

*Veselská, Magda: Archa paměti. Cesta pražského židovského muzea pohnutým 20. stoletím [The Arc of Memory. The Jewish Museum in Prague's Journey Through the Turbulent Twentieth Century].*

Academia, Židovské muzeum v Praze, Prague 2012, 287 pp., ISBN 978-8-020-02200-4.

The Jewish Museum in Prague, since its transformation during Second World War into the largest depository of Judaica in the world, has been an inexhaustible source of amazement, debate and controversy. The need for a comprehensive study of the historical and ideological development of this museum/depository/memorial has been felt for many decades, but has become particularly acute since 1989. As a matter of fact, an internationally acclaimed book about the history of the museum has already been published, written by its first post-war director Hana Volavková (*The Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague*), which appeared in English in 1968. However, the literary genre of Volavková's book can more accurately be described as an elegy rather than an historical account, so it cannot be regarded as an academic study of this topic. The expectations surrounding Magda Veselská's book which is the first complete recapitulation of the history of this unique memory institution "through the turbulent twentieth century" are understandably great.

The author of the book has been an employee of the Jewish Museum in Prague since 1999 and she is currently head of the Department of Collections. She first started to focus on the topic of the Jewish Museum in Prague during her studies at the Institute for Archaeology and Museology at Masaryk University in Brno, where she eventually took the museum as the topic of her thesis. Between 2005 and 2011 Veselská published several studies on the development of Jewish Museology in Bohemia and Moravia and about key personalities in the history of the Jewish Museum in Prague, such as its chief curator during World War, Josef Polák, and its first post-war director, Hana Volavková. She was an organiser of a number of exhibitions relating to the collections and history of the Jewish Museum in Prague. Veselská's recent publication can therefore be regarded as a final synthesis of years of research, of direct professional involvement with the museum's collections by an insider with great knowledge of the actual museum politics.

Veselská presents her subject in the form of a detailed historical reconstruction based on meticulous archival research. She carefully avoids any personal interpretation of her subject-matter, preferring to describe the museum using an evidence-based approach, referring back to the relevant corresponding documents. The text is divided into four main chapters: the first phase of institutional development from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until 1938; the war-time Central Jewish Museum; the transition from a community museum to a state museum between 1945 and 1950; the state controlled institutional phase in Socialist Czechoslovakia and the institutional changes in the first years after 1989. The text is rounded off by an epilogue written by the present museum director, Leo Pavlát.

In her discussion Veselská discloses a wide range of facts about the museum's internal institutional and external political contexts which, until now, have remained hidden from the public. However, the main content of this scholarly piece consists of the demystification of two existing theses related to the museum, which have had

a considerable impact on how post-Cold War paradigms of “collective memory” with regard to totalitarian systems, have developed.

The first important paradigm shift concerns the hitherto generally accepted thesis, that the idea of the war-time Jewish Central Museum (Jüdisches Zentralmuseum/Ústřední židovské museum) emerged in 1942 on the co-initiative of the Prague Central Office for Jewish Emigration (Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung) created at the end of 1939, and the Prague Jewish Trustee Office (Treuhandstelle) set up to administer the personal property of the deportees in 1941, operated by the Prague Jewish community. As Veselská points out with reference to a number of archival sources, the initiative to establish a Central Jewish Museum in Prague was in fact taken by the Prague Jewish community, primarily as an undercover manoeuvre with a view to saving parts of the property of Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia that had been dissolved by force during Second World War (except property in the Sudeten border region, which was annexed in September 1938). This cleverly devised storage-museum also housed the collections of the Jewish museums of Mladá Boleslav and Mikulov. The Prague Central Office, headed by Sturmbannführer Hans Günther, but run in effect by his deputy Karl Rahm, did not interfere actively either with the idea of establishing a Central Jewish Museum, or with the conception of the exhibitions set up under the curatorship of Josef Polák between 1942 and 1944. In this connection the Nazi authorities were basically external supervisors who only consented to or denied initiatives taken by the Prague Jewish community. On the other hand, the Jewish community appears here as an active agent, acting under extreme restrictions, trying to influence the destiny of the cultural heritage of its own disappearing communities. These efforts were paid for by bitter and, in some cases, even discrediting compromises. In this connection one important detail accentuated by Veselská is that the museum was not destined for a wide public, only for a very restricted circle of higher-ranking SS officers based around the Central Office. As a result, and as indicated by Veselská's argumentation, the Jewish Museum in Prague should not be identified with the so-called Institutes for the Study of the Jewish Question established in 1935-1943 both in Germany (Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt am Main) and in German-occupied Europe (Krakow, Paris, Milan, Florence, Trieste, Bologna and Budapest). The topos of the “museum of an extinct race”, which became intrinsically connected with the identity of the museum after 1945, is hence a teleology, confounding the consequence of an unprecedented historical tragedy with an intentional project. The afore-mentioned post-Holocaust interpretation was mainly issued by the first post-war museum staff, namely Hana Volavková, Jiří Weil, Egon Erwin Kisch and H. G. Adler. Veselská's documentary account about the precise circumstances of the genesis of the Jewish museum in Prague relativises the reliability of some of the latest research, such as that conducted by Dirk Rupnow (2000, 2005)<sup>1</sup> and Jan Björn Potthast (2002),<sup>2</sup> in which they

