

Michal Frankl – David Lawson

## **JEWISH OSTRAVA: VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND DIGITAL ARCHIVE. THE OSTRAVA GROUP IN LONDON AND THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN PRAGUE**

### **JEWISH OSTRAVA**

Before the Second World War, Moravská Ostrava (or Mährisch Ostrau in German) and its broader agglomeration was home to the third largest Jewish community in Bohemian Lands (after Prague and Brno/Brünn). Over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ostrava developed into a modern industrial metropolis driven by the steep upsurge of coal mining and its growing steel industry. As a new city, Ostrava exhibited extraordinary economic dynamism and vibrant cultural life, but also a large gap between the miners and workers on the one hand and the rich on the other. Moreover, it was an ethnically mixed city formed by immigration. People searching for employment or business opportunities poured in not only from Moravia, but in large numbers from Galicia, a region cast by poverty and large scale emigration – to America or any place offering a better chance of success, profit or at least modest salary. Ostrava, as an industrial centre hungry for manpower, offered it all.

Jews made up a significant part of the new society of the new city. While they had been banished from the town since 1531, the first Jewish family settled there legally in 1792. Mordechai Schönhof took over the town's brewery,<sup>1</sup> starting a long and significant Jewish involvement with the beer and spirit production and sale in Ostrava. In 1869, the 410 counted Jews made some 6 % of the total population of 6881, and by 1921 their numbers had multiplied tenfold to 4969 out of 41 765 inhabitants, a share of 12 %. As the population of the larger Ostrava agglomeration (which included nearby towns and villages) reached 113 709 by 1921, 9468 Jews (or 8 %) lived there. By the time of the 1930 census, the proportion was 125 304 to 10 109.<sup>2</sup> While the more than fifty traditional Jewish communities in Moravia (such as Mikulov/Nikolsburg, Prostějov/Prossnitz, Boskovice/Boskowitz, etc.) were increasingly caught in decline starting with the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> Ostrava became one of the new centres of Jewish life in Moravia (along with Brno which had been closed to Jews before 1848).

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1) Hugo Gold, 'Geschichte der Juden in Mährisch-Ostrau', in: H. Gold, ed., *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Brünn: Jüdischer Verlag 1929, pp. 372–378, esp. 372.

2) Ludmila Nesládková, 'Židé na Moravě a Československo. Postavení židovské komunity v průmyslovém městě na příkladu Ostravy v letech 1918–1938' [Jews in Moravia and Czechoslovakia. Ostrava 1918–1938 as an Example of a Jewish Community in an Industrial City], *Česko-slovenská historická ročenka* [Czech-Slovak Historical Yearbook], 2001, pp. 37–48, esp. 39.

3) Michael Laurence Miller, *Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation*, Stanford Series in Jewish History and Culture, Stanford University Press 2011.

Many Jews helped to develop the modern industry and dynamic economic life and to re-shape the town. The Rothschild and Guttman families significantly invested into and developed the Vítkovice (Witkowitz) steel works and coal mining. Jews made a profound contribution in banking and commerce in the region. For instance, the Wechsberg family developed one of the early private banks and large number of medical doctors, lawyers and business-people were Jewish. Several of the major department stores in Ostrava, among them the Rix sporting its modern building, were owned by Jewish entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup>

Ostrava became a centre of Jewish and Zionist life and the size and plurality of the community is demonstrated by the fact that it was served by six synagogues in the Greater Ostrava area before the Second World War. The main synagogue (*Hochtempel*) had seats for about 700 male worshippers and – following the reform practice – included an organ and mixed choir. The Žerotínasynagogue offered the traditional orthodox service and the small Zábřeh synagogue the traditional Chassidic practice. All of the synagogues were destroyed by fire in May and June 1939, although some of their religious artefacts were subsequently recovered from the ruins and saved. In 1920s Ostrava even became the organisational centre of the Czechoslovak Zionist organisation. The Jewish school in Ostrava, founded in 1863, was one of few remaining and relatively thriving Jewish schools in Bohemian Lands into the inter-war period.<sup>5</sup>

