The Daily Progress/Bill Clark

The Lithuanian scroll is used in the small sanctuary at Temple Beth Israel in Charlottesville.

After Nazis destroyed the synagogue in 1939, the congregration was not revived. But with a scribe's learned touch, the sacred writings now have a new home.

Holocaust memorial scroll

By ADAM GOLDMAN
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Photo courtesy Robert Capon

Many of the 120 scrolls stored in Kent House are unsalvageable.

Ruth Shaffer remembers gazing with dismay and bewilderment when two large trucks containing hundreds of war-scarred Torahs arrived at London's Westminster Synagogue 35 years ago.

"They looked liked corpses," she said of the handwritten parchments, revered by Jewish people as a symbol of their pact with God. "Almost all bore some evidence of the tragedy of the Holocaust. Many were blood-stained, some charred by fire or damaged by water."

The 1,564 holy scrolls, each containing the five books of Moses known as the Pentateuch, were written in biblical Hebrew. Laid out for inspection on the marble floor, the scrolls were in striking contrast to the temple's ornate interior, Shaffer said.

They were the eerie detritus of the Jewish communities in former Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia that had been annihilated by the Nazis during World War II.

"They were in every perceivable condition; it was quite an awesome sight," said Shaffer, who is the joint chairman of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Committee, founded shortly after the Torahs were shipped to England.

Before the Torahs were transported to the temple's Kent House in 1964, they had reposed in dank and fusty conditions since 1945 in the basement of Michele Synagogue outside Prague.

The Czechoslovakian government dumped the scrolls there after they were removed from the Jewish Museum in Prague, where the Nazis had collected them for a future exhibition.

"The scrolls ... together with gold and silver appurtenances, vestments, books, manuscripts and other treasures, were meticulously labeled and cataloged under German direction — in preparation, it is believed, for permanent exhibition as relics of a defunct culture," Shaffer wrote in a 1988 historical account of the Czech Torahs.

Today, however, only about 120 of the Torahs remain at Kent House, said Shaffer, adding that most are beyond repair. The others have been sent around the world to synagogues, the majority of which are in the United States.

More than half a century after the war ended, one of those sacred writings was given a new home in the winter of 1998 at Charlottesville's Temple Beth Israel on East Market Street.

On Friday at 8 p.m., almost two weeks after Holocaust Day or Yom Hashoah, the temple will officially dedicate the memorial scroll.

Search for a scroll

In the autumn of 1997, Robert Capon, a local high-tech entrepreneur and current treasurer of Temple Beth Israel, had a discussion with Rabbi Daniel Alexander, the 300-member congregation's spiritual leader.

The two agreed that Beth Israel was in need of a Torah for the small sanctuary that was part of an addition built on the temple three years ago.

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Scroll

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"We were at a meeting that had nothing to do with the synagogue and [Capon] followed me out and said, 'Rabbi, do you have a wish list?' " said Alexander, who responded, "No I don't, but it would be really desirable to have a Torah that would live there."

The temple has two other Torahs that are used for services in the larger prayer hall.

Alexander said he hadn't realized at the time how resourceful Capon was. "I didn't know Rob well enough then," he said.

But the acquisition of a Torah would not be easy, Capon said, and it would not be cheap, either. "It was expensive; financing was arranged in both cases — I'll leave it at that," he said.

A brand new Torah written today costs about $45,000; a reconditioned one sells for about $8,000 to $12,000, according to an executive with a New York firm that obtains Torahs for resale and commissions the writing of Torahs, too.

Not only are Torahs rare, but the process of writing one can take up to three years depending on whether the scribe is of Eastern European descent, Ashkenazi, or a Sephardic Jew, who would hail from the Middle East or North Africa.

A Torah written by an Ashkenazic scribe typically takes up to three years to complete; Sephardic scribes can complete the task in about one year.

Even though the effort in making a Torah is prodigious, the symbolism for the Jewish people is even more portentous.

"We look at the Torah as the embodiment of where the Jewish faith began," Alexander said. "It's not simply the revelation of the Ten Commandments or the culmination of the birth of our people — it's the beginning of our written and oral story."

In order to purchase a Torah, Capon retained a consultant. Seventy-two-year-old Rabbi Eric Ray, a Sofer, is one of the world's leading scribes.

"It's like buying a diamond," Capon said. "You need expertise to buy a Torah."

Art of writing

A Sofer is a person not only versed in the art of writing a Torah, he is first trained in the Jewish ritual slaughtering of the bull from which the parchment is made. A Sofer will spend an average of 10 years perfecting his skills before he puts his quill to leather.

Ray, who has written Torahs since he was in his 30s, is a scribe of renown who had a hand in restoring the Dead Sea Scrolls, he said during a Passover visit to his home in Great Neck, N.Y.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by a Bedouin in 1947 in Israel and are the oldest surviving Biblical texts, dating back to at least the first century B.C., Ray said. He also repaired the world's oldest surviving Torah, written in Spain in the 1300s.

Asked how many Torahs he has written or repaired, Ray declined to answer, deferring to the Talmud — the collection of writings that constitute Jewish civil and religious law.

"Impossible to say; not only that, the Talmud says I may not answer that because it would be considered boasting. ... I must answer that I have not written enough because you cannot write enough," he said, jocularly. "But you can imagine since I have been doing it for most of my life, I've done quite a few."

Through the Jay Levine Co. in New York, a well-known supplier of Jewish books, and with Ray's advice, Capon and Alexander located a Lithuanian scroll — a masterwork done by a particularly accomplished scribe. It had taken about seven years to complete and was in excellent condition, Ray said.

