

LAKEVIEW, WRIGLEYVILLE, NORTHALSTED

## A Survivor Torah From The Holocaust Now Housed At Jewish School In Lakeview: 'It's For All Of Us'

Survivor 1089 is one of a handful of Survivor Torahs in the Chicago area. It was gifted to Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, where students take the lead in protecting it.



By Maia McDonald

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Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

LAKEVIEW — Eighth graders who recently graduated from the Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School in Lakeview aren't just leaving behind teachers and a building holding years of memories and experiences.

The school is also the new home of a surviving piece of the Holocaust, with students taking the lead in safeguarding part of their history and passing it on to younger students.

Bernard Zell now houses Survivor 1089, a Torah that survived the Holocaust and traces back to Rychnov, a small town in then-Czechoslovakia.

The **Czech Memorial Scrolls** Trust at the Westminster Synagogue in London, which safeguards other Survivor Torahs, sent Survivor 1089 to Bernard Zell in November. **Why?**



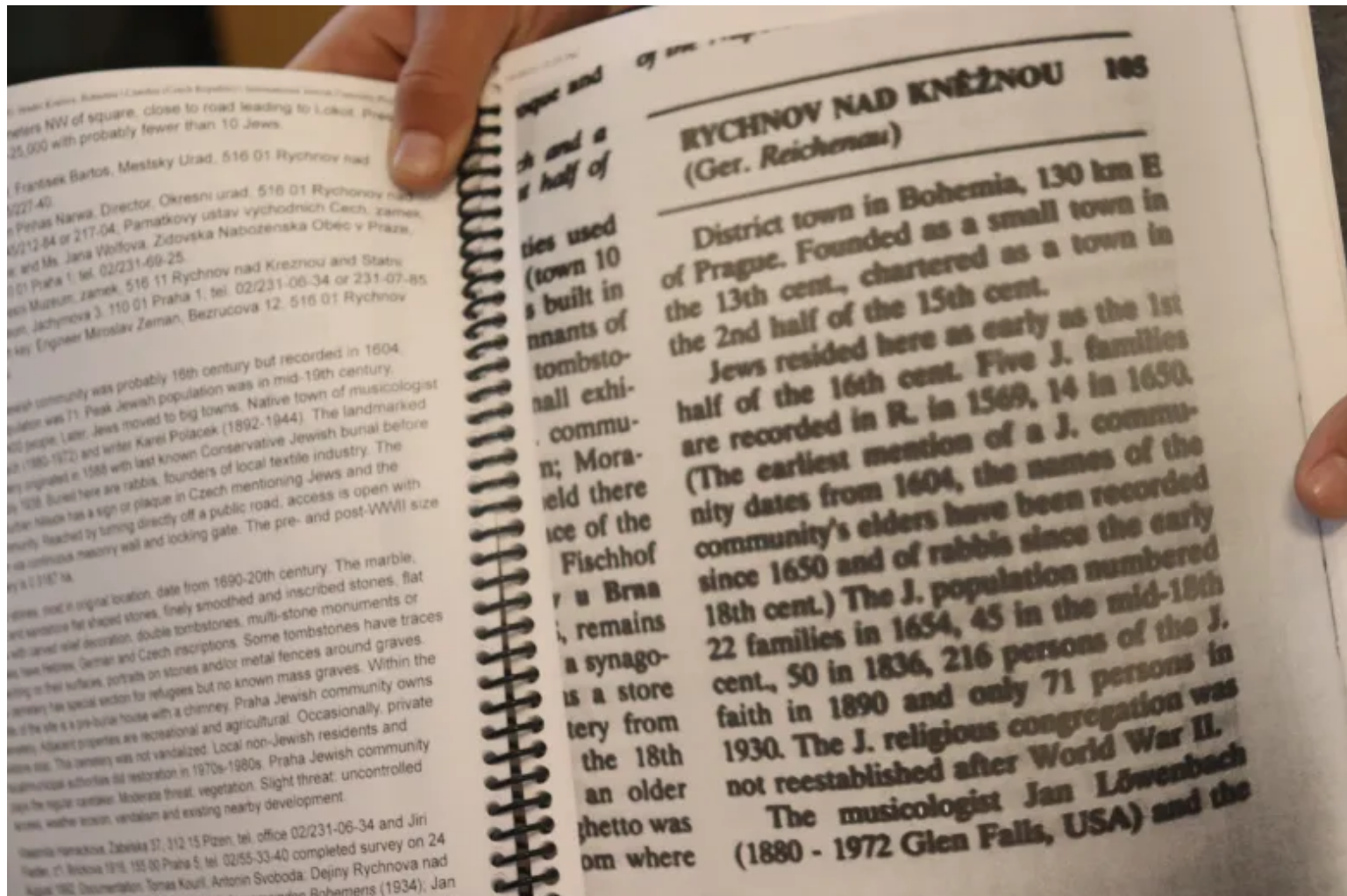
Eighth graders spent much of the school year learning about the Holocaust and the history of Survivor Torahs. They designed a specialized cabinet and accompanying religious accessories to protect Survivor 1089 for the foreseeable future.

