

Benjamin Stern

When he was fifteen years old, Benjamin Stern and his brother traveled from Kovna, Lithuania, to Boston because they had an uncle there. The year was 1890. Ben was a socialist who escaped the czar's police and the Russian army. As a Jew he was fair game for persecution in the army, but as a Jewish socialist he was marked for prison. He stopped first in London to visit an uncle, Jacob Stern, who was a banker and the father of the writer G. B. Stern, but felt sure there were better opportunities for advancement in America. He learned in Boston that Walter Lippman was his relative, but he never called upon him.

He started peddling linoleum from a wagon. He took orders and delivered large rolls to people who used them for floor covering. In Boston he became the partner of a man in a window-cleaning and building-maintenance business to learn the way business was conducted in the United States. From there he joined a man in Lawrence, Massachusetts, but could not get along with him. By 1920 he felt confident enough to buy such a business in Biddeford, Maine.

Ben Stern's four children grew up in a comfortable but by no means luxurious home in Biddeford. He spent as much time on civic affairs as he did on business. He hated communism, but all travelers found refuge in his home, even communists. He was devoted to Norman Thomas, a perpetual socialist candidate for president. Ben considered Professor Albert Abramson of Bowdoin College to be his guide and mentor.

The children remember that Jewish books were plentiful and pledges to causes sometimes exceeded income, but it was an especially active household. Ben did not attend synagogue, and his three sons were not bar mitzvahed, but he supported the synagogue and even dictated the curriculum in the Sunday school. He was self-taught after he left the cheder but apparently knew more about Judaism than the other forty Jewish families in Biddeford then. He would pound the table and demand larger contributions from the Jewish community to charitable and social causes. Funds were raised for the establishment of Israel.

Segregation was by religion: Yankees (Protestants), French Canadians (Catholic), Irish Catholics, and Jews. Social contact developed only in high school. Two of Ben's sons, Saul and Sam, and his daughter, Celia, were elected president of all activities. His son Arthur was the athlete who worshiped Hank Greenberg, the baseball hero, and Moe Berg, the intellectual catcher. Arthur continued to bring honor to the high school as a varsity basketball player even after he was called "a dirty Jew." Ben's son Saul graduated from the University of Chicago, Sam went to George Washington University, and Celia went to business college in Boston. The athlete died young.

Ben was active in the Arbeiter Ring and the Workman's Circle. He wrote and staged plays that were performed in the social hall above Ross Clothing store. He raised funds for the general community while he was on the board of Holy Cross Hospital.

When Ben ran for the state legislature, the priest of the French Canadians instructed the congregation to vote for Ben Stern because he advocated pensions for the old, restrictions on child labor, and maximum hours for women. The people who worked in the Pepperell Textile Mill were friendly to Jews because they too felt oppressed by the Yankees.

When he was forty-five years old, Ben was elected representative to the Maine legislature. He won reelection in 1933. He served on the Federal Relations Committee even though he was not a Republican. He ran as an independent and was regarded by his constituents as a student of history. Under Governor Brann, legislators were paid two dollars per day. Among the various bills he introduced were an act to provide a system of non-contributing old age pensions; an act relating to the forty-eight-hour labor law; an act regulating the wages of employees on state highways; and an act to amend an act to

redraft the charter of the city of Biddeford. He supported a resolution ratifying the proposed amendment to the U. S. Constitution permitting Congress to regulate child labor laws.

Mr. Jackson, representing Bath, commended Ben on his bill for old age pensions: "Every member of this House owes the gentleman from Biddeford a debt of gratitude for the hard work and the money he spent on this matter."

Where did Ben get his sense of responsibility for his fellow men? His son, Sam, explains it by tracing his ancestry to the statesman and philosopher Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508). It was the custom of the time in Portugal to enslave Jews who happened to live in the towns they conquered in Africa. It was also a time-honored custom for Jews to redeem their brethren from slavery. Abravanel and another Jew led a twelve-man committee to seek funds to buy the freedom of 250 war captives divided among the Portuguese grandees in 1471. He traveled throughout the country and not only dealt with harsh extortionist masters, but he also sought care for the rescued. His treatment of these North African Jews, with whom he could not even converse, showed how devoted he was to his people and how deeply he felt the responsibility of the welfare of those entrusted to his care.

