

# **"Steel and Schnapps, Sausages and Soldiers, Scrolls and Survival - the Story of Ostrava"**

**Brighton Limmud, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2009**

## **SLIDE 1 Title**

We all know of the militaristic and warlike skill and excellence of early twentieth century central European Jews so you will not be surprised to see us start this talk with Lt. Otto Gross being decorated by the Emperor Karl 1 in 1917.

## **SLIDE 2 Otto plus Emperor**

In later life, Otto was a Director of a Depositenbank in Vienna, that went bust!

And here is his daughter, Alice Anson, who also was a soldier.

## **SLIDE 3 Imperial War Museum poster**

Although not decorated by the King - Emperor, she did feature in an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum.

## **SLIDE 4 Albert Vogel as a soldier.**

Albert Vogel, Heinz' father ([Heinz will feature in our story later on](#)) , was also a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the first World War, although he had a less distinguished career than Otto.

They are of interest to us, not only because of their valour and military bearing but because they came from a town in Northern Moravia, Ostrava. And Ostrava is of interest because Kingstons shul has a sefer torah on permanent loan that came from there.

**SLIDE 5 Sefer**

**SLIDE 6 Certificate**

We have been researching the history of Ostrava and its Jewish community for some time now. Its story echoes the story of Central European and its Jews; I am sure you will find echoes of your own family story in some of the details today

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. It lies in the valley of the river Ostravice at its junction with the river Oder.

**SLIDE 7 Map**

Until the mid eighteenth century it was a little place of almost no interest to anyone. It had no Jewish population at all, as they were barred from the town so our story really doesn't start until the middle of the eighteenth century, the time of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire.

## **SLIDE 8    Map, Austro-Hungarian Empire**

Then Ostrava was on the border between Moravia and Silesia. In fact, the border between Moravia and Silesia there was the river Ostravice and Ostrava grew up first of all on the Silesian bank and later expanded onto the Moravian side. Its population spoke German of course and the name was, in German, Slesisch Ostrau or, most confusingly, Polnisch Ostrau or Polish Ostrava, despite the fact that it was not and had not been in Poland). The town on the Moravian side of the river was called Mährisch Ostrau or Moravian Ostrava (Moravská Ostrava in Czech).

In the mid C18, black coal was discovered and a major mining and iron industry developed. The economy grew and so did the population, increasing rapidly from 2000 in 1750 to about 300,000 in the mid 1930s.

The Emperor Joseph II issued the Edict of Tolerance in 1782 giving Jews more freedom to travel, trade and live and in 1785 the local Ostrava authorities allowed Jews to move into town.

The mines and the steel industry expanded, and Ostrava expanded round them, so that the town and the mines and the blast furnaces etc were all in close proximity and people lived surrounded by slag heaps, furnaces, mines, and industry – even well-to-do people who lived in the centre of town! It became almost a joke that there was a special Ostrava shirt – white with black polka dots!

**SLIDE 9 Ostrava in 1911**

**SLIDE 10 Mines and mills etc**

**SLIDE 11 Heinz and coke heap**

The iron and steel industry grew with investment and active involvement of the Viennese Rothschilds who owned the Vitkovice Iron Works. In 1837, Salomon Rothschild and supported by Chancellor Metternich, persuaded the Emperor Ferdinand to give permission to build a railway from Vienna to the northern coalfields of Bohemia and Moravia, to terminate eventually in Cracow in Galicia (now in Poland)

In 1849, David Guttman from Lipnik in Moravia extended his transport business from gypsum and grain into coal and rapidly decided to invest directly in the mines as well. In the late 1870's David Guttman and his brother joined forces with the Rothschilds as the Vitkovice Mining and Iron Works which was a major economic force in the Austro-Hungarian and later the Czechoslovak economy. By an awful irony, Vitkovice steel provided the tracks to what later became a Polish town, Oswiecim, which we now know as Auschwitz. Curiously, Heinz Vogel's father's family came to Ostrava from Oswiecim!

Ostrava grew as the coal and steel industries grew, and that growth was rapid. It was mainly by people moving into the area as it developed economically. In 1750 I guess the population was 1 or 2 thousand, at the most. By 1930 it was over 200,000

Population data are rather hazy because of confusion over what is included in “Ostrava”. That confusion becomes greater when we try to estimate the number of Jews, as ethnic and racial affiliations (e.g. German, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Jewish) are not at all unambiguous. However, it seems fairly clear that there were 10,000 or more Jews in Ostrava in the early 1930s.

