

HOLOCAUST TORAH RESTORATION PROJECT

September 2013 — March 2014



“It was one of the most memorable moments of my life.”

Our TBS Holocaust Torah MST#426 is on permanent loan from the London-based charity Memorial Scrolls Trust. This same organization has loaned 1,400 Torah that survived the Shoah to synagogues and organizations throughout the world to be cared for and used in meaningful ways. You can learn more about this important organization at <https://memorialscrollstrust.org>. Imagine former TBS' Rabbi, Marvin Schwab's horror when, following a roof leak over the Bima, our TBS Holocaust Torah was drenched and waterlogged. To quickly “save” the Torah, Rabbi Schwab unrolled it to its full length. It took days to dry out. The parchment survived but needed to be “re-hydrated,” a process that cost approximately \$25,000.

It quickly became apparent many of the letters had faded beyond recognition. For the Torah to regain its kosher status, a professional Sofer, Rabbi Moshe Druin and his unique organization, *Sofer on Site* were asked to restore our TBS Holocaust Torah to its pre-deluge condition. See the TBS Holocaust Torah Restoration Project at <https://youtu.be/5jq7ublwDdM>.

The Holocaust Torah Restoration Project Committee was formed, consisting of TBS Members, Cantor Meredith Brown, Thomas Carroll, Richard LaPan, Cindy Lyon, Michael Makoid, Meryl Marchand, David M. Miller, Rabbi Schwab, Aaron Wolf, and Ellen Zieselman. “On the day of the Torah letter ‘signing’ the HTRP committee was helped by Anna Rayne Levi, Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev, Deborah Weinberg, and many more as guests were invited to different stations to enhance the experience.” Each TBS family member was invited to participate in “signing” a Torah letter, with Rabbi Druin's assistance. Contributions were solicited – although not required – and collectively, the HTRP raised was over \$235,000. Participants had their “signing” experience photographed by a friend of our Temple, Linda McClellan and Mike Makoid's wife, Bette Evans, which was later sent to each family for their safe keeping. Other event activity included rock painting. Joy Rosenberg ran a table where congregants were able to paint the letter that they restored on the Holocaust Torah, directly onto a rock and take home for a lovely memory of the day. There was also a table where you could learn the meaning and symbolism of the letter you restored.

The committee worked diligently to provide each TBS family member a truly meaningful experience. The comments most readily heard following each and every “signing”, was “This truly was a Generation to Generation, v'dor v'dor experience.

Our TBS restored Holocaust Torah is actively used during High Holiday services, and at every Bar and Bat Mitzvah.

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History of Our Torah

Our Torah comes from Mladá Boleslav, a town approximately 40 miles north of Prague, Czech Republic. The presence of Jews in Mladá Boleslav (known in German as Jungbunzlau and known to Jews as Bumsla) was documented by 1471. Until the 19th century, Jews comprised roughly 10 percent of all inhabitants. The Jewish quarter there—together with those of Prague and Kolín—was among the most important in all of Bohemia.

The Jewish quarter in Mladá Boleslav was situated in the northwest part of the historical core of the town, not originally isolated from Christian neighborhoods. There were 31 houses in the Jewish quarter at the beginning of the 17th century, as well as a town hall, a hospital, and a ritual bath. The so-called Nová Škola (New School) was built at the end of the 16th century. In 1942, the inventory of the synagogue was transferred to Prague and the building was used as a warehouse. It was finally demolished in 1962.

In 1731, a Jewish shopkeeper named David Brandeis was accused of poisoning a local Mladá Boleslav Christian printer with plum jam and was imprisoned. When the accusation proved untrue and he was released, David Brandeis composed a *Megillah* (memorial scroll) titled *Shir ha-ma'alot le-David* (A Song of Ascent of David), which was read each year on the Tenth of Adar. The day was celebrated as "Povidl Purim" (Jam Purim).

Torahs are normally written using either Ashkenazi or Sephardic calligraphy. Our Torah is written with a combination of both, a rarity attributed to the fact that Kabbalist scribes, who use that style, moved to Bohemia in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In January 1942, the Nazis ordered 1,041 Jews from Mladá Boleslav and the surrounding areas to assemble in the old castle. They were first deported to Terezín and subsequently shipped to various extermination camps.

Later in 1942, members of Prague's Jewish Community brought the religious treasures from the deserted provincial communities to the comparative safety of Prague. The Nazis were persuaded to accept this plan and more than 100,000 items were sent to what became the Central Jewish Museum. The 1,800 Torah Scrolls were meticulously recorded on a card index by the Museum's staff with a description of each Scroll and the place from which it came.

At the end of the war fewer than 10,000 survivors returned and some 50 congregations were re-established, including one at Mladá Boleslav. They were provided with religious artifacts not necessarily from their particular communities. But freedom was short-lived as the Communist coup in 1948 stifled the revival of Jewish life. Most of the revived congregations gradually closed, and most of their artifacts were returned to what by 1950 had become the State Jewish Museum in Prague.