Classmates, teachers and parents marked the occasion with a dedication ceremony at the end of the school year.

“The Torah is kind of for the entire community, and this kind of showed that it’s not just for one grade, or one person, one teacher — it’s for all of us,” said Sam Schwartz, a graduating eighth-grader.

Bernard Zell’s incoming eighth-grade class will be Survivor 1089’s next set of guardians when they start school in the fall.

“We’re passing on this Torah. We were the guardians of it this year and now we’re passing it on to the [next] generations,” said Jade Labkon, another graduating eighth-grader.



Teacher Jeff Ellison created a multi-page document for students to use and study the history of Rychnov, a small town in the Czech Republic where Survivor 1089 was originally found. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

### The Life of Survivor 1089

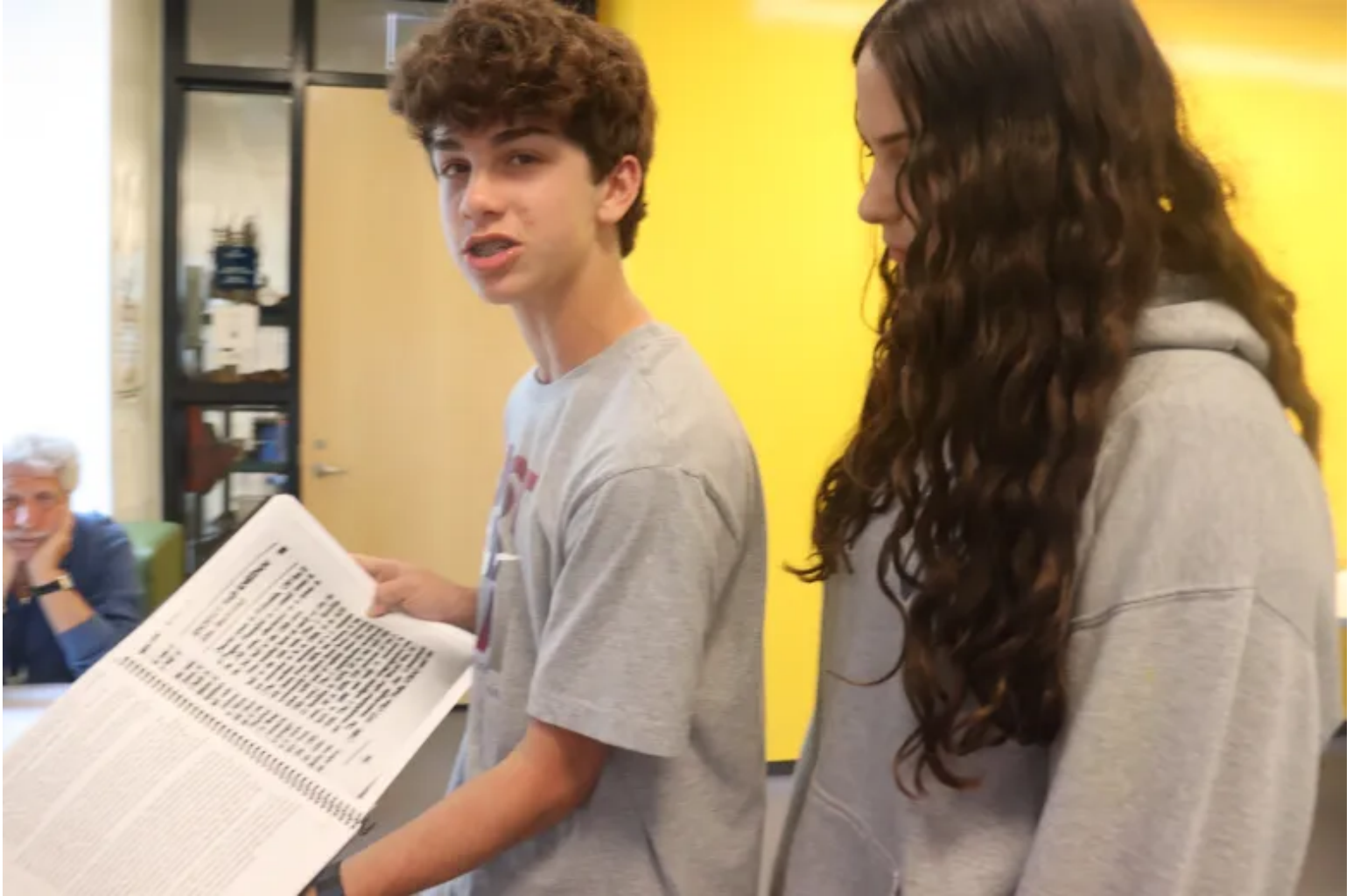
Survivor 1089 was given a number like many Torahs not destroyed during the Holocaust. It was one of 1,564 Czech Torahs under the care of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust, according to the Bernard Zell [website](#).

**Eric Estorick**, an art dealer, was given Survivor 1089 and other Survivor Torahs by the Czech government, Bernard Zell history teacher Jeff Ellison said. At the time, the government wanted to know if Estorick was interested in purchasing them and other scrolls, according to the Memorial Scroll Trusts [website](#).

Estorick had them repaired and authenticated, Ellison said. He then enlisted a client, Ralph Yablon, to pay the Czech government to have them taken to the Westminster Synagogue in London in 1964, according to the Memorial Scroll Trusts [website](#).

While it isn't clear why or how it survived, Survivor 1089 is now one of a handful of Survivor Torahs in the Chicago area, Ellison said. It will remain on permanent loan to Bernard Zell, according to the school's [website](#).

"The idea is that in the future, it will be taken to classrooms, even to the young children, and they'll be able to take the Torah out and they'll be able to read from this Torah that dates back to about the 1850s or so," Ellison said.



Benard Zell students like Sam Schwartz (left) and Jade Labkon (right) began learning about the Holocaust about the beginning of the school year in September 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

The student project to preserve Survivor 1089 started at the beginning of the school year.

Each year, Ellison's students work together on a year-long interdisciplinary project focused on the Holocaust, school spokesperson Laura Reff said.

This year, students collaborated to design an ark, curtain and mantle for Survivor 1089, each piece featuring motifs and symbols important to the Jewish faith.

Gili Sherman, a middle school art teacher who worked with Ellison's class on the project, said students were put in small groups and asked to consider if they wanted the ark to look more traditional or modern.

The ark, a wooden cabinet that holds Survivor 1089, features a scene depicting Jewish life in Czechoslovakia before the Holocaust, Ellison said. Together, his students composed a design with sun rays, stars and the moon on the front and vines, both alive and dying, on the side.



