

FEATURE

Centennial for a Copenhagen Shul

BY RHONA LEWIS

This year, despite the frigid weather that froze the lakes curving around the margin of the city center, the days surrounding Rosh Chodesh Adar (February 8, 9, and 10) were particularly joyous at the Machzikei Hadas shul in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Mr. Eliyahu Katzenstein, one of the few shul members still living in the city, brought together over a hundred people who had grown up in the community. He gathered everyone at the shul on 12 Ole Suhrsgade Street to celebrate its founding one hundred years ago.

While most members of the community have moved to Belgium, Switzerland, England, Eretz Yisrael, and America, the memories forged in what was once a strongly united community were vivid enough to draw many of them back. The three-day-long celebration included many shiurim, lectures, and trips to areas of Jewish interest.





(Above) The Machzikei Hadas building.
(Below) Some of the members who came together to celebrate.



Memories of Machzikei Hadas

Mrs. Gittel Davidson, who graciously shared her experiences at the event with *Hamodia* readers, opened her *shiur* at the centennial with a verse from *Hallel*: “*Zeh hayom asah Hashem, nagilah v’nismechah bo*, this is the day Hashem has made; let us celebrate and be happy on it” (*Tehillim* 118:24).

“It’s a miracle that out of a tiny community of about thirty-five families who were scattered throughout Copenhagen, we produced scholars, heads of major yeshivos, and senior lecturers,” she exclaimed.

Ninety-eight percent of the members of the community have remained Torah-true Jews. How did it happen?

Perhaps one of the reasons is the ironclad sense of community and belonging that was shared by all the members. “When my friend’s father passed away suddenly, we all cried with the same degree of intensity,” Mrs. Davidson recalls. “A woman who was passing by wasn’t able to tell whose relative had died.”

The community’s children shared many outings during the year. Mrs. Davidson, who now resides in Yerushalayim, has particularly fond memories of the *oneg Shabbos* gatherings that took place every Shabbos afternoon, separately for boys and girls. “I still remember some of the songs,” she says.

She also remembers that her mother did not allow the children to leave the house in the afternoon until they had read the *parashah* together and translated it into Danish.

“What should I do when someone calls me ‘Jew’?” her sister once asked her mother.

“Straighten your back and be proud,” her mother promptly replied.

This pride was passed down by Mrs. Davidson’s grandfather, who paid the curators of the Copenhagen Botanical Gardens to pick *lulavim* from the palms in the tropical hothouse when no *lulavim* were available during World War I.



The building that housed Machzikei Hadas before it moved to its present location.

Mrs. Davidson’s grandfather, whose money was deposited in the same bank used by the Danish royal family, took the unprecedented step of withdrawing all of his deposits the morning after he learned that the Jewish bank owner planned to leave Judaism.

When the bank questioned his motives, he replied, “Whoever swindles Hashem will eventually swindle people.” Sure enough, the next week the bank went bankrupt, and the royal family lost money.

Founding and Running Machzikei Hadas

In 1622, Denmark’s King Christian IV sent a message to the leaders of the Sephardic community in Amsterdam and Hamburg, inviting Jews to settle in the recently established township of Gluckstadt. Jews who accepted this invitation established trading and manufacturing operations there.

The king built the famous Round Tower, an astronomical observatory, on



which the letters *yud kei vav kei* can be clearly seen, to show his recognition of the Jews' contributions.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews from Eastern Europe continued arriving and settled in Copenhagen's small side streets. In 1910, the Machzikei Hadas shul was founded in two rooms on one of these streets, at 7 Norregade. The shul was moved a few times before it finally settled at its present address, 12 Ole Suhrsgade Street, in 1934.

Machzikei Hadas was, in fact, the solution of a small group of families determined not to compromise on any aspect of *halachah*, despite the inroads that the Reform movement and intermarriage were making. Shimshon Philip, Yaacov Ruben, Avraham Samson, and Harav Aryeh Leib Cohn were among

(Left) Document of the founding of the shul.

