

Fifth Annual Margot Jeremias Kristallnacht Commemoration Lecture

**Feb. 5, 2023
Young Israel of West Hartford**

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Opening Remarks

Rabbi Tuvia Brander

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the 5th Annual Margot Jeremias Memorial Kristallnacht Commemoration Lecture. Thank you all for coming and joining us.

For everyone who is here physically, please take a moment and silence your cell phone. For everyone who is joining via zoom, you should be able to see both me and the shared screen, one is smaller and one is larger on your computer, and you can change that via the three dots in the corner of your screen. If not, don't worry – you will see what you can and it will hopefully be just as enjoyable as it is in person.

Welcome everyone to our Young Israel both virtually and physically. It is a pleasure to be here and a real honor. I wanted to start off by acknowledging our partners, Jewish Family Services – this is also live streaming on their Uniper platform. Thank you so much for all your support and everything you do to support all of the beloved Holocaust survivors in our community. Of course, I wanted to thank Voices of Hope, whose mission is to continue and perpetuate the legacy of those who both perished and survived the Shoah – a legacy and mission that every Jewish institution carries the burden of continuing to do and it is an honor to continue to partner to do so together.

Of course, welcome and thank you to Helen and Les Loew who sponsor this lecture each year in loving memory of Helen's mother, Mrs. Margot Jeremias, Gittel bas Moshe V'Kayla

Acharon Acharon Chaviv, it is a pleasure to welcome our speaker, Dr. Leon Chameides! We are so glad that you are able to be here in good health! You should continue to be with us in our community, with your family and surrounded by all of us your friends and admirers for many years to come in good health. Also, it is an honor to welcome Rabbi Small, my rabbinic colleague, it is always an honor to have you in our shul.

Our Torah portion, introducing the 10 commandments, begins the portion telling us about Yitro. We are told “ וַיִּשְׁמָע יִתְרוֹ - Yitro Heard”. Now, the commentaries have a tumult as to what exactly did Yitro hear? What caused Yitro to come to Moses at this time? Was it the battle with the evil Amalek? Was it the plagues or the splitting of the sea? Much ink is spilled trying to discern what exactly did Yitro hear? While the commentaries struggle to understand that, I think there is far more important insight captured with the first words of the verse which is often glossed over. “ וַיִּשְׁמָע יִתְרוֹ - Yitro Heard”. In our contemporary times, we cannot take for granted this essential quality – people do not stop to listen, to step beyond our echo chamber and to listen to new perspectives or new ideas. Our society no longer stops, thinks, ponders – gives space to allow ourselves to discern, to consider new perspectives.

Yet, I am certain that this is one of the essential requirements – one of the core responsibilities – that we have in this generation. As we are still so blessed to have with us those heroes – courageous individuals – who made a life for themselves after the Shoah. It is our duty is to find moments like this to stop and to hear their stories, to understand, and to take on their perspective, their message and their meaning. The ideas and the ideals, the vision they bring to us out of that darkest era in our history and to be able to communicate it to us – the Jewish future – requires of all of us the precious skill of שמועה - listening, hearing, stopping and that is something in our day and age that is quite rare. This is why we come together each year and convene this lecture. It is something I learned and admired very deeply from Mrs. Jeremias zt'l whose memory is the inspiration for this annual event. The ability to take a step back at Kristallnacht and see the broader picture and what role it played in history and to be able to appreciate that. To be able to put that into action, the lessons borne from the horrors our people, unfortunately, dealt with in those terrible times.

This is what we are gathered to do tonight and is what we strive to do each and every year with this commemoration memorial lecture. We are so honored to be able to house it again today, mostly in person, with all of us in good health.

It is my honor and pleasure to call up my friend, Helen Loew, to further introduce the night and introduce our speaker. Helen Loew....

Introduction

Helen Loew

Good evening and thank you all for joining us. Les and I are proud to be able to sponsor this talk in memory of my mother, Margot Jeremias. I am so pleased that we were able to reschedule this lecture and that Dr. Leon Chameides is here to speak with us this evening. I'm sure you will agree after hearing him, that it was well worth the wait. In fact, this talk is now taking place the week of my mother's birthday. It's wonderful that we can offer this event in person and on Zoom.

