

How the Scrolls were saved

When the Munich Agreement was signed on 29 September 1938, Britain and France agreed to Hitler's demand to be given the German speaking border regions of Czechoslovakia, and the Germans marched in. The Jews from about sixty congregations in the prosperous industrial and commercial towns in the Sudetenland had 2 or 3 days to flee to the interior, which was still a free and sovereign country. They left behind their synagogues, which were in German hands in time for the destruction of the Pogrom of November 1938, when synagogues across the expanded Germany, which now included the Sudetenland, were burned or vandalised and looted. In almost every case the ritual treasures of these Sudetenland synagogues were destroyed or lost.

In the remainder of Czechoslovakia, which included Prague, the synagogues and their swollen congregations were safe for the time being, and there was no programme of destruction, even when the Germans invaded the rest of the country in March 1939. In 1940, the congregations were closed down, but the Jewish community administration was used by the Germans to execute their stream of decrees and instructions. In 1941 the first deportations started and the mass deportations of the Jews took place throughout 1942 and into January 1943.

The Nazis decided to liquidate the communal and private Jewish property in the towns, including the contents of the synagogues. In 1942 Dr Stein of the Juedische Kultusgemeinde in Prague wrote to all Jewish communities, instructing them to send the contents of their synagogues to the Jewish Museum in Prague. Thus the Torah Scrolls, gold and silver and ritual textiles were sent, along with thousands of books. The remaining Jews were deported in 1943 and 1944, but quite a number survived.

The inventory of the Prague Jewish Museum expanded by fourteen times as a result, and a large number of Jews were put to work by the Germans to sort, catalogue and put into storage all the items that had come from over one hundred congregations in Bohemia and Moravia. It needed over forty warehouses, many of them deserted Prague synagogues, to store all these treasures. When the task was eventually completed, the Jews who had been put to this work were themselves deported to the Terezin concentration camp and death. There were few survivors.

It was once accepted that the accumulation of this vast hoard of Judaica was intended by the Nazis to become their museum to the extinct Jewish race. There is, however, no evidence that any such museum was ever planned. The Prague Jewish Museum had been in existence since 1906, and was not created in order to house the Judaica collected in 1942. In 2012, the Prague Jewish Museum published "Ark of Memory" by Magda Veselska, a history of the museum that includes a clear explanation of how it was the Jews of Prague that worked before, during and after the war to protect a legacy that was threatened with destruction.

After the defeat of Germany, a free and independent Czechoslovakia emerged, but it was a country largely without Jews. Most of the surviving Jews in Prague and the rest of Bohemia and Moravia were from Slovakia and further east from Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Prague, which had had a Jewish population of 54,000 in 1940, was reduced to under 8,000 by 1947, and many of these were to leave.

On 27 February 1948, after less than 3 years of post war freedom, the Communists staged a coup and took over the government of Czechoslovakia. The Prague Jewish Museum came under government control, and was staffed mainly by non-Jewish curators.

In 1958 the 18th century Michle Synagogue became the warehouse which housed hundreds of Torah Scrolls from the large Prague Jewish community and what was left from the smaller communities of Bohemia and Moravia. The collection did not include scrolls from Slovakia, which the Germans had put under a separate administration.

Eric Estorick, an American living in London, was an art dealer who paid many visits to Prague in the early 1960's. He got to know many Prague artists, whose work he exhibited at his Grosvenor Gallery. Being a frequent visitor to Prague, he came to the attention of the authorities. He was approached by officials from Artia, the state corporation that had responsibility for trade in works of art, and was asked if he would be interested in buying some Torah Scrolls.

Unknown to him, the Israelis had been approached previously with a similar offer, but the negotiations had come to nothing. Estorick was taken to the Michle Synagogue where he was faced with wooden racks holding anything up to 2000 Scrolls. He was asked if he wanted to make an offer, and replied that he knew certain parties in London who might be interested.

On his return to London, he contacted Ralph Yablon, a well-known philanthropist with a great interest in Jewish art, history and culture. Yablon became the benefactor who put up the money to buy the Scrolls.

