

Jewish Bikers rally in D.C. to remember Holocaust

Rabbi Zach Betesh, an associate rabbi at Chabad Lubavitch of Fort Lauderdale and "spiritual leader" of King David Bikers, planned to bring along on the 1,100-mile journey from Miami Beach a Torah scroll that was used secretly by German Jews during World War II. "We are riding to remember in the face of the Holocaust and it's going to be a very powerful, moving event," predicted Mustard.

WASHINGTON — They looked like Hell's Angels, but they danced the hora.

Wearing black motorcycle leathers and headscarves, their jackets and vests festooned with patches and pins, aging bikers from Miami Beach to Toronto gathered Friday to commemorate Yom Hashoa, the Day of Remembrance, and the 60th anniversary of the end of the Holocaust.

Among them were riders from Boca Raton, Delray Beach and West Palm Beach.



"We ride to remember, so that nobody can forget that atrocities can happen at any time," said Bill Pike, 62, of West Palm Beach, who drove his motor home here after being injured in December in an accident involving candy wrappers on stairs.

"Ride to Remember" was the theme of this first international gathering of Jewish motorcyclists, who rode for days to honor the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. About 225 motorcycles from the United States, Canada and Israel roared into the capital, the riders taking a lap past the Washington Monument before gathering in a rugby field across from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Leading the group were the King David Bikers, three dozen strong, from South Florida. From Canada came the Yidden on Wheels, from New Jersey the Hillel's Angels and from greater New York the Chai Riders.

Playing host were the Tribe, bikers from the Washington metropolitan area, and the SOBs — Semites on Bikes — from the Baltimore area.

A 1929 Torah from Czechoslovakia that was used in Germany during the Holocaust and was recently restored as a "kosher" Torah — meaning it can be used for prayer services — was strapped to the back of Rabbi Zachary "Zig Zag" Betesh's Harley-Davidson, which came from Fort Lauderdale. The words Harley ben David (Harley, David's son) were written in Hebrew across the front of Betesh's bike. *Wild Thing* blared from its speakers.

"We have the passion to ride and the bond of faith," said Jeff Mustard of Pompano Beach, founder and president of the King David Bikers, established about a year and a half ago. "While we may not practice our faith, that doesn't mean we have no faith.

"It's important to remember that we are here. We have not gone away, we have not been erased, we have not been eradicated, we have not been exterminated. We have flourished."

There was an air of festivity and solemnity — and cigar smoke — as the bikers gathered to dance the hora (a style of Israeli folk dancing), celebrate their ride and recall its purpose.

Ron Miller, 65, of Boca Raton, who rode his Honda Gold Wing here with his wife, Marjorie, acknowledged the humor in a Jewish motorcycle club.

"A Jewish motorcycle club is an oxymoron," he said. "Usually, a motorcycle club rides from bar to bar. We ride from bagel place to bagel place."

But the Millers, who did not lose any direct relatives in the Holocaust, called their ride here a "spiritual trip" to remember the 6 million Jews who perished under the reign of Nazi Germany six decades ago.

Tova and Harry Fischtein, Israeli natives who have lived in Boca Raton for six years, both lost family members during the Holocaust.

Harry's parents met in Israel after the war. Both had lost spouses; his father, who survived Auschwitz and Dachau, also lost four children. Tova's father also was a Holocaust survivor, but the rest of his family was killed.

"This makes me so emotional," Harry said, choking back tears.

Perched on the back of their Harley Ultra Classic during the ride from South Florida, Tova said she looked back at the line of motorcycles displaying the flags of the United States and Israel, and a banner that said, "Never Again."

"It was beyond words," she said.

Laurie Lipman, 48, of Delray Beach, a homemaker and stock trader who rode a Yamaha Roadstar Silverado, said she did not lose any direct relatives in the Holocaust but wanted to pay her respects, particularly to the 1.5 million Jewish children who perished.

"I will never forget them, and hopefully the youth of today will never forget," she said.

Several riders said one reason for making the ride was the chance to tour the Holocaust museum.

"I came for two reasons: the ride and the destination," said Stu Sherman, 62, of Boca Raton.

Letitia Dahan of Miami, co-owner of Bashert's Inc., a women's formal wear store in Palm Beach, noted that she was named after a great-aunt who died as a young woman during the Holocaust.

"It's heart-throbbing. It's very emotional to be here," she said.

Larry Ashkenas, 65, of Delray Beach rode his Harley V-Rod 1,250 miles from the Holocaust museum in Miami Beach to the Holocaust museum in Washington on a cycle without a windshield.

"It wasn't until I joined the King David Bikers that I understood what it's all about," said Ashkenas, who has been riding for 45 years. "The togetherness and supporting each other and being Jewish, that's what makes this club unique."