My mother was 12 years old during the events of Kristallnacht. She spoke often of the significance of what occurred in Germany on November 9th and 10th, 1938. At that point, she was traveling to Heidelberg to attend a special Jewish school because the local Nazis kept her from attending in her small home town. On the train, she heard the sound of glass shattering and people shouting: "kill the Jews". She was, of course, terrified. She was advised to return home but had to wait two hours before the train arrived, listening all the while to rioting. When she got back, she found the Nazis had a celebratory bonfire, burning the synagogue's Torahs, siddurim, and whatever else they could find. Her father and other men were arrested and transported to Dachau. Because her father was a veteran and hero of World War I, he was eventually released. During the five weeks he was gone, my mother lived in fear, unable to eat or sleep.

Of course this pivotal event was merely the beginning of the atrocities. The rest of my mother's saga we will save for another time.

Our granddaughter Ariella is studying in Israel this year and this coming Tuesday she leaves with her school for Poland. She asked Les and me about family members who had perished during the Holocaust. We told her about our grandparents who were killed at Auschwitz, including my mother's parents. Ariella's Mom, our daughter Aviva, was asked to write Ella a letter that she could read while

at the camps. To quote from her moving message: "Quite fitting that you are reading this on Grandma's birthday. When I think of her story, the theme for me is not really death and destruction, but rather family." That is what kept my mother going during those dark times and beyond. Helping her mother by picking lice out of her hair; then being separated and waiting for a letter from her parents while in hiding; being welcomed by her sister and family in a small one bedroom apartment when she reached the US. Family gave her strength.

My mother pushed herself to share her story. It was always difficult for her but also somewhat cathartic. I was privileged to hear her speak many times and I always learned something new. Her message was one of the importance of education, the need to be tolerant and kind, yet remain vigilant. Certainly a timely message. She felt that her two daughters, her seven grandchildren and her eighteen great-grandchildren were the ultimate victory. Family.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Brander who conceived of this event connected to Kristallnacht as an appropriate tribute. In addition to the idea, he has been instrumental in planning and advertising this evening. I know he does this in part as a personal commitment due to his close relationship to my Mom. She lived in West Hartford for eleven years and we are still amazed at the connections and friends that she made.

My mother was involved with Voices of Hope as a speaker so it is especially meaningful that Kathy Fishman and that organization are cosponsoring this evening. Their work in fostering education and tolerance are vital, now more than ever.

Our speaker tonight also had a close relationship with my mother. Their mutual respect, admiration and affection, in addition to his scholarship, makes Leon Chameides a perfect choice for this talk. Leon was born in Poland and arrived in the United States in 1949. He attended Yeshiva University and then received his M.D. from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Trained in Pediatrics and Pediatric Cardiology, he and his wife Jean settled in this area in 1967. He has published extensively in his field of expertise and been an invited speaker internationally. Leon has also been active in our Jewish

Community, deeply involved in the Jewish Historical Society, Congregation Agudas Achim and the Hebrew Academy. He is active in Holocaust education both here and abroad. He is the author of several books and he and Jean are the proud parents of three children and seven grandchildren. A child himself during the war, he will share his experiences with us tonight. It is my pleasure to invite this good friend up to speak.



Children During the Shoah A Personal Odyssey

by Dr. LeonChameides

**Kristallnacht Commemoration
in Memory of Margot Jeremias**

Young Israel of West Hartford, February 5, 2023

First of all, thank you for your many prayers during my recent illness, and thanks to Hashem for responding. This was originally planned as an annual commemoration of Margot Jeremias, z"l, but tragically we have since also lost her daughter, our dear friend, Paulette Korn (Figure1). Jean and I met



Figure 1: (l to r) Helen Loew, Margot Jeremias, Paulette Korn (2006)



Figure 2: (l to r) JeanChameides, Leon Chameides, Paulette Korn, Margot Jeremias (2012)

Paulette and her late husband, Joe, shortly after they moved to West Hartford and we remained close friends and their great admirers throughout their all too brief lives. Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing Margot and Paulette (Figure 2) have been enriched by their warmth, wisdom, and kindness. We are also most grateful for our ongoing friendship with Helen and Les. (Figure 3)



Figure 3: (l to r) Helen Loew, Les Loew, Margot Jeremias, Paulette Korn (2006)

Margot and I were both children during the Shoah so I thought it appropriate to speak with you today about some children's experiences, an often neglected topic. Why has it been neglected?

