

Rene Lichtman, Holocaust survivor and ardent opponent of US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, dies at age 87

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The *World Socialist Web Site* mourns the death of Rene Lichtman, a Holocaust survivor who in his last years was an ardent opponent of the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Lichtman, 87, died from heart failure at a Detroit-area hospice care center on the night of January 28, according to family and friends.

A memorial service with moving tributes from long-time friend Rabbi Alana Alpert and several of Lichtman's children was held January 31 in Southfield, Michigan. Afterwards, Lichtman was buried in a simple pine coffin at the Beth Moses Cemetery.

Rene was living refutation of the foul slanders by political apologists for imperialism who denounce opposition to Zionism and the crimes of the Israeli state as "antisemitism." For this, he was vilified and slandered by Zionists.

Born on December 4, 1937, in Paris, Rene was the son of two Polish Jews who fled to France the year before his birth. Most of his family in Poland were rounded up and murdered at Majdanek, Sobibor and other Nazi death camps.

Rene's father, Jacob Lichtman, a tailor radicalized in Paris by the Spanish Civil War, joined the French Foreign Legion but was killed during the German invasion of France in 1940. When Rene was two-and-a-half-years old, his mother Helen, a seamstress, went into hiding and placed Rene with the Le Page family, Catholics living in Le Vert-Galant, a town outside Paris.

The Le Page family risked their lives to protect Rene as over 75,000 Jews in France were deported—most to Auschwitz, where fewer than 2,500 survived. In July 1942, the French police, collaborating with the Nazis, carried out the mass arrest of 13,000 Jews in Paris, imprisoning them at the Vélodrome d'Hiver before sending them to their deaths. "In July 1942, my mother had to go into hiding because that is when the 'Final Solution' really started getting implemented," Rene later told the WSWs.

For nearly five years, Lichtman lived as a hidden child. "The Le Page family were internationalists," he said, noting their nephew, Albert, was part of the resistance. His mother visited him in secret whenever possible. After the mass deportations, the Le Page family assumed that Helen had perished and considered Rene their own. However, she returned to reclaim him after the war. In 1950, they emigrated to Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Political awakening and radicalization

As a teenager, Lichtman saw Holocaust survivors in Brooklyn with concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms. He became politically conscious during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. In a 1996 oral history interview for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, he explained: "As Jews, as survivors, we should be fighting not just for ourselves but wherever we recognize any kind of oppression. We should be more sensitive than anyone else because we know what it feels like. That is why I opposed the Vietnam War. I knew my people got screwed over and that no one else should. I always considered that a Jewish value."

While serving in the US Army in Kansas, Lichtman encountered antisemitism and explored jazz clubs in Kansas City, deepening his understanding of racial injustice. Returning to New York, he studied art at Cooper Union and worked in a wallpaper business run by a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. He won a Fulbright Scholarship to study and paint in Belgium.

Lichtman and his wife Kathy moved to Detroit in the late 1960s, where he co-produced *Finally Got the News* (1970), a film about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a black nationalist organization influenced by Maoism. Making Detroit his home, he worked for nearly two decades at Beaumont Hospital developing educational resources for patients and employees. A lifelong learner, he received a PhD in instructional technology at the age of 63 in 2000.

Lichtman saw contemporary injustices through the lens of his own childhood experiences. During Trump's first term, he was active in protests against the administration's brutal immigration policies. In 2017, he testified before a hearing of the Michigan House of Representatives, describing how Jews were rounded up en masse when he was a young child in France, showing photos of his murdered relatives. "My family members were picked up in the streets of Paris in the very same way that ICE people are deputizing local police and picking them up in the streets," he said.

He also marked the historical significance of his testimony, noting it fell on the anniversary of the infamous 1939 voyage of the *MS St. Louis*, a ship carrying Jewish refugees that was turned away from US shores by the Roosevelt administration. "The

passengers were prevented by people from the State Department from coming into the United States, sent back, and half of them went to the gas chambers,” he said.

Fierce opposition to Zionism and Israeli war crimes

Rene was a founding member of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust. He was also a regular speaker at the Zekelman Holocaust Museum in Farmington Hills for a decade or more.

