

## **For it will Never be Forgotten from Our Children**

### ***Re-Dedicating the Melnik Sefer Torah***

*By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman*

#### *I. The Melnik Sefer Torah*

In Central Bohemia, 35 kilometers north of Prague, lies a town at the nexus of the rivers Elbe and Vitava, a place called Melnik. This town, first granted its royal statute in 1274, from King Otaker II, was known for its rich agriculture; fruits and vegetables of every sort were grown there. Eventually, Melnik became a royal retreat for the queens of Bohemia.

Prior to the revolutions which swept through Europe in 1848, only two Jewish families were permitted to live in this royal town. Following the Spring of Nations, as it was called, Jews were permitted to reside in Melnik.

Their numbers slowly increased, but it was always a small Jewish community, a suburb of Prague, home to some of the greatest scholars European Jewry ever produced, R. Yeshahua HaLevi Horowitz (Shalah), R. Yehuda Leib b. Bezalel (Maharal) and R. Yechezkel Landau (Noda B'Yehuda).

Melnik's Jewish population, officially counted in 1930, stood, in that census, at 94.

The community built a single shul. They procured a used Sefer Torah, one that had been written in 1820. And there, in that shul, the Torah remained.

When the Munich agreement was signed in September of 1938, and the Nazis occupied the *Sudentenland*, the nearby provinces of Bohemia understood that trouble was on the horizon. Some six months later, when the Nazis did invade the rump state of Czechoslovakia in March of the following year, synagogues were closed.

Deportations began in 1941, and continued through January 1943. Fearful for the desecration of their sacred Torah scrolls, the Jewish communities of Bohemia sought permission from the Nazis to send their Torah scrolls, and other valuable Judaica, to a planned "Central Jewish Museum", to be located in Prague. The Nazis, perhaps, as some historians have speculated, though more research on this point is necessary, out of a desire to one day open a "museum to an extinct people", shockingly acceded to this

request. The Sefer Torah of Melnik came to be stored, under these conditions, in various storehouses in Prague.

Dr. Josef Polak and a team of curators worked through the war years cataloging this Judaica. They worked in conditions of terror and dread, never knowing when their turn for deportation to Theresienstadt might come. Dr. Polak himself did not survive the war, but thanks to his efforts, these sacred objects did.

Following the war, and the Communist revolution of 1948, the Torah scroll came to be housed at the Michle Synagogue, just outside of Prague. And there, they were forgotten.

## *II. Rediscovery and Salvation*

Eric Estorik, an American art dealer living in London, who traveled often on buying trips to Prague, was told in 1963 by the Communist authorities of a trove of nearly 1800 Torah scrolls, in damp conditions, threatened by mold, at the synagogue. It seems that they simply wished to make a profit off of these artifacts that held no great or special meaning for them.

Estorik activated the London Jewish community for a rescue effort, and the following year, 1564 of the 1800 Torah scrolls were saved, brought to the Westminster Synagogue.

The Memorial Torah Scrolls trust was formed by the London Jewish community to distribute these living witnesses to Jewish history to Jewish communities throughout the world.

In August of 1981, Scroll number 1099 of 1564, reference number 529, 26 inches long, arrived at 70 Sterling Place, in Teaneck NJ, at the Jewish Center of Teaneck.

This, before our eyes, is what remains of the Jewish community of Melnik, Czechoslovakia.

### *III. Re-Dedication*

Today is a historic day at The Jewish Center of Teaneck, as we re-dedicate this Torah scroll, witness to a world destroyed and rebuilt so many times over in its 198 years of existence.

The Sefer Torah is now adorned with a new, and beautiful Torah mantle dedicated to the souls of the more than one million Jewish children killed by the Nazis.

The Sefer Torah mantle has been so elegantly designed by our incredibly talented Herb Stern, and so generously supported by a number of families in our community,

This morning, we take a moment to reflect.

We reflect on how much this Torah has seen.

1820, 1848, 1938, 1945, 1964, 1981, 2018.

