

“The Old Testament in the Arts” Festival

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We closed a circle. It was January 11th, 1994, in this beautiful building of the Ministry of Culture that I was privileged to meet a distinguished group of people—all leaders of the cultural life of Prague. We discussed ways and means of intensifying Czech-Israel cultural relations. As the conversation went on, I saw an opportunity to suggest an idea I had been thinking about for years.

This idea was to build up a multi-faceted cultural festival around one central theme—the Old Testament. It would encompass most forms of artistic expression: music, dance, theatre, literature, cinema and more.

This idea was based on the premise that the Old Testament (or the Hebrew Testament) has had a most profound impact on shaping the spiritual form of the Judeo-Christian civilisations, which in turn have deeply impacted cultures all over the world. No other collection of writings has experienced—and still enjoys—such wide circulation; nor has any other been translated to almost every language and dialect the world over—as has the Old Testament—the Book of Books.

From ancient times to our own era, the Old Testament has served as a source of inspiration to artists in all fields—to adherents of all monotheistic religions—and to people of many nations. It is the common heritage of Jews and of Christians of all denominations—observant and secular alike. From many points of view, the Old Testament became a foundation for much of the world’s cultural development.

The underlying aim of this Festival has been to demonstrate the influence of the Old Testament on the arts, from the Middle Ages to today, and its role in shaping Western civilisation. I believe that such a cultural effort is important in our century, which

has witnessed so much war, strife and suffering. The Holocaust—the mass assassination of the Jewish people of Europe—a phenomenon which defies human imagination—took place in our own lifetime. Would it not be meaningful to re-examine our common cultural heritage and contribute, if even slightly, to a better world, to the spirit of ecumenism?

Despite different approaches and interpretations, the Old Testament is an undisputed common source and foundation for all who consider themselves part of Western civilisation. This unifying factor is all the more relevant today as new sentiments spread in certain places which attempt to undermine our cultural values—when history is called “myth” and when “revisionist” historians try to re-invent the past. Thus, we are called upon to strengthen and revitalise the cultural elements which bind us together. As such, the Old Testament constitutes a powerful pillar of Western civilisation in all its artistic expressions.

Given the rich cultural heritage of the Czech Republic and Israel’s unique role as the birthplace of Judeo-Christian civilisation, I thought it natural for our two countries to join in creating a convincing demonstration of cultural solidarity. The response of most of the people who attended the first meeting, and of others who I met later was overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic. With few exceptions, the idea was accepted and preparations began forthwith. Initially our aim was quite modest. We thought that about twenty events would suffice, but the scope expanded as we went along.

We owe Minister of Culture, Mr. Pavel Tigrid our appreciation for his suggestion to invite other countries to participate in the Festival. He even had faith that some would join in spite of the unattractive necessity of covering all their own expenses. As we know today, he was right. Our Festival boasts 11 participating countries.

There were some people who became apprehensive at the growing magnitude of the Festival. Others thought that it’s scope was too wide and more time was needed for preparations. They asked: why 1995?—why not next year, or the year after?

The first unofficial “consulting committee” consisted of: Jan Bondy, Jiří Čížek, Petr Pokorný and Ladislav Brábek. We met often to discuss various ideas and examine the progress of our preparations. Dr. Helena Koenigsmarková guided me with wise

counsel. Monsigneur Evermod Gejza Šídelovský, Jan Bondy, and Prof. Rudolf Zahradník were sources of encouragement during some difficult moments when I thought it better to drop the whole idea. Dr. Richard Salzmann, with his quiet and reassuring smile, continued to express confidence that the necessary funds would be found. He supported his arguments with a most generous contribution from his own bank. Many other banks, commercial enterprises, and other organisations—such as the European Union, Foundation Rich in Paris and others—followed generously. The list of contributors has been made public, and it is thanks to them that this Festival was made possible.

The considerable administrative and financial responsibilities of the Festival were undertaken by Dr. Alexander Jerie and his efficient assistant, Mrs. Andrea Hoffmannová. Mr. Norbert Auerbach joined the executive committee at one of its most critical moments and instilled in us new optimism. Special thanks are due to my colleagues at the Embassy of Israel who—while not having expected to be dragged into such a strange adventure—cooperated with grace and in a spirit of friendship. I want to especially mention Mrs. Marta Ernyeiová and Dr. Milan Kenkuš, without whose dedication and devotion this Festival would not have taken place.

I wish also to convey my appreciation to the media representatives of television, radio, and the press who helped promote our Festival and publicised it.

Allow me to conclude on a personal note. I wish to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity that working on this Festival gave me to get to know so many wonderful people in Prague—whom I doubt that I would have met otherwise. For this alone the whole project was worthwhile. Some will, I hope, remain friends even after Dvorah and I end our tour of duty in the Czech Republic and return home to Jerusalem in a few weeks time.

May I express my thanks to some people with these small tokens of appreciation.