

Oscar J. van Leer
1914–1996

Founder of the
Oscar J. Van Leer Fund in
The New York Community Trust
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New York, NY 10022

“**W**hen Oscar leaves a room, one gets the impression that several people have gone out.” “A self-contained, peripatetic think-tank.” “A multiple man.” These are some of the words his awed colleagues have used to try to capture the extraordinary Oscar van Leer. Physicist, mathematician, world traveler, international lawyer, president of a multinational company and a multimillion dollar charitable foundation, Oscar van Leer could truly be called a “Renaissance man.”

Oscar Jacques van Leer was born in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, on November 15, 1914, to an old Dutch family in which the commitment to helping others was bred in the bone—as was a genius for business. His father, Bernard, had founded a small company that produced cans and boxes, and rapidly built it into Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer, one of the world’s leading packaging manufacturers. Never interested in making money for its own sake, Bernard founded the Kavaljos Circus, a circus composed of professional and amateur artists, featuring the famous Lippizaner stallions. But his true interest was philanthropy. Guided by a strong social conscience, Bernard channeled part of his profits into charitable works.

Oscar’s mother, Polly van Leer Rubens, was a visionary in her own right, and devoted much of her life to establishing the Van Leer

Jerusalem Institute, a place where she hoped great minds could come together to find solutions to the world's problems.

Already as a young man, Oscar displayed a formidable intellect and an astonishing range of interests and talents. He loved music, studied the piano, and became so accomplished that he contemplated a career as a concert pianist. At the University of Amsterdam, he studied physics. He worked for a while as a film editor in the nascent Dutch film industry being created by a group of German Jewish filmmakers who had fled to Holland from Nazi Germany. In 1938, at the age of 24, Oscar founded his own optical company, De Oude Delft, The Netherlands, which would later become a major partner in the Israel Electro-Optical Company of Rehovot.

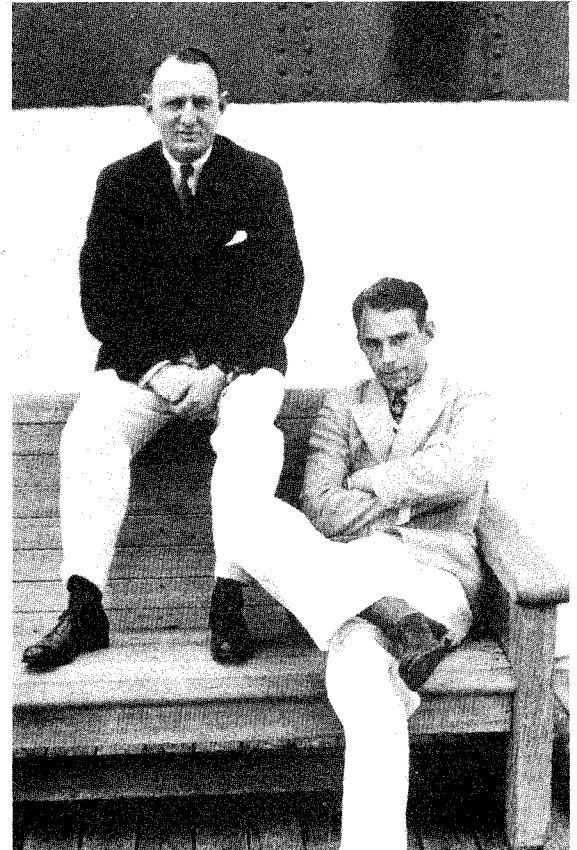
In 1940, the Nazis occupied The Netherlands. In 1941, with the situation becoming threatening, the van Leer family managed to flee to the United States. Oscar settled in California, where he became the CEO of the optical company called Ray Control Corporation, which manufactured navigational instruments for the U.S. Navy. After the war, Oscar represented the Van Leer Company's interests in the Western Hemisphere, living for periods in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and Barrington, Illinois. With characteristic versatility and foresight, Oscar plunged into the study of law at Northwestern University, earning his law degree in 1958. His legal acumen was to serve him in good stead in the formidable challenge that awaited him.

That same year, Oscar was poised to make a great change in his life. He had been asked to serve as scientific director of the

Weizmann Institute in Israel, and he decided to accept the position. When his father died in January 1958, Oscar, at the urgent request of the Van Leer Company's board of directors, took the helm of what was by 1996 a \$2.5 billion enterprise.

In the late 1940s, Bernard and Polly and their two sons, Oscar and his older brother, William, had made an extraordinary decision. Bernard was determined to ensure that his enterprise and the charitable work continue after his death. Aware that children must inherit a legal portion of their family's estate

Oscar and his father, Bernard, in the 1940s.



under Dutch law, the van Leers agreed, in effect, to disinherit themselves. After making suitable financial settlements on each family member, Bernard's interests, about \$150 million U.S. at the time, were transferred to a foundation in Lucerne, Switzerland, where the family had a residence. This would eventually become the Van Leer Group Foundation.

According to Bernard van Leer's wishes, upon his death the Van Leer Company's shares were to become the property of the Swiss foundation. Determined to ensure that Bernard van Leer's legacy continue, Oscar plunged into the immense task of restructuring and refocusing the Van Leer corporate and charitable activities. He arranged for the transfer of the Van Leer assets from Switzerland back to Holland, under the umbrella of the Van Leer Group Foundation. He also estab-

lished a new charitable spending foundation, the Bernard Foundation, headquartered in The Hague and financed by the Van Leer Group Foundation. Since the mid-sixties, its purpose has been to help socially and culturally disadvantaged children, especially children in the 40 countries where Van Leer has factories, to develop their inborn potential. He created a new, nine-member Governing Council, which he chaired until his retirement in 1986.

