A Torah for Uganda

After meeting leaders in Putti, Dr. Isador Lieberman says, "I don't know what came over me, but I said, 'I'm going to work on getting you a Sefer Torah.' "

Photos by Lara Solt/Staff Photographer

From left: Judah Epstein, Lieberman, Rabbi Nasanya Zakon and Rabbi Avraham Bloomenstiel display the Torah scroll that Lieberman plans to deliver to a Jewish congregation in Uganda next month.

11 years ago, visitor propelled Plano surgeon on a life's journey

By SCOTT FARWELL
Staff Writer
sfarwell@dallasnews.com

Dr. Isador Lieberman, a world-renowned spinal surgeon, is the kind of guy whose work life is scheduled to the minute.

So, when a man appeared unannounced in his office 11 years ago with vague questions and a hard-to-decipher accent, Lieberman's response was frosty.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" he said to his secretary. "Does he have an appointment? Who is he? What does he want?"

She shrugged and offered thinly, "He's pretty persistent."

"OK," he relented, "bring him in."

The decision changed the trajectory of Lieberman's life.

Next month, he will lead a small team of Texans into the foothills of Mount Elgon, a towering, dormant volcano in eastern Uganda. He will carry a dirt-proof, waterproof, insect-proof acrylic cylinder containing the most sacred document in Judaism: a Torah scroll.

How did a 51-year-old Jewish physician from Plano end up delivering an ancient Hebrew text to a remote village in Uganda?

The story begins in the early 1900s

See **DOCTOR'S** Page 6A

Doctor's mission: a Torah for Uganda

Continued from Page 1A

with an elephant hunter named Semei Kakungulu.

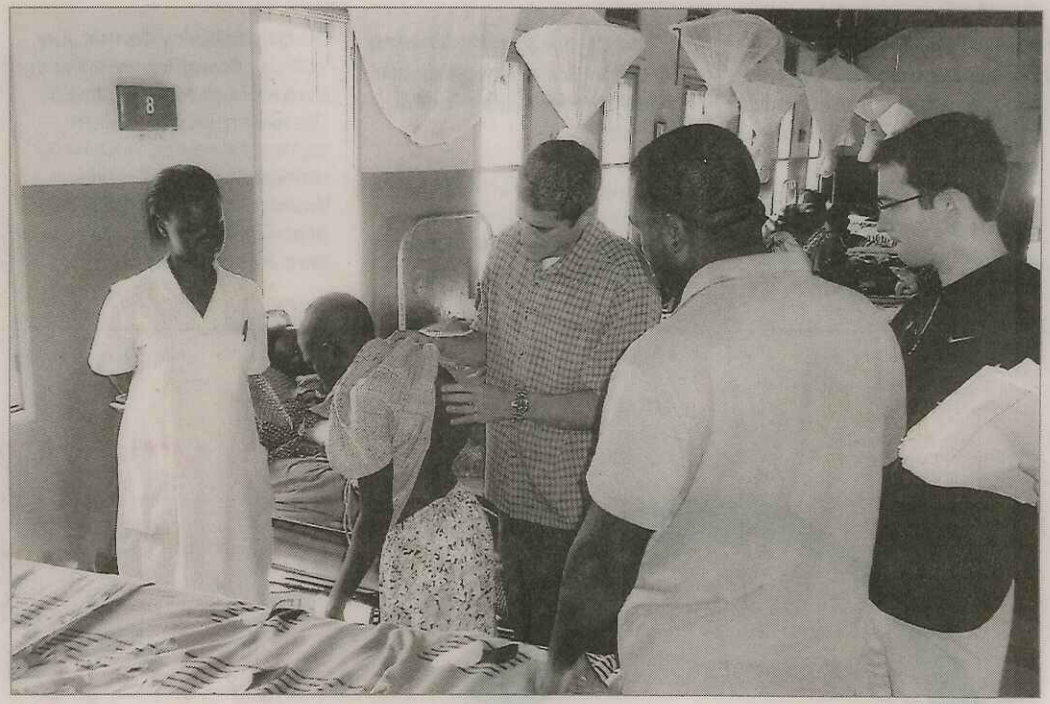
Protestant missionaries and European colonialists swarmed across Africa, importing Christianity while exporting the continent's natural resources.

Kakungulu, a charismatic and opportunistic leader of the Baganda tribe, learned to read the Bible in Swahili and to understand the language and ambitions of the British, eventually helping them conquer vast swaths of his homeland.

Some called him a traitor; others called him Uganda's first king.

