

JEWISH COMMUNITY MUSEUM  
AS A RESULT OF CITIZEN ACTIVITIES**PETER SALNER**

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The study focuses on circumstances under which the Jewish Community Museum was established and officially opened in the Bratislava synagogue in 2012. Already prior to WWII, a respected architect and collector Eugen Bárkány came with the idea of opening a museum consisting of Slovak judaica. He followed up his project after the liberation, too. In the second half of the sixties, it seemed that thanks to the Jewish Religious Community (JCR/ŽNO) Bratislava support there would be created a Slovak branch of the Prague Jewish Museum within the premises of the Neolog Bratislava synagogue. However, the project implementation had to be postponed for many years to come: first of all due to Bárkány's death (1967), demolition of the synagogue giving place to the construction of a new bridge, and the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

In the beginning of the next millenium, it was Maroš Borský, Art historian and Judaist, who undertook this project. He persuaded the board members of the JCR (ŽNO) Bratislava to vacate the already abandoned female gallery of the only preserved synagogue for presentation of Bárkány's collection. Apart from the permanent exhibition, the museum already offered three exhibits entitled: *The Shadow of the Past* (2013); *We Are Here* (2014); and *Engerau – a Forgotten Story of Petržalka* in 2015.

*Key words:* The Jewish Community Museum, E. Bárkány, ŽNO Bratislava (JRC Bratislava), synagogue, civic activities, M. Borský

The prerequisites for sustainable development of the urban environment include interpersonal relationships between individuals, but also between ethnic or religious groups. Civic activities aimed at maintaining the culture of minority segments of the society play an important role in how they are formed and how they develop. One example of this is the process of creating the Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava.

In Bratislava the Jews have traditionally constituted a major city-shaping layer. In the past they accounted for more than 10% of the population.<sup>1</sup> Following the historic

<sup>1</sup> According to the 1930 census, 14,882 people (12.0% of Bratislava residents) reported to have Jewish religion and 4747, i.e. 4.1% to be of Jewish nationality (Hromádka, 1932: 195; 193). In the text I pay special attention to the activities of the Jewish Religious Community.

events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the Holocaust, emigration waves in the years 1945 to 1949 and the fear of reprisals after August 1968) the number of active members of the community and the scope of their activities in Bratislava decreased significantly.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, after November 1989 the community and its umbrella Jewish Religious Community (ŽNO) have participated in the life of the city. It seeks to revitalize traditional values, which in the past formed a natural part of Bratislava, but today it is “a great unknown” for some in the majority population. As a consequence, old prejudices persist, as do fears of the Jews from the response of the public.

Knowledge of facts and the return (at least partial) of traditional functions may be considered important determinants of sustainable development of the capital of Slovakia. Museums and educational institutions play an important role in this process. As part of the project VEGA 2/0024/14 *Citizen activities as determinants of sustainable urban development (ethnological perspective)* I will try to present the long-term efforts of individuals and the Bratislava Jewish Community leadership in establishing their own museum. The role of the new institution is to present to the public (as well as to the community members) the principles of Judaism, in particular the history and the current status of the largest Jewish community in Slovakia. In my paper I pay attention to attempts of individuals to preserve cultural heritage, which used to be the property of the Jewish community in Bratislava and the approach the community leadership took to these efforts.<sup>3</sup>

The first steps towards the creation of the museum date back to 1950s and the whole process successfully culminated in June 2012. The Jewish Community Museum was then officially opened on the premises of Bratislava’s only preserved synagogue.<sup>4</sup> The leading role and the main implementation in this successful project were taken up by the director of the new institution Maroš Borský. However, he did not start at



*Neolog synagogue in Bratislava, a view from above; tablets with Moses’s Ten Commandments in the middle. Photo: archive of P. Salner.*

2 Based on data from the 2011 census, in Bratislava the Jewish religion was reported by 675 persons and Jewish nationality was reported by 228 persons. In both cases, they are much smaller than one percent of the total population of the city.

