

Current Affairs - Rare medieval Jewish cemetery beneath Plzen shopping centre?

[2006-10-06] By Dita Asiedu

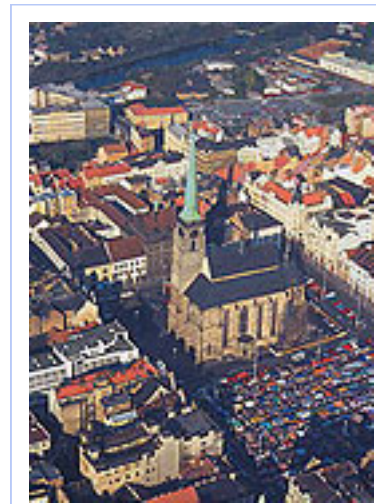
Almost six hundred years ago, the Jewish community in what is now west Bohemia bought some land on the outskirts of Plzen, west Bohemia, to build a cemetery. A few decades later the land was confiscated and the community expelled. Since then, very little has been known about the location of the burial site. But now, a team of archaeologists say the cemetery is right beneath land that is to house a new billion-crown commercial centre. Dita Asiedu reports:



Back in spring, a team of archaeologists headed by Radek Siroky was commissioned to examine a piece of land ahead of plans to build the Plaza Shopping and Entertainment Centre. After a preliminary examination of the 4,700m², the researchers say there is reason to believe that the site holds relics of an ancient Jewish burial ground:

"The cemetery dates back to the 15th century. Unlike Christian graves, the Jewish ones are usually well preserved. We can learn how the people looked, what illness they suffered from, and it is possible to easily examine the population sample. Archaeologically excavated medieval Jewish cemeteries are really only known from three European cities - Barcelona in Spain, York in England, and Prague in the Czech Republic. It is necessary to carry out a very detailed archaeological excavation of the construction area very carefully, centimetre by centimetre. It is an area of 4,700 square metres and around two metres deep."

But the investor of the project, paradoxically an Israeli company, says it was only informed of the possible existence of the cemetery a few days ago - not from the archaeologists but from a reporter from Pravo newspaper.



Plzen

Plzen City Hall has not received an official request to intervene in the dispute but when asked to react, Deputy Mayor Stanislav Hajny had this to say:

"Overall, it is a matter for the investor. Plaza has the responsibility by law to commission an authorised company of its choice to carry out archaeological research on the area that will be affected by construction work. Right now, it's difficult to say whether the construction work will reach the alleged archaeological findings of the Jewish cemetery. We know that the cemetery is somewhere in that location, however we also know that the terrain along the river Mze was raised extensively in the past because the river banks were sloping downwards. The archaeological findings in question could therefore be buried much deeper and would thereby not be affected by the construction work. So, the investor is not obliged to commission any more archaeological examinations."

Plaza project manager Martin Kodrle stresses that archaeologists have so far found only the walls of the basement of a former restaurant. He also argues that Plaza Centre is to spring up next to a river and cemeteries were usually not built so close to water bodies. From information in the archives it is almost certain that the cemetery existed but it is still a mystery where on the outskirts of the city it is buried. The chances that it was built almost half a kilometre from the city's former

borders are slim, says Martin Kodrle:

"The border of the city was about 300-500 metres from our land and the suburb, according to archaeologists, was only made of about ten houses that were built right by the city's enforcement. So, the possibility of this cemetery existing under our land is very low. The Jewish community at the time consisted of only seven families in Pilsen and they had the land for about 46 years. The area on which the cemetery ought to be can only be of an area equivalent to about ten parking spaces. I also repeat once more that nothing was found until now."

You've decided to ask a different team of archaeologists to take another look...

"Yes, because the former team of archaeologists wanted to examine the land for at least eight months and wanted an unacceptable amount of money for it. So we announced a new small tender and found that the West Bohemian Museum is able to do the work in a time frame that we can accept. An agreement with the city gives us fifteen months to build the entire Plaza Centre. So the examination will be conducted until the end of the year for a price that is acceptable to us."



If a cemetery were found, how would it affect the building of the centre?

"We would follow the law on memorials and if it is a Jewish cemetery then we will invite the Jewish community to come up with a solution. But I know that according to Jewish religion the relics of cemetery are not to be moved. It will all depend on where it would be found. We could close it off and write that it is the place where an old Jewish cemetery used to be. I don't know how to solve it. It will be solved with the community and conservationists after it is found, if it happens at all."