

Righting a wrong: Books stolen by Nazis returned to local family



Written by Ken Borsuk

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To correct one of the greatest wrongs of human history, many little steps have had to be taken, with many more still to come.

One of those steps was taken in Greenwich this past Wednesday when books stolen from a man named Issac Bick by the Nazi Gestapo were returned to his daughter, Inge Isler, a town resident and a member of Temple Shalom. Mr. Bick lost the books along with all his possessions when he fled Germany in 1939 with his family. While they were able to successfully escape the horrors of the Nazi regime it was thought that his possession, including his treasured collection of books, were lost forever.

Now 71 years later the books are back in the hands of his daughter. At a ceremony Wednesday at Temple Shalom, Ms. Isler was given the books, the result of a joint effort between the temple's senior rabbi, Mitchell Hurvitz, Volker Cirsovius-Ratzlaff and Professor Beger of Hamburg State and University Library in Germany and the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust.

There are only five books left from her father's large library, but the day before the ceremony, Ms. Isler told the Post it was more the gesture than the actual volume of the books that mattered.

"This is something that's hard for me to grasp," Ms. Isler said. "I thought that everything had been lost. It's more of a symbol now than anything, but it's still a powerful one. I never thought I would see these books again. Everything was confiscated from us and I don't know how they were able to retrieve them."

Rabbi Hurvitz spoke to the Post on Tuesday and said this was a meaningful event for him and not just because it directly impacts a member of his congregation, but because of what it means to the Jewish people that this is happening.

"It's very powerful," Rabbi Hurvitz said. "There's a principle in Judaism about retrieving stolen or lost property. It's important you do everything in your power to do it and because of that I am very moved by the officials from Hamburg State University and men like Volker and Professor Beger. There was such a serious effort on the part of two people who were born after World War II and even though they didn't live through this, they made it their mission to return every book stolen by the Nazis."

Finding the descendants of Mr. Bick was not easy. The effort began with Mr. Cirsovius-Ratzlaff and Mr. Beger who saw the collection had been in the university's library since 1940. They began the search and it ultimately led Mr. Beger to reach out to get help in America from Paul Radensky, the museum educator for Jewish Schools at the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust.

It was Mr. Radensky who helped coordinate the search on our shores that ultimately led to Greenwich through an obituary for Ms. Isler's late husband, Eric, that contained her maiden name of Bick in it. Once that connection was made, Rabbi Hurvitz helped bring all the parties together. While there were once many more books seized by the Gestapo, not just from the Bick family, but from other Jewish families, the bombing of Germany destroyed a majority of what was taken.

"Even though they were able to escape unharmed, Issac Bick had to leave everything they had to secure their freedom," Rabbi Hurvitz said. "He was a very scholarly man and had built a great library. There were sacred texts in there like a Haggadah [which tells the story of Passover and the Jewish exodus from Egypt] and a cantorial collection of sacred music. This is a reminder that not only do we survive, but we thrive."

As a celebration of the books being returned, the cantorial collection was utilized on Wednesday as the temple's cantor sang from the book. Rabbi Hurvitz said this is not just a celebration for the Jewish people, but for those he calls "righteous gentiles" who he said not only today are working to make the world a better place, but resisted the Nazis to help Jews to safety.

"The Holocaust blighted out God's light in the world, but one of the remarkable parts of the Holocaust are all the people who have sought to shine God's light once again and put their lives at risk to do it," Rabbi Hurvitz said. "This is a mitzvah and we see people here who cared beyond themselves. This is a reminder that the world can be a different and better place."

Ms. Isler, who was just a child when her family fled Germany, agreed that the help of people who would seem to have no motivation to assist her or her family is one of the most touching parts of this story.

"These are people who really feel very strongly about the wrong dealt to all the people touched by the Holocaust," Ms. Isler said. "They really want to make up for it."

Mr. Radensky said he was happy to play any kind of role in this event because of the greater significance of returning the books.

"I believe that something like this is really important," Mr. Radensky said to the Post in an interview this week. "Even though it's 70 years later, it's still a small piece of justice. I'm so impressed with Volker's effort. He's done so much to get these books back to Inge and it shows that there's no statute of limitations when it comes to justice."

To people who have spent much of their lives trying to overcome the wounds inflicted upon the Jewish people by the Nazis, this event was entirely positive, but they also said they go into this knowing much more must still be done.

"It's not a closed issue," Mr. Radensky said. "This proves that. This is something that is happening after 70 years of waiting. It's a small event, but it shows that the wounds of the murder of 6 million in the Holocaust is still being felt. It's a happy ending here because people have come forward and worked to make sure these books are returned, but something like the Holocaust will continue to resonate. It's so good and so important that the people involved have done what they've done."

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