3 Given the focus of this paper, I rely mostly on materials from the archives of the Jewish Religious Community Bratislava (especially the minutes of the Board of Directors of the community), showing the positions of the leadership of the community.

4 The official date of the founding statute is 27<sup>th</sup> September 2012 and as of 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2012, the Museum was entered in the Register of Museums and Galleries under No. RM 103/2012.



*Interior of the Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava. Photo: Maroš Borský, archive of the © Jewish Community Museum.*

“point zero” because his was not the first attempt to create an exposition of historically valuable religious objects owned by the community.

The foundations of the collection were put together as early as 1950s by Eugen Bárkány (28<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1885 in Prešov – 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1967 in Bratislava). He was a civil engineer and an enthusiastic collector of Judaica who – as early as 1928 – founded the Jewish Museum in Prešov and managed it until 1940 (Švantnerová, 2012: 19). During the Holocaust he fled to Hungary, where he lived with forged documents. Yet, his existential problems continued even after the liberation of Czechoslovakia. In early 1950s he had to move from Prešov to Meretice village and later to Smolník as part of the initiative called ‘Action B’. In 1952 Bárkány received help in a difficult situation by the Ethnographic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. He was employed to document folk architecture buildings.<sup>5</sup> (One part of his extensive research work is now documented at the Documentation Department of the Slovak Academy of Sciences Institute of Ethnology.) Bárkány continuously collected also evidence of material culture of the Jews, and worked together with his wife (Plávková, 2010: 5). Even though he never managed to summarize the facts into a synthesized work, they have not been lost.<sup>6</sup>

In 1955 Eugen Bárkány retired and moved with his wife to Bratislava. Almost symbolically he was offered by the Jewish Religious Community to stay in the historic building of the then mikveh (ritual bath) in Baštová street (Švantnerová, 2012: 21)<sup>7</sup>.

5 In a difficult situation, Eugen Bárkány was given help also by the State Jewish Museum in Prague. It commissioned him to write a short historical study for every Jewish religious community in Slovakia focusing on synagogues, cemeteries etc. (Veselská, 2013: 189).

6 Bárkány’s knowledge was summarized and extended by E. Dojč in the publication Bárkány, Dojč (1991) which still represents the key literature for the study of Jews in Slovakia.

7 Today the building houses the Austrian Cultural Institute. From the original building of the bath, only the chimney remained, which the new owner had renovated.



*Interior of the Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava. Photo: Maroš Borský, archive of the © Jewish Community Museum.*

In the new setting Bárkány continued his collecting activities related to the museum and took care of Judaica of the Jewish Religious Community. As documented in photos in the Hungarian magazine *Múlt és Jövő*, some of these items can be traced back as property of the Jewish community back to 1913 (Švantnerová, 2012: 20). Gradually he added other items which he managed to preserve. In early 1960's (when he was a student shortly after finishing secondary school) the historian Štefan Holčík helped him in his work. He mentioned how he and Bárkány collected old artefacts in Bratislava which did not have an owner or whose owners were willing to donate them: "Objects were given to us not only by the Jews, but also by Christians such as the architect Szönyi. When Betstube was being demolished in Klariská Street, we took out books and furniture from there, as well as a tablet always showing with electric light bulbs (as eternal light) whose death anniversary it was, and for whom to pray. Then a tailor shop was set up in the place. We moved many artefacts from the warehouse behind the shochet (religious slaughterer) dwelling (designed by architect Szalatnai). It was just such a wooden shack under a support slope-wall made of stone, from which we removed, for example, a wooden model of the Tabernacle from the Great Synagogue (Grosse Schul) in Zámocká Street, and a sort of bars – as if demolished al-memor – which was, however, from another building (perhaps from a small prayer room in Zochova Street). There were a lot of books, but they were already moldy or rotten. They were thrown out. On the covers of some of the nicely bound ones (individual volumes of the Bible, published at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most likely in Vienna), the owner's name Grünhut (I can no longer remember his first name) was printed. We moved many objects from some kind of warehouse in a recessed basement of a house in Kozia Street (Šmeralova). The keys were with a certain 'Mr. Žaki' who worked there as a kind of servant (when it was the anniversary of architect Szalatnai's death, this gentleman 'Žaki' prayed for him,