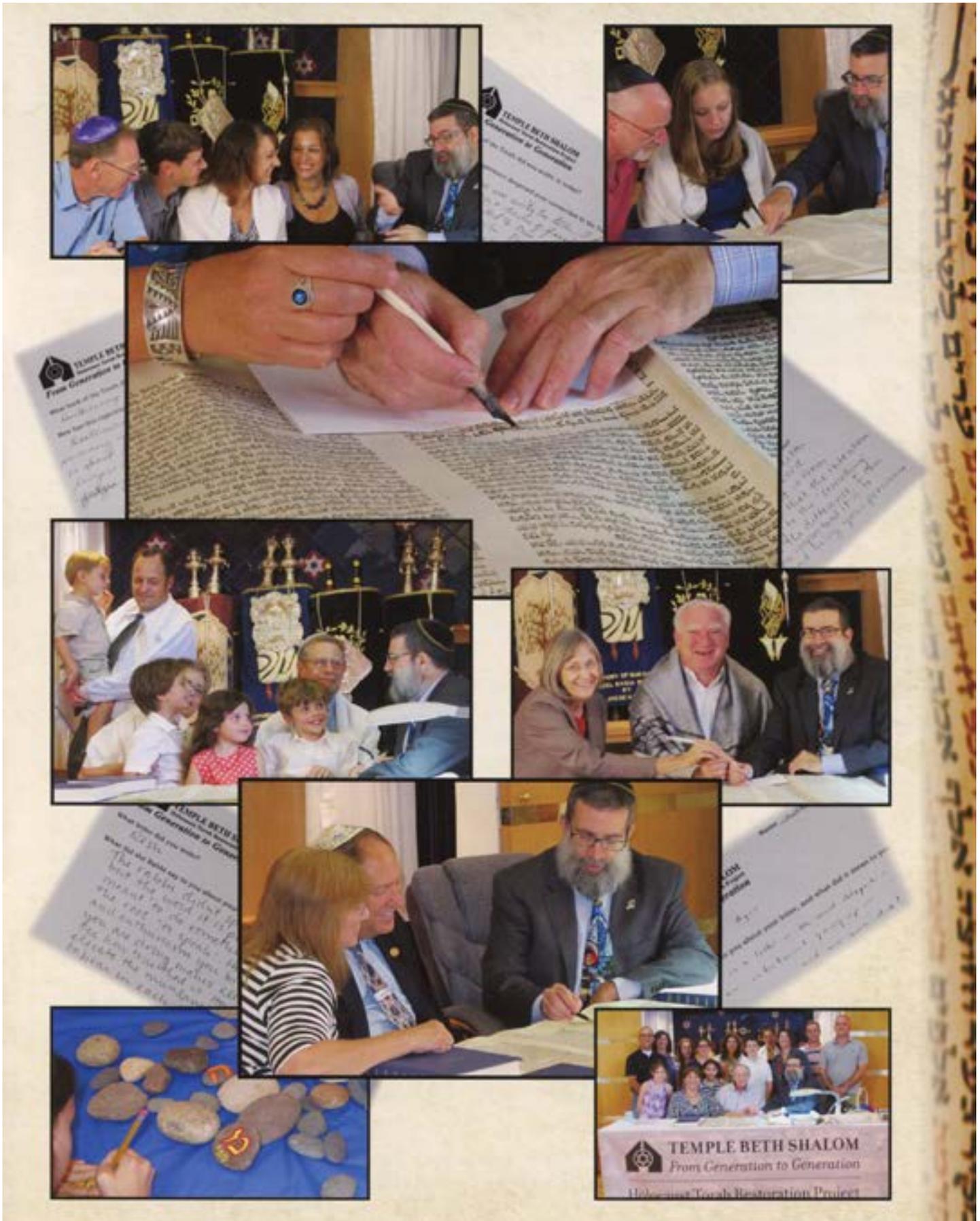
Rescued Holocaust Scrolls

In 1964, 1,564 Czech Memorial Scrolls were purchased from the Czechoslovak Communist state and taken back into Jewish hands by Westminster Synagogue in London, England. The scrolls were restored and distributed to hundreds of Congregations all over the world.

Our Torah, Number 426, was restored by Rabbi Joel Newman of Denver, Colorado. For over two decades this scroll that survived the Nazis, has been on permanent loan to us from the Memorial Scrolls Trust, Westminster Synagogue in London, England. The scroll serves as a memorial to the Jews of Czechoslovakia and a reminder that, despite the best efforts of the Nazis, the Jewish people continue to persevere.

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SCROLL RESTORATION

Restoration begins on Torah scroll that survived war, Nazis, monsoons and time

By Robert Nott

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Rabbi Marvin Schwab points with his yad, a Jewish ritual pointer used to help read the Torah scroll, at Temple Beth Shalom. The rabbi points to where the scroll needs to be repaired and preserved.

Rabbi Marvin Schwab recalls his reaction the first time he used a quill pen on the historic religious document. The fabric was so fragile. The Torah scroll has survived the Nazi extermination of Jews and their religious artifacts in 1940s Czechoslovakia. So as he inscribed a Hebrew letter as part of a repair effort on the scroll, Schwab was overcome with emotion.

