



Libuse and Hollace

The Torah's Tex-Czech Connection

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When I could not locate the Czech village of Uhrineves in a current world atlas, I looked no further. Uhrineves, [*U-rijz-ne-vesh*], a word pronounced with soft, meshing consonants, was the original home of my congregation's Holocaust Torah. Although I tried to learn something about the town while researching my Temple's centennial history in 2002, I hit a dead end because it was not on the map. Countless settlements disappeared during the Holocaust, so I thought no more of it.

Then, as my husband, Bruce, and I began planning a trip to Prague in December of 2003, we looked through the *Jewish Heritage Travel Guide to Central & Eastern Europe*, a guidebook by Ruth Ellen Gruber. There it was: Uhrineves, described as a former farming village now incorporated into the Prague city limits. The writer recommended visiting the village's Jewish cemetery, where weathered gravestones etched with Hebrew words date from the 1840s through 1939 when the Nazis' reign of terror was on the rise.

Uhrineves had once had a synagogue, a handsome building with a façade of archways constructed in 1848 on the village's main avenue. This house of worship had served more than 300 Jews who farmed the neighboring countryside. After World War II, when no Jews returned, the building was converted 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 <<http://www.czechtorah.org/home.php>>, 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 maintain 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. That contact person was Libuse [*Li-bush-er*] Votavova, a Righteous Gentile. I wrote her from America. Receiving no response, I telephoned when I arrived in Prague and, in my rusty German, asked if we could meet. Much surprised, Libuse said knew about the Torah housed at London's Finchley synagogue but was astonished to learn that the Uhrineves congregation had possessed more than one scroll. I assured her that I would bring her proof. With that, we arranged to meet on a cold, blustery December day outside the former synagogue

For our appointment, Libuse brought along her granddaughter Klara, who is fluent in English. The grandmother and granddaughter had made arrangements to escort us inside the former synagogue and into a private boardroom where we shared mementos and stories.

Libuse recalled visiting this building as a child when the synagogue was lit with a handsome chandelier and had a wooden balcony, since removed, where women prayed. She pulled from her purse a list of Jews who had lived in Uhrineves in 1941 when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia, and she began to reminisce. She recalled her 12-year-old girlfriend, Hana Polackova, who was called out of her schoolroom and never returned. She remembered the day a Jewish teacher, a beautiful woman named Helena Rezkova, was interrupted in the middle of a classroom lecture and deported to Terezin. She spoke of the Kolbenova family -- Alfred, Elsa, Frantiska and Klara -- who were deported. Although decades have passed, "their house is still named the Kolbenova home." As Libuse shared her memories, tears welled in her eyes and in mine.

We gave Libuse our congregation's centennial book, which has a photo of the Holocaust Torah. We also gave her a copy of the appraisal submitted by a scribe, or *sofer*, who refurbished our Holocaust scroll. The scribe replaced the wooden rollers and removed stains from the parchment. When the Czech woman realized the care the scroll had received, she broke into smiles, and warmth filled her face.

FAST FORWARD to the summer of 2007 in Texas. Out of the blue, I received an email from one of Libuse Votavova's grandchildren with the message that my friend from Uhrineves was en route to the United States with a host of Czech friends to attend an international gymnastics competition in my home town, Fort Worth! I could scarcely believe that a Czech woman nearing her 80th birthday planned to visit Texas, much less during a summer heat wave. Since she would be here over a weekend, I invited her to our home for Shabbat dinner followed by Friday evening services at Beth-El.

During services, I introduced Libuse to the congregation and explained her ties to our Torah. After services, we removed the Holocaust Torah from the ark, unrolled it and pointed out evidence of repairs. We compared this scroll with a newer Torah in which the parchment is bright white, in contrast to the dusky quality of the Uhrineves scroll, which spent decades in a drafty warehouse exposed to the elements. Reverently, we rolled up the Torah and covered it with a custom-made cloth mantle on which is needlepointed the Hebrew words which mean, "The Jewish People Shall Live."

The close-up photos of the scroll show how gray the parchment became during the decades it was improperly stored in a drafty warehouse. The black circles look like mold. The "Band-Aids," which are made of kosher parchment, are areas where the "sofer" reinforced weak sections of the scroll. He also reinforced many of the seams holding together sections of parchment. We are proud that our scroll is maintained and still in use.

Attached is a photo of Beth-El Congregation's Holocaust Torah. The Torah Mantle is needle-pointed. It was designed and sewn by Ellen Mack.