*A view of the collections in the Neolog synagogue interior. Photo: archive of P. Salner.*

because Szalatnai had no son. Ms. Slatinská always gave him a reward for it. I do not know whether it was the corner house of the Union of Jewish Communities, or the one next to it – perhaps I could identify it. Various objects were thrown in a chest there, not looking like property of the community, but rather as items from various households.” The obtained objects were placed neatly in a large hall on the first floor the Neolog Synagogue in Rybné Square.<sup>8</sup> “Originally, it was a kind of ceremonial hall with many large windows to the west, to the Vydrlica Street. A separate staircase was built to the left of the synagogue (from the same period!). Photographs of the synagogue show large windows above the main entrance. The hall was at the same level as women’s choir (in the Neolog synagogue there was also an organ). Perhaps originally a door connected the hall and the choir, but I no longer remember this, the door may have been walled up. Various embroidered Torah blankets were hung on the southern wall of the room, which might have covered the original door. Somewhere there is a photograph of this room cluttered with collected objects.”<sup>9</sup> Bárkány believed that it was in this building that a permanent exhibition would later be placed. He was then assisted by historian Ivan Kamenec. As stated, the museum opening was planned for 1<sup>st</sup> January 1966 (Kamenec, 1966: 18)<sup>10</sup>. Eugen Bárkány was actively involved also in the activities of the Jewish community in Bratislava. Until his death, he was a member of the Jewish Religious Community Committee. He had a chance to promote at this forum his vision of the Jewish Museum and he used the space offered to him. The Board of Directors embraced

<sup>8</sup> J. Švantnerová (2012: 22) writes that the collection “was stored in the loft area of the Neolog Synagogue...”

<sup>9</sup> Memories of Štefan Holčík sent by mail.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from Švantnerová 2012: 21.



*Interior of the Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava. Photo: Maroš Borský, archive of the © Jewish Community Museum.*

his vision to establish a permanent museum exposition. As an argument in negotiations with the authorities they used the existence of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

Some minutes from the meetings of the Jewish Religious Community Committee from 1964–1969 are available (the rest, as far as I know, were lost during any of the numerous transfers of the community’s documentation).<sup>11</sup> In this short period the board repeatedly addressed the difficulties connected to the implementation of the project.

The first preserved piece of information appears in the “Minutes of a meeting of the Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Bratislava” from December 1964.<sup>12</sup> The context makes it clear, however, that this issue had been addressed previously: “The archive collection, put together so selflessly by Eugen Bárkány must be inspected also by members of the committee and therefore Mr. Valent proposes a joint visit to the rooms in the church at Rybné Square, in which the collection is placed. The committee unanimously approves the proposal and sets the time for the visit on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1965 at 10 am.” (dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 1964).

Those who made the visit were likely satisfied with the results of the inspection. This is evidenced by the fact that at the February meeting, Mr. Valent “... read the letter from the Jewish State Museum in Prague addressed to the Slovak National Museum, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1965, saying the Prague Jewish Museum intended to establish its Bratislava branch made up of our collections placed in the former Neolog church. The Board would very much approve of implementing such a proposal, be-

