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THE JOURNAL *JUDAICA BOHEMIAE*, THE “PRAGUE SPRING”  
AND THE RENEWAL OF JEWISH HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN  
POST WWII CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Commemorating the Historian Jan Heřman (1933-1986)\*

In this short paper, I wish to examine the origins of the multilingual journal of Jewish history *Judaica Bohemiae*, on the eve of the so-called Prague Spring of the mid-1960s and the life work of its founder, the young Czech-Jewish historian Jan Heřman. The year before last marked the thirtieth anniversary of his tragic, untimely death.<sup>1</sup>

I wish to dedicate my contribution to the present congress to his memory.

In the introduction to the first issue of *Judaica Bohemiae*, which he founded and then edited from 1965 to 1971 on behalf of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Jan Heřman wrote that he considered the editorship to be a first modest step towards a continuation of the historiographical project of the well-known pre-WWII *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte der Juden in der Tschechoslowakei*, edited between 1929 and 1938 by the renowned Jewish medievalist Prof. Samuel Steinherz.<sup>2</sup> Its work was truncated by the Nazi occupation in 1939, and the silence imposed on Jewish scholarship under Nazi rule continued under the Communist regime's suppressive policy until the mid-1960s.

Jan Heřman began his work in 1958 at the then nationalized State Jewish Museum in Prague after graduating with distinction in history and archival studies from Charles University in Prague. He began by reorganizing the valuable archives of the famed thousand-year-old Jewish community of Prague, and later, together with others, the archives of all the Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia, which had been confiscated by the Nazis during the “Final Solution” and transferred to the Jewish Museum in 1943. His second project was to continue the life work on the Jewish tomb epigraphs, begun by his mentor in the museum, Otto Muneles, the last surviving scholar of Jewish studies of his generation in Prague.<sup>3</sup> However, Jan Heř-

\* Based on a paper delivered at the 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, in 2017.

<sup>1</sup> See *Kalendarium*. In: *Roš chodeš* (January 2017) 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Juden in der Čechoslovakischen Republik, Prag 1929-1938*. – On Steinherz see *Oberkofler, Gerhard: Samuel Steinherz (1857-1942): Biographische Skizze über einen altösterreichischen Juden in Prag*. Innsbruck 2007.

<sup>3</sup> On Muneles see the obituary by *Sadek, Vladimir: Otto Muneles und sein wissenschaftliches Werk (08.01.1894-04.03.1967)*. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 2, 73-78. – Among his most important works, I wish to highlight here: *Muneles, Otto: Der Alte jüdische Friedhof in Prag*. Praha 1955. – Also in Hebrew: *Muneles: Ketovot mi-bet he-'almin ha-Yehudi ha-'atik be-Prag* [Tomb Epigraphs of the Ancient Jewish Cemetery in Prague]. Jerusalem 1988. – *Muneles: Bibliographical Survey of Jewish Prague*. Praha 1952. – *Heřman, Jan/ Muneles: Prague Ghetto in the Renaissance Period*. Praha 1965.

man's major project – of founding and editing *Judaica Bohemiae* – was inseparably intertwined with the short-lived, fascinating historical episode of the Prague Spring and the outburst of the long suppressed freedom of intellectual and cultural creativity in the Czech society in the mid-1960s.

I want to share with you the excitement I felt while preparing this paper as a bio-bibliographical study, when my research on the topic led me gradually to discover its thrilling, parallel Jewish counterpart.

I refer to the short-lived renaissance of Jewish intellectual and cultural creativity and reawakening of Jewish self-perception and communal life.

It was against this background that Jan Heřman undertook his daring experiment to breach the wall of silence and the ban on Jewish studies by establishing the journal *Judaica Bohemiae*, the first issue appearing in the spring of 1965. In that year, Jan Heřman almost single-handedly edited and published the first volume of *Judaica Bohemiae*, which accepted scholarly studies in French, German, and English. The first volume was followed in 1966 and 1967 by two further volumes, each in two semi-annual issues. He went on to edit another four volumes until 1971, when he was forced to leave his position under the reimposed totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia.