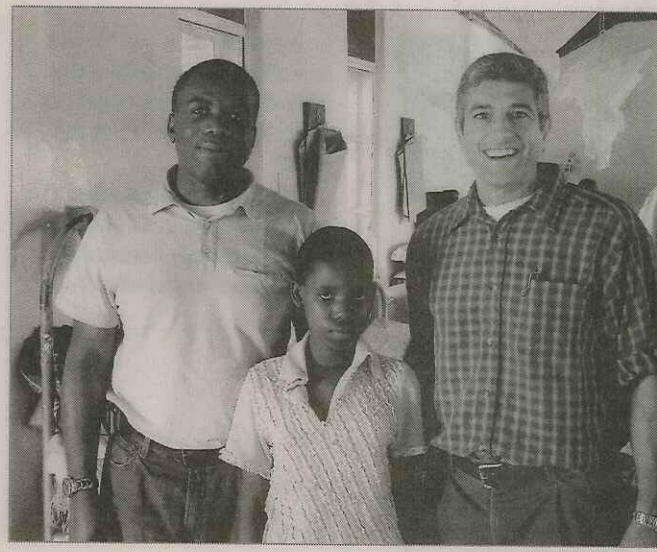
But as Kakungulu's power grew, he became disillusioned with the moral and political agenda of the white men. Around 1917, he retreated to the jungles encircling Mount Elgon and began meditating on the Old Testament.

He claimed a conversion to Judaism, wrote a 90-page manual of rules and prayers and planted a Jewish community called the Abayudaya, which flourished even after Kakungulu died of tetanus in 1928.



Isador Lieberman

Dr. Isador Lieberman examined a patient at Mulago Hospital in Kampala, Uganda, during the Uganda Spine Surgery Mission in 2009. In six years, Lieberman and other physicians have operated on more than 200 patients through the mission.



Isador Lieberm

Lieberman and Dr. Selvon St. Clair stand with a patient at Mulago Hospital. Lieberman first heard of the Abayuday remote villages after a few years volunteering in Uganda

3

Judaism outlawed

Ugandan leader Idi Amin outlawed Judaism soon after he seized power in 1971, and later proclaimed that Hitler "was right to burn 6 million Jews."

The Abayudaya fractured in the face of persecution, but some tribesmen continued to worship in private, honoring the Sabbath on Saturdays and circumcising their sons.

Religious freedom was eventually restored in Uganda, and today about 1,500 of the Abayudaya remain in a scattering of villages on what was once Kakungulu's estate.

They exist in relative obscurity, unknown to many Jews — including Lieberman, until he came upon a collection of clay huts imprinted with menorahs and Stars of David last year.

Lieberman, who runs a spinal surgery mission in Uganda, celebrated a Friday evening religious service last year with about 200 Jews in a small village called Putti.

"In typical fashion, it was a culture shock to us North Americans, as privileged as we are," he said. "I saw how they lived, and their grass hut, which was their synagogue."

Villagers danced and sang, blending African rhythm with traditional Jewish rituals.

Lieberman's spirits soared, until religious leaders opened a small wooden box, the Aron Kodesh, which in Hebrew means "Holy Ark."

"I saw this little paper Torah scroll, maybe 12 inches high, one of those things you buy in some Judaica shop for kids to draw on with crayons," he said. "I was just troubled by that."

The Torah consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and is the foundation for the Old Testament. It is used in religious services for ritual readings and teaching.

Lieberman listened as community members described their struggle to live as Orthodox Jews and their desire to undergo conversion and be recognized by rabbinical authorities in Israel.

The Abayudaya are not accepted as Jewish by all Jews. Under Orthodox law, a person who was not born into the faith must undergo conversion.

"I don't know what came over me, but I said, 'I'm going to work on getting you a Sefer Torah,' " said Lieberman. "I had no idea what it would take to get one, the logistics involved, the resources needed.

"And that just triggered this incredible chain of events."

A turning point in the story, Lieberman said, was the afternoon 11 years ago when the man showed up unannounced in his office.

His name was Mark Kayanja. He had traveled from Uganda to learn spine surgery.

Hearing rumors

Lieberman was skeptical.

"Mark, do you have a license?"

No.

"Do you have any support?"

No.

Kayanja interrupted. He said he'd do anything, including work for free.

"I started him off in our research lab," Lieberman said. "Within six months, I realized I was dealing with — this is no stretch — one of the smartest human beings I've ever had the privilege of being associated with."

Kayanja, today a spinal surgeon in Cleveland, was the first graduate of an orthopedic program in Uganda to train abroad.

Lieberman was his mentor at the Lerner Research Institute's Cleveland Clinic, but in some ways, he learned more than he taught.

"He was always asking me about Uganda, what the conditions are like, what is the state of spine surgery there, what could be done to improve it," said Kayanja.

"I told him a lot of the patients have conditions that are treatable, especially the children."

Lieberman said Kayanja began a relentless campaign.

"He pestered me for four years, 'Let's go to Uganda. We need to work in Uganda,' " Lieberman remembered, laughing. "I was like, 'OK, Mark. May 2005, we'll go to Uganda. Now get back to work.' "

In April 2005, Kayanja appeared in Lieberman's office again with airline tickets and a list of patients.