“I cried,” Schwab said.

Schwab, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Shalom, announced the temple’s efforts to restore the scroll’s lettering — damaged by flooding from a summer rainstorm some years back — during the Wednesday evening’s Rosh Hashanah service, the start of the Jewish High Holy Days. The restoration project, which started this summer, was a surprise to many in the congregation, although, as Schwab joked, “In the Jewish world, there are very few secrets.”

The Holocaust Torah Scroll, as it is called, is 250 to 300 years old. It is one of the only existing items from the Jewish community of Mlada Boleslav in Czechoslovakia. It has been in Temple Beth Shalom since the late 1980s.

It seems destined to outlast its creators, its keepers, its enemies, and Santa Fe’s monsoon season.



Rabbi Marvin Schwab looks over a scroll Wednesday at Temple Beth Shalom. This scroll suffered water damage, and will be repaired and preserved. The congregation raised funds to preserve this historic centuries-old Holocaust Torah Scroll that survived the Nazi conquest of Czechoslovakia during World War II.

Photos by Jane Phillips/The New Mexican

While Schwab leads a charge to restore the lettering of the scroll — “It wasn’t fit to be used in services” — he is proud of what its imperfect state says about Jewish fortitude: “Having it carry its scars is important.

Specially trained scribes, known as sofers, write Torah scrolls. The Temple Beth Shalom scroll is unique, according to both Schwab and sofer Rabbi Moshe Druin, because it includes script from both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. Sephardic Jews come from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East, among other locales, while Ashkenazi Jews were from European and East European nations.

“While all the scripts are the same — every letter has its own character look — the style of each letter will be different according to the two ways of ethnic Judaism,” Druin said. “With European [Ashkenazi] Jews the letters are at a particular angle, they have a particular shape of design, and the Sephardic way is very different. And the two shall never meet.”

Temple Beth Shalom hired Druin, who laughingly calls himself “a glorified forger,” to recreate the original lettering in the Holocaust Memorial Torah Scroll. “We are not writing our own script over the existing script but re-enacting the style of the script that was there, so it is meant to look as if the original scribe came back from 100, 200, 300 years ago and is writing his own script,” Druin said.

Earlier this summer at the temple, Druin worked with Schwab and members of about 50 families from the congregation of some 350 families to carefully rescribe the roughly 40,000 (out of close to 305,000 letters) damaged in the scroll.

“It is an act not just of love but of learning, cherishing the act of holding a quill in your hand and together with the guided hand of the scribe, write letters in the Torah,” Druin said.

The history of the scroll was enough to evoke tears in some who worked on it at the temple. “It made me well up,” said David Miller, chair of the restoration project.

Mlada Boleslav, founded in the 10th century, is located about 40 miles north of Prague. It was once known as Jerusalem on the Jizera [River] for its vibrant Jewish population. After the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the town fell under the control of its German invaders.

As the Nazis rounded up and sent Jewish residents to concentration camps, the people of Mlada Boleslav asked their captors for permission to gather up their religious and ceremonial belongings in one locale. They were aware that the Nazis were destroying Torah scrolls everywhere.

According to Druin, the Nazis were delighted with the idea of letting the Jewish citizens do all the hard work, for it would make it easier for them to destroy the artifacts. Rumor has it that the Nazis may have contemplated creating a museum of these items to showcase their success in exterminating Jews. In fact, most of the Mlada Boleslav residents were sent to concentration camps, where they perished.

“The Jewish community [of Mlada Boleslav] did not survive. The Torahs did survive,” Schwab said.

The Jews decided to number the scrolls. Temple Beth Shalom’s is 426. It was moved to Prague in 1942 where it was stacked, along with about 1,500 other Torah scrolls from other parts of Europe, in a synagogue/warehouse basement for over 20 years. In 1963 the scrolls were discovered and rescued by art expert and historian Chimen Abramsky, who sought the scrolls on behalf of London art dealer Eric Estorick.

Both Schwab and Druin said Abramsky inadvertently stumbled into the room with all the Torahs and made some attempt to illegally smuggle them out before being jailed and then released. Eventually, he and Estorick helped broker a deal in which the British government paid for the return of the Torah scrolls.

Shortly thereafter, according to Druin, congregations around the world began receiving the scrolls on permanent loan with the condition that they care of them. By his estimate, somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200 scrolls ended up in American synagogues, including Temple Beth Shalom.

The temple is working to raise about \$250,000 for the restoration project. Druin, who works for Sofer on Site in Miami Beach, Fla., said he will return to Santa Fe to work with other congregation members in the lettering process. Ideally, the restored scroll will be used in services at the temple.

“I want people to be reunited around the project and feel a sense of accomplishment,” said Schwab, who intends to retire next year. “I want to see the light of hope shine in their eyes.

“I can’t imagine what the Nazis thought as they were handling these Torah scrolls. And now they serve as a symbol of survival and perseverance — and possibly of renewal.”

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