

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Mary Baroff: [00:00:01](#) This is an interview with Leonard Norman Simons a prominent leader in the metropolitan Detroit community. In connection with the 75th-anniversary celebration of the United Jewish Charities and the 50th anniversary of the Jewish Welfare Federation, these organizations have undertaken to record the memories and experiences of a number of community leaders which highlight developments in the organized Jewish community.

Mary Baroff: [00:00:33](#) This interview with Mr. Simons is being taped in his home on March 15, 1975. The interviewer is Mary Baroff. Mr. Simons before we begin discussing your community activities and your involvement in both the organized Jewish community and the general community, could you tell me a little bit about your life? When and where you were born, your education, your work, your hobbies? Do you think we could do this in about five minutes?

Leonard Simons: [00:01:09](#) Well, I don't know that's not too easy to capsulize 70 years in five minutes but I'll try. I was born in Youngstown, Ohio on July 24, 1904. The same date on which I celebrate my birthday is also the birthday of the City of Detroit except that it was born in 1701. I was a two and three-quarter pound, premature baby, at birth. I was impatient to get things going even then. After living in Chicago as a child we moved to Detroit when I was 12 years old.

Leonard Simons: [00:01:43](#) For a while, I lived with my maternal grandparents. I was Bar Mitzvah at Old Shaarey Zedek on Willis and Brush. I went to the Irving School, then Central High School graduating in June 1921. Because the family could not afford to send me to college I secured a job at an advertising agency as a combination office boy and an assistant artist at the age of 17. After seven and a half years at this agency, Larry Michelson who also worked for the same agency joined me in starting the Simons Michelson Company in January of 1929.

Leonard Simons: [00:02:24](#) We're still in the advertising agency business and we still go to work every day. We're still partners and friends. In fact, during all the 55 or 56 years we've known each other we've never had an argument of any kind and that's an accomplishment that gives me utmost satisfaction. Excuse me. My dear wife Harriet

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
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and I recently celebrated our 45th wedding anniversary. That too is something great to brag about I think, especially in these days when divorce is breaking up one out of every three marriages.

Leonard Simons: [00:02:57](#) I have two married wonderful daughters and they've given me five grandchildren who are real good kids. These young people make my life a thrilling daily experience. My business career of over a half a century with the most understanding partner and a tolerant wife both of whom encourage me and my extracurricular activities made it possible for me to try to help so many people and causes and to spend so much time away from my business and my home, working on matters that mean so much to me.

Leonard Simons: [00:03:30](#) As I think back, these were and are the most exciting and most rewarding series of challenges and responsibilities a person could possibly have to keep life interesting and from ever becoming boring. And so on many occasions when I've been the principal speaker or master of ceremonies or the one who introduces the person being honored I developed what I like to call the Simons Format. It combines some seriousness with a certain amount of humor or nonsense because I find that when you make a speech or you talk you can make people smile or laugh, they'll listen more carefully to what you have to say and you'll get your message across to them.

Leonard Simons: [00:04:15](#) My hobbies are travel everywhere to see how people live. My wife and I have been overseas over 20 times including two study missions to Israel, a trip to Russia, several times to the Orient including a trip around the world. I enjoy golf and was president of Franklin Hills Country Club back in 1952, '53 but my great hobby is book collecting. On my 50th birthday, I gave Wayne State University Library over 2,000 books on the history of Detroit in Michigan. All of the books were rebound in leather with gold stamping down the spines.

Leonard Simons: [00:04:55](#) Recently I gave my Judaic book collection, again over 2,000 books to Brandeis University Library. Now I'm working on my third book collection. A rare book Judaic collection with all the books published prior to 1900. Some of the books date back to the 1600s and 1700s and all of them are in English or partially in

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
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English. And all these books too are rebound in old-world style leather bindings with gold stampings down the spine. So far I've collected and rebound about 600 books and they're all going to the New Temple Bethel Library.

Leonard Simons: [00:05:35](#) Because of my interest in books, I've met and become friendly with many of the authors and this has added another enjoyable facet to my life's experiences because my favorite hobby is people. Last December I was asked by the editor of Who's Who in America to give them a statement of those principles, ideas, goals, and standards of conduct as they word it that have helped me live my kind of life and I wrote them these words. Since I was a youngster these thoughts have been my personal credo. I have always believed that there is much more to life than begin, beget and be gone.

Leonard Simons: [00:06:19](#) That the most important words in the dictionary are love, respect, and generosity and if I should ever do well in business I should never forget to share because a shroud has no pockets. That essential to happiness is something to do, someone to love, something to hope for. That life's greatest satisfaction comes from realizing your own capabilities as fully as possible for the benefit of others. That there is a big difference between putting your nose into other people's business and putting your heart into other people's problems.

Leonard Simons: [00:06:54](#) That schools of higher learning should be assisted because the salvation of the world relies on the education of young men and women and if I had a chance to do it all over again I would try to do the very same things because I believe in them. You might be interested to hear that my wife has already picked out the epithet for my gravestone. It's going to read "Here lies Leonard N. Simons gone to another meeting."

Mary Baroff: [00:07:25](#) How beautiful. Thanks a lot. You've actually given a wonderful overview of your life and not only that but your basic philosophy of living.

Leonard Simons: [00:07:40](#) Thank you.

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Mary Baroff: [00:07:44](#) Mr. Simons I'd now like to talk with you about your activities in the Jewish community. Could we start with the Jewish Welfare Federation?

Leonard Simons: [00:07:53](#) How far do you want me to go on something like that?

Mary Baroff: [00:07:58](#) Well, tell me over what period you served the Jewish Welfare Federation, what jobs you've held, what projects you've worked on, what's been your role, who were some of the people you worked with.

Leonard Simons: [00:08:09](#) Well, I don't honestly remember when I first started being active in the Jewish Welfare Federation but I think it was back in 1936. I remember being in meetings with Kurt Peiser who was then the Federation director. He served during the years I believe 1932 through 1936. I seem to remember Abe Srere being the chairman of the Allied Jewish Campaign. Isidore Sobeloff came in 1937 and I worked on various campaigns in subsequent years all of which were headed by Fred Butzel. When the war came around and there were no more Allied Jewish Campaigns during the years of 1943, '44 and '45, I worked on the big city campaign which was called The War chest.

Leonard Simons: [00:08:56](#) The Allied Jewish Campaign was discontinued and The War Chest took care of the charities. Then we started up again I believe it was 1946 and I remember well that Nate Shapero was the chairman that year. Sam Rubiner and I had gone over to convince Nate to take the chairmanship. We told him we would do most of the work for him if he would just take the chairmanship. He finally agreed. Sam used to work for Cunningham Drugs, Nate was the head of Cunningham Drugs and our office handled the advertising for Cunningham Drugs.

Leonard Simons: [00:09:31](#) It so happened that Nate Shapero went to work with enthusiasm as he usually does on any job that he tackles and we did not have to do the work for him but we did help him. I remember our goal was two million dollars for the campaign and all the letters that went out over Shapero's signature closed with the expression, thanks two million instead of the customary expression thanks a million.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
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Leonard Simons: [00:09:57](#) I remember in 1947, I remember being in Sobeloff's office when the Federation office was in a building on Lafayette Street on what is now Washington Boulevard. This is before they moved to their present location. We were trying to decide whom we could get to be the next chairman of the Allied Jewish Campaign. The people we had approached had turned us down. I remember very well Fred Butzel saying, "Keep this in mind, even though I have already been chairman several times if no one else will accept you can always have me. I will serve as chairman of the next campaign or any future campaigns or in any capacity, the Federation can ever use me."

