

Modern Genizot: “Sacred Trash” Reconsidered

Lenka Uličná

PhDr. Lenka Uličná, Ph.D.
Jewish Museum in Prague
U Staré školy 141/1
110 00 Praha
Czech Republic
e-mail: lenka.ulicna@jewishmuseum.cz

Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, 2019, 7:1:143-154

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For many years, the Jewish Museum in Prague has been documenting and researching a large collection of genizah finds from Bohemia and Moravia. This collection contains once-used Jewish ritual objects of various age (16th–19th century), especially texts that no longer served their purpose but were placed in a storage area, usually in a synagogue attic – out of respect for the Hebrew letters and for other religious reasons. In addition to assessing the current state of research and the processing of genizah finds, as well as their museumization, this article focuses primarily on a theoretical description of the genizah as a liminal space.

Key words: Jewish museums, rural synagogues, genizah, museumization of genizah finds

Taking a responsible approach to waste and issues relating to recycling and upcycling are not just a modern-day trend, nor does this relate only to the modern secular consumer society; the handling of discarded religious objects is subject to no less restrictive processes. Sacred texts and objects that serve various purposes in the religious life of worshippers are regarded with special respect, which is why, from the perspective of religious law with regard to custom and tradition, they are guaranteed special handling even after they cease to fulfil their function. In Judaism, these objects are subject to rules of storage or burial in a genizah.

Modern-day consumerism is also manifested in the increase of defunct or worn-out items in the religious sphere. In this context, particularly in the last decade, the Jewish world has shown a greater interest in matters relating to the handling of *shaimos/sheimos*,¹ discarded ritual objects that usually contain one of the names of God (Hebrew *shem*, pl. *shemot* / Yiddish *sheimos*).² The number of these objects in present-day society is growing as manufacturing technology is becoming cheaper; the requirement for worn-out ritual objects to be dealt with in the proper

¹ A sheimos genizah generally refers to a standard genizah, which contains less sacred objects, unlike a strict genizah, which includes Torah scrolls, mezuzot (parchment scrolls inscribed with a Hebrew text in a case and fixed to the doorpost of the rooms of a Jewish house), tefillin (a set of small leather boxes, each containing strips of parchment inscribed with a Hebrew text, fastened to the forehead and left arm during prayers) and amulets containing the name of God; see NEUSTADT, Doniel. Proper Disposal Of Ritual Objects. Parshas Behaaloscha. In: Weekly-Halacha, 2010 [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <https://torah.org/torah-portion/weekly-halacha-5770-behaaloscha/>.

² The Gamliel Institute with its Genizah Project is an example of an organization involved in the study of issues relating to modern-day genizot. See BLAIR, Joe. *Genizah Or Burying G-d Burial Beyond Bodies Name Recognition What's In A Name? Cleaning & Greening? Rest Among the Holy & the Pure*. 2015 [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <http://gamliel.institute/blair.html>.

manner primarily involves a struggle for space at the periphery of the sacral domain that is intended for such items.

No clear answers or exhaustive lists are provided by authorities in the contemporary Jewish world with regard to the question concerning which objects must be put away in a special place of storage when no longer in use, and which may be burned or otherwise destroyed. As in other areas of Jewish life, so in the case of *shaimos* (i.e. objects requiring genizah), there is clearly a tendency to formulate local practice on the basis of tradition. In their own concept of genizah, both recent and long-established Jewish communities follow on from the practice of previous generations across the Jewish diaspora – a custom that is many centuries old, albeit for historical reasons discontinuous.

The attitude taken towards worn-out and unusable ritual objects in pre-consumer society was shaped by the fact that, until the 19th century, society in general produced much less waste, and recycling, including that of material derived from religious objects, was very effective. Worn-out objects were given new shapes and purposes and were utilized in new contexts.