First, Chimen Abramsky, who was to become Professor of Hebrew Studies at the University of London, was asked to go to Prague for twelve days in November 1963 to examine the Scrolls and to report on their authenticity and condition. On his return to London, it was decided that Estorick should go to Prague and negotiate a deal, which he did. Two lorries laden with 1564 Scrolls arrived at the Westminster Synagogue on 7 February 1964.

After months of sorting, examining and cataloguing each Scroll, the task of distributing them began, with the aim of getting the Scrolls back into the life of Jewish congregations across the world. The Memorial Scrolls Trust was established to carry out this task.

Each Memorial Scroll is a messenger from a community that was lost, but does not deserve to be forgotten.

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The Legacy of the Czech Memorial Scrolls

People are fascinated by the story of the Czech Scrolls. How they were not destroyed. How they were not plundered or traded. How they remained together and forgotten as a collection in a deserted Prague synagogue for years. How they were rescued by the Westminster Synagogue in 1964 and put back into Jewish religious life.

It is a great story, and the success of the Memorial Scrolls Trust under Ruth Shaffer is a great achievement across 40 years. But it is much more than a story, and it is much more than any achievement. It is a key to opening a door to a whole aspect of Jewish life.

For most congregations who received a Scroll, it was the most powerful symbol of the Holocaust that was in their midst. Its presence in their congregation acknowledged that they associated themselves with the Holocaust, while having been spared being touched by the life long trauma of those who endured and of those who somehow survived.

The Czech Memorial Scrolls were celebrated on their arrival, and after the euphoria of the ceremonies that welcomed them into their new congregation, they then became part of the everyday life of the congregation. Synagogue life got back to normal, and the congregation got on with the things that congregations get on with.

They missed out on the benefit of having been joined to the legacy that came with their Scroll, and all it could tell them about the sort of Europe from which most of them had come; a version of their own personal history that had been confused and often lost in the turmoil of emigrating from an oppressed life in Old Europe to a life with more opportunity in Britain or the Americas, Australia, South Africa, and, of course, Israel. They missed out on the benefit of being able to involve the children in their religion schools in an approach to the Holocaust that would interest them because they could identify with some of the children who had to face the Holocaust, and they could picture a place somewhere in Europe that was special to them.

What is this legacy ?

It is a legacy that belongs to all of us, but many of us are scarcely aware of it, because we have very little connection with it.

We all know that we are, in most cases, the descendants of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, but many of us don't have the picture of a particular place in our mind that exemplifies where we came from. After all, our grand parents' roots come from all over the place, and few of us have been there. For some of us, the nearest that we come to it are the cinema images like Anatevka in "Fiddler on the Roof" or "Yentl". But we cannot depend on Hollywood for reliable images or objective information. So how would we feel if there were a place in the heartland of Jewish Europe with which we could feel a real connection ? A place that we knew and recognised, and could even visit.

We know what happened to Europe's Jews under Hitler, and, for the most part we can't bear to think about it. And if we do, and if we go to a holocaust museum like the one at the Imperial War Museum in London, the impact and the realism and the horror activate our subconscious defences against such an assault on our emotions. We protect ourselves from identifying too closely with what it was like for those Jews just like us who didn't have our good fortune to be in the right place at the right time. And anyway we could never feel a millionth part of what those people felt as they came face to face with the unimaginable.

And then there are our children or grandchildren.

The problem of getting children in the family or in the religion school to be interested in the Holocaust is a real one. Adults know that it is important, and that it is important that the children should know that it happened and what it was about. The trouble is that most children seem not to want to deal with a subject which is interesting to their parents but is boring to them. It is worse than boring. They recoil from engaging a subject which is unremitting bad news with no happy ending.

Brutal realism may be honest and truthful, but it is ineffective if it fails to engage the interest of those whom it seeks to engage. But is there a way to gain children's interest and to enable them to identify with aspects of the Holocaust and to relate to it ?

