

Books seized by Nazis returned

By Lisa Chamoff
Staff Writer

GREENWICH — One of Inge Isler's recollections from her childhood in Germany is the extensive library accumulated by her father — a huge room in their home filled with books.

After she and her family narrowly escaped Nazi persecution, Isler had assumed the books would remain just that — a memory.

But 71 years after Isler's parents parted with their possessions, which were eventually seized by the Gestapo, the Greenwich resident was reunited at Temple Sholom with a symbol of her family. Several books, bearing the name of Isler's father, Isaac Bick, a teacher who had earned a doctorate in philosophy, were returned to her by the Hamburg State and University Library.

Rabbi Mitch Hurvitz presented the books — including a Haggadah, which contains the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and is read at Passover, and a rare collection of cantorial music — to Isler during a ceremony at the synagogue's last Lunch 'N Learn session of the summer Wednesday afternoon.

"I never thought they would survive the war," said Isler, 86, a longtime member of the temple.

In 1939, Isler's parents packed up their belongings and left them at the port of Hamburg with orders to ship them to their new home in New York. Isler had already gone to Belgium, and was awaiting her parents. Shortly after they

left, World War II broke out, and their possessions never arrived.

The family's container had been confiscated, and everything in it was auctioned off. The books were given to the Hamburg Library by the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, in October 1940.

About 10 years ago, officials at the library were seeking out Nazi-looted property among its stock. They found four books and, following a trail that began with research into the stamps and signatures that marked them, discovered the rightful owner. With the help of the U.S. consulate in Hamburg and the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, the library officials learned more about Isler, and contacted Hurvitz after seeing a notice of the death of Isler's husband, Eric, in the Temple Sholom bulletin.

"Today's bringing a little bit of God's light into the world," said Hurvitz, who recounted the story to the more than a dozen people assembled.

Hurvitz, along with the Rev. James Lemler of nearby Christ Church Greenwich, recited a blessing over the volumes. The temple's cantor, Asa Fradkin, sang a song from the book of music.

"I wonder how my father would feel?" said Isler, choking up during the ceremony.

Along with the books, the library included copies of documents used for research about Bick and his family, such as a list of passengers bound for the United States in 1939.



HELEN NEAFSEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Inge Isler, left, and Rabbi Mitch Hurvitz celebrate the return of Isler's family's books Wednesday at Temple Sholom.

"The fact that we are now, 70 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 property in our stock," wrote Gabriele Beger, executive director of the Hamburg State and University Library, in a letter to Isler.

Isler said she hasn't yet discussed with Hurvitz or her family what to do with the books, but they may re-

main at Temple Sholom.

After the war, the German government compensated Isler's family for their losses, but Isler said the return of just some of their possessions is much more meaningful.

"It's symbolism, really," Isler said. "It's really amazing that this happened."

Staff Writer Lisa Chamoff can be reached at lisa.chamoff@scni.com or 203-625-4439.