People have asked me what motivated me to research the history of our Czech scroll. There are two sentences from our liturgy, one centuries old and one recent one that I always think of when I see the scroll. The first is from Ben Sira and is from a passage that precedes the Yizkor service on Yom Kippur and the other is from the bar/bat mitzvah prayer that is recited on the occasion of child becoming bar or bat mitzvah.

“But there are some, who have no memorial,

who perished as if they had never been;

Who vanished as if they had never existed,

And also their children who followed them.”

“I think also of those who have gone before me, who through all the troubles of the world preserved this heritage of holiness and goodness, so that I should enter into it now.”

By knowing about the community who had the scroll before us, we are able to give them a memorial and ensure that we carry on the heritage for which they themselves were so cruelly persecuted and murdered.

I was inspired by a conference of the Czech Memorials Scrolls Trust which I attended back in November to begin the research and I thought that I was most probably 20 years too late. The ironic thing is that had the research begun then much of the information for reasons I will explain later would not have been available; also the advent of the internet made communication and research very much easier.

Not knowing much about Czech Jewry and knowing even less about geography, I had always imagined that Ceske Budejovice was a small religious shetel in the Carpathian mountains much like those portrayed in Roman Vishniak’s book the Vanished World. One hit on the internet, the day I started my research, quickly disabused me of that notion. **Slides 1- 4**

Ceske Budejovice is the commercial and political hub of southern Bohemia and as you can see from the following slides, is a prosperous town. Founded in 1265 it developed quickly into an important trading place becoming wealthy from silver-mining, breweries and the salt trade. The world’s first pencils were invented in the town and the world’s first railway line with horse-drawn carriages was built linking the city to Linz in Austria. Today the city is worldwide famous for its beer - the Budějovický Budvar (Budweiser Budvar), however the name was so hard to pronounce that it was referred to as “Budweis” which is imported to America, Japan and many other countries. The American Budweiser has only one thing in common: the name.

The earliest known Jewish community was second half of 14th century. The beginning of the 16th century was marked by a progrom directed at the local Jews. Nine Jews burned alive and 13 Jews drowned in 1505 after an accusation of ritual murder and the entire Jewish community was banished in 1506. The Jews began to return in 1848 and twenty years later the Gothic style synagogue was built. In 1930 Jewish population was 1,138 and like the majority of Czech Jews were acculturated and assimilated middle class people. The following is a description of the synagogue is by John Freund, a survivor from the town and you can see from the slides that it resembles a cathedral more than our notion of a synagogue.

 “The synagogue was fairly large, it may have accommodated 500 people It had many entrances, it was dark inside, women sat in a different section than men (I do not think that there was a female gallery ). There was a German liberal style service. The Rabbi, as I remember preached in Czech. As I was only nine in 1939, when the Germans invaded, I remember the services at the synagogue only quite vaguely. Yes, there was a cantor and very proper Rabbi, attired in black or for Yom Kippur, white long coats and tall hats. The rabbi’s  name was Rudolf Ferda (and he was related to me).”

# Slides 5 – 7

On 15 March 1939, the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia. From that moment life for the Jews in Ceske Budejovice as well as other parts of Czechoslovakia changed for ever. They began to suffer the incremental persecution that was to become part of life for all Jews under Nazi rule. They were forbidden to enter parks or places of public entertainment and could only shop in certain stores. Jews had to abide by an 8.00 o’clock curfew and had to turn over all musical instruments to the Nazis. After the end of June no Jewish children were allowed to attend school or play with Christian school-friends. Jews were forced out of their jobs. To make ends meet, many families moved into smaller accommodation with other families. Men who had had professional jobs such as doctors and lawyers were forced into manual labour dredging the Vltava River.

## Slide 8

With the Jewish children unable to play on the streets or in the parks, the Jewish council of the town (Kile) appealed to the Nazi authorities for permission to set up a summer playground for the youth. Surprisingly, this request was granted and a local Czech farmer Mr Vorishek appalled at the treatment of the Jews, agreed to allow a patch of his land, 50 metres deep and 300 metres long, by the river to be used as a playground. It was located just outside the town, it had a run down shack and the river was polluted but it provided the Jewish youth with a much needed meeting place where they could play and be children and temporarily forget the increasingly menacing conditions under which they lived.

# Slides 9 – 13

Throughout the summer the children were able to keep themselves occupied at the swimming hole playing sport but with winter and bad weather approaching, they needed something else to keep them occupied. Ruda Stadler was a bright 15 year old when the swimming hole opened and he came up with the idea of writing and producing a newspaper. Obviously, resources were limited, there was no way to mass reproduce the newspaper but using an old typewriter, Ruda composed the first issue of the newspaper Klepy (Gossip) which consisted of comments about each of the children who attended the swimming hole. A sign-off sheet accompanied the newspaper and when each child had read the copy they signed their name together with any comments they might have and passed it on to the next child. That first edition was 3 pages long, by the time of the 22nd and last edition was produced, it had grown to 30 pages. All the children were encouraged to contribute something for the magazine, stories, poems, jokes or puzzles. There was constant debate among the editorial team as to whether they should write about what was happening to the Jewish community or to keep the content lighthearted. Perhaps mindful of not drawing themselves to the attention of the Nazi authorities and risk being closed down, the content of the newspaper, given the dire circumstances in which the children were living, is surprisingly optimistic and cheerful and like Anne Frank’s diary personalises the experiences of what it was like to live as a Jew under Nazi tyranny. As more children got involved in its production, it served as an important lifeline for them. It became one of the few things for the Jewish children of Ceske Budejovice to look forward to.