First of all because so few of us survived. For the Germans, children were useless mouths to feed and it is estimated that about 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered. It has been calculated that in Poland the mortality rate for Jewish children was greater than 99.5% or, to put it another way, the survival rate was less than 1/2 of 1%. In the early years following the end of the war there was a conspiracy of silence. Survivors weren't ready to speak and those who weren't there weren't ready to hear. In the early 1960s, the Eichmann trial unleashed a flood of information and conversations started



Figure 4



Figure 5. Rabbi Kalman Chameides (1902-1942)

but they were pretty well confined to concentration camp experiences and children almost never survived. Only now are we beginning to speak about the unique experiences of hidden children.

I was born in 1935 in Katowice, (Figure 4) in southwestern Poland. My father, Rabbi Kalman Chameides (Figure 5) was the town rabbi. We had a beautiful synagogue that was built in 1900 (Figure 6). The invading Germans filled the synagogue with dynamite on September 4,

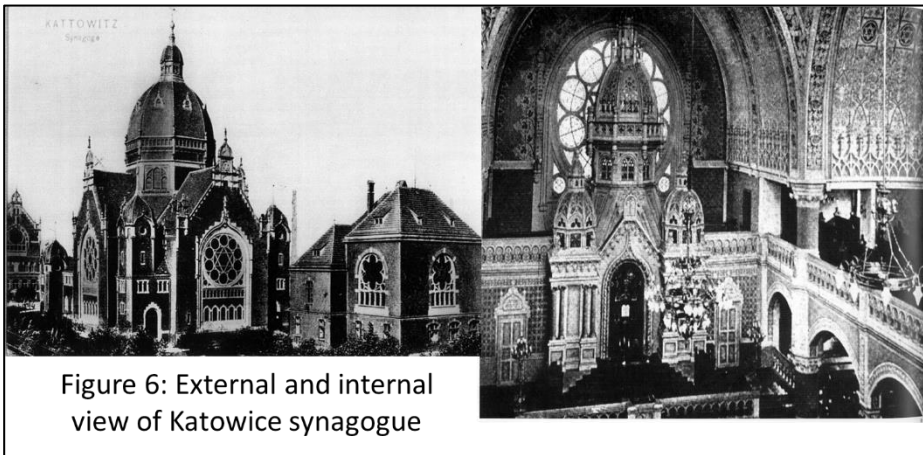


Figure 6: External and internal view of Katowice synagogue

1939 and blew it up (Figure 7).

My father was also the founding editor of a small community biweekly paper to which he contributed essays, many undoubtedly based on his sermons. I eventually found copies of 118 issues published between January 1932 and December 1936 (Figure 8) and I translated his essays from German and Polish (Figure 9).

Only two of the essays are about children. The first, based on midrashim, shows the pride, happiness, and hope of a new father and was published about a month after my brother's