Leonard Simons: [00:10:40](#) I think that that attitude expressed by Fred Butzel made one of the strongest impacts on my mind regarding service to the Jewish community above all the other things that I'd ever heard, seen or read about the subject. Fred probably never knew this but he was unquestionably the most important influence on my attitude toward serving as a volunteer worker on so many causes both Jewish and non-Jewish for the past 35 or 40 years or so.

Leonard Simons: [00:11:12](#) Getting back to the early years I worked primarily in the arts and crafts division because advertising agencies were in that division. I worked myself up to the point where I was the chairman of the arts and crafts division and then in 1949 I was the vice-chairman of the entire Allied Jewish Campaign under Lou Berry's leadership. If my notes are correct, I was also vice president of the Jewish Welfare Federation during the years of 1947, '48 and '49 under Julian Krolik who was president.

Leonard Simons: [00:11:47](#) Sobeloff who came in 1937 was the new director and from the beginning, I am frank to admit he and I did not hit it off particularly well. We did not see eye to eye on many subjects and we argued quite often. This happened on so many occasions that I came to the conclusion that under no circumstances would I consider being president of the Federation if I had to work with Sobeloff. Now, this doesn't necessarily mean he wasn't a nice man or a capable person because he was both of these things. But so long as there was this extreme clash of personalities between us I knew I would not be very happy working with him if I were president.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
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**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [00:12:27](#) So I let it be known that I did not want to be president if any committee was considering me. In 1948, I worked very hard on the campaign when Morrie Aronson was chairman and I think at that time the state of Israel had just been established. Under his chairmanship, Detroit raised about six million dollars which remained the peak amount the Detroit community had ever raised in an Allied Jewish Campaign from that date until this record was finally equaled in 1967.

Leonard Simons: [00:12:58](#) At no time during the 19 years in between did we equal the amount of money we raised under Morrie Aronson's chairmanship. And in 1948 we had almost 31,000 individual pledges. To this day we have never equaled that number either. I think we have about 24 or 25,000 pledges each year now. From then on I served in some capacity in every campaign each year but I did not take a position of leadership again until 1956 when I became a pre-campaign chairman under their chairmanship of Johnny Lurie.

Leonard Simons: [00:13:34](#) In 1956, I went on my first study mission to Israel. In fact, after a very exciting 10 days or so, during which we met and listened to all the Israeli leaders including Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir and so forth. The day we left Israel for home and stopped off in Rome to pick up passengers on our flight I bumped into the president of the Chrysler Motorcar Company, a man named Tex Colbert. Tex was a friend of mine. He asked me where I had been and I told him.

Leonard Simons: [00:14:06](#) He had been in Rome for an automobile fashion show and told me that while he was there he had been visited by several Arab leaders who had asked him to intercede for them with the United States government because the Israeli people were such a warlike group of people. I, of course, told him that the Arabs were all wrong, that I had spent all this time in Israel listening to these speeches by the Israeli leaders in which they constantly reiterated how all they wanted was just to be able to live in peace with the Arabs in the world.

Leonard Simons: [00:14:38](#) I showed the Chrysler president copies of all the talks which had been duplicated and given to us. We spent the whole night on the plane talking about how all Israel wanted was to be able to live in peace with their neighbors. When we reached New York

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
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**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

about 5:00 in the morning and were getting off the plane the newsboys were yelling, "Israel invades Egypt." Tex Colbert looked at me, I looked at him, I shrugged my shoulders and continued walking down the plane.

Leonard Simons: [00:15:08](#) Then I met my wife and daughter who had stayed up practically all night waiting for my arrival and my wife greeted me by saying, "I knew you were a tough guy but I never thought that you could go over to Israel and in 10 days start a war." While I was in New York all the Detroit papers phoned me and asked for a statement on what I saw and so forth and my reply was, "Well all I can say is that I would have made a terrible spy for Uncle Sam because I did not see anything at all in Israel which would lead me to believe that war was imminent."

Leonard Simons: [00:15:40](#) In 1956 and again in 1957 I was a pre-campaign chairman. Co-chairman. In 1958 and also in 1959 I was a co-chairman of the entire Allied Jewish Campaign. In 1961, I was the chairman of the Allied Jewish Campaign collection committee and in 1963 I was given the Jewish Welfare Federation's Fred M. Butzel Memorial award. I can't seem to remember a year in which I wasn't involved in the Federation in some capacity or another. I know for several years I was associate chairman of the Federation's committee on capital needs. I think that was in 1959 or so.

Leonard Simons: [00:16:24](#) I remember around 1949, 1950 I was vice president of a Detroit service group. I had been on the Federation board of directors or board of governors for so many years and I have served on so many boards of the Federation beneficiary agencies that I just wouldn't know where to start to talk about all of them. I do remember being the publicity chairman for the 60th anniversary of the United Jewish Charities 15 years ago and I helped design and write a brochure which won an award for the United Jewish charities. I think it was from the council of Jewish Welfare Federations and fund. This was a big thrill.

Leonard Simons: [00:17:03](#) One of my big disappointments on the other hand at the Federation was not being able to secure Soboloff's approval to have a history written of the united Jewish charities and the Jewish Welfare Federation from the very beginning up to the year 1959. I had spent a lot of time in the project with the

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**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

American Jewish Archives and some of the greatest Jewish historians in our country. I had the approval of Wayne State University's President Hillberry that the Wayne State University's press would be willing to publish the history of Detroit Jewry as I had outlined it.

Leonard Simons: [00:17:36](#) I had planned an anthology with various authors writing about the different agencies of Federation. People would do research on their assignment, then when it was all written we would get some professional help editing and recasting the various stories, all of which would have been put into book form. I never could get an okay to go ahead so we left 15 years of valuable time and remembrances by people of the community who are no longer with us disappear to a great extent from the record.

Leonard Simons: [00:18:08](#) I think what the history committee is doing right now, taping the remembrance of some of the town's old-timers is a wonderful idea. I am confident that at long last we will have a pretty good record of our local Jewish community thanks to Mrs. Phillip Marcuse, Barbara, and George Stutz and their committee. As president of the Detroit Historical Commission and a member of the boards of the American Jewish Historical Society as well as the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, I must compliment all of you on what you are doing to preserve our local history for future generations of our people.

Leonard Simons: [00:18:44](#) I could not in good conscience conclude any statement about the Jewish Welfare Federation of Detroit without saying a few words about my good friend Bill Avrunin with whom I've had nothing but the most pleasant relationship ever since he became the executive director of Federation. It's pretty hard for anyone to have an argument with Bill. When someone like me can make that statement you can be sure it's true because I have a reputation for being willing to argue with anyone at the drop of a hat.

Leonard Simons: [00:19:13](#) I have a low boiling point and have not been able to control it too well throughout my life because I am an impatient person. I know my faults but this one I have always had great difficulty in controlling to a certain extent. On the other hand, I've been in business with my partner, Larry Michelson for 46 years. Prior to



**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

that, we worked for the same advertising agency for seven and a half years and I knew him even as a youngster.

Leonard Simons: [00:19:37](#) In all sincerity, I proudly tell you that in all this time about 55 years or more we have yet to have our first argument on any matter. And then I'm still married after 46 years to the same woman, so I don't know if that proves anything except that my partner and my wife are wonderful people.