Our story, that of Jewish Ostrava, really starts in 1792 when Mordechai Schoenhof became the first Jew to settle. There had been one Jew previously recorded as living in Ostrava in 1530 but Jews were shortly afterwards banned from residence so Mordechai was the first. He ran a distillery with his son, Pinchas. As we will see, there is a powerful stream of alcohol, laced with coal-dust, which runs through the early part of the Ostrava story.

Katya Gould’s family were fruit brandy distillers. They lived in Frydek Mistek (15 miles from Ostrava) and had been distillers for 3 or 4 generations. Katya went to school in Ostrava and had most of her social life there. She came to England, to study English, just before the War.

George Roden’s grandparents ran a small distillery and bar in one of the main streets in Ostrava –it is now the site of The English Pub! .

Leo Wiener’s grandfather, Julius Ferber, owned the Hotel Post in Svinov, now a suburb of Ostrava. It was close to the Vitkovice Iron and Steel works and the bar was very popular! His daughter married Josef Wiener, whose father also owned a hotel near

Ostrava. In fact, of about 360 hotels, coffee houses, bars etc in Ostrava in the early 1930s, about 100 were Jewish owned.

(Co-incidence: I recently heard from Dr Eva Arend in Switzerland, whose family name was Wallner. The Wallner family lived in one of the apartments in a house built by Josef Wiener and Leo remembers the Wallner family!)

Back to our story!

Simon Fraenkel took the lease of the brewery in Sleska Ostrava and in 1832 established the first room for prayer in a room over the brewery. By 1848, the Jewish community had out-grown that room and they moved to a room above the *Zavada Inn* also in Sleská Ostrava.

So now we have seen the Steel and Schnapps of our alliterative title, as well as some, at least, of the soldiers.

Simon Fraenkel had already set up the *Jewish Religious Association for Silesian and Moravian Ostrava* but the community could not agree which side of the river to build the synagogue, so they delayed!!!

Death then took a hand! In 1872, a cholera epidemic broke out and the local Medical Officer refused to allow the body of Mrs Fanny Reicher to be taken to Teschen for burial in the Jewish cemetery, so she had to be buried in the local Protestant one. When Mrs Bertha Reiss (grand-daughter of Mordechai Schoenhof) died of the disease two days later, something had to be done!! So

Markus Strassman (now the landlord of the town's brewery) and Joachim Kafka (a businessman) bought a couple of fields on the road to Troppau (Opava) for a cemetery.

The purchase price was 4000Fl or £352 at the then exchange rate, or ca £14500 in today's (2006) money. It was raised in a very short time, giving you some idea of the wealth and size of the community.

On 7 December 1872, official permission was received for the cemetery and the unfortunate Mrs Reiss was the first person to be buried there.

**SLIDE 12 Cemetery – original shed**

**SLIDE 13 Cemetery 1920**

In the mid 1980's, the cemetery was razed and turned into a park and on 18 October 1994 a Memorial was unveiled by President Vaclav Havel to the Jews Deported from Ostrava to Nisko. We will hear more about Nisko later.

**SLIDE 14 Memorial**

**SLIDE 15 Memorial with me**

We have already met the Rothschilds in connection with the steel industry in Ostrava. Now let's meet Ostrava's own Rothschild!

This story starts on a sunny day in early autumn (that's a poetic creation, no idea!) in 1847 when a 20 year old Albert Wechsberg

arrived in Ostrava from the East, on a hay cart (or rather a cart with corn)

He prospered and became a money lender, then a Banker.  
(A.Wechsberg u. Söhne)

### **SLIDE 16 Albert and Frankeská**

He was known as Albert der Guter because would lend money (at only 5 or 6%!!) without security if he liked you. He was known as “Our Rothschild”, “Der Herr Bankier” and was the wealthiest man in town.

He built a house with bank on ground floor in centre of town with the Bank on ground floor; offices on 1<sup>st</sup> floor, eldest son on the second and youngest, Siegfried, on the top floor

### **Approx HALF WAY**

### **SLIDE 17 Wechsberg House**

Albert died, full of years honour and money in 1913.