When examining genizah finds, one must, therefore, divest oneself of the notion of ‘sacred trash’ whose value is determined by the amount of ancient manuscripts and rare printed books that have been found. Genizah finds should be viewed as a whole with focus on their overall structure and context, rather than on the textual content of the finds. This perspective, however, does not question the fact that respect for textual relics is of primary importance for the concept of genizah. It is symptomatic that ‘genizah studies’ – which developed as a separate discipline in connection with research on the largest and most famous genizah, the Cairo Genizah – emphasizes precisely the textuality of finds.³ In my view, research on modern-day genizah finds, which has been methodologically inconsistent to date, requires a more comprehensive approach based on socio-anthropological, ethnological and museological perspectives.

The aim of this paper is to tackle the topic of genizah in an unconventional way, placing it in new, perhaps provocative, contexts. This approach draws on many years’ museum experience of processing genizah finds at all stages of their museumization as collection objects. The first, more extensive, part of the paper focuses on theoretically defining the core issue; the second part sets out the current state of research on genizot in Bohemia and Moravia, particularly with regard to the specific features of the process of including genizah finds into the museum’s collection.

What is a genizah?

From the perspective of modern Jewish orthopraxy, a genizah is defined as “*a protected place where worn and torn holy articles that are no longer used are put away.*”⁴

The term ‘genizah’ derives from the Hebrew root G-N-Z, which is used only as a plural noun – not as a verb – in the sense of ‘treasury’ or ‘storehouse’. The Aramaic verb *ganaz* means ‘to save, hoard up, reserve’ or ‘to remove from sight, hide’; the noun *ginza* (construct state: *giniʔ*)

³ HOFFMAN, Adina – COLE, Peter Cole. *Sacred Trash : The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*. New York : Nextbook : Schocken, 2011. Hence the somewhat polemical title of this paper.

⁴ *Mishnah berurah : the classic commentary to Shulchan aruch Orach chayim, comprising the laws of daily Jewish conduct : an English translation of Schulchan aruch and Mishnah berurah with explanatory comments, notes and facing Hebrew text. Volume 2 (A), Laws concerning the raising of the hands in blessing, falling on one’s face in supplication, the end of the prayer service, the reading from a Torah scroll, the synagogue and its appurtenances, one’s business schedule §128-§156 = Mishna brura / by Yisroel Meir ba-Cohen (the Chafetz Chayim), edited by Aviel Orenstein. Jerusalem : Pischah Foundation : Feldheim Publishers, 1993, p. 394.*

appears with the meaning of ‘hidden treasure’ (in the sense of something valued). Another of the meanings of the Aramaic verb accentuates a possible reason for concealment: ‘to declare a book apocryphal, to suppress, prohibit the reading of’.⁵

Defining the term ‘genizah’ is complicated by its ambiguities. Genizah may be understood as a process of concealing or putting away ritual objects that are no longer in use. In a local sense, genizah may indicate an area in a cemetery or elsewhere for the temporary or permanent storage of worn-out ritual objects, particularly Torah scrolls. Specifically, the term relates to the best-known and oldest genizah, the Cairo Genizah; genizot from the modern period, particularly in Europe, are usually referred to collectively as ‘modern genizot’. Hebrew and other manuscript fragments that have been put to secondary use in the bindings of other books are referred to figuratively as ‘European genizot’.

For the purposes of this paper, I am using the term ‘genizah’ to refer to a protected, closed and publicly inaccessible space, for example in a synagogue attic, which for centuries was used by a local Jewish community as a storage area for worn-out objects relating to religious practices. A genizah contains mainly textual relics that are no longer suitable for ritual use; these items were supposed to be buried in the Jewish cemetery at an appropriate later date (see Picture 1), although, for reasons that have not been established, this did not happen in many cases. In addition to texts of a religious nature, genizot also contain secular publications, archival materials, synagogue furnishings, textiles for ritual and other use, and shoes.

As mentioned above, the requirement to treat written documents in a special way is based on Jewish religious law (*halacha*), according to which it is necessary to prevent any desecration of God’s name. See, in particular, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim 154:5: “*When a Torah Scroll has become worn, it should be placed in an earthen vessel and put away in the grave of a Torah scholar. It may even / be put away in the grave of a scholar / who merely learned halachic / rulings /, but did not attend a Torah scholar.*”⁶ Also see the respective commentary:⁷

“When a Torah Scroll has become worn. *The same ruling / applies / to / Books of / Prophets or Writings, when they have been written on skin, in roll form and with ink.*

In an earthen vessel. / This is required / so that it will endure.