Leonard Simons: [00:19:57](#) To get back to Bill Avrunin, Bill gets things done. He uses calm persuasion and patience. He reminds me of the story of the man who could tell you to go to hell in such a nice way that you'd look forward to the occasion. Bill has helped Detroit become what I believe is the outstanding Jewish community in America bar none from the standpoint of fundraising and from the standpoint of being able to surround himself with the very best young leadership brains in our local community, and I take my hat off to him.

Leonard Simons: [00:20:30](#) I only wish that I had had the opportunity of working closer with him earlier in my career. I might have had an even more interesting bit of reminiscing to share with you today. Stop it?

Mary Baroff: [00:20:46](#) Yours has been a long and contributing association with the Jewish Welfare Federation Mr. Simons. And then there's another group that you have also had an ongoing and long relationship with and that's the Jewish home for the aged. Could you tell me a little bit about this?

Leonard Simons: [00:21:08](#) Well, what do you want to know? Do you want to know when I first started working with them?

Mary Baroff: [00:21:14](#) Sure. Yes, yes, when and what were some of your involvements. What were some of your contributions, who you worked with?

Leonard Simons: [00:21:20](#) Well as I remember back, I first became interested in what I like to call the old folks home back in early 1937. Excuse me. My father-in-law Max Lieberman was a secretary of the home and he influenced me in serving on its board. I remember my very first meeting in the new building on Petoskey, it was only partially completed. The homes minutes reflect that they met

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
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**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

with Kurt Pizer the executive director of Federation and I was there.

Leonard Simons: [00:21:54](#) We moved the residents to the home on Petoskey and dedicated it in June of 1937. I remember that very sweet person, Jacob Levin who was president and Myron Keys who was chairman of the board. Doctor Otto Hirsch was the home superintendent but I remember him being a very difficult person to handle. Things didn't really start to run smoothly until Ira Sonneblick came in and took over as director. I think that was in 1947.

Leonard Simons: [00:22:24](#) Ira has just retired but is still with us on a consultant basis. I take my hat off to him because in my opinion, he was the greatest director any old folks home could have. We now have a young man as director who was trained by Ira. His name is Charles Wolf and we think he has great potential.

Leonard Simons: [00:22:47](#) In reminiscing, I go back to the 1937 meeting in the almost completed Petoskey building. The main purpose of that meeting was to decide if we were willing to take a gift from Mrs. Aaron DeRoy of \$100,000 payable over about 10 years. In return for this, we were to name the building the Aaron DeRoy Home For The Aged. We met with Kurt Pizer because we wanted his advice to confirm what we had pretty much already decided in our own minds and that was that we should not take the gift.

Leonard Simons: [00:23:21](#) So we turned the offer down and the money went instead to the Jewish Community Center which was being established on Wood and Holbrook. I have been on the home's board for almost 40 years and at one time I was a vice president. I was chairman of the home's executive committee for about five years and in addition, of course, I did a lot of work helping them with publicity and other things that pertained to the home.

Leonard Simons: [00:23:48](#) As I think back to the days when we were going to put up the second building, the one that is now called Borman Hall. I was supposed to be the chairman of the new building fund campaign. I turned the title over to another person, this time to Harry Barnett and I became his co-chairman or vice-chairman I've forgotten what title I had. However, I did most of the work

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

of the chairman while always a nice guy didn't seem to like to go out and ask people for money.

Leonard Simons: [00:24:17](#) I raised the bulk of the money by pestering any Jew in town who had any money. I went over to see Al and Tom Borman. I started the conversation by saying I had a great metzia for them. If they gave me a quarter of a million dollars I would see if I could get the board of the home to approve naming the new building which was supposed to cost somewhere in the neighborhood of two and a half million dollars Borman Hall.

Leonard Simons: [00:24:42](#) They gave me the money and always pitted me in front of various groups about the big metzia I gave them by taking a quarter of a million dollars of their money away from them just to put a sign on a building. I remember when we dedicated Borman Hall and Rabbi Adler was supposed to be the principal speaker on Sunday morning. I had been out of the country and returned the day before the dedication.

Leonard Simons: [00:25:06](#) I was immediately told that it was up to me to introduce Rabbi Adler at the dedication. I replied "But I just came back from overseas, I've had no time to prepare anything. You don't introduce a fine man like Rabbi Adler with an extemporaneous or unprepared introduction." They said, "Don't worry you can do it, say anything you want to." Well, that didn't sit well with me so I went down to my office that same day, being Saturday and we were closed.

Leonard Simons: [00:25:33](#) I searched through my old files and came up with an introduction of Rabbi Adler that I had given him on the previous year at a Federation meeting. I changed the first sentence and then gave him the identical introduction. This took about five minutes so you can see that there was a lot of wording in it. The dedication was over, Rabbi Adler came to me with tears in his eyes to tell me that it was the most beautiful introduction he had ever received in all the years that he had been introduced.

Leonard Simons: [00:26:03](#) I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had given him the identical introduction the year before. He hadn't remembered anything I had said the year before. When the new Borman Hall was open the members of the board got together and voted to name the garden area where the old folks sit in nice weather to

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

relax and sun themselves the Leonard Simons Garden but I renamed it the Garden of Yidden which everybody seemed to think was funny.

Leonard Simons: [00:26:31](#) When we were ready to give up Petoskey they had to find another location for a second building because Borman Hall by itself was not large enough to accommodate all the people we wanted to take care of. So we started talking about a new building and they were talking about eight million dollars, 10 million dollars. I decided it would take too long and be too difficult to raise that kind of money so I went exploring on my own and came up with the idea of trying to buy the Southfield Nursing Home. I put in a long distance call to the man who owned the Southfield Nursing Home.

Leonard Simons: [00:27:03](#) I happened to know him, he lived in Chicago and I asked him whether he would consider selling it. He said he would if the price was right. I went before the board and told them what I had done, we met with the man and we agreed to buy the Southfield Nursing Home for somewhere around a million dollars. We spent another \$150,000 or less to fix it up because it didn't need too much fixing. After all, it was a relatively new building and had been used as some type of institution.

Leonard Simons: [00:27:33](#) Then I went to the Meyer Prentis family and talked to them about the idea of naming this new building the Meyer L. Prentis Manor in memory of their father and Mrs. Prentis' husband. They agreed to give me a quarter of a million dollars and that's how we handled that proposition. The next step will probably be a home out on Maple and Drake alongside the new Jewish community center when that's finished. Actually, the best place for a home for the aged is next to a setup like the Jewish community center.

Leonard Simons: [00:28:03](#) Old people like to see life in action. They can go over to the center and hear concerts, lectures, watch the kids swim and play basketball. So many things that go on at a Jewish community center which make life so much more meaningful to an older person even if they can watch without participating although in many instances they can participate.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [00:28:25](#) Some of the people who worked with me and who come to my mind in addition to those I already mentioned are Sidney Allen who was a tower of strength. The Fleishman brothers, Edward and Arthur. Jack Lefton, Milton Mahler, Morrie Aronson, Isadore Winkleman, Ben Cramer, Herman Mesias, Al Sklar, Doctor Ben Willing, Joe Kukas, Alan Schwartz, Sylvan Rappaport, Dan Levine, Dave Myro, Dave Zach and so many other wonderful dedicated people who gave so generously of their time and effort and money.

Leonard Simons: [00:29:00](#) In the olden days, there was a little friction between the home and the Federation because the old-timers wanted to keep their autonomy. They were willing to be a beneficial agency of Federation but did not want to give up their right to make individual decisions without any interference of many Federation professionals or the Federation board.

