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THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Former chief rabbi of Zurich, who was a US Marines chaplain, dies at 80

Zalman Kossowsky led congregations on three continents during decades-spanning career; his synagogue in Florida notes he didn't die of COVID-19

By SAM SOKOL

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Illustrative: A view of the Lowenstrasse synagogue in Zurich. (Wikimedia Commons via JTA)

JTA — Rabbi Zalman Kossowsky, a former chief rabbi of Zurich who led congregations on three continents during a career that spanned decades, has died.

Despite German-language media reports, Kossowsky's synagogue in Boynton Beach, Florida, stressed that he passed away Sunday of natural causes unconnected to the coronavirus pandemic. He was 80.





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Born in Tehran to Lithuanian refugees fleeing the Soviet takeover of their country, Kossowsky was raised in South Africa. He later went to Israel for his rabbinic studies before migrating to the United States, where he stayed for the better part of the 1960s and '70s, serving at one point as a chaplain in the US Marines and working on his doctorate in sociology.

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He later served as a congregational rabbi of the Kenton Shul in London before accepting the role of chief rabbi of the ICZ, a communal umbrella organization representing Orthodox, liberal, and secular Jewish streams in Switzerland's largest city, which he led from 1991 to 2007.

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Rabbiner Zalman Kossowsky verstorben

Der langjährige Rabbiner der Israelitischen Cultusgemeinde Zürich prägte die Einheitsgemeinde in herausfordernden Zeiten.

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“His biggest accomplishment was that he kept the community together,” said Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis. Kossowsky served on its standing committee.

“On the one hand, you could see he was a very elegant and aristocratic person, but on the other hand, he had a very warm and welcoming side and was very people-orientated and very soft spoken.”

Kossowsky was a scholar who toiled to find solutions for agunot, women trapped in marriages because their husbands refuse to give them a biblical bill of divorce, or get.

Rabbi Noam Hertig, the current chief rabbi of Zurich, recalled Kossowsky as “very kind and always smiling.”

“He was my rav. He was the one who encouraged me to become a rabbi,” Hertig said.

Hertig recalled his playful side and his big-time interest in technology.

“He always had the most advanced technical gadgets, a pager and then a Palm Pilot,” he said, “and always the newest phone.”

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