

# AroundNZ

FROM THE CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

## Temple Torah trip to Czech Republic

The highlight of Temple Sinai's 2008 study tour was the celebration of Simchat Torah in Hermanuv Mestec, the small Czech town which had been home to the Temple's Torah scroll for about 100 years, up to the early 1940s. We went to honour our Czech scroll and the vibrant Jewish communal life that had existed in this town.

The idea for a congregational trip took shape from early 2006 when Michael Heppner visited New Zealand to talk about the work of the Memorial Scrolls Trust from where Temple Sinai's Czech Torah scroll came, 40 years ago.

Subsequent discussions led to a decision to take the Torah scroll back to Hermanuv Mestec, a trip that six Temple members made in October, spending 10 days together between Warsaw and Prague. It was memorable for all of us and was educational, spiritual and respectful while being a lot of fun.

### Symmetry

Our trip had a perfect symmetry to it. Without a doubt the highlight came right in the middle: the journeys between Krakow, Oswiecim and Auschwitz, Prague and Hermanuv Mestec. In these incredibly intense 36 hours we experienced the ghastly low of the Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps,

*In the former synagogue of Hermanuv Mestec (l to r): Myra Mortlock, Rick Sahar, Paul Blaschke, Lynda Young, JoEllen Duckor, Rabbi Johanna Hershenson and Vera Eggermeyer (Hon NZ Consul in Prague)*

and then the amazing high of our unique Simchat Torah celebration in Hermanuv Mestec. We spent two wonderful Friday nights with the Progressive Jewish congregations of Beit Warzawa

(Warsaw) and Beit Simcha (Prague) where we experienced the vitality of current Jewish life.

It was a pleasure to experience the vitality of the new/old congregations and their apt forms of worship. We met many warm and interesting people, and learned a little about the many issues faced in the huge challenge of rebuilding Jewish communities in an area that was once the hub of the Jewish world.

Visiting Jewish sites brought us to the many memorials, plaques and

statues that seek to keep memories alive against the need for a city to rebuild itself and to reflect modernity and new values.

### Shtetl life

On route to Kracow we visited the largely unspoilt town of Kazmierz Dolny to try to get a feel for shtetl life in Poland. Local people have cared for the remnants of a Jewish cemetery, now isolated from the town, and have constructed a memorial wall from broken headstones.

From Prague we traveled to Hermanuv Mestec, a beautiful small town of about 5,000 people. The synagogue was instantly recognisable. We had seen so many photos of the lovely simple plain white synagogue building but we were not prepared for what was inside. The walls were painted with intense and intricate patterns. Gorgeous soft blues and greens and golds. We were mesmerised and thrilled. The building had been lovingly and carefully tended by the local non-Jewish population. We carefully unwrapped our scroll, which had been meticulously packed for its world trip and each of us held it for a moment.

A Czech Torah scroll from Beth El in North Carolina, also originally from this region, had also made the journey and the two scrolls met again for the first time in nearly 70 years.

Meanwhile the synagogue was filling with over 150 local people including the mayor:

### Two Torahs

The two Torah scrolls were brought in and placed in the ark, where they used to live when there was a thriving Jewish community. We brought a song from Aotearoa, Te Aroha, to welcome the joyous Simchat Torah celebrations. ReBelcantissimo, a Ladino/Klezmer ensemble, sang and played as the Torahs were paraded around the synagogue and people reached out to them, to shake our hands and to hug us. Many people were overwhelmed by our presence there, that we came from so far away, that we came at all. These people were not Jewish but they also expressed a strong sense of loss of their Jewish neighbors. This was a truly memorable occasion

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*In Auschwitz cemetery Rick Sahar and JoEllen at a Hornung family grave*

and we all felt the intensity that surrounded it. After the ceremony we ate and drank and sang together deep into the night. They couldn't speak English, we couldn't speak Czech, but that just didn't matter at all.

These wonderful feelings of elation, warmth, and mutual respect were tempered by great sadness for what had been lost. They have to sit alongside the sadness and loss that we had just seen at Auschwitz.

## Respect

What can we say about Nazi brutality, other than that it defies explanation? We did our best to pay our respect to the victims of the Holocaust, pondering on the suffering inflicted so widely, on the tragic loss of life and on the plight of the few survivors. We all felt degrees of ambivalence about the inevitable transformation of the terrible reality of the camps into a type of exhibition, an example of 'world heritage', a 'tourism product'.

Alongside our planned trip were many spontaneous deviations and some thrilling discoveries. Close to Auschwitz we visited the old shule and museum in Oswiecim, the home town of Rick's father's family. We felt a bitter/sweet joy on discovering two of his family's graves in the old Jewish cemetery. This accentuated the loss of such communities and the very enormity of this loss.

In Warsaw we stumbled upon a sukkah and could observe the mitzvah of eating in the sukkah, having found really good fresh challah nearby.

Another beautiful occasion was our late night visit to a stunning old shule (needless to say, not in current use) in the tiny town of Boskovice, in the eastern Czech Republic. We had the feeling of being lost in the fog during the hours it took to get there but managed to pass the time with singing and JPS (Jewish positioning system) jokes. Our singing in the shule was astounding, such acoustics in a beautifully fresco painted building waiting for a Jewish community to return. For nearly an hour we brought some life to it - goodness knows what the neighbours thought!!

Alongside these great experiences we took in the Warsaw

Film Festival, went to the ballet in the National Theatre in Prague, sampled the local food and drink, enjoyed street entertainment, tried to learn Polish and Czech with surprising results!

Throughout our time together we all shared a sense that much of what we thought we knew had been learnt through the lens of our own upbringing and education. Being there and talking to locals altered our perspective and introduced further doubt to our opinions. The challenge for any traveler is to remain open to new information, to listen to people's stories, to live with contradictions, to live with the ugly brutality of the Holocaust.

## Polish colour

We expected a lot of gray in Poland but we found colour, vibrancy, and friendliness. We were overwhelmed with the intensity of the greetings we received in Hermanuv Mestec. We were stunned by graveyards, they show how Jewish communal life was abruptly ended, ending generations of family life in a locality.

As well as the more serious aspects of the trip, and the educational material that we had all tried to digest beforehand and en route, we had a heap of fun together. The group worked so well and even though we didn't always meet the goals we had set, every day was so rich and varied that preconceived plans ceased to matter. This balance gave each of us the support we needed, as the weight of the past is always evident throughout Eastern Europe.

On either side of this shared trip we each had made our own travel plans. With a strange sense of "how will I manage without you" we each headed off in various directions, compelled to tell the story of our Czech Torah Scroll and how it travelled from Wellington to Hermanuv Mestec, returning home twice in one return journey.

Our travel blog can be read at [www.sinai.org.nz/czechscroll](http://www.sinai.org.nz/czechscroll)

- Paul Blaschke, JoEllen Duckor,  
Rabbi Johanna Hershenson,  
Myra Mortlock, Rick Sahar,  
Lynda Young.