11 Only the minutes from the years 1945–1955 and 1963–1969 have been preserved; however even those are not complete.

12 In the text below, such data are labelled by ‘Z’ (standing for ‘Minutes’), followed by the date of the meeting.

cause the collection would be in professional hands.” The Board approved the proposal unanimously and also asked Eugen Bárkány to submit “a complete inventory of the exhibits so we know which museum objects are included” (dated 7<sup>th</sup> February 1965). Other minutes mention that the Slovak National Museum (SNM, which likely acted as a state guarantor) announced the collection „would be taken over by the Jewish State Museum in Prague, specifically its Bratislava branch, from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1966.<sup>13</sup> To this end, representatives of the Jewish State Museum made a commitment to arrange in appropriate places that the former synagogue in Rybné Square would be made available for this purpose and modified appropriately.” (dated 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1965). Another piece of information confirms that the community had been taking specific steps to secure the synagogue building for the museum. At that time it was used as a warehouse by the Czechoslovak Television (dated 17<sup>th</sup> October 1965).

Optimistic plans did not materialize. As shown in a report from a meeting almost exactly a year later (i.e. long after the announced date of 1<sup>st</sup> January 1966), the problems included the fact that community leaders and management of the Slovak National Museum had different views on the future of the collection: “A letter from the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava no. 2493/66 of 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1966 was read in which we were informed that they are ready to take our collection as a long-term deposit. They would take care of its preservation, professional processing and safekeeping. The Board does not agree with this proposal and requests that a State Jewish Museum be established here, similarly as in Prague.” The following paragraph of the minutes reported on a letter in which City Roads Administration announced in August 1966 that due to the planned construction of a bridge in the area of Rybné Square, the synagogue would need to be demolished “or at our cost moved about 20 meters eastward.”<sup>14</sup> (dated 11<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1966).

At the October meeting, Board members searched for a way out of crisis. The then Chairman of the Jewish Religious Community saw the solution in accepting the conditions of SNM and requested that the Board change its resolution “not to submit our collections to SNM for a long-term deposit, but rather attempt to establish a State Jewish Museum just like in Prague, because we do not have suitable rooms or a specialist for it.” Most of those present, however, were opposed to submitting the collections to SNM: “The Board has resolved to thank the SNM in Bratislava for their interest and willingness, but also to inform them that our collections would not be submitted to them but rather provisionally stored in our own rooms” (dated 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1966).<sup>15</sup>

The community leadership continued to pay attention to the issue of the museum. As early as January 1967 Eugen Bárkány announced that due to his old age “he can no longer run our museum and asks whether under the previous resolution, we are to

13 The date mentioned is also used by Ivan Kamenec in the cited paper (see note 2).

14 The planned demolition of the Neolog Synagogue sparked protests not only from members of the Jewish community, but also from the public. The building did not fulfill the original religious purpose for some time. It was used as a warehouse, but thanks to its location near the St. Martin's Cathedral it remained a symbol of tolerance in Bratislava. The cultural and historical values must also be mentioned. For further details on this topic, see Bončo, Čomaj (2010) but especially Bútorá (2011).

15 I cannot refrain from making a personal comment on the cited text: I personally knew most members of the then Board of Directors (including my father), but I had no knowledge of those facts. I saw them as elder gentlemen dealing exclusively with religious and economic issues. I was surprised by my father's level of involvement in this matter, but also the straightforward decision of the committee to leave the objects in the ownership of the community despite the difficulties and risks. Apparently, this commitment to ancestral heritage persisted after November 1989.



*Interior of the Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava. Photo: Maroš Borský, archive of the Jewish Community Museum*

run the museum ourselves or submit the collection to deposits of SNM. After a long debate, the leadership decided that the collections would be managed by the worship commission of the Jewish Religious Community” (dated 8<sup>th</sup> January 1967). In May 1967, the community leadership discussed information according to which “Mr. Eugen Bárkány without our knowledge or our consent has already submitted some collections of this museum to the State Museum”<sup>16</sup> (dated 14<sup>th</sup> May 1967). The agenda of that meeting included also “former Neolog church”.

