

Tracing the Roots of Beth-El's Holocaust Torah

By Hollace Weiner, Beth-El Archivist

When I could not locate the Czech village of Uhrineves in a current world atlas, I thought no more of it. Uhrineves [*U-rijz-ne-vesh*], a word pronounced with soft, meshing consonants that sound Hungarian, is the home town of Beth-El's Holocaust Torah. I had tried to learn something about the town when researching Beth-El's Centennial history in 2002, but I hit a dead end because it is not on contemporary maps. Countless settlements disappeared during the Holocaust, so I thought no more of it.

Then, as my husband, Bruce, and I were planning a trip to Prague in the autumn of 2003, we looked through the *Jewish Heritage Travel Guide to Central & Eastern Europe*, a book by Ruth Ellen Gruber, niece of congregant Herman Morris. In that guidebook, there it was: Uhrineves, described as a farming village incorporated into the Prague city limits. The writer recommended visiting the village's Jewish cemetery, where weathered gravestones etched with Hebrew words date as far back as the 1840s and continue to 1939.

Uhrineves also has a synagogue building, constructed on the main street in 1848. The shul once served more than 300 Jews who farmed the neighboring countryside. After World War II, when no Jews returned to this wide spot in the road, the shul was turned into a laundromat, then slated for demolition until the Prague Historical Monuments Authority interceded. Because of its status as a Jewish landmark, the building was saved and refurbished into a storm-window shop.

To find a contact person in Uhrineves, I emailed the [Czech Torah Network](#), an Internet site that assists synagogues tracking down their Holocaust scrolls' home communities. To my amazement, I received a lengthy response from the Finchley Synagogue in London, which also has a Torah from Uhrineves. The Finchley Jews have an active cultural exchange program with the citizens of Uhrineves, who want to preserve memories of their Jewish neighbors. The Londoners put me in touch with the liaison between world Jewry and Uhrineves—a 73-year-old woman who cherished her schoolgirl ties to dozens of Jewish neighbors.

Our contact person, Libuse Votavova, met my husband Bruce and me outside the former synagogue along with her granddaughter Klara who is fluent in English. The grandmother and granddaughter escorted us inside the landmark and into a boardroom where we shared mementos and stories. Libuse [*Li-bush-er*] recalled visiting the synagogue as a child and described the long-gone chandelier and the wooden balcony where the women had prayed.

She pulled out of her purse a list of Jewish people who had lived in Uhrineves in 1941 when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia, and she reminisced. She recalled her 12-year-old girl friend Hana Polackova being called out of the schoolroom and never returning. She remembered the day a Jewish teacher, a beautiful woman named Helena Rezkova, was interrupted in the middle of a classroom lecture for deportation to the Terezin Concentration Camp. She spoke of Alfred, Elsa, Franziska and Klara Kolbenova. She said that today, more than six decades later, "their house is still named the Kolbenova home." As Libuse shared her memories, tears welled in her eyes. It made the Holocaust chilling to us as well.

We left Libuse with several mementoes that she placed in the Uhrineves village museum. Among these items is the *Beth-El Centennial* book, which has a photo of the Holocaust Torah. We gave her a copy of the appraisal submitted by the scribe, called a *sofer*, who refurbished our Holocaust scroll. The *sofer* replaced the wooden rollers and removed stains from the parchment. When the Czech woman realized how much care the scroll has received, she broke into smiles. Warmth filled her face.

FAST FORWARD TO THE SUMMER OF 2007 IN TEXAS. Out of the blue, I received correspondence from Libuse Votavova. She was traveling in the United States and was en route to an international gymnastics competition in Fort Worth, my home town!!! I could scarcely believe that a woman nearing her eightieth birthday was visiting America with a busload of Czech tourists who planned to brave the heat wave in Texas, where temperatures were soaring above 100 degrees.

Libuse would be in Fort Worth over Shabbat. What an opportunity. I invited her to dinner, then panicked. My German is so rusty that I hastened to invite friends who could more easily converse with her. My first call was to Brigitte Altman, a Lithuanian-born Holocaust survivor. The next call was to her close friends Hilda and Helmut Horchler, a German couple who had worked in the US for many years. We welcomed everyone for a traditional Shabbat meal with blessings over candles, wine, and challah followed by generous servings of brisket, kugel, roast potatoes, and salad.

Then we drove to the synagogue where we were in for an annual summer treat. That night at services, instead of a sermon, pianist Jose Figbali, a winner of the International Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, and violinist Curt Thompson of the city's Mimir Chamber Music Festival were performing. I was relieved, certain that our European guest would appreciate a classical recital more so than a sermon in English.

During services, I was asked to introduce Libuse. Afterward, the musicians remained in the sanctuary as we removed the Holocaust Torah from the ark and gently unrolled the scroll. With awe, Libuse and the two musicians gazed at the handwritten Hebrew text. Reverently, they touched the outside of the parchment scroll, which is thick, with a furry texture akin to suede. Neither Libuse nor the musicians had ever seen a Torah scroll up close. For each of us, these were moving, memorable moments.

<https://memorialscrollstrust.org/>