Oscar shared his mother's deep interest in Israel. Under his guidance, the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute which she founded became a vital intellectual center which draws scholars from around the world. The Institute provides a neutral meeting ground where Jews and Arabs can come together to discuss the urgent problems that confront Israel, as well as the international community. Ever

Oscar displaying special equipment to some professors, circa 1965.



alert to the need for economic stimulation, Oscar also established Crecor BV, a 100 percent subsidiary of the Van Leer Group Foundation, to promote and support creative business development in Israel.

“Oscar was an intellectual adventurer,” says Harry Leliveld, executive director of the Van Leer Group Foundation, who worked with Oscar for ten years. “The moment anyone said, ‘That’s impossible!’ that’s when he got interested. For example, in the early 1960s, when flexible plastic packaging was first introduced, many of our people said, ‘There’s no profit in it, it’s too far from our core business,’ but Oscar didn’t accept this. He got us into it, and now it’s an extremely profitable part of our business.”

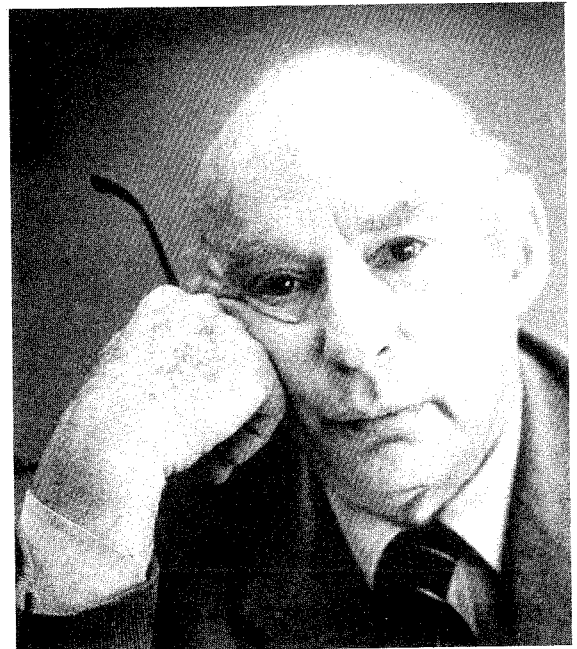
Another example of Oscar’s direct and creative approach to problem-solving occurred in Israel. He observed that management was spending too much time making notes of meetings, writing letters, and making appointments, because of the lack of executive assistance commonly available in the U.S. and Europe. He promptly bought a license from a successful secretarial school in Holland, rented space in Tel Aviv, hired skilled teachers, and in no time was turning out crack executive assistants.

Driven by Oscar’s abiding passion for affecting the lives of children and young people, the Bernard Foundation has reached out to help children in every corner of the world. In Israel, the Foundation sponsored an innovative kindergarten program in the kibbutzim for Jewish, Arab, and Bedouin children. The Foundation has worked with aborigines in Australia, with children of the

barrios of Colombia, and in nursery schools in Kenya.

In the late 1960s, the American writer, Budd Schulberg, encountered Oscar in a villa in Italy called Serbelloni, owned by the Rockefeller Foundation, which serves as a scientific center and artists’ retreat. Returning from a walk, Schulberg and his wife heard the music of Chopin, exquisitely played, pouring from the music room of the villa. Assuming the pianist was the villa’s composer-in-residence, the Schulberg’s introduced themselves and complimented his playing. The pianist, of course, was Oscar van Leer, and he knew exactly who Budd Schulberg was. Unprompted, Oscar inquired about Schulberg’s Writers Workshop, a product of the Los Angeles Watts riots several years earlier. Schulberg related

Oscar in 1990.



the struggles involved in founding this incubator for aspiring young poets, and showed him *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts*, the newly published collection of their work. The next morning, a check for \$12,500 was slipped under Schulberg's door. But even more impressive, on his next trip to Los Angeles, Oscar made a point of traveling to Watts to see the workshop himself.

Over the course of a remarkable lifetime, Oscar van Leer collected many honors, among them the Royal Dutch decoration, "Knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion," and the illustrious "Medal of Honour for Drive and Ingenuity in the Order of the House of Orange," conferred on him by Her Majesty, Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands.

Upon his retirement from the company in 1979, the Van Leer Group published a collection of Oscar's essays and speeches, with an introduction by his friend, Budd Schulberg. A glance at the table of contents reveals the astonishing range of Oscar's interests: philosophy, law, education, management and industrial policy, conservation and ecology—all were his subjects.

In his introduction to the volume, Schulberg provides the most eloquent tribute to Oscar van Leer's legacy:

Were it not for [his] vision and its practical realization, [Oscar van Leer] would be notable only as one of the world's more successful entrepreneurs. Instead . . . he has transformed a corporate giant into an instrument for reshaping the social structure, peacefully.

Hanging on the wall of Oscar's office until the day he died was this famous text by Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Oscar van Leer seemed determined to do enough good to triumph over evil single-handedly.

Among Oscar's many philanthropies is a fund in The New York Community Trust, established in 1973 by Oscar van Leer at the suggestion of his American attorney.

*New York Community Trust
is a community foundation
which provides centralized management
for charitable funds.
New York's major banks serve as trustees.
Trustee for the Oscar J. Van Leer Fund
is Chase Manhattan Bank.*