Information was presented from state authorities which confirmed the decision to demolish the synagogue because of bridge construction (dated 14<sup>th</sup> May 1967). The final obituary for this important building (and any hope to place in the Jewish Museum in it) came two years later: “The Chairman informed the Board of the decision of the National Committee to demolish the former Neolog church, which had happened in the meantime. Under the authority of the Board from 16<sup>th</sup> February 1969, Mr. Ehrental and Mr. Reichenberg managed to sell the available construction materials for 41,000 Czechoslovak crowns to be used exclusively for making changes to the church in Heydukova Street” (dated 15<sup>th</sup> June 1969).<sup>17</sup>

As it turned out, the demolition of the synagogue did not mean the end of hope for the Jewish Museum, because SNM showed continued willingness to take over the Judaica collection. At the meeting in September, the community chairman “... explained that we are unable to keep these collections for reasons related to physical and human resources, because we do not have the appropriate resources. After a brief de-

16 In a personal conversation, Štefan Holčík said that in his opinion such action was motivated by the serious medical condition of Eugen Bárkány and the fear of what would happen to the collection after his death. He viewed the museum as a guarantee of the collection’s preservation. From the context it is not clear whether it was the State Jewish Museum in Prague, or the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava. Based on indirect information given below, personally I am inclined to think it was the “Bratislava” alternative.

17 Of the building, only two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments were preserved, which had been placed on the roof of the synagogue (look at the picture on p. 367). It is said that once two elderly men brought them into the synagogue on Heydukova Street, leaving them in the community for a bottle of kosher wine. Today these tablets are included in the community museum exposition.

bate, the Board has unanimously decided that our collection – which we had in the former Neolog church and which was transported to the castle – would be submitted to SŠM (Slovenské štátne múzeum – Slovak State Museum) into a long-term deposit with the following conditions: Objects of silver placed in glass cases in our office will remain with us and will not be transferred anywhere. The collection will continue to remain our property and will only go into long-term deposit. We are going to make a request that SŠM employs one capable Jew or Jewess who would help process this special collection” (dated 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1967).

The Board considered the issue of the collection’s future also on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1967. The meeting opened with the news of the sudden death of Eugen Bárkány. The museum was to be dealt with as a separate item on the agenda. The chairman reported about a meeting with the director of the Slovak National Museum, “... who informed us that the collections are provisionally stored in the castle, and an accurate inventory was developed. The objects have been repaired, cleaned up and preserved. He informed us also that if the former Neolog church would not be demolished, the Jewish Museum would be placed there. In case the church is pulled down after all, the museum would be located in the street on the opposite side.” (dated 12<sup>th</sup> November 1967).

The last time the museum was mentioned in the minutes was a few days prior to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. In the item museum, it was mentioned that the collection was moved to the premises of the Slovak National Museum at the castle (dated 18<sup>th</sup> August 1968).

The death of Eugen Bárkány, the demolition of Neolog synagogue, but especially the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent emigration of many members of the community, and attitudes to the Jewish community in the normalization period pushed the idea of building a dedicated Jewish Museum into the background for a long time. Bárkány’s collection was stored in the depository of SNM and was given back to the Jewish Religious Community Bratislava in the mid-eighties. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1990, the offices of the community (then at 21 Kozia Street) were broken into by unknown (obviously professional) burglars who stole the most valuable artefacts (Švantnerová, 2012: 23). In 1992, the rest of the collection was moved again to the depository of SNM and after the establishment of the specialized Museum of Jewish Culture of SNM, the objects were submitted to be managed by this institution. The museum management wished to purchase the items, or otherwise wanted to return them to the community. The board members responded just as their predecessors did a quarter century earlier: “We have agreed that emotionally speaking, their cultural and historical value is priceless. We intend to continue to exhibit the items in the future (after they are repaired). Step by step we are going to repair them and preserve the cultural heritage for future generations” (dated 9<sup>th</sup> January 1995)<sup>18</sup>. The community finally took over the objects in 2002. In the absence of other options they were provisionally stored in less than satisfactory premises. However, a nicer chapter in the history of this valuable collection started to be written in 2008...

