



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

Press Release

November 18, 2003

14th CENTURY HEBREW MANUSCRIPT RETURNED TO VIENNA JEWISH COMMUNITY



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) today returned a 14th century Hebrew manuscript stolen by the Nazis during World War II to the Austrian Jewish community. ICE Acting Assistant Secretary Michael J. Garcia presented the manuscript to Ms. Erika Jakobovits, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Organization of Vienna. The manuscript is one of the oldest versions of the Kabbalistic text known as “Sepher Yetzirah” and is valued at approximately \$68,000.00.

"This manuscript is a cultural treasure to the people of Austria and to people of the Jewish faith everywhere. It is not a mere souvenir to be imported and sold to the highest bidder," said Garcia. "The repatriation of this rare manuscript to its rightful owners is the latest example of ICE's commitment to combat the theft and resale of cultural items worldwide."

The ICE investigation began in March 2002, when a newspaper article reported that the rare manuscript was to be sold at a New York auction house, Kastenbaum and Co. The investigation revealed that Aaron Stefansky, a U.S. citizen, had smuggled the manuscript into the U.S. after purchasing it from an antiquities dealer in Israel. On June 10, 2002, New York ICE agents seized the manuscript after determining that the antiquity had indeed been stolen by the Nazis from the Jewish community in Austria. Kastenbaum and Co. agreed to retain custody of the manuscript pending the outcome of an investigation.

ICE New York Special Agent-in-Charge Martin Ficke said, "The return of the manuscript helps bring some closure to the survivors of the Holocaust and the members of the Jewish community of Vienna. It is an honor to be able to return this manuscript to a community that has suffered so much."

In March 2003, Stefansky was arrested and pleaded guilty for his participation in smuggling the manuscript into this country for commercial purposes. In September, 2003, Stefansky was sentenced in the U.S. District Court of the Southern District of New York for introducing commercial merchandise into the U.S. by means of false declarations.