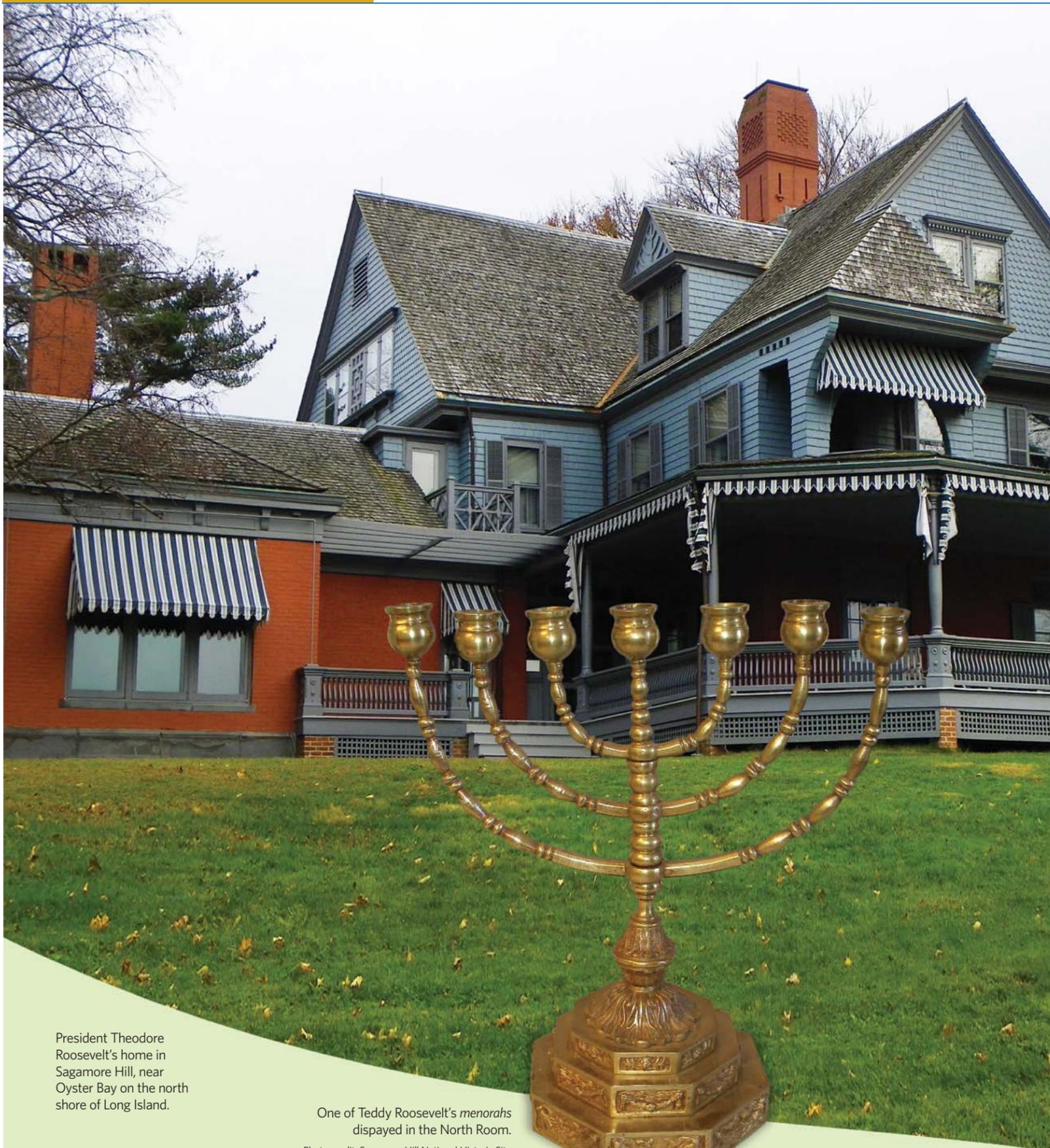


A GLIMPSE OF HISTORY



President Theodore Roosevelt's home in Sagamore Hill, near Oyster Bay on the north shore of Long Island.

One of Teddy Roosevelt's *menorahs* displayed in the North Room.

Photo credit: Sagamore Hill National Historic Site



# Teddy Roosevelt's Menorahs

BY MORDECHAI SCHILLER

*How I discovered that President Theodore Roosevelt spoke softly and carried ... golden candlesticks. And how a presidential pair of menorahs taught me a lesson about miracles and gratitude.*

Sagamore Hill, near Oyster Bay on the north shore of Long Island, was the home of Theodore Roosevelt, twenty-sixth president of the United States. He lived there from 1885 until he died in 1919. Roosevelt loved Sagamore Hill and spent much of his time there, often meeting with heads of state at his “summer White House.”