In the first decade of the new millennium, the community once again attempted to establish an institution focused on the history and present of Jewish Bratislava. These efforts were driven especially by the personal initiative of Maroš Borský. He studied art history at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Comenius University in Bratislava, completed a study stay with specialization in art history in Regensburg, Germany, and la-

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<sup>18</sup> As you can see, there is again interest to expose these exhibits.

ter focused on Jewish Studies at Leo Baeck College in London. He spent two years at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He completed his PhD at the well-known Hochschule für Jüdische Studien in Heidelberg. Even during his studies he worked at the Slovak National Museum – Museum of Jewish Culture, where he launched and led the documentation project *Synagoga Slovaca*. He summarized the results of his long-term research in the monograph *Synagogue Architecture in Slovakia: A Memorial Landscape of a Lost Community* (2007). He also worked at the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Comenius University.

Similarly as Eugen Bárkány, also Maroš Borský has been a longtime member of the Board of the Jewish Religious Community and currently holds the position of vice chairman. He initiated the reconstruction of the synagogue in Bratislava (since 2006) and the house of mourning at the Orthodox cemetery. (Both buildings are cultural monuments.) Thanks to his activities, he managed to win support in the Jewish Religious Community for the idea of the museum from its leadership as well as understanding from a large part of the community.

He shared his view of the process of creating the museum in a catalog published on the occasion of the exposition opening: “The Jewish community museum is the result of a long-term policy of the Jewish Religious Community in Bratislava to protect its precious monuments. The first project was the construction of Chatam Sofer Memorial, completed in 2002. Subsequently, in 2006, gradual repairs of the synagogue in Heydukova Street started, as well as renovation of the ceremonial hall in the New Orthodox Cemetery. In 2008, we took over the care of the collection of Judaica from Eugen Bárkány. Ever since it has been returned by the Slovak National Museum – the Museum of Jewish Culture, it was stored for several years in boxes in unsuitable conditions. Yet, it was a long way to the opening of the Museum, which now presents to its visitors the rich cultural heritage of Bratislava Jews. The key persons behind the project’s implementation are the curator of the collection Jana Švantnerová, the experienced documentary photographer Viera Kamenická and the project manager Maroš Borský” (Borský, 2012: 27).<sup>19</sup>

The permanent exhibition is housed in the former women’s gallery. This run-down space on the first floor of the synagogue served for years as a warehouse. Seasonal exhibitions are now housed in the small prayer room, unused in winter. Important moments from the history of the community are presented on the walls along the staircase. Even though this part of the building was unused for many years, situating the museum in a functional synagogue raised controversy among regular worshippers. As Borský said, “we faced the dilemma of whether or not to make access to the synagogue possible for the general public and whether or not this place with active Jewish religious services would be fitting for meeting cultural interest of visitors from outside of our community. Some members have asked whether it is fitting to place a museum in the synagogue.” (Borský, 2013: 13). There were also security concerns, as well as concerns of possible disruption of worship by the visitors. During the last three seasons that the museum has been open, these fears have not been confirmed. The opening hours (open on Fridays and Sundays from 10 am to 4 pm from May to

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19 Work was divided into three stages. In 2008–2009, 1,122 objects were processed, documented, recorded and given professional treatment. In 2010, detailed research of objects was conducted and a curatorial concept was developed. Finally (in 2011) the construction and technical modifications of future premises were carried out (Borský, 2012: 27).

October and closed during Jewish holidays) limit the possibility of conflict to a minimum.

As Borský stresses repeatedly, the aim of the project is not to secularize the building, or to make show of worship services or to turn worshippers into museum exhibits. He argues that museums operate successfully in synagogue buildings in many European cities. The helpful attitude of Rabbi Baruch Myers was also very important. At his concerts of Chassidic music, he repeatedly comes into contact with non-Jewish public, and perhaps that is why he sees more positives than problems in the revival of the synagogue.