While the Ostrava Jewish community exhibited some of the demographic characteristics of the emerging middle class,<sup>6</sup> especially the lower birth rate, the immigration from Galicia and elsewhere differentiated it from most Jewish communities in the region. Whereas large scale immigration of ‘Eastern’ Jews avoided most communities in the Bohemian Lands, Ostrava served as a magnet for Jews from Galicia.<sup>7</sup> However, it was not only Jews who were recent immigrants. The fact that in the new city, almost everybody was a recent arrival structured the ease and tensions of cohabitation between different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups differently. It seems that, compared to many Bohemian and Moravian communities, the Czech-German antagonism played a lesser role here, whereas the social cleav-

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4) Eva Chvalová, ‘Obchodní domy v Moravské Ostravě v období první republiky’ [Department Stores in Moravská Ostrava during the First Republic], *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska* [Ostrava. Contributions to Historical and Present Ostrava], 22 (2005), pp. 119–146.

5) Blažena Przybylová, ‘Židovská škola v Moravské Ostravě’ [Jewish School in Moravská Ostrava], *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska*, 21 (2003), pp. 378–398; Marsha L. Rozenblit, ‘Creating Jewish Space: German-Jewish Schools in Moravia’, *Austrian History Yearbook*, 44 (2013), pp. 108–147, doi:10.1017/S006723781300009X.

6) Kamil Rodan, ‘Soubor židovského obyvatelstva Moravské Ostravy v roce 1921 ve světle vybraných demografických faktorů’ [The Sample of Jewish Population of Moravská Ostrava in 1921 in Light of Selected Demographic Factors], *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty Ostravské univerzity* [Almanac of Papers of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava] (hereinafter *SPFFOU*) – *Historie*, 2005, No. 12, pp. 111–115.

7) Ludmila Nesládková, ‘Haličští židé v 19. století na cestě za novou existencí na Ostravsko’ [Galician Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century on their Way to a New Existence in the Ostrava Region], *SPFFOU* – *Historie*, 208 (2003), No. 10, pp. 145–156.

age was more important in defining local loyalties and conflicts. Given the present state of research, we can only speculate that it was this character of the city as a place of immigration which smoothed Jewish integration into the society there. Jewish eye-witnesses describe, however, how this cohabitation started to crumble by 1938: Joseph Wechsberg, for instance, depicts the gradual disappearance of guests from Café Palace, where – previously – Czechs, Germans and Jews mixed freely and sometimes frivolously.<sup>8</sup> Ilse Weber – with much bitterness – reflected in her letters on the break-up of ties with Czech and German neighbours which had already started in 1938.<sup>9</sup>



Synagogue in Ostrava-Prívov/Oderfurt, 1942. JMP Photo Archive, Negative No. 550

The destruction of the Ostrava Jewish community started earlier than elsewhere in the ‘Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia’ with the deportations to Nisko in occupied Poland in October 1939 and due to a stronger pressure on local Jews which

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8) Joseph Wechsberg, *The Vienna I Knew. Memories of a European Childhood*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1979, pp. 230–232.

9) Ilse Weber, *Wann wohl das Leid ein Ende hat. Briefe und Gedichte aus Theresienstadt*, ed. Ulrike Migdal, München: Carl Hanser Verlag 2008, pp. 66, 69.