Although Ben came from Lithuania and his wife came from Tashkent, Russia, where her father was chief rabbi of Odessa, both sets of parents were descended from Abravanel. His wife's family, descendants of General Boris Stern, lost the women and children to Hitler because they were sent north for "safety." The men remained in Odessa to defend Tashkent and were saved.

Ben's social consciousness was inherited by Saul and Sam. They owned an office furniture business, but Saul devoted a great deal of time to the Jewish Social Service Agency and other causes in the Washington, D.C., community. He was awarded the Joseph Ottenstein Award, a prestigious award established by Jewish convert Mabel Ottenstein, 1980. He is a member of the District of Columbia Bar, past chairman of the Maryland State Planning Commission, the Maryland Inter-Governmental Relations Commissions, Maryland Medical Manpower Study Commission, Montgomery County Ethics Commission, and a former member of the Montgomery County Planning Board.

This legislative record reflects the personality of Ben—witty yet serious.

“The question is the motion of the gentleman from Dexter. Mr. Plouff, [is] that this bill *be indefinitely postponed*. Does the gentleman desire to speak on that motion, which has precedence over his own motion.

Mr. STERN: Mr. Speaker and members of the House: I do not feel like speaking on this matter and I think that the members know just as much about the old age pension bill as I know myself. Two years ago we had the same matter before the House and we had hearings on it. We had people before us from all walks of life who appeared for that bill. We had Dr. Tyson, who proved to us that we had about 300 people in the insane institution who were just as sane as we were, but because of the fact that they came from villages and towns that had no poorhouses, or some of their relatives were ashamed to have them in the poorhouse, they just shoved them over there so that they would not be disgraced by having them in the poorhouses. They feel better about it to have them in a home for feeble-minded than to have their relatives take care of them.

The report of the committee two years ago ought not to pass, because the bill was too big for them; they did not have money enough for it; but the House voted then and there unanimously for an old age pension.

We had a similar hearing about three or four weeks ago. There were present social workers and people from all walks of life, and the fact remains that we have in this State 100 almshouses and there was not one municipality to come before the committee and appear against it, with 100 people holding offices in the almshouses who did not appear either. That shows that the people and the Overseers feel deeply in their hearts that it costs the State too much money and that it would be unjust to appear against such a humane proposition as this **old age pension**.

I personally thought that in this House we have so many doctors, we have so many lawyers, we have lady members, we have people with practical minds, business people, and I never expected I would have to appear for the old people myself. I thought, listening to some of our friends who fight for everything and who are speaking always in the name of Christianity—I

thought they would be for that measure and not against it, because being against that measure is against Christianity.

Now, my friends, I am just coming to myself, because I am not in a position to make any speeches on the matter, but I will tell you that it looks to me like this: Not long ago, when I landed in this country, a friend of mine gave me a piece of paper. I had to read the law in the English language on my own, without any help. I remember I came to a shoe shop and I was in the same position as an Italian who had a brother who was only a couple of weeks in this country, and he told him “Tony, I have got to go into the market, and you attend to the stand.” Tony said, “I can’t speak any English.” “But,” he says, “that is nothing—if anybody comes in and wants to buy some bananas, tell him they are two for a nickel, and if he argues, tell him they are three for a nickel, and if he don’t buy them, tell him somebody else will.” A big fellow comes up and says, “Tony, what time is it?” He says, “Two for a nickel.” And the big fellow says, “What are you talking about?” And the Italian says, “Three for a nickel.” He says, “You keep quiet or I will give you a punch in the jaw.” And the Italian says, “If you don’t, somebody else will.” (laughter)

Now friends, I am not afraid to address this House. I am not afraid to talk facts. I am not going to make a speech. I have been thirteen weeks in this House, and we have had all kinds of speeches, necessary and unnecessary, all kinds of bills, and lots of bills came in that I thought, at least, should not come in. I know I am limited in my vocabulary. I know that I am not really the man to get up and hope to speak, but if I have to, I will do the best I can.

Now, first of all, why are we against the poorhouse? Are we the supporters of the bill, supporters of that kind of measure? Social workers, liberal, progressive people, are we only aiming for an ideal government with some practical features in it? I will not bother you with too many facts, but of course we are practical business men here and I will prove to you that it is not only humane but it is also economically practicable.

To start with the bill, the matter which I have introduced to you, comes from the American Association for Old Age Security, Incorporated. Bishop Francis J. McConnell is President. They have a list of diplomats, what we call in American “the better element.”

