

A TORAH SCROLL FROM DVŮR KRÁLOVÉ

Rabbi Norman R. Patz

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Shabbat shalom! Thank you, Rabbi Mikelberg, for inviting me to speak to you about the Torah scroll from Dvůr Kralove in your synagogue's ark. Having that scroll puts your congregation in an exclusive club, one with only six members, each of which is a trustee for a Torah scroll from the destroyed Jewish community of Dvůr Kralove nad Labem in the northeastern region of the Czech Republic. I am here because my congregation in New Jersey is one. The others are in Newton, Massachusetts; Geneva, New York; Claremont College, in California; and in Wellington, New Zealand.

It is a great privilege for your congregation to be the custodian of this scroll. It is one of the 1,564 Czech Torah scrolls that were saved from the destruction visited upon our people during the Second World War. In nearly all of the countries they occupied, the Nazis looted the synagogues – melted, destroyed or scattered the ritual objects – and condemned our people to be murdered. But in the historic lands of Bohemia and Moravia, which today constitute the Czech Republic, they adopted another procedure. They permitted the Jewish community leadership to gather the ritual Judaica together and sent them to Prague, the capital city. The motives of the Jewish community were clear: to save whatever ritual objects they could possibly preserve; there was no way they could save all their fellow Jews. Why the Nazis allowed it is still a mystery.

In this way, the little Jewish Museum in Prague, which had been founded in 1906 and had about 2,000 items in its prewar collection, was dramatically expanded. By the end of the war, when Prague was liberated, the museum's collection numbered over 100,000 items, stacked floor to ceiling in eight synagogues and 50 warehouses throughout the city, with very few survivors alive to reclaim their possessions or to reestablish the synagogues that had existed in interwar democratic Czechoslovakia.

After the end of the Second World War, the surviving Czech Jewish community, reduced by 85%, struggled to resume living. One of their challenges was figuring out how to cope with the extraordinary treasure of Judaica that had fallen so tragically into their hands. But just three years later – in 1948, a Communist government – totalitarian, atheist, more orthodox in its Communism than Moscow itself – came to power in a coup d'état and, among its other acts, nationalized the Jewish Museum. From then until 1989, when the Velvet Revolution brought an end to that terrible regime, the museum – dedicated at least in theory to the faith and fellowship of our people – was under the control of an atheist Communist state.

The Torah scrolls the Nazis had allowed to be collected were never put on display. They were stored in a disused synagogue in Prague until 1962, when the Communist government, looking for Western cash, sold them to an English art collector for £30,000, a much larger amount of money than it is today. (In those years, a new Cadillac cost \$5000.) The scrolls were brought to London, where the Memorial Scrolls Trust was established and a *sofer* was hired to repair those that could be repaired. To the best of its ability, the Trust researched the history of each scroll. It then began distributing them in trust to living Jewish communities such as ours to enable the kosher scrolls – those fit for ritual use – to be given an honored place in the *aron kodesh* and be read to the congregation at appropriate times; and to display those that were too damaged for ritual use in

ways that would honor the memory of the Jewish communities that were destroyed in the maelstrom of the Holocaust.

Your Torah scroll comes from a town called Dvůr Králové. My congregation in New Jersey is also custodian of a Dvůr Králové scroll, which we received in 1975. We have been living with our scroll, treasuring it, and researching its history and that of Dvůr Králové in the more than 50 years since. It is my privilege to speak to you on this Shabbat to share some of that with you.

If your scroll could speak, this is what I think it would tell you: “I am an aging survivor. I need you to be my witnesses so that the truth will not vanish, so civilization can be saved. If you are not willing to be my witnesses, then big lies – like those being circulated on Holocaust denial sites on the Internet – will permanently displace truth, you and your family will be endangered, and civilization will be doomed because everything that I stand for will be lost.”

On what basis do I make such a dark statement? How does your scroll get to carry so much weight, to be so central to our very survival? I believe that this scroll – like all of the others rescued from the Nazis – has the burden of conveying not only our understanding of God’s word and our people’s covenant with the Holy One, but also the knowledge? of the darkest period in Jewish history.

After we got our scroll, we tried to find out whatever we could about the Dvůr Králové Jewish community before, during and after the Holocaust. But until the fall of the Communist regime, all we could learn was that 111 Jewish men, women and children had been deported to Terezín and then to the death camps, and that there was no information about survivors. And we were told that the synagogue, a major structure whose dome, topped with a Jewish star, was clearly visible on the skyline along with the town’s church spires, had been torn down in 1966 as part of a renewal project to make way for a highway. *And we were told that there were no names* – not the names of survivors nor the names of those who were murdered. It was as if they had not been. They had disappeared and so, too, had their names.

The Dvůr Králové scroll in my synagogue is kosher and quite small and can be comfortably carried by our b’nei mitzvah. Every week, beginning in 1977, I would tell what I knew of the story of the Czech scrolls to the worshipers and guests at the bar/bat mitzvah service and the b’nei mitzvah would then read from that scroll and display it to the congregation. But there was virtually nothing I could say about our particular scroll, a scroll from Dvůr Králové.