Photo of students of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade of the Jewish school in Ostrava with Jewish badges, 1942. JMP, Shoah History Department, Jews in Ostrava collection, Lydia Tischler collection, see [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/77271](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/77271)

contributed to the early dispersion of the community. The fates of the Goldberg family illustrate this: while the father with two of his three sons crossed the border illegally to Oswiecim (to join his parents who lived in the town) immediately after the occupation, his wife and three daughters with children stayed behind in the 'Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia'. As the pressure on Jews grew in Ostrava after the occupation and the sisters were expelled (the family didn't have Czechoslovak citizenship), they moved out of Ostrava to stay in Solopisky, a small village close to Prague where living with all the anti-Jewish laws and decrees felt easier. Eventually, only the three sons managed to escape to the United Kingdom; the women were deported to Terezín (Theresienstadt) and further extermination camps and none of them survived.<sup>10</sup>

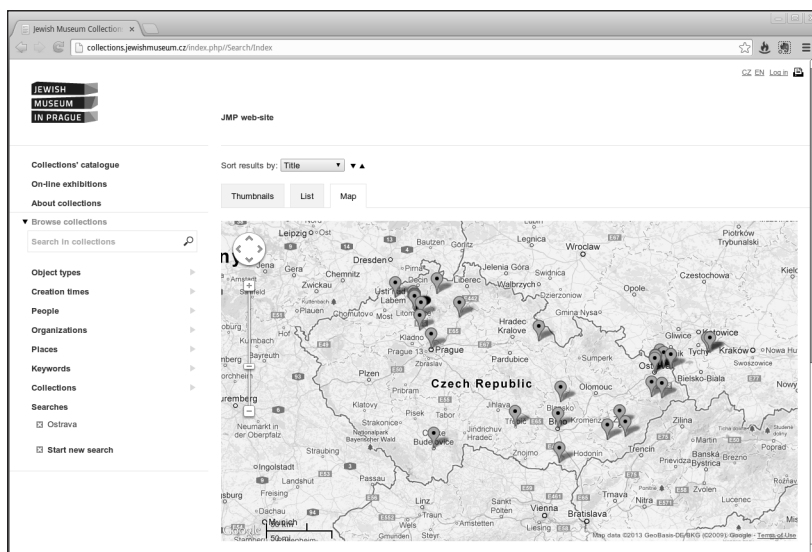
### DIGITAL ARCHIVE

When Joseph Wechsberg returned to his home country after the war and organised a reunion of his class from the German-language *Gymnasium* (high school) in

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10) See Jewish Museum in Prague (JMP), Archive of the Shoah History Department, Jews in Ostrava, Norbert Goldberg Collection, accessible at [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Browse/clearAndAddCriteria/facet/collection\\_facet/id/2316](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Browse/clearAndAddCriteria/facet/collection_facet/id/2316).

Moravská Ostrava in which the majority of classmates were Jewish, he found that only five of them were living in Czechoslovakia, three in the United Kingdom, two in the United States, two in Germany and one each in Palestine, China, Australia and Russia. He was only able to account for sixteen out of the class of thirty nine.<sup>11</sup> This episode illustrates the high degree of destruction and of dispersal of one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in pre-WWII Bohemian Lands and the ensuing complication in documenting the stories of former Jewish inhabitants of Ostrava. The Memorial to the Holocaust victims in the Pinkas synagogue in Prague lists, under Ostrava, 3600 names of those who were deported and murdered. But many others were deported from other locations and are listed under the last place of residence. Happily, some of them had the wit, means and the luck to escape abroad. Many young men joined the Czechoslovak armies in exile during the WWII.



Digital objects from the Ostrava collection located in the map in the JMP online collections' catalogue

Many of these fates have been documented only in the framework of the Ostrava project at the Kingston synagogue in the United Kingdom. The project aims to find living eye-witnesses and family members and to collect available evidence of Jewish life in Ostrava. The project was triggered off by curiosity of the Kingston community about the origins and fate of one of the Torah Scrolls originating from Moravská Ostrava which was brought, in 1942, to the Central Jewish Museum in Prague. Having been stored in the post-war State Jewish Museum in Prague until 1964, it was one of the 1564 Torah Scrolls sold by the Czechoslovak state to Eric Estorick, an art dealer from London, funded by Ralph Yablon, a wealthy

11) J. Wechsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

English textile merchant, and donated to the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust in London. The Trust provides those scrolls that were in a good condition on loan to synagogues and congregations around the world.<sup>12</sup> One of these scrolls, from Ostrava, was given on permanent loan to Kingston orthodox synagogue, in London, England, where it is still used today.