Two years ago the draft of the bill was my own. It was drafted by a professor in college, but I helped him, and of course

the bill was more progressive and was more to my taste. This time we accepted an amendment. It was drafted by Professor Chamberlain of Columbia University, who drafted practically all the measures for the nineteen states that are working under old age pensions. But in the meantime I assure you that this bill comes from the American Association of Old Age Pensions.

How much does it cost us for poorhouses here in the States? I asked a gentleman who is very practical about this. A few years ago a study made by the United States Department of Labor showed that there were in Maine a total of 100 almshouses, the largest number in any state except Massachusetts. The total value of property invested in these institutions amounted to \$1,209,000. Listen to these figures: The total number of inmates in these institutions were 701, and the direct maintenance cost amounted to \$505.02 per year per inmate. If 5 percent interest were added to the investment involved, the actual cost of supporting an inmate in an almshouse in Maine would amount to \$591 per person. It is also important to bear in mind that 62 of that 100 institutions in Maine have less than ten inmates each and that the cost per inmate in these institutions amounted to \$763.21 per inmate outside of the investment involved, and \$850 per person if the investment is to be taken into consideration. It costs \$850 per person in the almshouses.

Here are some other statistics from the Department of Labor and Industry of the States that accepted the old age pension under that system. These figures show what it cost them now and what it used to cost them and how much they saved. California, it costs today to take care of people under the old age pension system \$275.28. Before, under the poorhouse, it cost them \$484.12, saving \$208.84. Delaware, it cost them today \$113.91, and used to cost them \$395.62. They are saving \$281.71. Idaho, it costs them today \$132.21 and used to cost them in the poorhouse \$528.52. They are saving \$396.31. Kentucky, today it is costing them \$60 and it cost them in the poorhouse \$295.95 and the saving is \$235.95. Maryland, it costs them \$332.28 and formerly cost them in the poorhouse \$459.69, a savings of \$127.41. Massachusetts, today it is costing \$312.00 and formerly cost \$539.33, a savings of \$227.33. Minnesota, it costs them today \$192.36. It used to cost them \$631.86. They are saving \$439.50. Montana, it costs them today \$158.35. It used to cost them under the poorhouse \$634.19, a savings of \$475.84. Utah, Wisconsin and

Wyoming, they are making substantial savings in all those states. You see in states of the same population it costs them more than in our state.

What I am trying to prove to you, members of the House, is that it is a pure saving of the State's money, saving of the people's money. I have shown you the figures of Wisconsin that the average cost of taking care of old age pensions now is \$13.50 per month. We have here California and it cost them there \$15.63 a month. We have every state. This is a report our Secretary gathered together. Miss Martin was not against the old age pension bill but her point was that we could not raise the money and I agree we could not. I will come to that later. We didn't have the money to spend. Where are the figures of the Secretary of the Research Committee. Taking the average cost in the other states, California and Kentucky, the cheapest cost in these states today is \$171.84 per person. Now we have today over four thousand people and it costs us \$600,000. We have one thousand in the almshouses. Who is feeding the other three thousand people? We are feeding them just the same through Overseers of the Poor, by private charities, but the fact remains that we have one thousand people in our poorhouses and it costs us \$600,000. According to the figures of the Secretary of the Research Committee, the average cost in nine states for the year 1930 was \$817,776. Now friends here is what happened in our own committee, the pension committee. The pension committee received a resolve for a gentleman who applied for a pension of twenty dollars a month, and we found out that gentleman is taken care of by the government in an institution or private home, so we decided that ought not to pass. A week later Mr. Leadbetter, the head of the Social Welfare, explained the situation. What I would like to prove to you is the economic effect, the saving to the people. I say to you that nobody would suffer, and I think it would be a great saving if we were assured of a place at Augusta where we could take care of these people. This is not a lie. You can go down to the library and you can get hold of a report of the Federal Labor and Industry and if it does not conform with my statement you can call me a liar.

In this bill that you have before your eyes, if we are accepting that measure, we are only accepting it in principle. We have here the new draft and it is section 25, L.D. 1020, "Effective date of act. This act shall not become operative until the Governor and Council can find ways and means to raise or

arrange for the finances necessary to carry out the provisions of this bill and to report thereon to the Eighty-seventh Legislature."

