

# ***Edgar M. Bronfman, Who Built a Bigger, More Elegant Seagram, Dies at 84***

**By Jonathan Kandell**

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Edgar M. Bronfman, the billionaire businessman and philanthropist who as chairman of the Seagram Company expanded his family's liquor-based empire and who as president of the World Jewish Congress championed the rights of Jews everywhere, died on Saturday at his home in Manhattan. He was 84.

His death, of natural causes, was confirmed by the family's Samuel Bronfman Foundation.

Mr. Bronfman inherited control of Seagram from his father, Samuel Bronfman, an irascible, self-made Canadian magnate who founded a distilling company in 1924 and got rich during Prohibition when Bronfman liquor found its way to American customers through bootleggers.

Edgar gave the company a more sophisticated image, in keeping with his own elegantly turned-out profile in New York society — a prominence underscored in the 1970s by the headlines generated by the kidnapping of his son Sam for ransom money.

But as liquor profits began to falter, he broadened the company by acquiring Tropicana, taking Seagram into the oil business and eventually making it the largest minority shareholder in DuPont, the chemical giant. Later, he allowed his son Edgar Jr., who had succeeded him as head of the company, to risk billions of dollars to transform Seagram once again, this time into a major player in Hollywood.

As president of the World Jewish Congress, from 1981 until 2007, Mr. Bronfman turned a loose, cautious federation of Jewish groups in 66 countries into a more focused, confrontational organization.

Under his leadership, the Congress pressed the Soviet Union to improve conditions for Jews living within its borders and to allow freer emigration. Spurred by Mr. Bronfman, the Congress led efforts to expose the hidden Nazi past of Kurt Waldheim, the former secretary general of the United Nations who became president of Austria. And it campaigned successfully to force Swiss banks to make restitutions of more than a billion dollars to the relatives of German death camp victims who deposited their savings in Switzerland before World War II.

Mr. Bronfman shrugged off criticism from those who feared that his aggressive tactics were risking an anti-Semitic backlash. "The answer isn't to say, 'Don't make trouble,' and hide our heads in the sand," he wrote in his 1998 memoir, "Good Spirits: The Making of a Businessman." "We may not earn the friendship of others, but we will demand their respect."

## **Prospering by Prohibition**

Edgar Miles Bronfman was born in Montreal on June 20, 1929. His father and his mother, the former Saidye Rosner, were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who had moved to Montreal from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Edgar was the third-born of their four children.



Edgar M. Bronfman in the Seagram Building in 1985. William E. Sauro/The New York Times

Sam Bronfman and his brother Allan established a successful mail-order liquor company but were forced to give it up when provincial governments in Canada took over the retail side of the liquor business themselves. The Bronfmans decided that if they could not sell liquor, they would produce it. The family built its own distillery near Montreal in 1925.

It prospered, and the Bronfmans took advantage of Prohibition by opening more distilleries just across the border from the United States. One that the brothers bought was owned by the Seagram family, and they incorporated the name. When Prohibition ended, they were strategically placed to open a Seagram subsidiary in the United States, in 1933.

“How much business Father and his brothers did with bootleggers was never clear,” Mr. Bronfman wrote in “Good Spirits.”

Edgar and his siblings grew up in aristocratic splendor. Their family’s suburban Montreal mansion was staffed with a butler, a cook, maids, nannies, gardeners and chauffeurs. They spent summers at their country estate in Tarrytown, N.Y., and at the family retreat on Lake Placid in the Adirondacks.

But affluence did not always evoke fond memories. “My childhood was marked by a tension between privilege on the one hand and emotional dysfunction on the other,” Mr. Bronfman wrote in “Good Spirits.” He complained that his father had rarely been around and that his mother had been remote and inaccessible.

Mr. Bronfman said he had grown up with a confused understanding of his Jewish identity. The Bronfmans kept a kosher home, and the children received religious schooling on weekends. But during the week Edgar and his younger brother, Charles, were among a handful of Jews sent to private Anglophile schools, where they attended chapel and ate pork. “No one said anything to my face,” Mr. Bronfman remembered, “but I constantly heard comments denigrating Jews.”

Mr. Bronfman enrolled at Williams College in Massachusetts and then transferred to McGill University in Montreal, graduating in 1951.

At 21 he joined Seagram, working as an apprentice taster and accounting clerk in Montreal and then at the main distillery nearby, where he eventually oversaw production. He had a knack for finances and the boldness to tell his tyrannical father how best to handle his money. At 22 he explained that Seagram could reap great tax benefits if it incorporated its petroleum subsidiary and carried out exploration in the United States rather than in Canada.

“Fortunately, Father saw the point at once and agreed,” he wrote.

Mr. Bronfman was a confident executive, safe in the knowledge that as the firstborn son he was the heir apparent. His brother accepted his status and throughout his life deferred to Mr. Bronfman on business decisions. But his oldest sibling, Minda, resented the accident of gender that had removed her from consideration as the eventual heir, despite her degree

in business administration. Relations between her and Edgar were strained for most of their lives.

Mr. Bronfman received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Clinton in 1999 for his philanthropy, much of which focused on Jewish causes.  
Pablo Martinez Monsivais/Associated Press

In 1953 Mr. Bronfman married Ann Loeb, a granddaughter of the financier Carl M. Loeb. Loeb, Rhoades & Company helped the Bronfmans purchase the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company.

### **Building an American Empire**

Mr. Bronfman convinced his father that since the United States accounted for 90 percent of Seagram revenues, it made sense to install himself permanently in New York. In 1953 Samuel Bronfman put Edgar in control of the company's subsidiary in the United States, Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, and placed Charles in charge of the Canadian branch, the House of Seagram.