The search for pros and cons of museum activities in the synagogue manifests the long-term strategic dispute within the community. While some members are interested in opening the synagogue (and the community) more widely to the public, others for various reasons prefer isolation from the surrounding environment. It appears that most people feel positively about the museum's existence. Most people realize that the museum (just like the state-run Museum of Jewish Culture of SNM) opens up the community through its activities and helps dissolve the myth of "mysteriousness of the Jews" which is still shared by part of the public. Also important is the fact that the Jewish Community Museum focuses on specific manifestations of Jewish life in Bratislava. Community members show their understanding for the museum which can be seen by the extensive list of donors who gave donations to help establish this institution. Plaques with their names now welcome visitors at the entrance to the museum in the synagogue. The museum was welcomed with great interest among both the lay and professional public. The Annual Award by the magazine *Pamiatky a múzeá* (Monuments and Museums) given in 2012 in the Exposition category testifies to the high standard that the museum has achieved.

In addition to the permanent exhibition, short-term exhibitions and educational events prepared by the Jewish Community Museum also fulfill important function. Two exhibitions were installed in the Museum in its short history. Both elicited response from the public and from community members. Especially the first one, entitled *Shadows of the Past*, had a profound impact because it dealt with a less comfortable topic of the not so distant past. Visitors could see paintings which were aryanised from Jewish owners and (because the original owners could no longer be identified) which are today the property of the Slovak National Gallery (SNG). The curator Jana Švantnerová has for some time dealt with the fortune of the nationalized works and has now published the most comprehensive list yet of such works (Švantnerová, 2010).<sup>20</sup>

At the opening of the exhibition, SNG Director Alexandra Kusá underlined, "... it is necessary to speak (exhibit, publish, lecture) also about the less positive parts of our history." She further said she was pleased that "the Slovak National Gallery contributed to research into the confiscation by the state of art objects from Jewish property during the period of the Slovak State. The concerns about reputational risks clearly must yield to scientific approach, information sharing but also of taking responsibility. As is apparent from the text of Jana Švantnerová, an exhibition like this also raises very important issues related to the boundaries of professional ethics and concessi-

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<sup>20</sup> According to the author "this paper is the first attempt at a systematic treatment of the issue of nationalization of Jewish movable property, its gathering, expert valuation and subsequent transfer to state collections" (Švantnerová, 2010: 1).

ons to lesser evil.” (Kusá, 2013: 6). The controversial topic was not received unanimously. It elicited positive response and great interest from the media and visitors, but also led to some uneasiness or open refusal.

At the time of writing of this article the museum houses the exhibition *We Are Here!* Through photographs it attempts to present to the public the activities of the community after November 1989. Pictures (typically documentary photos made by photographer Viera Kamenická) and the accompanying text fulfill an important function. They aim to explain the nature of the illustrated event in life or annual cycle, but also the current position of the Jewish minority in Slovak society. The complexity of the issues was formulated by Maroš Borský when he searched for an answer to the question whether the identity of Slovak Jews was ethnic, cultural or religious: “Our exhibition and accompanying catalog are trying to provide the answer by showing contemporary life of the community. We see that it is deeply rooted in religious tradition, the historical events captured in the Bible. Overall, this makes us a religious ethnic group with a specific culture which maintains its traditional community structures. We are fully integrated into society. We are loyal citizens of the Slovak Republic, but we are proud of our past. We maintain emotional ties, lasting centuries, with the Holy Land and the modern State of Israel, where many of us have friends and relatives” (Borský, 2014: 7). He also expressed hope that this project would contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the culture and community life of Jews in Slovakia (Borský, 2014: 9).

