

# Nice Nazis, 3 Ambassadors, a Degenerate Artist, a Brass Chanukiah and A Magic Doll

## Talk to Kingston Synagogue 12 November 2008

### 1 Title Slide

Let us start with some recapitulation.

We, in this *shul*, have a sefer torah on permanent loan from the Memorial Scrolls Trust which came originally from Moravská Ostrava in Czechoslovakia. Ostrava is about 200 miles East of Prague:

### 2 SLIDE Map

In this talk, I hope to mention some of the more interesting or unexpected things that we have found about the scroll, Ostrava and the people who lived there.

We know that we received the scroll in 1964 from MST

### 3 SLIDE Scroll Cert

We were not the only shul to receive a scroll from Ostrava. The Leicester Liberal shul also received an Ostrava scroll and I had hoped to have Martie Jelinek from Leicester with us here tonight, but lack of suitable trains home prevented that. They, too, will be researching the history of Ostrava and its Jewish community.

We also know how the MST received 1564 scrolls from Prague through the good offices of Eric Estorick and Ralph Yablon. But what was a scroll from Ostrava doing 200 miles away in Prague in 1964?

We know that there were some large and beautiful shuls in Ostrava:

### 4 SLIDE Main shul

### 5 Slide Vitkovice shul

### 6 Slide Zerotingasse shul

We know that the Germans invaded Ostrava on 14 March 1939 (the day before they occupied Prague). We know that the shuls in Ostrava were all

burnt down, one after the other, in the middle of the night in May and June 1939

## 7 SLIDE Newspaper reports

We also know that the German authorities instructed the local Jewish community to raze the buildings and clear the ground or they would do it themselves and give the community the bill

## 8 SLIDE Instruction to clear site

Curiously, by no means all the *shuls* in Bohemia and Moravia were destroyed. Indeed, most of them were not. We do not yet know why there was the difference and if this was part of an overall plan or merely the result of local Nazi decisions.

But if the Ostrava *shuls* were burnt and the sites cleared, how did the *sefer torah* survive and what happened to it? How did it get to Prague, when and why?

And now we come on to some of our more recent findings!

We now know that our *sefer*, and many other artefacts, arrived in the Jewish Museum in Prague in 1942 (in the middle of the war) and was recorded and catalogued:

## 9 SLIDE Accession card

You can see that this is a proper, well-designed accession card which was, in fact specially developed to deal with all the material which arrived at JMP at this time from all over the Protektorat of Bohemia and Moravia. It was designed by Josef Polak

## 10 SLIDE Photo of Polack

He was recruited especially to help catalogue and record all the new accessions and, incredibly, to arrange exhibitions at the JMP which continued to operate throughout the war!

## 11 SLIDE Exhibition

Also there was Dr Julius Jacobovitz, the uncle of the late Chief Rabbi, who had been the Librarian of the Prague Jewish community. Once the cataloguing was complete, all the staff were shipped off to Auschwitz and the gas chambers.

Which still leaves us with the questions: what happened to the scrolls etc between 1939 and 1942, and of how and why they were all sent to JMP in 1942.

It appears that the *shuls* were NOT completely destroyed in the fires and that some materials were rescued from the damaged buildings before they were demolished. Information from Ostrava City Archive is:

“We found out that scrolls and other liturgical objects from the synagogues were not damaged during the fire. The buildings of the synagogues in Ostrava were not so much damaged during the burning out. Somebody (but we don't know his name or names) took scrolls and other things to the Jewish school in Moravská Ostrava where was after burning out of synagogue a place for liturgy. In August 1942 were all these artefacts sent to the Jewish Museum in Prague.”

Peter Erben recalls going to the Jewish School with his father in early 1942 for his father to say *Kaddish*. The school functioned as a *shul*. It also continued to function as a school and Jewish children, who could no longer attend local schools, were educated there.

## 12 SLIDE School 1942 ex Hana's Chronik

The school had been in existence since 1884 and we have just received from Hana Adara in Israel a manuscript copy and a printed *ivrit* copy of the history of the School.

## 13 SLIDE Class of 1884

## 14 SLIDE Chronik

We do know the name of at least one of the people who rescued material from the main *shul* in Ostrava. Lilly Reiser (who lives now in USA) remembers the main shul burning and her father recovering something she described as a torah breastplate from the wreckage.

