Museum Education Seminar 2015: Excursion to Bratislava

On Wednesday 14 October the participants of the Museum Education Seminar 2015 visited Bratislava in Slovakia. In the morning the group was welcomed at the Bratislava Jewish Community Museum, situated in the Heydukova Street Synagogue, by its director Maros Borsky who told the story of the renovation of the synagogue, the creation of the museum and explained the specifics of its functioning.

First of all, the group had to understand why there are two Jewish museums in the city. The Museum of Jewish Culture, branch of the Slovak National Museum, was established in 1993. The Jewish Community Museum dates back to 2008 when the community started to document the Barkany Judaica collection that belonged to the community. It was stored in boxes for many years; then it was catalogued, researched and opened to the public as an exhibition.

The museum exhibition is installed in the synagogue's women gallery and mostly focuses on the heritage of the Bratislava Jewish community and Bratislava region. The museum is open from May 22 until October 11; on the day of our visit the museum was open for the last day of the year. It has a permanent exhibition, an open storage display and a space for temporary exhibitions where the museum displays one exhibition a year.

Borsky and his education team, Lucia Hidvegyova and Monika Vrzgulova, introduced the pedagogical programme that the museum runs. The programme is developed for 13 – 14 year old students from good schools in Slovakia. There are about 4-5 groups in spring and a similar amount in autumn that go through the programme. It includes four lessons with the same groups: the first meeting takes place at the school, the second and third meeting at the Holocaust Memorial Camp and at the museum, followed by a fourth lesson back at the school. The aim of the programme is to let them understand that many cultures lived in the area, and that one has to learn about the heritage of these cultures.

As the city of Bratislava boasts two Jewish museums, the afternoon was dedicated to visiting the Museum of Jewish Culture, branch of the Slovak National Museum and housed in the Zsigray Mansion, where educator Stanislava Sikoluva guided the group. The Slovak National Museum operates 18 museums, several of which specialise in the representation of minorities living in Slovakia. The permanent exhibition of the Museum of Jewish Culture was established in 1993 and showcases objects, which illustrate the everyday life of Slovakian Jews and which commemorate the Holocaust.

One room of the museum is dedicated to the presentation of ritual objects in the style of an open storage with little accompanying information about the artefacts on display. Other rooms present exhibits in which the objects are contextualised to show for example a Torah scroll on a bimah or a table set for Shabbat. The participants discussed the importance of including examples of contemporary Jewish life alongside precious objects from previous centuries. The second floor of the museum documents the fate of Slovakian Jews during the Holocaust. Also located on this floor is a colourful room, which is used for workshops with children.

In the end the group felt that working with the exhibition would most likely be very challenging for educators. Our guide told the participants that the museum itself could only change parts of the exhibition if the curator agrees and that this applies even for little changes. This must be a very difficult starting point for educators.

After visiting the Museum of Jewish Culture, the group visited the Holocaust Memorial together with the same guide. The memorial is situated just some minutes of walk from the museum, in the Old Town centre of Bratislava, on the site of the former Neolog Synagogue – former Rybné Square synagogue - which was torn down in the communist period to make way for a highway. The memorial is a sculpture with a non-figurative motif and a Star of David on the top; an image of the synagogue is shown on the black wall behind the monument. On the black platform of the sculpture there is an inscription with the word “Remember!” in Slovak and Hebrew. The memorial was erected in 1996 by the Slovak Republic and the site belongs to the Bratislava Municipality. The Museum of Jewish Culture maintains the memorial. Unfortunately, the memorial is lacking any explanation or description in any language. It would be recommended to discuss the possible educational programs that involve visiting the memorial.

A short bus trip then brought the group to the Chatam Sofer Memorial, a striking memorial to Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, the Chatam Sofer (1762-1839). He was the Chief Rabbi of Bratislava and an influential authority in Jewish law. The memorial is located on the grounds of a Jewish cemetery from the 17th century, which was destroyed in 1943. Only the tomb of the Chatam Sofer and a few surrounding graves were preserved as an underground compound which has since become a site of pilgrimage and can be accessed after prior arrangement with the Jewish community.

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