

Origins

American Jewish World Service

From a forthcoming memoir
by Laurence R. Simon
Founding President



Elisa Wiesel wrote of Larry Simon

"A magnificent companion and friend of all who need help"

With affection,

Elie Wiesel, June 20, 1988

LAURENCE R. SIMON

Biographical Note

Laurence Simon is Professor of International Development at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management. He founded the Graduate Programs in Sustainable International Development (SID) in 1993 and served as its Director for twenty years through August 2014. In that time, SID grew to become the largest development studies program in the United States with 200 graduate students from over 50 countries annually and recognized globally for its innovative interdisciplinary curriculum. He also serves as co-Chair of the Ph.D. in Global Health and Development. Dr Simon served as the Associate Dean for Academic Planning from 2003 until September 2009 and created new degree programs in International Health Policy and Management among others.

His research and teaching center on critical issues in global poverty, and he is writing on psychological and cultural barriers to social change and on the role of social movements in development. Currently, Simon currently leads research teams on two main problems in development: the nexus between social exclusion and poverty within countries; and community adaptations for mitigating the effects of climate change among vulnerable populations.

In 2007 he took a leave from Brandeis to serve as the senior advisor on global poverty to the executive director of the Google Foundation. He has also been a Visiting Scholar at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University.

In the late 1970s, Dr. Simon was a program director for Oxfam America and launched its work in Central America and the Caribbean. Later as Oxfam's first director for policy analysis, he helped usher in an era when major NGOs look critically at aid and development policy. His research effort in 1981 on the impact of the U.S. financed El Salvador agrarian reform prompted a major investigation by *The New York Times* that resulted in Congressional hearings. Since then he has lectured widely in the United States, Europe and Asia on problems of landlessness and agrarian repression.

Dr. Simon created the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) in 1984 and was its Founding President until June 1989. During his AJWS years, and beyond, Dr. Simon collaborated with Israeli scientists Drs. Shlomo Navarro and Jonathan Donahaye, and the American disaster mitigation specialist, Frederick C. Cuny of Intertect, which resulted in sweeping technological innovation in the way emergency relief and development grain storage is handled. Simon directed the establishment and monitoring of UN World Food Programme field trials for elimination of losses of emergency grain en route to or in areas of famine. This work led to his founding of Grain Protection International, an NGO, and with Fred Cuny founded GrainPro Inc. which is today the leader in hermetic storage which completely eliminates chemical insecticides and ozone-depleting gases.

At the request of the Soros Foundation, the International Rescue Committee and Intertect, Dr. Simon worked on Sarajevo relief during the Serbian siege of the city assisting Fred Cuny to design and implement emergency winterization programs. Their major effort was the construction of a below ground water treatment plant that provided the only potable water for the city during the war. His close colleague, Fred Cuny, was killed on another Soros mission two years later in Chechnya.

In 1990 and 1991, Dr. Simon served as the resident strategic planner and evaluation officer for a joint United Nations Development Programme / World Bank national poverty alleviation program in Sri Lanka. He has also been an advisor to the World Bank on land reform.

His early career was at the City University of New York where he taught in programs to raise the academic skills of students from disadvantaged and minority communities. He taught at Fordham University where he served as Assistant to the Dean and administered the Third World Institute where he began his association with the Brazilian social theorist Paulo Freire.

Laurence Simon earned his doctorate from the School of Geography at Clark University where he had previously received a Master's in International Development. In 1997, the University of Judaism (now American Jewish University) conferred upon him the Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa. He also has studied philosophy and political theory at the New School for Social Research in New York under Horace Kallen, Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt.

The American Jewish World Service: Origins¹

Laurence R. Simon

January 29, 2012
Quaking Aspen Cottage
Sudbury, Massachusetts

What follows is an abbreviated version of a manuscript in progress on the founding and early history of AJWS based on extensive documentation from correspondence, field notes and reports.²

Excerpts from my journals are shown in italics.

King David Hotel, Jerusalem 1982

I've come to Israel for some respite after several arduous weeks in southern Africa.³ The region is still torn by efforts of the South African government to destabilize black majority rule in neighboring states, especially Mozambique. I have never before been to Israel and remember how my mother dreamt of visiting. So much of my career has been spent in areas of conflict that I have not been tempted to take a vacation in another one. I've come here to be a tourist ...and that is all. I have a room with a view of the old city which I wandered about all day long. It is spectacularly beautiful. The stones seem to sing to the heaven above – a chorus of forgotten harmonies that saturate the air with expectations. After visiting some of the poorest villages of Africa, the King David Hotel is quite a treat.