Personally I lived in Ostrava for my first 21 years with the exception of about four years during which my family and I were in concentration camps. For the first 17 months I was in Terezin and then deported to Auschwitz Birkenau. In late 1944 we were sent to Germany (Hamburg) where we were forced into labor re-assembling bricks following Allied bombardments. Towards the end of the war I went on a death march from Hamburg to Bergen Belzen where we were liberated by the British. I came to the United States in late 1946 and have been living here ever since. Following Terezin, my parents, Elsa and Isidor Reiser, emigrated, in 1949, from Ostrava to Israel and lived there until their deaths in 1973, and 1974 respectively. My brother Leo (Eli) Reiser passed away January 3, 2008, after a long serious illness. Leo survived a death march from outside of Berlin back to Terezin. He emigrated to Israel in 1948 where he passed this year.

I often think of my childhood in Ostrava and recall attending Temple, near the Main Square on Friday evenings and High Holidays. My father rescued the brass breast plate from the Torah located in our burning temple and it was returned to us after the war from a gentile friend. I believe this breast plate is over 100 years old.

Lilly sent me a photo of the “breastplate” and, as you can see it is in fact not a torah breastplate but a brass *Chanukiah*

## 15 SLIDE Lilly Reiser plus Chanukiah.

The JMP have seen the photograph and confirm that it is a *chanukiah*, almost certainly of central European manufacture and dates from ca 1900.

Lilly has, unfortunately, no close family and she has said that she will leave the *Chanukiah* to us on her death.

The scrolls and the *chanukiah* are not the only things to have been saved.

## 16 SLIDE Ark in present shul

The Ark in the present shul in Ostrava is clearly much older than the end of the war. It was, apparently hidden during the war and installed in the present *shul* after the war. We do not know where or how it survived.

So we have the *shuls* in Ostrava destroyed in 1939 but artefacts saved and used in the Jewish School until 1942, when the remaining Jews of Ostrava were transported to Theresienstadt (Terezin) and thence to Auschwitz. In 1941, they will have stood in the school on Yom Kippur and recited:

*On the first day of the year it is inscribed, and on the Day of Atonement the decree is sealed, how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who at the measure of man's days and who before it, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by the sword,... who by hunger and who by thirst; who by strangling and who by stoning, ...who shall be brought low and who shall be upraised.*

The first transport from Ostrava with the deported Jews arrived in Theresienstadt (Terezin) on Tuesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1942. It was the day after Yom Kippur. By Simchat Torah, most of the Jewish deportees from Ostrava had already been shipped to Auschwitz and the gas chambers. We have the names of 3600 of them.

But how and why did they send their precious scrolls to Prague, before they themselves were sent away?

Contrary to myths and legends about the Nazis planning to establish a Museum of a Vanished Race, the impetus seems to have come from the Jewish community in Prague itself:

## 17 SLIDE First letter

Following the orders of the Supervisory Authority, all historic and historically valuable objects in the branches and local offices of the JKGP are to be sent to Prague

We, therefore, request all branches and local offices to follow the instructions immediately. The materials to be sent should be carefully packed to be sent to the JKGP. At the same time, 4 copies of a list of the articles must be prepared, in German. The first 2 copies are to be sent to the JKGP Department of Provincial Affairs. The third copy is to accompany the packed goods and the fourth copy remains with the local office.

On the list, each item must be exactly described. Individual items on the list are to be given consecutive numbers. Further, it should be shown where each item came from. In so far as historical data are known on individual items, they should be recorded as notes. The JKGP must be advised in advance of the type, number etc of the packages of the delivery.

JKGP  
Department for Provincial Affairs  
The Board  
Dr Stein m.p.

## 18 SLIDE Second letter

This is a 4 page detailed bureaucratic set of instructions. Interestingly, it is written in Czech, whereas the May letter was in German. I do not know if that is significant, at all.

The tone of both letters is very heavily bureaucratic. Again, I do not know if that is typical of the Jewish communal organisation or if it reflects the recent German influence

Jewish Religious Community in Prague  
Section for countryside matters

Ref: 016099

Dr.VP/Asp

Prague 3<sup>rd</sup> 8 1942

To all branches and local offices!

Re: Jewish central museum in Prague – section countryside-  
Transfer of various objects to Prague

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The supervising authority agrees to transfer all ritual objects, archives, documentation and furnishings of synagogues, unless permanently fixed or interconnected, to Prague for the purpose of examination and eventual inclusion into the central Jewish museum – section countryside. In order to carry out this instruction it is necessary to proceed as follows:

1. / We enclose to this circular a summary as a way of instruction of which objects must be sent from every branch eventually local office to Prague\_

In particular we draw your attention to the fact, that objects under item 5. / Of the summary with a an asterisk, are not to be sent yet to Prague, instead so designated objects should be photographed and the pictures with a description sent to Jewish Office in Prague – central museum, which will decide if and which of these objects should be transported to Prague.

