

## Temple in Sharon celebrates restoration of Torah saved from Nazis



THE BOSTON GLOBE

At Temple Sinai in Sharon, a completion ceremony was held recently to mark the end of an 18-month project to restore a beloved Torah scroll that survived the Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia. Torah scribe Rabbi Kevin Hale prepares to enter the second of three final letters to the scroll. Behind him are representatives of other area congregations in possession of Czech Torah scrolls. (George Rizer for the Globe)

**By Jennette Barnes** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 23, 2015

Word went out to synagogues in the Czech countryside in 1942: Bring your Torah scrolls and other religious objects to Prague, where they will be safer at the Central Jewish Museum.

Bohemia and Moravia, regions that today make up most of the Czech Republic, had been under brutal Nazi control for three years. Three more murderous years lay ahead. The vast majority of Czech Jews would perish in the Holocaust, but 1,564 Torahs would endure.

Temple Sinai in Sharon recently celebrated the conclusion of an 18-month project to restore one of the scrolls, so the Torah can be used as it was intended, not kept silent in a display case.

How the Czech scrolls were saved, and returned to active Jewish life in Massachusetts and around the world, is a story of survival, and of the connection of modern-day Jews with thousands of years of Jewish history.

The scroll also gives Temple Sinai a reason to extend the hand of friendship to other synagogues that hold scrolls from Bohemia and Moravia. Some 18 such scrolls were on hand for the Oct. 4 ceremony, carried in a procession by representatives of their congregations in Brockton, Needham, Newton, Norwood, Randolph, and Sharon, among others from Massachusetts and around New England.



Photos: A celebration of survival

All are on permanent loan from the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London.

Jeffrey Ohrenstein, chairman of the trust, spoke at the ceremony. He said a Torah scroll binds all Jews together, regardless of their denomination.

Temple Sinai has held its scroll since 1990. The scroll originates from the area of Přeštice, a small town about 60 miles from Prague where items from surrounding villages were collected before being transferred to the city.

Congregations faithfully moved their Torahs and other ritual items, including gold, silver, and textiles. They swelled the museum's collection fourteen-fold, requiring 40 storage buildings, many of which were deserted Prague synagogues, according to a historical account compiled by the trust.

The Nazis sent the people who meticulously catalogued those treasures to the death camps. They deported about 82,000 Jews from Bohemia and Moravia in all, and murdered about 71,000 in the camps, Ohrenstein said. Thousands of others were killed in the Czech lands.

As the war ended, the scrolls were still far from safe.

Fast-forward to the early 1960s. Communist authorities who had taken over the museum after the coup of 1948 asked American art dealer Eric Estorick, who lived in London and visited Prague regularly, if he would like to buy some scrolls.

The Communists had dumped many of them in an old synagogue where conditions were poor – no better than a damp warehouse, Ohrenstein said.

That didn't bode well for their survival. But the scrolls were durable, written on animal-skin parchment, some already more than 200 years old.

The art dealer worked with benefactor Ralph Yablon, who was a member of Westminster Synagogue in London, to acquire the scrolls. On Feb. 7, 1964, the 1,564 Torahs rolled into London on two open-sided trucks.

Members of Westminster Synagogue later established the Memorial Scrolls Trust to care for them and give them new life. The trust has distributed more than 1,200 scrolls to communities and organizations around the world, and it opened a museum in 2008.

In addition to using the scrolls for education and religious services, the trust hopes to develop interfaith work around the link between the Torah, Christianity, and Islam, Ohrenstein said.

“I’m interested in the more global picture,” he said in a later interview.

With even small damage, a scroll is not kosher and cannot be used in religious services. Temple Sinai’s scroll sat in a wooden cabinet in the lobby until 2013.

Bob Soffer, co-chairman of the restoration committee, said in an interview that the scroll’s place in the lobby served as a reminder of the Holocaust, but also of the scroll’s disuse. He said Rabbi Joseph Meszler and Steve Gilman, then president of the congregation, determined to see it restored.

Rabbi Kevin Hale, a professional scribe who lives in Northampton, did the work. He had both the technical capability and the necessary approval from the Memorial Scrolls Trust.

During the restoration process, the congregation held three scribing sessions in which families would place their hands on Hale’s shoulders as he wrote a letter – symbolically fulfilling a Torah commandment to write a Torah.

“That served a very important religious objective,” Soffer said, and it helped raise money. Hundreds of people participated in those sessions, he said.

Hale also visited the temple’s Hebrew school to teach the children about the calligraphy.

He painstakingly cleaned and repaired the scroll and re-wrote letters. At about 250 years old, the parchment showed evidence of severe water damage. It had holes in it and ink flaking off.

The ink is made from oak gall and a catalyst of copper sulfate, Hale said during the ceremony. A faster-acting catalyst can cause the letters to burn right through the parchment over time.

“It’s all a labor of love,” he said.

He inscribed the last few letters as part of the celebration. For the final letter, children from the congregation placed their hands on his shoulders.

Now complete, it will be used for readings on special occasions.

“I think this was an emotionally very powerful thing for people to do,” Meszler said in an interview after the ceremony. He said the congregation spent time remembering the Holocaust -- and for some, family members lost -- and looking ahead to a world without prejudice.

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Photo gallery:



**Some of the more than 1,500 Torah scrolls that survived the Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia, now in the care of the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London. (Memorial Scrolls Trust photo)**



**The Memorial Scrolls Trust in London has loaned some of its scrolls to synagogues in Massachusetts, including those in Norwood, Randolph, and Sharon, and around New England. (Memorial Scrolls Trust photo)**



GEORGE RIZER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Temple Sinai in Sharon recently celebrated the end of an 18-month project to restore one of the Torah scrolls from Prague that survived the Holocaust.**



GEORGE RIZER FOR THE GLOBE

**At Temple Sinai in Sharon, representatives of various Jewish congregations carried Torah scrolls from the Czech lands during a ceremony celebrating the restoration of one of the scrolls. Here, Ed Baron from Temple Beth Emunah in Brockton leads the way.**



GEORGE RIZER FOR THE GLOBE

**Congregants singing during the ceremony in Sharon's Temple Sinai celebrating the restoration of one of the Torah scrolls that survived the Holocaust.**



GEORGE RIZER FOR THE GLOBE

**Torah scribe Rabbi Kevin Hale prepares to enter the first of three final letters to the restored Torah scroll at Temple Sinai in Sharon.**



GEORGE RIZER FOR THE GLOBE

**Torah scribe Rabbi Kevin Hale enters the second of three final letters to the restored Torah scroll at Temple Sinai in Sharon.**

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[http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/south/2015/10/22/temple-sharon-celebrates-restoration-torah-saved-from-nazis-bohemia/pvIteaBhEAR7RG8bDN4vRM/picture.html?p1=Article\\_Gallery](http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/south/2015/10/22/temple-sharon-celebrates-restoration-torah-saved-from-nazis-bohemia/pvIteaBhEAR7RG8bDN4vRM/picture.html?p1=Article_Gallery)