Leonard Simons: [00:29:21](#) Over the years as the new buildings went up the new buildings were owned by the United Jewish Charities which had put up some of the money for the buildings. The rest usually came from public contributions or capital funds in the home's treasury.

Leonard Simons: [00:29:34](#) I think it is only a question of time before the Jewish Home For The Aged will be a wholly-owned subsidiary of United Jewish Charities and I think that's the right way it should go. The home should be a responsibility of the general Jewish community and not just of some small group of men and women.

Mary Baroff: [00:29:54](#) Mr. Simons, you had some involvement in the early period of thinking about the Federation apartments did you not?

Leonard Simons: [00:30:01](#) Yes, I think that's correct. In fact, I know it's correct without being immodest. I believe I was the one who initiated this idea in Detroit about 1956. I had recently returned from a trip to Europe during which I visited countries like Denmark and Sweden. I saw many apartment buildings those communities had put up for the elderly citizens which they could rent for a very low monthly figure.

Leonard Simons: [00:30:30](#) Each of these buildings had a central dining room where the people could eat their meals for very little money. There was a

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

nurse in every building to give them simple medical care day and night and also physicians who made regular calls on each of the apartments to make sure the people were okay.

Leonard Simons: [00:30:46](#) When I brought this idea back to Detroit the reaction of Soboloff was that he wasn't interested because this type of problem did not exist in Detroit. He said there were not enough poor people in our town to make something like this necessary and I could not sell anybody the idea even though I kept harping on it year after year.

Leonard Simons: [00:31:06](#) Finally, some publicity started to seep into Detroit from other communities and Detroit learned that this type of apartment was being put up in several of the larger Jewish communities and that the trend was going in that direction. So during Hy Safron's presidency, I was appointed a chairman of a committee to explore the feasibility of doing the same thing in Detroit.

Leonard Simons: [00:31:28](#) I had a committee of about 20 people and some of us made trips around the country. I remember going to Baltimore and Philadelphia and Cleveland to see what they were doing and we brought back the report that we should move ahead of an apartment of this kind. It was very much in demand, there was a need for it and others were doing it and it made sense to our community.

Leonard Simons: [00:31:50](#) At that particular moment, I was asked to stop any further work on the project because Max Fisher didn't think the idea was a good one. He was afraid that this might interfere with private enterprise. When I tried to argue the point with Bill Avrunin he said, or in these words, "Max Fisher is our largest contributor and you and I both know that he's a very nice person. Isn't it better if we have him on our side rather than opposed to the proposition? Please give me enough time to see if we can switch him over to our type of thinking."

Leonard Simons: [00:32:23](#) With that in mind, we all stopped working for a certain number of months, I've forgotten how long but finally Max Fisher came around to being satisfied with the idea and we went ahead with it. So the building was finally erected and I was asked if I wanted to be president of the new Federation apartment project. I said

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

no, I had done my part and I was satisfied now that the apartment was up.

Leonard Simons: [00:32:48](#) I did try to convince the Federation to start a second apartment building immediately because the government was putting I believe 100% of the money and we would have a 50-year mortgage but so far nothing has been done. I would love to see a second apartment built somewhere on the grounds of the new Maple Road and Drake location because here again a building for old people located pretty close to the new Jewish community center would be the perfect spot for the second Federation apartments.

Mary Baroff: [00:33:18](#) Your activity in this area have been most constructive. This is certainly one of the most meaningful facilities that have been established in this community in recent years. Let me ask you this, you have also been extremely active with Sinai Hospital and I believe right from the beginning. Is that true?

Leonard Simons: [00:33:42](#) Yes, I'd say so. My earliest recollection of being involved in what has become Sinai Hospital was an invitation to attend a meeting at Max Osnos' house with Doctor Harry Saltzstein and some others. It was in the summer of 1941. We also met at Maurice Aronson's home. The group of us were convinced that Detroit was ready for a hospital under Jewish hospices because the young Jewish doctors were not easily able to get on the staff of the general hospitals.

Leonard Simons: [00:34:13](#) There was still a lot of discrimination and for that reason more than anything else we wanted a Jewish sponsored hospital. Federation had rejected this idea for a very long time but finally, we had a big meeting at the old Stratford hotel in one of the ballrooms and I remember Fred Butzel getting up and saying that while he had been opposing this idea for many years he had now come to the conclusion that we were right and that we should have a Jewish hospital.

Leonard Simons: [00:34:41](#) So in my book, you can thank you can thank Doctor Harry Saltzstein that we have this hospital. His persistence of purpose or call it stubbornness kept the idea alive. When Max Osnos' father died I think he left \$100,000 in his will to be given to a Jewish hospital if there was going to be one in Detroit. If not the

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

money went someplace else. So we all got together and started raising money. There were also a couple of other little Jewish hospital groups which had the same idea that didn't get off the ground so they merged their efforts with ours, gave us whatever money they had.

Leonard Simons: [00:35:16](#) We also got a nice big chunk of money from a big city-wide, non-sectarian civic drive and when we put it all together we thought we had enough to get started. The first set of plans that were drawn by Albert Kahn's office were sent out for bids. The price came back, it was for more money than we had so we had to redesign the hospital or try to bring it down to the price we could afford.

Leonard Simons: [00:35:39](#) By the time the architect's office finished the new set of plans increased cost of building brought the revised plan in at the same price as the original set of plans so we got a smaller hospital for the same money. This time there was nothing else to do so we had to go ahead.

Leonard Simons: [00:35:56](#) In the early days, we had a lot of active leadership in addition to the men whose names I've already mentioned. Nate Shapero, Irwin Kohn, Dave Shrewery, Charlie Agrie, Hyde Davidson, Lou Berry, Joel Holtzman and certainly we can't forget the great contribution of time and effort of Sydney Allen. It was Max Fisher, Max Zivian, Lou Tabasnick and oh so many wonderful men who jumped in with both feet to do the best job they could.

Leonard Simons: [00:36:25](#) And it has been a great job because today after a little over 20 years Sinai is recognized as one of the very finest hospitals in this part of the country. From the very beginning, I was named chairman of the designation's committee which meant it was my job to try to raise money by selling certain designated areas in the hospital.

Leonard Simons: [00:36:45](#) In fact, just the other day I secured a gift from the Fishman family of a little over \$100,000 to name our rehabilitation center in honor of Nathan Fishman in connection with his 80th birthday. I have served on a great many sub-committees and eventually became one of the vice presidents serving in this capacity for about three years.



**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [00:37:08](#) Some of the other names that come to my mind on the hospital board who did Yomen work are Milton Madden, the current president. Chick Schafer, Harvey Goldman, Sal Heisenberg, Irwin Simon, George Stutz, Abe Shiffman, Sidney Karbel. There are probably others but unfortunately, I can't seem to remember them at the moment.

Leonard Simons: [00:37:28](#) I'm still on the executive board and go to meetings whenever they are called. I'm still chairman of the designations committee. I was also very active the last few years as one of the chairman of their fundraising campaign to build the hospital addition which ran about 16 million dollars.

Leonard Simons: [00:37:46](#) There's one cute little story I think I'd like to tell now. There was a lot of trouble when we were ready to open the hospital. Certain orthodox groups in Detroit insisted that Sinai be a kosher hospital but most of us felt that that was out of order. We felt that it should be a non-sectarian hospital under Jewish sponsorship. As the Jewish contribution to the healthcare of our community.

Leonard Simons: [00:38:09](#) We planned to have a kosher kitchen all the time but all the food in the hospital would not be exclusively cooked in a kosher manner. We had many meetings with orthodox rabbi's but we could not agree. There was a big neon sign, there still is, on the front of the hospital with the individual letters, S-I-N-A-I Hospital.