During the first years of his work in the Jewish Museum, and as a PhD student and assistant at the Historical Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Prague under the world-famous Czech-Jewish medievalist František Graus,<sup>4</sup> he also devised his long-term editorial strategy for *Judaica Bohemiae*. His principal idea, which proved successful, was to obtain for the journal the contributions of leading Czech-Jewish and non-Jewish Czech historians as well as of foreign historians (among them from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Israel). He himself published in each volume an article from his research on Jewish history in the Late Middle Ages and the early modern era, a period in which the Prague Jewish community gradually acquired a status of major importance in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The result is most strikingly reflected in the volume that appeared under Heřman's editorship close to the peak of the revolutionary events in Prague during 1967. The contributors to this volume are almost exclusively eminent historians from universities and academies in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere as well as scholars from the Jewish Museum itself, including Heřman. The central figure that looms over the whole volume is undoubtedly František Graus, who at that time became the head of the History Department of Charles University while remaining a corresponding member of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. And, what is perhaps most important for our purposes – and for the Jewish aspect of the Prague Spring – he joined the scientific committee of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Heřman received his PhD from Charles University in Prague in 1965 for his thesis "Jewish Community of Prague before the 1541 (temporary) Expulsion", *Archiv Židovského muzea v Praze* [Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague] (hereinafter AŽMP), fonds *Židovské muzeum v Praze* [Jewish Museum in Prague, hereinafter ŽMP] (1945-1994), inventární číslo [inventory number, hereinafter inv. č.] 620, Ms. 273 p.

<sup>5</sup> See Jan Heřman's article on the history of the Jewish community of Prague. *Heřman, Jan: Prague*. In: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 (2007) 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 448-453, here 449.

Also of great significance from our perspective is his article in this volume, “Prolegomena to a History of the Jews in Bohemia”,<sup>6</sup> which he dedicated to the memory of the Jewish scholar Otto Muneles (whom I mentioned earlier), who died that year. In his “Prolegomena”, Graus transcended the article’s declared framework and as well addressed the challenging, profound questions of Jewish history and historiography per se. But, at the same time, he emphasized its inseparability from the context of general historical research.

Here I will limit myself to the quotation of a remarkable question posed and answered by him in this article:

Were the Jews in the past a nation, a group with a clearly defined economic function, a Schicksalsgemeinschaft [that is, a community bound together by a common fate; O.D.K.], or a religion? They were a little bit of all of these and yet none of the above – they were a sui generis phenomenon that cannot be understood by applying the usual categories.<sup>7</sup>

Other noteworthy articles in this volume are by Prof. Josef Polišínský, the important Czech historian of the early modern period, on “Jewish History, Economic History and General History”;<sup>8</sup> by Prof. Guido Kisch, the prominent German-Jewish historian, refugee from the nazified University of Halle and later at the University of Basel, on “The Jewish Prague Two Generations Ago”;<sup>9</sup> by the Israeli historian Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein on the “Economic History of the Czech Landjuden (rural Jews) of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century”;<sup>10</sup> and an obituary, “Dr. Otto Muneles and His Scholarly Work”, by Vladimír Sadek, a colleague of Jan Heřman at the Jewish Museum.<sup>11</sup> It should be mentioned, of course, that, as in each semi-annual issue, this volume also contains a scholarly article and book review by Jan Heřman himself, “The Economic Factor in Jewish Historiography”,<sup>12</sup> as well as review articles on the “New Literature on the History of the Jews in Czechoslovakia”<sup>13</sup> and

<sup>6</sup> Graus, František: Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der Juden in den böhmischen Ländern (gewidmet dem Andenken an Dr. Otto Muneles). In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 2, 79-86.

<sup>7</sup> „Waren die Juden in der Vergangenheit eine Nation, eine Gruppe mit fest umrissener wirtschaftlicher Funktion, eine Schicksalsgemeinschaft oder eine Religion? Sie waren von all dem etwas und doch keines von ihnen – sie waren ein Phänomen sui generis, dessen Verständnis man sich durch das Einreihen in die üblichen Kategorien nur verbaut.“ *Ibid.* 81. English translation quoted after Koeltzsch, Ines: *Modernity, Identity and Beyond: Historiography on the Jews of the Bohemian Lands in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. In: *Studia Judaica* 19 (2016) 1, 41-64, here 42.

<sup>8</sup> Polišínský, Josef: Histoire juive, histoire économique et histoire générale. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 1, 3-6.

<sup>9</sup> Kisch, Guido: Das jüdische Prag vor zwei Generationen (Zur fünfzigsten Wiederkehr des Todestages von Rabbiner Alexander Kisch). In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 2, 87-100.

<sup>10</sup> Kestenberg-Gladstein, Ruth: Wirtschaftsgeschichte der böhmischen Landjuden des 18. Jahrhunderts. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 2, 101-134.

<sup>11</sup> Sadek: Dr. Otto Muneles und sein wissenschaftliches Werk (cf. fn. 3).

<sup>12</sup> Heřman, Jan: Le facteur économique dans l’historiographie juive. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 1, 7-17.

