



FREDY HIRSCH *a Maccabi hero during the Shoah*

Dear Friends,

The sheer scope of the massacre of 6 million of our brothers and sisters in the Shoah is absolutely incomprehensible and almost immeasurable for any human being. How can one summarize the infinite quantity of hopes and hopelessness, dreams and frustrations, action and inaction, joys and sadness that characterize the life of all human being... *of 6 million lives* cut off by the most absurd of hatreds? How does one calculate the proportions of loss, of the universe emptied and left devastated, of whole Jewish communities obliterated by Nazi bestiality? How can we internalize that *1 of every 3 Jews in the world* - the overwhelming majority of the Jewish community of the continent of Europe and the Mediterranean basin - *vanished into the odious apparatus of the Germans and their multiplicity of accomplices and collaborators in the space of a mere 6 years?*

The simple answer to these unbearable questions is that *there is no way to understand, conceive or imagine, even minimally, the monstrosity that those numbers represent* - 6 million children, young people, adults and elderly men and women, brutally assassinated.

How to honor, then, in this Yom HaShoah, this Holocaust Day, so many souls, so many spirits, so many hearts and minds that knew no mercy nor have any tomb? The only possibility, perhaps, of grasping this immensity is to learn the story of *one person* who succumbed at the hands of the assassins, as in the case of that little girl and grand heroine, Anne Frank, *and then to multiply the story by many millions in our minds.*

Maccabi counted many tens of thousands of members in the lands covered by the dark shadow of the Shoah. Many fought in the





clandestine resistance; but most, together with their families,

became prisoners in the ghettos and death camps. One extraordinary singular story is that of a young Maccabi leader, an educator who gave his life for his young pupils, and who accompanied them right to the moment of his and their deaths: **Alfred (Fredy) Hirsch**, *of blessed memory*.

Fredy was an enthusiastic Maccabi Zionist from Germany whose family reached Prague. He put much effort into working with youth, teaching sports and preparing *chalutzim* (pioneers) for *aliyah* to the "Promised Land". Until 1940, he organised scouting summer camps in the village of Bezpráví on the river Orlice. In Prague, Hirsch was the leader of a group of 12 - 14 year-old boys called "Havlagah". In October 1939, 6 months after German troops annexed what little of Czechoslovakia had remained independent after the infamous Munich agreement, this group miraculously left for Denmark, and then moved on to Palestine a year later.

Numerous anti-Jewish measures and bans were decreed when Nazi Germany occupied the Czech Republic, and the place where **Fredy** worked was one of the few outdoor facilities where Jewish children could still exercise and play games. He organised sports, competitions, campfires and theatre performances for hundreds of children, trying to spread ideas of community, responsibility and fitness in the midst of the dark evil.

Fredy was transported to the Theresienstadt (Terezin) concentration camp on December 4, 1941, along with 22 other Jewish Community employees; they became "Aufbaukommando II", whose task was to organise daily life in what was to become a massive ghetto. From the very beginning of the camp, children were concentrated in special rooms, separated from their parents; these later developed into 11 "kinderheims" (children's homes) where they were cared for by Jewish





educators and teachers. They had a rough, stony field, and there they hosted the "Terezin Maccabi Games" for Therezienstadt inmates in May 1943.

In the summer of 1943, a *Transport* of 12,000 Jewish children from the liquidated Białystok ghetto arrived in Terezin; they were kept

isolated from the other prisoners. All communication with them was strictly prohibited, lest the other prisoners realize that death was the end the Germans intended for all Jews. Nevertheless, **Fredy** attempted to establish some contact with their teacher. He was caught, and his punishment was to be included in the *Transport* that left Terezin on 6 September with 5000 other prisoners for the "family camp" at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Fredy became the leader of the Children's Block, whose amenities differed from those found in the remaining Birkenau prisoner barracks: instead of 3-tier bunks, the rooms were filled with small chairs (the children spent only their days here, returning to their parents at night). Barrack walls were decorated inside with drawings of the Snow White and the 7 Dwarves, Eskimos, fairies and flowers. The children were held for most of the time in Block No. 31, where they ate their meagre meals. While children suffered from hunger, none starved to death until the March liquidation of the September transport. The block became for the children a kind of safe haven from the ever-present terror of SS officers and guards. After further *Transports* arrived in December, the block was overcrowded with around 500 children, and Hirsch succeeded in bargaining another barrack to accommodate for the children.

Improvised educational activities took place in secret in the children's block, with the children divided into smaller groups according to age. Teachers narrated the contents of books they remembered, taught geography, history, played games and sang together. At the turn of 1943 and 1944, the children also rehearsed and performed Snow White and the





7 Dwarves.

Confronted with the insoluble and immense moral dilemmas of an uprising in the camp against the Nazis in February 1944 - which would almost certainly mean death for all children in the family camp - **Fredy Hirsch** committed suicide. His body, together with the remains of 3,792 murdered prisoners from the Terezin family camp, was burned in the Birkenau crematorium in the evening of that very same day.

In an era when our People have an independent State and are completely sovereign over ourselves and our homeland, the deeply painful sense of utter impotence and desperation that overtook so many in the devastation of the Shoah is a ghost of the past, but it is an *ever-present* component of the horror with which we regard those times. In the act of honoring those men and women of whom the Nazis wanted to erase all memory, one of Hitler's most desired objectives, we retain their memories as a *living* presence and assume the enormous, almost overwhelming, but sacred responsibility to continue their legacies, paths, examples, and realizing by our actions, at least *some* of their hopes and aspirations.

*May the lives of the Six Million be always remembered, blessed,
honored and perpetuated by our deeds,
for we are their living memorial.*

