

## **Leo Hepner's personal torah presented to Hanover Congregation**

Dear Congregation, family and friends!

In the London newspaper "The Guardian" I found an article on 2 November 2019 about the Kennicott Bible which the Bodleian Library has loaned to the regional government of Galicia[North-West Spain] for five months to be shown at an exhibition in Santiago de Compostella where it was written. With its miniatures Moses Ibn Zabarah, the best scribe of torah scrolls of his time who handed it over to a wealthy Jewish family that had commissioned it, in 1476, this world-famous illustrated Jewish Bible represents one of the most impressive examples of Jewish art.

Not long after, the great time of Jewish life in Spain came to its end finally when the Spanish Inquisition required Jews to convert to Catholicism or leave the country. The Galician family did not renounce their faith and fled from Spain, thus saving their lives and their most valuable possession, the illustrated Bible. From Spain, the book was taken to Portugal, North Africa, Gibraltar and Scotland until it finally ended up in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and, as by a miracle, unharmed throughout all these centuries. It now forms the "jewel in the crown" of the collection of Judaica and Hebraica at the Bodleian.

This is just one of the many stories you can hear in the context of Jewish life, fleeing and exile: splendid, moving, sad and touching.

Similarly, the story of the Tzar Nicolas II torah is a story of exile – moving, sad, touching, and not splendid. The scroll you see here today, has not been illustrated with magnificent miniatures like the Kennicott Bible. Nor is it large, heavy, massive and hard to carry, nor as old as its world-famous magnificent sister. Compared to her, this torah is a young one, created most likely in Penza in 1904, so it is just 115 years old. It is rather smallish, and it is humble, not decorated with silver rimonim and bells, but it has a yad and a new torah mantle. It has been written in a wonderfully clear hand, is easy to read and – perhaps also important – it is easy to handle.

This torah does not originate in the West, the Sephardic world, but it comes from the East and the Ashkenazi culture, and, unlike the Kennicott Bible, it was commissioned not by a wealthy Jew, but by a congregation.

It does not need much farsightedness to understand why, shortly after the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a small Jewish congregation would commission a scribe, certainly at considerable sacrifice, to write a particularly beautiful torah scroll. It was in the hope for protection and safety in return for the donation of the torah to the Tzar during these highly dangerous times for Jewish people. We still do not know yet whether the generous gift helped the Penza congregation to survive the terrible pogroms decimating the Jewish population.

What we do know, however, is that the Tzar Nicolas II torah has remained undamaged to this day. It will be for the experts to research its fate during almost an entire century and find evidence of its whereabouts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is clear that the torah survived the time of the pogroms, the upheavals of the Russian Revolution, the horror of World War II and the subsequent, no less dark years without suffering any damage. We have evidence to prove that it eventually came into the possession of an English Rabbi in England and was acquired by an English Torah scribe after his death. A few years ago, Leo Hepner bought it much to his delight and happiness; he deeply treasured it and regularly read and studied it.

It is my hope that the Tzar Nicolas II torah has now found its final home after its long odyssey through many stations and dark times. For me, this means that on the eve of the Reichskristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) 81 years ago and the dramatic political upheavals following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc precise 30 years ago, things are coming full cycle. Perhaps there are any descendants of the Jewish community which donated the torah, in Etz Chaim; it is my wish and my hope that this might be the case.

Let me at the end of my short speech return to the beginning of it:

Handing over the illustrated bible in 1476 to the family that had commissioned it, Moses Ibn Zabarah wrote: "The Blessed Lord grant that he study it, he and his children and his children's children throughout all generations."

The Book of Books, be it from the West or the East, be it richly decorated or humble, has survived all the horrors and upheavals of the times, and it is therefore not difficult for me to agree wholeheartedly with the wish of Moses Ibn Zabarah.

The new Jewish year is in its early days yet, and the reciting from the new torah at Etz Chaim starts almost at the beginning. A unique new start, and again something that has come full cycle.

May your torah have found a new home at Etz Chaim for a very long time to come, and may it be studied by many future generations in this community.

I am convinced that Leo Hepner would also gladly have approved.