<sup>13</sup> Heřman, Jan: Nouvelle littérature sur l’histoire des juifs en Tchécoslovaquie. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 2, 140-141.

on “The Fate of the Jewish Museum in Prague” by its first post-WWII director Hana Volavková.<sup>14</sup>

Graus, who was forced to leave Prague following the Soviet invasion and the crushing of the Prague Spring, continued his research and teaching, first in Germany and then, until his death in 1989, at the University of Basel. His magnum opus, *Pest – Flagellants – Murders of Jews. The 14<sup>th</sup> Century as an Era of Crises*,<sup>15</sup> completed in 1985, is considered in historiography as the work of a master historian of the Late Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup>

Yet it can also be seen as his monumental memorial, not only to the great calamity of the European Jews during the Black Death of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but indirectly also to those who were annihilated during the Great Death of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which he himself witnessed at the Metropolis of Death – Auschwitz. Allow me to quote from his introduction:

It was not only the accumulation of the events and their comparability that led me to devote my attention to this aberration of the mass murder of 1348-1350. In addition, there was another reason, which is *connected to our present and ‘near’ past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century* [my emphasis, O.D.K.]: this research might also be regarded as a contribution to the discussion of the question of the degree to which an autonomous Jewish history exists and its inextricable connection with ‘general’ history.<sup>17</sup>

We return now to Jan Heřman and his *Judaica Bohemiae*, having left them in 1967. A few weeks before the incursion of the Soviet tanks in August 1968, and after preparing in advance the next two volumes of the journal for the years 1968 and 1969, he left Prague to take up an invitation from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to spend the academic year 1968/69 as a visiting scholar there.

During that year in Israel, his outstanding qualities manifested themselves through his research activity and in lectures he delivered at the university and other scholarly institutions, such as the Historical Society of Israel, and through his work in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem (CAHJP). He also contributed 28 articles to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, most notably on the history of the Jewish community of Prague.<sup>18</sup>

At this time in Prague, though possibly already before, he started working on the project of microfilming the archival materials from the collections of the Jewish

<sup>14</sup> Volavková, Hana: Schicksal des Jüdischen Museums in Prag (Jan Heřman). In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 3 (1967) 1, 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Graus, František: *Pest – Geißler – Judenmorde. Das 14. Jahrhundert als Krisenzeit*. Göttingen 1987. The part “Judenmorde” on pp. 155-389 embraces 2/3 of the book.

<sup>16</sup> See reviews by Steven Rowan in *The American Historical Review* 95 (1990) 2, 484. – And by Lawrence G. Duggan in *Speculum* 66 (1991) 1, 160-162.

<sup>17</sup> “Es ist aber nicht nur die Konzentration der Ereignisse und ihre Vergleichbarkeit, die mich dazu geführt hat, der Variante des Massenmordens 1348-1350 besondere Aufmerksamkeit zu widmen. Hinzu kam noch ein Grund, der unmittelbar mit unserer Gegenwart und der ‚nahen‘ Vergangenheit des 20. Jahrhunderts zusammenhängt: Diese Untersuchung möchte zugleich ein Beitrag zur Erörterung der Frage sein, inwieweit es eine autonome jüdische Geschichte gibt, bzw. wieweit sie mit der ‚allgemeinen‘ Geschichte unlösbar zusammenhängt.” Graus: *Pest – Geißler – Judenmorde* 11 (cf. fn. 15).

<sup>18</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 (2007), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 448-453.

Museum in Prague for the CAHJP in Jerusalem, and at the same time microfilming for the Jewish Museum in Prague the valuable historical documents brought to Jerusalem by the immigrants from Prague in 1939, in order to save them from the grasp of the Nazis.

In a rare joint offer by two leading professors from the Department of Jewish History at the Hebrew University – Chaim Beinart and Chaim Hillel Ben-Sasson, who generally disagreed on everything – Heřman was given the opportunity to begin working on a postdoctoral project in his field of research and to join the staff of the Hebrew University.

However, in 1969 Heřman made the fateful decision to return to Prague and the Jewish Museum. He tried to pursue his previous endeavors as an archivist, while stepping up the microfilming project for Jerusalem. Under the new conditions of the reimposition of totalitarian Communist Party control in all spheres of life and its specific impact on all aspects of Jewish activities, he was still able to publish the 1969 and 1970 volumes of *Judaica Bohemiae*, in which his last two salient studies on the Prague Jewish community in the 16<sup>th</sup> century appeared.<sup>19</sup> However, as he started to work on the next volume, he was notified that at the end of 1971 he would be replaced as editor by Jiřina Šedinová, another employee of the museum, who, unlike Heřman, was not marked by his recent stay in Israel, where he maintained contacts.<sup>20</sup>

In the aftermath of the Six-Day War and the severing of diplomatic relations, Israel was subjected to a virulent “anti-Zionist” campaign with its inherent anti-Jewish implications. In this situation, Jan Heřman decided to devote the entire 1971 volume of *Judaica Bohemiae*, the last in which he apparently was still able to decide the structure and contents, to his own contribution.

