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Synagogue welcomes tattered Torah

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

A 19TH-CENTURY Torah desecrated during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia has found a new home in Farmington Hills.

The Holocaust Memorial Torah — burned and ripped and missing several chapters — was unveiled on Yom Kippur, Oct. 13, in a glass-bordered corner of Adat Shalom Synagogue. It stands as a memorial to the 6-million Jews slaughtered by the Nazis during World War II.

"It will serve as a tangible, constant reminder of the Holocaust and what happened to our people," said Rabbi Ely Spectre of the 1,100-family synagogue.

The rabbi led the dedication procession for the precious parchment scroll. The cantor and choir sang songs written by Jews housed in World War II concentration camps and ghettos.

Known as the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. The day was chosen for the dedication because it traditionally draws a large number of congregants.

In addition, Spectre said, "part of the holiday service remembers the martyrs who gave their lives for Judaism. Another part of it is to remember the 6-million Jews who died in the Holocaust."

"So it was an appropriate day."

EVEN THOUGH irreparable damage prevents the Holocaust Memorial Torah from being used, it nonetheless will play an active role at two times of the year:

● On Holocaust Memorial Day, observed in the spring to commemorate the Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis.

● On Tisha b'Av, a summer observance recalling the destruction of Jewish temples in 586 CBE and 70 CE, the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, the Holocaust of World War II and the past destruction of Jewish communities around the world.

The memorial scroll has special meaning for many Adat Shalom congregants. As Spectre put it: "We've got members who are survivors of the Holocaust. We've got members who are children of survivors. And we've got members who are children of those who were killed."

When written in 1890, the Torah contained the five books of Moses, which make up the Old Testament. It had been part of the Jewish community in the Czechoslovakian village of Kyjov.

During World War II, the Nazis made it a point to collect Jewish objects, including Torahs. "They wanted them for a museum showing the kinds of things they destroyed," Spectre said.

Collected objects were stored in synagogues, which the Nazis used as warehouses, Spectre said.

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Adat Shalom Synagogue

JUST BEFORE Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia in 1968, 2,000 damaged Torahs were salvaged, thanks to philanthropists from around the world. Repair proved painstaking. "A scribe was used, and the parchment had to be matched," Spectre said.

Sent to Westminster Synagogue in London, the Torahs now are entrusted to the care of synagogues around the world through an application process.

The educational value of Adat Shalom's newest Torah is immeasurable. Said Spectre: "It will serve as a lasting reminder for our young people of the Holocaust. It's something personal they can relate to in a very vivid way."

Artist Elsa Wachs of Philadelphia designed the Torah mantle — a charred and burned prayer shawl with two cloth arms, bent with pain, rising to protect the scroll. Both the arms and the Torah are bound with Tiflin, leather straps with small boxes containing scriptural passages. When worn, they remind Jews that their thoughts and actions should be directed to God.

"The soul of the Jew and the Torah cannot be parted," says a brochure detailing the story of the Holocaust Memorial Torah.

THE TORAH'S new support, designed and sculpted by Morris Brose of Detroit, shows a bronze-plated representation of the Ark of the Covenant, fragmented and pierced by black steel blades.

On the blue collar of the prayer shawl are the words "... in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; ... and the bush was not consumed." The burning bush has long been a symbol of Israel.

Jews lived and worshiped in Kyjov at least as early as 1506. It was the only royal city open to Jews.

A royal charter of 1613 protected the Kyjov Jews through the centuries until World War II. At the time the Nazis attacked, 300 Jews lived in Kyjov. In its heyday of 1890, it had 881 Jewish residents.

Sadistic creativity was rampant among the Nazis. They made lampshades from desecrated Torahs as well as from human skin. "We also have found pieces of Torah used to make shoes," Spectre said.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Rabbi Ely Spectre, with Adat Shalom Synagogue's newest Torah. The precious parchment scroll, although badly damaged, survived the Holocaust of World War II.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Adela Minor, at the dining room table in her Farmington home, working on her Braille transcriber.

Helping hand

Retiree is selected Braillist of the Year

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

FOR 12 years, Adela Minor, a retired high school geometry teacher, has concentrated on another discipline focused on shape and structure.

She has logged 26,000 hours transcribing and proofreading Braille, looking for mistakes on pages of raised dots designed to be deciphered by touch.

Because of her dedication in transcribing 26,000 pages of Braille and proofreading another 120,000 pages, Minor, 79, was honored as Braillist of the Year.

The second annual ceremony, sponsored by Volunteers Helping All to Read in Michigan, took place in the Farmington Community Library, which houses the regional library for the blind. The Farmington resident was nominated by Nardin Park Braille Transcribers.

"I'm not a person who likes to go out to eat. I don't belong to any bridge clubs," Minor said.

When she retired from teaching geometry at Bedford Union High School in 1972, she realized she would need to become involved in an outside activity. "I wanted something that occupied my mind. You

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Farmington

have to have a good mind for this. It isn't an easy thing."

AS A retirement occupation, it seems particularly suited to Minor's abilities. The demands of transcribing and proofreading call into play a meticulousness toward detail and recordkeeping cultivated during 40 years of teaching high school Latin and geometry.

A specialist in transcribing textbooks, Minor keeps a record of each text she has handled in a red card-board binder. Carefully written on looseleaf paper is the title of each book she has either transcribed or proofread. If she has proofread the text, the name of the transcriber appears next to the title. "I'm more interested in textbooks, having been a teacher," she said.

Usually, several transcribers

share the typing for the same book. Minor's current project, transcribing a Gregg typing book into Braille, is a solo effort. The project poses challenges because the book's practice pieces are tallied according to the number of syllables per line.

For the sighted typist, the numbers are printed above the appropriate syllable. Minor is placing them at the end of the words in parentheses. Since these modifications to the book must be consistent, she's typing it herself.

As a student, Minor skipped typing class. "I'm not much of a typist," she said. But that hasn't hindered her from becoming a prolific transcriber.

She completed the Braille class sponsored by the Sisterhood of Temple Beth El and received a proficiency certificate from the Library of Congress in 1974. In 1979, she earned a proofreader's certificate through the Library of Congress proofreading correspondence course.

MOST OF her work is done at the dining room table, where her six-key Braille typewriter is positioned next to a window affording a view of a gnarled tree in the back yard. She has a second work area set up near the living room window and its view

of a tree in her front yard. "I have the whole house covered with Braille," she said.

She's fastidious about her work and the transcriptions people deliver to her door to be proofread. "I don't think a week goes by that I don't get two-three packages. Sometimes, I get five or six."

Demand for textbooks follows the course of the school year, reaching its peak in the fall and slackening off in the spring and summer.

Transcriptions submitted to her for proofreading, with many hasty mistakes, irk her. "Sometimes, I feel like I'm still teaching," she said.

Corrections for each volume are listed according to page, line and word on a separate sheet of paper. When the volumes are returned to the transcriber, the mistakes are corrected with a Braille eraser, an instrument that could pass on first glance for a felt-tipped pen.

CORRECTIONS ARE punched in by hand with the aid of a slate, a rectangular metal piece with four slotted rows of dots to guide the Braillist. With each new page, Minor looks over the patterns of dots, scanning for mistakes. She has a respect for people who can read Braille by touch. "I can't understand how they can do it."