Melnik, Sudetenland, Prague, Michle, London, Teaneck.

Bohemia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, the Third Reich,

Czechoslovakia again, the Communist Occupation, Great Britain, The United States of America.

Melnik was not a large town. We can imagine, in our mind's eye, the joy of a Bar Mitzvah boy called to this Torah for the first time, someone who would now be able to help complete the minyan.

We can imagine, in our mind's eye, a chattan, a groom, called to the Torah on Shabbat before his wedding.

We can imagine, in our mind's eye, the Torah lifted in the air for Hagbah, and the community of Melnik beholding it as one.

We can imagine, in our mind's eye, the Torah being danced with on Simchat Torah.

We can imagine, in our mind's eye, the Torah held tightly at Kol Nidre and the blessing of the New Month.

We reflect on how much this Torah was loved.

And now we are its guardians, and we know that we are part of a chain that has been, so often, bent, but never broken.

The Torah mantle is designed with a pattern of flames, connoting the destruction which its community suffered, but equally, communicating the eternity of the Jewish people.

For, as Moshe first beheld the vision of the Shechinah, the Divine presence, it was in a burning thorn bush, והנה הסנה בוער באש והסנה איננו אוכל, but which refused to be consumed, to go quietly. Such is the story of our people. Maimonides referred to a Sefer Torah as the "ed ne'eman", the reliable and trustworthy witness: it bears witness to our Covenant with the Almighty, and this special Sefer Torah, bears additional witness to the survival of our people.

A study recently conducted, published this week by the New York Times, noted that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of Millennials do not know- simply do not know- what Auschwitz was. Forty percent of millennials, and this is ignorance, not anti-semitism, believe that fewer than two million Jews were killed in the war. The pace at which history moves, and the unforgettable is forgotten, is simply terrifying.

The Torah Mantle bears the words from Devarim Chapter 31:21. "And it will be, when they will encounter many evils and troubles, this song will bear witness against them, for it will not be forgotten from the mouth of his offspring..."

Our people has surely encountered many evils and troubles, as foretold by the sacred text of this Torah scroll. And yet, as is emblazoned on the mantle, "it will never be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring", כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו. The Torah made a promise, that our offspring, our children, those born, and those unborn, will never forget her words.

And so, in this age of forgetting, we take increased devotion to ensure that the unthinkable, the indescribable, will never be forgotten.

We think of the children of Melnik who, with over one million others, never grew up to be adults, whom we honor and remember this morning.

We think of our own children and our grandchildren, and our deepest hopes and aspirations for them. Our resolve has never been greater to ensure that they never forgot either the words of the Torah, their sacred heritage, nor the memory of those whom we have lost.

And, our commitment to ensure that this synagogue, whose very year of birth corresponds to the beginning of that darkest chapter in our history, 1933, will be the vehicle through which our children will come to be part of this chain, has never been firmer.

#### *IV. The Final Stop*

And, as we bridge this Shabbat between the greatest tragedy to ever befall our people, and the greatest miracle in the annals of humanity, the return of an exiled people to their ancestral homeland after two millennia, we know that this Torah scroll has but one stop left to make.

As the Talmud teaches, the sacred synagogues and study halls of the Jewish diaspora will one day be constituted in the Land of Israel.

And, when, in God's good time, this synagogue will be rebuilt there, our children, or grandchildren, or their children, some unborn generation will not forget our Sefer Torah.

And so, as the Jews who left Egypt remembered to take the bones of Joseph, who thereby was redeemed, when that day comes, and the words of the Talmud regarding the sacred synagogues and study halls will be realized like a Divine prophecy, and our people will return, as one, to our ancestral homeland, so too, through us, will the community of Melnik be redeemed.

For it will Never be Forgotten From Our Children.

The words of the Torah will never be forgotten.

The memory of the six million will never be forgotten.

And, surely, we will never forget a town in Central Bohemia at the juncture of the Elbe and Vitava, a place called Melnik, and the Jews who lived there, and the Torah which was their very own.