Alongside the Castle, the Jewish Museum of Prague is one of the city’s crown jewels, a requisite stop, and often the prime destination, for tourists who visits the capital. For the past two decades countless tour guides have regaled those visitors with stories of the Museum’s fabled beginnings. The amazing collection of Jewish religious and social artifacts, unparalleled in the world thanks to their great extent and coherence, the guides explain, survived the war only thanks to the Nazis’ perverted desire to create a ‘Museum to the Extinct Jewish Race’. According to that story, the perpetrators of genocide allegedly sought to commemorate those whom they had erased from the earth. That illogical aim, to memorialize precisely what the Nazis sought to eliminate, illustrates the contradiction at the heart of this well known and, as Magda Veselská convincingly demonstrates, fundamentally untrue story. In this impressive, fascinating, and beautiful book, Veselská demonstrates to the contrary that the Jewish Museum was and remains a remarkably successful project of the Jews of Prague themselves, who sought before, during and after the war to protect a legacy that was threatened with destruction.

*Archa paměti* is in many ways two different books that are intimately related and mutually supportive. At first glance, it is a ‘coffee-table book’ that strikingly represents the Museum’s development and collection in dozens upon dozens of color and black-and-white images. On a more thorough read, however, the book is far more than just a beautiful representation of the Museum. Unusually, for a work with so many images, *Archa paměti* is also a work of serious historical investigation, supported by hundreds of archival and textual references. As a result, the book simultaneously offers the general reader and the scholar the opportunity to understand and visualize the Museum from its origins to the present day.

Veselská’s deconstruction of the ‘Extinct Race’ myth begins with a thorough investigation of the Museum’s origins. Ironically, the Czech Jews who first imagined and then founded the Museum, did actually seek to memorialize something on the verge of erasure: the old Jewish quarter of Prague. The founders saw the so-called *Asanace*, the fin-de-siècle urban renewal of the Josefov quarter, which included the razing of three synagogues, as an opportunity to document a Jewish way of life that was quickly disappearing through assimilation. Veselská traces the peripatetic journey of the Museum from those ideas through its various locations in the years prior to the Second World War. From its opening in 1912, the Museum was a secular institution that originally even welcomed the public for several hours on the Jewish Sabbath. Despite growth in the collection and a more permanent home in the Ceremonial Hall next to the Old Jewish Cemetery, the Museum remained in the interwar years a relatively small affair.
Nazi Germany’s genocide of Bohemian and Moravian Jewry made the Museum what it is today. The chapter about the Second World War is the heart of the book, by far its strongest and most original section. Veselská is an authority on that period and her expertise shows in her skillful use of previously unexamined sources from the archives of the Jewish Museum. Contrary to popular belief, the author illustrates that the directors and employees of the Jewish Museum, and not the German occupiers, were the driving force behind the survival and astronomic expansion of the Museum’s collection. True, German antisemitic policies of expropriation, forced emigration, and ultimately genocide provided the tragic opportunity. But it was the Museum staff itself that worked tirelessly to gather the materials left behind by Jews who departed first for abroad and later for concentration camps and ghettos. The staff, and not the leading Nazis in the so-called Central Office for Jewish Emigration (Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung), developed the concept behind wartime exhibits. Veselská explains, “Without doubt the greater initiative was demonstrated by the Prague Jewish Community which followed its goal, to protect the property of the Protectorate’s Jewish communities for the future.” (p. 97)

Veselská divides the Museum’s development during the occupation into three periods: from 1939 till the spring of 1942, it was a “Prague Jewish Art Museum existing with the agreement of the Zentralstelle”; from then till summer 1942 it was “a select, limited museum built according to the vague wishes of the Zentralstelle”; and ultimately it became little more than a “warehouse called a museum”. (p. 96) Incredibly, the Museum remained open to the public in the early months of the war. After that the staff continued to develop exhibits, but the only visitors were the highest ranking local Nazis, who came alone to preview detailed exhibitions curated seemingly only for them. The chiefs of the Zentralstelle, Hans Günther and Karl Rahm, demonstrated the greatest interest in the Museum. Contrary to the theory of a Nazi-planned museum, however, the two men neither communicated their views on the Museum to their leaders back in Berlin, nor did they seek to micromanage the staff’s activities. Günther did call for an exhibit on “interesting things” from pre-emancipated Jewish life in the ghetto, but he left it to the employees to determine the content. (p. 89) In general, the Germans showed the greatest interest in Jewish books, which had the greatest realizable value on the market. The Nazis also allowed the Museum to organize the repository of liturgical and ceremonial items confiscated from Jews prior to their deportation from Prague and from the many communities throughout the countryside. The staff painstakingly collected and recorded these items to maintain them, but also because a job at the Museum provided protection, albeit temporarily, from deportation. In two and a half years the Museum classified and recorded more than 200,000 items and ensured their survival. Nearly all the staff, by contrast, perished in Nazi German ghettos and camps.

