

Schindler's Ark. Thanks to a partnership between the descendants of the factory owners and the local community, a unique memorial will be created in Brněnec

Published: 29.1. 2022, Forbes, Czech Republic

<https://forbes.cz/schindlerova-archa-v-brnenci-vznikne-diky-potomkum-prezivalsich-i-mistnim-unikatni-expozice/>

Nearly eighty years have passed since the end of World War II, forty years since the original book by Thomas Keneally was published, and thirty years since the premier of Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film Schindler's List that brought the story of Oskar Schindler and more than a thousand rescued Jews into the public consciousness.

However, the very place where the most important events of this history took place remains forgotten. All that remains are the ruins of the original textile factory in the Moravian town of Brněnec, where Schindler brought hundreds of people from Krakow in 1944 who would otherwise almost certainly have been condemned to death in Auschwitz.

The grandson of the original owners, Daniel Löw-Beer, decided to change that together with the locals and bought the rundown complex in 2018, setting up a foundation with the ambition of breathing life back into this unique place. The project includes a museum and interactive facilities for teaching using local guides. This will give visitors a deeper insight into the background of one of the most famous stories reflecting the turbulent history of the twentieth century.

"In a remarkable partnership with the local community until 1938, we created one of the most innovative factories in Europe, and a prosperous and beautiful Brněnec valley. Now it is one of the poorest again. The challenge is to make it sustainable, beautiful, and prosperous again.," says Daniel, whose ancestors were among the most important Moravian factory owners.

He spoke to Forbes not only about the planned reconstruction of the factory complex in Brno, but also about his relationship to this special place.

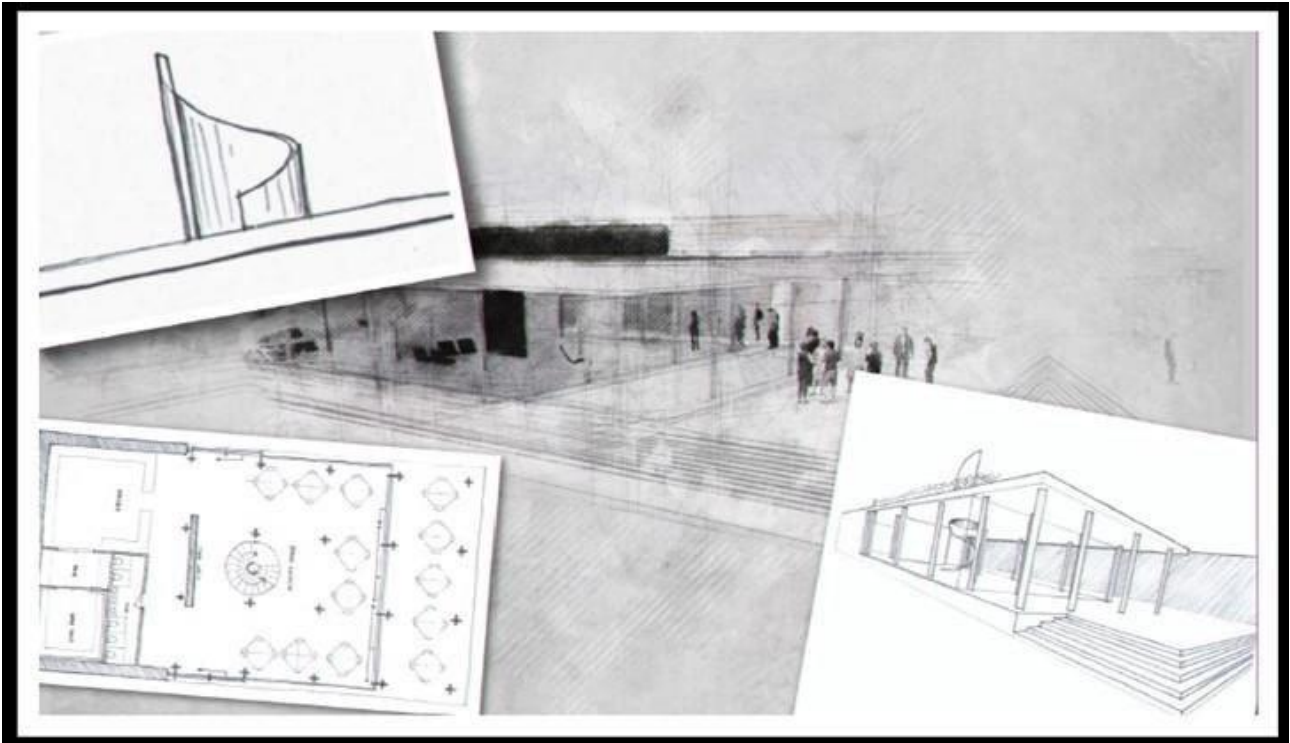
When did You visit Brněnec for the first time?

