



MACCABI WORLD UNION

Department of Education

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כ"ד ניסן תשע"ח

YOM HASHOAH – HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

יום הזיכרון לשואה ולגבורה

Alfred Nakache¹:

from winner before the Shoah to World Champion²

Dear friends,

Yom HaShoah commemorates the worst crime in human history: the Genocide against the Jewish People, devised, planned and executed as state policy by Nazi Germany and its numerous henchmen.



The Holocaust carries 6,000,000 mostly unknown personal stories. Millions of lives not recalled, no one to tell them, without description. The simple scenes of life and everyday actions of the millions murdered by Nazi Germany and its despicable accomplices are hidden in the ashes of the crematoria and mass common graves.

There are some exceptions, especially of those who were prominent before the Shoah, amongst them several connected to Maccabi and its history before the Nazi genocide. The extraordinary life of a great athlete before and after the Holocaust is one of these.

ALFRED NAKACHE was born in 1915 into a large Jewish family in Constantine (Algeria). His family arrived from Iraq in the 19th century to settle in this beautiful place overlooking a river, the Rhummel. Around the age of 10, Alfred overcame his fear of water; actually, he took to it like a duck. Noted for his physical stamina, 2 French soldiers stationed in Constantine trained him in the city's Olympic pool. Alfred competed in local galas, and moved to Paris to attend the prestigious Lycee Janson de Sailly. In his mid-teens, he was already Champion of North Africa, and his swimming career really began to take off,

¹ Jewish Sports Legends: The International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, by Joseph Siegman (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000); encyclopedia of JEWS in sports, by Bernard Postal, Jesse Silver, and Roy Silver (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1965); New York Times, August 3-14, 1936; New York Times, August 7, 1948.

² I want to thank my dear friend **Rodney Sanders** for teaching me about Alfred Nakache, editing this article (as he usually does with my Messages), adding important info and bringing his encyclopedic comments.



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especially from 1935, when he became the 100m French Swimming Champion.
In that year, Alfred was one of 1,600 Jewish athletes in part in the 2nd Maccabiah in Tel Aviv, where he took the Silver medal in the 100m freestyle.

After some hesitation, the Popular Front government decided to send a delegation to the 1936 Berlin Games – "Hitler's Olympics". Nakache competed in the 4x200-meter freestyle relay. The French team won its preliminary heat in 9:21.7 minutes Nakache swam the second leg, and they came in ahead of the German team. Advancing to the Final, they finished fourth, just missing a medal.

Between 1936-1946, Nakache was Champion of France in the 100-meter freestyle (6 times!), 200-meter freestyle (4 times!), and 200-meter breaststroke (4 times!). In He won a silver medal in the 1938 European Championships with the 4x200-meter freestyle relay team. When the Wehrmacht overran France in May-June 1940, his life entered a period of intense danger, but it was not immediately apparent. Alfred, his wife and their baby daughter lived in Vichy France, the puppet Nazi collaborationist state that Hitler allowed to govern itself under Petain, and remain unoccupied. Too famous to simply disappear, he actually swam in competitive races, 'protected' by his Gentile teammates. Incredibly, he actually beat German champion Joachim Balke, in 1941, on his way to setting a European and WORLD breaststroke Record (2:36.8)! But now a Fascist French journalist wrote: "Nakache should not be allowed to hold any European titles because he is a Jew!"

Alfred Nakache constituted an insolent Jewish challenge to the Nazi myth of German racial superiority, and after November 1942, when Nazi troops suddenly occupied all of France, he was in imminent danger. Opponents worked to keep Nakache from competing, while other French swimmers withdrew from national competitions in support of Nakache. In January 1944, betrayed by his closest friend who had thrown in his lot with the Nazis, Alfred, his wife & their two-year old daughter were arrested and deported to Auschwitz. His wife and two-year old daughter were murdered upon arrival; of the 1,368 men, women and children in their death camp convoy, only 47 survived. For Alfred, the nightmare did not end. The SS practiced their superiority with grotesque mockery, continuously torturing him beyond imagination. As the Russian army approached Auschwitz, Alfred was moved to Buchenwald in Germany.



So he survived the Shoah, barely: he'd lost 53% of his body weight, his muscles were wasted, his right arm was severely injured, and he was emotionally devastated. He returned home in May 1945, and subsumed the horror and pain he had endured, by immediately resuming training. **Less than 1 year after liberation from Auschwitz and Buchenwald, he was back in the French team. In August 1946, Nakache swam for the French 3x100m Relay Team that established 2 successive World Records in that now archaic discipline. That year, Alfred also became Champion of France in 100m butterfly and 4x100m relay.**



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Alfred was one of only two Jewish concentration camp survivors who competed in the Olympics³.

Though he remarried, Alfred was never really happy, except when swimming. He sometimes visited friends in Israel, but his life ended, perhaps as might have wished: he drowned in the Mediterranean sea in 1983, where he went for his daily swim near his home in the South of France. Inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, Alfred Nakache was the subject of a French documentary in 2001 entitled *Alfred Nakache, the Swimmer of Auschwitz*⁴. The City of Paris, named a Swimming Center ("piscine") in his honor.

During this Yom HaShoah, may God grant that we shall remember the extraordinary content, flowering creativity and productivity of the individual lives and Jewish communities so brutally uprooted.

May God always protect the State of Israel!

***And may we always remember, bless, honor and perpetuate by our deeds
the lives of the Six Million, for we are their Living Memorial.***

Chazak ve'ematz!

**Rabbi Carlos A. Tapiero
Deputy Director-General & Director of Education
Maccabi World Union**

³ The other is Ben Helfgott, a medal-winning Maccabiah weightlifter, captain of the Gt. Britain weighthlifters at Melbourne 1956 & Rome 1960.

⁴ ALFRED NAKACHE, le nageur d'Auschwitz, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxwWa8XgbPo>