

## B'nai B'rith Europe honour Valerie Bello and Barbara Nathan

Written by B'nai B'rith Europe

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*Written by Wally Sacks. Photos: Brian Nathan*

It is perhaps Ralph Hofmann who has really got to the core of why B'nai B'rith's Heritage Days events are so important to diaspora Jewry. Ralph, who is the BBE President, was speaking at a presentation ceremony honouring Valerie Bello and Barbara Nathan for their joint efforts in organising this increasingly popular cross-communal event and achieving a success which has led to around ninety different events being staged each September in the UK.



He told an audience of around eighty BB members and individuals closely associated with the events that he considered Heritage Days to be the most important project in which the organisation is involved. He also remarked how serious he considers the spread of anti-Semitism in Europe today leading to a view that the presentation to both Jewry and, possibly more importantly, the wider community of the outstanding Jewish contribution to European culture is one of the ways of countering this threat. It was also, he said, a source of great pride that unlike our European counterparts who hold the event in one day, here in the UK the numerous happenings are spread over a fourteen day period involving a great deal of organisational effort

It was also entirely appropriate that Claude Bloch, of the Strasbourg Lodge, who actually founded the concept some fifteen years ago, flew over especially for the event. Claude is now the Honorary President of the European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Culture and her vitally important role in being the initiator of the idea was touched upon by all the speakers at the event. In a short address she referred to the events' importance in fostering social, moral and intellectual co-operation between the countries of Europe.

BBUK National President Jean Etherton opened the proceedings which were held at the West London Synagogue (itself one of the regular participants in Heritage Days) on Sunday 18th September by welcoming the attendees; including a number of BBE executive members who

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had also flown in to attend. She said: 'It is a great honour and great pleasure to welcome you all on this most auspicious occasion when Valerie Bello and Barbara Nathan are to receive awards from BBE for their outstanding work on the European Days of Culture and Heritage. It is an occasion when we can all take pride and naches from their wonderful achievements in the UK over the past twelve years.'

A short speech of welcome was performed by Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers, one of four ministers of the synagogue, who remarked on the close association that Valerie and her family had always fostered with the shul.

Expressing her profound thanks for the award which took the form of an attractive glass prism suitably inscribed, Valerie said: 'Barbara and I embarked on this journey, almost into the unknown, starting with just a few events on one day and reaching between 80-90 events in recent years over one or two weeks. None of this would have been possible without the enormous support we received from many of the people whom we are delighted to see with us today. One person, sadly, is missing - Audrey Faiman, who worked with us in the early days with such dedication and efficiency. We are also most grateful to Dr. Sharman Kadish, Director of Jewish Heritage UK, who advised us on our original list of heritage sites and who has been a constant source of knowledge and support ever since.'

'I feel that the awards are not only for Barbara and me; they represent recognition of our hard-working loyal committee, without whom none of this could have been achieved. Their willingness and ability to take on a myriad of tasks has been outstanding. And, of course, I cannot express sufficiently my thanks to my team-mate, Barbara, whose exceptional ability has been the bedrock of our success.'



'I should also like to pay a special tribute to our designer, Rob Trup who, from the outset, has designed the eye-catching designs of our leaflet and poster incorporating the annual theme with a British twist. And, on the subject of the Jewish press, I am happy to see Janet Levin, Editor of the highly successful cultural magazine, 'Jewish Renaissance', with us today. Janet has been very generous to us since the beginning in giving our programme of events excellent coverage in her magazine.

'One of the essentials of Heritage Days is partnership, for which B'nai B'rith with its cross-community ethos is ideally placed. Over the years close working relationships have been built up with synagogues right across the religious spectrum, all over the country, to whom we are most grateful for their enthusiastic co-operation - and perhaps I may be permitted to thank my own synagogue, where we are today, for their unfailing support in their participation and never saying "no" when asked to provide a venue for our events.

'The diversity of our rich cultural heritage can be seen in the participation of our communal institutions such as the Jewish museums, the Judaica Department of the British Library (thank you, Ilana), the Ben Uri art gallery, Jewish Care with their Reminiscence Teas and the JMI, (remember 'Simcha on the Square' and 'Klezmer in the Park') whose new Chairman, Jennifer Jankel, is with us today; and outside our own community we have established relationships with national institutions, the heritage organisations, and, most importantly, we have reached out to the interfaith organisations, whose response has been extremely gratifying.

'And my dreams for the future? I'd like to see us involved with the Cultural Olympiad, as 2012 is such a significant year with the Olympics in the UK. I'd like to see us extend the European Route of Jewish Heritage in the UK and I'd like to reach out to our youth to encourage them to become interested and involved in what is their heritage, too. In conclusion, I wish our Administrators, Lydia Drukarz and Lara Pront, and our loyal committee (including Gerald Kirsch) every success. The future of Jewish Heritage Days is in safe hands.

Barbara Nathan, in her speech of thanks for the award, said she was a bemused awardee. She said: 'Bemused, because I find it quite amazing to be receiving an award, simply from hard work and constant effort over 12 years. How often does that happen to anyone?'

'What began back in 1999 as a somewhat reluctant embarkation on uncharted seas, has developed into a journey around Europe and a new major project for B'nai B'rith UK, of which Valerie and I are, of course, very proud indeed. But this is much more a shining example of inspired teamwork, serendipity and sheer determination. From nothing, we have all together created a project with credibility and long-term viability. If you genuinely believe in the product, you can give it wings, as we have seen.

'So thank you B'nai B'rith UK for seeing sense last year and bringing in the highly professional Lydia to run the project, allowing Valerie and me to jump off the treadmill, take a deep breath and offer instead the benefit of a wider overview based on our experience. And, of course, thank you B'nai B'rith Europe for deciding to present us with an award, which we will always treasure.

'Just one word about Valerie herself - I'd like to announce publicly that she is a remarkable

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woman, as you probably already realize. She has an innate natural talent for instinctive public relations, with a wide circle of contacts whose names, titles and even family history, she can remember with total and enviable recall. And she does it this with infinite charm and compassion. She is also quite clearly dedicated to bringing the UK, kicking and screaming towards Europe. Culturally of course - not politically. That's another matter altogether.

'It is entirely due to her drive, back in 1999 when she was the Secretary General of BBE that the European Jewish Heritage Days project was brought to this country. She set up the CJI committee here, pulling us together and encouraging us to begin the project with our first printed leaflet detailing the events, published in the year 2000.

'I well recall Audrey and I saying to each other, rather desperately, "We just can't expand as much as Valerie would like, because we really don't think we can administer it all between us. It's an open-ended project." And it still is.

'But this is Valerie's strong point - she kept our noses to the grindstone. And year by year, we were able to pull together the Jewish Heritage Days every September.'

But if there was one over-riding impression that emerged from the ceremony which emphasised the importance of B'nai B'rith's Heritage Days events is was Valerie's simple statement of fact: 'It is inspiring to realise that groups of us in up to 30 European countries are working together to welcome the wider public to discover and enjoy our heritage.'

Among the guests who had flown to London to be present at the event were Erika Van Gelder (Senior Vice-President BBE) from Amsterdam and Derrick Smouha (Chairman of the Constitution Committee and Electoral Commission) from Geneva.

To watch a video of the event please click:

<http://youtu.be/PN8xW5Sjmio>