Each Czech Scroll came from a congregation, and there were dozens of small Czech congregations apart from the few large and famous congregations in Prague and Brno and Plzen. Small congregations that were important only to those who knew them. Each had its own story, often going back over centuries. Sometimes

trivial and seemingly unimportant, and yet often full of insights into the Jewish life of people who were probably more like our ancestors than we might imagine, for we know so little about the lives of our ancestors, and the history of our own congregation usually goes back for less than a hundred years. With the Scroll came an acquired history.

This is the Legacy of Roots.

1848 marked the beginning of an era of escalating change for the Jews, as they emerged from the ghetto and became involved in aspects of community life from which they had been excluded. No longer restricted as to where they lived, freed from secular restrictions on marriage and able to enter the professions, politics and the army, the community of pedlars increasingly became a driving force in the economic life of the whole community.

In the case of the Czech Jews, 15 October 1918 marked the foundation of their own state and the beginning of what was later looked back on as the "golden age". But for the Jews it was also a period of deepening secularism, and a time which saw the closing of many Jewish schools, the decline in local congregation numbers and the closing of many small local congregations.

This was the Legacy of Emancipation.

The shame of the Munich Agreement in September 1938, and the betrayal of Czechoslovakia to the Germans brought everything to a sudden halt, particularly for the Jews. The image of Neville Chamberlain flying back to Heston aerodrome on 30 September, waving his piece of paper and declaring "I believe it is peace in our time", coincided with a largely unknown catastrophe for the Jews in the congregations that lived in the area of the Sudetenland that had been handed to the Germans. Most Jews fled within 48 hours, never to return. Every Jewish community in Czechoslovakia was directly affected, either as refugees or as those who took in those that lost everything. That is part of the story of each Scroll, and it is a story that most Jews have never heard. Less than six months later, on 15 March 1939 Hitler entered Prague.

With war declared in September 1939, the Jews in all their towns faced a stream of unbearable restrictions and deprivations, and the children did not escape, and throughout 1942, the deportations to Terezin took place from the various deportation centres across the country.

Graphic descriptions of the suffering in the camps and the horrors of onward transportation are attempts to bring home to us, who can have no conception of what it must have been like, the horror of what it was like. Whether they help in enabling us to identify with the victims is a matter of opinion. What is important is that succeeding generations of Jews should be aware that the deportation of the Jews did happen, when it happened, where it happened, and who were the victims. If we can get our children and our children's children to understand and appreciate that it happened sufficiently personally that it becomes part of their overall memory, then we shall have made important progress.

This is the Legacy of Destruction

And then, there is the Legacy of Remembrance.

Each of the rescued Czech Scrolls is a messenger from a destroyed congregation, where there is no new generation to honour and remember those who went before.

When they were sent across the world to resume their role in living congregations the Scrolls took with them a message.

The message was to save the Jews from that congregation from the anonymity of being lost among the Six Million. For each lost congregation, there is a list of every Jewish man woman and child who died at the hands of the Germans. With each Scroll came the obligation to dedicate some part of the life of the new congregation and particularly the children in its religion school, to honour and remember its lost Jews as individuals, just as they would remember their own family, and just as they would themselves wish to be remembered. No one wants to be forgotten, and we must not let our little group of Jews be forgotten.

A congregation that has been entrusted with a Memorial Scroll has an obligation to dedicate one Shabbat a year to their Memorial Congregation and to include the Jews of their Scroll in their thoughts and prayers on Yom Hashoah and on Yom Kippur.

So why all this concentration on the Czech Jews ? In numbers they account for only 77,297 Jews out of Six Million. No reason, except that with each Czech Scroll the connection with a lost congregation is easy and straightforward. But most living congregations do not have a Czech Scroll, and they can decide to choose to dedicate one of their Scrolls to a lost congregation somewhere across the heartland of what was Jewish Europe - Poland, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Hungary, Norway. These Jews are just as important as any Czech Jews. The Czech Scrolls have set an example. They have shown the way. They have put out the idea

that focussing attention on one community that was lost in the Holocaust can help us to understand and to teach about what happened to the Jews more effectively than trying to take in the full scale and reality of the enormous panorama of the Holocaust.

The Legacy of the Scrolls is that they show us how the little picture can help us better to relate to what happened and to identify and to feel involved, to understand. Remembering is a very personal affair.