

Manhattan congregation to rededicate 400-year-old Torah scroll

By STEVE LIPMAN

A four-century-old Torah scroll that survived the Holocaust but has not been used since it was brought out of Hungary 37 years ago will be rededicated next month by a chasidic congregation in Manhattan led by a man and wife who also survived the Nazi era.

The Lisker Congregation, 163 E. 69th St., will hold a ceremony of speeches, singing, dancing and candle-lighting for the *sefer Torah* at 2 p.m., Feb. 23. More than 2,000 invitations for the public ceremony have been mailed.

"It's considered like a wedding," says Mrs. Judith Friedlander, rebbitzin of the synagogue, the Upper East Side's only chasidic *shtetl*.

Her father, Rabbi Solomon Friedlander, who led the 275-year-old dynasty from 1945 until his death in 1979, carried the Torah to America in 1949 with a menorah, a kiddish cup, a Havdalah spice box and a handful of holy books he recovered after the war. With him came a dozen family members and followers from their home town, Olaszliszka, in central Hungary. The town is called "Liska" for short.

The rabbi kept the scroll wrapped in a tallis in the *aron kodesh* as the congregation moved from Washington Heights to the Bronx, then seven years ago to its current site, where a carriage house once stood. "He was waiting for a special occasion" to reopen the



Rabbi Abraham Friedlander inspects Torah scroll that will be rededicated Feb. 23 at the Lisker Congregation.

Photo: Zion Ozen

scroll, Mrs. Friedlander says.

"This Torah has an incredible history," she says, watching her husband, Rabbi Abraham Friedlander, the current Lisker Rebbe, lift it out of the Ark to show a visitor.

Rabbi Friedlander estimates the scroll was written at least 400 years ago. Like other sifrei Torah, it bears no scribe's signature or completion date.

When the Nazi army advanced on Olaszliszka in April 1944, Mrs. Friedlander, her parents, an uncle and her future husband — her cousin — went into hiding in Budapest under false identity papers.

They left behind 18 Torah scrolls in the Olaszliszka synagogue.

A German soldier entered the building, tripped and, in a fit of anger, threw one Torah scroll into the Bodrog River behind the synagogue, Mrs. Friedlander says.

A gentile boy who had run errands for the congregation watched the Nazi's act. He fished the Torah out of the water that night and smuggled it to the Friedlander family in Budapest.

"He knew it was a very holy thing," Mrs. Friedlander says. "He knew it was not supposed to be destroyed."

The elder Rabbi Friedlander, who spent his days rounding up food for fellow Jews in hiding, dried the parchment by spreading it over a table top and hid it in the closet of the apartment building where his family spent a few months. Still fit for use, the scroll was brought out on the Sabbath and read at surreptitious services attended by over 100 Jews.

"We prayed in secret. Everything was secret," Mrs. Friedlander says.

One Sabbath, an Allied bomb fell on the building, collapsing its seven floors and killing a dozen people. About 115 Jews were in the other wing listening to the Torah reading. "This Torah saved 115 peoples' lives," Mrs. Friedlander says. "We would have been in the other rooms if not for the Torah reading."

The building's secret residents needed safer quarters. Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who was credited with saving 100,000 Jewish lives during the Holocaust, provided many of the Jews, including the Friedlanders, with new "protection" papers and hiding places.

After liberation in January 1945, the family returned to the bombed-out apartment building. The prayer room was nearly destroyed, but the table holding the Torah was intact. The scroll, still open as it had been left, was covered with debris but otherwise undamaged.

The elder Rabbi Friedlander took the Torah back to Olaszliszka, where he tried to regroup the town's remaining Jews. The synagogue's other Torah scrolls were gone. "The rest, the Germans

took," Mrs. Friedlander says.

Olaszliszka has no Jews today, and the synagogue stands empty and crumbling, says Mrs. Friedlander, who has returned to Hungary several times.

An oil painting of the original three-story brick Lisker synagogue hangs in the sanctuary of the Manhattan congregation, illuminated by chandeliers the Friedlanders preserved from defunct Bronx synagogues.

Before the rededication a local scribe will examine the brittle, two-foot-tall scroll that still bears watermarks. He will repair cracked or faded letters. At the ceremony, he will write the names of Holocaust victims on three parchment panels to be added to the scroll.

The first name to be inscribed will be Rabbi Zwi Hirsch Friedlander, the rebbe's grandfather, who died in Auschwitz. The second will be Wallenberg's, who disappeared into Soviet "custody" in January 1945.

"We consider Wallenberg one of the greatest martyrs there ever was," Mrs. Friedlander says of the Swede, whose fate after capture by Soviet troops is unknown.

Anyone who lost a loved one in the Holocaust can include the name in the Torah listing, she says.

The scroll will be used for the first time after its rededication during Sabbath morning services March 1.

"What is a better way of memorializing" victims of the Holocaust than "with a name on a Torah?" Mrs. Friedlander asks. "I'm sure my father would have approved 100 percent."

Community Calendar

guest speakers, Program of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, 7 p.m., Minskoff Cultural Center, 164 E. 68th St., \$5 (212) 737-8694.