The first part of the article in this volume contains a historical survey of the Jewish communities’ archives of Bohemia and a comprehensive, retrospective report on the history, the state, and the activities of the Jewish Museum’s archives, with particular concern for the resumption of its work after WWII.<sup>21</sup>

In its second part, he decided to make accessible to the international community of scholars analytical tables and indexes that detail the content of the archival material of all Jewish communities preserved in the Jewish Museum, except for Prague. These included the archives of a large number of Jewish communities eradicated by the Nazis.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, Jan Heřman’s great deed, before being purged from the Jewish Museum in Prague, was to complete, by December 1972, the major microfilming

<sup>19</sup> Heřman, Jan: La Communauté Juive de Prague et sa Structure au Commencement des Temps Moderns. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 5 (1969) 31-71. – Heřman: The Conflict Between Jewish and Non-Jewish Population in Bohemia Before the 1541 Banishment. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 6 (1970) 39-54.

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of his successor as the editor of *Judaica Bohemiae* Jiřina Šedinová for the author, January 1, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Heřman, Jan: Jewish Community Archives from Bohemia and Moravia. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 7 (1971) 1-2, 3-11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 12-44.

project for the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People and send it to Jerusalem.

From his removal from the Jewish Museum in 1973 until his tragic death in 1986, he had to work as a technical photographer at the Prague municipal hospital Na Bulovce. According to contemporary testimony, he was prohibited from using the museum's archives and library and even denied entry to the building.

Twice during this period, in 1973 and 1977, he tried to get permission for a scholarly visit to Israel, but in vain, as the requests were rejected by the regime's state security service. The first time he was not allowed to present and discuss his proposal for a postdoctoral thesis at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. And on the second occasion, he was denied permission to participate with a paper at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1977. His paper on "The Evolution of the Jewish Population in Prague 1869-1939", accepted by the conference but not presented there, was subsequently published in an extended version by the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry.<sup>23</sup>

The long-lasting bleak situation of being deprived of any possibility to continue his life work of research in Jewish history was probably what ultimately drove him to put an end to his life. On 13 November 1986, Jan Heřman drowned himself in Prague. Just three years later, Prague experienced the "Velvet Revolution", in which democracy and freedom were restored in the Czechoslovak Republic. The State Jewish Museum, which had been nationalized and almost entirely purged of its Jewish researchers, was placed back in the hands of the Jewish community of Prague, heralding the onset of a new chapter in its genuine research activities.

Jan Heřman did not live to see this. According to a contemporary reliable source, at the time of his death the Jewish Museum of Prague, which during the Nazi period was designated a museum of the "extinguished Jewish race", was intended to serve the official campaign of Communist ideology to promote atheism.

Jan Heřman's *Judaica Bohemiae* survived the vicissitudes of the time and continues to appear to this day as an international journal of the Jewish Museum in Prague, predominantly in English. Most recently, one year after the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jan Heřman's death, the journal published (upon Rachel Greenblatt's and my initiative), a detailed bio-bibliographical article by two of the museum's scholars, Vlastimila Hamáčková and Alexandr Putík, titled "Jan Heřman (1933-1986) – Archivist and Historian".<sup>24</sup>

In a letter to me by the co-author, the historian Alexandr Putík, following the article's publication, he wrote:

I consider the basic cause of the personal tragedy of Jan Heřman to be his return to occupied Czechoslovakia. Had he remained in Israel, today he might be a professor emeritus with many students and published books. In a way his return was self-sacrifice. Had he not come back in 1969, it would have been impossible to organize and conclude the project of microfilming the

<sup>23</sup> Heřman, Jan: The Evolution of the Jewish Population in Prague, 1869-1939. In: Papers in Jewish Demography 1977 (1980) 53-67.

<sup>24</sup> Hamáčková, Vlastimila/Putík, Alexandr: Jan Heřman (1933-1986) – Archivist and Historian. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 52 (2017) 1, 119-134.

documents of the Jewish Museum for the Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People. In 1972 the trap of the Iron Curtain fell, and the international scholarly public could gain access to them only after the 1989 revolution. One should ask whether all the diplomants [MA and PhD candidates] and scholars who used the copies of the Prague documents were aware of the price that Jan Heřman paid to make them available in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup>

I feel privileged to commemorate in this short paper for the World Congress for Jewish Studies the first post-WWII Czech Jewish historian, Jan Heřman – his life and his life work.

יהי זכרו ברוך<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Alexandr Putík's letter to me from 3 July 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Of blessed memory.