In 1914, Albert youngest son, Siegfried, was called up into the army as First Lieutenant and was killed in November 1914 fighting the Russians. – [another Ostrava Soldier](#) –

The family was very patriotic and Austro-Hungarian (like most of the Jews), hence the pride shown in all the photographs of our

Jewish Ostrava Soldiers.. The family invested in Government War Bonds! So, in 1918, family lost most of their money (and were also swindled by the elder brothers!)

Siegfried's wife Hermina (née Krieger) was left to bring up her two sons Joseph and Max. Joseph had a particularly interesting life. He was a gifted musician and spent some time as a pianist on Atlantic liners, qualified as a lawyer, and was sent by the Czechoslovak government to Washington in the late 1930's to explain their position and policies and to lobby the US Government. He remained in USA when war broke out and returned to Czechoslovakia as an American soldier and returned (unofficially) to Ostrava – then in the Russian sector – by hitching lifts with Russian soldiers and swapping Camel cigarettes for vodka and rides!

He later became a journalist and author and it is thanks to him that we know so much about the Wechsberg family history.

He tells how, when the Bank collapsed, The Bank floor was rented out to a delicatessen (Joseph thought that a great improvement!!) owned by S Bitter. We do not know where the sausages for this delicatessen came from, but it is likely that they were made by the Huppert's who ran a very successful sausage manufacturing business (kosher and not kosher) in Privoz.

Ruth Huppert describes her early life, which sounds absolutely ideal (except that her parents divorced and she lived with her father and Aunt and Uncle) in her autobiography "*Die Hofnung*

*erhielt mich am Leben*” published in English as *The Triumph of Hope*. It describes her life in Theresiensatdt, where she married, and Auschwitz (where she gave birth to her son to whom she gave a lethal injection to prevent him suffering even more) She survived, married a second time and lived in Israel until a few weeks ago when she died.

Ruth’s uncle (The father of Leo Wiener who lives in Edgware) ran a hotel, as did Peter Erben’s father (see *Auf eigenen Spuren*). In fact, out of 360 hotels, wine bars and coffee houses in Ostrava 100 were in Jewish ownership, firmly establishing the Jewish connection to Schnapps and sausages!

Let’s return to Fraenkel and Strassman and the brewery. Fraenkel did not approve of the cemetery being on Moravian soil, and there was a classic row between Fraenkel and Strassman. Strassman won, and in 1875 became the President of the new Moravská Ostrava Jewish Community.

The Board had 6 members beside Strassman. One was a medical doctor, one a manufacturer, a miller, a restaurateur, and two businessmen.

On 6 March 1876 they bought a plot of land for a synagogue. Building started in May 1879 and, incredibly, the synagogue was opened by the local Royal and Imperial Representative (I suppose the Deputy Lieutenant!) in September 1879!

**SLIDE 18 Main shul exterior old picture**

**SLIDE 19 Main shul interior point out the Ark**

**SLIDE 20 Report in main paper about the opening.**

The article in the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1879 issue of the Mähr.-Schlesischer Grenzbote (Moravian-Silesian Border Messenger) reported in considerable detail the festivities that took place to celebrate the opening / consecration of the new Jewish Synagogue in Mährisch Ostrau (Moravská Ostrava). The report emphasises that this event was of great importance to the town as a whole and expands on the spirit of tolerance and enlightenment of the place.

Before we leave Markus Strassman and his Presidency of the Ostrava Jewish Community, we should see the Illuminated Address that the community presented to him in 1900, to mark his 25years as President:

**SLIDE 21 Illuminated Address**

**SLIDE 22 Illuminated Address**

So that is how/where our sefer torah started its life. But how and why did it arrive in 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. 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 Kingston.

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. We have seen the establishment of the main shul in 1879. Over the next couple of decades, other equally impressive synagogues were established

### **SLIDE 23**

### **SLIDE 24– Vítkovice, Erotingasse**

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 25– 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.

Albert Vogel, Heinz' father, finally escaped from Ostrava because of the coal mines and this border shift. He went down a mine in Ostrava and came up through another shaft in what was then Poland! Heinz and his mother joined him later, by tram!