Rededication service for the Ostrava Scroll in the Kingston, Surbiton and District Synagogue, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2006. Photo Kingston Synagogue

Albeit none of them had any personal or family connection to Ostrava (and some in fact first had to look up the strange location on the map), the presence of this scroll encouraged the members of the synagogue to research the history of the Jews in the city. The Kingston Group, coordinated by David Lawson, started in 2006 by making contact with ‘Ostravaks’ whose stories could be found on the Internet and by recording video interviews with them. The group was literally

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12) Magda Veselská, ‘The Selling Off of Items from the Collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague after the Second World War, with Particular Focus on the Sale of Torah Scrolls in 1963–1964’, *Judaica Bohemiae*, 42 (2006), pp. 179–232; *Druhý život českých svitků Tóry. České svitky Tóry a povijany na Tóru v Memorial Scrolls Trust v Londýně a Židovském Muzeu v Praze / The Second Life of Czech Torah Scrolls: Czech Torah Scrolls and Binders from the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London and the Jewish Museum in Prague*, Praha: Židovské muzeum v Praze 2006; Philippa Bernard, *Out of the Midst of the Fire*, London: Westminster Synagogue 2005.

learning about Ostrava and its Jewish history, as well as about methods of historical documentation, on the go. Through lectures and reports about its activities online, thousands of emails as well as a regular online Newsletter, it step-by-step got in touch with further families and collected their stories, documents and photos. Surprisingly, the snowball approach worked very well and by spring 2013, the project had collected material from 83 family archives and conducted 38 video interviews with former Jewish 'Ostravaks', many of them Holocaust survivors or members of Czechoslovak exile armies. The group worked together with Libuše Salomonovičová in Ostrava who accumulated a unique archive on genealogies of Jewish families from the city. The Anglophone Kingston Group readily attracted worldwide contacts from 'Ostravaks' and their families, while the Czech-speaking Mrs. Salomonovičová is able to research much relevant family history from original sources in Ostrava. This synergy has been extremely fruitful.

The very success of the documentation project brought about the question of the long term archiving of the material and making it accessible to researchers and the general public. The Jewish Museum in Prague (JMP) agreed to cooperate through its Shoah History Department and to catalogue the collection which fits nicely the already extensive collection of family related materials and its oral history collection. The documents were mostly received in digital form, even though sometimes in a lower image quality compared to the standards of the JMP. All relevant information was entered into the new cataloguing system based on the CollectiveAccess<sup>13</sup> software which enables, among other features, multi-lingual cataloguing, flexible creation of named relationships between different types of data objects and can store many types of media. All digital objects were linked to authority (vocabulary) lists such as keywords, locations, people and organisations. Thanks to geocoding, the objects can be also located on a map.

