

MEMORIAL SCROLLS TRUST

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How was it that the Czech Scrolls were saved.

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.