

“Five Five Six”

By Reuben Lazarus

July 2018

יְהִי שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שָׁמַיָא וְחַיִּים עֲלֵינוּ. "May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us". It's the closing of the weekly Friday night service, the sun has just set, and the Sabbath has arrived. The darkness of night is slowly becoming visible through the stained-glass windows, each adorned with religious imagery. Only the internal lights of the synagogue at Chatswood's North Shore Temple Emanuel now illuminate the large hall. The Rabbi softly recites the ancient words, praying for the memory of those lost. The ark has just closed, a large display acting as an altar, housing sacred texts, many much older than those who gaze upon them. Each scroll is adorned with a silver breastplate and crowns on top of the rollers, a tradition dating back to biblical times. The Rabbi continues the prayer, memories of loved ones flood the minds of the mourners. They gaze upon the curtain that hides away the Torah scrolls. Though unseen, they still proudly stand as a symbol of a faith. They're only parchment but the words they carry bear more meaning to the community than just how they read.

But there is one scroll that hides in plain sight. One that bore witness to a story that soon only it and similar artifacts can show first hand. A living relic, a survivor of the atrocities that were forced upon European Jewry by a foreign regime. Jews are taught from a very young age that it is an obligation to learn about these horrors, to never forget the cruelty that humans are capable of. However, the children of today will be amongst the last generation to hear firsthand the stories of survival.

The Rabbi finishes up the service and the curtain remains closed, like the door to a vault, protecting the relics for the night. Many of those who had stared at the Torah that very night do not know the story it has to tell.

The scrolls are not only created to tell the biblical stories but also to carry their own unique ones. From the moment of their conception, they are bound in history and tradition. The process of creating even a single Torah scroll is not an easily undertaken process. Each of the exactly 304,805 words that make up a Torah have to be handwritten, an exact replica of another Torah. This creates its own legacy, each is a copy of a copy, right up until the very origins of the Torah itself, the words seen today are in essence the same as was read thousands of years before. If the expert Scribe, a pious and dedicated person, makes a single mistake, the parchment page, made from the hide of a kosher animal, cannot be used until the word is literally scraped away, taking the top layer of the page with it. If that word is the name of God, then the entire page must be removed. For if one of the many rules required to make a scroll is broken, the entire Torah becomes pasul (not fit for ritual use).

But what of a repaired Torah scroll? One that has seen so much, and survived it all? One that could not have made it this far without bearing the scars? Though it shares a home beside the other Torahs in the ark, because of the breaking of the rules, it is no longer Kosher. The holes, the stitching, the rewriting, and the correcting. All these methods designed to bring it back to its birth state almost ironically left it unkosher. If these surgeries were successful, the Torah would have been considered kosher, but unfortunately, it did not make a full recovery. Yet, you cannot disqualify its importance and legacy because of this, for it'll be around longer than we will.

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Where the Torah was conceived has long been lost to time. Even its age falls into question. What is known is its number. A plaque rests at the bottom of one of the scroll's rollers. Its number etched in brass like ink to the skin. "556". The number shows how it fits into the few Torahs saved from the

Jewish communities in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, all a part of the modern-day Czech Republic. According to a 1930 census over 350,000 Jews lived in these parts; by 1948 only 19,000 were registered with the Jewish Communities in Bohemia and Moravia. Within this once large and thriving community, only 1564 Torahs survived. The one in Chatswood being number 556.

Number 556 survived these times, a witness to all the monstrosities. Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, alone saw the systematic destruction of over 250 Synagogues. A famous image depicts a synagogue engulfed by tremendous flames, while firefighters save a nearby house instead. Residents are forced to watch as the building is reduced to ash and the smoke plumes into the air like an industrial chimney.

Despite these events, with all the odds against it, 556 survived. Now it stands proudly in its home as a symbol never to be forgotten.

Its old home was in Domažlice, a small town in the Czech Republic, an area adorned with Renaissance housing resting on Gothic arcading. Its population size is well under half the size of Chatswood. All that is left of its Jewish community is a bank built from the bricks of the old Synagogue. It was in the pile of those old bricks, after the Synagogue had been destroyed, that the damaged corpse of the Torah was found.