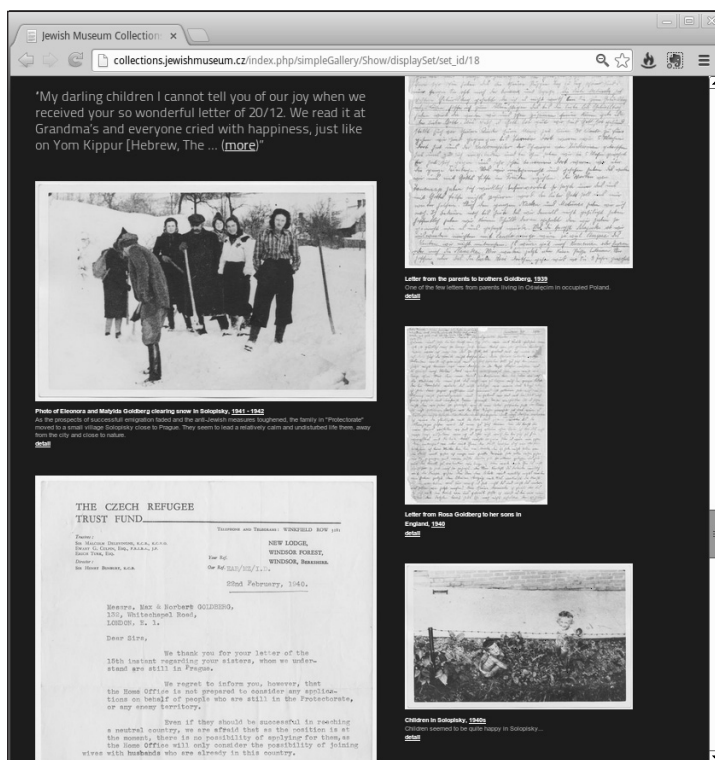
Even though further materials are being acquired continuously and the cataloguing is an ongoing effort, most of the available documents were published online in the new collections' catalogue of the JMP which is – since September 2012 – freely accessible under <http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/>. The collections' catalogue offers access to approx. 1600 Ostrava related documents and photos in 42 collections. Some additional documents are only accessible in the collections' catalogue from the reading rooms of the JMP, due to privacy protection. In the future, the online catalogue of the JMP will contain an increasing part of the various collections housed in the Museum, including archive and photo archive and information about artefacts. By November 2012, the JMP made accessible approx. five thousand documents from the Terezín (Theresienstadt) archival collection,<sup>14</sup> which made the catalogue one of the most extensive digital online archival resources in the Czech Republic.

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13) See <http://www.collectiveaccess.org>.

14) See Jewish Museum in Prague, Archive of the Shoah History Department, Terezín/Theresienstadt Collection, accessible at [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Browse/clearAndAddCriteria/facet/collection\\_facet/id/5](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Browse/clearAndAddCriteria/facet/collection_facet/id/5).

Among many other interesting materials, the online catalogue contains the unique series of letters from the members of the Goldberg family from the 'Protectorate' to the three brothers – Oskar, Moses and Norbert – who managed to escape to Britain in 1939. Full of sadness at being separated and longing to be reunited, their letters effectively illustrate how difficult it was for the Jewish inhabitants of the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia' to escape to the free world facing the obstacle of visas, permits and closed borders. To mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of systematic deportations of Jews from Ostrava in 1942, the Jewish Museum in Prague and the Ostrava Group created an online exhibition based on the Goldberg letter collection.<sup>15</sup>



Screenshot from the online exhibition 'You are now my only hope' based on the Goldberg family letter archive, see [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/simpleGallery/Show/displaySet/set\\_id/18](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/simpleGallery/Show/displaySet/set_id/18)

The photo of a Czechoslovak Jewish refugee who arrived at the Croydon airport on 30 March 1939, who lacked a visa and was supposed to be returned was published in the *Daily Mail* on Friday 31 March and became subsequently well known and has been used by historians.<sup>16</sup> However, the identity and exact fate of

15) See [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/simpleGallery/Show/displaySet/set\\_id/18](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/simpleGallery/Show/displaySet/set_id/18).

the person have only been uncovered within the Ostrava project. The photo<sup>17</sup> shows Oskar Goldberg who resisted as he was supposed to be deported back to Poland. He later explained to his brothers that he decided to physically resist his deportation when he noticed a group of journalists watching. He successfully created a media event; however, the deportation of the group of Jewish refugees, including Oskar, was probably prevented by the Danish pilot of the plane who refused to take refugees back on board – fearing they might cause trouble during the flight.

So far, the Jewish history and culture of Ostrava has been the subject of articles or shorter studies by several historians and is reproduced in testimonies and memoirs.<sup>18</sup> However, given its significance and specifics, there is no doubt about

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16) Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948. British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press 2000.