And put away. The same ruling / applies to / other / Holy / Books which have become worn. They must / also / be put away / in a protected place / and it is forbidden to burn them. Although one’s objective / in burning them / is that they should not come to /



Pict. 1: *The Jewish community’s approach to worn-out Torah scrolls is similar to its approach in dealing with the deceased – ideally, they should be buried in earthen vessels alongside the grave of a scholar. Photograph of the tombstone of Meir Fischl with vessels for the storage of worn-out Torah scrolls at the front of the base. Prague, 1921. Inv. No. JMP 95.676.*

⁵ JASTROW, Marcus. *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. New York : Chobeb. 1926, p. 258 [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <http://www.tyndalarchive.com/TABS/Jastrow/index.htm>.

⁶ *Mishnah berurab*, ref. 4, p. 357. *Shulchan Aruch* is the most extensive halachic codex of Jewish religious law; the section *Orach Hayim* deals in general with prayer, Torah reading in the synagogue, Shabbat and holidays.

⁷ *Mishnah berurab*, ref. 4, p. 357.

be treated with/ disrespect, it is nevertheless /forbidden to burn them as/ one would be acting destructively. The Rambam writes /in his Sefer Ha-Mitzvos,/ Negative injunction, No. 65, that if one destroys Holy Writings he transgresses the negative injunction of “You should not do this to the Lord your God”.⁸ Correspondingly, in the case of a holy appurtenances one should be careful about this. [Acharonim]”

Talmudic discussions broadly cover questions relating to the language of the texts, the size of the script used, etc., to which the genizah requirement applies.⁹ The opinions of rabbinic authorities about the treatment of texts written in other languages vary, although they mostly confirm that sacred texts in any language require genizah. In many religious communities, the genizah requirement was applied to the actual Hebrew script: any use of Hebrew letters, even in a secular text, was most likely perceived as an impulse for special treatment and, hence, when no longer in use, for placing the text in a genizah. This is why genizot contain fragments of private correspondence, as well as simple messages and documents about business contacts, etc., written in Hebrew and other languages.

As mentioned above, genizot also contain non-textual materials. The question of what to do with worn-out holy appurtenances is dealt with in *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim* 154:3: “Holy appurtenances, such as a case for /holy/ Books, /cases for/ mezuzos, tefilin straps, a chest in which one puts a Torah Scroll or a Chumash, a desk on which a Torah Scroll is laid and a curtain which is hung in front of the Sanctuary, have holiness, and require genizah.”¹⁰ See also the respective commentary:¹¹

“Holy appurtenances. I.e., although we rule in Sec. 21 with reference to mitzvah appurtenances that after their mitzvah /service/ is over it is permitted to throw them away, this is not the case where holy appurtenances are involved. /For them the ruling is that/ even after they have become worn and are no longer fit for their function, they nevertheless have holiness and must be put away in a genizah. It is forbidden to make any /non-holy/ use of them.

This only /applies/ to an appurtenance of the holy /article/ itself, but an article which serves a holy appurtenance, that is called an appurtenance of a /holy/ appurtenance, has no holiness and may be used /for a non-holy use/ even when it is still in order /for its mitzvah function/ . “

In practice, it was and still is very difficult to decide what should and should not be placed in a genizah. At present, book-based instructions are being published¹² and there are a large number of websites with lists of items that require genizah. There is a clear tendency not to fill

⁸ Deut 12:4; see also the previous verse, Deut 12:3: “And ye shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and ye shall destroy their name out of that place.” [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0512.htm> .

⁹ See, in particular, the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 115a, [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.115a.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en> .

¹⁰ *Mishnah berurab*, ref. 4, pp. 349–353.

¹¹ *Mishnah berurab*, ref. 4, p. 349.

¹² For example, FEINHANDLER, Yechezkel. *Sefer Ginzei hakodesh*. Lakewood, New Jersey : Israel Bookshop Publications, 2012.

a genizah with objects that do not belong there.¹³ It is, therefore, surprising to find that older genizot may contain objects not requiring genizah, such as parts of ordinary garments and, in particular, shoes.

