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Assembly California Legislature

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Reb Yakob Basner Biography

Yakob Basner was born in Riga, Latvia on December 8, 1927. He attended a Hebrew elementary school and, following the Soviet Union's occupation of Latvia in 1940, a Yiddish high school. The last celebration at the Basner home was Yakob's Bar-Mitzvah in December of 1940.

By June of the following year, Germany had attacked the Soviet Union and Riga fell under Nazi occupation within days. Mr. Basner and his family were forced into a ghetto where his mother, sister and 7-year old twin brother were all murdered, along with 40 other members of his extended family. Having survived 2 years in the Riga Ghetto, Mr. Basner spent the remainder of World War II being transported between 5 different concentration camps, including Kaiserwald, Stutthof, Buchenwald, Leitmeritz, and Theresienstadt.

Finally, on May 9, 1945, Mr. Basner was liberated from Theresienstadt where he had been suffering from epidemic typhus. After receiving medical treatment, he returned to his home in Riga in the hopes of finding his father, who Mr. Basner believed had been successfully liberated from the Stutthoff concentration camp in the months prior to his own liberation. Tragically, Mr. Basner learned his father was killed just one day before Stutthoff had been freed. At age 17, young Yakob was totally alone in the world.

Determined to persevere and build a new life for himself, Mr. Basner found work in the leather cutting trade and began taking linguistic classes in the evening. Several years later he married his wife, Doba, and quickly started his own family – beginning with the births of his two daughters.

After a decade struggling to leave Latvia, the Basners finally reached California in 1980 and found a new home in Long Beach. A lover of language, Yakob has mastered English, Russian, Latvian, Hebrew and German; but it is Yiddish that remains closest to his heart. He has made it his mission to connect new generations of Jews to their past by teaching Yiddish language and literature at the Workmen's Circle in Los Angeles for nearly three decades.

Mr. Basner has lectured around the world, including Switzerland, Israel, Latvia, Germany and the United States. A sought-after teacher, he has worked at the University of Judaism, the California Institute for Jewish Culture and Languages, as well as many other community centers and teaching facilities.

The recipient of numerous accolades – including the Award of Merit from Long Beach City College and the Judge Murray I. Gurfein Memorial Award from HIAS – he still finds time to serve as an advisory board member at Museum of Tolerance where he works as a volunteer sharing his experiences as a holocaust survivor. He also is the narrator of the Riga Ghetto and Latvian Holocaust Museum website and continues to teach Yiddish at the SoCal Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle. Most of all, Yakob is the proud grandfather of three grandchildren and great-grandfather of three great-grandchildren.