Figure 7: Katowice synagogue after destruction on September 4, 1939



Figure 8: Official Newspaper of the Katowice Jewish Community #1 January 1932

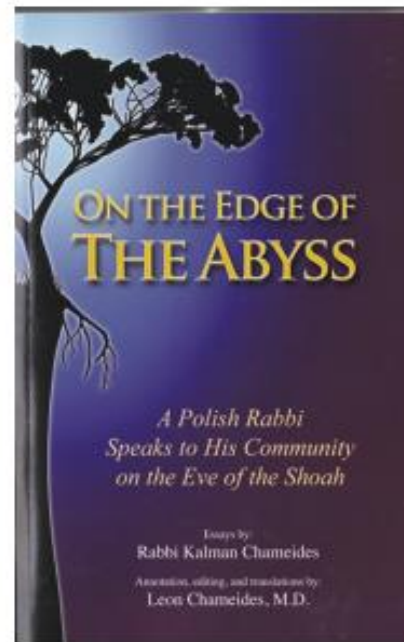


Figure 9: Translations of Rabbi Chameides' essays

birth in 1932. The second is entitled Jewish Children As Martyrs, was written for Tisha B'Av 1935, and was published shortly after, and I am sure as a result of, my birth. Permit me to read you my translation of portions of the first paragraph:

“In every age, the voice of children is drowned by the energetic, pompous noise of grown-ups. Grown-ups make war. Grown-ups make history. Grown-ups write history. It is their interpretation, of course, and from their point of view. They fought. They made peace. They suffered. But no historian knows how to describe the suffering of children. They bloom like flowers, and decorate our paths of thorns. And, just like flowers, they are often trampled underfoot by the relentless march of ruthless events. Quietly, and without a sound. They fade rapidly because they need much sunshine, and don't receive it. Everywhere, there is only haze, shade, and a sorrowful darkness... Their souls shatter easily because they need so much joy and have none. Everywhere, there is only sorrow, anxiety, and distress... They age early because they need so much freedom, and have none. Everywhere, - only oppression, bondage,

and persecution... Born into a cold, joyless, and subjugated world, they carry the burdens that we impose on them. But their voice, that thin voice of children, is not heard. For grown-ups have no time. Their heroism remains unacknowledged. For, after all, no weapon glitters in their tiny hands. Grown-ups can be so easily deceived. They are certain that heroism resides only in the mouths of cannons, and on the sharp edge of polished knives. "Children cannot be heroes," say the grown-ups, who make and write history. "Children can be heroes, if they are taught heroism," answers an echo from bygone days..." He goes on to give examples of martyrdom of Jewish children including Chana and her seven children.

He concludes the essay:

"...Today, the Caesar is no longer trying to win over Jewish children's hearts. He no longer tries to convert them to his own faith. He wants to annihilate them. He knows no pity. Sympathy is a stranger to him."

...Jewish children must once again become heroes. Teach your children ...to bear humiliation with pride; to accept degradation in peace; and teach them in suffering never to deny [GD]; in an assault from hostile forces, never to lose hope. Hope in the enlightenment of humanity. Hope in the deliverance of the Jewish people." (UGGIK #85, August 1935 p 4-5. Original in German translated by Leon Chameides in *On The Edge of the Abyss* pp 70-76).

In 1935, my father was indeed prescient.

In August 1939, on the eve of the war, we fled Katowice for Lwów, now the Ukrainian city of Lviv. My father was born in a nearby shtetl and my paternal grandparents, many aunts, uncles, and cousins lived in the vicinity. What we didn't know was that the Soviets and Germans had divided Poland and that placed us under Soviet occupation (Figure 10) until June 22, 1942 when the Germans attacked and occupied our area.

Within a week, shortly after my sixth birthday, I experienced my first pogrom carried out by our Ukrainian

