



Gannett/Howie Swetz

Mr. and Mrs. Gerhard Spies carry the Torah down Delancey Street in Mamaroneck Sunday.

Mixed emotions

Torah, once confiscated by Nazis, brings joy to Mamaroneck synagogue

By Joshua Peck

Staff Writer

A newcomer was embraced as an old friend Sunday by congregants of the Westchester Jewish Center in Mamaroneck, though with the joy came unspeakably painful memories.

The excitement revolved around a Torah, more than 150 years old, brought over recently from England. It was one of more than 1,500 Torahs — scrolls containing the first five books of the Old Testament — confiscated from European synagogues 50 years ago by the Nazis.

At about 9:45 a.m., Gerhard Spies, his arms wrapped about the scroll, emerged from his Delancey Avenue home into a happy crowd of 200 friends and fellow

congregants singing and dancing to celebrate the new acquisition.

The scroll was carried to the synagogue a few blocks away by a series of older men and women, many of them European-born members of the synagogue who survived the Holocaust. They exhibited mixed emotions as tears blended with smiles. Many were visibly overjoyed, but family members and friends who had died at the hands of the Nazis obviously weighed on their minds.

The ceremony was also a coming together of generations. While the survivors carried the scroll, they walked under a chupah, or canopy, supported by four teen-agers.

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Alfred Appel, 78, one of the first to carry the Torah, was once a butcher in his native Borken, Germany. He said he was jailed by the Nazis for following Jewish kosher laws.

"It was a big crime to kill animals in the kosher fashion," he said. "I escaped the day before I was supposed to be sent to a concentration camp."

After World War II, 1,567 Torahs — including the one acquired by the Westchester Jewish Center — lay for 20 years in a vacant synagogue in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where the Nazis had collected them. In 1964, the Torahs were taken to London, where they were examined, classified and restored, according to a brochure distributed Sunday at the synagogue.

Spies, a native of Worms, Germany, and his wife, Ninna, born in Livorno, Italy, negotiated with Jew-

ish authorities in London for one of the Torahs. They finally succeeded in bringing over the one known simply as Torah #909 on a permanent loan. Technically, the scroll still belongs to the synagogue that originally had it made, but because of the mass confiscation by the Nazis, it is impossible to identify the Torah's exact origin or age.

Rabbi Solomon Koenig of Brooklyn, an Orthodox scribe who repaired and restored the Torah, said there were indications in the scroll that it is 150 to 200 years old and was written by a German scribe and possibly used by a congregation in Czechoslovakia.

Louis Brause, the center's president, said Sunday's ceremony marked the transfer of knowledge and memory from the older generation that suffered under the Holocaust to their children and their grandchildren.

"This is the introduction of another generation into this community," Brause said. "This is now the third generation of Holocaust survivors."

At a dedication service after the procession, Spies, Brause and Rabbi Irving Koslowe, the center's spiritual leader, reflected on the event's significance.

"In a way, I'm representing a congregation that's no longer here," Spies said. "The congregation from Worms." He said he believed there was one Jewish native of Worms still living in the city, out of what was once a large, thriving community.

Koenig said the Torah would be used in a bar mitzvah ceremony at the center on March 29. The portion of the book to be read that day is an account of the Jews' exodus from slavery in Egypt, under the leadership of the prophet Moses.