We mentioned Nisko earlier in the talk. In September 1939, the first mass deportation of Jews took place from Ostrava. 2000 men were sent to Nisko nad Sanem in Poland, as a pilot run, organised by Eichmann, for mass deportations.

### **SLIDE 26 What to take to Nisko**

### **SLIDE 27– Eichmann telegram**

## **Martin Gilbert writes:**

On October 17 (1939), more than a thousand Jews from the former Czechoslovak town of Moravska Ostrava were deported by train to the Lublin region of Poland, and there forced to build a labour camp for themselves. In the Nazi terminology of deception, the camp was given the name 'Central office for Jewish Resettlement'.

One of their number, Max Burger, later recalled, the Jews deported from Mostravska Ostrava were put into railway coaches – passenger coaches – on October 17. The coaches were placed under SS guard, locked and sealed. On October 18 the train began to move. No water was available, and when, at Cracow station, those in the train pleaded for water, and Poles on the platform wished to help them, Stormtroopers chased away the Poles 'with rifle blows'. On reaching Nisko station, in the Lublin region, all engineers, builders and doctors among the deported Jews were ordered to leave the train. Because the doors of the train were sealed, they had to clamber out through the windows.

A German officer addressed them. He was Adolf Eichmann, now in charge of 'Jewish Resettlement', as he had earlier been in charge of emigration. 'About seven or eight kilometres from here.'

Eichmann told them, 'across the river San, the "Fuehrer" of the Jews has promised a new homeland. There are no apartments and no houses – if you will build your homes you will have a roof over your head'. There was 'no water', Eichmann added. 'The wells

are full of epidemics, there's cholera, dysentery, and typhus. If you dig for water, you'll have water'.

The deported Jews were then sent across a pontoon bridge to the 'resettlement' region. Once there, such luggage as they had been able to bring was opened and German soldiers 'just took whatever they wanted'.

(from Testimony of Max Burger: Eichmann trial 27 April 1961, session 19)

Subsequently, other transports arrived in Nisko from other parts of Bohemia and Moravia, still as part of the "pilot run". It was, unfortunately, a success and mass deportations became horribly common. So the camp was abandoned after some months, having proved the point. Some of the deportees escaped eastwards to the Russian border. Some were shot by the Russians but some managed to cross the border and some joined the Russian forces and a few survived the war. Others returned to Ostrava and were later deported to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz and death.

Perhaps at this point, we should introduce our last soldier, Kurt Karroll Smulovic. He was mobilised as a Lt in the Czechoslovak Army in 1939 and when the Germans invaded, he escaped over the border to Poland with a group of his soldiers, having "removed" the German border guard. Thence he came to England and joined the British Army and, after many adventures, was sent as liaison officer to the Red Army. He appears to have actually joined a tank

regiment in the Red army and took part in the battle to liberate Ostrava. Here he is, leading the Liberation Parade in Ostrava.

### **SLIDE 28 Smulovic and Liberation Parade**

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 Kingston shul. 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 29 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 30 – 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 31 – school in 1942, with Stars.**

Peter Erben remembers going to the school in 1941 with his father to say Kaddish.

In 1942, the remaining Jewish population was all shipped off to Theresienstadt and thence to Auschwitz and Treblinka and death.

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 32 – August letter, page 1, with translation.**

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 33 –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 34 –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 Kingston.

But although the shuls in Ostrava were destroyed and most of the Jews were murdered by the Nazis, Ostravak Jewish life survived and prospered, but elsewhere.

For example, Eastbourne! After the war, Eastbourne was the site of an ice-cream factory, producing a rare delicacy invented by a Czech lawyer called Dr Ernest Velden It was the *Arctic Roll*

**SLIDE 35 Arctic Roll**

While it is not certain that Ernest Velden came from Ostrava, his family almost certainly did. So, on behalf of ice-cream lovers everywhere, I claim him for Ostrava!

In conclusion, let me introduce you to Bertie Goldberg, of Golders Green, whose story merits a lecture in its own right. He arrived in England in 1939 to join his elder brother. The rest of his family, from Ostrava, were murdered.

**SLIDE 36 Goldberg family**

Here he is, in Kibbutz Lavi, celebrating his 60<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary, with his present family.

This is a story of survival and hope, not just of loss and destruction.

**SLIDE 37 Title**

Thank you