These finds, however, cannot be deemed accidental, for they recur and conform in type with caches in non-Jewish buildings (see below). All of the European genizot that are known and have been researched so far come from synagogues in rural areas or small towns,¹⁴ which is why they can be assumed to show the influence of local folk practices. It appears that, at least in rural areas, the tradition and practice of genizah may, to a certain extent, have been associated with superstitions practised by the Christian population.

The genizah in comparison with caches of “deliberately concealed garments”

The Deliberately Concealed Garments Project was set up in 1998 by the UK-based conservator Dr. Dinah Eastop with a set of precisely defined aims that largely resonate with the research on genizot in Bohemia and Moravia:¹⁵ to raise awareness of the existence and value of concealed garments, to prevent the destruction of such finds on site and by means of suitably adapted conservation techniques, to gather information about such finds, and to provide information about them to researchers. The project focuses on the practice of concealing parts of garments, shoes, candlesticks, candle snuffers and other such items in the fabric and foundations of buildings – mostly in rural houses, but also, for example, in churches – not only in Britain and continental Europe, but also in Australia and North America, from the Middle Ages through to the present.¹⁶

The British footwear historian June Swann started her systematic study of concealed garments in the 1950s. She has given several presentations at the Shoe in History conferences, which have been held since 1994 in the Czech city of Zlín. Several of her papers have been published in the proceedings of these conferences, one of which was directly focused on shoes that had been found hidden in buildings.¹⁷ These proceedings also contain several articles on archaeological finds of footwear in the Czech lands, although these come from wells, graves

¹³ *Today, with the use of photocopiers and cheap printers, and in our throw-away society, there are instances of thousands of pounds of so-called 'shemot' that are disposed of by burial on a regular and ongoing basis. This practice causes a significant problem for communities as burial in a cemetery is often regulated and restrictions on what may be placed there apply, and burial in any other location requires permits as a form of 'dumping' or waste disposal. (...) Based on my research and common sense, I decided that English or other languages did not rise to the level of sanctity that justified inclusion in a Genizah. (...) I included all HEBREW texts, in calligraphy, printed, or reproduced in any manner which included the Tetragrammaton, or the accepted direct substitutions and variations on it (...) For ritual objects, I included those that had a very high level of perceived sanctity. This included any items embroidered or decorated with one of the Hebrew representations of a name for G-d, Torah mantles, Wimpels or binders, Tefillin boxes and straps, and Tallitot, all of which are used directly for performance of a Mitzvah or come in direct contact with something necessary to perform a mitzvah. This is not a definitive list (...)*“ BLAIR, ref. 2, pp. 8-14.

¹⁴ The genizot in Prague synagogues have not been preserved.

¹⁵ Deliberately Concealed Garments Project, [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <https://www.concealedgarments.org/information/>.

¹⁶ See also the extensive list of publications relating to the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project, [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <https://www.concealedgarments.org/publications/>.

¹⁷ SWANN, June Marion. Obuv utajená v domech / Shoes Concealed in Buildings. In: *Obuv v historii '97* [The Shoe in History '97 : Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference], 29 September – 1 October 1997. Edited by Ivan Plánka. Museum of Southeast Moravia (Zlín, Czech Republic), Vol. 2, 1998, No. 2, pp. 11–19.

and septic tanks.¹⁸ Few papers in Czech publications have focused directly on footwear or garments hidden in the walls of rural buildings in Bohemia and Moravia;¹⁹ there are more frequent references in general to building offerings, particularly of animal or plant origin.²⁰

The purpose of the concealed garment and shoe caches is touched upon only marginally in the published texts. A comprehensive approach to such finds, i.e. consideration of their precise location and of the other objects found, indicates that the caches were most likely used for magic, protective and apotropaic purposes. Dinah Eastop states that the garments are usually hidden “*at the juncture of old and new parts of a building, in voids, and at points of entry or access (doorways, windows and chimneys).*”²¹ As Ceri Houlbrook notes, all of the above are liminal spaces;²² they are located in the peripheral areas of a building and, as such, are potentially dangerous, as they are the most easily accessible to negative forces. As the author further shows, feet and shoes touching the ground are also perceived by some anthropologists as being liminal, which is why “*it is the liminality of the shoe itself that resulted in its prominence in worldwide superstitious beliefs, such as its intrinsic association with luck.*”²³ From here one can infer the frequent occurrence of footwear among the concealed objects: this is related to the metaphorical character of the shoe,²⁴ which retains the imprint of the wearer’s foot, and to the primarily protective function of footwear when walking.