After the Israeli regime launched its genocidal attack after the Palestinian uprising in Gaza, Rene and members of the Jewish Voice for Peace organized a December 2023 protest outside of the Holocaust museum, where he carried a sign, declaring, “Jews and allies say never again for anyone.”

In retaliation, the museum’s board fired him. “What’s going on in the museums today, in the universities, is McCarthyism — Jewish McCarthyism,” he said at the time.

Lichtman remained defiant, telling the WSWS in January 2024, “I think Israel is a fascist state today. What else would you call it? Can you imagine dying in a way where the building falls on you? That’s the way death occurs in those places, day after day. It is almost like torture.”

Drawing historical parallels, he stated: “There are parallels to what the Nazis did. The Nazi plan was, if they didn’t have to waste a bullet on Jews or communists, they would starve them instead. And the Israelis are very conscious, and they are proud, and they brag about that.”

Refusing to join the hypocritical denunciations of the Palestinian militants, he continued, “The other issue that I think is really significant about Hamas when you study the African-American rebellions, Nat Turner’s rebellion, they were not polite you know, tea and cookies type thing, they were extremely violent. There were excesses, because the process of liberation includes that. There is so much anger built up and hatred that excesses are done and to be expected. But the abolitionists, they understood the anger and the hatred, and they did not criticize Nat Turner and these other rebellions, so I think you have to put Hamas in that context.”

Denouncing the slanders hurled at anti-genocide protesters, Rene said, “The real antisemitism comes from the right-wing, the Trumpers, Steve Bannon, and those people. They are Jew-haters. But they are very selective in their Jew-hatred. So, for example, they love Israel, but they hate American Jews.”

In June 2024, Rene and his supporters in the Coalition Against Genocide demanded that Holocaust museums call for a ceasefire and incorporate into their exhibits the work of prominent historians with Jewish backgrounds, including Ilan Pappé, Avi Schlam and Norman Finkelstein, on the 1948 expulsion of the Palestinians. At a vigil, he declared: “How are you now going to portray the Nakba? You end the story with the happy ending of Jews coming to Israel. But that is no longer the ending. What about the Palestinian people?”

On July 14, despite threats from fascist militias, Lichtman led

another protest outside the Holocaust museum. Unperturbed by the crowd of 200 Zionist counterprotesters who were shouting insults and foul language at him, he said, “This institution pretends to be objective. But no, no, no. You’re part of the Israel lobby indoctrinating people every day. What’s going on now is actually equal to or worse than what happened during WWII. It’s genocide, ethnic cleansing. ... The Nakba continues.”

Rene’s political outlook was shaped by the student radicalism of the 1960s and he was cut off from a Trotskyist analysis of the role of Stalinism and how its betrayals of the working class led to the victory of fascism, the Holocaust and Zionism. But he was a deeply courageous, cultured and principled man who considered himself a socialist and internationalist opponent of imperialism and capitalism.

The relationship he developed with the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party in the last year of his life was rich and rewarding. He regularly invited SEP members to speak at his rallies, stressing the need for the struggles of a new generation to be guided by a socialist perspective.

Lichtman endorsed the July 24, 2024, demonstration in Washington, D.C., called by the SEP, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in protest of Netanyahu’s address to Congress. He urged workers and youth to attend, saying, “Yes, absolutely. Anything like this that exposes the imperialists and what Biden is doing with Netanyahu is very good. They are the architects of genocide. People should go—you can’t be bystanders. That is one of the lessons [of history].”

Summing up her father’s principles and courage during her tribute at the memorial service, Risa Lichtman said, “Standing up for his morals outranked everything else, and he never allowed himself to be comfortable in the face of injustice. He confronted it head on with marches and protests all the way up to his 87 years of age...One of the last things my dad said to me when he was lucid was, ‘See you next time, somewhere.’ It broke my heart when he said it because I wasn’t ready to say goodbye. But I know it’s true. I’ll see him everywhere. I’ll see him when people are organizing online and marching through the streets. I’ll feel his hand on my shoulder as I walk through museums and art galleries. And, I’ll feel that moral compass within me, reminding me of how he lived that big life of his.”



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