

(by William Portnoy)

LEON FALK

A Lifetime of Service

When news of the unspeakable horrors inflicted on the Jewish people filtered out of Europe in the middle thirties and early forties, the American Jewish community began desperately to come together in an effort to save lives. The most outstanding and successful representatives found an identity with the newest immigrant, united in a common revulsion and mutual compassion. Men like Edward Warburg, William Rosenwald, Henry Morgenthau, Herbert Lehman, Rudolph Sonnenborn and others whose interests and pursuits reflected a long-time integration in the fabric of American society, turned with zeal and competence to this central task. Foremost among this group in Pittsburgh was Leon Falk.

The UJA, the Joint Distribution Committee, the various rescue and immigration agencies, required tremendous sums of money. He gave strong and inspired leadership to this effort in Pittsburgh. But money, important and necessary as it was and is, was not enough. In 1938, Franklin Roosevelt sponsored a refugee conference in Evian on the French-Swiss border. Out of this meeting came a plan to colonize one hundred thousand refugees in the little Caribbean country of Santa Domingo. Leon Falk, without forsaking his leadership in Pittsburgh, added a dimension by accepting national leadership to save whoever could be saved and brought to Santa Domingo. He gave not only money, but committed his time, his person, his experience, and dedication.

He negotiated personally with Trujillo for the admission of Jews. He arranged for their settlement, for their establishment in agriculture and trade. Trujillo, whatever his other faults and defects as a ruler, nevertheless opened the door, whether out of compassion or self-interest, or both (and nobody really cared why). He honored Leon Falk for his efforts with the order of Juan Pablo Duarte.

In these troublesome times for Israel, the Jewish community needs to review and understand the struggle to save the remnant of a remnant, and to pay tribute to those who were involved.

In recent years, others have come forward to build on those early foundations. Leon Falk has retained his interest in Israel and typically, has reflected it in unique fashion. Although he has contributed to UJA and purchased Israel Bonds, his special contribution was made through the Falk Foundation which sponsored an extensive economic research study to determine the nature and the future of Israel's economy.

It is impossible to over-estimate the impact of this timely and creative contribution. Picture the economy of Israel in 1953. The country, ravaged by war, into which tens of thousands of Jews, the emotionally and physically mutilated survivors of Dachau, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and the "civilized" camps of Cyprus, streamed. They brought not only their spent bodies, but their hopes and dreams for the future. The country had meagre resources and seemingly insuperable challenges. It was not enough to feed and clothe and house these people. UJA and world Jewry reached new

levels of giving to meet this problem. But a nation cannot be forged out of reliance on charity. It was necessary to develop a viable economy, to project the means for people to earn a living, to rebuild their lives while building a nation.

The Israel Bond program was started in 1951 to develop the infra-structure of the economy. But that was only a beginning. Into this breach, in 1953, stepped the Maurice Falk Institute of Economic Research, developed through the creative understanding of Leon Falk and his associates. The project began with a five year grant from the Falk Foundation with A. D. H. Kaplan of the Brookings Institute as first chairman of the U. S. Advisory Committee. Subsequently, Dr. Simon Kuznets, currently Professor of Economics at Harvard, was designated as chairman of this board. The group contained such eminent scholars as Dr. Daniel Creamer, Dr. Isadore Lubin, Industrial Commissioner of the State of New York, and Dr. Stacy May of the Rockefeller Brothers organization.

At the first annual report of the Falk Project, the scope and purpose were presented clearly: "The scope of the Falk Project is intended to be as broad as the range of economic problems that confront a new nation."

J. Steele Gow, Executive-Director and guiding spirit of the Falk Foundation, visited the State of Israel and met with Levi Eshkol, then Minister of Finance and later, prime minister. At the urging of Mr. Eshkol, the Institute expanded its horizon to study the relationship of the economy of Israel to other emerging nations and set the basis for the close economic ties subsequently

developed with the nascent countries of Asia and Africa. During a ten year period, the Falk Foundation made operational grants totaling \$814,575. Having guided and developed this vital project, it was decided that it should become a part of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and operated under a board of its own. An endowment grant of \$500,000 was added to the previous sums, making a total of over \$1,300,000 contributed by the Foundation. To this was added a matching sum of \$500,000 by the Hebrew University.

