

Detroit memorial for René Lichtman, Holocaust survivor and ardent opponent of Israeli genocide in Gaza

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On Sunday, June 8, a memorial was held for Holocaust survivor and pro-Palestine activist René Lichtman in Detroit, Michigan. Lichtman, 87, died from heart failure at a Detroit-area hospice care center on January 28.

The event at St. Matthews & St. Peters Episcopal Church brought together a cross-section of René's comrades, friends and family, young and old, including those from Jewish and Arab backgrounds. Addressing different aspects of Lichtman's history and political activity, the speakers highlighted how his childhood experiences in Nazi-occupied France produced a life-long hatred of fascism and imperialist war.

In his last years, these principles drove Lichtman to actively oppose the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, earning him the hatred of Zionists in the Detroit area, throughout the US and internationally. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* in January 2024, René denounced Israel as a fascist state and opposed the support given to it by US imperialism, without which the genocide would be impossible.

A program distributed at the memorial gave a brief overview of René's life. René was born in Paris in 1937 to Jewish immigrants from Poland, Helen and Jacob Zajdman. When he was two years old, his father died on the frontlines fighting against the Nazis with the French Foreign Legion. His mother hid him with a non-Jewish left-wing couple in the countryside. They supported his early love for art, which became a lifelong passion.

After the war, René was reunited with his mother. They emigrated to New York when René was 12 years old. There he attended the High School of Music & Art. He enrolled in the Army after he graduated. He later attended Cooper Union through the GI bill, continuing his pursuit of painting. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study painting in Brussels.

An obituary published on the *World Socialist Web Site* provided a sketch of René's political development:

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."

During the first Trump administration, René opposed the Gestapo-style actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. A picture of René holding a sign displaying the word "ICE" together with a

swastika, with an equal sign between the two, was taped to the podium at the memorial. Notably, the event took place as Trump was deploying the military against protesters opposing the abduction of immigrants by ICE in Los Angeles.

Risa Lichtman, one of René's four children, and her partner Jamie Thrower, who both played a prominent role in organizing the memorial, spoke on the profound impact he had on the lives of everyone he knew, both personally and politically. The remarks of the subsequent speakers drew out this theme. All speakers testified to his warmth and energy.

A film about René's life, featuring interviews with him, produced by journalist and podcaster Katie Halper was played at the event. Halper, who was present and spoke at the memorial, explained that she first came in contact with René in researching for a film she is producing on Jews protesting the genocide in Gaza. Kalper, who comes from a Jewish background herself, called attention to the long-standing participation of Jewish intellectuals and workers in the labor and socialist movements. In her film, René identifies himself as a socialist and Marxist.

Photographer and ceramic artist Barbara Barefield recalled protesting with René across the street from the Zekelman Holocaust Center. René had been a regular lecturer at the museum for more than a decade until he was fired for organizing a December 2023 protest outside the museum with members of Jewish Voice for Peace to oppose the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians.

"René was a man who was not afraid to lie down in the street to protest the barbarism in Gaza, side by side with his friend Nabil. ... They threw him out and rejected him. I know that was a very painful thing for him, because he had been teaching people for years and years his personal stories and the importance of knowing that the Holocaust lesson 'Never again' means 'Never again' for anyone, anywhere, ever again."

In mid-2024, René and his supporters in the Coalition Against Genocide began holding regular vigils at the Zekelman Holocaust Center, demanding that all such museums call for a ceasefire and incorporate into their exhibits the work of prominent historians with Jewish backgrounds, including Ilan Pappé, Avi Schlaim and Norman Finkelstein, on the 1948 expulsion of the Palestinians.

Barefield described a July 14 demonstration at the museum when Lichtman and supporters defied the shouts and threats of Zionist counter-protesters. "He wasn't afraid to protest across the street from the Holocaust Museum faced by hundreds of Zionists with a sound system that drowned out our sound system. ... So he stood with us across the street from all these people screaming at us, telling us we're baby killers. ... They called his name and said he wasn't really a Holocaust survivor, and he was a liar. But he stood firm and strong."

Referring to the same protest, Heather Burnham, a pre-school teacher whose grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, said, "When there were

hundreds of Zionists across the street, I remember feeling nervous. But René said, ‘Heather, it’s a good turnout today. Look what they’re doing. Make sure it’s recorded. ... If they’re angry with us, we’re doing something right.’ ... I just thought he’s the bravest man I’ve ever met, and I want to carry that bravery forward.”