The lecture series *Opening Doors*, subtitled *Education Program in the Synagogue*, was also well received. Its very name expresses symbolically that this event fits the concept of the museum exposition and seasonal exhibitions. The aim is to present to the public the Jewish community, to show the synagogue, explain the principles of Judaism and current activities of the Jewish Religious Community. In the opening lecture, Rabbi Baruch Myers reflected on the two decades of his activities in Bratislava. Then followed Slovak and foreign experts who shared their knowledge of Jewish identity, Slovak-Jewish relations and other current issues. The European Day of Jewish Culture was included in the series as well. The second year started with a lecture by Jewish Religious Community Chairman Egon Gál on the Jewish Community Today. The emphasis, however, remains on religious issues and rabbinical authorities. Lectures were given by Tom Kučera from Munich (on the concept of free will in Judaism), Andrew Goldstein from London (Temple and Synagogue), Mikhail Kapustin from Bratislava (Jewish Resistance from the Perspective of Halacha) and Baruch Myers, also from Bratislava (Jewish Month Tishrei and its Holidays). The series this year was concluded by the coordinator of the event Maroš Borský with his lecture *We Are Here!*

Another important activity is the educational program *Jewish Cultural Heritage in Bratislava*. It is designed for high school students in Bratislava and the Museum implements it together with the Department of Education, Youth and Sports of the Bratislava Higher Territorial Unit for Bratislava high school students.<sup>21</sup> To the question of what is the essence and reason for creating an independent Jewish Community Museum, Maroš Borský highlighted his four main points:<sup>22</sup>

1. The very existence of the museum and its placement in the synagogue. It is linked with “opening the doors”, but there is also the long-term strategy for the preser-

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21 VÚC Bratislava (Bratislava Higher Territorial Unit) is a permanent partner of the Museum and also cooperates in the preparation of other events.

22 The responses are taken from mail correspondence between Maroš Borský and the author.

vation of the synagogue building. Also this approach helps the Jewish Religious Community to raise grant funds;

2. I am convinced that care for cultural heritage must be on the agenda of religious communities – whether they are listed buildings where worship services still take place or ritual objects. In Western Europe, it is common to see diocesan museums, in which the church manages a museum collection of rare liturgical objects, altarpieces and sculptures etc. In our country, in view of the historical context, this kind of museums is just starting;

3. Another important argument is related to point 2 above. In Slovakia the model remains in place of culture financed but also managed by the state (or region or city, etc.). Such exclusivity is no longer a functional model in the west. On the contrary, many institutions are independent.

4. Connected to point 3 above is the question of whether Jewish culture should be cared for only by the state-run Museum of Jewish Culture or the community has the right to formulate its own cultural policy. Naturally, as a state-run institution, the Museum of Jewish Culture fulfills functions prescribed by the state. This is clear particularly in how international commitments of the Slovak Republic are being fulfilled in the field of education and research of the Holocaust (administration of the Holocaust Memorial, the National Holocaust Exposition in Nitra, the construction of a museum in war-time labor and concentration camp Sereď, organization of Holocaust remembrance events in Bratislava and Poprad), Holocaust education, publications (I will mention translations of works by Arnošt Lustig, publishing the Slovak version of the so-called Pinkas hakehilot by Yad Vashem Museum in Israel)... The Jewish Community Museum aims, among its other goals, to present the Jewish culture. The Holocaust is a tragic historical event that affected the further development of the Jewish community and should therefore be remembered but it is not an expression of our culture!

The creation of the Jewish Community Museum is a manifestation of civic activism of individuals and understanding of their vision by the leadership of the religious institution. The result is a new impetus for development of the community, but also for improving the Jewish – Gentile relations and thus sustainable development of Bratislava.

The paper is an outcome of the project VEGA 2/0024/14 *Občianske aktivity ako determinant udržateľného rozvoja mesta (etnologický pohľad)* [Citizen activities as determinants of sustainable urban development (ethnological perspective)] and internal project of the Institute of Ethnology of SAS no. 30/2013 *The Transformation of the Jewish Community in Slovakia After 1989*.

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