



**Samuel Sacks**  
1886-1972

Founder of the  
Samuel Sacks Fund in

The New York Community Trust  
909 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10022

*In his Will, Samuel Sacks  
established the Samuel Sacks Fund,  
to be administered by  
The New York Community Trust  
for charitable purposes.*

Its narrow cobbled streets lined with gabled dwellings, Riga, capital of Latvia, was a beautiful medieval city when two of its citizens, Hannah and Moses Sacks, welcomed the birth of their son Samuel on January 15, 1886. Although the country of Latvia had passed into Russian hands in the eighteenth century, it was dominated by German merchants and landowners. Not until a year before Samuel was born did Russian replace German as the official language. Jews were, of course, a minority.

In a suburb of Riga, important port on the Baltic Sea, leading industrial center and, as a result of the newly-completed railroad, hub of Europe's timber trade, Moses worked hard to support his family as a *schochet*, Kosher butcher for the Jewish community. Samuel joined four brothers in the Sacks family, Abe, Harry, Paul, and Irving, and while Samuel was still very young a sixth son, Carl, was born. With such a family dependent on him, Moses Sacks made the decision that thousands of others had made: to forsake the comfortable home and the secure trade for the promise of a better life in a new country.

Leaving Hannah and the boys in the safety of familiar surroundings, Moses struck out alone, first for London, and then for the United States. It was about 1890 when Moses arrived in New York, full of hopes and dreams. The reality of living in the New World was more difficult than he had imagined, but soon the for-

mer butcher had immersed himself in a completely new line of work; he became a jewelry peddler, traveling from city to city. It was a fine way to get to know his new country, as well as to make a living, and within two years he was financially secure enough to send for Hannah and the children.

Life was a struggle, but it brought its rewards in time. Rearing their sons, Moses and Hannah emphasized the virtues of hard work and diligent study, both for the love of learning for its own sake, and as a way to a better, more prosperous life. They were excellent models for their children. Within a few years, Samuel and his older brother Paul were following their father's example and traveling about the country selling furs. The other boys were growing up, too, and establishing themselves. Abe became an optometrist and Harry a watchmaker. Paul and Irving eventually founded successful retail businesses. Carl, the baby of the family, was the only one who seemed not to have the Sacks flair for business, but he had something that was valued at least as highly: musical talent. Carl became a violinist.

Meanwhile, when Samuel was about 21, he met Minna Leah Zirinsky, a lovely young woman who was employed as a saleswoman in a corset shop. Samuel and Minna were married on March 14, 1908; Sam was 22, and Minna was 20. Almost immediately they decided to open their own retail corset shop at 1874 Third Avenue, near 103rd Street, in New York. They were an ideal combination. Minna had the perfect personality for selling—warm, outgoing, and honest; Samuel, congenial but less intimate, had already demonstrated his acumen as a business man. Working together, they established a chain of seven corset shops, supplied by their own factory, which adjoined the original store.

The business was their way of life. For many years they lived in an apartment behind the store on Third

Avenue, so that they could take care of the shop and supervise the manufacturing from early in the morning until late in the evening. With the apartment so close by, they spent much time with their two children, Sylvia, born March 10, 1910, and Mervin Joseph, born three and a half years later, on October 24, 1913. And after they had closed up shop for the day, it was customary for the family to visit Sam's older brother, Harry, the watchmaker, whom Sam had always greatly admired.

With the business prospering and the children growing up, Sam and Minna decided to move, and in 1924 they left the apartment behind the shop and settled in more ample quarters on Riverside Drive. A few years later, when the business no longer occupied their attention for twelve or fourteen hours every day, they also acquired a summer place in Saddle River, New Jersey, to escape the noise and heat of New York. Ten years later, their son away at college and their daughter off on her own, they moved one more time, to 5 West 86th Street, within sight of Central Park. The good life, for which Moses Sacks had left Latvia, was theirs.

But it did not last. Minna died on July 3, 1938, at the age of fifty. They had been married for thirty years. Sam grieved, but eventually he set aside his grief and threw himself again into his work. In addition to the corset business, Sam became increasingly involved in real estate investment and management and financial investment as well. And the intellectual curiosity that had been a hallmark of the Sacks family continued to show itself. Sam Sacks made it a practice to read *The New York Times*, almost from cover to cover, every day. And he maintained his lifelong interests in classical fiction, history and drama.

Sam's Jewish heritage was rich, but his beliefs had moved away from his Orthodox upbringing toward the

more liberal thinking of Reform Judaism. Sam was a great admirer of the oratory and leadership of Stephen S. Wise, one of the foremost leaders of Zionism and Reform Judaism, who had pressed for labor reforms and relief of refugees among other good works. For twenty-five years Sam was a member of the Free Synagogue, which Wise had founded in 1907 and of which he was the rabbi. Later Sam joined Congregation Emanu-El and became an active participant of the Men's Club of that congregation.

One of the organizations in which Samuel Sacks was most deeply involved was the Jewish Chautauqua Society. Organized in 1893, it was based on the original Chautauqua movement, a program of adult education that offered summer courses in the arts, sciences, and humanities. By the middle of the 1920's, most of the smaller Chautauqua organizations had disappeared, and the big, commercial Chautauqua had ended its circuits. The Jewish Chautauqua Society, however, continued very much in existence, fulfilling its original intention of bringing a better understanding of Jewish faith and traditions to Christians, offering programs at various Christian universities, placing reference books in college libraries, offering the study of Judaism in depth to college students, reaching teenagers in summer church and Boy Scout programs, and communicating with the general public with award-winning films on television.

Despite his business activities and community and religious involvements, Sam realized that he was, at the age of 54 and in the prime of life, a lonely man. It was then that he met Rhonie, a 51-year-old widow, who also had a grown daughter. Sam and Rhonie were married on September 3, 1940, and Rhonie fitted easily into the role of companion and business assistant.

Again, Sam's life was rich and full. But ten years later, tragedy touched his life again. His beloved daugh-

ter, Sylvia, died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of forty, on November 4, 1950.

But Sam, blessed with good health and abundant energy, again accepted his grief and learned again to greet life with enthusiasm. Although the corset business was disposed of in his later years, Sam continued with his real estate and financial interests, continuing to demonstrate by his shrewd investments that his acumen was not diminishing with age.

Like many successful businessmen of his time, Sam Sacks was politically conservative, and had often, in the past, argued with his more liberal college-age son about Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom he referred to as "that socialist." But Sam was an enormously generous man, who gave of himself as well as of his fortune. He made substantial contributions to charity, usually in the form of memorials, which was his way of perpetuating the names and memories of those to whom he felt closest.

In 1960 his philanthropy found expression in the incorporation of the Self Improvement Clubs of America, for the purpose of honoring exceptional achievement of individuals or organizations by public recognition.

The Samuel Sacks Achievement Awards grew out of this concept. The Awards were designed to recognize achievement in arts and letters, education, sciences, religion and public service. In his Will, Samuel Sacks made a bequest to The New York Community Trust, establishing the Samuel Sacks Fund to carry out his charitable interests.

On June 4, 1972, Rhonie, the helpmeet of the second half of his life, died at the age of 83. Within the same month, on June 30, 1972, Samuel Sacks died at the age of 86, having realized the dream of his parents in another time and another place.



The New York Community Trust, an aggregate of charitable funds, is the metropolitan area's community foundation. It serves charitable donors and builds an endowment for New York City. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the Samuel Sacks Fund is The Chase Manhattan Bank.