Ismail Noor, an Arab activist who met René during the anti-genocide protests, pointed to a quote by Lichtman in which he explained that the genocide is not a religious conflict but a geopolitical one. “From the first time I met René, he made a very positive and strong impression on me. He was an extraordinary human being. He was a kind of historian. He read history, and he analyzed history.

“Long before I met him in person, I was demonstrating against the Vietnam War in the 1960s back in Palestine, and he was doing the same here in the United States. That is an indication of how we met on principles and shared lots of values. We became friends, although the short time that I have known him, we became more than friends. We became comrades also. ... The last time I saw him alive in his hospital bed, he [said] ‘Palestine will be free.’ He was smiling, and we chanted, ‘Free Palestine’ together three times.”

Also speaking at the event was Democratic Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib from Michigan, the only representative in Congress with a Palestinian background. She noted that René defended her when the US House of Representatives, with the support of a significant section of Democrats, censured her for criticizing Israel on the floor of Congress. She did not, however, attempt to explain how opposition to the genocide in Gaza can be reconciled with support for the Democratic Party, which has fully backed the arming of Israel and the violent suppression of student protests against the genocide.

Jerry White, a member of the Socialist Equality Party and writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke during the open mic portion of the event. He said, “René’s life was so profoundly shaped by history—and until his last breath, he was committed to transforming it.”

White said René was “was deeply familiar with the role of the Big Lie in history: Hitler committed the most horrendous crimes in the name of fighting a so-called ‘Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy.’ The McCarthyite crusade against communism was used to justify US invasions and CIA coups. The imperialist plunder of Iraq was carried out under the lie of defending the world from ‘weapons of mass destruction.’

“But there was no lie he hated more than the claim that opposing the Israeli state’s ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians is ‘antisemitic,’” White said to applause from the audience.

He then quoted from a recent statement by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and author of *The Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to the Gaza Genocide*:

The biggest lie of all is the claim that opposition to Israel’s genocidal war against the population of Gaza is “antisemitic.”

This lie is the filthiest libel against the Jewish people since the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. It asserts, for all intents and purposes, that the defining characteristic of a Jew is support for the killing of Palestinians. The identity of Jews is defined by the policies of the Israeli state and its fascistic Zionist ideologues. Antisemites are all those, including and especially Jews, who oppose genocide.

This is a case of “semantic inversion”—i.e., attributing to a word the opposite of its actual meaning—which is on a scale far greater than anything imagined by George Orwell in *1984*’s depiction of “Newspeak.”

René Lichtman stood firmly against that inversion. He knew what

antisemitism was. He had lived through it. And he would not allow the truth to be turned on its head to serve the interests of war and imperialism. “The Trumpers, Steve Bannons—They are the real Jew-haters,” René told us.

He was right. Just last week, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth appointed Kingsley Wilson, a notorious supporter of the white nationalist “Great Replacement” theory, as the Pentagon’s chief press secretary. Wilson has long supported the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory superintendent in Georgia who was falsely accused of rape and murder in 1915, dragged from jail by an antisemitic mob and hanged from a tree.

René was not swayed by media campaigns or political pressures. He saw how this lie was being used to criminalize dissent, especially among students and youth. He saw how the Biden administration had deployed this falsehood to silence protests, revoke visas and send in police to shut down university demonstrations.

René also understood from history that moral appeals to imperialist backers would not stop genocide. “Biden, Harris and the Democrats have just as much blood on their hands as Trump and the Republicans,” White said to loud applause.

White concluded:

He invited the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak at his rallies because he wanted a socialist perspective presented to young people. He understood that only the independent, international struggle of the working class to abolish capitalism can stop war and fascism.

Let us remember René Lichtman not only as a survivor but as a fighter. A man who stood with Palestinian children facing bombs, just as others once stood with him. A man who believed that history brings not just knowledge—but responsibility. And he lived up to it.

To honor René is not only to remember him but to continue his work. He urged young people to look to the left-wing fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as their role models. To tell the truth in the face of lies. To build solidarity across borders. And to fight—uncompromisingly—for a world without genocide, fascism or war.



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