topic of the Prague Jewish Museum during the Second World War have been able to get beyond this proposition entirely.

The first text to mark a radical shift in the approach towards this topic was a dissertation on the Central Jewish Museum in Prague by Dirk Rupnow (2000).¹¹⁴ The latter dealt with the museum primarily on a theoretical basis at the expense of archival research; it drew on Adorno's perspective on the Shoah as a *Zivilisationsbruch*, or a rupture in civilization, and was also based on the ideas of the historian Dan Diner and the media theorist and archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst. Rupnow placed the Prague Jewish Museum in the context of the active creation of memories and recollections with regards to both perpetrators and their victims. As an expert in the field of memory research and the creation of recollections, he interpreted the museum as an act of 'memory genocide', whereby the perpetrators who were primarily involved in the planning of the museum, exploited it as a means of preserving the memory of European Jews while intending to interpret it according to their requirements. As such, the author reduced the employees of the Central Jewish Museum to mere tools, notably in the context of other similarly abused groups of victims, such as the Jewish councils in the ghettos of German-occupied Poland.

In contrast, Jan Björn Potthast (2002) based his dissertation on detailed heuristics and a factual analysis of the sources in archives in the Czech Republic and abroad, of which he gathered a remarkable amount, even though even this author did not hesitate to refer to the museum – in the title of the dissertation – directly as a Nazi SS museum.¹¹⁵ Of particular value, among other things, is Potthast's thorough characterization of the staff of the Prague *Zentralstelle*, whose mentality he captures just as well as the behaviour of its chief, Hans Günther, who turned Prague into his private little kingdom where he could pursue his hobbies, such as the Prague museum and, later on the film about the Terezín ghetto. In connection with the emphasis placed on characterizing the Nazi apparatus, however, the actual protagonists of the story, i.e. the Prague museum staff are somewhat sidelined. Like Rupnow, Potthast also tends towards the view that there was some hidden goal behind the existence of the museum; he places the *Zentralstelle's* motivation for founding the museum in the context of researching the enemy by the national socialists and their *weltanschauliche Erziehung* (education for a world outlook).

The context in which the Prague Jewish Museum during the Second World War should be seen, however, is not the context of Alfred Rosenberg's *Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage* in Frankfurt or of Heinrich Himmler's Posen speech of October 1943, but the context of the work done by Tobias Jakobovits, Salomon

113) For example, Elisabeth Kiderlen, 'Museum einer untergegangenen Rasse', *Der Spiegel*, 1988 (42), No. 46 (14 November 1988), p. 226. In contrast, the editors of catalogue for an exhibition of the then State Jewish Museum in Prague referred to both of the possible interpretations; see Edna Brocke – Michael Zimmermann, eds., *Das Jüdische Museum in Prag: Von schönen Gegenständen und ihren Besitzern*, Bonn 1991, p. 13.

114) Dirk Rupnow, *Täter – Gedächtnis – Opfer. Das "Jüdische Zentralmuseum" in Prag 1942–1945*, Wien 2000.

115) J. B. Potthast, *op. cit.*

Hugo Lieben, Alfred Engel, Josef Polák, František Zelenka and Hana Volavková. These experts worked in extreme circumstances, having an opportunity to do what they had done throughout their career: collect, describe, select, exhibit and interpret objects. Like the Jewish academics who resumed their scholarly work in Terezín – jurists who drafted a legal codex, musicologists who wrote reviews of concerts and theatre shows, Hebraists and experts in Judaic studies who resumed their studies and writings, all in the harsh conditions of the ghetto – the museum specialists in Prague also continued their work in Prague during the war. It was only the period and the circumstances under which the Prague museum was founded that infused a unique importance to their efforts.

It is beyond doubt that the museum was of great importance for the mutual relations between the Prague community leadership and the *Zentralstelle*. The museum was evidently of interest to Günther, and if he was satisfied, there existed a chance that he would be more open to other requests made by the counter party. The Prague community's employees saw things in context, and their perspective was on the fate of the Jews throughout the Protectorate in all its aspects. It is difficult to say to what extent their hopes were unfounded, however, they cannot be blamed for their attempt to take advantage of a favourable situation and to expand their playing field. In the end, despite all the circumstances, the museum's creators could have been pleased by the results of their work, but only a few of the members of the entire museum team and of the Prague community's wartime staff survived the Second World War.