



*Inge Isler and her son Frank (left) accepted the returned books confiscated by the Nazis at an Aug. 11 ceremony attended by Rabbi Mitch Hurvitz and Rev. James Lemler of Christ Church, a neighbor of Temple Sholom and its partner in interfaith activities.*

## After 70 years, Nazi-looted books returned

By Cindy Mindell

GREENWICH – Ignatz Isaac Bick was a scholar and rabbi in Frankfurt, Germany when the Nazis came to power in the early 1930s. He and his wife Mira saw their chance to leave the country and shipped their possessions to the port of Hamburg, then migrated to England. "When the war broke out, we could not get our stuff shipped," says daughter Inge, who was 13 at the time.

The Gestapo confiscated the family's belongings, auctioning off most of the items and shipping the rabbi's extensive book collection to the State Library in Hamburg in October 1940. That year, the Bicks made their way to New York City. Inge married Eric Isler in 1943 and the family moved to Greenwich in the mid-'60s.

Since the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, the governments of Germany and other European countries have worked to locate and return confiscated items to Holocaust survivors and their descendants. The search requires the perseverance and resourcefulness of a detective, and is often hampered by bureaucracy and dead ends.

In 1999, a number of books inscribed with Isaac Bick's signature were discovered in the state library. While administrators were able to ascertain that the Bicks had escaped Germany, and learned of Inge through research at the Wiesbaden State Archive, they could not locate her because she had taken her husband's surname.

Prof. Gabriele Beger, director of the Hamburg State and University Library, and Volker Cirsovius-Ratzlaff, head of the library's book collections, turned to the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt and the American Consulate in Hamburg, who put them in touch with the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. When Eric passed away last year, an obituary in the Greenwich newspapers included Inge's maiden name. Paul Radensky, the museum educator for Jewish schools at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, found the obituary and gave the library administrators contact information for Rabbi Mitchell Hurvitz of Temple Sholom, where Isler is a member.

On Aug. 11, six books were returned to Inge and her son, Frank, at Temple Sholom.

"The fact that we are now, seventy years later, able to return some of these books to you as the rightful heir of Isaac Bick, encourages us to keep up the search for Nazi-looted [sic] property in our stock," wrote Beger in a letter to Isler.

Dr. Wesley A. Fisher is director of research for the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc, one of the two organizations set up by the World Jewish Congress after World War II to help Holocaust survivors secure compensation from the German government and reclaim Nazi-looted possessions. The Claims Conference and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) work to identify and publicize art and archival collections throughout the world that contain looted objects, and help establish a process whereby claimants can get the objects back. While most of the efforts have historically revolved around looted art, the Claims Conference recently compiled and publicized a descriptive catalog of looted Judaica.

"I like the Greenwich book-restitution story because people in the press and the public pay attention to 'high end' stories of restitution from the art market, but they don't pay as much attention to the restitution of Judaica, books, and art that are important for the families and communities involved," he says.

At the Aug. 11 ceremony, Temple Sholom's cantor Asa Fradkin sang from one of the returned books, a collection of rare cantorial pieces, some of them ancient melodies.

"This commemorates the injustice and deprivation your father and family had to suffer," said Rabbi Hurvitz. Isler was tearful and told the story of her family's escape from Germany. As she picked up the books for the first time since her childhood, she said, "I wonder how my father would feel."

**The Ledger will take a more in-depth look at the issue of restitution of Nazi-looted property in the coming weeks.**

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