Swann provides a fairly detailed typology of the concealed objects: mostly footwear (single shoes or pairs), but also a large amount of head coverings, wigs and “*men’s, women’s and children’s outer- and underwear*”.²⁵ The garment finds are usually combined with finds of animal remains, in particular cats, plant matter (flowers, grains, seeds, nuts) and various tools. Symbolically

¹⁸ BRAVERMANOVÁ Milena – BŘEZINOVÁ Helena – HLAVÁČEK Petr. Zvláštnosti obuvi ze 16. století nalezené při archeologických researchech na Pražském hradě / Renaissance Leather Footwear Found in a Well in Front of the All Saints Church at the Prague Castle, In: *Obuv v historii ’97* [The Shoe in History ’97 : Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference], 29 September – 1 October 1997. Edited by Ivan Plánka. Museum of Southeast Moravia (Zlín, Czech Republic), Vol. 2, 1997, No. 2, pp. 86-92; HLAVÁČEK Petr – PRUDKÁ Alena – SHROMÁŽDILOVÁ Ivana. Nález usňové obuvi ze 16. století v prostějovském ghettu / A Discoveries of Leather Shoes from the 16th century in Prostějov Ghetto. In: *Obuv v historii* [The Shoe in History : Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference], 25–27 September 2000 / Museum in Zlín, Czech Republic : Museum of Southeast Moravia, 2001, Vol. 3, 2000, No. 3, pp. 179–184.

¹⁹ POSEKANÁ Klára – ŠIMEK Rudolf. Depot fragmentů pozdně barokních oděvů a obuvi z Panského mlýna ve Starosedlském Hrádku [A Cache of Fragments of Late Baroque Garments and Shoes from Panský mlýn in Starosedlský Hrádek] (under publication).

²⁰ PLESSINGEROVÁ Alena – VĀŘEKA Josef. Obyčeje a obřady spojené se stavbou domu v českých zemích [Customs and Rituals associated with Building a House in the Czech Lands]. In: *Národopisná revue* [Ethnographic Revue], 28/1, 1991, pp. 15–20, especially pp. 16–17. VĀŘEKA Pavel. Stavební obětiny z české středověké vesnice v archeologických pramenech [Building Offerings from a Medieval Czech Village in Archaeological Sources]. In: *Český lid / The Czech Ethnological Journal*, 78/2, 1991, pp. 117–119, etc.

²¹ EASTOP Dinah. Outside In: Making Sense of the Deliberate Concealment of Garments Within Buildings. In: *Textile*, 4/3, 2006, pp. 238–255, pp. 246–247. The same author develops a metonymic and metaphorical analysis of concealed garments, describes their active protective purpose on several levels, and also refers to the functional connection between the concealed garments and the mezuzah (p. 250).

²² HOULBROOK Ceri. Ritual, Recycling and Recontextualization: Putting the Concealed Shoe into Context. In: *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 23/1, 2013, pp. 99–112; p. 104.

²³ HOULBROOK, ref. 22, p. 105. For more on the liminal perception of footwear, see the literature ibidem.

²⁴ HOULBROOK, ref. 22, p. 107. For more on the emotional symbolism of footwear, including concealed shoes, see most recently DAVIDSON Hilary. Holding the Sole: Shoes, Emotional, and the Supernatural. In: *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions Through History*. Edited by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 72–93.

