

Etz Chaim Weekend
November 11, 2005
Richard Grilli - Olga's son

Good evening Rabbi Edwards, congregants and friends, Shabbat Shalom

Thank you so much for inviting my sisters and me to your Shabbat Services and to participate in your Temple's activities during the Tree of Life Etz Chayim Weekend. Both tonight and tomorrow night's events have deep meaning to our family and gives new life to a very special Torah. This Torah is covered with the fingerprints of many of our relatives whose descendants in almost all cases did not survive the Shoah. Tonight's event is not only a reunion and dedication of a torah but to another degree it is a dedication to our Mom's extended Czech family that did not survive and specifically to our Mom's mother, our grandmother.

It's been 66 years since our mother, Olga, stood on the platform at the Prague train station saying goodbye to her mother, a way of life, and a childhood. On July 31, 1939, at the age of 11, she left Czechoslovakia with the clothes on her back, a suitcase, a knapsack, a few pictures and as many memories a child could hold. Tonight, as we celebrate with our fellow Jews of congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim, a reunion with a rescued Czech torah from Chotebor, our mother's hometown, we are quite sure our mother is presently revisiting those very memories that she stored as a child before she set forth on her very long journey.

This Czech torah has great significance to our mother due to its personal relationship with her grandfather - Wilhelm Bergmann. He was the only male figure in our mom's childhood with whom she lived with in his house along with her mother - Marie.

This living arrangement came about because our mother's father divorced his wife, Marie, when our mom was one year old. He immediately moved back to Hungary and was never heard from again. Our grandmother Marie found herself in a difficult and somewhat unusual situation at that time - a divorced women, a single mother with limited financial means and, as was the custom in those days, she moved in with her father, Wilhelm Bergmann.

Wilhelm Bergmann was a dominant figure in his town of Chotebor. He was a very successful businessman who owned and operated a factory making wigs for Orthodox Jewish women in Poland and Czechoslovakia. He was the first person in his town to have indoor plumbing installed in his house. He was very active in his shul in Chotebor, holding many important positions. There is no doubt

that this torah that we celebrate tonight was a torah that, on numerous occasions, he held, prayed from and read. There is a famous saying which goes as follows - what links the Jewish people from one generation to another generation is the word of God - the torah. In our family's case, this expression can be taken both figuratively and literally.

Wilhelm Bergmann left Czechoslovakia in the early 1880's and came to America to find his fortune since he had been told that the streets of America were paved with gold. After becoming a US Citizen he determined that he could be more successful in the old country. In 1896, after the birth of his first child, he left the United States to go back to his Czech hometown. Little did he know that his descendants, still practicing Jews, would end up in America holding a Torah from his hometown town 110 years later. For the Bergmann family, life has come full circle.

In 1993, our parents took us on a trip to the Czech Republic and Poland to see where our mom and all the other Bergmann relatives lived and died. We traced our grandmother Marie's footsteps from her house in her home town of Chotebor, to the house in that town where all the Jews were forced to live, to Terezin, the Czech concentration camp where she and many of our relatives along with other Czech Jews were sent prior to their deportation to Birkenau, the major death camp of Poland, where she was killed. At the Jewish cemetery outside of Chotebor, we saw at least 40 Bergmann graves including Wilhelm Bergmann's and his father as well - our great great grandfather. Bergmann's had lived and died in Chotebor for over 150 years but it all came to an end in 1939. By 1945 Jewish life had both ended in Chotebor and to a large degree as well in Eastern Europe. But tonight, we need to celebrate that not all Chotebor Jews perished, that at least one Jew survived - our mom, that the Bergmann family in America has grown from that one Jew through her children and grandchildren, and that the Bergmann family has been reunited with a torah that our relatives and ancestors utilized in their worship and was part of their heritage.

Our trip to Eastern Europe left me with two fundamental beliefs. One, was that educated people and especially Jews should never underestimate man's ability and in some cases his desire to commit pure evil based upon prejudiced hate towards a group of people. The second is, that the Jewish people, having seen their ranks decimated by the Holocaust, can not afford to be exclusive, but must be inclusive if we as a people, and Israel as a country, are going to survive in the 21st century.

On this anniversary of Kristallnacht, which is considered by many as the start of the Holocaust, it is important to remember, that there was a small minority of individuals and organizations who would not participate in or support the madness that engulfed Europe. Further, they refused to sit by idly and apathetically do nothing. Therefore, it would be remiss of us not to mention,

as it pertains to our mother's childhood, those non Jewish individuals and organizations that prevented our mother from becoming one of the murdered victims of the Holocaust.

-Nicholas Winton, the subject of tomorrow night's HBO documentary, The Power of Good, who arranged for our Mom along with 668 other Czech Jewish children, to escape from Czechoslovakia just prior to the war.

- The Cardwells of Croston England, a poor but deeply religious Methodist family who took our Mom in to their house and gave her food and shelter, and

- The English Quakers who put up the required money of 50 pounds, a substantial amount of money at that time, to ensure that my mom did not become a dependent of the state.

And finally we also must remember a grandmother that we only know from pictures and our mom's recollections but whose courage and sacrifice allowed the Bergmann family to not become extinct. That person was, our grandmother Marie who in 1939 was willing to give up the most important possession that she had in life - her daughter, our mom.

Our family wishes to thank Rabbi Edwards, and the congregation of Beth Chayim Chadashim, and specifically some of its members who planned the events of this weekend and made them so meaningful. We and our mom, will have fond memories of tonight and tomorrow night and we are thankful that the Chotebor Torah has found a new home that is so warm and friendly. We are grateful that this Temple found our Mom and gave her a piece of her history, a part of her childhood back. You have all made us feel so welcome with your generous spirit and hospitality. We hope that in the future, we find ourselves in Los Angeles, so that we can visit you again. Once again, thank you and let tonight be the start of a new friendship.

Ann Grilli Rosen, Richard Grilli, Barbara Grilli Lambert