Still, at the time, it felt like a great deal of information because, by the early 1980s, my wife Naomi and I had begun visiting Communist Czechoslovakia and everything was so secretive, closed and frightening there that getting any information at all felt miraculous. We became friendly with a few leaders of the small, fragile Jewish community there, but every time we asked about visiting Dvůr Králové, we were told it was many hours away – a long journey over virtually impassible roads. “And besides, there’s nothing to see there.”

We finally traveled to Dvůr Králové for the first time after the fall of Communism, at which point we learned that the roads were indeed bad, but not *that* bad, and that the town is only 65 miles from Prague!

With the revival of the Jewish Museum after the collapse of Communism, the files we had been told were non-existent or destroyed suddenly reappeared. By the end of the 1994, five minutes after I asked the then-new director of the museum about the Jews of Dvůr Králové, he handed me a computerized list of deportees from the town, all one hundred and eleven names we had been told

about, in alphabetical order, with birthdates, transport numbers and, in some cases, the actual date of their murder.

With so much new information available, accessible by computer and transmittable by email, Naomi wrote a long monograph, which she called "Thus We Remember," about the history of the Jewish community of Dvůr Králové and as much as she could discover about its individual members and their fate.

Just a few days before we were going to press with the document, Naomi had a very last-minute question she asked of the Jewish Museum even though she was sure it would yield no positive results: Had any children from Dvůr Králové made drawings or written poems like the ones that appeared in the book *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* and had any of these survived? We sent the names and ages of the children from the list of 111 names. Almost immediately, we got the answer: Yes, drawings and paintings by three of the Jewish children deported from Dvůr Králové had survived.

Appended to the email were 16 attachments, the work of Petr Hellman, Marianna Schonova and Ota Hammerschlag. We clicked each one open and, with chills looked at the work of three children who had been murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau, pictures that had probably not been seen from the time they were catalogued in the late 1940s until they were photographed to send to us for the book. Sixteen disturbing drawings are in the book: an incredible personal connection to the realness, if you will, of the Jews of Dvůr Králové and the horror of their story. Rabbi Mikelberg already has a copy of this book.

In the summer of 2005, Naomi and I finally traveled to Dvůr Králové with a copy of our monograph for the mayor who then took us to see the site of the synagogue. We walked about 500 yards from the City Hall to a heavily traveled four-lane road. This was where the synagogue had stood, said the mayor. And added: the city still owns the land. Perhaps we should put a marker on the site! Three years later, our congregation and the municipality erected a 10-foot-tall Jewish star made of interlocking granite slabs, with a dedicatory plaque at its base, crafted by a young local sculptor named Ota Cerny, who also put us in touch with Eva Noskova, the one Jewish survivor who still lived in town. and put us in touch with her. There isn't time now to tell you about the incredibly moving dedication ceremony, to which I brought the members of our Confirmation class and their parents on a bitter cold day in February, but I will share with you one very telling story. In a phone call in advance of the ceremony, Eva described to me how fearful she was that the monument, which had been put in place in November 2007, would be defaced or even demolished on the anniversary of Kristallnacht. Instead, on the morning of November 10th, she went to the monument and found dozens of memorial candles and bouquets of flowers on the horizontal slabs of the star which had been placed there during the night, she had no idea by whom.

Eva also gave us a list of eleven names that were not on the official documents supplied to us by the Jewish Museum in Prague and had therefore been missing from our original list. Eleven more names. Eleven more memories rescued from oblivion. Eleven more names connected with your Torah scroll from D'vur Králové. We know their names! We know them as individuals with real stories, a real past – and no future. In my congregation, we read their names in the kaddish list, six names each week throughout the year, noting their age and the place of their death. We include the list in the Yom Kippur memorial book. We remember each of them along with our own loved ones who have died; they are part of our synagogue family and we mourn their loss, name by name.

Your Torah scroll offers you the moving, tangible opportunity to remember the past and to care for the future in its light. As trustees of this scroll, as spiritual heirs of the lost Jewish community of

Dvůr Králové, you have a holy task: to tell the vital truth that needs to be told about the legacy it represents – the dark truth about the human propensity for evil, and its bright truth as well: Torah as a source of the wisdom we need to live by and to bring sanity into our world. With this scroll, you are accepting the obligation of bearing witness to the next generation. When the only survivors of the Holocaust will be scrolls like this, you and your children and grandchildren will be able to tell its story and, through the stories of the Jews of Dvůr Králové, tangible representatives of the six million who are no more.

This Torah summons us to be bearers of light in a world that has been considerably darkened by human cruelty. That summons is what we have always meant by the obligation to help bring God's sovereignty into the world – *kabbalat ohl malkhut shamayim*. Torah, made most tangible in your Dvůr Králové scroll, calls us to the highest potential that lies within the human heart. May we be worthy!