

How the Law — and Mayer — came to Kingston

SLIDE 1 TITLE

May I first thank Stanley Moss and the organisers of the Kingston Rotary Club for this opportunity to speak to you today, and may I introduce my colleague, Mayer Vogel, whose story (which you will hear, briefly) parallels the one that I am going to tell you. A few years ago, Mayer retired as Visiting Prof of Aerospace Engineering at Kingston University.

Before we start the story proper, we need a bit of 'O' level Religious Studies. All synagogues, as part of their general kit, have a number of copies of the Five Books of Moses, in Hebrew, hand-written on a parchment scroll, on wooden rollers. These are quite substantial items, about 1m high and weigh about 7-8kg. The Five Books are normally known as The Law and the scroll is called, in Hebrew, a *sefer torah*

We have a number of such scrolls in our synagogue in Uxbridge Road including one that, according to the certificate that accompanies it, came from Moravska Ostrava or Mährisch Ostrau.

SLIDE 2 Here it is, being shown to the congregation during service.

That raises a couple of obvious questions:

1. Where, what, who are Moravska Ostrava and Mährisch Ostrau
2. What is a *sefer torah* from there doing in Uxbridge Road

The first question is easy to answer. Mora^vska Ostrava (nowadays just known as Ostrava) is a major town at the N E corner of the Czech Republic, almost on the border with Slovakia and Poland. It is almost exactly half way between Vienna and Warsaw about 240 miles East of Prague. Until the mid eighteenth century it was a little place of almost no interest to anyone. It was on the border between Moravia and Silesia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its population spoke German of course and the name was, in German, Marisch Ostrau or Moravian Ostrava (Mora^vska Ostrava in Czech). Then black coal was discovered and a major mining and iron/steel industry developed so the population increased rapidly from less than 200 to about 300,000 in the mid 1930s.

So that's what and where Moravska Ostrava is. But what about the Scroll - how did it come to Kingston? That is a tale of three halves –where the scroll came from, how we got it, and what happened to it in between times. Let's start at the end. We received the *sefer* on permanent loan from the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust based in the Westminster Synagogue in Knightsbridge.

SLIDE 3– Certificate

But that doesn't really help; it just moves the question 10 miles down the road.

The story of how the Trust got the scroll reads like a John le Carré thriller and starts in the 1960s with a Jewish art dealer, Eric Estorick who was doing business with the Czechoslovak authorities. One day he was approached (and I like to imagine this conversation happening in a dingy gents' toilet somewhere in Prague)

"Psst – you're Jewish aren't you? Do you want to buy a job-lot of sefer torah scrolls?" What do you mean? "We have a lot of scrolls that are rotting away - do you want to buy them, cheap? And Eric was taken to a dark suburb and to an abandoned synagogue where he saw almost 2000 scrolls lying around. He thought he was going to be kidnapped/killed or shipped to Siberia (it was the middle of the cold war!) But he survived and came back and spoke to Ralph Yablon, a wealthy textile merchant who was a client of his and who was a member of Westminster Synagogue. Yablon told Eric to go get them, so he did. And in 1964, 1564 scrolls arrived at Westminster synagogue and those that were usable were lent out to communities round the world, including one to Uxbridge Road.

So what was a sefer from Ostrava doing, 240 miles away in Prague in 1964?

Let's go back to Ostrava and track it forward, if we can. Jews were banned from the town until in late C18 the edict of Emancipation. Then, with the tremendous economic growth, the population increased and Jews moved in, the community developed rapidly and by late 19th century they built the first synagogue, a very impressive pile in the centre of town, seating 700 male worshippers (women being supernumerary were not counted. They sat upstairs in a gallery)

SLIDE 4— Main Shul

Over the next couple of decades, other equally impressive synagogues were established

SLIDE 5&6— Vitkovice, Zerotingasse

Life was good and everything went well until, of course, the rise of the Nazis and, in September 1938, the Munich Agreement which handed the Sudetenland over from Czechoslovakia to Germany. At the same time, and importantly for our story, Poland occupied some territory that had been disputed since WW1 and moved the border very much closer to the centre of Ostrava.

SLIDE 7— map

Then on 14 March 1939, the Germans invaded Ostrava actually the day before they occupied Prague and declared the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia while Slovakia became a separate German Puppet state.

Now we have the first half of our story — the scroll was part of one of the splendid synagogues in Ostrava; and the third half with the scroll being shipped from Prague in 1964 to Westminster and thence to Uxbridge Road. So let's talk about the middle half — how did the scroll get from Ostrava in March 1939 to Prague in 1964? This part of the story is much less clear than the rest and, of course, much grimmer.

In May and June 1939, all the synagogues in Ostrava were burnt down, one after the other, in the middle of the night.

SLIDE 8 newspaper report

Then, the German authorities instructed the Jewish community to demolish the ruins and clear the sites, or the authorities would do it themselves and give the bill to the community

SLIDE 9 – letter re demolition.

And here we have our first apparent mystery - if the synagogues were burnt, how did the scroll survive? Apparently, the fires were not as serious as they might have been and many articles survived and were rescued after the fire. Although the synagogues were destroyed, the Jewish school remained and did double duty as a synagogue and a school, until 1942.

SLIDE 10– school in 1942, with Stars.

In 1942, the remaining Jewish population was all shipped off to Theresienstadt and thence to Auschwitz and Treblinka and death. We have a list of 3600 people whom we know went that way

BOOK

But before the destruction of the Ostrava Jewish community, all the scrolls and other artefacts had been shipped to Prague (remember, this is September 1942, in the middle of the War!). How and why?

It was done at the instruction of the Jewish Community of Prague which had authority over all the Jewish communities in the Protectorate, clearly with the approval of the German authorities, in order to preserve the material. The instruction came in the form of two letters, in May and August 1942, with highly detailed instructions about what to send, how to send it, and how to record what was sent.

SLIDE 11— May letter,, with translation.

SLIDE 12 August letter p 1

The Jewish Museum in Prague specifically recruited people to deal with and catalogue all the material. Among them was Josef Polak, a Jewish Museum Director, who joined Dr Julius Jacobovitz (the uncle of the late Chief Rabbi here, Lord Jacobovitz) and others. Polak developed a system of recording the

vast amount of material that arrived in Prague, including a new and specific Accession Card. We have a copy of the Accession Card for our scroll

SLIDE 13—Accession card.

Incredibly, the Jewish Museum continued to operate throughout the war and even put on an exhibition of Jewish Life in Czechoslovakia, in 1944,

SLIDE 14—Exhibition.

How the Prague Jewish community persuaded the Nazi authorities that all of this was a good idea is not known. We can only be thankful that they did.

The people who had been recruited to record and organise the material were all saved from deportation, but only until the job was completed. After that they were all shipped off to Auschwitz and to be murdered.

And so Scroll 129 stayed in Prague during the rest of the War, during the brief post-war period of freedom and during the Communist takeover, until, in 1964, The Law came to Uxbridge Road.

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