Theodore Roosevelt was born in Manhattan — the only New York City native ever to become president. When he was a child, his family spent summers at Oyster Bay and he loved its country atmosphere. Years later, he built his two-story, twenty-three-room Victorian home there on 95 acres.

As soon as I stepped into this U.S. National Historic Site, I was stunned by the huge number of hunting trophies on display. The second thing that struck me were the shelves and shelves of books; over six thousand volumes lined the walls. Roosevelt was a voracious reader. And I discovered that in years when he wasn't running the country, leading troops into battle, or heading the New York City Police Department, he made his living as a writer.

There are no mounted heads of state on the wall. But perhaps the animal heads helped convince the envoys of Russia and Japan, who met with Roosevelt at Sagamore Hill in August 1905, that this president meant business. That meeting led to the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russo-Japanese War and earned Theodore Roosevelt the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize.

### The Menorahs of Sagamore Hill

Our park ranger guide led us into what is known as the “North Room.” The Roosevelts added the huge North Room in 1905 to host social functions. To enter this 30-by-40-foot room, you (gingerly!) step through an archway of two African elephant tusks, a gift from the emperor of Abyssinia (today Ethiopia). The ranger, who happened to be Jewish, knowing we would be particularly interested in this item, pointed to the mantelpiece, bookended by two massive bison heads, and suggested we look at two items in the corner. They turned out to be two golden menorahs!

I wanted to get closer but the area was roped off, and that meant I couldn’t get any pictures. I asked the ranger about them, but although he was well versed in Rooseveltian history, he had no information on the history of the menorahs.

### The Search Begins ... and What I Found

When I got home, I searched and researched, but I couldn’t find anything about Roosevelt’s menorahs. What I did find, though, was that Theodore Roosevelt had a unique relationship with Jews and the Jewish community.

In 1895 Roosevelt dispatched an anti-Semite using a very Jewish weapon — humor. In his autobiography, he wrote: “While I was police commissioner, an anti-Semitic preacher from Berlin, Rector Ahlwardt, came over to New York to preach a crusade against the Jews. Many of the New York Jews were much excited and asked me to prevent him from speaking and not to give him police protection. This, I told them, was impossible; and if possible would have been undesirable because it would have made him a martyr. The proper thing to do was to make him ridiculous.

“Accordingly I detailed for his protection a Jew [sic] sergeant and a score or two of Jew [sic] policemen. He made his harangue against the Jews under the active protection of some forty policemen, every one of them a Jew! It was the most effective

possible answer.”

Then Roosevelt added, “And incidentally it was an object lesson to our people, whose greatest need it is to learn that there must be no division by class hatred. ... We must ever judge each individual on his own conduct and merits, and not on his membership in any class, whether that class be based on theological, social, or industrial considerations.”

In 1898, with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Theodore Roosevelt resigned as assistant secretary of the Navy and volunteered for active duty to help end Spanish rule in the New World. He led the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, known as the “Rough Riders,” to battle in Cuba. The Rough Riders were “a mix of troops ranging from Ivy League athletes to glee-club singers to Texas Rangers and Indians.” This rag-tag, heroic band also included a number of Jews. The first Rough Rider killed in action was Jacob Wilbusky, a Jewish cowboy from Texas.

Roosevelt later wrote about “the bravery of the Jews who have served under me in my regiment and on the police force of New York City, who have done their duty splendidly.”

### The Pogrom, the President, and the Petition

On April 6-7, 1903, the first blood libel of the twentieth century led to a pogrom. Russian mobs killed forty-nine and injured five hundred Jews in what became known as the Kishinev Pogrom. American Jewish leaders came to Roosevelt with a petition protesting the slaughter and pressed him to send it to the czar. Roosevelt knew the czar wouldn’t listen, so he took a short-cut. He sent the petition to the American ambassador at Petrograd, and he added his own letter denouncing the atrocities. The ambassador gave the letter to the Russian secretary of state and respectfully asked for the czar to receive the petitions. The czar refused, but the letter was published around the world.

In a memorandum on the Kishinev Pogrom dated June

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President Theodore Roosevelt

The North Room in Sagamore Hill, where the menorah was spotted.