"At that point, I realized I did promise," Lieberman said. "We did go to Uganda. I was hooked, and we've been going back ever since."

In six years, Lieberman, Kayanja and other physicians have operated on more than 200 patients through the Uganda Spine Surgery Mission, which is operated under the auspices of a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, Health Volunteers Overseas.

Their work focuses on treating spinal injuries, correcting children's congenital deformities and training local doctors.

After a few years volunteering in Uganda, Lieberman began hearing rumors about Jews living in remote villages in the shadow of an ancient volcano.

Last year, he set out to find them.

It took about six hours to drive from Uganda's capital of Kampala to Mbale, a city of about 80,000 near the country's eastern border with Kenya.

From there, Lieberman's group followed red-clay motorcycle trails into the jungle. It was nearly dark by the time they arrived in Putti, a village of about 200 subsistence farmers who live in mud huts without electricity or running water.

Tribal leaders seemed thrilled at the prospect of having a legitimate parchment

scroll.

"When you're looking at a village that's struggling to survive, a Torah doesn't seem like the first thing they need," said Lieberman.

"From a religious standpoint, sure, but when you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, there's no Torah scroll on there."

Community of the soul

After he returned to his home in Dallas, Lieberman said, he received emails nearly every day from the religious leader in Putti, Rabbi Enosh Keki Mainah. He either walked or caught a ride to the nearest Internet cafe about seven miles away from his home.

"He was like, 'We're so thankful that you promised to bring us a Torah. We can't wait until next year to see our new Sefer Torah,' " Lieberman said. "And I'm thinking to myself, 'Oh, my God, what have I gotten myself into?' "

His anxiety grew as he started making calls.

Lieberman learned that Torah scrolls can cost $25,000 or more and often require expensive repairs. To withstand the climate in rural Uganda, the parchment document would need a special protective case.

In December, he scheduled a meeting at a Starbucks in Plano with Rabbi Nasanya Zakon, director of the Dallas Area Torah Association, and Rabbi Avraham Bloomenstiel, an expert in the rare art of writing and repairing Torah scrolls.

"That place was empty," Lieberman said. "And we're sitting there, drinking tea with Christmas music in the background, planning how to get a Torah scroll into Uganda. And I'm thinking, 'This is not real. You couldn't write a sitcom like this.' "

Months later, Bloomenstiel — who was admitted to Harvard University at 16 and later received a master's degree in music from the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University — found five stolen Torahs in a police evidence locker in Brooklyn. They had gone unclaimed for more than a decade and were available for purchase.

With the help of donors, Lieberman bought one of the ancient texts for $12,000 — a scroll created in Poland about the time his father was a prisoner at Nazi death camps in Buchenwald, Germany, and Auschwitz, Poland. He survived and ultimately immigrated to Canada.

"I must admit that I was a less-than-enthusiastic religious Jew until my father passed away in 2001," Lieberman said. "Some things have happened the last few years that are just not explainable to me. I feel like there's something guiding all of us."

Bloomenstiel said it's hard not to see divine intervention in the story of the Torah scroll and how it has intersected with lives on three continents.

"Here we have a story that starts with a leader of the Baganda tribe who is living in the jungle and develops a connection with Judaism," he said.

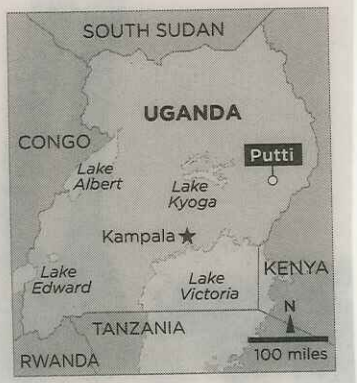
"Then Izzy contacts me to get a Torah scroll that was written pre-World War II, somehow survived being stolen, ends up in an evidence locker in Brooklyn and now has found its way to a synagogue in the mountains of Uganda."

The journey may also challenge some people's religious reference points.

"Judaism is always thought of as an ethnicity, but it's not — it's a community of the soul," Bloomenstiel said.

"This story has the potential to remind the greater community that you have to step outside of this very narrow European view of what it means to be Jewish."

The Abayudaya Jews



The Abayudaya community was founded in the 1920s by Ugandan warlord Semei Kakungulu, who rejected the Christian teachings of British missionaries and converted to Judaism.

After circumcising himself and his sons and ordering his male converts to follow suit, Kakungulu compiled a book of rules and prayers for members of his tribe. In it, he demanded strict adherence to commandments in the Old Testament.

Judaism thrived in Uganda, even after Kakungulu's death in 1928.

When Ugandan dictator Idi Amin came to power in 1971, he outlawed Judaism and threatened to execute anyone who practiced the religion. The decree fractured the Abayudaya and forced its most loyal adherents underground.

Freedom of religious practice was reinstated after Amin was deposed in 1979.

About 1,500 Abayudaya Jews live in villages in eastern Uganda today.