Leonard Simons: [00:38:32](#) So what do you think happened? The first day we opened and turned on the neon sign all the letters lit up except the A and the I. It came out S-I-N Hospital. Sin Hospital. The Orthodox rabbis were convinced that God was trying to tell our hospital board something for not having a kosher hospital. In my estimation, the outstanding reason for Sinai's enviable reputation today as a quality hospital is its executive director Doctor Julien Priver.

Leonard Simons: [00:39:05](#) We are truly blessed that Doctor Priver has been guiding Sinai's destiny since it was first started. His intelligent understanding, imagination, planning, and supervision have carried our hospital to the aspired heights of excellence that we always hoped for. I say at the end.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Mary Baroff: [00:39:31](#) Again yours has been a very active and contributing role with the Sinai Mr. Simons. Tell me this, what about your involvement with Synagogue affairs? This has also been a very important part of your life has it not?

Leonard Simons: [00:39:46](#) Yes, I would say that I'm very much involved and have been for a very long time. And thinking back, as I reached my teens the families of most of my friends belonged to Temple Beth El so even though I was Bar Mitvah'd at Shaarey Zedek I joined the young people's society of Temple Beth El because it gave me a chance to go to parties with my friends and that's the way you get interested in things.

Leonard Simons: [00:40:14](#) Occasionally I would hear Doctor Leo Franklin talk and was very much impressed with him as a rabbi. After I married in 1930 I ran into a siege of illness and this combined with the depression made membership in our synagogue something very far from my mind. One day in the middle 1930s my wife and I decided that we should join a congregation.

Leonard Simons: [00:40:36](#) We decided on Temple Beth El because again most of the young married couples who were our friends belonged to Temple Beth El, it's as simple as that. The first time I took an active part in the synagogue's affairs was when it was putting on a campaign to burn its mortgage.

Leonard Simons: [00:40:52](#) My partner Larry Michelson and I handled all the publicity. We also did a lot of fundraising and the mortgage was burned. A little later on I received a call from Rabbi B. Benedict Glazer saying he wanted to come to my office to talk to me. He asked me to become vice president of the Temple's men's club because he said he needed some help in that direction.

Leonard Simons: [00:41:14](#) I did not want to become involved in a men's club on a regular basis so I said I would not become an officer but I suggested that Leon Wayburn who was working for us be given the job and that Larry and I would help behind the scenes without any titles. Again I am pleased to report that we brought the membership of the men's club up to a new high.

Leonard Simons: [00:41:36](#) We also put on some interesting social affairs that created much interest and that's when everything got started. The next

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

thing I knew I was on the board of the Temple and I soon became vice president. I got this title you might say by default because Sydney Allen wouldn't take it.

Leonard Simons: [00:41:53](#) It so happened I didn't want it either at the time because I was president of Franklin Hills Country Club and this meant I would be president of both Beth El and Franklin Hills at the same time. I thought it was too big an assignment to try to satisfy so many Jewish families. However, with Rabbi Glazer at my side, he convinced me I could handle it.

Leonard Simons: [00:42:14](#) Unfortunately, Rabbi Glazer died just a few months before I became president of Beth El. David Wilkerson who was president decided to take a trip around the world which he had previously planned and so I immediately became president pro-tem which meant that I had the primary responsibility of getting a group together to pick a successor to Rabbi Glazer.

Leonard Simons: [00:42:37](#) Up to that point, my relationships with Rabbis Leo Franklin and Glazer gave me some of the most enjoyable moments in my life. I was learning a lot, I had many happy experiences. The assistant rabbi that Glazer had chosen before he died was a young man just graduating from Hebrew Union College, his name was Rabbi Bernard Cline. He too represented a wonderful association for me.

Leonard Simons: [00:43:02](#) In fact, even though Rabbi Cline is no longer at Beth El we have maintained a close relationship and friendship during all these years. One of the very first things I did after becoming president was to reinstitute the ceremony of Bar Mitzvah after a lapse of about 50 years at Beth El. The majority of our members wanted it and even though I had no sons, so it wasn't something really personal or a personal concern to me, I felt that if the members wanted a Bar Mitzvah they should have it and they got it.

Leonard Simons: [00:43:33](#) Okay. During the course of my activities, I became a member of the board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. I was the national vice president of the combined campaign, a fundraising organization for reformed Judaism. I actively support the American Jewish Archives, the Hebrew Union College society of bibliophiles and the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons

**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff

**Date of Interview:** June 1975

**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [00:43:59](#) My friend the late Rabbi Nelson Glick was president of the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, wanted me to serve on its board but I turned him down. I knew I would not have the time to go to Cincinnati to board meetings once a month and I suggested Max Fisher. Max Fisher accepted and served for several years and when he left they asked me to come on board, again and again, I turned them down and again I made a suggestion, this time Maxwell Jospey. He accepted and Maxwell is still on their board.

Leonard Simons: [00:44:32](#) In 1964, the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion gave me an honorary doctorate, doctorate of humane letters. Before Doctor Glazer died he suggested that we start thinking about moving further north where our members were beginning to move. After he died Rabbi Hertz did not want to move. He thought we should stay where we were. So I argued this point with him for many years and I insisted that we had to move.

Leonard Simons: [00:45:01](#) I had purchased a 22 and a half-acre site at Nine and a Half Mile and Northwestern for the Temple for about \$150,000 while I was president pro-tem. The rabbi thought it was too far out, that's why he did not want to move. Finally, when he agreed that the time had come for the congregation to move the Northwestern Highway location was not out far enough.

Mary Baroff: [00:45:29](#) This is tape number two in an interview with Leonard Simons taking place in March of 1975. Okay, ready?

Leonard Simons: [00:45:43](#) So the temple sold the site for approximately a million dollars. I only wish I had been smart enough to buy the land for myself. The new Temple Beth El, is now located at 14 Mile and Telegraph and is part of the current trend in religion of having an edifice complex.

Leonard Simons: [00:46:03](#) So far Beth El has spent about eight million dollars and they're not through spending. They now find themselves in financial difficulty. This is the same story you hear from most synagogues that build new homes these days. In addition to Temple Beth El, I have been a courtesy member of Temple Israel from the day it started around 25 years ago. In fact, I handle the advertising

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

and publicity for the Temple and it was just getting started and I did it as a labor of love.

Leonard Simons: [00:46:33](#) I am also a member of Temple Emmanuel in Oak Park and I am an honorary member of Temple Beth Emeth in Ann Arbor. As a past president of Temple Beth El, I am on its board of governors for the rest of my life. I'd like to mention that after "battling" and I say that in quotation marks, in a nice way for about 20 years to have the local reform congregations actively promote and sell Israel bonds with no success, I was finally able to get them to do this starting about six years ago.

Leonard Simons: [00:47:09](#) Now the reform congregations have an annual dinner in Detroit. All the local reform temples participate jointly. Some reform Jew in town is honored at each of the dinners. I was the person so honored at the first dinner. These annual Israel bond dinners have sold many, many million dollars worth of bonds and continue to get bigger each year.

Leonard Simons: [00:47:35](#) I will close my comments about my involvement in synagogue affairs by saying a few complimentary remarks about Irving I Katz the executive secretary of Temple Beth El. We have had a beautiful working relationship for over 35 years. He has taught me a lot and I think I have taught him some things about how to run a synagogue in a business-like way. Irving and I also collaborated on a book published by the Wayne State University Press called The Beth El story.

