

A SEGMENT OF HISTORY OF THE BRISBANE HEBREW CONGREGATION.

OECH MEMORIAL SEFER TORAH #450 (NUMBER 3908)

In 1970, the then president of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, Mr. Arthur Myers,(Z'L) communicated with the Memorial Scrolls' Trust Committee in London seeking a possible Sefer Torah for our community.

His request received a favourable response and with the not insignificant financial assistance of Mr. Abe Newhouse, (Z'L) also a past president of the BHC, the Torah (number #450) was safely delivered for communal use , the transfer being by Qantas on what was referred to as "Cargo Freight collect basis." The Klei Kodesh is reported as being brought back from Israel by his son Arnold.

What do we know of Sefer Torah #450 ? Its date of writing was 1824, and it was used in the city of BRNO, at least up until the second world war, This city , the second largest in the Czech Republic, is the cultural and administrative centre of the south Moravian Region. In 1938 there were 11,000 Jewish people in Brno. Around 1000 escaped , and finally entered the then Palestine, as illegal immigrants leaving some 9,700 people there in 1939. After the Shoah, only 804 were found to have survived.

In 1942, the nazis ordered the Jewish communities in the Protectorate (historical lands of Bohemia and Moravia) to send all their liturgical objects to the newly established Central Jewish Museum in Prague. Some 1800 Sefer Torahs were thus centralised. A small number of these were sent to some communities which were re-established after the war. Under Communism sadly many of these were again disbanded and some of the Torahs returned to Prague. In 1950 the repository for the Torahs in Prague was changed and by 1956-9, these became a " museum of scrolls". In the early 1960s the communists found there was a lucrative market for the Sifre Torahs. In January 1964, the entire residual set of Torahs numbering around 1564 were bought by a philanthropist wrapped and shipped to Kent House in London . Strict guidelines were in place for their use.(eB...could not be sold, could only be sent to "needy" congregations etc) Over 1,000 of these Sifre Torahs are distributed throughout 20 countries by the Memorial Scroll Trust. The then Deshon Street Shul in Brisbane also was a beneficiary of the Trust.

Now what of Sefer Torah #450.It has sat in our Aron HaKodesh (Ark) for many years. It was re- identified only very recently by the Czech marking on the Aitz Chaim,(number. 3908), and unfortunately cannot be used during the normal services, as it is "Posul". However it is still used on Simchat Torah, and with its lineage now being identified

Since the initial presentation of this article, Rabbi Jaffe with the assistance of Melbourne's Sofer, (Scribe) Rabbi Eli Gutnick have both examined this 200 year old Torah in detail. Despite its age, the condition of the Torah was such that it was actually repairable. The two sons of communal stalwarts, Robert and Elizabeth Skala, who had passed away and were both Czechoslovak Holocaust survivors,(Z'L) have sponsored this project. We are now the proud possessors of an additional Sefer Torah (1824) which can be used in our Services when necessary.

A Memorial Cabinet has been provided to display this aspect of our Jewish history, albeit such a tragic period of same. This Holocaust Memorial" now stands in the Synagogue as a proud reminder

of those once flourishing Jewish communities in Czechoslovakia which were destroyed and whose members inclusive of men, women and children were murdered by the nazis.

THE MEMORIAL SCROLLS TRUST of London, has provided us with the two following sentences which warrant reading and remembering

“ EACH MEMORIAL SCROLL IS A MEMORY OF THE PAST AND A MESSAGE FOR THE FUTURE.

WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO THOSE PAST GENERATIONS TO KEEP THEIR MEMORY ALIVE AND TO ENSURE THE LESSONS FROM THE SHOAH ARE REMEMBERED”.

DR A.M.BRINER OAM (Hon Heritage Officer Brisbane Hebrew Congregation)

Updated in 2023 corresponding to the Jewish Year of 5783