

## **Biographies of Rabbi Siegmund Unger and Leah Klein**

**Rabbi Siegmund Unger (1883-1944)** Born in Frauenkirchen, Austria on 22 August, 1883 of a poor family, Siegmund Unger attended cheder and was a good student. He married Leah Klein in 1907 in Trnava, Slovakia. She came from a well to do family. The marriage was probably a match made by the parents, in accordance with the custom of the times. They had six children. Alfred, born in 1909 in Zielenzig, was the oldest. Kurt, Ruth, Manfred, Margot and Lotte followed him.

He studied at Hildesheimer Seminary and in Zielenzig but never finished his PhD. He was drafted in the Austrian army and served from 1915- 1918. He told his family that when he had to shoot, he always “shot in the air”.

From 1918-1922 he served as director of a school in Chemnitz, Germany. From 1922-1933 he owned and helped run a women’s hosiery wholesaling business in Chemnitz. He was a leader in the Jewish community and he helped fund and build the synagogue in Chemnitz. He served as the Parnass (president/senior official) for the synagogue.

He left Germany and traveled for the Agudah making speeches. He was a dynamic speaker. The family moved to Brno, Czechoslovakia when Hitler came to power. From 1934-41 he was the Rabbi in Brno. During this time period, he wrote a book representing his life’s work. Not much is known about the book; it was probably an unfinished work although substantial. It was entrusted to a Mrs. Loewy, a friend of the family, for safekeeping. After the war, she promised to return it to Rabbi Unger’s daughters once they became settled. They followed up with her in 1947 after they arrived in the United

States, but Mrs. Loewy was unwilling to return the book. It is presumed lost. Rabbi Unger was the Chief Rabbi in Theresienstadt CC. He was head of a tribunal of three rabbis, and he led services, officiated religious ceremonies and events such as marriages and funerals. Later the family was sent to Auschwitz. They were on the last two transports to Auschwitz from Theresienstadt. When he was deported to Theresienstadt he brought along a small Sefer Torah and a small Aron Kodesh, which was used in the camp. Prior to his deportation to Auschwitz, the Sefer Torah was entrusted to a Mrs. Bloom who was in charge of the children's facilities. She survived and moved to Netherlands and later to Port Elizabeth, South Africa along with the Sefer Torah. Many years later, the son made aliyah along with his aged mother. The Sefer Torah and its small Aron were deposited with Yad Vashem so its history would not be forgotten.

The most important things in Siegmund Unger's life were his family, his religion, his community, and his studies. He was a loving and devoted father who was affectionate towards his children.

He and his wife **Leah Klein** (1886-1944) shared a love for reading and for singing. Leah came from a very well to do family that had an estate in Trnava. The family was large—her parents had 17 children, 14 of whom survived—and they were very religious. She had a formal upbringing and told of having to knock on her parent's door when she wanted to speak to them, addressing her father and mother with a "Good morning, Frau Mama, Good morning Herr Papa".

Not surprisingly, marriage to the studious and financially modest Siegmund Unger was a change in circumstances for her. By all accounts she adjusted well and worked to run the household in a diligent manner even though she was not used to the daily grind of the numerous tasks required to run the

household. She sacrificed herself, but still made time to be hospitable and social. She had a network of friends, and was sociable and outgoing. Indeed, she had a modern approach that complimented her husband in that she was interested in her community and in world events.

Siegmund Unger studied day and night. His day began as early as 5 AM with studies and prayers. It often ended well past midnight with reading and more studies. He met life in an optimistic and accepting manner.

He was popular and well liked. He was charismatic--when he walked into a room, it was as if he lit it up with his magnetic charm. He had a good sense of humor, enjoyed singing songs, and he practiced charity. He always made a practice of inviting a poor student to his home to attend and partake of the Friday night Sabbath dinner.

Although he was religious man, Rabbi Unger saw himself a German Jew. He had a humanistic perspective, and non-Jewish neighbors in the community his children to see their Christmas trees during the holiday season. He was a generous man with a big heart, and he always tried to help others. While in the Theresienstadt CC, he once tried to give his food ration to a man who he thought needed it more than he did.