Leonard Simons: [00:48:05](#) It was the 100-year history of Temple Beth El. The bulk of the cost of the printing was underwritten by the Leonard N. Simons Fund of Temple Beth El. This fund had approximately \$20,000 in it which came from contributions made by my friends in honor of my 50th birthday. My wife had told my friends that she knew that contributions to some charities would make me much happier than receiving a lot of presents so they established the Leonard N. Simons Fund of Temple Beth El.

Leonard Simons: [00:48:36](#) I also worked with Irving Katz on a book called The Jewish Soldiers From Michigan in The Civil War and the two of us helped Doctor Harry Saltzstein publish a booklet on the history of medicine in Detroit under Jewish hospices. Both of these little publications were also published by the Wayne State

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

University Press. Irving is the so-called unofficial Jewish historiographer for Michigan and in my book he's a fabulous person.

Leonard Simons: [00:49:04](#) Next to our faith in God, I think the history of the Jewish people have done more than anything else to keep the Jewish community in existence for these many thousands of years. I wonder if that is one of the reasons why I am so interested in history per se. So you asked me am I involved in synagogue affairs, what do you think?

Mary Baroff: [00:49:26](#) I would say you are involved in synagogue affairs. Mr. Simons this leads me to a question around your thoughts on current trends in the Jewish community. What directions do you feel the Jewish community should take?

Leonard Simons: [00:49:43](#) Well, I've given some serious thought as to how I should answer this question. You gave me a little time to prepare myself on this on and I worked real hard to come up with what I think is an objective viewpoint of the current trend in the Jewish community as I see it.

Leonard Simons: [00:50:03](#) Several important thoughts run through my mind. The first one and I know it is not peculiar to Detroit alone but rather is true of every large city in America is that the American Jew is becoming more and more assimilated and becoming less and less interested in Judaism. So I wonder what this will mean exactly to Jewish survivalism.

Leonard Simons: [00:50:25](#) It seems to me that identifying yourself with the word Jew today means giving money or working for Jewish charitable projects with most of the money going overseas to try to help the Jews in Israel. Now, of course, that isn't all bad but on the other hand, it's not all good either when you consider the reactions. The trend to assimilation which I will discuss first is not something brand new. It has been going on for a long time except that in previous days to a much lesser degree.

Leonard Simons: [00:50:55](#) Today assimilation is creating a gigantic increase in the number of inner marriages with one out of ever three Jews marrying out of the faith. Synagogue membership reflects this trend because today only 47% of all the Jews in America belong to a

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

congregation. Marrying someone who is not a Jew does not mean necessarily that the Jewish person is lost to the Jewish community.

Leonard Simons: [00:51:20](#) But in a great many instances it does. In the early days of this century, you found a few Jewish boys married gentile girls and very rarely Jewish girls marry gentile boys. Today both Jewish boys and girls are intermarrying in vast numbers. What all this means to the future of the Jewish people as a community remains to be seen.

Leonard Simons: [00:51:42](#) Some Jewish scholars who express their opinions on this subject in books, articles and before audiences feel that it is only a question of a relatively short time before there will be no longer an American Jewish community. This has been said and predicted many times before because of various reasons but whether it will come true this time who knows.

Leonard Simons: [00:52:04](#) I'd hate to see that happen because Judaism is an excellent, believable, comfort-giving religion based on divine commandments which if followed by Jews and others will make this world a better place for all of us. So how do we strive to reverse these trends and continue our fight for survival?

Leonard Simons: [00:52:24](#) For one thing, we know that we cannot stop people from intermarrying. Our history is told to us by the Jewish Bible, it's full of instances where Jews intermarried and this began with the father of our religion Moses himself. It was King David, King Solomon, The Story of Ruth and many others. But the Jewish partner in all these mixed marriages was so deeply and strongly attached to his religion that the result was a gain rather than the loss of a person to Judaism.

Leonard Simons: [00:52:55](#) We must keep our religion in existence so that it can continue to be influential in our lifestyles and hopefully in the morals and ethics of the world in general. We can try to reverse the current trend of a declining interest in Judaism by a recognition of the importance of both the religious as well as the secular priorities in Jewish life.

Leonard Simons: [00:53:17](#) I think a step in the right direction would be the merged efforts of Federations, lay leaders and professional staff with our

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

synagogues lay leaders and rabbinical staffs to create unity in our community rather than competition. No matter how softly you say it there is great competition today for the money, time, ideas, status symbols or what have you between the Federation and the synagogues.

Leonard Simons: [00:53:45](#) Now don't misunderstand, I'm not critical of Federation for becoming such an all-important factor in doing its job of trying to organize our community. I'm quite proud of Federation in nearly all instances. In fact, when I first became active in the Jewish Welfare Federation of Detroit I was convinced that its basic idea of a federated community interested in the problems of the total community was the right way to go.

Leonard Simons: [00:54:10](#) Its plan was to put every Jewish cause in its true perspective. Through the Federation planning and budget process Federation related one agency to another with full regard for relative needs. I am still convinced that Federation is important and all-important. But in addition, we must remember that in the early days we had synagogues that were financially healthy and strong because of large congregational memberships and we also had some truly great rabbis.

Leonard Simons: [00:54:41](#) But today our synagogues are having serious vital problems. So I say if Federation is concerned with the total communities problems as I've always believed they are, then the Federation professionals and lay leaders must be re-educated to the priority importance of our religious identification through synagogue support. We must constantly strive for a better understanding than we now have of the equal importance of the synagogue survival as well as Federation survival.

Leonard Simons: [00:55:15](#) There must be sympathy toward each other's problems and efforts. Cooperation at every level because if for no other reason Federation and it's future is only as strong and as secure as is our religion and its synagogues are strong and secure. Most synagogue members channel practically all of their charitable funds through the Allied Jewish Campaign.

Leonard Simons: [00:55:38](#) The non-affiliated Jew does the same thing. A great many Jews are trying to justify their lack of interest in giving money to synagogues or for that matter and belong to a synagogue by



**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

satisfying themselves that they are good Jews because they gave money or give money every year to Federation. This is what I call a pocketbook kind of Judaism which is quite shallow. This type of thinking is why the synagogues are not being supported adequately.

Leonard Simons: [00:56:07](#) Something is basically wrong with this kind of a situation. The lop-sided interest in favor of non-religious Jewish problems and affairs is creating what I consider to be a trantordic community of secular Jews. A present apathy in neglect of our synagogues has weakened the importance of our religion. The long-range result of this trend can mean the end of Judaism and going down with it, the end of Federation and their agencies.

Leonard Simons: [00:56:35](#) I find it difficult to understand how our people can believe that philanthropy is the major and possibly the only way to express our Jewishness. Detroit will raise the fantastic sum of over 20 million dollars in a year. At the same time, most of our synagogues are in great financial difficulty. They do not take in enough money to pay the annual operating expenses.

Leonard Simons: [00:56:58](#) The congregations go deeper and deeper in debt each year, some even go broke and out of existence. Most of our synagogues are in trouble because of money matters. Because their membership is torn between deciding what is more important, the Federation money problems or the synagogue money problems. Federation and congregations today are vital to each other.

Leonard Simons: [00:57:23](#) One is only as strong as the other, they are husband and wife. I believe that Judaism will survive by the quality of our loyalties. Even those who call themselves Jewish atheists or Agnostics cannot but acknowledge that their destiny is molded by the Jewish Bible, a moral code which to this day retains its relevance everywhere.