²⁵ SWANN, ref. 17, p. 18.

remarkable finds are those of objects that are associated with fire and flames, such as pipes for smoking, candlesticks, lamps, candle snuffers, and coal. With regard to textual relics, Swann refers only marginally to “pages from a bible, prayer and hymn books and Jewish religious books. Occasionally there are papers with names, perhaps an attempt to ensure their existence was noted”.²⁶

Extensive finds of shoes and garments, occasionally accompanied by textual relics, are of particular relevance for comparing Swann’s research with a study of the finds from genizot in Bohemia, Moravia and elsewhere²⁷. The main difference between these finds is in the proportion of textual and non-textual objects: the items found in non-Jewish caches are primarily non-textual, while those found in genizot are predominantly texts. Another difference is the way these items are stored: objects in non-Jewish caches are usually concealed in a wall cavity, while those in genizot are always just stored there. What these finds may have in common, however, is the assumed protective function of the objects that have been put away and concealed.

The genizah’s protective function

The genizah’s primary purpose of protection is twofold. Objects bearing an inscription of God’s name are stored there in order to prevent its desecration; objects that no longer meet the standards for religious texts or, in general, for ritual objects as a result of wear and tear or damage are stored there in order to protect the Jewish community or individuals from the negative effects of such objects.²⁸ As in the case of concealed garments and building offerings, it is also possible that objects placed in a genizah may have the purpose of active protection. A worn-out Torah scroll in a genizah is protected and, in a certain sense, also provides active protection.

As Shalom Sabar shows on the basis of a large number of examples, “the power of the Torah scrolls and their appurtenances goes beyond their “official” function in the synagogue [...] and beliefs in its magical powers and abilities to heal and protect became widespread.”²⁹ In folk practice, Torah scrolls were used in unorthodox ways, whether or not they were approved by the rabbinical authorities.

Sabar does not examine whether worn-out Torah scrolls also appear in similarly unorthodox contexts. The actual genizah requirement, i.e. the need for discarded scrolls to be treated specially, however, proves that the Torah scroll was widely perceived to have retained a certain amount of its original properties, including its sacredness. The same applies to phylacteries, mezuzah scrolls and amulets, which are usually at the forefront of the lists of objects stored in a genizah.

If these objects once served a protective function, which was the primary purpose of mezuzah scrolls and amulets, it is likely that some of these qualities were retained in the genizah. Together with the concealment of garments, shoes, candle snuffers and other such items, the storage of materials in a genizah was probably informed by a knowledge of similar practices from the non-Jewish milieu; these materials might have been intended to protect – the synagogue,

²⁶ SWANN, ref. 17, p. 18.

²⁷ In terms of typology, there are practically identical finds in genizot in Alsace and, particularly, in Germany. See Geniza-project Alsenz, [online], [cit. 23. 8. 2018]. Available at <https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb01genizatalsenz/inventar/textilien/>.

²⁸ See also BLAIR, ref. 2, p. 3: *The hiding place, or Genizah, was thought to serve the twofold purpose of preserving good things from harm (protecting items that are elevated in sanctity), and preventing “bad” things (items that somehow convey ill or curses or that are associated with demonic or evil traits) from having the opportunity to harm things, places, or people.*

²⁹ SABAR Shalom. Torah and Magic: The Torah Scroll and Its Appurtenances as Magical Objects in Traditional Jewish Culture, In: *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, 3/1, 2009, pp. 135–170; s. 169.



Pict. 2: Fragment of a manuscript of hymns (*yotzrot*). Manuscript on parchment. Central Europe, perhaps 16th century. Found in the synagogue genizah in Luže. Inv. No. JMP 177.974.



Pict. 3: Torah mantle. Bohemia, 1691. Wool, chain stitch embroidery, appliqué (Star of David motif). Found in the synagogue genizah in Luže. Inv. No. JMP 178.565.

its furnishings and the local Jewish congregation, and probably also each other. This ambiguity – the unclear distinction between the protector and the protected – is one of the main features of liminal spaces, and genizot are liminal spaces par excellence.