(Below) At a Mchazzikei Hadas *siyum* in 1933, when Rav Wolf Zeev Jacobson, z'l, (sitting, center with hand on forehead) had just arrived in Denmar.. Mrs. Davidson's father is seen..... . Names of others on file in *Hamodia*.



the founding members of the shul.

Harav Tuvia Levenstein, *zt"l*, born in Suriname, Africa, then a Dutch colony, served as rabbi in Haag, Holland, before becoming the rabbi of the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen in 1903. When the son of a shul member decided to marry a woman who had converted questionably, an irresolvable conflict arose.

Although it was impossible to fire Harav Levenstein, who had a lifetime contract, his chair was removed from the shul. For an entire year, the Rav continued to come to the shul and stand in his customary spot. Although he went to court over being fired and won, he

decided to leave the shul in 1910. He then served as rabbi in Machzikei Hadas until 1913, when he left for Zurich.

That year, Harav Michoel Winkler, *zt"l*, took over as Rav of Machzikei Hadas. Harav Winkler, who had studied under Harav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, *zt"l*, recognized that the future of the community depended on its Torah. He therefore traveled to America to raise money for a yeshivah he hoped to establish. Tragically, he passed away during the trip, leaving behind his wife and two children.

His son, Harav Ephraim Winkler, taught for many years in Yerushalayim's Yeshivah Ohr Torah and passed away while this article was being written, on Erev Shabbos *Parashas Zachor*. Many of Harav Winkler's grandsons hold teaching positions in major yeshivos.

In 1934, Harav Binyomin Zeev Wolf Yakovson, *zt"l*, came from Hamburg to head the congregation. In 1943, having shaved off his beard to complete his disguise as a fisherman, he fled to Sweden, as did almost all Danish Jews.

There he established the famous Lidingo School for girls who had survived the Holocaust. Some of these girls became his daughters-in-law. After the war, many Jews returned to Copenhagen, but Harav Yakovson left Sweden for Yerushalayim.

Harav Mordechai Lebowitz, who hailed from Slovakia, replaced Harav Yakovson until 1952, when he left for Brussels, Belgium. He was replaced by Harav Zev Dov Steinhaus, *zt"l*. Harav



(Left) Harav Tuvia Levenstein

(Right) The kever of Harav Michoel Winkler.

(Below) Harav Zev Dov Steinhaus

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Centennial CELEBRATIONS

After Friday-morning *davening* and *Daf Yomi*, the returning shul members chose between a visit to the Judaic department of the Royal Library, where thousands of books and fragments of the Cairo *genizah* are housed, and a tour of Jewish Copenhagen led by Miriam Bentow, who grew up in Copenhagen.

“On Shabbos, the shul was as full as it used to be on Yom Kippur, and there was as much dancing as there used to be on Simchas Torah,” says Mrs. Davidson, who came from Yerushalayim to attend the celebrations.

The *chazzanim*, also former members who traveled from Paris and Antwerp, led the services.

Rabbi Yitzchok Loewenthal of the Chabad community spoke as well, pointing out that it was fitting for the centennial to be taking place on the weekend of *Parashas Mishpatim*, which follows *Parashas Yisro*. While *Mishpatim* focuses on the interpersonal *mitzvos*, *Yisro* focuses on the *mitzvos* between man and Hashem. *Machzikei Hadas* excelled in both areas by



(Above) Mr. Eliyahu Katzenstein receives the *ktav chaver* from guest of honor Harav Ozriel Chaikin. To his left is Rabbi Yitzchok Loewenthal of Chabad.

(Below) Mr. Eliyahu Katzenstein



maintaining a strong brotherhood and remaining true to Torah.

Writes one woman who grew up in the community: “I felt that those very same walls, which must have absorbed all the Torah learning of past generations, and the *kiruv* work of Beth Chabad, were now joining us in our Shabbos.”

All the services were held at the shul, and other events took place in Beit Chabad at 10 Ole Suhrsgade Street. At the gala *melaveh malkah*, Harav Azriel Chaikin, the guest of honor, spoke about Mr. Eliyahu Katzenstein and Rabbi Loewenthal, comparing them to Noach and Avraham Avinu. He said that each one does his work in his own way — Noach by safeguarding tradition, and Avraham by drawing people closer. By merging and working as a team, they create an active community.

