

Dr. Desider Friedmann, lawyer and Zionist leader

By: Dr. Margalit Shlain , May 2010

Dr. Friedmann was born 1880 in Boskovice, Moravia, studied law in Vienna and settled there. Still a student he became a Zionist and a follower of Dr. Benjamin Zeev Herzl, beginning with the first Zionist congress. He became a Zionist leader and active in the Vienna Jewish community.

He served as head of the Vienna Jewish community in the years 1933 – 1938 and initiated many cultural and social activities. In this period he was elected in 1934 as the only Jewish member of the Austrian parliament and fought incessantly for the rights of Jews.

In April 1938, after Austria was annexed by Germany, Friedmann was arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. After a year, in April 1939, he was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp. A few weeks later he was released and returned to Vienna, as a hostage for Jewish emigration from there. But he did not return to the leadership of the Jewish community, now headed by his deputy Dr. Josef Löwenherz.

In 1923 Dr. Friedmann married Ella Stassny; the couple had two daughters, Hedwig and Ernestine. Friedmann succeeded to send his two young daughters to what was then Palestine; they and their families live in Israel until this day.



In September 1942 Dr. Friedmann and his wife were deported to Theresienstadt where he became representative of Austrian Jewry on the Council of Elders. On November 24, 1942, he was nominated deputy of the Elder of the Jews, Jacob Edelstein; he remained in this post until January 27, 1943.

In February 1943, after a month in prison, he was arrested by order of the head of the (Jewish) police, Dr. Karl Löwenstein. On June 26, 1943, Friedmann was nominated to head the bank of the Jewish self-administration of the ghetto, because of his standing. On January 16, 1944, he was re-elected to the Council of Elders, representing Austrian Jewry. Being director of the bank, as it were, he had to present the Theresienstadt banking system to the delegation of the International Red Cross during its visit to Theresienstadt; he was also forced to take part – like the rest of the ghetto inmates – in the shooting of the Nazi propaganda “documentary” of Theresienstadt (Left, in the picture)

On October 28, 1944, the last transport to Auschwitz left Theresienstadt. This transport included by “special order”, e.g. to be killed immediately, most of the members of the Council of Elders with their families, Dr. Friedmann and his wife Ella of blessed memory, among them.