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Rabbi Zalman Kossovsky, former chief rabbi of Zurich and a US Marines chaplain, dies at 80

Former chief rabbi of Zurich Rabbi Zalman Kossovsky, who once served as a chaplain in the US Marine Corps, dies at age 80.

Contact Editor Sam Sokol, JTA , 21/04/20 07:14



memorial candle

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Rabbi Zalman Kossovsky, a former chief rabbi of Zurich who led congregations on three continents during a career that spanned





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decades, has died.

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

Born in Tehran to Lithuanian refugees fleeing the Soviet takeover of their country, Kossovsky was raised in South Africa. He later went to Israel for his rabbinic studies before migrating to the United States, where he stayed for better part of the 1960s and '70s, serving at one point as a chaplain in the U.S. Marines and working on his doctorate in sociology. Rabbi Kossowsky returned to South Africa in 1978 where he spent several years as the Rabbi of the Sydenham Hebrew Congregation, one of the largest Congregations in the Southern Hemisphere.

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.

"His biggest accomplishment was he kept the community together," said Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis. Kossovsky 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."

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

Rabbi Noam Hertig, the current chief rabbi of Zurich, recalled Kossovsky as "very kind and always smiling."





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“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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