

• NEW YORK

The Last Remnants Of The Proskurovers

Recently unearthed marble tablets from old East Village shul founded by Ukrainian Jews saved from the scrap heap.

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Peter Kohn found tablets in Upper West Side basement.

A veteran construction supervisor in Manhattan, Peter Kohn is familiar with the type of items he typically sees, and immediately discards, at work sites. Old office equipment, discarded hospital gurneys, empty milk cartons. “You find all kinds of stuff,” he said.

But the other day he came across something that was out of the ordinary, and that caught his eye. A pair of large marble tablets engraved with Hebrew lettering.

In the dark and dank basement of a vacant six-story office building he was inspecting on the Upper West Side, Kohn, carrying a small flashlight, noticed the pair of large tablets leaning against the wall. A resident of New Jersey who had a typical religious school education several decades ago, he figured the dust-covered artifacts came from a local Jewish institution, but didn't know enough Hebrew to determine exactly where. "It was the first time I came across anything from a temple" while going through a building about to undergo renovations, Kohn said.

So he took pictures of the tablets with his cell phone, and looked for some experts to help him. Working on another job near NYU Hospital in the Gramercy Park section of Manhattan, Kohn showed the photos to two chasidic Jews, "total strangers," outside the medical center. The language on the tablets was Yiddish, Kohn discovered. They were from the Proskurover Zion Congregation, a long-defunct congregation in the East Village, between the Lower East Side and Stuyvesant Town; and from the Proskurover Center Ladies Auxiliary.

The Proskurover synagogue was founded in 1900 by immigrants from the city of Proskurov, in western Ukraine, where a bloody pogrom took place in 1919; on a Friday night in February, 390 men, 309 women and 76 children were killed, according to accounts. The shul was among scores of synagogues and small prayer halls established by émigrés from the one-time Pale of Settlement in the early years of the 20th century.

The inscriptions on the tablets, according to the translation given to Kohn, were mostly lists of names of members of, and contributors to, the shul and its women's auxiliary. These types of plaques, observers say, were common in New York's Orthodox congregations, which were functioning and flourishing in the early and middle years of the 20th century. And while the tablets themselves are ordinary, the names carved neatly into them are stand-ins for the thousands of Jews who built and sustained synagogues as New York's population surged with immigrants from the Old Country.

Kohn's research turned up nothing else about the shul, which is now a four-story brick apartment building at 431 E. Sixth St.; an engraved sign in English and Yiddish, identifying the site's former incarnation, remains above the building's front door. Kohn found no organization of Jews from Proskurov, or a successor organization to the synagogue, whose members might be interested in the objects he found. "I hit a dead end."

He decided to try to locate someone in the Jewish community who would take the tablets, each of which weighs several hundred pounds and measures several feet across. He wanted them to have a new home; otherwise they might be destroyed or discarded.

Kohn, feeling he needed to do "a mitzvah," contacted several congregations on the Upper West Side until he found a taker – Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, who retired last June as spiritual leader of the Synagogue for the Advancement of Judaism after 14 years at the Reconstructionist congregation. Rabbi Strassfeld, best known as an author of the series of "Jewish Catalog" do-it-yourself guides to Jewish life in the 1970s, collects such artifacts. He said he has about 500 of them, gathered over the last 30-plus years. At his Manhattan home, and at a storage facility upstate, he has accumulated signs and posters and announcements, in English and Hebrew and Yiddish, from shuls and schools and restaurants and other Jewish institutions in the Northeast that are no longer in business.

He collects those items, he said, to keep them from being discarded, and to serve as the focus of a book he hopes to write on this unique slice of Jewish history. His work, he said, is in the spirit of the Yiddish Book Center, the institution based in Amherst, Mass., which has saved more than a million Yiddish books from the scrap heap since 1980.

So, accompanied by a fellow Judaica collector who has a van, Rabbi Strassfeld went to see the tablets. He took one, which he has moved to his upstate location; his friend claimed the other tablet.

“If I didn’t take these things,” he said, “they would end up in the garbage.”

Rabbi Strassfeld said the tablet is among the largest items in his growing collection. “It might be the heaviest.”

Beyond the bare facts about Proskurov and the Proskurover synagogue, the rabbi has been unable to gather any more details about the congregation (when did it shut its doors?) or about the tablets (how did they end up in an Upper West Side basement?)

He’s still looking for answers.

What is known is that the First Proskurov Sick Benevolent Society formed on the Lower East Side in 1897, and three years later, 20 young men established the Proskurover Zion Congregation; they met first at Hennington Hall on Second Street, according to a 1986 article about landsmanschaften by Susan Milamed, and eventually moved to the East Sixth Street site.

When news of the 1919 pogrom reached New York, the congregation dispatched two emissaries to Proskurov to bring \$3,000 in relief funds it raised for those suffering back home, according to shul records cited in Milamed’s article. According to a 1924 memorial book, “The first news of the great calamity in Proskurov hit all of us like a thunder bolt. This was a short dispatch in the newspaper that ‘the entire Jewish community of Proskurov had been slaughtered.’”

Getting \$3,000 in cash to Ukraine without causing suspicion turned out to be a concern. So a young woman who worked for the benevolent society stayed up all night and sewed dollar bills into the shirts worn by the two emissaries. Twenty residents of Proskurov traveled back to New York with one of the emissaries to begin new lives here. In the end, the Proskurov Zion Congregation may have fallen victim to demographic forces; as more and more “landsmen” left the Lower East Side for Brooklyn in the 1930s, many of them, Milamed suggests, found it inconvenient to attend services and meetings. A successor to the benevolent society, United Proskurov Relief, was still functioning in 1981.

The Upper West Side building where Kohn found the tablets once served as a storage facility. Rabbi Strassfeld guesses that the tablets were moved there some time after the synagogue closed, and were forgotten over the years. “It’s all speculation on my part.”

The contents of the tablets were unremarkable, typical of how the synagogues recognized the people who helped build the institutions. Yet that very ordinariness is likely why observers find them such a valuable documentation of Jewish urban life here. And it is probably why those two tablets were put into storage – out of all the belongings of the shul – when the synagogue closed its doors. Things like the Ten Commandments were common to all synagogues, but each institution’s list of its builder-members was unique.

The tablets may be part of an unknown number of similarly discarded items from the city's former Jewish institutions, Rabbi Strassfeld said. "They are a piece of the story of American Jewry, part of the 20th century."

They are, agrees an expert in this country's Jewish past, a legitimate way of documenting American Jewish history.

"American Jews live in ever-changing urban environments, and Jews in New York City particularly live in a dynamic metropolis," said Jeffrey Gurock, professor of American Jewish history at Yeshiva University. "Street scenes of the past are always lost as urban removal alters the face of where we lived. These artifacts provide us with a virtual walk down the Jewish streets of the past. They are invaluable and wonderful sources to tell our story."

Rabbi Strassfeld said he wonders how many other old synagogues and homes and office buildings, like the basement where Kohn found the tablets, house similar treasures, pieces of Jewish history that he can add to his collection. "Are there some more basements out there?"

Anyone with knowledge of the Proskurov community can contact Rabbi Michael Strassfeld at mstrassfeld@aol.com.