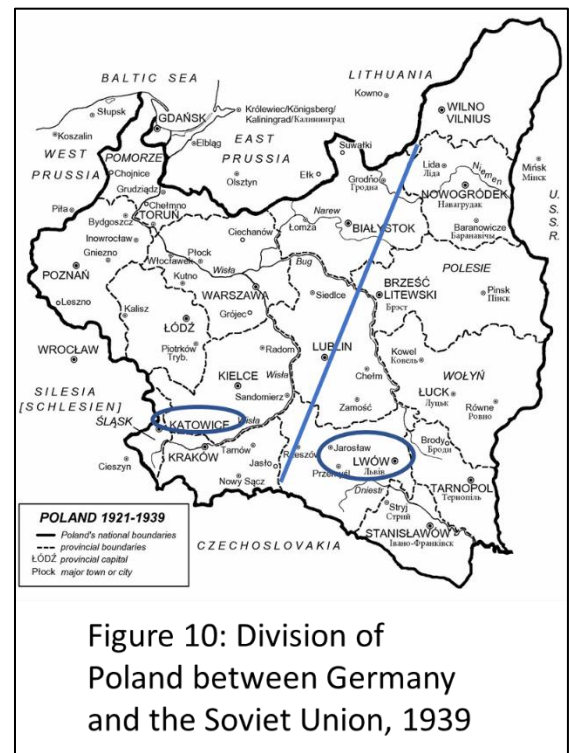


Figure 10: Division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union, 1939

Figure 11. Jews in the Lwów Region

- October 1941: 119,000 – 150,000
- November 1942: 29,000
- April 1943: 8,000
- July 1944: 823 (almost no children)

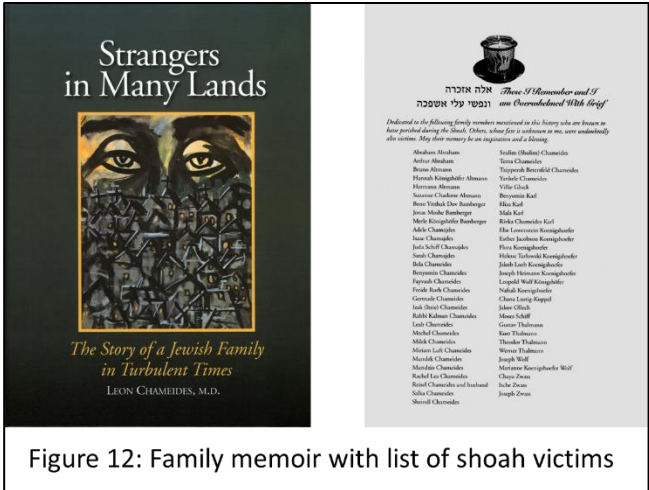


Figure 12: Family memoir with list of shoah victims

neighbors. I remember Jews being beaten and forced to scrub cobblestones with toothbrushes in the town center. I remember hiding, terrified, in a dark smelly and hot cellar with my mother. We could hear frequent yells, screams, and occasional gunshots. Suddenly, there was pounding on the cellar door and, as it gave way, a shaft of light penetrated the darkness and made us wince. We heard the pounding of boots on the cellar stairs and we were hauled out of our hiding place. That evening, when we finally came home, we found my grandmother alive but with a bloodied face and missing several teeth. My next memory is of my mother sitting with needle, thread, and measuring stick sewing a blue Magen David on a white armband, a sign that had to be worn by every Jewish adult for easy identification. In August 1942, 50,000 Jews were murdered in Lwów and it became clear to my parents that we would all be killed. That they were correct can be seen from the following figures (Figure 11) for the town of Lwów. Before WW II, about 35% of the population was Jewish. The number increased somewhat by the influx of immigrants, such as we. There was a gradual diminution as Jews were killed and at liberation, only 852 Jews were still alive. On a personal level, when I wrote a family history, I made a list of family victims. (Figure 12).

My father made arrangements to have my brother and me hidden. In the Fall, 1942, when I was seven, I was placed in the back of a truck full of workers and after a long ride, the truck slowed to a crawl. My father took my hand and we jumped out and walked towards a huge building, that I later learned was St. George’s Cathedral (Figure 13). A casual observer

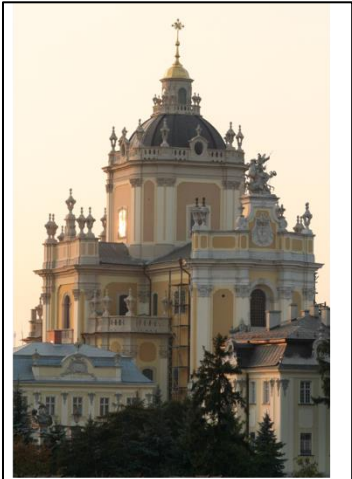


Figure 13: St George Greek-Catholic Cathedral in Lviv (2007)