# Slides 14- 16

By September 1941 the 20th edition of Klepy was produced and Ruda Stadler decided to step down as editor. He felt that the magazine had achieved what he had set out to do and that he had nothing more to contribute to it. In his final editorial he wrote that the original purpose of Klepy had been “To give expression to the pride of the Jewish youth of our town; to energize them to physical and mental achievements … For two summers we have played sport, established friendships, and kept up our spirit”.

In early February 1942, all the Jewish families in Budejovice received the news that they were to be transported to Thereisenstadt. Each person would be allowed to take 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of luggage. Unable to take the issues of Klepy with him, Ruda decided to give them to their former housekeeper, a Christian woman called Thereza. In defiance of the curfew, he ran to her house and handed her the newspapers, and at great risk to herself, she promised to hide them for him until he could return to retrieve them. It was Ruda’s sister, Irene, who retrieved the papers from Thereza after she was liberated from Thereisensadt, Ruda himself was shot by one of the guards in a concentration camp for refusing to give up his warm coat. In 1989 after the fall of communism, John Freund, one of the reporters who had survived Auschwitz, traced Irene and discovered that all the copies of Klepy had survived. They were finally donated to the Czech Jewish Museum in Prague by Irene’s children, Jiri and Hana Kende.

The community was transported to Thereisensadt on the AKB transport on 18 April 1942. Of the 909 people who were deported from Ceske Budejovice 32 survived incarceration in Thereisenstadt or the death camps in the East. I will not go into detail about conditions in the ghetto except to give the following statistics. 140,000 people were transported to Theresienstadt, of those 90,000 were shipped to death camps in the east.  33,000 people died in Theresienstadt itself.  Of the 15,000 children sent there 90% of them died. I have a moving description of the bar mitzvah of John Freund that took place in Thereseinstadt if anyone would like to read it afterwards. Three months after the community was transported, in July 1942 the Nazis blew up the synagogue.

# Slide 15

I would like to mention at this stage a prominent citizen from the town whose work survives to this day. His name was Karel Fleischman, and he managed the hospitals for old and infirm people in the ghetto, he was a rare combination of physician, poet and artist. A book about his life entitled “With the rake of time” containing the 1,200 lectures he gave in Thereisenstadt, some of his sketches and poetry and his work as physician in the ghetto was published in 1998. I have a translation of one of his poems if anyone wishes to read it.

**Slides 18 - 19**

I began my research by firing off emails to every organisation I could think of that could assist me. Much to my delight, one of the replies that I received was from Otto Herman vice-president of the Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic who informed me that the municipality of Ceske Budejovice were mounting an exhibition to the Jewish community. Could they, he asked, borrow the scroll for the duration of the exhibition. So began a process that in my naivete I thought would be relatively simple, I would pack the scroll carefully in a bag and take it on board the aircraft with me and fly it out to the Czech Republic. I will not bore you with the details but suffice to say I am on first name terms with most of the employees of Czech Airlines who now know what a Torah Scroll is and my non-Jewish co-workers could give you a lecture on Czech Scrolls as a result of hearing my numerous phone calls. So it was that on 6 May Barry Hyman and myself flew the Czech Republic accompanied by a professionally packed scroll in the aircraft hold and delivered it for safe keeping to the museum organisers.

**Slide 20 - 22**

On 9 May, Barry and I conducted a memorial service at the Jewish memorial which stands on the site where the synagogue stood. The service book which was compiled and edited by Rabbi Freedman, Barry and myself, contained the names of all those who were on the transport list. What was incredibly moving was that people were looking in the booklet for names that they knew and somehow finding the names gave them comfort. What was also moving was that we stood on the roadside on a busy street and passers-by stopped to look at what was taking place and stayed with us. Although as you can see from the photographs, the memorial could hardly be described as a beautiful work of art, what is encouraging is that at least the town unlike many has a memorial, it has no graffiti on it and is preserved in good condition. The deputy mayor who joined us for the service has plans to improve the site. When I met survivors from Ceske Budejovice in Israel I told them that my dream was to take the scroll back to the town and hold a memorial service there. I was advised in very strong terms not to do it, “no-one is interested”, “you will only stir up trouble and for what?” What we found was that the very opposite was true. 150 people turned up to the opening of the exhibition, the deputy mayor himself is very involved in running a project teaching Czech school children about the Shoah called ‘Missing Neighbours’ and was very emotional during the memorial service. We came away feeling that everything that can be done to preserve the memory of the decimated Jewish community is in good hands.

**Slides 23 - 26**

Before I finish I would like to thank several people. Firstly the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust for their encouragement and help, Lana Young and Manny Alvarez who did the original research into the provenance of the scroll without which I would not have had a starting point, Rabbi Freedman for his help with the memorial booklet and for his patience whilst I bombarded him with emails with the words “Czech Scroll” in the subject line; Alisha Shuller at the Beit Terezin Museum in Hadera Israel for her unstinting help and for providing me with the transport list; two doughty old ladies, Margit Silberfeld and Ester Wider, survivors from the town who live in Jerusalem whom I had the good fortune to interview and John Freund, a survivor who lives in Toronto, with whom I have had a lively email exchange,. But I would especially like to thank Barry Hyman for his endless patience, understanding and support while we were in Ceske Budejovice and without whom the trip would not have been possible.

I would like to end by reading a letter that I received from Hana Kende, the posthumous niece of the original editor of Klepy Ruda Stadler. Hana today lives in Bath and has also been enormously helpful and encouraging.

"I was delighted that you got in touch and to hear your news. It all seems somehow improbably miraculous and wonderful……………Thank you for caring and for all the work you have done to preserve in memory that small decimated community."

We at Radlett and Bushey Reform Synagogue are ensuring that the Jewish community of Ceske Budejovice do **not** vanish as if they had never existed and **do** have a memorial to honour their memory.