2. / All objects under item 1 covered by the enclosed summary, when in Synagogues or places worship, should be at first cleaned, packed into boxes or other suitable packaging and for the time being stored away from synagogues at branches and local offices in a suitable and safe place.

For this purpose it is necessary to search thoroughly all cabinets, tables, alters, alter and prayer tabernacles etc so that written materials and other objects could be recover in the prescribed manner.

Packing should be carried out, in particular of objects used for ceremonial purposes and written materials, with dignity. Packing of all items must ensure that the packed materials could not be damaged during transit or during the subsequent storage without unpacking.

3. / All other moveable object, such as rugs, tapestries, cabinets, tables, desks are to be also removed from the Synagogues, exceptions being alters, ban, chairs etches. These items will not be yet packed nor prepared for prepared for despatch to Prague.

4. / Any silver objects still in position of branches or local offices should be also packed, separately from other items, and insured posted to Prague. The postage must be covered when mailing.

And it goes on in that way for a further three pages!

How they persuaded the German authorities that this was a good idea, in the middle of a war, is still a mystery but the unknown German who agreed to this must count as our first “nice Nazi”

As you know, we held a Service of Rededication for our Scroll on November 12<sup>th</sup> 2006 in the presence of Rabbi Ginsbury representing the Chief Rabbi, the Mayor of the Royal Borough of Kingston, and HE Mr Jan Winkler, the Czech Ambassador. In March of this year, we held a gathering of Ostravaks and members of our shul and Mr Winkler, the Czech Ambassador visited us once more, bringing his son as well. With a small amount of diplomatic licence, Jan Winkler is our first Ambassador. In March, he presented us with a wonderful book about post and stamps relating to the Terezin.

Pavel Seifter was at school after the war with Josef Salomonovic. He worked as a window cleaner for 20 years after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, before becoming a key member of the Civic Forum movement during the Velvet revolution in 1989. He subsequently served as Deputy Director of the Institute of Contemporary History and then as the Deputy Director of the Institute of International relations in Prague. He was Director of foreign Policy to President Vaclav Havel between 1993 and 1997 and was Czech Ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1997 until his retirement in 2003. He is our second Ambassador. Interestingly, he has written about President Havel in the programme of the Orange Tree Theatre's season of Havel plays.

Our third Ambassador has an even more remarkable story. Jakob Reichenbaum was born in Lachowice in Poland and died in 1935 in Ostrava. His eldest son, Artur, was born in 1896 in Ostrava and studied in Germany. He married his landlord's daughter, Herta Krebs, and died in 1944 in Dachau. Their son, Werner, survived

19 SLIDE Werner and parents

He became the Ambassador of the German Federal Republic to Chile. I think you will agree for the son of an Ostravak Jew who was murdered in a concentration camp to become a German Ambassador is quite an achievement!

20 SLIDE Werner Reichenbaum

## 20 MINUTES

Heinrich GOLDBERGER was born in Ostrava in 1908. He had a childhood friend by the surname Müller who came from a poor German-Czech family. Müller would come to my grandfather's house to eat lunch a couple of times each week, and otherwise was lucky to get much lunch at all. When they were young teens, Müller ran away from home and wasn't heard from again. The Goldberger family ran a business importing and selling sausage casings

21 SLIDE Heinrich Goldberger

22 SLIDE Ferdinand Goldberger

Michael Goldberger writes:

Shift ahead to 1939. Hitler has swept through Czechoslovakia and Jews are prohibited from exiting the country without an exit visa. Within days, my grandfather's father meets Müller on the street to find that Müller was an SS officer assigned to Ostrava, I think a Captain. Müller told him to send his son (that is, my grandfather) to his office. My grandfather did as instructed. He was not permitted to see Müller, but his passport was stamped with an exit visa. With this, he made his way to London. From there, he was able to make the bribes necessary to obtain exit visas for my father and grandmother. By then, he was joined in London by his sister's husband (Fritz Brichta), who made similar arrangements for his wife and child. The woman and children went across Russia by rail, then to Japan, and on to Brazil. The men crossed the Atlantic and met them in Rio de Janeiro. Others in the family stayed back and died, mainly in Treblinka.