seeing us walking up that hill, could have remarked, “וילכו שניהם יחדו” which many meforshim understand as agreement between father and son as to what was about to happen but a careful observer might have noted a jaunt in my walk and perhaps a smile on my face because it was such a rare treat in these difficult times for me to walk alone hand-in-hand with my father. My father’s mind was undoubtedly in a world I can’t even imagine, as he struggled with desperate and conflicting emotions about what he was being forced to do. I had no idea where we were going nor what was about to happen. Today, 81 years later, I still painfully recall and relive the moment when, sitting in front of Archbishop Andrej Sheptytsky (Figure 14), I overheard something that suggested that I was going to be left alone in this strange environment separated from everything and everyone I knew and loved.

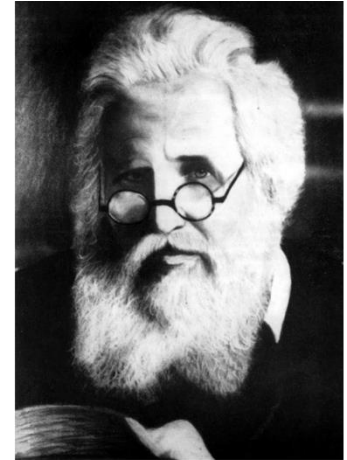


Figure 14: Metropolitan Andrej Sheptytsky

When I first met Margot Jeremias, we were both in our seventh or eighth decades. To a casual observer we were two contemporary elderly people recalling the past. What became an insignificant age difference late in life, loomed much larger when we were young. Margot was born in 1926. At the time of Kristallnacht she was already an almost 13- year old schoolgirl who could feel her classmates’ taunts, experience the pain of her school expulsion, was able to read the anti-Jewish street graffiti, and see the broken glass and burning synagogues. At the same time, I was three (Figure 15) and blissfully unaware of anything happening outside our apartment and only interested in things inside if I could either eat them or throw them at my brother.



Figure 15: Leon (l) and Herbert (r) Chameides in Katowice 1938

A priest, dressed in a cassock with a heavy cross dangling from his waist took over my education and thus began my transformation. I was given a new name, Levko Chaminskyi, and a new background. I



Figure 16: Univ Monastery (2007)

was taught to speak Ukrainian, how to pray in Church Slavonic, how to cross myself, how to make confession, and how to receive communion.

I have already mentioned age as a major difference between Margot's and my experiences. Another was gender; it was much easier to hide girls than boys because our religion was engraved on us. I was repeatedly warned never to speak of my family or my past and never to allow others to see me bathe or go to the bathroom. This became a challenge because for the next two years I lived in a self-sufficient farming monastery in the village of Univ, (Figure 16 and 17) and we all had agricultural chores. There are no toilets in the field and a simple biologic act often degenerated into a distance contest among the boys. It was a challenge to constantly make excuses and disappear but I understood that my life depended on it.



Figure 17: Univ Monastery church (Cerkva) (2007)

Gradually I acquired a veneer of the “other” and over time the veneer grew thicker. I knew that I was “Jewish” although I didn’t know what that meant except that it was dangerous but here is the paradox. I was reminded not to mention that I was Jewish so often that I was always aware of it. It’s like the paradox of being reminded each year of our obligation to obliterate Amalek’s name by reading about him.