Leonard Simons: [00:57:47](#) The next item I want to mention is the beginning of a trend to concern ourselves with the fact that we have Jewish neighbors who are poor and who need some kind of financial help. The Federation apartment is a step in that direction. When we first announced that we'd accept applications for the apartments that would be available and remember your income had to be

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

below a certain level, we had over 2,000 people apply who would qualify for the limited number of about 160 apartments.

Leonard Simons: [00:58:17](#) That proves something, doesn't it? But the people I'm talking about are the truly poor people in our midst, really poor with incomes at or below poverty levels. Based on the national average there could very well be as many as five to 10% of our total Detroit Jewish population in the poverty level classification. I'm not sure of the number but it's well known that there are a great many poor people who need food and clothing, healthcare and a decent place to live at a price they can afford to pay.

Leonard Simons: [00:58:49](#) I hope Federation will get into this matter with sufficient force to find out how many poor people we have in our community. Then let's see what we can do to make the lives of these poor Jews in our community comfortable. I understand that the Jewish children of family service started a few weeks ago to explore the problems of some of our local poor, this is good news a step in the right direction.

Leonard Simons: [00:59:12](#) I've talked to Federation about this problem for several years. So naturally, it's very satisfying to me to hear that a Federation agency is checking this out. Maybe now we'll know just how many there are in need and just how much we have to do to help our poor Jewish neighbors. If Detroit can raise millions of dollars for Jewish causes all over the world we certainly ought to be able to find money to take care of our poor people in Detroit. Charity begins at home, so I've always been taught.

Leonard Simons: [00:59:41](#) And finally, no comments of mine or any Jewish person on current trends could end without including some remarks on the state of Israel. For over 25 years we have constantly been aware of the fact that wherever we are, whatever we are Israel's fate is our fate and if the unthinkable were to happen, and God forbid Israel were to go under it would be the greatest disaster to organized Judaism. The greatest tragedy to Jewish life that has ever happened in the course of our millennial history.

Leonard Simons: [01:00:14](#) It would affect all of us. All of us must continue to try to do everything in our power to protect Israeli Jews from danger and

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

peril because our interests are involved. Our very being is involved. We must make sure that Israel can survive and persevere the current trend of American and world Jewry to give of its financial resources to Israel in ever-increasing amounts year after year in outbursts of generosity never before equaled makes this Jew's heart swell with pride.

Leonard Simons: [01:00:46](#) I anticipate to continue to try to help the Jews in Israel so long as I live but I realize that I must have room in my heart also to help my fellow Jews over here. And last but certainly not least, to help my region remain strong and alive. That's my opinion.

Mary Baroff: [01:01:03](#) You've raised a number of thought provoking questions in your comments Mr. Simons. Another of the areas that I'd like to discuss with you is your activities in the general community which you have been very, very active in the metropolitan Detroit community. How do you feel the combining of your Jewish and general community activities have served to strengthen and improve communications between people of different groups?

Leonard Simons: [01:01:36](#) Well for one thing in many of the activities in the general community in which I have become involved, I find that they have practically no Jews taking an active interest. For instance, the Detroit Historical Society. It has over 3,000 members, many of whom are Jews I'm sure. When you come down to taking an active interest coming to meetings or going to see exhibits and so forth, practically no Jew that I can recognize is involved. They don't attend. I don't think that's right.

Leonard Simons: [01:02:06](#) I think this holds true, the very same thing of many general community activities where Jews feel that if they give money that's enough. Well, it isn't. You have to give of yourself and your time also and then the people in the general community who are not Jewish come to realize what kind of people that Jews really are. We don't have horns and tails as some of them think we do. We are the same as other people.

Leonard Simons: [01:02:31](#) I think that through my efforts in the general community that I have strengthened and improved communication between the Jew and non-Jew to a certain degree. I think that this is necessary to permit the Jew to be accepted by the non-Jew as a

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

fellow citizen in the community who is entitled to equal consideration on every level including employment and friendship.

Leonard Simons: [01:02:53](#) I do not think that America can continue indefinitely with its old sense of values and segregation between Jew and gentile or white and black. I think it's only a question of time and I don't know how soon that's going to be but the day will surely come when all people in America will be accepted at face value. They will hold jobs in any organization, in any capacity depending upon their ability, common sense, and personality.

Leonard Simons: [01:03:22](#) This is the way it has to be. The Jewish Bible says world peace will come through our teaching God's divine moral and ethical commandments to mankind and that's what the Jewish people were chosen to do as I understand my religion.

Mary Baroff: [01:03:36](#) And you played your part in paving the road so that some of these dreams can come true.

Leonard Simons: [01:03:42](#) Thank you.

Mary Baroff: [01:03:46](#) What has been your most important contribution to the Jewish community Mr. Simons?

Leonard Simons: [01:03:53](#) I'd say that my most important contribution is that I have always been willing to accept positions of leadership in any projects that interested me, Jewish or non-Jewish. That I've tried to set an example for my contemporaries as well as the younger people as to how a person wants to be a good citizen can be of service to others. And I have combined enthusiasm with consistency over a period of 40 years plus.

Leonard Simons: [01:04:20](#) So if I were to describe in two words what I consider to be my most important contribution to the Jewish community I'd say enthusiasm and consistency. I've made some other kind of contributions too that I... As I think back over the years I remember some of the experiences I had soliciting the men in our community who later on became our top leaders.

Leonard Simons: [01:04:45](#) I don't know how much credit if any that I can take for helping to motivate them but I think I did accomplish something with

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

each of these three men I'm going to talk about even though they might not be ready to acknowledge it. I think in the early years I showed them by example and by encouraging them that they should become active. This might have had some effect on them.

Leonard Simons: [01:05:08](#) It was in the early days of the post-depression years that I became quite friendly with Max Fisher who was just beginning to make money in the oil business working for his father. I never had any trouble getting money out of him for nearly any cause for which I was soliciting.

Leonard Simons: [01:05:23](#) I can picture in my mind's eye a certain evening in front of his home when I put on a particularly strong pitch for him to become a solicitor for some Jewish cause and also to give me some money for the cause. He gave me the money I wanted and then we marked you know Leonard, I couldn't solicit people as you do for all the money in the world. It's just not part of my makeup or words to that effect.

Leonard Simons: [01:05:50](#) However, I want you to know, Max said, that as long as your willing to give your time and effort to work on these causes you can always come to me and I'll give you money. Little did Max realize that in the not too distant future he would become one of the greatest solicitors in the world of Jewish causes. Maybe some of my reasoning and enthusiasm for fundraising, when we were both young, rubbed off on him. At least I hope so.

Leonard Simons: [01:06:17](#) I remember also, and I'm sure Hy Safran remembers this because he mentions it every so often. The first time my partner and I went in to solicit Hy and his brother Dave. They were little printers and we were giving them some work from our advertising agency. We felt that because we were a customer of theirs we could probably get a bigger contribution out of them than anyone else.

Leonard Simons: [01:06:40](#) They were two very young boys whose father, a printer had died and left them his little shop. I remember Hy asking me how much money we expected them to give. When I said \$500 he turned pale and almost fell off his chair. This is a true story because he tells it himself. But he was a good sport, they gave us their pledge for \$500.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [01:07:01](#) After that, we had his name for solicitation every year for a long time. Little by little Hy became very active in Campaign and also in Federation affairs. Their business prospered and soon they were able to give much more than Simons Michelson could give. Eventually, Hy became the president of the Jewish Welfare Federation and was a fine one. I cannot swear for sure but I think I had a little bit of influence in Hy's move up to a position of leadership in Jewish affairs.