17) Wiener Library, London, photo WL25 – Refugee from German-occupied Czechoslovakia being forcibly deported from Croydon airport 1 April 1939; see [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/76635](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/76635).

18) See for instance: Marek Otisk, ed., *Město v nás. Příběhy Ostravských Židů* [City in Us. Stories of Jews of Ostrava], Ostrava: Montanex 2004; Ludmila Nesládková, 'Židé v procesu proměny poddanského městečka Moravské Ostravy v průmyslové velkoměsto' [Jews in the Process of Transformation of the Servitude Town of Moravská Ostrava into an Industrial City], *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska*, 20 (2001), pp. 7–27; eadem, 'Židovská populace Vítkovic v procesu vytváření industriální společnosti na Ostravsku (věkové složení, původ migrantů, profesní orientace 1869–1930)' [Jewish Population of Vítkovice in the Process of Formation of Industrial Society in the Ostrava Region (age composition, origins of migrants, professional orientation 1869–1930)], *SPFFOU – Historie*, 162 (1996), No. 4, pp. 51–69; B. Przybylová, 'Židovská škola v Moravské Ostravě'; Blažena Gracová, 'Židovské obyvatelstvo Ostravska v období druhé republiky' [Jewish Population of the Ostrava Region during the Second Republic], *SPFFOU – Historie*, 153 (1995), No. 3, pp. 73–87; Ludmila Nesládková, 'Židé na Moravě a Československo' [Jews in Moravia and in Czechoslovakia], *Česko-slovenská historická ročenka*, 2001, pp. 37–48; Ludmila Nesládková, 'Židé – muži, ženy a děti – z Moravské Ostravy ve světle výsledků sčítání obyvatelstva z doby rakouského mocnářství' [Jews – Men, Women and Children – from Moravská Ostrava in Light of the Results of the Population Censuses from the Time of the Austrian Monarchy], *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska*, 21 (2003), pp. 98–116; Blažena Przybylová, 'Uprchlíci z Haliče na Ostravsku a jejich repatriace po ukončení Velké války' [preklad], *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska*, 24 (2009), pp. 135–154; Kamil Rodan, 'Soubor židovského obyvatelstva Moravské Ostravy v roce 1921 ve světle vybraných demografických faktorů'; Václav Štěpán, 'Osudy židovské rodiny Heřmana Brodávky a "bartovská hrenda"' [Fates of the Jewish Family of Heřman Brodávka and the Bártovice Inn], *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska*, 17 (1995), pp. 256–281; Ludmila Nesládková, 'Demografickohistorická charakteristika židovské minority z okruhu ostravské náboženské obce v 19. a 20. století' [Demographic-Historical Characteristic of the Jewish Minority from among the Members of Ostrava Religious Community in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries], *SPFFOU – Historie*, 139 (1993), No. 1, pp. 73–84; L. Nesládková, 'Haličští židé v 19. století na cestě za novou existencí na Ostravsko'; Mečislav Borák, *První deportace evropských Židů. Transporty do Niska nad Sanem (1939–1940)* [First Deportations of European Jews. Transports to Nisko at San], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Ostrava 2009; M. Borák, *Transport do tmy. První deportace evropských Židů* [Transport into Darkness. First Deportation of European Jews], Ostrava 1994; L. Nesládková, ed., *Akce Nisko v historii "konečného řešení židovské otázky". K 55. výročí první hromadné deportace evropských Židů. Mezinárodní vědecká konference. Sborník referátů* [The Nisko Action in the History of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question". On the 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first Mass Deportation of European Jews], Ostrava 1995.

the fact that the subject would merit a detailed monograph. The materials collected within the project do not indeed provide a full historical picture of the Ostrava Jewish community or of the cohabitation of Jews with non-Jews in the city. For instance, many of the family archives describe typically middle-class life style and values. This could well be due to the fact that the well-off were more likely to be able to flee abroad successfully compared to their less wealthy co-religionists. Every historian seeking to provide a larger picture will have to combine this Ostrava archive with other archival documents, extend it by using oral history collections, published memoirs and other sources. But we are persuaded that the personal documents and photos will prove invaluable for any future account of Ostrava Jewish history and that the community eventually finds its ultimate historian.