I first visited Brněnec and Czechoslovakia in 1973.

What were your feelings then?

When we got to the border and my father said he was Tomas Löw-Beer at the checkpoint, he was taken away and questioned for three hours. I remember thinking I would never see him again. My father was named after Thomas Masaryk.

He always talked of a Czechoslovakia that led Europe culturally, economically richer than Switzerland, and got the best of its peoples, Czech, German speaking and Jewish. In 1973, he did not recognize his country.



I went back to Czechoslovakia in 1989 to cover the events of the Velvet Revolution as a journalist. Since the 1990s, I have returned regularly to collect stories for my book *The Ark of Life*, which has been published in Czech and English.

In 2017, we were then officially invited to Brno and Brněnec to visit the houses and factories that belonged to our family before 1938. That's when I met a remarkable team of people from Brněnec, thanks to which the partnership between our family and the locals was renewed after many years. For the first time in eighty years, our family was able to feel at home in the Czech Republic again.

How strong is your family's relationship to this place?

For us, the factory in Brno was like a long-lost relative with whom we lost contact in 1938. It had its remarkable adventures, but it was always part of the family.

A certain part of my father always lived there. The separation was terrible. One day my grandfather Walter Löw-Beer woke up and suddenly stood on the dividing line that split the original Czechoslovakia, as well as the whole of Europe, in two. And the Jewish world of that time was shattered into pieces.

The new border, drawn by the Munich Agreement, ran right along the stream that ran through the factory. My short but athletic Jewish grandfather stood there, armed with a walking stick, facing an approaching battalion of Nazi soldiers. They stopped on the other side of the bridge, dismounted from their armed vehicles and asked him to cross the bridge to negotiate. If he had crossed the stream, the soldiers would undoubtedly have immediately loaded him into their trucks and taken him to one of the concentration camps.

But he stood his ground. He told the soldiers that they couldn't go any further. And to call Berlin to check their borders and order, which they apparently did. So he delayed the Nazi occupation of that part of Czechoslovakia for three days, a Jew defending a broken Czechoslovakia.

But you didn't get the site back in restitution. You bought it in 2018.

It was a ruin by then, and it was cheaper to buy it than to pay all those lawyers and authorities to try to get uncertain restitution.

I could not afford it if the factory was not ruined, as we lost all our money during the war. We have put the buildings into a Foundation run with the local community and the group of mayors. They agreed to change the zoning to allow its redevelopment. It is now perhaps the most unique brownfield site in Europe.

Why do we need to preserve this area for future generations?

The place is hauntingly beautiful. A huge textile workshop, open and naturally lit, with industrial architecture that influenced the famous architect Mies van der Rohe. The Schindler's Ark building was a unique concentration camp where 1,200 Jews were rescued. It tells a story of survival and that it is possible to stand up to the system and win.

The 50,000 hours of testimony of Schindler's Jews. These survivors of the genocide tell their story to the present day and in doing so how survivors shape our world. Their voices, reflections and lessons are preserved in the very place where these pivotal events took place. And they repeat again and again. "No matter how small, there is always an opportunity to make a difference."

How crucial is it to build such a monument in the Czech Republic?

The key events of perhaps the most famous story of the Second World War took place here. A visit to the Schindler's Ark building is breathtaking because it is the original scene of historical events. But the story that is told here is timeless. And it has another meaning, quite Czech. And that is that an individual can stand up to discrimination and win. Yet this year, the buildings almost collapsed, and with them a piece of history.

Who came up with the idea of building a museum?

We co-designed the project in 2019 and 2020 with the local community and architects from five European countries. We then consulted locally, in Brno and Prague.

There's a great team of locals, led by František Olbert, who has the same ability as my grandfather to feel a fabric and know how it was made. The local people still have incredible skills. I can say that the Schindler's Ark project has renewed the partnership between the Löw-Beer family and the local community after many years.



When do you plan to start construction?