The Torah, like most of those saved, had to undergo a surgery-type restoration process. Transported from the war-torn lands, the Torah scrolls found temporary safe-haven in Westminster, London. Each scroll needed significant attention before they could be made available for synagogue use. The repairs were undertaken by a Sofer, the same scribes that originally gave birth to them. Like many Jews in history, a Sofer's life is almost nomadic, travelling around to where their services are needed. The process is long; repair to the wooden rollers, stitching of parchment sheets, and even the scraping of the top layer of ink in order to rewrite the damaged areas. While some Torahs were able to return to a near-perfect state, others could not hide the scars of their pasts. Such is the burden that 556 must bear. Many pages are still stained and dirtied like a Rorschach test, holes and burn-type marks still litter the parchment, and stitch marks are noticeable from where each repair took place.

Through these injuries, 556 almost appears to be living. It was so lovingly created by humans; every inch is a type of perfect imperfection. Its rough, almost leathery pages tell stories millennia years old. With a study of each letter, they appear to be exact copies, as if the result of a typewriter, instead of the ink and quill that are the real reason for the marked pages. A damaged relic, perfectly imperfect.

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After its attempted repair project, it lay in wait for a community to adopt it and bring it to a new home. The Memorial Scroll Trust made it their responsibility to oversee the rehousing project, to send the scrolls across the world, in honour and memory of what happened. Torahs have found new life all over the world. From the Americas to Puerto Rico, Crete to Australia, and many places in-between.

It was the work of three men in the 1980's that managed to bring 556 to Chatswood. At this time Hans Jensen was the president and Gerald Lipman was a board member, as well as the now retired Rabbi Richard Lampert, and it was the work of these three men that found the Torah a home. Rabbi Lampert, having heard of the surviving Torahs, persuaded Hans Jensen to get in communication with Gerald Lipman to bring the Torah from Europe to eventually find a home in North Shore Temple Emanuel's ark.

There is a story that Rabbi Lampert tells, one that happened over 30 years ago, but he recited it with little hesitation. In the late 1980's he received a call from a Doctor David Pick, informing him that his

father was dying and was asked if he could go and visit him. Rabbi travelled to the man in Manly Vale near Sydney's Northern Beaches. Rabbi asked the man, "Mr Pick, where are you from?"

"I'm from Czechoslovakia." was the man's response.

"Where about."

"You wouldn't know."

"Tell me where."

"From a place called Domažlice."

The Rabbi said later that "I went cold because I'd been looking for remnants of Domažlice for years and there in Manly Vale, on my doorstep, was a man from Domažlice and I told him the story of the Torah and he began to cry....He [Mr Pick] said "my father used to be the Shamash [a liaison that helps run a Shabbat service] at that shul in Domažlice and I had my bar mitzvah in that shul and I probably read from that Torah scroll"".

Despite what this Torah has been through, and the stories it has to tell and that are told of it, there are still many more questions than answers. Where did it come from originally? How old is it? What happened to it during the war up until it was found amongst the rubble? How did it even survive the destruction of its synagogue?

"We don't know much about it. We only know that it came from Domažlice. It's got a plaque that it came from Domažlice which is known in German as Taus. It was repaired and sent out to us" mentioned Rabbi Lampert. And that appears to be the extent of the known knowledge.

Among North Shore Temple Emanuel's community, many had heard of one of the Torahs being a survivor, but no one seemed to be able to point to which one it was. It hid in plain sight, blending in like a Holocaust survivor in a crowd. Upon hearing about this revelation Rabbi replied: "It's a pity because I used to use that one specifically for the festivals: Pesach, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I know I used it to make a point to tell people about it and I'm disappointed that nobody knows where it is."

It should not be seen as just an obligation to learn about the horrors of the Holocaust, but to hear firsthand the stories, and to see what has survived. Everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike should see the Torah, see the burns and holes that weave in between its ancient words.

It should not be forgotten the 6 million Jews and 5 million other 'undesirables' that were lost. 11 million people. That's about the size of Australia's 3 largest cities disappearing. Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, all systematically destroyed.

The current political trend across Europe and other parts of the world is a rise in right-wing extremist views. According to many news outlets from the Telegraph, the Guardian, and to the New York Times, anti-Semitism is on the rise. In times like these, it important to learn history and learn the legacy it left. Soon the original witnesses won't be around to stop what could come, but rather it is left to the new generations to stand up, so that history doesn't repeat itself.

Next week there will be another service at North Shore Temple Emanuel, but this one will be different. It's run by the new generation: children and their parents. They will read the same words, sing the same songs, and perhaps even see the same Scrolls. For that is their obligation; to see these scrolls and see what stories they have to tell. Perhaps the stories not written are the most important. These are the children whom will be among the last few to hear firsthand the survivors' stories, to have the ability and honour to sit down and have the conversation. And they must listen. It's a legacy to remember, in respect for the victims and to learn from the mistakes. Soon only the relics will be left.