

Etz Chaim Weekend
November 11, 2005
Olga Grilli - Holocaust Survivor

It is wonderful to be here with you tonight and share this weekend.

From the moment my rabbi in Poughkeepsie, Rabbi Case informed me - about 9 months ago - that Rabbi Edwards called asking if he knew "an Olga Grilli" I have been in states ranging from awe to excited to anxious. As you know, the Holocaust Torah you obtained, which had originally been housed in my synagogue in Chotebor is the only my grandfather Wilhelm held and kissed every Shabbat. This brought back memories of my childhood which was a happy and carefree one, filled with fun and much love.

However, it ended abruptly when I was ten years old and Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, changing my life forever. Jews were being sent to concentration camps throughout Europe, and there was a frantic effort to save the children. Through the compassion and generosity of a selfless Englishman, Nicholas Winton over six hundred Czechoslovak Jewish children were saved. He organized the Kindertransports which brought Jewish children out of Prague to England to live with foster families. I was fortunate to be on the last transport in August 1939 as World War II broke out on September 1st and the Kindertransports ceased. The Germans were very methodical and stored in warehouses most of the Jewish artifacts confiscated from Jewish families and also Torahs. They planned to exhibit all of this in a museum of an extinct people. Thank God it never came to that. Although many of the Torahs were damaged by water and other elements, some were able to be restored such as yours from Chotebor.

When a tree is cut down, its roots are still intact. This is true of our people. Though Hitler tried to annihilate us, those of us who survived picked up the pieces of our lives and started over again. I was one of the lucky ones. I married, had three children who are here tonight, Ann, Richard and his wife Susan, and Barbara. I am also the proud grandmother of six - and one, Pamela is also here tonight. My husband Leon, who passed away 2 years ago would have been touched by the events of this weekend. Just as I was reborn after the war, this Torah has been given new life through your love and devotion.

The Torah is a tree of life. May this Torah from my little home town of Chotebor breathe additional life into your congregation and be a reminder of all those six million who no longer have a voice. The kindness and warmth extended to me these many months by Rabbi Edwards, Steve Sass, Sylvia Sukop, Susan Boyer of the Czech Torah Network, and others through phone calls and e-mails have

given me hope that this congregation will perpetuate our heritage and never forget the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. My heartfelt thanks to all of you, for all that you have done, and my family and I look forward to a memorable weekend.