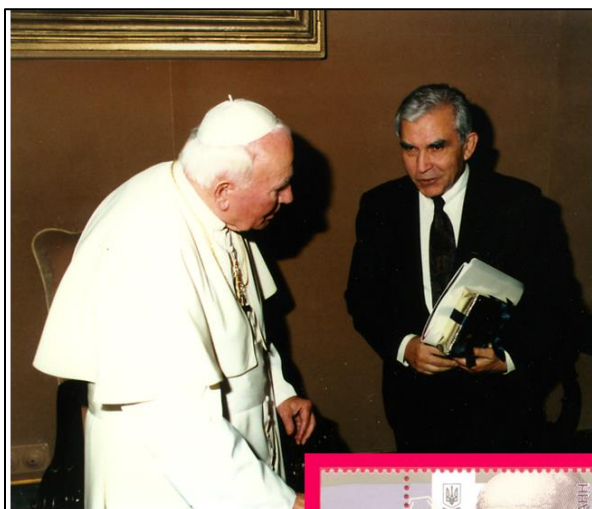
Although we never spoke about it, I was aware that two other children in the monastery orphanage were Jewish. In 1944, we were given clean pants and shirts and carefully placed in front of the church. A professional photographer took the photo (Figure 18). The placement of the Jewish children next to each other was not an accident. In front of me and to my right is Danil Cherwinski (Daniel Adam Rotfeld), who remained in Poland and eventually became a famous diplomat and Foreign Minister. On my left is Dorko (Oded Amarant) who became an engineer in Israel. Unknown to us, another little boy, his mother and aunt were being hidden in the attic of our school house by our teacher, Mr. Dyuk. That

little boy, Roald Hoffman, eventually became a Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry, a poet with seven published books of poetry, and most importantly, Les Loew's professor of chemistry at Cornell (Figure 19).

Margot was about 16 when she was separated from her family and about 18 at liberation. She carried many family memories and had a good



Figure 18: Univ 1943 or 1944



Daniel Adam Rotfeld with Pope Joh Paul II

Ukrainian Stamp honoring Roald Hoffman



Daniel Adam Rotfeld dedicating plaque recognizing Archbishop Sheptytski for saving Jews

Figure 19

idea who she was and could therefore easily differentiate the veneer that hid her and her true self. I was 7 when I was separated from my family. By the time I was 10, I had answered to three different names: Leon Chameides, Levko Chamynskyi, and Lestaw Kuszarecki; in four languages: German, Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian; practiced three religions: Judaism, Greek Catholicism, and Roman Catholicism; and had many birthdays. So who was the real I? When I enrolled in a Russian school after liberation, (Figure 20) the first question was: what is your name? I started to answer, Levko and was corrected



Figure 20: Leon Chameides in Lvov (1945) with Soviet officers

that I could now give my real name. How strange! Is Leon my real name? What is your birthday? My brother thought I was born in 1935 but we had no idea about the month or day. I had already learned that if you don't know, make it up so I said April 15 and that's the date on my early documents. I later changed it to June 13 before I received a copy of my birth certificate.

Since my family did not survive, I was very fortunate to be taken in by a wonderful Jewish woman in her thirties who lost her entire family. Tola Wasserman (Figure 21) was not religious and that interval, I believe, was critical for my future because it allowed me to gain some distance before re-confronting Judaism.

Mother Tola, as I called her, respected my past, had full faith in my future, and taught me how to live without bitterness or rancor.

In 1946, we received a temporary visitor's visa to England and stayed there for 3.5 years while awaiting permission to enter the United States. We arrived in New York on June 13, 1949 when I was 14 and I decided that I wanted a Jewish education. Someone told me about Yeshiva university and I spent the next six years there before going to medical school. When Margot was liberated in 1945, she was a young lady of 18 who had been active in the work force for some time. She married and raised a family and didn't have time for formal education. Just about a year before her death, Margot was awarded an honorary high school diploma from one of the magnet schools in Hartford in gratitude for her talks to the students. I, on the other hand was nine at my liberation and easily caught up and was fortunate to get a good education.



Figure 21: Tola Wasserman and Leon Chameides, New York, 1955

For a long time I struggled trying to understand my true identity; to distinguish the real from the veneer. And then I read the following by Alfred Lord Tennyson:

“I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!” (from Ulysses)

This poem made me grateful for the many people from a variety of cultures I have met and it taught me that each encounter and experience, both good and bad, enriched me and created a new me. Translated into our own cultural terms, the poem states that since tradition tells me that I was created in the image of אהיה אשר אהיה , at any moment, therefore, I am what I am...
And that is just fine with me! Thank you



Figure 22. Margot Jeremias with children and grandchildren (2006)