Genizah research in Bohemia and Moravia

The Jewish Museum in Prague has been focusing on research on genizot in Bohemia and Moravia since the 1990s, with increasing intensity in recent years.³⁰ Since 1996, it has examined genizot in the attics of synagogues in the following localities of Bohemia and Moravia: Luže, Bezdrůžice, Všeradice, Březnice, Zalužany, Kdyně, Janovice nad Úhlavou, Rychnov nad Kněžnou, and Holešov. The only intact genizah – in the refurbished synagogue in Luže – has been fully explored. Much of the genizah that was discovered in Březnice had already been taken apart or destroyed earlier; the remainder was also completely explored by the museum, as were the small genizot in Kdyně and Janovice. The most valuable items and several other samples were selected from the other genizot.

Jewish Museum staff set about collecting and relocating genizah finds immediately after the fall of the Communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia. The main aim was to save objects in synagogue attics that faced imminent danger, and to prevent their misuse (desecration, illegal sale, etc.), hence it was primarily a rescue and research operation. The approach taken towards the materials was intuitive;³¹ the Jewish Museum staff devoted most of their attention to the oldest finds, or, more specifically, to those objects whose age or uniqueness was evident. Genizah finds comprising between 4,000 and 5,000 items (mainly textiles, papers and parchment documents) were gathered together at the Jewish Museum in Prague. Only a small portion of this material, however, has undergone conservation and restoration measures for inclusion in its holdings as part

of the Central Register of Collections in accordance with Act No. 122/2000 on the Protection of Museum Collections.

³⁰ SIXTOVÁ Olga. Findings from Genizot in Bohemia and Moravia. In: *Judaica Bohemiae*, 34, 1995, pp. 126-134; VESELSKÁ Dana. Nálezy textilí v genizot českých a moravských synagog [Textile Finds from the Genizot of Bohemian and Moravian Synagogues], *Český lid / The Czech Ethnological Journal*, 87/4, 2000, pp. 295–306.

³¹ The methodological guidelines for the museum's genizah research was provided mainly by the project Professor Falk Wiesemann's project; see WIESEMANN Falk. *Genizah – Hidden Legacies of the German Village Jews*. Vienna : Bertelsmann, 1992.



Pic. 4: A man's waistcoat (*tzidakel*) from a prayer shawl. Wool, repp. Bohemia, 18th century. Found in the synagogue genizah in Lužce. Inv. No. JMP 178.570.



Pic. 5: A child's shoe. Leather, twill tape, cloth. Bohemia, 19th century. Found in the synagogue genizah in Brěznice. Inv. No. JMP 179.424.



Pic. 6: Candle snuffer. Wrought Iron. Bohemia, 19th century. Found in the synagogue genizah in Lužce. Inv. No. JMP 179.299.



Pic. 7: Removing the genizah finds from the attic of the synagogue in Zalužany, 2017. Jewish Museum in Prague.

Aside from religious texts in the form of scrolls, codices, single sheets and manuscripts (see Picture 2) and secular Hebrew texts (fragments of private correspondence, simple messages, documents about business contacts, etc.), the finds included mainly synagogue textiles (particularly Torah binders, as well as Torah reading table covers, and Torah mantles – see Picture 3), personal textiles, including ritual textiles (*tallit katan*, a rectangular garment with a hole for the head and ritual fringes; sometimes a *tzidakel* or man's waistcoat – see Picture 4), as well as frequently worn garments, in particular footwear (see Picture 5). Another group of materials comprise parts of synagogue furnishings (fragments of decorative architectural elements, candlesticks, candle snuffers, etc. – see Picture 6). Objects that are of less interest in terms of text or typology have not yet become part of the Jewish Museum's holdings; they are kept in a separate room where they can be handled only in necessary cases.

The actual storage of objects testifies to the perception of the genizah as a liminal space: for example, in the synagogue genizah in Zalužany – the exploration of which was completed by the Jewish Museum in 2017 – most of the objects were situated near the attic entrance, along the edges of the attic, and under the beams near the window, i.e. in places where “negative forces” have the easiest access (see Picture 7). To date, insufficient attention has been paid to the specific placement of objects found in genizot. Particularly if a genizah is explored by someone lacking the necessary skills, albeit with the good intention of saving the Hebrew writings that are stored there, this may devalue the quality of the find for various reasons, including the fact that attention is not paid to the actual placement of the objects or to the presence of non-textual relics. Methodological gaps in genizah research have also been contended with by Jewish Museum staff in the past.

