

BREAKING

## Sheldon Adelson, Billionaire Donor to G.O.P. and Israel, Is Dead at 87

Mr. Adelson drew a cornucopia of cash from casinos and resort hotels and poured money into right-wing causes.

By Robert D. McFadden

Jan. 12, 2021 Updated 8:55 a.m. ET

Sheldon G. Adelson, a cabdriver’s son who built the world’s largest empire of casinos and resort hotels in Las Vegas, Macau, Singapore and other gambling meccas and used his vast wealth to promote right-wing political agendas in America and Israel, died on Monday night. He was 87.

The cause was complications of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a form of blood cancer, his company, Las Vegas Sands, said on Tuesday in a statement. It did not say where he died.

Mr. Adelson grew up tough, a Depression-era street urchin who hawked newspapers and fought roughnecks in Boston. Unfazed by risks, rivals or the law, he built a fortune estimated by Forbes in 2014 at \$36.6 billion and by Bloomberg Billionaires Index at \$40.8 billion, making him the world’s eighth or ninth wealthiest person.

By March 2016, Forbes said Mr. Adelson’s net worth had dropped to \$25.2 billion, largely because of gaming revenue declines at his giant casino in Macau, where the swarms of junketing Chinese businessmen and Communist Party officials had all but dried up in a corruption crackdown by President Xi Jinping of China. But Mr. Adelson seemed to take the loss in stride, and it had no apparent effect on his political influence or his bottom line. In March 2019, Forbes put his net worth at \$35.1 billion.

His ride to riches had been more roller coaster than escalator, anyway. After taking the Sands public in 2004, his net worth grew for two years by \$1 million an hour — weekends, holidays and nights included. In a few months in 2009, it fell from \$30 billion to \$2 billion. But by 2013, he had it all back, with billions to spare. Often the cash register rang up \$2 million an hour.

Along the way, he drew countless gamblers and vacationers to his archipelago of fantasy resorts with Venetian-themed canals, motorized gondolas, singing gondoliers and replicas of St. Mark’s Campanile and the Rialto Bridge to go with acres of slot machines and roulette wheels, lavish floor shows and the biggest, gaudiest hotels anywhere on the planet.

Mr. Adelson also became one of America’s heavyweight political spenders — the largest single donor in the 2012 elections — following the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling in 2010, which removed many limits on political contributions as unconstitutional infringements of free speech.

In May 2016, after Donald J. Trump became the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Mr. Adelson told him in a private meeting in Manhattan that he was willing to contribute more to help elect him than he had to any previous campaign, a sum that could exceed \$100 million, according to two Republicans with direct knowledge of Mr. Adelson’s commitment. He eventually gave the Trump presidential campaign only \$25 million, and was still its largest donor.

Mr. Trump, who had swept through the primaries with astonishing ease, had relied for nearly a year on his own wealth and small campaign contributions. But for the general election campaign, he said that he would need perhaps \$1 billion. Many of the Republican Party’s wealthiest contributors, including Charles G. and David H.

Koch, indicated that they were unlikely to support Mr. Trump, so Mr. Adelson’s pledge was a hefty boost to his campaign.

“He is a candidate with actual CEO experience, shaped and molded by the commitment and risk of his own money rather than the public’s,” Mr. Adelson wrote in an op-ed for The Washington Post. Mr. Trump, he added, “has created a movement in this country that cannot be denied.”

**DEALBOOK:** An examination of the major business and policy headlines and the power brokers who shape them.

Sign Up

After Mr. Trump’s election, Mr. Adelson gave \$5 million to the committee organizing the inauguration festivities. It was the largest single contribution for any president’s inaugural event, and on the day of the swearing-in ceremony in January 2017, Mr. Adelson and his wife sat along the aisle a few rows back as Mr. Trump took the oath of office. Under the Trump administration, the Adelsons achieved at least one of their long-held goals: the relocation of the United States Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in 2018.

With cornucopias of cash, Mr. Adelson had for years showered king’s ransoms on Republican Party stalwarts. He was a major supporter of President George W. Bush in 2004, and gave \$92.7 million to campaigns and super PACs supporting Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney and others in 2012. He told Forbes he was willing to spend \$100 million to defeat President Barack Obama.

Mr. Adelson’s influence was on display in March 2014, when four prospective presidential candidates — Govs. Chris Christie of New Jersey, Scott Walker of Wisconsin and John Kasich of Ohio, and former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida — went to Las Vegas for what critics called an audition before the Republican Party’s most coveted and fearsome moneyman.

“The four Republican candidates prostrated themselves, seeking Adelson’s stamp of approval and cash,” Thomas B. Edsall wrote on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times.

Mr. Adelson set off another flap in December 2015 when he bought The Las Vegas Review-Journal, Nevada’s biggest newspaper, for \$140 million, using a shell company to hide his involvement. When he was revealed as the buyer by his own newspaper, questions were raised about whether he would interfere with its journalistic independence. His family pledged that the paper would be “fair, unbiased and accurate,” but the editor and some staff members took a buyout and resigned. The Review-Journal was reportedly the only major newspaper in the nation to endorse Mr. Trump for president.

