

WITNESSTODAY

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Chanukah in Theresienstadt Chanukah 1942-5703

Theresienstadt was the “model camp” established in German-occupied Czechoslovakia for the affluent and privileged Austrian, German, and Czech Jews whose prominence made it difficult for the Nazis to immediately liquidate them. They were to live in this ghetto labor camp while the rest of the world chose to believe they lived serenely in a beautiful spa town. Among these victims of forced labor was the famed sculptor Arnold Zadikow. He had created artistic masterpieces, some of which are still auctioned off today, yet none were as memorable, significant, and famous as the one he made clandestinely.



The handcrafted menorah made by Arnold Zadikow and Leopold Hecht in Theresienstadt.
Credit: “How Jews Celebrated Hanukkah during the Holocaust,” history.com

It was the time before Chanukah, and Mr. Zadikow felt that that beautiful tradition would help raise the morale and sustain the hope of the young boys in the camp. According to his daughter Marianka, Zadikow approached Mr. Leopold Hecht, a carpenter and friend, saying, “Hanukkah is coming, and these boys are away from home. I would like them to have a *menorah*.” Mr. Hecht worked in the Bauhof, the craft workshop, of Theresienstadt from which he would be able to take a piece of wood large enough to carve. “They have taken everything away from us. Our families, our homes, our relatives, everything. So, two pieces of wood are a very small thing to take,” declared Mr. Hecht. So he took them. The two men risked their lives obtaining materials for crafting this *menorah* in secrecy. If they had been caught, they would no doubt be killed. The pair of them worked with their lives on the line so that these young boys could light the *menorah* and bask in the light of the candles, even so far away from home and everything they knew.

Unfortunately, this hidden masterpiece was lit only once in the camp on the Chanukah of 1942/5703, as Mr. Zadikow sadly died not long after on March 8, 1943. With his death so soon afterward, his daughter Marianka declares, “This was definitely the last work my father

made with his own hands.” The existence of this *menorah* in the heart of a ghetto concentration camp represented a miracle in itself. It was this precious *menorah*, infused with a connection to his *Yiddishkeit*, that was Mr. Arnold Zadikow’s last memorable, hand-crafted creation.



Theresienstadt “model camp” ghetto.
Credit: “Theresienstadt Ghetto,” Geni.com

Chanukah in Bergen Belsen Chanukah 1943-5704

The first night of Chanukah of 1943 in Bergen Belsen came on the heels of a brutal random selection that had hundreds of Jews tortured and murdered, so the uplifting light of the *menorah* came at a perfect time to raise spirits. A wooden clog, strings from a uniform, and shoe polish were gathered to create a makeshift *menorah*, wick, and oil.

The Bluzhever Rebbe, Rabbi Yisroel Spira, *zy”a*, stood before the crowd, lit the wick, and recited the first two blessings fervently with a melody “filled with sorrow and pain.” Before reciting the third blessing, *Shehecheyanu*, the Rebbe turned his head around as if he were searching for someone, but he immediately turned back around again and recited the third and final blessing — proclaiming, with strength, G-d “Who has kept us alive, and hast preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season.”



The Bluzhever Rebbe, Rabbi Yisroel Spira.
Credit: hevratpinto.org

Once Rabbi Spira had finished, a man by the name of Mr. Zamietchkowski, a former leader of the Warsaw Bund, stepped forward.

He wondered how the Rebbe could praise G-d for keeping them alive and preserving them when “hundreds of dead Jewish bodies are literally lying within the shadows of the Chanukah lights.” The Bluzhever Rebbe responded that he too had questioned whether to recite the third blessing, and he had turned his head around to ask the distinguished Rabbis surrounding him. However, the moment he looked behind him, he noticed the peaceful expressions of devoted faith reflected on each face in the crowd as they watched the lighting of the Chanukah lights.

There and then he decided, “If G-d, Blessed be He, has such a nation that at times like these, when during the lighting of the Chanukah lights they see in front of them the heaps of bodies of their beloved fathers, brothers, and sons, and death is looking from every corner; if despite all that, they stand in throngs and with devotion listening to the Chanukah blessing... then I am under a special obligation to recite the third blessing.”

This powerful message stayed with Mr. Zamietchkowski throughout the war as a source of inspiration and kept him going through the darkest of times.