After the war, my grandfather heard that Müller was shot by the SS for helping Jews to escape. —

He is our second “nice Nazi”

Otto Hornung's father was a lawyer in Ostrava. He escaped into Poland where he was subsequently shot by the Nazis. His mother moved to Prague with Otto. She was Hungarian and was in contact with her family in Hungary. Her sister, Zuzi, invited her to come back to Hungary “to buy horses”, so Otto's mother dressed in her best clothes and went to the local Gestapo office for an exit permit. The Gestapo officer said to her, “I will let you go but you must promise not to come back!” Otto meanwhile had escaped and come to England so she went to Budapest. There she received a Swedish Schutzpass and residence in a Swedish protected house.

**23 SLIDE Hornung schutzpass.**

However, the Nazis came to power in Budapest also and decided to send all the Jews to concentration camps, including those in protected houses and including Otto's mother. She had been hiding in the cellar of the house and was found by a young Hungarian Nazi. She appealed to him, in good educated Hungarian, "You must have a mother and/or a sister" and he let her escape!

He is our third "Nice Nazi"

Ostrava was a big busy dirty smoky sooty industrial coal and steel town

**24 SLIDE Ostrava and muck**

It is not the most obvious place to be the home to a remarkable collection of artists. We have mentioned Yehuda Bacon on several occasions in these talks and he produced our "theme picture":

**25 SLIDE Bacon – Escaping from the Fire with a Torah Scroll**

Yehuda is alive and well, in Israel, where he still paints and recently had an exhibition in Würzburg

**26 SLIDE Wurzburg catalogue**

Salomon Salomonovic was born in Ostrava and was the uncle of Josef and Michal. He painted a portrait of his nephew, Michal as a child:

**27 SLIDE Salo plus Mischa**

He emigrated to Palestine and painted there

**28 SLIDE Haifa Bay**

And some of his paintings are in the Jewish Museum in Prague

**29 SLIDE Lady with jug**

Leo Haas was born in Opava, Czechoslovakia to parents of Slovakian origin.. His first year of art studies was financed by a rich relative from the United States, but when the relative died Haas had to support himself as a musician in bars or restaurants. In 1921 Haas moved to Berlin and studied with Emil Orlik, who made him his assistant. In 1922 he became assistant in a graphic design studio and from then on his main source of income was from painting. In 1923 he travelled to France - first to Paris and then Albi, and from there he moved to Arles, in the steps of Van Gogh.

In 1929 he married Sophie Hermann and became a well-known portrait painter in Opava in the Sudetenland, earning enough money to support his family and even help out his parents. After *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, he and his wife went to live with her parents in Ostrava.

In October 1939 he was sent to Nisko

### 30 SLIDE Nisko camp by Haas

When the camp was dismantled Haas returned to Ostrava and on 1 October 1942 Haas and his extended family (his wife, her parents, and his sister, Elvina) arrived at Terezin, where they were forced to separate. Haas was transferred to the *Zeichenstube* (technical-graphic department) of the camp. Haas drew portraits of his colleagues. He also gave painting courses for the children of the ghetto, for which he received a little food.. On 25 October 1944 Haas and Bedrich Fritta, another artist and a close friend, were sent to Auschwitz where Fritta died of blood poisoning eight days later.

### 31 SLIDE Leo Haas – Jewish children in Terezin

In November 1944, Haas, other artists and a number of chemists from Belgium, were transferred to Sachsenhausen camp where they were given their mission: they would join a "counterfeiting gang" who had already been at work for two years producing counterfeit British currency, documents and stamps. Haas' group was given the job of counterfeiting American money. You may remember the story from the recent film *The Counterfeiters*

After his liberation Haas returned to Terezin and there, in the Magdebourg Barracks, he found his entire art collection, as well as many works produced by Fritta. Thomas Fritta., Bedrich's young son and Haas's wife Erna had also survived The couple adopted Thomas Fritta and they settled in Prague. Leo compiled and produced a book for his adopted son, Tommy, of pictures produced by Bedrich, Tommy's father, for Tommy's third birthday in 1944. We have a copy in our Ostrava book collection

### 32 SLIDE Tommy's book

### 33 SLIDE Tommy

David Friedmann writes of his life:

"The soot laden Mährisch Ostrau (Moravská Ostrava), centre of the deep coalfields and steel industry in Moravia, Czechoslovakia is my homeland. It was there that I was born on 20/12/1893 and where I spent my youth. Later I attended the Malerakademie (Art Academy), in Berlin, the then most important Art Centre of central Europe.