Students in Bernard Zell's outgoing eighth-grade class designed a new home for Survivor 1089, a Torah that survived the Holocaust. Credit: Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School

The design hearkens back to when Jews still lived in that part of Europe, Ellison said.

“During that time, life was normal. There were good times and there were bad times,” Ellison said. “That’s also reflected in the vines on the side, some of which are alive, some of which are dying, because there were times when Jews were expelled from Czechoslovakia, then allowed to come back, then they were forced out again.”

Students also designed a curtain and mantle for Survivor 1089, drawing on traditional Jewish religious themes, he said. A carpenter and seamstress were hired to craft these and other items Ellison’s students designed for the Torah, Sherman said.

The curtain depicts a Golem seeing the horrors of the Holocaust while the mantle shows its aftermath, according to the Bernard Zell [website](#).

Additionally, a yad, a Jewish pointing instrument used when reading the Torah, was made with a 3D printer, Sherman said.



Middle school art teacher Gili Sherman shows Survivor 1089, typically behind a curtain and wrapped in a mantle. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

One student documented the entire process through pictures and video, and Ellison created a multi-page document detailing the project, including information about Rychnov, he said.

Ellison said he's sent photographs of the items students designed to a historian in Rychnov who has worked with them throughout the life of the project.

The Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust hopes to do an exhibit on the project, "so the people of Rychnov can grasp the significance of what they provided us, all the material they provided is something incredible [and] something came of it," Ellison said.

## Protecting History From One Generation To The Next

Labkon sees the experience of working on a new home for Survivor 1089 as a blessing, despite its heavy history, she said. It was also an impactful experience to learn about this history and collaborate with her classmates, she said.

"Obviously it's sad, but hearing about all the details of this specific Torah's specific story, it really puts everything into perspective for you," Labkon said. "This is probably the most holy thing that could have been left at our school from us, and the fact that I can come here in, say, 40 years with my kids, and show them this and teach them the story is just really impactful for me."

Students often updated their parents on the progress of the project, they said. Many parents were moved to tears by the dedication ceremony, Sherman said.

"This is something that we can remember the school from and the school can remember us from," Schwartz said. "It's also something that like everyone will be able to learn from. It's just kind of us impacting the community a way we otherwise would not have been able to."



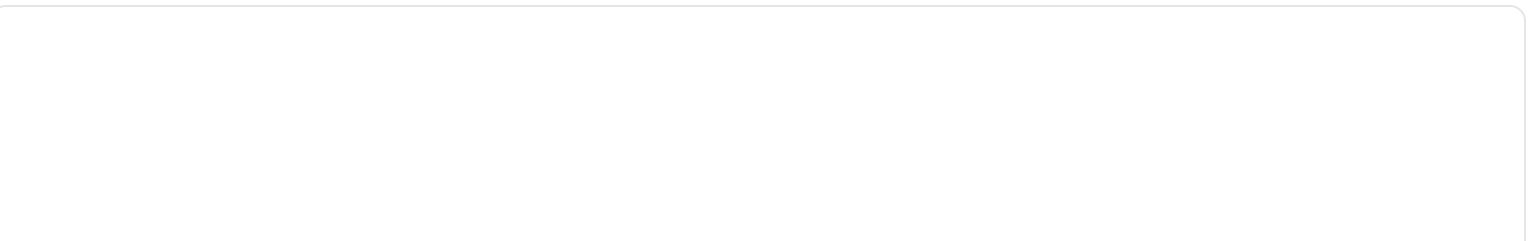
Bernard Zell students designed the ark, curtain, mantle and yad using traditional Jewish themes, motifs and religious symbols. The curtain depicts a golem crying at the horrors of the Holocaust. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

Teachers said the Survivor 1089 story shows how important symbols can be in processing historical tragedies. Learning how to coexist peacefully and not bully others are some of the lessons students can take from this project, Sherman said.

“I think a project like this also helps students really be engaged in something that’s sort of taking a very difficult, hard topic and having it grow into something meaningful and hopeful and beautiful,” she said.

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