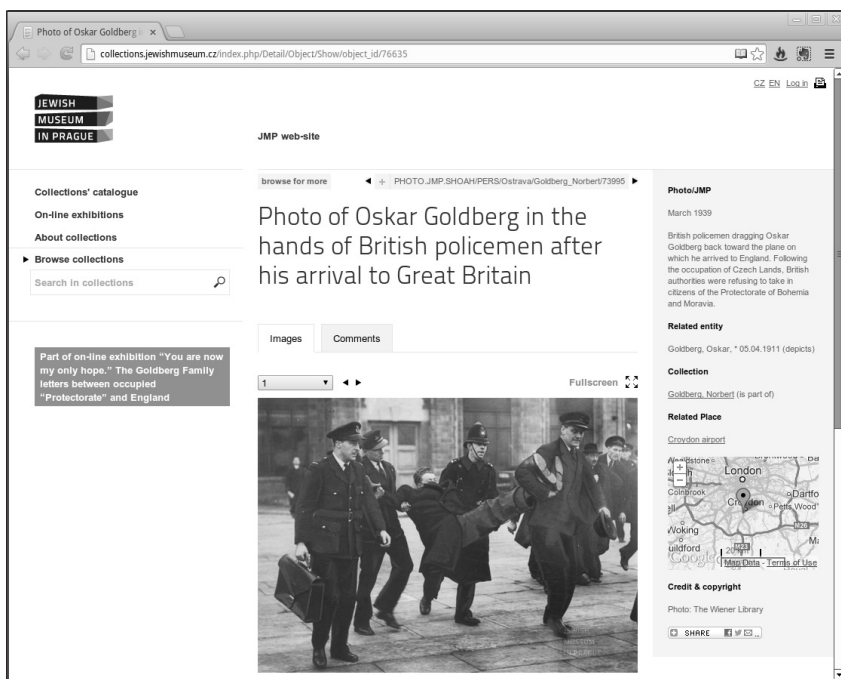


Photo of Oskar Goldberg taken away after his arrival to the Great Britain, in the JMP on-line collections' catalogue (original in Wiener Library, London), see [http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/76635](http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/76635)

## VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

But ultimately, the project results in more than an archive. It is the story of families today who strive to learn more about their own histories and about Jewish Ostrava. The members of this worldwide Jewish Ostrava network, about 200 families, are now in touch with each other, with the help of the Internet and through personal meetings. Among the striking achievements of the project is putting in contact

family members and friends who have lost track of each other during and after the WWII. For instance, after a gap of over 70 years, we have been able to connect Peter in Israel with Alfred in Birmingham in the United Kingdom, the brother of Peter's girlfriend in Ostrava who was murdered by the Nazis; and to introduce Tom, from South East England, to a whole branch of his family who still live in Ostrava. Neither they nor Tom had any idea of the existence of the other before reunited through the Ostrava group.

The Group has arranged for some of the 'Ostravak' families to have *Stolpersteine* laid in Ostrava in memory of their murdered relatives and has arranged for a trip to Ostrava. Inspired by the activities of the Ostrava group, several families have also organised their own visits. The City authorities in Ostrava also expressed their interest and offered help to the project, during the visits and to prepare the laying of the *Stolpersteine*.

The project serves as a good example of an interplay between a community (virtual or real) and an archive. It demonstrates how documentation can catalyse the building of virtual communities centred around the history of Jewish life before, during and after the Holocaust. However, it is also apparent that building of such virtual communities requires much time, attention and devotion. From the perspective of the Jewish Museum in Prague, the cooperation with the Ostrava group is an important model project which could and should desirably be replicated with other Jewish communities in Bohemian Lands as well.