In succeeding months, the new ownership brought financial muscle to The Review-Journal, enabling it to hire personnel and upgrade equipment. But the newsroom was roiled by tensions between top editors on the one hand who saw it as part of their job to review coverage of Mr. Adelson and his family and business affairs, and news staff members on the other who chafed at what they regarded as inappropriate interference. A longtime columnist who had filed for bankruptcy in 2007 while defending himself against an Adelson libel suit was barred by management from writing about Mr. Adelson. The columnist left the paper, one of about a dozen staff members who quit or were fired during the contretemps.

In Israel, where he had a home and owned major conservative media outlets, Mr. Adelson supported Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party. He opposed statehood for Palestinians, favored Israeli settlements in occupied territories and underwrote junkets to Israel by congressional Republicans.

He looked like a man spoiling for a fight: short, stout and pugnacious, with sparse reddish hair and a puffy pale face that reddened easily. Unions, reporters and associates he considered disloyal incurred his wrath. He kept bodyguards and lawyers close for privacy and libel actions.

Mr. Adelson began his rise in 1979, when he and four partners started a Las Vegas computer trade show called Comdex. Years before computers proliferated in households, the show drew sellers and buyers to see the latest technology in a field that was growing exponentially. In the 1980s and '90s, it was the nation's top computer exhibition, and Mr. Adelson made \$500 million from its sale.

In 1989, his partnership concluded the purchase of the Sands Hotel and Casino, the Frank Sinatra-Rat Pack hangout, and added a convention center. Honeymooning with his second wife in Venice in 1991, he found the inspiration for his next move. He imploded the Sands in 1996 to make way for his \$1.5 billion Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in 1999. By 2003, it had 8,000 suites and rooms and a casino the size of two football fields. He owned a majority interest in the corporation, and, taking it public, became a multibillionaire overnight.

In 2007, three years after gaining a toehold in Macau with a \$265 million casino, Mr. Adelson opened his next big thing: the Venetian Macao, a \$2.4 billion, 39-story hotel and casino — the world's seventh largest building, with a gaming paradise almost as big as 10 football fields. Asia's fanatic gamblers poured in, and Mr. Adelson multiplied his wealth many times over.

Mr. Adelson built other casino-hotels in Macau, Singapore and Pennsylvania, and added the Las Vegas Palazzo. In 2013, he dropped plans for a \$30 billion resort near Madrid after failing to win Spanish concessions. But he planned casinos in Japan, an untapped gambling mega-market, and, with billions at stake, lobbied hard against online gambling.

His company faced lawsuits, investigations and accusations of bribing Chinese and American officials and of tolerating prostitutes and the Mafia. Mr. Adelson denied the allegations and was not personally implicated. Nor was his company convicted of serious wrongdoing, although it paid a \$47 million fine in 2013 to avoid criminal charges in a money-laundering investigation.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee once issued a “sincere” apology after insinuating that he had profited from prostitution.

Sheldon Gary Adelson was born in Boston on Aug. 4, 1933, one of four children of Arthur and Sarah Tonkin Adelson. Arthur Adelson was descended from Jewish Ukrainian and Lithuanian ancestors. His wife had immigrated from England, and one of the boy's forebears had been a Welsh coal miner. In the family's two-room flat in the Dorchester section, the parents slept on a mattress and the children on the floor. Sheldon, a go-getter, sold newspapers, and at 16 had candy-vending machines in factories and gas stations.

He fought anti-Semitism and toughs in the streets and at Roxbury Memorial High School. “We had to go to school with at least four kids,” he told Forbes in 2012. “The Irish kids came out of the bushes and tenements with rubber hoses and chains and brass knuckles.”

In the early 1950s, he attended City College of New York, but dropped out after less than two years and joined the Army. He later sold toiletries, magazine ads and windshield de-icers; brokered mortgages, developed condominiums and booked charter tours. After his trade show successes, he bought the Sands Hotel and Casino for \$128 million.

Mr. Adelson had homes in Las Vegas, Malibu, Boston and Tel Aviv, and flew to Israel six to eight times a year on his own jetliners. A staunch Zionist, he even considered settling there.

“He fell in love with the country,” an associate told The Times.

Mr. Adelson's first wife, Sandra, had three children, Mitchell, Gary and Shelley, all of whom he adopted. They divorced in 1988. In 1991, he married Miriam Farbstein Ochshorn, an Israeli physician, and had two sons, Adam and Matan.

Mr. Adelson and his wife contributed hundreds of millions to medical research, education and other philanthropies in America and Israel. They also gave \$500,000 to President Bush for his second inauguration in 2005, and in 2008 accompanied him to Jerusalem for the 60th anniversary of Israel's founding.

Mr. Adelson had first visited Israel in 1988, wearing the shoes of his father, a Lithuanian-born Jew who never made the trip.