

## Senior-housing resident in Whippany to display one-of-a-kind menorahs

BY JENNIFER L. NELSON • SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD • NOVEMBER 24, 2009

Those looking to commemorate the arrival of Hanukkah this year needn't look further than Lester Senior Housing in Whippany, where 86-year-old resident Roslyn Handler keeps her expansive collection of more than 50 menorahs.



Her classic designs and a variety of intricate, one-of-a-kind menorahs will be on display from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dec. 15 for residents and visitors in the second-floor theater at Lester, one of five communities comprising the Jewish Community Housing Corporation in northern New Jersey.

"I look for things that are different and unique," she said. "In each case, there was something that struck me about the menorah. It's just something you feel."

Her vast collection features electric, oil and candle menorahs that come in all shapes and sizes and are constructed with everything from glass, ceramic and wood to metals such as brass, silver and bronze.

"I can't explain it. I don't think any collector can. Something just piques your interest, and it keeps you busy," she said. "It can be a bad habit, though, particularly if you don't like dust."

While her collection includes several traditional seven-branched candelabras that have served as a symbol of Judaism for nearly 3,000 years, some of the menorahs are in the form of the Hanukiah. These holds nine candles, representing each night of Hanukkah, in addition to the "shamash" used to light the others.

Her menorahs range in price from \$2 or \$3 to the \$2,400 menorah designed by Israeli artist Frank Meisler that graces the front hallway of her two-bedroom apartment. Another prominent piece is a hand-carved wooden menorah depicting Maccabean soldiers that she purchased in Haiti, while a 5-foot-tall menorah stands behind her sofa — she discovered the ratcheted candleholder while scouring secondhand shops in Puerto Rico and had its stand custom made when she returned home.

"My husband and I loved to travel," she said of her late husband, Archie Handler, a physician who practiced in Passaic County. Together they have five children and 11 grandchildren, many of whom have already received pieces of Handler's collection ("I had to give some away, and I can't buy any new menorahs — unless I move to a larger apartment," she said.)

After spending their 25th wedding anniversary in Israel shortly after the conclusion of the Six-Day War in 1967, the Handlers came home with a heavy brass menorah found in the Arab section of Jerusalem, in addition to a smaller menorah they bought in Haifa that was made from shells used in the war.

"We always had menorahs around to celebrate the holiday, but that's really when my collection started," she said. "I don't think anyone wakes up one morning and says, 'I think I'll start a collection.' It's something that just happens."

Born in Jersey City, Handler raised her family in Passaic and Clifton before moving to Florida about 25 years ago. She returned to New Jersey five years ago to be closer to her children.

Not surprisingly, many of the Handlers are also collectors, of everything from silver coins to baseball cards to condensed milk containers.

"It's in their genes," Handler said, laughing. "I don't know if they got it from me or if I got it from them."

Throughout the years, Handler also has started collections of keepsakes, including Russian dolls, kaleidoscopes and Buddha statues.

"When my husband died, I was angry at the world, and I just had to do something," she said. She "kept her hands busy" by dabbling in ceramics, and while purchasing supplies one day, she spotted a Buddha statue holding five children.

"Something struck a chord with me, and that was the beginning of my collection of Buddhas holding five children," she said.

Still, Handler couldn't possibly narrow down which menorah is her favorite. However, some do hold a particular significance. She purchased a large stone statue of an older man holding up a metal candleholder while her husband was in the hospital for the last time ("I named it Aaron after his Hebrew name," she said), while another menorah was presented to her by her dentist.

The only menorah she lights for herself during the holiday season was given to her by a 99-year-old cousin in Israel, along with a special note that Handler still keeps nearby the menorah today. She also proudly displays a replica of a menorah from The Jewish Museum in New York City, which pictures Judith, whom Handler called "a Jewish Joan of Arc," being blessed with oil.

"As time goes by, I've come to appreciate them all," she said. "They all bring me back to things I've done in my life."