

Feature story

Joseph and Rebecca Bau honoured by B'nai Brith



By

MARTIN ZEILING

When Hadassa Bau and Clila Bau Cohen received notice earlier this year that their parents, Josef and Rebecca Bau, were going to be honoured, along with some other Holocaust survivors, at a ceremony in Jerusalem in April, they burst out in tears.

It was an emotional moment.

"We were very moved," said the two sisters, who have both lived in Winnipeg at different times over the years, in an email in early July to this reporter from their home in Tel Aviv. "Our parents deserve it so much."

The B'nai Brith World Center in Jerusalem and the Committee to Recognize the Heroism of Jewish Rescuers During the Holocaust held a Zoom meeting on Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah, Tuesday, April 21, 2020) to extol the heroism of some 20 Jews who endangered themselves during the Holocaust to rescue fellow Jews, said information on the B'nai B'rith International website. Relatives and representatives of the now-deceased rescuers addressed the meeting, and the – a joint project of the World Center and the Committee – was conferred virtually on them. The event was carried live on B'nai Brith's Facebook page and was primarily in Hebrew, with some English.

There were a total of 16 rescuers honoured on that day.

A brief biography of each person is included on the website:

Joseph Bau (June 13, 1920-May 24, 2002), a graphic artist who forged documents for the Jewish underground in Krakow, Poland, and later in Oscar Schindler's factory camp in Brněnec in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia;

Rebecca (Tennenbaum) Bau (1918-1997) was a nurse who served as the manicurist of Amon Goeth, the ruthless Nazi who ruled over the Plaszow concentration camp. She shared secrets she overheard that helped many inmates survive, while also providing them with moral and physical support.

"The Zoom meeting represented a break from the traditional annual ceremony held by the World Center and Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (KKL-JNF) for the past 17 consecutive years in the B'nai Brith Martyrs Forest," said the BBI website.

"It is the only event dedicated annually to commemorating the heroism of Jews who rescued fellow Jews during the Holocaust.

"Since the establishment of the Jewish Rescuers Citation in 2011, 314 heroes have been honored for rescue activities in Germany, France, Hungary, Greece, Slovakia, Yugoslavia, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Italy, Holland and Belgium.

One of the most recent recipients of the Jewish Rescuers Citation, Frida Wattenberg, a member of the Jewish underground in Grenoble, France, during the Holocaust, contracted the coronavirus and died in Paris on April 3, just three weeks shy of her 96th birthday. The citation was conferred on Sept. 23, 2019, at the Foundation de Rothschild seniors' home where she resided. Tsilla Hershco, the author of the most authoritative book to date on the Jewish underground movement in France and a member of the Committee to Recognize the Heroism of Jewish Rescuers During the Holocaust, conferred the citation."

In their email, Hadassa Bau and Clila Bau Cohen said their parents only thought about how to help others, and in the Holocaust they risked their lives in order to save other people. The sisters participated in the Zoom meeting on April 21 by providing more details about their parents.

"They never thought about themselves," the sisters said.

"Our father, Joseph Bau, managed to finish one year of art school in Krakow before the war broke out. At the end of that year, he was taught Gothic letters. When he and his family were sent to the Ghetto, the Germans looked for someone who knew those letters, so that saved his life. He worked for the German police, the Jewish police and the Jewish underground. He forged documents for the underground, thus saving hundreds of Jews that managed to escape. He was also a spy that conveyed information from the German police to the underground.

"When the underground people told him, 'Forge a document for yourself and escape...', he answered, '...but if I escape who will save the rest?'



Joseph and Rebecca Bau (1956 photo)



Joseph & Rebecca's wedding in Plaszow concentration camp as depicted in "Schindler's List"

"In the concentration camp, she met her husband Joseph. He snuck into her barracks in the woman's camp dressed as a woman and they secretly got married."



The Bau family in a 1962 photo taken in Israel

"So, he risked his life and stayed till the end of the war. Our father was very modest and never told us how he saved many lives, even though our parents spoke about the Holocaust daily. During the Holocaust, he led a secret life and this continued in Israel.

"He told his memoirs of the Holocaust in a book he wrote named 'Shnot Tarzach – Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?' that was translated into many languages."

In 1950 Josef and Rebecca and their three year old daughter, Hadasa, immigrated to Israel.

"After his death, we discovered that he worked for the Mossad and forged documents for spies such as Eli Cohen, also for the team that captured Eichmann and Eichmann himself," said the sisters.

"We turned the studio that he used as a cover for his activities into the Joseph Bau House Museum. He was a pioneer of animation and one of the first graphic artists. He designed titles for many Israeli movies."

Rebecca Bau was in the Krakow ghetto, also Plaszow, Auschwitz and Lichtenwerden concentration camps.

"She was a fearless woman. All her life she encouraged people and always laughed," the sisters wrote.

"Rebecca was a nurse and cosmetician who worked in the ghetto hospital until all the patients were murdered. While in the ghetto, she saved many by helping them avoid the transports - among whom were 11 members of the Gietzhalz family.

"She was then transferred from the ghetto to the Plaszow concentration camp and there she saved many by giving them pedicures, because the Germans murdered those who limped."

"In the concentration camp, she met her husband Joseph. He snuck into her barracks in the woman's camp dressed as a woman and they secretly got married."

Their wedding is depicted in the movie "Schindler's List" directed by Steven Spielberg.

The sisters also noted that their mother replaced her name, which was on Schindler's list, with that of her husband, "our father," and she herself was sent to Auschwitz.

"The reason she was on the list was because she had saved the life of Pemper's mother and he was one of the people making the list," the sisters wrote in their email.

"In Auschwitz, she saved some girls - even during Mengele's selection process. All the time we hear more and more things from people who knew our parents, who come to the museum and tell us. This is unbelievable. We are surprised every time anew. They were very different and special people."