Now we are accepting nothing impracticable. We are not imposing upon anybody. We are just asking of you that when you adjourn you meet your people and tell them that you have done something which ought to have been done long ago. I think I have talked too long and I am sorry that you forced me to make such a long speech. I don't think I can tell you anything more about it than I have. I will not say anything about the moral and ethical side of it. I think you know what is right and what is wrong, but I wish no harm to anybody and I do not wish anybody to reach old age when everything is against him and he has no place to live. I hope none of you will ever have to make the almshouse your home. Sometimes when I stop to think of Edgar Allen Poe's poem "The Raven," I think perhaps he meant those people there on the poor farm and had them in mind in his line "Never, nevermore."

My friends, I appeal to you from a business point of view and from a humane point of view. It is time for us to decide this thing and leave it with the Governor and Council and the next Legislature. I hope that you will accept the report of the committee. (Applause)

Mr. VALLELY of Sanford: Mr. Speaker, I wish to go on record on behalf of my people down home as in favor of this measure.

Mr. PLOUFF of Dexter: Mr. Speaker, I suggested that we indefinitely postpone this bill, particularly because of the fact that our State has not the funds with which to function. I am sorry that I have had to appear to oppose a measure so dear to Mr. Stern's heart. I do not like to pass the buck to the Eighty-seventh Legislature. Why can we not assume our responsibilities here? That is what Section 25 means. However, I withdraw my motion, if that has any effect, and let the members vote as they wish.

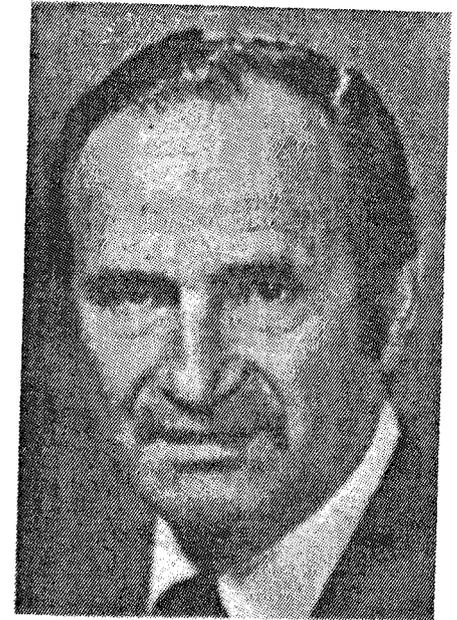
Mr. SPEAKER: The Chair understands that the gentleman from Dexter, Mr. Plouff, asks unanimous consent of the House for the privilege to withdraw his motion to indefinitely postpone. Is there any objection? Hearing none, the Chair rules that consent is granted and the motion is withdrawn. The pending motion is the motion of the gentleman from Biddeford, Mr. Stern, that under suspension of the rules this bill have its first reading.

Mr. GOUDY of South Portland: Mr. Speaker and members of the House: I feel that on behalf of Mr. Stern and the bill he introduced, being a member of the last Legislature, in which Mr.

Stern was also a member, that I should say something in behalf of Mr. Stern and his bill.

I have great admiration for Mr. Stern, and I feel that the citizens of the city of Biddeford should be proud to send a man of Mr. Stern's character to this Legislature. (Applause)

Mr. Stern has worked hard, efficiently and conscientiously in behalf of the aged dependent citizens of our State of Maine who have spent their lives in toil for the State and its inhabitants."



Saul I. Stern

(Saul I. Stern, President of the Council, has been active in the Jewish Community for many years. A Vice President and Member of the Executive Committee and Board of the UJAF, Mr. Stern also serves as a Director of the Greater Washington Jewish Community Foundation, a board member of the Jewish Community Council, a board member of the American Association of Jewish Family Service and Children's Agencies and Chairman of the Public Funding Policy Committee of the UJAF. Mr. Stern is a former Vice President of the Jewish Community Center, a past president of the Jewish Social Service Agency and has been active in the state of Maryland as a past chairman of the Maryland State Planning Commission, Maryland Inter-Governmental Relations Commissions, Maryland Medical Manpower Study Commission, Montgomery County Ethics Commission and a former member of the Advisory Committee of the Montgomery County Planning Board. Mr. Stern is married to the former Marcia Amanuel and they have one son, Stephen. Saul Stern is a member of the District of Columbia Bar, and is Secretary-Treasurer of Stern Office Furniture.)