

CZECH HOLOCAUST TORAH SCROLL MST860



MST860 turned to 10 Commandments

The Torah scroll is the most important document in Judaism and has been the “spiritual glue” that has held the Jewish people together through the centuries. MST860 is on loan from the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London. They have 1,564 scrolls in their collection and have cared for them since 1964. Scrolls are on loan throughout the world.

We know that the scrolls are rare not just because many in the collection are hundreds of years old, but because they were rescued from the terror and destruction of the Holocaust. Temple Beth El Israel (TBEI) will house scroll MST860. While many of the scrolls have a known provenance, no such data exist for MST860. Truly, MST860 is an “orphan.”

In late 2022 Rabbi Benson became aware of several Czech Holocaust Torahs available for adoption. At a Friday night service he told the Congregation about the Torahs and suggested that adopting one could be both an educational and inspirational experience for the Congregation and the community. Within 48 hours the project was launched by member pledges of the \$5000 needed to cover acquisition costs.

Over several months the history of the Czech Holocaust Torahs was discussed in the context of increased acts of antisemitism at home and worldwide. It was decided that the project would not be limited to adding another Torah to the Temple, but to use its presence as a means of making the community aware of the actions, and inaction, that enabled the Holocaust and the destruction of Jewish communities.

HISTORY OF THE CZECH HOLOCAUST TORAHS

Jews have lived in Bohemia and Moravia for more than a thousand years, and over that time a rich Jewish culture developed. As in most European countries, those Jewish communities were alternatively welcomed and expelled over the centuries and life was precarious. By the middle of the 19th Century they no longer suffered from residential, demographic or occupational restrictions.

Following the Munich Agreement of 29 September 1938, the Sudetenland was absorbed into Germany and their Jews expelled. Virtually all the synagogues and ritual artifacts in the Sudetenland, as in Germany, were totally destroyed in the November 1938 Pogrom.

The Nazis invaded Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939, causing little destruction, possibly as they wished to benefit from the Czech armaments industry. However, the Nazis immediately took over Jewish businesses and property, forcing the congregations to close, and, as elsewhere, using the Jewish community administration to enforce their demands and decrees.

In 1942, as a result of instructions sent by Dr. Stein of the *Jüdische Kultusgemeinde* in Prague, the communities of Bohemia and Moravia packed their Sifrei Torah, gold and silver filials, books and textiles and sent them to the Jewish Museum in Prague. The volume was so great that no less than forty warehouses were required to house these treasures. As a result the inventory of the museum, which had been in existence since 1906, increased fourteen-fold. The Germans had this vast hoard cataloged by Jews, who were deported to Concentration Camps once the work was finished. Unfortunately very few of them survived.

There had been at least 350 synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia, but by the end of the war more than sixty had been destroyed. After only three years of freedom there was a Communist coup on 27th February 1948 which, among other things, took over the Jewish Museum and warehouses, subsequently transferring some 1800 Torah Scrolls to a damp warehouse that had once been the sixteenth century Michle synagogue. Following instructions from the *Nazi Zentralstelle* in 1942 for all communities in Bohemia and Moravia to send their "historically valuable" items to the Jewish Museum in Prague, some members of Prague's Jewish community persuaded the Nazis to allow them bring other religious treasures from the deserted communities and destroyed synagogues to the comparative safety of Prague. More than 212,000 artifacts were brought to the Museum. Among them were about 1,800 Torah scrolls. Each item was meticulously recorded, labeled and entered on a card index by the Museum's staff with a description and the place it had come from. The Nazis' interest in the museum most probably developed from a number of practical problems that had to be resolved. The main reason is clear - the museum enabled the Nazis to gain in a short period of time in-depth knowledge about confiscated Jewish objects that were of particular value. It is clear

that the Nazis had no experts for such specialist work as the registration and evaluation of confiscated Jewish artifacts that were of artistic or historical value. It is possible that the Nazis saw the museum as a special department for the collection, documentation, storage and evaluation of confiscated Jewish property.

After the war some fifty Jewish congregations re-established themselves in the Czech Republic and were provided with religious artifacts, not necessarily from their own communities. When the Communists took over the government of the country in 1948, Jewish communal life was again stifled, and most synagogues were closed. Their possessions went to the newly re founded Jewish Museum of Prague. The scrolls were transferred and warehoused in the ruined synagogue at Michle outside Prague where they remained until they came to London in 1964.

In 1963, the Artia, a company run by the Czech Communist government approached Eric Estorick an art dealer who frequently visited Prague to buy paintings for his Grosvenor Gallery in London, to ask if he was interested in buying some Torah and other scrolls. He approached a client, Ralph Yablon who discussed the situation with Harold Reinhart, Rabbi of the Westminster Synagogue.

It was decided to instruct Chimen Abramsky, Professor of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College, London to examine the scrolls in Prague and report on their authenticity and condition, on receipt of which Ralph Yablon generously agreed to fund the purchase of 1564 scrolls that arrived in London in February 1964.

Subsequently the Memorial Scrolls Trust a charity, was set up and the scrolls have subsequently been allocated on to communities and organizations around the world. The scrolls are never sold or donated, but allocated on loan. Communities that close or merge with other Czech scroll-holders are obliged to return their scroll to the Trust.

The Czech scrolls are survivors and silent witnesses. They represent not only the lost communities of Bohemia and Moravia, but all those who perished in the Shoah. The MST encourages all their scroll-holders to use their scrolls for inter and intra-faith work, as well as for ritual and education.

Source:

<https://www.memorialscrollstrust.org/index.php>