

Alexander Torah Siyyum address 17 May 2015

Belsize Square Synagogue

John Alexander

Let me tell you the story of the Alexander Torah. It is very special for lots of reasons.

It is the very first Torah which was used in this synagogue when the synagogue was established in 1939 by refugees from Nazi Germany. We now have lots of Sefer Torah but for a long time the Alexander Torah was our only Torah. For this reason it is very special and has pride of place in our ark where it sits, always in the centre of the front row.

It is probably one of the oldest Sefer Torahs in the world still in use. A Torah has to be perfect for it to be used in services. Most Sefer Torah last only two or three generations, say 70 or 80 years, before they become worn out, letters fade and the parchment gets torn, when they can't be used anymore. It was tradition that when that happens the Torah gets buried in a Jewish cemetery in the grave of someone special, such as a Rabbi. Because this Torah was special to the Alexander family and this synagogue it wasn't buried but it has been kept. Now it has been restored and is perfect again so it can be used in services again and will last another few generations.

This Torah is about 225 years old. It was written in about 1790. The breast plate, *yad* (the hand used as a pointer) and the *rimonim* (the bells), were also made at that time. It was commissioned probably by my great-great-great grandfather, that would be five greats if you are my grandchildren's generation. On the Torah mantle we see today is embroidered that it was made on behalf of the Alexander Family in memory of my great-great-great grandfather's parents or grandparents Moshe son of Avraham and Merat Chana daughter of Avraham. They lived in Thalmässing in Southern Germany, near Nuremberg, in the centre of Bavaria. My great-grandfather was born there in 1841 but then moved to Bamberg, still in Bavaria, where my grandfather Alfred Alexander was born. Alfred Alexander is the one who brought the Torah to Belsize Square. Let me tell you how that happened.

Alfred was a doctor who married my grandmother Henny who came from Frankfurt, also in Germany. After they married in 1909 they decided they would build a small hospital or clinic in which he and other doctors could treat their patients in comfort, a bit like the London Clinic here in Harley Street. So they looked around and considered building it in Switzerland or Italy but in the end decided on Berlin, which was the up-and-coming still new and exciting capital of Germany and where lots of wealthy Jews lived. (As it turned out, this may not have been the best choice!).

By this time Alfred had inherited the Torah from his father who had died young. The family tradition is that the Torah gets passed down from father to son, from generation to generation, just like the British monarchy. That is how it came to me, via my uncle Hanns. The other family tradition is that it should be used in the synagogue where the eldest son worships but it must not be given to the synagogue, it can only be on loan, as it must always belong to the family.

So, when Alfred arrived in Berlin he joined the *Neue Synagogue* in *Oranienburger Strasse*, which was a very grand, cathedral like and very fashionable synagogue in the west end of town. However, it was a very wealthy community and had as many Sefer Torah as they needed. The synagogue said, however, as it was a special Torah, already old then, they would happily accept it as a gift but they

did not want it in their ark if they didn't own it. Alfred said family tradition meant he couldn't give it away. That proved to be a bit of luck! So Alfred Alexander kept the Torah and all its silver and mantle neatly wrapped up in the back of a cupboard in his home in Berlin, where it sat comfortably for the next almost 30 years. During this time my aunts Bella and Elsie were born as were the twins, Hanns and my father Paul. Alfred went to war, WW1, running a field hospital for the Germans and after the war resumed his medical practice in Berlin. Things were great...for awhile.

In 1933 Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany and immediately things got tough for the Jews. Alfred's non-Jewish staff and doctors all had to leave the clinic and he was only allowed to treat Jewish patients. There were lots of other restrictions. There were also times when Nazi thugs went around breaking into Jewish homes and arresting prominent Jews – this all happened even before *Kristallnacht* in 1938, the worst of these pogroms. In 1933 my aunt Bella married and moved to London and in 1934 my cousin Peter Sussmann was born there. When Alfred was in London in 1934, visiting his new-born, first grandchild he began to make arrangements to bring the rest of his family here. During another visit in 1936 there was another attack on Jewish businesses in Berlin but a fellow officer of Alfred's from the first world war stood outside the Alexander clinic and protected it from the thugs. But he warned his friend Alfred not to return as he would be arrested and taken to a concentration camp. So Alfred stayed in London whilst his wife Henny sold the clinic to pay the exit taxes that Jews leaving Germany had to pay. She took a break from this and met up with Alfred for a short holiday in Switzerland in the summer of 1936 but Alfred wouldn't let her go back to Germany to finish sorting out their things as he said it was too dangerous. So she came to London with Alfred and there she stayed. They sent word back to their housekeeper Hilde to box everything up and arrangements were made for their boxes to be shipped to London. In 1936 this was still possible, so long as one was able to pay the heavy taxes charged by the Nazis. So Hilde packed up everything, absolutely everything, including the Alexander Torah which was packed up with a pile of books and bed linen, Hilde probably having no idea what it was. She was asked to pack everything, so she did! Thus the Alexander Torah arrived safely in London. Had it been accepted by the Oranienburger Synagogue it would have been burnt with all their other Sefer Torah on Kristallnacht.

After a couple of years, when more Jews from Germany had arrived as refugees in London, many speaking little or poor English, they gathered together, forming a group to pray together in the way they were used to in Germany, creating a community in which they felt comfortable and safe. However, they had few of the basics needed to hold services. My grandfather Alfred provided them with the menorah still in use today to the right of the Bimah. More importantly, however, they didn't have a Sefer Torah to use in services. So it was to this community my grandfather Alfred lent the Alexander Torah which was the only Sefer Torah in use for many years and more recently has been used for Alexander family B'nei Mitzvat and other significant occasions. Having now fully restored it, we and future generations of synagogue members will be able to continue using it, here at Belsize Square Synagogue for years to come.

It is also particularly appropriate that we are celebrating the Alexander Torah today as this weekend marks the 65th anniversary of the death of Alfred 'Papi' Alexander, who died on 15 May, 1950.

L'Chaim!