Mr. Bronfman moved to New York two years later and shortly afterward became an American citizen — although it was his sister Phyllis, who had studied architecture, who was put in charge of the construction of the new company headquarters, the Seagram Building, on Park Avenue, designed by Mies van der Rohe and considered a jewel of modern skyscraper design. At its zenith, in 1956, Seagram products accounted for one of every three distilled-alcohol drinks in the United States. Then its market share began to slide. To compensate for the losses, Mr. Bronfman squeezed more profits from less production, using modern cost-cutting methods and focusing on more expensive brands of whiskey.

But he was frustrated by his inability to wrest full control of Seagram from his aging father, and he began to dabble in film and television production. After losing a bid for MGM to the financier Kirk Kerkorian, however, he returned full time to the beverage business.

With the death of his father in 1971, Mr. Bronfman's personal life began to unravel. That same year he separated from his wife, with whom he had five children. After their divorce, he married Lady Carolyn Townshend, in 1973, but that marriage also ended in divorce, a year later. He quickly became involved with another Englishwoman, Rita Webb (who changed her name to Georgiana). They married and divorced each other twice, and had two daughters. He then married Jan Aronson, an artist and a former triathlete.

He is survived by Ms. Aronson; his sons, Samuel, Edgar Jr., Matthew and Adam, and his daughter Holly Bronfman Lev, all from his first marriage; his daughters with Ms. Webb, Sara Igtet and Clare Bronfman; his brother, Charles; his sister Phyllis Lambert; 24 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

In 1975, Samuel Bronfman II was kidnapped in New York and held for ransom. Mr. Bronfman himself delivered the \$2.4 million ransom to one of his son's two kidnappers, who were both arrested shortly afterward by the F.B.I. But the kidnappers' lawyer claimed in court that the abduction had been a hoax and that Sam Bronfman had been a part of it. In the end, the jury convicted the defendants of the lesser charge of extortion. With liquor consumption in decline in 1981, Mr. Bronfman tried to buy Conoco, a major oil and gas company. Seagram lost out to DuPont in the bidding but, because of its investment in Conoco, ended up with a 20 percent share of DuPont — and soon raised this to almost 25 percent, making Seagram DuPont's largest minority shareholder.

Initially, most Wall Street analysts and the financial press took the position that Seagram had been outdueled for Conoco by DuPont. A 1981 Business Week article quoted a DuPont senior executive as saying jokingly that he enjoyed drinking "Seagram on the rocks." But by 1985 its stake in DuPont accounted for nearly 75 percent of Seagram's earnings, and Mr. Bronfman was being hailed as a smart, risk-taking businessman.

At the same time, Mr. Bronfman was becoming increasingly involved in Jewish causes. He was elected president of the World Jewish Congress in 1981. "Making money is marvelous, and I love doing it, and I do it reasonably well," he told The New York Times in 1986, "but it doesn't have the gripping vitality that you have when you deal with the happiness of human life and with human deprivation."

A 2006 photo at a World Jewish Congress event. Ralf Succo

As his devotion to Jewish causes grew, he reduced his involvement with Seagram and prepared to turn over the company to the next generation. By family tradition his oldest son, Sam, was the logical successor, but he favored his second son, Edgar Jr., and without consulting either, Mr. Bronfman announced his choice in a 1986 interview with Fortune magazine. It

would be Edgar Jr.

“It took Sam a long time to get over the hurt that I had inflicted,” Mr. Bronfman later conceded. “But my responsibility was to choose the right C.E.O. for Seagram regardless of presumed birthright or familial relationship.”

Edgar Bronfman Jr. became president of Seagram in 1989 and chief executive in 1994. With his father’s approval, he sold Seagram’s shares in DuPont and used the proceeds, more than \$9 billion, to purchase MCA, a major Hollywood film and music company, which was later split into Universal Studios and Universal Music.

DuPont’s share price doubled within four years, while Seagram’s stock barely budged during the long bull market of the 1990s. Undeterred, Edgar Jr. spent billions more on entertainment.

In 1998 he bought PolyGram, the giant music company, but the resulting conglomerate floundered, forcing him to seek a strategic partner. So in 2000 he negotiated yet another controversial deal, an all-stock acquisition of the French conglomerate Vivendi. He briefly became chief executive of the new company, Vivendi Universal, but after Seagram lost control of its entertainment holdings, he stepped down from an executive capacity in 2001. Seagram then sold its beverage business. In 2004, Edgar Jr. acquired Warner Music Group.

### **A Voice for Jews**

Edgar Sr., for his part, became a major philanthropist through the family foundation, with a focus on Jewish educational and social programs in the United States and Israel. At New York University, he helped establish the Edgar M. Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life. In 1999, President Bill Clinton presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Mr. Bronfman also wrote four autobiographical books.

His work with the World Jewish Congress also accelerated. In the 1990s the congress, spurred by Mr. Bronfman, negotiated with Eastern European countries to recover — or at least receive compensation for — the property of Jews that had been seized first by the Nazis and then by the Communists.

In the late ’90s, the congress became one of the foremost critics of Switzerland’s role during World War II, accusing Swiss banks of having stolen the deposits of European Jews who died during the war. After several years of bitter negotiations, Swiss banks agreed in 1999 to distribute at least \$1.25 billion in compensation to relatives of European Jews who had secretly deposited their money in Switzerland before perishing at the Nazis’ hands.

Mr. Bronfman acknowledged that he could be abrasive in pursuing Jewish causes, but he defended his approach, telling *The Times* in 1986, “I would like every Jew to be as comfortable in his skin as I am in mine.”

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