Leonard Simons: [01:07:31](#) And then another important name that comes to mind is Paul Zuckerman. Paul has been our client for probably 40 years and we've been very good friends. In the early days, Paul didn't have much money because his business was just getting started but I used to talk to him a lot about Federation, Jewish affairs and took him with me to meetings. Talked about the philosophy of giving money to worthy projects and so forth.

Leonard Simons: [01:07:55](#) And little by little I believe I talked him into making bigger pledges each year. It was not difficult because of Paul's big heart. Each year he has been giving more and more until today he is probably the second-largest giver to the Allied Jewish Campaign in Detroit. He is probably the number one giver in the entire world so far as giving time to Israel and Jewish causes are concerned. He is certainly one of our most distinguished Jews in the entire world today.

Leonard Simons: [01:08:25](#) And I believe that if Paul would think back about the part that I played in the early days in his life he too would admit that I showed him how to do it my way. He did it my way and then he did it a whole lot better than I had ever done it. I could name many more whom I am sure would admit that they felt the weight of some of my influence in the past and who today have accomplished a great deal of good on behalf of our fellow Jews.

Leonard Simons: [01:08:52](#) But these are three especially important names and I honestly believe that I did contribute something to help motivate them to do some of the things that they did and are doing. I hope they will forgive me for getting a vicarious thrill out of being a little part of their successful efforts to be of service to our fellow man.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Mary Baroff: [01:09:13](#) I'd like to end our taping with you Mr. Simons with some discussion about your current activities. With what groups are you currently active? And what projects are you involved?

Leonard Simons: [01:09:24](#) Well as you put it, you have to sort of combine them. If I were to make a list of all the groups and projects in which I am involved you would probably think there was something psychologically wrong with me and you might be right. I will mention some of them that I work on. Some of the others I have already mentioned.

Leonard Simons: [01:09:45](#) Actually, I have slowed down a lot and today I try to pick my spots. People come to me for advice and I'm glad to try to help but I usually stay away from as many meetings as I can. I remain constantly interested in the welfare and the affairs of the various synagogues in town. In fact, right now I'm trying to affect a merger between Temple Beth El and some other local reform temple to help strengthen Beth El's financial picture.

Leonard Simons: [01:10:15](#) I've been on the Detroit Historical Commission for about 30 years. I am its president. One of my commission projects right now is the reconstruction of Detroit's Fort Wayne which was built around the Civil War period. This is a very large undertaking and will call for an investment of a minimum of three or four million dollars to fix up the old buildings and reconstruct the area into a beautiful historical monument park.

Leonard Simons: [01:10:42](#) I serve the Detroit Roundtable of Catholic Jews and Protestants, a division of the national conference of Christians and Jews as it's perennial fundraising dinner planning chairman. I've always felt that every little step in the right direction is something worthwhile and the right direction in this instance is the eventual peaceful co-existence in America between all people of various faiths.

Leonard Simons: [01:11:07](#) As I said I'm one of the founders and I'm still active on the board and executive committee of Sinai Hospital. I am also active on the board and executive committee of the Jewish Home For The Aged. One of my pets right now is working on my Judaic rare book collection which I'm going to give to Temple Beth El's new library.

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [01:11:29](#) This is a very interesting project and some of the books that I've collected go back to the 16 and 1700s. In many instances, I read some of them but I don't have time to read all that I'd like to read. I'm still on the board of the Michigan Cancer Foundation. I was the one who originally headed the campaign in 1945 to raise a quarter of a million dollars to buy their first site on the corner of John R. And Hancock.

Leonard Simons: [01:11:56](#) Then recently I helped them complete the new building which is on John R. Also but it goes the entire block from Hancock all the way down to Warren. This new building cost about six million dollars. I secured a half a million dollars from the family of the late Meyer Prentis and \$100,000 from General Motors in Meyer's memory. Meyer used to be treasurer of General Motors.

Leonard Simons: [01:12:18](#) Today this building is called the Meyer L. Prentis Cancer Center. Recently the library of the building was dedicated as the Leonard N. Simons Cancer Research Library. It was created by a gift in honor of my 70th birthday by my friend Nate Shapero.

Leonard Simons: [01:12:35](#) I work on the United Negro College Fund. I was campaign chairman back in 1957 in the State of Michigan. In recent years I continued to serve as one of the vice-chairman. I happened to believe that the future welfare of our country depends on how well educated our young men and women are and this, of course, includes black people as well as white people.

Leonard Simons: [01:12:57](#) I like to remind my Jewish friends that our Bible tells us that Moses, the founder of the Jewish religion was married to a Cushite woman and in some dictionaries, they call her Ethiopian. Cush in Hebrew means black. So the founder of our religion was married to a black woman.

Leonard Simons: [01:13:15](#) Our Bible also tells us, "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me?" I'm on the board of the American Jewish Historical Society. I am active in the annual Jewish national fund dinner honoring some Detroiters and incidentally there is a forest in Israel, a Jewish National Fund forest that carries my name.



**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons  
**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff  
**Date of Interview:** June 1975  
**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

Leonard Simons: [01:13:35](#) I'm involved in many projects at Wayne State University. There are six buildings on the university's campus in which I was responsible in having them named after some person in our local Jewish community. I'm still very interested in the Wayne State University Press board of advisors. I was a founder about 25 years ago.

Leonard Simons: [01:13:55](#) In fact, there are so many things in connection with Wayne State University in which I am involved that they gave me an honorary doctorate, an LLD in 1957. For many years I've had a close relationship with the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion. They too gave me an honorary degree in 1964.

Leonard Simons: [01:14:17](#) I could go on and on and list many organizations that I still help when they need me such as the United Foundation, The Jewish War Veterans and incidentally they made me an honorary member back in 1952. I was also made an honorary member of Zeta Beta Tau, the ZBT Jewish fraternity at the University of Michigan.

Leonard Simons: [01:14:36](#) I was given the Israeli Prime Minister's medal for my efforts in selling Israel bonds and I still try to help sell Israel bonds every year. I'm on the board of the 100 Club of Detroit. We help take care of the financial problems of widows, firemen, and policemen killed in action. From time to time I concern myself in the affairs of the Bene Beth Hillel organizations in the state. Especially those in Detroit and in Ann Arbor.

Leonard Simons: [01:15:02](#) In fact, they elected me president of the Hillel building at the University of Michigan because I spearheaded a successful drive to raise enough money to burn its mortgage. Pardon me. There are more names I could mention but I think you've heard enough. A few years ago the Pope gave me a papal blessing because of some of the help I had given the Catholics in town such as being a lay board member of Marygrove College. It is a beautifully illuminated parchment hand-lettered on it. I was proud to get it naturally because it is not given to many Jews.

Leonard Simons: [01:15:38](#) One of my friends looked at it and said, "You help the Catholics, you help the Protestants, you help the Jews, what are you doing Leonard? Playing religion across the board?" And I replied,

**Oral History of:** Leonard N. Simons

**Interviewed by:** Mary Baroff

**Date of Interview:** June 1975

**Location of Interview:** Home of Leonard N. Simons

"That's right when I die I want to make sure I go to heaven." So he answered me, "With your mazel when you get to heaven, God will be an Arab."

Mary Baroff: [01:15:59](#) But may you have many more years of productive giving Mr. Simons. My thanks to you for the time that you've given to this most important oral history project and for what you've added to our memories of things past as well as your thoughts regarding the future.

Leonard Simons: [01:16:13](#) Thank you very much.