Having undermined the myth of the ‘Museum of the Extinct Race’, Veselská then sets out to discover where this so widely spread falsehood originated. She shows that the concept was nowhere to be found in the writings of the few museum
staff members who survived the war. Instead, H.G. Adler, author of one of the foundational histories of the Terezín Ghetto, and the ‘raging reporter’, Egon Erwin Kisch, first expressed the idea that there was coherent German plan. But Veselská concludes that Vilém Benda, Director of the Jewish Museum in the more open 1960s, may have been responsible for spread of the idea of a ‘museum of a liquidated race’ in an effort to draw international attention to its collections. (p. 102) To a great extent, we may conclude, he was successful.

The third chapter of the book focuses on the incredible postwar efforts of Hana Volavková to ensure the survival of the Museum. Volavková was an extraordinary person, without whom it is hard to imagine today’s Museum. During the occupation the staff had long imagined that they were safe-keeping religious and communal artifacts which could be returned to Jewish communities after the war. Once it became clear that few Jews were alive to return and, consequently, very few communities could be reestablished, the Museum’s role shifted to one of preserving the memory of the world that had been destroyed. Volavková and her coworkers, including the writer, Jiří Weil, successfully convinced the regime to keep the Jewish Museum as an intact institution, even though over the years it found itself subordinated to the Ministry of Culture and then, through the process of decentralization, to the city of Prague.

The shifting politics of communist-era Czechoslovakia battered and propelled the Museum over the subsequent decades. The new regime presented the staff with a series of challenges and threats, both in terms of their personal standing – changes in state policy led to changes in Museum staff, including the forced retirement of Volavková in 1961 – and in terms of the content of the displayed collections. The Museum had to fit into the new ideological framework, which was contemptuous of religious practice and reluctant to recognize the Jews independently as victims of the war. Postwar curators had to operate within both those constraints, which together often forced them to tailor exhibits to mute that which made the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia Jewish, both in their own eyes and those of their persecutors. Nonetheless, Veselská illustrates that over time the Museum found ways to successfully present Jewish religious life and memorialize the Holocaust as an independent event. In the latter case, the Museum gained international renown through repeated exhibitions of children’s drawings from Terezín.

The opening of the most visible memorial to the Shoah, the Pinkas Synagogue, with its haunting registry of the Bohemian and Moravian Jews murdered during the war, was part of an unprecedented burst of public activity for Museum. In 1960 alone the Museum expanded from its existing two buildings, the Klausen Synagogue and the Ceremonial Hall, and opened new exhibitions in the Pinkas, Spanish and Maisel Synagogues. The book notes this remarkable development, but could have paused a bit longer to explain in greater depth to the reader why these changes occurred at precisely that moment. Looking backwards, it appears that this was the time that the Jewish Museum physically became the institution we know today. The reader would also be interested in learning how the general public and the then small Jewish community viewed the sudden and very visible expansion and new
public role of the Museum. After the antisemitism of the 1950s, the seeming philosemitism of the 1960s is striking.

The survival of nearly all the Museum’s collection over past seven decades is remarkable. The communist state was forever short of hard currency and tempted to sell off to the West anything of value. In 1964, for example, the regime sold most of its Torah scrolls (around 1,500) to Great Britain, an irreparable loss. (p. 167)

Over time, however, thanks to the efforts of the staff and the interest of the outside world, the Museum successfully demonstrated the collection’s value as a positive representation of the country and as a magnet to tourists, who increasingly came to Prague to view the city’s Jewish heritage. Those visitors, or at least the promise of them, arguably helped to save the collection from further decimation in the economically tight years of the 1970s and 1980s. Ironically, the so-called Velvet Revolution of 1989, which ended communist rule, presented the greatest existential threat to Museum in decades. Thanks to the new democratic government’s desire to build good relations with the outside world, Czech political leaders nearly agreed to send more than two-fifths of the collection to a private institution in Israel. Though democracy opened up this possibility, it also offered the Museum’s employees the means to rally supporters at home and abroad and thus effectively end the threat. Thanks to those efforts, and the ones exerted by Volavková, her predecessors, colleagues and successors, the Jewish Museum of Prague has become the premier institution of its kind in the world. Thanks to this beautiful book, that story can now be vividly appreciated by a wider public.

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