The long-term aims of the Jewish Museum in Prague are to process, sort, conserve and digitize all of its genizah finds and then to include them in its collections, to register them in the Central Register of Collections, to provide access to them in digital form, and to show the general public this unique and little-known phenomenon of Jewish culture. To facilitate the adequate processing of thousands of genizah finds, it has been necessary to verify the curation, conservation/restoration, administration and digitization procedures, as well as the possibility of focusing the project on a smaller sample. In 2017, the Jewish Museum successfully completed a pilot project for the comprehensive processing of a selected genizah find (specifically in Rychnov nad Kněžnou). This involved work in its own conservation and restoration studios, as well as work done by external conservators

and by students as part of their practical training.³²

Refining the approach towards the conservation and restoration of genizah finds may be regarded as the project’s most important conclusion. Unique objects³³ undergo complete conservation, which includes taking apart book blocks, mechanical cleaning and washing, gluing and repairs with Japanese tissue for firmer adhesion without filling in losses, straightening the materials, and sewing in accordance with the origin method. Mass-produced items, in particular printed books of a later date,³⁴ however, should be seen as general objects, rather than primarily as texts (mostly standard liturgical texts in various languages). The amateur stitching of book blocks, as well as the actual wear and tear of the material, is important for the sake of authenticity. These valuable characteristics are lost in the case of complete conservation. For these objects it is necessary to find a compromise between a conservational perspective – i.e., prioritizing minimal intervention in terms of the amount of material added – and a museological perspective, i.e., the necessity to approach an object with regard to the permanent preservation of a collection, etc.³⁵ The Jewish Museum in Prague opted to conserve these finds in a minimalist way (mechanical cleaning and reinforcing the adhesion) so that as much further damage as possible would be prevented, and so that the objects could be stored safely (in Melinex, folders, boxes, etc.) and adequately digitized.³⁶

The Jewish Museum in Prague is now emphasizing that all genizah objects should retain clear traces of their history even after conservation, which means that they should reflect the fact that they already showed signs of considerable wear and tear when placed in the genizah. As such, it will then be possible to draw attention to the still little-known phenomenon of the genizah through appropriate digital presentations of these finds, particularly set out in contrast with the well-preserved ritual objects that came to the Jewish Museum in Prague at a time when they were still suitable for use.

Last but not least, the pilot project led us to reconsider what may be regarded as a genizah find. In future, it will be necessary to place more focus on non-textual finds and on objects that at first glance are not associated with Judaism (ordinary garments, canes, dried fruit, shells, hair and other items found in a genizah). The genizah should no longer be seen solely as a dump site for useless objects, but as a place that is an important part and active feature of Jewish community life. By sensitively exploring and carrying out a detailed analysis of the content of a genizah, it is possible to gain a better idea of the life of a particular community and of the local customs, including those that are not described in textual sources perhaps because they relate to magical practices. Moreover, genizot also provide insights into the activities of local rabbinic courts and schools, as well as insights into the wider sociolinguistic context. To conclude, modern local genizot remain an unappreciated source of information for understanding the values, behaviour patterns, wealth, preferences, and direction of Jewish communities in the diaspora.

³² ULIČNÁ Lenka. The Genizah of Rychnov nad Kněžnou: Preliminary Research for a Project Involving the Processing of Genizot Finds from Synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia. In: *Judaica Bohemiae*, 52/1, 2017, pp. 135–141.

³³ Manuscripts, old and rare printed books, printed books with hand-written notes, maps, etc.

³⁴ Mostly fragments of prayer books, dating from the 18th and 19th centuries.

³⁵ See JEFFERSON Rebecca Jefferson – VINCE-DEWERSE Ngaio. When Curator and Conservator Meet: Some Issues Arising from the Preservation and Conservation of the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection at Cambridge University Library. In: *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 29/1, April 2008, pp. 41–56.

³⁶ Digitizing entire printed modern-day codices (mostly prayer books) is ineffective; for mass-produced books, it is appropriate to replace large-scale digitization with several illustrative photographs, subject to agreement between the curator and photographer.

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