<sup>1</sup> Rupnow, Dirk: Täter-Gedächtnis-Opfer. Das „jüdische Zentralmuseum“ in Prag 1942-1945. Wien 2000; Rupnow, Dirk: Vernichten und Erinnern: Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächtnispolitik. Göttingen 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Potthast, Jan Björn: Das Jüdische Zentralmuseum der SS in Prag. Gegnerforschung und Völkermord im Nationalsozialismus. Frankfurt/Main 2002.

correlate the museum with a wider framework of Nazi propaganda apparatus, the so-called “Ideological research on political enemies” (*Gegnerforschung*) and with its intrinsic goal to annihilate the enemies’ memory, respectively its historical self-consciousness (*Gedächtnismord/Memorizid*).

Paradoxically, the museum has only become an ideological propaganda tool after the Holocaust, in socialist Czechoslovakia. With this point, however, we have arrived at Veselská’s second crucial contribution to the debate concerning the place of this minority-centric institution within the grip of an oppressive power. According to Veselská, the nationalisation of the museum in 1950 should not be considered as an act of force, but as the result of mutual consent between state authorities (the National Administration/Národní správa, the Fund of National Renewal/Fond národní obnovy and the Ministry of Education) on the one hand, and the museum’s leadership (represented by Hana Volavková) on the other. It was Volavková herself who initiated and urged the transition of the museum into state guardianship in order to secure the survival of its invaluable collections as a whole. Yet her vision of entrusting the “cultural heritage” of the extinct Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia to the patronage of the Czechoslovak State could not be accomplished in the way she had originally understood due to the Communist coup of February 1948. In the following 40 years the museum became the last stakeholder of the historical memory of a shrinking, dissolving Jewish community as well as an instrument of state propaganda pursuing programmatically the neutralisation of the inherent Jewish specificity of the above mentioned historical memory. Notwithstanding this point, as Veselská demonstrates by detailed documentation, the museum has managed to reconcile this antagonism under the cover of ideological conformity.

One of the advantages of Veselská’s analytical approach is that she is able to keep an emotional distance by describing the key protagonists in the history of the Jewish Museum in Prague. She characterises them as ordinary human beings with personal ambitions, frailties and shortcomings, not as heroes or victims. Her text evokes for the reader people who were trying to maintain normality through self-discipline, labour and professional achievement in the midst of a storm whose consequences they were unable to foresee. Strangely, this sober evaluation endows even the interim period of the war-time Jewish Central Museum with a glint of catharsis, in spite of its close encounter with the Holocaust.

The paradigm shift in the typification of the Jewish Museum in Prague from a morbid ideological experiment during the Holocaust, or as Volavková paraphrased it after 1945, “a memorial for the dead” (*posmrtný památník*),<sup>3</sup> to an active cultural and memory institution even during WWII and under Communism, will undoubtedly affect the future research in memory culture studies. It will also be interesting to see, how this paradigm shift will be reflected in new exhibitions planned between now and 2016, if at all, and how the cultural vitality and pedagogical interactivity

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<sup>3</sup> Volavková, Hana (ed.): *Židovské muzeum v Praze. Průvodce sbírkami* [The Jewish Museum in Prague. A Guide to the Collections]. Praha 1948, 6.

within the new public image of the museum will be balanced with its tragic historical heritage.

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