



## TRAVEL

# Chanukah in Berlin

## A Menorah In Front Of The Brandenburg Gate?



By **RICHARD LEVY**

In 1916 my grandfather Leopold Katz came to America from Budapest, Hungary. He quickly got a good job as a baker, saved his money and within a year sent for his family including my mother, Mollie, and a few very close cousins. My cousins did not like it in America. After a few years, they yearned for the simpler good life they had left in Hungary where they had held prominent positions and booming businesses. They said their sad and long goodbyes and returned to Hungary. Unfortunately and ironically, my cousins were rounded up by the Nazis and Hungarian Secret Police along with 400,000 other Hungarian Jews towards the end of the war in 1944 and put on trains to Auschwitz, never to be heard from again.

Last December, to pay tribute to my cousins, whom I had never met, I went to Berlin, the former capital of the Nazis, to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Chanukah with my two sons, who now live there and my one year-old granddaughter, whom I had never met.

Before leaving for Berlin, I packed my cherished old bronze Chanukah Menorah that my father left me; and that his dad had left him. A Menorah is a special candelabrum that holds eight symbolic Chanukah candles. Why eight candles? Chanukah is known as The Festival of Lights, commemorating a Chanukah lamp that magically burned for seven days, in ancient Jewish times.

Let me tell you, ever since I was a child and learned from my parents and grandparents about the Holocaust and the fate of my Hungarian cousins, I started to harbor tremendous hostility and anger towards Germany. Before I left for Berlin, I was prepared to walk around seething with 50 years of resentment and anger bubbling up inside of me.

On my first day, surprisingly, everything started to change. I woke up early and ventured out to explore this bustling city filled with ghosts of the Nazi past. My first stop wasn't the famous Berlin Wall, but the huge, imposing monument and symbol of Hitler and his Nazi thugs, the Brandenburg Gate. In Nazi films the gate was always adorned with huge swastikas,

but now as I approached the infamous Brandenburg Gate, right in front of it was a giant Chanukah Menorah. I did a double take and as I stared unbelievably at this huge Menorah, tears rolled down my face. I was mesmerized; choked-up. I could not believe my eyes. To demonstrate to the entire world just how sorry and remorseful they were about the Holocaust, the "new Germans" had incredibly placed a huge Menorah, the symbol of the Jewish holiday of Chanukah, right in front of their most beloved, and oldest city monument. Oh, my God!

But that was just the beginning of my astonishment and revelation in Berlin. Just a couple of blocks away I visited the overwhelming "Memorial to the Murdered". This giant sculpture or monument, created by a famous German artist, occupies an entire Berlin city block, totally covered with a maze of huge gray concrete blocks of all sizes, which you can walk through and get lost in. Standing in the middle of this huge gray maze, it is impossible to see the outside. Underneath the memorial is a small but mind-wrenching museum that takes you step-by-step through each of the death-camps, showing you through astounding Nazi photographs and films that they had proudly taken to document each beastly step in their effort to exterminate the Jews. The exhibit included many heartbreaking recordings of death camp survivors.

Then as I walked the streets of Berlin, I started to notice small bronze plaques embedded in the old cobblestone streets outside some houses. As I looked closer, I gasped, Oh my God! These plaques are engraved, documenting names, dates and the camps where the Jews who had lived in these houses were taken away to, never to return. Similar cement plaques are embedded on the sidewalks in front of many shops that had been owned by Jewish tradesman who were taken away. The plaques have bold graphic symbols of tools used by the tradesmen, to remember them by.

Afterwards I lost myself for hours in the beautifully designed new Jewish Museum, which spectacularly documents the history of the Jews of Germany and of the Holocaust. This was yet another demonstration of the extreme remorse



felt by the German people at what their not-so-distant ancestors had methodically done to 6 million Jews. I was totally overwhelmed by the fact that the German people had not tried to cover up or bury the years of their Holocaust past. Instead they had confronted it over-and-over again and with class and dignity. Today every German High school student must complete two years of Holocaust studies to graduate.

As I moved around Berlin on their very efficient U-Ban and S-Ban train system I stopped off and enjoyed some great German beers and the most

popular Berlin fast-food specialty, the "Currywurst": a delicious small sausage on a bun covered with hot curry flavored onion sauce.

While hanging out in Berlin's wonderful cafes, I struck up many conversations with college-aged Germans, telling them that I was from New York, visiting my two sons who now lived in Berlin, that I was Jewish and in Berlin to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Chanukah. They were all very fascinated, respectful and exuberant about meeting me. They spoke perfect English, as almost everyone in Berlin does, and looked forward to coming to America

one day. The students had this contagious sense of optimism about them. In fact, they appeared to be much more like our young Americans than youth I had met in France, Italy or even the United Kingdom.

Everywhere I went in Berlin I looked, listened and totally absorbed all of the powerful positive vibes the Germans and their amazing city gives out, to demonstrate their remorse for the holocaust. But I could not stop thinking that some of these lovely and now very peace loving, sophisticated German people I encountered might have been the great-grand children of these Nazi monsters. Yes, they might have been the offspring of evil, but so what? They had obviously had left their past far behind.

They say the cherry does not fall far from the tree, but my Chanukah in Berlin experience and revelation totally changed my mind. I realized that sometimes, like in Germany, the cherry falls very far from the tree. As you can imagine, I have now totally embraced the new German people and their beautiful, vibrant city of Berlin; I can't wait to come back.

Oh, by the way, my "Chanukah in Berlin" celebration with my two sons, daughter-in-law, granddaughter and her two moms was over-the-top wonderful and a very emotional evening. As I watched my youngest son holding my grand daughter in his arms light the Chanukah candles and recite the prayers out loud, once again tears rolled down my eyes and my pulse quickened. I was "kveling". It was like an out-of-body experience.

But I must confess, despite going to Berlin to celebrate Chanukah, I am not very religious, and only go to Temple on High Holidays, though I do make an effort to fast on Yom Kippur to repent for my sins. After lighting the candles, we devoured my son's Chanukah dinner of organic chicken soup and huge crispy potato latkes with applesauce. We drank lots of wine, laughed a lot and told funny stories about our Chanukah's past. As

I watched the Chanukah candles burning down in the Menorah, I thought again, about my Hungarian cousins who perished in World War II and how happy my mom and dad would be if they could see me now, on this very special night. But maybe they *could* see me, after all this night was not just any special night; after all, it was "Chanukah in Berlin".

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