Some of the finest Torahs ever written were done in Vilnius, Ray said. These scribes traditionally worked longer on the Torahs and hence the quality of the work was more time consuming.

"It was a beautiful Torah," said Daniel Levine, an executive with family-owned Jay Levine Co. whose relatives hail originally from Lithuania.

Levine, a scribe himself, said the Torah was written at the turn of the 20th century in Vilnius — once the epicenter of the Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah in the 19th century and a hotbed of Jewish activity before the Nazis captured the country in three days during Operation Barbarossa in June 1941.

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Nazis left behind their mark.

According to Levine, the Torah was taken out of Vilnius in the 1930s when members of the Jewish community saw that their lives were in danger after a series of devastating pogroms, where Jews were terrorized by the local gentile population.

A synagogue in Pennsylvania eventually acquired the Torah and it was sold to the Jay Levine Co.

after the temple merged with another one in the area.

"The nature of the community was changing," and they had more Torahs than they knew what to do with, Daniel Levine said. "There was no room in the ark."

In January 1998, the scroll was bought and shipped to Charlottesville. Ray had recommended reducing its weight by trimming the margins, so it would be easier for the congregation to handle during services.

The Lithuanian Torah was dedicated during Rosh Hashanah last September and is now used during services.

A "tattooed" Torah

While Capon was searching for a scroll for Temple Beth Israel, he culled information from the Internet about possible Torahs for sale.

While online he happened upon a random temple Web page and discovered Shaffer's name and the Holocaust Memorial Scrolls.

Soon Capon was in contact with Shaffer.

The petite, gray-haired Shaffer wanted assurances that any Holocaust scroll given to the Charlottesville congregation would end up in the appropriate hands, she told Capon.

The Westminster Synagogue itself had been subject to the same type of scrutiny by the Czech agency responsible for moving the scrolls decades ago, Shaffer said.

With the agency's permission, a well-known British art dealer was able to arrange for the scrolls' acquisition by a London businessman and philanthropist. They arrived in England on Feb. 7, 1964.

Shaffer wanted to adhere to the same stringent guidelines so that any Torah on permanent loan to a Jewish community would have "staying power."

She asked for an application with Beth Israel's history, which stated, among other items, that it was founded in 1881 and has been a member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations since 1927.

Not long afterward, Shaffer gave her consent, and Capon journeyed to London in December 1997 with his family to look over the Torahs at Kent House.

"When I saw the scroll room for the first time it was like walking into a morgue. It was a very intense experience," he said.

By the time Capon and the others were finished handling the Torahs, he said his hands were "covered with the soot and dust of the Holocaust."

Many of the remaining 120 scrolls were unsalvageable and in bits and pieces — broken bones of the Jews, Shaffer said.

According to Jewish law, these Torahs should have been buried in a Jewish cemetery, if possible next to an important rabbi, but Shaffer and her group decided not to cast them into darkness again.

"We reckoned they had been buried once already," she said.

Capon's son, Howard, who was 11 years old at the time, scoured the room and found a marked — or "tattooed" — scroll tucked away at the bottom of one of the many racks. Sections of the scroll had been gnawed on by rodents and damaged by water, Capon said, and the text in many places had been obviously repaired.

But each Torah, no matter its condition, could be identified.

The Germans had placed numbers in white ink on the bottom off the wooden rollers that the parchments are wrapped around. But, unlike the Jews sent to their deaths at concentration camps, the Torahs were numbered for preservation, not slaughter.

Because the Nazis were methodical about listing where the Torahs were from and how old they were, Shaffer could provide a short history of the vanished congregation to which it once belonged.

The memorial Torah came from the town of Frydek-Mistek, roughly 178 miles southeast of Prague. The synagogue in which this particular scroll had been housed was built in 1865 and demolished by the Nazis in 1939 — about a year after Adolph Hitler's henchmen wreaked havoc on Germany during Kristallnacht or the "night of broken glass." It was a precursor to the tenebrous times to come.

After World War II, the congregation was not revived and its former home is now a prayer hall for the Seventh-day Adventists.

In remembrance

The need for the Vilnius scroll was clear, Capon said, "but what would we want with a tattooed Torah?" he asked. The Baltic Torah was kasher, or fit for use in Jewish services, but the Czech scroll could most likely never be used again.

Only a perfect Torah may be used — one with no blemishes.

"Maybe most importantly, I thought that this lost community of Frydek-Mistek deserved to be remembered because it no longer exists," Capon said.

The notion of preserving the Torah and exhibiting it, however, rankled Alexander's conscience. It would in fact, he thought, be carrying out the Nazis' warped plans to display the Torahs at a museum commemorating the destruction of the Jewish people.

"I had misgivings about getting a Holocaust Memorial Scroll. One is an issue regarding the display of a sacred object. In a certain way there is a danger of us doing what the Nazis did; I certainly don't want to carry out their task," Alexander said.

It eventually took the trenchant arguments of Capon, Ray and a few other authorities on Jewish morality and ethics to convince Alexander he was making the right decision.

"They all persuaded me that to display such a scroll in a place of honor is to honor the victims of those communities and keep alive those communities. It gives a challenging opportunity to remember the Holocaust without being overwhelmed by it," he said.

"When we get close to the event, we identify with the victims and that is a terrible problem we need to overcome — Jews should not see themselves primarily or essentially as victims," he said.

Today, the Torah rests in an austere case with a swinging glass door surrounded by the equally simplistic decor of the small sanctuary.

With its tattoo clearly visible, it stands as evidence of unprecedented brutality and as a reminder of how resilient the Jewish people have been through the ages, even in the face of extinction.