

*Westminster Synagogue
Kent House
Rutland Court
Rutland Gardens
London
S.W.7*

June 15th 1966

Dear Flora and Harold ;

Babette and Abe returned last night . They had glowing accounts to give of their visit with you . I am delighted that they had an opportunity to be with you and to freshen the families .

I appreciate the reprint about the collection of Sifre Torah .

This is a remarkable collection . You are fortunate to be the custodians of this great collection . I understand from Abe

that one purpose will be to distribute these gems to various Synagogues . Can you give me some idea of the price of a single Torah

If the cost would not be prohibitive I might be interested in obtaining one for the Temple in Baton Rouge as a token of the association of my father with you and Mr Whaley's father . I will await your advice .

I was glad to hear that both you and Flora are in such excellent health .

My best wishes ,

Sincerely yours

Isidore L. Lurie

WESTMINSTER SYNAGOGUE

RUTLAND GARDENS. LONDON. S.W.7

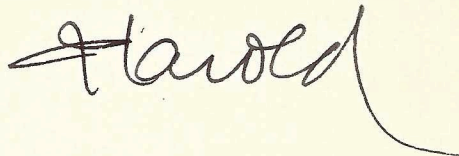
24th June, 1966

Dear Isidore,

Many thanks for your letter. I already told Babette that, in spite of my bad record, I would write to you now. I do so with much pleasure to say how glad we were to see her and Abe, for many reasons, not least because they brought us first hand and good news of you.

It is not a surprise that you should be so deeply moved by the thought of the vast collection of rescued Scrolls. Our task of distributing them round the world is not light but is a unique privilege. As you can imagine, it will have a very special meaning for me if one of these Scrolls comes to my beloved Temple in Baton Rouge. I know that Frank Waley will also be specially interested in this enquiry. In view of the heavy financial obligations in connection with the enterprise, our Committee asks each recipient of a scroll who is able to do so, to contribute a sum of £100 toward the expenses. Do please let me know how you feel about this.

With affectionate regards to you and your dear ones, in which Flora joins me, I am as ever yours,



Dr. Isidore Cohn,
1522 Aline Street,
New Orleans, 70115,
La, U. S. A.

MEMORIAL SCROLLS TRUST

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How was it that the Czech Scrolls were saved.

Michael Heppner

When the Munich Agreement was signed on 29 September 1938, Britain and France agreed to Hitler's demand to annex the German speaking border regions of Czechoslovakia, and the Germans marched in. The Jews from dozens of congregations in the prosperous industrial and commercial towns in the Sudetenland had between 3 and 10 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 general programme of destruction, though a few synagogues were destroyed 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 locally by the Germans to execute their stream of decrees and instructions. Deportation started in 1941 and the mass deportations of the Jews took place throughout 1942 and into January 1943. Then, all that was left in these Czech towns were the half-Jews, Jewish partners from mixed marriages, the empty synagogue buildings and the homes of the Jews.

Fearful that the deserted synagogues and community buildings would be at the mercy of looters and plunderers, a group of Jews at the Jewish Museum in occupied Prague submitted a plan to the Nazis to save the Jewish ritual and cultural treasures in the vulnerable buildings by bringing them to the museum in Prague so that they could be catalogued and preserved. Why their Nazi overseers accepted the plan is not known. The result was that the Nazi controlled Prague Jewish Community sent out the orders that implemented the plan and permitted the transport companies to carry Jewish goods. With a few exceptions, the Torah Scrolls, other liturgical treasures in gold and silver and ritual textiles were sent to Prague, along with historic archives and thousands of books. The remaining Jews were deported in 1943, 1944 and 1945, and quite a number of these late deportees survived.

The inventory of what had become the Central Jewish Museum expanded from under 800 to over 100,000 items as a result. A task force of Jewish curators, art collectors, librarians, and other experts, effectively prisoners of the Nazis, set to work under Dr Josef Polak, the former director of the museum in Kosice meticulously to sort, catalogue and identify the items that had come from over one hundred congregations in Bohemia and Moravia. It needed over forty warehouses, including deserted synagogues in Prague and elsewhere, to store all the Jewish items. As the task progressed under oppressive and intimidating conditions of fear and uncertainty, some of the Jews who were undertaking this work would suddenly be deported to the Terezin concentration camp and death. Eventually there were very few survivors. Polak did survive until 1945, to disappear in sinister circumstances.

A legend has grown that the accumulation of this vast hoard of Judaica was planned by the Nazis to become their museum to the extinct Jewish race. However, it has become clear that the idea to gather together of this collection was conceived by these Czech Jews to save their heritage and to make possible the retrieval of their treasures by those survivors who returned. While their plan would not have been possible without the approval of the Nazis, there is no evidence of a Nazi plan for a museum which remains only as conjecture. It is possible that, faced with the reality of this vast collection of treasure, the idea of a museum to the extinct race may have been born.

So it was that, in 1956, the Michle Synagogue, in the suburbs of Prague, became the warehouse at which the hundreds of Torah Scrolls were consolidated from various locations. They had come from the large Prague Jewish community and from the many smaller communities that were scattered across what was left of Bohemia and Moravia, after the Sudetenland had been detached. The Scrolls in the Michle Synagogue did not include Scrolls from Slovakia, which was under a separate administration.