The Jews of France and the Holocaust: Project Witness Webinar Fills in the Details

DEBORAH SCHECHTER

On Wednesday evening, November 18, Project Witness hosted yet another webinar in its ongoing series. The topic of this most recent event was “The Jews of France and the Holocaust,” featuring three informative segments.

The first segment consisted of a deftly delivered brief overview of the history of France during World War II by Mr. Montimer Mason, an expert in French history, a contributor to Project Witness’ *Witness to History* textbook, and the master of ceremonies for the evening. In his overview, Mr. Mason described the incipient and open anti-Semitism haunting the Jews of France through the centuries up to the present. Mr. Mason eloquently demonstrated how anti-Semitism has impacted the lives of French Jews in the past and present.

He pointed out that Jews in France represent the third-largest Jewish population in the world. He also noted that during the years of the Vichy government, Jews played a big role in the Resistance, establishing many Jewish groups and working with non-Jewish resistance groups to do everything in their power to thwart the Vichy government, a regime which of its own volition instituted anti-Jewish laws deporting thousands of Jews. Mr. Mason then proceeded to introduce Dr. Mordechai Paldiel.

Dr. Paldiel, a leading scholar on the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust, served as director of the Righteous Among the Nations Department at Yad Vashem for 24 years. Under his stewardship, some 18,000 non-Jewish men and women from various countries were awarded the prestigious honor of “Righteous Among the Nations” by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial for their role in saving Jews from the Nazis at considerable risk to themselves.

Listening to Dr. Paldiel, one gained a definite sense of the problems facing both French Jews and those who had fled to France to avoid the Nazi takeover of other countries.

Dr. Paldiel spoke about a number of organizations that already existed, or that were formed to help the refugees from Germany, Poland, the French Jews, and, of course, the Jewish children.

Dr. Paldiel movingly related the story of how Rabbi Zalman Schneerson, *zt”l* (the father of Rebbetzin Hadassa Carlebach, who spoke immediately after him), heroically ran children’s homes in France during the war and saved many children. In fact, Dr. Paldiel himself was sheltered for a short time when he was five years old in one of Rabbi Schneerson’s homes and Rebbetzin Carlebach was his teen-age mentor!

Both Dr. Paldiel and Rebbetzin Hadassa Carlebach mentioned the Joint Distribution Committee and its very valuable assistance. The funds provided by the Joint (as it is called colloquially) saved many lives.

In closing, Dr. Paldiel recounted an act of inspiring spiritual bravery that was carried out by Rabbi Schneerson on a Rosh Hashanah morning in 1943. He also took a moment to remember the many women who took immense risks to save the children. Many of these heroines were deported, never to return.

Last to speak was Rebbetzin Hadassa Carlebach, the daughter of Rabbi Zalman Schneerson, who shared interesting anecdotes about her father’s life. Born in Russia, Rabbi Schneerson began his career of clandestine activism during the early days of communism in the Soviet Union. He was arrested at least 16 times by the Soviets and finally decided to leave in 1935. After traveling to Palestine and Poland, he arrived in Paris, intending to go to the U.S.

However, he remained in Paris because he realized that there was much work to be done there, especially with Polish Jews who had fled Germany. Within a short period of time, he set up two shuls, two food kitchens, and two schools. As conditions worsened due to the imminent outbreak of World War II, he became involved in setting up a children’s home for orphaned and homeless children.

Rebbetzin Carlebach described vividly what life was like during the war years, as her father moved the children’s home from place to place to avoid Nazi persecution and the anti-Semitic individuals who threatened to expose them. She describes arriving at a dilapidated chateau in a secluded location with broken windows and a broken front door and how her father converted the chateau into a farm, complete with cows for milk and oxen to till the ground. She emphasized that no matter where her father traveled with the children, he insisted on *chalah Yisrael* and “negel vasser.”

Rebbetzin Carlebach concluded by describing how ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training), an organization that assists young people, and the Joint supported them during this difficult period. Her father set up a school for the children in the home, and she, as a young teen-ager, was one of the teachers.

Even under emergency situations, he never forgot a promise. Once, two days before Purim, he received notification that it was no longer safe to remain in that location, but even as major packing for departure was under way, he made sure that the Purim party and a play had been delivered as promised.

In her closing message, Mrs. Carlebach advised all of us to be vigilant and positive. We should not live in fear, but we should also always be aware of what is inspiring around us. Her personally narrated experiences represent a gift to us all.