Rabbi Loewenthal expanded on these thoughts for *Hamodia*. “Chabad and *Machzikei Hadas* have been good neighbors for the past ten years,” he said. “Chabad draws people closer and offers

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them the opportunity to grow on their level, and Machzikei Hadas shows them the importance of connecting with deep roots.”

The crowning moment of the evening was when Mr. Katzenstein made a *siyum* on *Shas* and Harav Chaikin surprised everyone by presenting him with a *ktav chaver*, a letter of approbation honoring him for all he has done for the shul.

The Sunday program, which focused on the history of Denmark’s Jews, opened with a lecture by historian Bent Bludnikow, who specializes in Holocaust history. Everyone was very moved to meet the second speaker, ninety-three-year-old Jorgen Kieler, who was instrumental in rescuing the parents of nearly all the people in attendance. In October 1943, as leader of a group of resistance fighters called Holger Danske, he helped orchestrate the escape of almost all the Danish Jews, who crossed the Oresund Strait from Denmark to Sweden in fishing boats.

He described the shame that the Danes felt when their government surrendered to the Germans without opposition, and their determination, in a show of

resistance, to save innocent people doomed to destruction. Kieler was later arrested for his efforts and sent to a concentration camp, but he survived.

Last to speak was Tuvia Torben Samson, who focused on the founding of Machzikei Hadas and the community. The three days of celebration culminated in a trip to the Danish Liberty Museum, where participants viewed a display about the rescue of Jews in Denmark, and a farewell dinner.

All the events took place at Beit Chabad. This building used to be a school that catered to the general population in the mornings but served as Cheder Yaldei Yeshurun for the families that belonged to Machzikei Hadas. When the Danish government was considering giving the building to Arabs, Mr. Erik Gutterman, a son of one of the founders, bought it.

Chabad, which is used to catering for up to a hundred people for a Friday-night meal, was happy to cater the events. Even though staples such as kosher bread must be imported and some products aren’t available at all, Chabad’s Mrs. Rochel Loewenthal did a superb job, cooking and baking almost all the food for the entire celebration. Only the salmon was “Danish”!



Mr. Joergen Kieler receives a certificate declaring him a *tzaddik umot ha'olam*.



A minyan in the shul.
(Left) Harav Chaim Tzvi Ruben speaking.

Steinhaus had been recruited on a trip to Gateshead. Unable to find a suitable candidate, the person who had been entrusted by the community to find the shul a rabbi decided that the man who had been driving him around, a *talmid* of Harav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *zt"l*, was the perfect choice.

"These years were the golden times of our *cheder*," recalls Mrs. Davidson.

In 1957, Harav Steinhaus established a yeshivah with several *bachurim* from Gateshead.

In 1961, Harav Ozriel Chaikin, *shlita*, took over as rabbi until 1968, when he left for Eretz Yisrael.

Today

Today the Machzikei Hadas community is very small. In fact, Mr.



Eliyahu Katzenstein has sometimes had to bring in people from England to make up a *minyan* for the Yamim Nora'im. His grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Kahn, a former president of the shul, often stated, "Denmark is an intermediate station on the way to Eretz Yisrael. We hope that next year

we will [all] come together in Yerushalayim."

It seems that his wish is coming true. And yet, as small as it is, Machzikei Hadas still provides a link to tradition for the outreach work of Rabbi Yitzchok Loewenthal of Chabad (see sidebar).

Harav Chaim Tzvi Ruben, a grandson of one of the founders, began his speech with the words "*Yismechu hashamayim v'sagel haaretz*, the heavens will be glad and the earth will rejoice" (*Tehillim* 96:11). He explained that in the heavens, the founders of the shul are experiencing joy, and here on earth, the former members of the community are celebrating. Both exult when they see the thousands of Torah Jews and the many rabbis that Machzikei Hadas has produced. ■