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 would leave.

Over 50 congregations were re-established by survivors, but 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 country was back under dictatorship. The revival of Jewish life was stifled. The Prague Jewish Museum came under government control. The Torah Scrolls which ended up in the Michle Synagogue building came under public ownership. The State Jewish Museum put on the exhibition of the collected Judaica.

Eric Estorick, an American art dealer living in London, paid many visits to Prague on business in the early 1960's and got to know Prague artists, whose work he sold at his Grosvenor Gallery. Being a frequent visitor to Prague, he came to the attention of the authorities, and, on a visit in 1963 he expressed some interest in a catalogue of Hebraica. He was approached by officials from Artia, the state corporation responsible for trade in works of art, and 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 about 1800 Scrolls, in seriously damp conditions. He was asked if he wanted to make an offer. He replied that he knew certain parties in London who might be interested.

On his return to London, he contacted a fellow American, Rabbi Harold Reinhart, of the Westminster Synagogue, one of whose congregants, Ralph Yablon, offered to 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 trucks laden with 1564 Scrolls arrived at the Westminster Synagogue in February and March 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.

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16 March 2009

Congregation B'nai Israel
3354 Kleinert Avenue
BATON ROUGE
LA 70806, USA

For the attention of Rabbi Corie Yutkin

Dear Rabbi Yutkin

Memorial Scroll Certificate 1467 – Kutna Hora

We are pleased to enclose the Certificate for Czech Memorial Scroll No 1467 which was received from the town of Kutna Hora. This certificate is a replacement for the original certificate that was issued with the Scroll in January 1967.

I must apologise for the very long delay in sending this certificate. There have been a number of logistical problems and a backlog of certificates has unfortunately built up which we are doing our best to tackle.

Now that you have the certificate, please ensure that this it is framed and placed in a prominent and appropriate position where it can be seen often by most of those who enter your building. It is our hope that seeing the certificate will provoke awareness and curiosity and that it will lead people to seek more information about the Scroll and its significance.

The certificate gives the number of the Scroll and the name of the town from which it was received when congregations in Bohemia and Moravia were required to send their Scrolls to the Central Jewish Museum in Prague in 1942. We should point out that in many cases the place from which the Scroll was received may have been a "collection point" and not necessarily the actual community from which a particular Scroll came. In the case of Kutna Hora many of the 11 Scrolls sent from there were probably from that congregation though some may have been collected from elsewhere.

You may be interested to learn that research at the Jewish Museum in Prague has shown that bringing the Jewish treasures to Prague was the result of a remarkable plan devised by a group of Jewish leaders to save these treasures from vandalism and plunder at the deserted provincial synagogues. The Nazis had to authorise the implementation of the Jewish scheme, but there is no evidence to support the legend that there was some Nazi plan to create a "museum to an extinct race".

The certificate states the name of the recipient organisation to which this Scroll was entrusted on long term loan. The Memorial Scrolls Trust does not issue Scrolls to individuals, but only to institutions such as congregations and museums. If the original recipient institution closes down, changes its name or merges with another institution the Trust must be informed so that a decision can be made either to retrieve the Scroll or to re-allocate it officially and to issue a new certificate. The original recipient institution is not entitled to transfer the Scroll or to allow it to be removed permanently to another location. For your information I am enclosing a copy of the Trust's "Conditions of Loan"

In the bottom right hand corner of the certificate, there is the date on which the Scroll was issued to your congregation. In your case the year was January 1967. This means that 2007 marked the 40th anniversary of Scroll 1467 arriving in Baton Rouge. At that time Rabbi Dr Harold Reinhart – the rabbi who was responsible for bringing the 1564 Czech Torah Scrolls to his Westminster Synagogue was still active. For 7 years until 1924 he had served the congregation in Baton Rouge and I assume that it was your congregation. So your Czech Memorial Scroll has a particular personal link with B'nai Israel.


We take this opportunity to restate that it is a condition of issuing a Scroll to a congregation that it must commit itself to dedicating one Shabbat each year to the Jews of its Memorial Scroll, their fate, and the heritage of their congregation.

The 211 Jews from Kutna Hora and the surrounding area were deported to Terezin in one of three transports from Kolin on 3, 9 and 13 June 1942. You can find out the names of those Jews who were living in Kutna Hora itself in 1941/2 from the Jewish Museum in Prague jana.splicholova@jewishmuseum.cz. Please send me a copy of any list that you receive so that we can make it available to other congregations.

We hope that you arrange to hold a Memorial Scroll Shabbat between 3 and 13 June 2009 and every year thereafter and will include something about the Jews of Kutna Hora, their fate and local Jewish heritage on that Shabbat

Today the synagogue building in Kutna Hora has been converted into a Hussite church. Other synagogues have made contact with the Hussite congregations that now pray in the former synagogue and have established active ecumenical links between the two congregations. Maybe you can consider doing something similar.

I apologise again for the delay in sending this certificate. Please confirm in writing that this certificate has been received.


Michael Heppner
Research Director
Memorial Scrolls Trust