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15, 1903, Roosevelt wrote: "I need not dwell upon a fact so patent as the widespread indignation with which the American people heard of the dreadful outrages upon the Jews in Kishineff [sic]. I have never in my experience in this country known of a more immediate or a deeper expression of sympathy for the victims and of horror over the appalling calamity that had occurred. It is natural that while the whole civilized world should express such a feeling, it should yet be most intense and most widespread in the United States; for of all the great powers I think I may say that the United States is that country in which, from the beginning of its national career, most has been done in the way of acknowledging the debt due to the Jewish race and of endeavoring to do justice to those American citizens who are of Jewish ancestry and faith."

And in a list of goals for the end of World War I, Theodore Roosevelt included "Palestine made a Jewish State."

### Teddy 'Berele' Wins

As long as we're getting ethnic, I should include the origin of the Teddy bear. Roosevelt hated being called Teddy. But the name — and the bear — helped him win reelection to the White House in 1904.

The story started in 1902, when the governors of Mississippi and Louisiana asked Roosevelt to settle a dispute over their boundary. Roosevelt saw this as an opportunity to combine his arbitration with a bear hunt. But despite all his hunting prowess, he didn't down even one bear. Roosevelt's inability to bag a new trophy was a huge embarrassment.

To help the president save face, Holt Collier, a former slave who became a noted bear hunter, cornered and tied a bear to a tree and urged the president to shoot it. But Roosevelt refused to do so, insisting that it was unsportsmanlike and beneath him.

His refusal to shoot a defenseless bear became the major news of the day. It reached New York, where Morris Michtom, a Jewish refugee from Russian pogroms, and his wife, Rose, ran a candy store. Mrs. Michtom was so moved by Roosevelt's refusal to kill the bear that she sewed a stuffed toy bear and told Morris to put it in the window of their candy store. He placed a sign near it: "Teddy's Bear."

Soon people were coming into the store asking to buy a Teddy bear! Mr. Michtom, afraid of offending the president, mailed the original doll to the Roosevelts as a gift for the first family's children. He also asked permission to use the name on a new toy bear. President Roosevelt didn't think his name would be of much help, but he gave them permission.

The rest is history. The Michtoms closed their candy store and launched the Ideal Novelty & Toy Company. (The company was later renamed Ideal Toys, and in 1953 made the first toy Smokey

the Bear.) "Teddy" Roosevelt and the Republican Party used the Teddy bear as their mascot for the 1904 election, and the Michtom's gift bear later went on display at every White House function. Today, the original "Teddy's Bear" is in retirement at the Smithsonian Institution.

### But What About the Menorahs?

Well, I finally did get someone to shed a bit of light on them. I wrote to the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site of the National Park Service. Curator Amy Verone wrote back.

"We do not know much about the two *menorahs* in the North Room," she stated, "just that they were given to Theodore Roosevelt by a Mrs. Leavitt, who is described in park records as 'a family friend.' There are historic photographs showing the *menorahs* on top of the bookcase in the front of the room in 1909, and on top of the bookcase in the back of the room in 1948. We don't have any additional information on who Mrs. Leavitt was, her relationship with the Roosevelts, or her reasons for giving the *menorahs* to the Roosevelts."

Now, here is where it really gets interesting. Ms. Verone added some comments of her own:

"Both Theodore and Edith Roosevelt had a habit of giving belongings away to friends, family, and admirers (a terrible habit from a curator's point of view!). To me, the fact that the Roosevelts kept the candlesticks on view for forty years and moved them around the room shows that they valued them and their friendship with Mrs. Leavitt."

Fascinated, I asked if I could get photos of the *menorahs*. Finally, in the midst of major renovations at Sagamore Hill, Ms. Verone found time to write again — this time with pictures of the *menorahs*. And she added apologetically: "I was not able to get photographs of the *menorahs* in place in the North Room of the Roosevelt home. The home is currently closed for renovations; and ... I don't expect to have everything back in place or the house reopened to visitors until early 2015."

So the full story of the *menorahs* is still shrouded in mystery. But what emerges is another kind of Chanukah story. Every Chanukah we celebrate *l'hodos u'l'hallel* — to give thanks and praise for the miracles of Chanukah. I have relearned a lesson from all this, and that is that we should thank Hashem for yet another miracle: the United States of America, a safe haven for Jews like no other country in history, with some leaders, such as Theodore Roosevelt, who have been respectful of Jews. No wonder so many of our sages referred to America as the *malchus shel chessed*, the "kingdom of kindness."

As for the mystery of the Sagamore Hill *menorahs* ... perhaps, in the spirit of Chanukah, a reader will enlighten us before the official story is revealed. Stranger things have happened. ■



One of Teddy Roosevelt's *menorahs*.  
Photo credit: Sagamore Hill National Historic Site