

Czech Sefer Torah



This Sefer Torah was written in 1850 for the Jewish community of Smíchov (pronounced SMEE-hov), a district of Prague in the former Czechoslovakia. The Sefer Torah remained in the Smíchov synagogue and played an integral role within the local Jewish community until the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939.

In 1942 this Torah along with 100,000 other precious religious objects from Jewish communities across Czechoslovakia were gathered by the Central Jewish Museum of Prague and stored in the Míchle synagogue. There has been much historical debate as to whether or not this was a project initiated by the Nazis to create a “museum of an extinct race.” While this is an often-repeated narrative, many historians today suggest that the collection of religious items was actually initiated from within Jewish communities in an effort to preserve materials and memory. Despite having differing intentions, this plan to gather items from across Bohemia and Moravia was ultimately agreed upon by Nazi officials. The Torahs and other religious items were catalogued under Nazi orders and remained in the synagogue throughout the duration of the war. The number for this scroll (37111) is still visible on the bottom plate of the right roller. In the face of the devastation suffered by the Jewish communities in Czechoslovakia under the Nazis, many precious belongings were able to survive the Holocaust under the care of the Central Jewish Museum. The present day Jewish Museum in Prague stems from that early work by Czech Jewish communities to save and preserve belongings during the Holocaust.

After the war, the Torah scrolls fell under the control of the Czech State Authorities and the subsequent communist government. In 1963, a British art dealer acquired the 1,564 surviving scrolls and donated them to the Westminster synagogue in London where the Memorial Scrolls Trust committee was formed in 1964. The repaired Scrolls were allocated to a permanent loan collection where they have been received by institutions and synagogues around the world.

This Torah is on permanent loan to the VHEC and was selected and donated to the Centre by Anita Shafran, Israel Zev & Elaine Shafran and families “in memory of our Grandparents Israel & Chana Shafran.”

Learn more about the Memorial Scrolls Trust at www.memorialscrollstrust.org