The project continues to function in Israel under the leadership of Professor Don Patinkin, Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Chicago, who has settled in Israel, and is training an entire generation of Israeli leaders. Its significant impact derives from the fact that it is an independent research organization, free from the vagaries of government change and politics.

Presently, Leon Falk is a director of Isorad, which is partially owned by the State of Israel, and is primarily concerned with the employment of irradiation for agricultural, industrial and medical purposes.

Leon Falk has reflected the Jewish ethical tradition. He has provided substantial support, first to Rodef Shalom Congregation and then, as a key figure, in building and developing Temple Sinai into a new, vibrant and expanded institution, that has taken its place in all phases of the communal life of Pittsburgh. He was the decisive factor in the merger of the Y and the IKC which has today become a great unified organization, serving the community.

He has turned his attention to the one major remaining source of discrimination against Jews in America -- "exclusion from the

executive suite." In a responsible, dignified and yet increasingly effective manner, the American Jewish Committee has initiated first a survey delineating the facts, and then productive efforts to crack this "genteel" barrier to advancement. The Falk Foundation has provided both funds and leadership to this effort.

Leon Falk has been concerned also with providing intelligent assistance to the movement for equality among the negro people. Again, this has reflected itself in direct assistance and leadership to particular projects; one such activity is the establishment of a negro owned and operated ambulance service.

His appreciation of the role of education in shaping our society is reflected in substantial grants and active involvement in the building of the University of Pittsburgh. He is one of its leading benefactors.

His interest in public health is shown in innumerable medical grants and projects, particularly in assistance to the Medical School of the University of Pittsburgh.

Mrs. Leon Falk, in a short period of time, has earned the admiration, love and affection of Pittsburgh. Her interest in the performing arts was demonstrated by her direct and personal involvement in rescuing the Playhouse from its serious financial difficulties. She has fostered by direct example and hard work, the concept that Pittsburgh is not a cultural desert, but that this community, heralded for its industrial genius, must create the social and cultural environment to attract the talent and brains to maintain its pre-eminence.

She has shown her devotion and concern for the State of Israel by sponsoring an annual luncheon for State of Israel Bonds on the principled basis that this must be a plus function, producing additional thousands of dollars in direct assistance to the Government of Israel. This has been an outstanding success, not only because of the prestige attached to her name, but also because of the warmth and graciousness and direct involvement of the hostess. Each guest, from the little old lady on Murray Avenue, to the most fashionably attired young socialite, is personally greeted and truly welcome in the Falk home. What a fine complement to the distinguished reputation of her husband!

A few years ago, immediately after his death, the Herbert H. Lehman Award was created in consultation with the late Senator's family. Leon Falk has lived and worked in the distinguished tradition of Herbert Lehman. It is not only fitting, but necessary that this tradition be extolled and emulated to assure the progressive future of Jewish life in America. Mr. Falk has afforded us the honor and opportunity of presenting him with this uniquely suitable award.

The Man of the Year Dinner is a gala formal occasion. To it are invited representatives of the cultural, social, political and industrial life of the city. The consular corps in Pittsburgh has made this an annual date in their social calendar. Such eminent performers as Mr. Jan Peerce and Theodore Bikel have added their talent. The distinguished Foreign Minister of the State of Israel, Mr. Abba Eban, has utilized its rostrum to present a major policy

address. Senators and congressmen have been liberally sprinkled in its audience. It is an occasion for celebration. Israel Bonds are sold prior to the dinner so that the evening is a happy conclusion to a successful year.

In this period of Israel's great need, the choice of Leon Falk as the central figure in this celebration, is a guarantee of outstanding success.