

SERVICE TRANSCRIPT: *11:55 minutes*

Max's mother, Mollie, had always encouraged him to give, even at an early age. Even as a struggling 24-year old with a \$15/week job, he managed to pledge \$5 to Detroit's Allied Jewish Campaign.

In the 1950s, Max Fisher made several trips to Israel to better understand the needs of the Jewish people. He made his first visit in October 1954 with the first United Jewish Appeal (UJA) study mission.

The goal of this trip was to observe the results of campaign funds and demonstrate the importance of giving.

Upset at how poorly many Israelis were living, Max suggested to Israeli Finance Minister Levi Eshkol that Israel should shut down immigration for a while.

Eshkol's response: "Israel exists so Jews may exist." Fisher says that Eshkol taught him "the greatest lesson I would ever learn about Zionism" and returned from Israel with an even stronger commitment to Jewish philanthropy and fund raising.

Fisher had a great talent for raising money, and a true passion for service and helping others. And he was steadfastly becoming an icon in the American Jewish community. His ability to bring together American Jews and to raise money to help Jews abroad was one of his greatest gifts.

In 1964, Fisher was elected Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, an organization founded to raise money to help meet the needs of Jewish refugees in Israel and overseas. By 1965, he was the general chairman of the UJA and in 1968 he was the president.

In 1965, Fisher helped to orchestrate the Loan Agreement between 11 U.S. life insurance companies and the Jewish Agency for Israel, Inc. (JAFI), for which Fisher also served as the Finance Chairman.

Unthinkable by today's standards, the collateral for these 15-year, \$50 million loans was the good faith and credit of the American Jewish members of the UJA.

Feeling that the sole responsibility of world Jewry was to assure the existence of Israel, his fundraising efforts increased. He saw a critical need for an organization that would more closely tie the diaspora, those Jews living outside of Israel, to Israel.

Fisher knew that it was critical for American Jewish organizations to raise the funds needed to allow Jews to emigrate to Israel.

In the late 1960s, the issue of Soviet Jewry took on a larger significance in Fisher's life and would be the subject of much of his work until the early 1990s.

Fisher approached President Nixon on the issue of Soviet Jewry in December 1970 during his tenure as President of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds.

Fisher was involved in trying to secure clemency for the Leningrad 11, who allegedly attempted to hijack a plane out of Russia.

Mary Fisher:

He likes to live in the solution. He doesn't like to live in a problem. So, I think that he is very um...able to put things together. And he did this at the White House. And he did it regularly. And he was there all the time.

Nixon quickly contacted the Soviet authorities. He was able to negotiate the appeals of the death sentences for two of the Russian Jews and their sentences were reduced.

In 1972, Nixon won the presidential election and gave much of the credit to Fisher for the high level of turnout among Jewish voters.

Among Vietnam, Watergate and other important issues the Nixon administration was facing, Fisher worked to keep the issue of Soviet Jewry a priority.

Fisher often spoke with his friend Jacob K. Javits on how those Jews emigrating from the Soviet Union to Israel might receive a financial boost from the U.S.

It was difficult to build a consensus among the various Jewish agencies on the best way to approach the US government for support of Israel. But Max was committed to finding a way to make it happen.

Bill Berman:

Max brought us together because there's no point in voting. You have to know.. you can feel from the discussion where you were going. And it's that consensus that Max was always seeking. But you can't do that without information; without knowing what people are thinking. So, the power that Max was able to gather um.. by sheer weight of all the things that I talked about. Was achieved by understanding where you had to.. how you had to go to get people to.. to agree. It doesn't mean Max would.. and he did not often take positions adamantly. But in his judgment, it was the right position to take. Sometimes I saw him do it, and sometimes people weren't comfortable. But usually if he could, Max sought consensus. That doesn't mean middle ground that means consensus on what's the right thing to do.

In March 1973, legislation was passed providing \$50 million of resettlement aid for Soviet Jews emigrating to Israel.

The money was given through a contract between the State Department and the United Israel Appeal, with the funds being passed to the Jewish Agency. Fisher was Chairman of the

Jewish Agency Board of Governors.

Fisher continued to work behind the scenes by using his friendship with Gerald Ford once Ford rose abruptly into the White House. Max's influence averted a major policy shift in 1975 when Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were considering a reassessment of US policy toward Israel.

Max visited the White House to confer with the President eight times during the spring and summer of 1975 and made several trips to Israel. He was a trusted, unofficial statesman who could convey private messages and provide advice and counsel to both parties.

In 1981, Fisher was thrust into the AWACS controversy involving the sale of advanced radar systems to Saudi Arabia. Both Congress and the American Jewish community were against this deal but the Carter administration had promised the sale and the Reagan Administration could not back out.

In 1981, Max Fisher along with 32 Jewish Republican leaders met with President Ronald Reagan. They discussed growing anti-Semitism as it related to the debate over the sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia.

Max's insistence that the Reagan administration set up an ad hoc committee to help them better understand Jewish issues paid off. His advice was sought on most issues related to Israel and the Middle East throughout Reagan's eight years in office.

Robert Aronson:

The legacy that he leaves is a legacy of service to the Jewish people above all. Of using your.. one's resources and one's talents and abilities to advance the needs and the causes of the Jewish people as a people around the world. Um.. his legacy is that, it is the highest calling to aspire to.. to work on behalf of the Jewish people. That there's no higher calling. There's no greater mission that a person can have, than to work for the Jewish community.

By the spring of 1989, Fisher was almost 81 years old and was considered the elder statesman of American Jewry. His long history as a leader of Jewish communal organizations, combined with his philanthropic work in Israel and his service to every Republican President since Nixon placed him in the highest echelon of American political life. But there was still work to be done.

With tensions between President George Bush and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir increasing over differing opinions on how to approach the Middle East peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine, Fisher again stepped in to serve the interests of both.

Shamir knew how crucial the influx of Soviet Jews to Israel was for its long-term security. In order for that to be successful, it would need financial assistance from the US.

Central to the emigration issue was the rift within world Jewry as to where the Soviet Jews should ultimately settle.

Since the late 1960s, Fisher had tried to convince Jewish federation leaders that the emigrants should be discouraged from going to the United States and should go to Israel instead, where the population and the skills of the educated Soviet Jews were needed.

In 1989, he formed the No Name Committee with Mark Talisman of CJF's Washington office, Bill Berman, President of the CJF and Shoshanna Cardin of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Their goal was to influence the administration's plans for clearing the Soviet Jews through the bureaucracy.

The committee was instrumental in getting the US to press the Kremlin into agreeing to let Soviet Jews apply for exit visas for both the US and Israel. But if a Soviet Jew wanted to come to the US, at least a one-year waiting period was required.

And with only 40,000 spots available a year, America was now not an option for the vast majority of those wanting to leave Russia immediately. Fisher's plan helped steer them to Israel. By 1992, the one million new emigrants had helped to bring stability to the region. Fisher knew the costs associated with settling such an enormous number of people in Israel. So he helped organize a massive fundraising effort called "Operation Exodus." At an inaugural breakfast in February 1990, Max got a call from Walter Annenberg.

Annenberg told Max to announce that he was donating \$15 million to the cause. This huge gift led the effort to raise more than \$420 million that year.

In 1991, the Israeli government had to organize an emergency airlift of 14,500 Ethiopian Jews,

Fisher was able to contact the White House to help with a solution for getting the Jews to Israel.

By 1992, the one million new emigrants had helped to bring stability to the region. Operation Exodus with help from the US government and Max Fisher's steady influence had been a huge success.