Between 1919 and 1933 my works were constantly on view in the various exhibitions of the Berliner Akademie der Künste Berliner Sezession, as well as in other towns.

Following Hitler's assumption of power in 1933, my artistic activities came to a rapid end. I could practice my art only in the limited circles of my Jewish friends. At the end of 1938, these circumstances led me to flee from Berlin with my wife and 3-months old child.

In Prague I started to work once again, but in October 1941 was transported by the GESTAPO with my family to the Litzmannstadt (*Lodz*) Ghetto.

At the end of August 1944 the ghetto was evacuated. We were brought to the Oswięcim (Auschwitz) extermination camp, where I had to hand over all my belongings, including my art documents. At that time I had no idea that my wife and 6-year old child would meet their death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. And I got further, via the Gleiwitz concentration camp to the Blechhammer concentration camp, where on 25/01/1945 I was liberated, along with my comrades, by the Red Army.

He lived in Czechoslovakia after the war and subsequently emigrated to Israel and thence to USA where his daughter Miriam still lives.

34 SLIDE Miriam plus art

35 SLIDE Ostrava park

36 SLIDE Because they were Jews, one picture

Eric Lichtblau was a contemporary of David Friedmann's from Ostrava and, like him, was deported to Theresienstadt. He survived and emigrated to Israel where, as Eli Leskly, he painted his memories of the camp. His material is exhibited in the LA Museum of the Holocaust.

37 SLIDE Leskly picture

38 SLIDE Leskly picture

Leo Haas was described as a degenerate artist and Friedmann had his work confiscated but, so far as I know, only one artist associated with Ostrava produced a self-portrait as a degenerate artist:

39 SLIDE Selbstbildnis als entarteter Kuenstler

This was actually painted in 1937 in Ostrava when he was staying at the home of "JUDr. Edmund Palkovský, a leading person of Czech national movement in Ostrava region (\*1858+1930)." (info ex Liba Salomonovicová). the grandparents of the woman whom he subsequently married. The Palkovsky family were not Jewish.

Can you recognize him?

He painted Ostrava

40 SLIDE OSTRAVA

He was Oskar Kojkoschka.

We started the discussion about Ostrava artists with Yehuda Bacon's theme painting and perhaps we should close it similarly, with his painting ), **In Memory of the Czech Transport to the Gas Chambers**, 1945,

41 SLIDE Picture of Yehuda's father

Now let me tell you a Children's Story, *The Magic Doll*.

Once upon a time, there was a war and a little girl had to run away with her mother to a strange country and all she could take with her was her doll, Lizzi

42 SLIDE Doll

The little girl could not speak to the children in the new country at first, as she did not speak their language so she spoke only to Lizzi. One day, Lizzi came alive and told the little girl all sorts of wonderful stories. As the little girl learned to speak to the local children, she told them about the magic doll. One day, a lady came to the girls mother and explained that her daughter was very ill and desperately wanted to have the magic doll to help her get better. The little girl was persuaded to part with Lizzi and, because she was so grateful, the other woman gave her mother a bucket of potatoes and a bucket of turnips for Lizzi.

43 SLIDE Bucket

And the little girl actually got better. So Lizzi really was magic, producing food and good health!

The story was written by Gitta Thieberger, who is the niece of Eli Laskly. Gitta's father had a photography shop in Ostrava and he and Gitta's mother were staunch communists before the war. Her father escaped to Russia after the German invasion of Ostrava and Gitta and her mother joined him later. When Russia joined the war, he joined the Russian Army as an aerial photographer and was killed on active service.

The story is, of course, true and the events in it took place in Rostov on Don.

44 SLIDE BOOK

Gitta and her mother survived and made their way finally to Australia, where Gitta still lives

45 SLIDE Greetings

What do we plan to do with all this information that we have collected? We hope to write a book of *The Ostrava Story* but the first priority is to sort out and organize all the material we have and ensure its preservation. Dr Leo Pavlat, the Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague has said that the JMP would be pleased to receive and preserve our archive, so it will be transferred there as soon as we have properly organized it.

We are, therefore, now going through the material and putting it in order and trying to fill in some of the many gaps. If we can get financial support, we will employ an archivist in Ostrava on a part-time basis to help with this.

So, at some stage in the not too distant future, the Kingston Ostrava Archive will be available to all researchers and students in the Jewish Museum in Prague, from where our Scroll started its journey here.

46 SLIDE End