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Edgar Bronfman, philanthropist and Jewish communal leader, dies at 84

NEW YORK (JTA) – Edgar Bronfman, the billionaire former beverage magnate and leading Jewish philanthropist, died December 21.

As the longtime president of the World Jewish Congress, Bronfman fought for Jewish rights worldwide and led the successful fight to secure more than a billion dollars in restitution from Swiss banks for Holocaust victims and their heirs. As a philanthropist, Bronfman took the lead in creating and funding many efforts

to strengthen Jewish identity among young people.

Bronfman spent the 1950s and 1960s working with his father, Samuel, at Seagram Ltd., the family's beverage business. He became chairman of the company in 1971, the year of his father's death.

Just a year earlier, in 1970, Bronfman took part in a delegation to Russia to lobby the Kremlin for greater rights for Jews in the now-former Soviet

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President Barack Obama and Edgar M. Bronfman

The Jewish Voice

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Union. He would later credit the trip with inspiring his increasing interest in Judaism, saying: "It was on those trips to Russia that my curiosity was piqued. What is it about Judaism, I asked myself, that has kept it alive through so much adversity while so many other traditions have disappeared? Curiosity soon turned into something more, and that 'something more' has since turned into a lifelong passion."

In 1981, Bronfman became the president of the World Jewish Congress, stepping up the organization's activism on behalf of Jewish communities around the world. From his perch at the WJC, in addition to battling with the Swiss banks, he continued the fight for Soviet Jewry, took the lead in exposing the Nazi past of (United Nations' head) Kurt Waldheim, and worked to improve Jewish relations with the Vatican. In 1991, he lobbied President George H.W. Bush to push for the rescission of the United Nations resolution equating Zionism and racism.

"In terms of defending Jews, I'm a Jew," Bronfman told JTA in a 2008 interview. "And I was in a position to do so, so I did so."

Bronfman's final years as president of WJC were marred by allegations of financial irregularities revolving around his most influential adviser on Jewish political affairs, the organization's secretary general, Rabbi Israel Singer. Bronfman was never implicated in any of the financial allegations, but the controversy and feuding surrounding his top aide dominated the final years of his decades-long stint as WJC president.

The office of then-New York

Attorney General Eliot Spitzer issued a report in 2006 that found no criminal offense, but criticized the WJC's financial management; it ordered that Singer be prohibited from making financial decisions in the organization. Bronfman initially stood by Singer before ultimately firing him in 2007. Several months later, Bronfman stepped down.

But Bronfman did not disappear from the public stage. A staunch supporter of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, he continued to be a very vocal and public backer of liberal politicians in the United States and Israel. And, as president of the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, he dedicated most of his final years to his Jewish philanthropic causes.

He founded the Bronfman Youth Fellowship in 1987, a young leadership program that brings together Jewish high school students from Israel and North America. Then, in the 1990s, he worked to revive Hillel, serving as the founding chair of the campus organization's board of governors. In 2002, he provided the funding to launch MyJewishLearning, a digital media entity that now also includes the Jewish parenting site Kveller and boasts 1 million visitors per month.

Bronfman and his first wife, Ann Loeb, had five children, Sam, Edgar Jr., Matthew, Holly and Adam. He had two daughters, Sara and Clare, with his second wife, Georgiana Webb. In 1994, he married the artist Jan Aronson. He is survived by Aronson, his seven children, 24 grandchildren, two great grandchildren, his brother Charles Bronfman and his sister Phyllis Lambert.

"He was the first of his kind, a titan of industry that dedicated himself fully to advocating, advancing and encouraging the Jewish people," said Dana Raucher, executive director of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation.

In 1999, President Bill Clinton awarded Bronfman the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. In the citation, Bronfman was heralded for working "to ensure basic rights for Jews around the world."

In a 1986 Associated Press profile, he said his position and money helped him have access to world leaders.

"It's a combination of the two," Bronfman said. "In the end, it doesn't really matter why that access is available, as long as it is there."

The year before, he had become the first congress president to meet with Soviet officials in Moscow, bringing his case for human rights and taking a little time to promote Seagram's interests. He visited again in 1988, by which time Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, a key goal of the congress, had begun to rise under the reforming leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the congress also helped lead the effort to gain \$11 billion in restitution for heirs of Holocaust victims.

In 1975, the Bronfman family made the news for a far different reason when one of Edgar Bronfman's sons, 21-year-old Samuel 2nd, was abducted in a New York suburb.

The family paid a \$2.3-million ransom and Samuel was later found when authorities raided a Brooklyn apartment. The missing money was found under a bed and two men were arrested.

The two were convicted of extortion, but acquitted of kidnapping, in a sensational 1976 trial in which the defense accused Samuel Bronfman of staging his own kidnapping as a hoax intended to cheat his father out of the ransom money.

PASSAGES

Edgar Bronfman; Jewish advocate

Billionaire, former head of Seagram's lobbied Soviets to let Jews emigrate

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Edgar M. Bronfman Sr., the billionaire businessman and longtime president of the World Jewish Congress, which lobbied the Soviets to allow Jews to emigrate and



Bronfman

helped spearhead the search for hidden Nazi loot, died Saturday. He was 84.

The Canadian-born Bronfman died at his New York home surrounded by family, according to the family charity he led, The Samuel Bronfman Foundation.

Bronfman made his fortune with his family's Seagram's liquor empire, taking over as chairman and CEO in 1971 and continuing the work of his father, Samuel. Under Bronfman's leadership, Seagram expanded its offerings and was eventually acquired by French media and telecom group Vivendi Universal in 2000.

But Bronfman's wealth, combined with his role in the World Jewish Congress, an umbrella group of Jewish organizations in some 80 countries that he led for more than a quarter century, allowed him to be a tireless advocate for his fellow Jews.