

## The History of Touro Synagogue's Holocaust Scroll

### Scroll #363: An Orphan Scroll from Czechoslovakia

The story of our scroll goes back to 1938, the year before World War II. In 1938, Czechoslovakia was a relatively new country, having been formed in 1918 from the regions of Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, but Jews had lived in the region for over a thousand years.

Thinking that they would thereby avoid a war, France, Italy, and Great Britain signed the **Munich Agreement** with Germany on **29th September, 1938**, agreeing to the transfer of the Czech regions of Bohemia and Moravia (referred to as the Sudetenland) to German authority, in return for a promise that Germany would make no more territorial demands in Europe.

The agreement was signed and the Germans marched in. Destruction followed. In November 1938 synagogues across the now expanded Germany territories were burned, vandalised and looted during a pogrom that is known in history as **Kristallnacht – the night of broken glass**.

But despite the widespread destruction a vast collection of Judaica survived under the protection of the Jewish Museum of Prague, with the surprising cooperation of the Nazis, whose motives in this endeavour have never been clear. All in all, more than 100,000 items of Judaica were gathered together in Prague and housed in over 40 warehouses.

After the war, **in 1956**, the Michle Synagogue, in the suburbs of Prague, became the warehouse at which hundreds of Torah Scrolls were consolidated. They had come from the large Jewish community of Prague and from over one hundred smaller communities in Bohemia and Moravia. They were in a terrible state of disrepair.

Eric Estorick, an American art dealer living in London, who had visited Prague on numerous occasions, was shown the collection of Torah scrolls. He was so moved by what he saw that he contacted a wealthy friend, Ralph Yablon, a member of Westminster Synagogue in London, and together they approached the rabbi of Westminster, Rabbi Harold Reinhart (the founder of Westminster Synagogue but originally from the United States) to see what could be done. Subsequently, Mr. Yablon agreed to finance the transport of the scrolls to Westminster, and Rabbi Reinhart agreed to become their protector. And so it was that in February 1964, 1,564 Torah scrolls representing hundreds of Jewish communities that had been wiped out in the Holocaust found a new home in London.

Most of the scrolls arrived at Westminster Synagogue with a label attached, and some had a painted number on the rollers. These numbers referred to the Card Index at Prague's Central

Jewish Museum. But there were over 200 scrolls that had lost their identification and these were called orphan scrolls. Our Touro scroll, Westminster Scroll #363, is an orphan scroll.

After the transport to London, the years-long task of rehabilitating the scrolls began. The **Memorial Scrolls Trust** was established to carry out this incredible project. Scrolls have since been adopted by Jewish communities in Europe and the United States – over twenty countries in all – to be cherished as memorials to a tragic past but also to be read and studied by a new generation of Jews who are the guarantors of a hopeful Jewish future.

### **Scroll #363 comes to Touro Synagogue**

After Westminster Synagogue received the scrolls in **1964**, and the Memorial Scrolls Trust was established, a full time Sofer was hired to work on the Torahs. Eventually hundreds of scrolls would find new homes around the world, and three would come to Louisiana.

Marian Berkett (a distant relative of Dr. Isidore Cohn Jr. whose family are long-time members of Touro Synagogue) was very close to Rabbi Reinhart and his wife. She also knew Mr. Yablon, the man who financed the transfer of all the scrolls from Prague, and others associated with the establishment of the Trust. Marian was responsible for the adoption of a Czech Torah Scroll by Temple Sinai in honor of her mother Beulah Lob Mayer. Both of Marian's grandparents had been members of Sinai in the 19th century and her husband and she were close friends of Rabbi and Mrs. Julian Feibelman of Temple Sinai.

Dr. Isidore Cohn Sr. was a long-time friend of Rabbi Harold Reinhart of Westminster, ever since Rabbi Reinhart served at Congregation B'nai Israel (1917-1925) in Baton Rouge, where Dr. Cohn had been raised. Dr. Cohn's daughter, Babette Golden, and her husband Dr. Abe Golden went to London for a vacation in **1966**. While there, Rabbi Reinhart gave them a tour of the building holding the scrolls and they were both very moved by this experience. After Babette and Abe returned home and told Dr. Isidore Cohn Sr. about the scrolls and the intention to "distribute these gems to various Synagogues," Dr. Isidore Cohn Sr. contacted his friend Rabbi Reinhart and arranged for one of the Czech scrolls to be adopted by Congregation B'nai Israel in Baton Rouge. This was Scroll #1467 from Kutna Hora.

Following Dr. Abe Golden's death in **1968**, Babette Golden and her daughter Linda Golden Gilmore wanted to do something similar for Touro Synagogue in his memory. And so it was that in March **1969** Rabbi Leo Bergman received scroll #363 in honor of Dr. Abe Golden, along with a certificate and a plaque from the Westminster Memorial Scrolls Trust.

A dedication ceremony was held on Saturday **May 10, 1969** Abe's one year Yahrzeit. Mrs. Golden had a silver memorial plate made to be put on the opposite side of the scroll from the plaque, and a new blue velvet cover was made, lined with blue satin and edged with silver braid. The braid was also used to create a Star of David in the center. The scroll was later fitted with an old silver crown and a silver Yad was attached.

(The cover was replaced with a green one when a set of matching covers was made for all the Touro Torahs. Date uncertain.)

With the passage of more than twenty years, and with the retirement of Rabbi Bergman, the history of the scroll was forgotten. In **1994**, in response to a request from Babette Golden, Rabbi Goldstein (then rabbi at Touro Synagogue) contacted the Westminster Memorial Scrolls Trust in an attempt to identify Scroll #363. Apparently the plaque had been long since lost, along with the certificate.

Once the scroll was correctly identified it was taken to a Sofer in the French Quarter to be repaired. A plaque bearing the Golden family name was attached to the scroll handle by the Sofer and remains on it today, ensuring the correct identification of the scroll.

The scroll was honored once at a Shabbat service in 1998 or '99, but then its story was forgotten once again and more than a decade passed.

In response to renewed enquiries from Dr. Isidore Cohn Jr. the story once again came to light in **2010**. And so it was that contact was renewed with the Westminster Memorial Scrolls Trust and a new official Memorial Scrolls plaque and certificate were ordered. The new certificate will be framed, along with a copy of the new plaque, and put on prominent display. The new, official plaque will be attached to the scroll handle.

A re-dedication ceremony will take place on April 15, 2011. The plan going forward is to acknowledge the scroll each year – as the Westminster Memorial Scrolls Trust requires us to do – and to include the history of the scroll in an ongoing broader archived history of Touro Synagogue and its congregation.

*If you are interested in Touro history and would like to get involved in protecting and preserving our story, please contact Adrien Genet at [agenet@cox.net](mailto:agenet@cox.net) or Phyllis Allmont at [pjza@cox.net](mailto:pjza@cox.net).*