

# *Mitchel Levitas, Editor in Leading Posts at The Times, Dies at 89*

By Sam Roberts

June 24, 2019

Mitchel R. Levitas, a journalist who won the prestigious George Polk Award in his 20s for a series on labor racketeering and held leading newsroom positions at The New York Times for decades, died on Saturday at his home in New Marlborough, Mass. He was 89.

The cause was Alzheimer's disease complicated by pneumonia, his son Daniel said.

In a series of appointments from 1976 to 1995, Mr. Levitas oversaw The Times's metropolitan coverage and edited The Week in Review section, The New York Times Book Review, the weekend edition of the paper and the Op-Ed page.

A native New Yorker and product of the city's public schools and colleges, he joined the newspaper in 1965 as a writer and editor with The New York Times Magazine. He retired 37 years later, in 2002, as editorial director of book development, a post in which he inaugurated volumes on the best travel writing by Times reporters and anthologies of Times reportage on great historical events.

He continued to serve as a consultant to that office until 2014.

Mr. Levitas, who was known as Mike, was a sharp-eyed editor. According to an article in The Book Review in 1975 by the editor and writer Victor Navasky, it was Mr. Levitas, as an assistant metropolitan editor, who instinctively assigned a reporter, Nicholas Gage, to investigate the authenticity of "The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano." The book was being billed as a personal memoir dictated by the Mafia boss himself.

Mr. Gage, however, wrote in a Page One article: "An examination of the book, including research into papers and documents concerning Mr. Luciano and more than 20 interviews, has produced information that questions that claim."



Mr. Levitas, who was known as Mike, in 1982, when he was editor of The Times's Week in Review section.  
The New York Times

Mr. Levitas wrote articles for The Times Magazine and reviews for The Book Review as well as “Editorial Notebook” essays on the opinion pages and in The Times Magazine. One of his magazine articles, in 1990, explored the rise of homelessness and discussed how the word “homeless” itself had re-entered the national lexicon.

“It has all happened in less than a decade,” he wrote, “after the experts realized that the 1981-82 recession was not a temporary spasm, but an early warning of an evolving, major socioeconomic breakdown. Homeless — a word that until recently was virtually unknown in the public-policy vocabulary — has become a slogan, a stigma and a symbol of the country’s reluctance and inability to relieve a novel suffering among its poorest people.”

Mitchel Ramsay Levitas was born on Dec. 1, 1929, in the Bronx to Samuel and Esther (Zilboorg) Levitas, Jewish immigrants who had fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and first settled in Chicago.

His father, who was known as Sol, edited *The New Leader*, a Social Democratic weekly. He was a prominent Menshevik in Russia and had befriended Alexander Kerensky, the revolutionary who was living in self-imposed exile in New York. Kerensky gave his fur-collared greatcoat to Sol Levitas as a gift, and his son inherited it.

Mike Levitas graduated from Brooklyn Technical High School and earned a bachelor's degree in English from Brooklyn College.

He was editor in chief of *The Vanguard*, a student newspaper, which was deemed so radically leftist by Dr. Harry D. Gideonse, the school's president, that the college shut it down and disciplined the top staff in 1950, as Mr. Levitas's tenure ended and a year before he graduated.

Mr. Levitas, seated with his back to the pillar, in *The Times* newsroom on West 43rd Street in an undated photo. He held a series of senior editing positions in a 37-year career at the newspaper. William E. Sauro/*The New York Times*

In addition to his son Daniel, he is survived by his wife, Gloria (Barach) Levitas, a writer and anthropologist who taught at Queens College; another son, Anthony; four granddaughters; two step-granddaughters; and two great-grandchildren.

In 1951, Mr. Levitas joined the Russian desk of Voice of America, the government-funded broadcaster. He was hired as a reporter by The New York Post two years later. He won the Polk Award in 1957 for metropolitan reporting for a series of articles in The Post on how labor racketeers exploited Puerto Rican workers.

After completing a Nieman fellowship at Harvard University in 1959, he worked at Time magazine as an assistant editor before joining The Times.

He wrote the text for “America in Crisis” (1969), a book of Magnum photo agency photographs chronicling the tumultuous 1960s.

Mr. Levitas, customarily serious-minded, was known to surprise colleagues on occasion with just a hint of a wry smile as he insouciantly dropped a bon mot.

That trait seemed to be even more publicly evident in 1966, when, in The Times Magazine, he wrote a profile of Robert David Lion Gardiner, the 16th lord of the 3,000-acre manor off the East End of Long Island known as Gardiners Island, which had been in the family for 11 generations.

Accompanying the article was a brief note identifying the author. “Mitchel Levitas,” it said, “is himself the lord of a manor, a heavily mortgaged summer place on Martha’s Vineyard that has been in the family for less than one generation.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 25, 2019, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Mitchel Levitas, 89, Editor With Top Roles at The Times