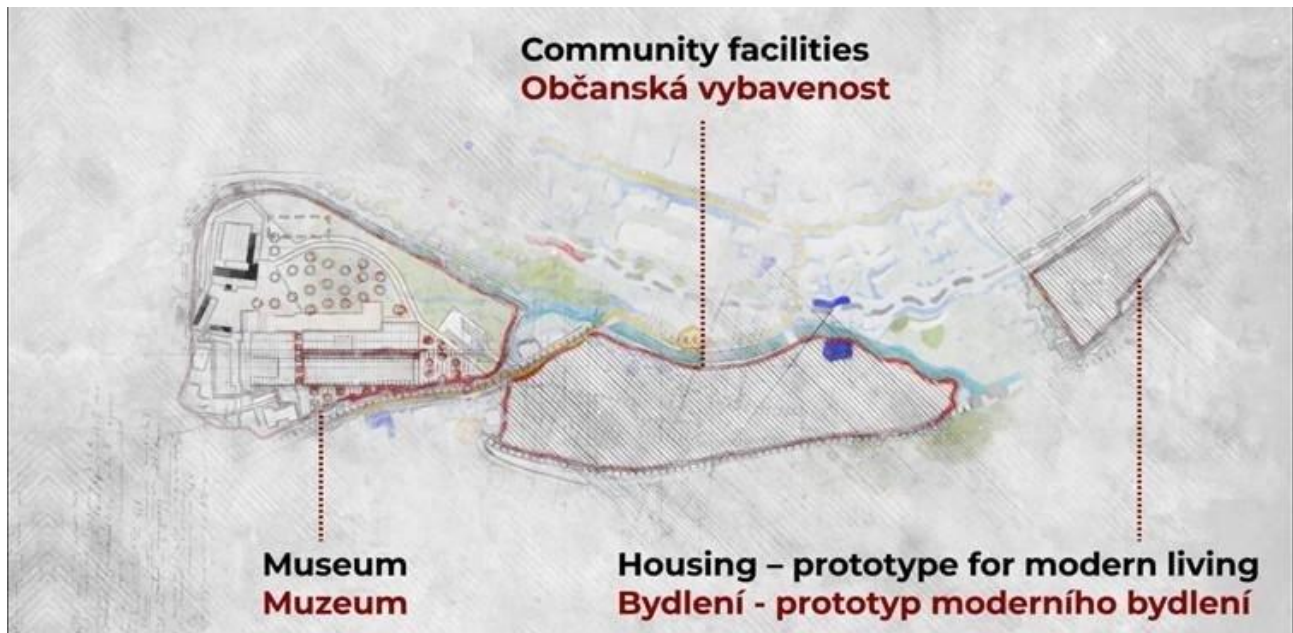
We have applied for a subsidy and we want to start work this year. The aim is to have the new building with the survivors' museum open within two years. We will also produce textiles here again and would like to return the original fabrics to Villa Tugendhat, which were designed by the famous Bauhaus designer Lilly Reich. She worked closely with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

We are a partner of the New European Bauhaus initiative of the European Union and aim to build a museum of survivors, a textile laboratory that will show the importance of textiles for sustainable living and housing for the village.

How do you perceive the personality of Oskar Schindler himself?

His intentions are an enigma, which is part of what makes the story compelling and always new in some ways. Why did he do what he did? And more importantly, how would you stand up against

oppression and discrimination in the present day? His actions saved the lives of twelve hundred



Jews. And in Judaism - more than in Christianity - actions are more important than intentions. It's fascinating how much your answer tells as much about you as about him. For Czechs, it opens up questions about what it really means to be Czech. For the Germans, why more people didn't stand up to Nazism when one man was able to. The Communists did not accept the story of the good German and that influence is still felt.

There is also the role of Emilie Schindler and the Jews themselves. Joseph Bau forged documents and saved more Jews than Schindler. And he continued to do so, as seen, for example, in the Spy mini-series available on Netflix.

One part of Schindler is also typically Czech, namely that he still believes that an individual can stand up to the system and prevail. In a stubborn line from Jan Hus to the good soldier Svejek to just Schindler. He and his wife Emilie took the Jews back to their home in Moravia.

After the war, he wrote the screenplay for the film. We have a copy of it and it's called Until the Last Hour. Schindler was to be played by Gregory Pack and his wife by Romy Schneider. But the U.S. Congress decided they weren't ready for a movie about a good Nazi. This film begins and ends in Brněnec.

The most important events took place in Brněnec. The escape from Auschwitz, the rescue of the Goleshau Jews, the building of a unique concentration camp that saved people, Schindler's Ark, the forgery of documents, the donation of a ring with the inscription "Whoever saves even one life saves the whole world", the last speech and the escape. For Schindler, it was a Czech story. Even though Spielberg told it as the Polish story in his remarkable film.