In the weeks prior to my visit, I had the occasion to spend some days with members of the African National Congress of South Africa. They were still in exile in Lusaka and always glad to receive visitors. The Oxfams were providing assistance for the ANC school for exiled youth in Tanzania, a crèche and other projects. Max Sisulu, who years later was to become the chief whip of the South

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² While on sabbatical in California in 2007, Larry Brilliant, then head of the Google Foundation, told me that Don Abramson would like to get together with me. I had not seen Don since I had left American Jewish World Service in 1989 after serving as the founding President for five years. I always remembered his warmth as well as his dedication to my original vision for AJWS. One afternoon while driving around San Francisco, he urged me to write up the origin of the organization which he said very few actually knew. I also learned from Don and from others who were on the Board in the years after my departure what a critical role he played when he assumed the chairmanship in saving AJWS from what would have been its demise. This briefest of early histories is therefore dedicated to this wonderful man.

³ I was director of policy analysis for Oxfam America and working on evaluation of development strategies and partnerships.

African parliament,⁴ came to a week-long Oxfam evaluation meeting on a farm outside Lusaka and spoke to me about his bewilderment as to why Israel seemed, in his mind, insensitive to the plight of the victims of apartheid. I had no good answer for the geopolitics of the day did not impress either of us.⁵

On a flight a few days later from Lusaka to Rome, I sat next to Jacob Chiwane of the ANC projects department. When learning that I was en route to Israel, he seemed taken aback when I told him I was Jewish and curious about Israel. His confusion was typical of many I met in Africa who knew their Old Testament well enough but thought that the words Jew and Israeli were as synonymous as they might have been in the time of Saul and Solomon. Many knew nothing of the diaspora and for that matter of the modern Israel apart from its struggle with the Arab world. Later I was to learn a more nuanced view of Israel particularly in countries that had benefited from Israeli agricultural assistance but that story comes later. Jacob seemed to be surprised, perhaps even disappointed, that I, long a supporter of the ANC struggle, would be going to Israel. This troubled me for his reasons seemed not at all anti-Semitic but based on Israel's military assistance to the apartheid government in Pretoria. I was to encounter the flip side of this attitude years later when, as President of American Jewish World Service, I was called into the office of Anti-Defamation League President Nathan Permuter who berated me for escorting a delegation of AJWS board members to ANC headquarters in Lusaka. "Don't you know they are an anti-Semitic, communist organization, Larry." But again, I am ahead of the story.

Jacob's surprise played on my mind as I sipped coffee on my terrace at the King David, as I walked the ancient city's streets and hills, and as I watched pilgrims pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Gol'gotha of the New Testament, and as I meditated at the Western Wall.

I thought back to all the famine and disaster relief operations in which I had worked. Never in my experience had there been a recognizable Jewish presence. In more recent years until his death, the Israeli activist Abie Nathan would fly in and "do his thing" but his presence, while welcome, was as a maverick making as much a statement about himself as about the absence of Israel or world Jewry.

⁴ Max Sisulu was in exile from South Africa for 27 years. His father, Walter Sisulu was head of the ANC's armed wing.

⁵ This topic would come up again years later when I escorted a delegation of the AJWS board to Lusaka for meetings with the ANC leadership. I shall write later about that journey to Mozambique where we met with President Samora Machel and held the first Rosh Hashanah dinner there in a hundred years. Attending was the ANC representative to Mozambique, Albie Sachs, who was subsequently the target of an assassination attempt that maimed him for life. In the post-apartheid era, Albie became a judge on the Constitutional Court of South Africa and recently retired. He still remembers that Rosh Hashanah dinner.

Some time later, at a ceremony inaugurating AJWS, Elie Wiesel told a story of his sojourn to a Khmer refugee camp in Thailand. In a few days it would be the *Yahrzeit* of one of his parents. Where, among refugees from the killing fields of Pol Pot, would he find his *minyan*? How would he recite the *Kaddish*? Slowly word spread that nine other Jewish men were needed at the refugee camp. Many probably thought this an odd request indeed but slowly they came forward from the international aid organizations and the press. Elie had his minyan and the sanctity of a community of Jews.

The lesson for Elie Wiesel was familiar to me. Traveling into the remotest and poorest communities on earth, I often encountered Jews. Given how small our numbers are in the world, it was at first a surprise to see our presence almost everywhere. We were doctors from *Médecins Sans Frontières*, we were Oxfam field workers, we were journalists, the human rights monitor, the anti-apartheid activist, the witness for peace. We were present but we were silent Jews, like me, who were not there *qua* Jews. Some were observant but most were drawn by the values of Judaism, like those powerfully transmitted to me from my own secular father, and brought us, almost against our will, into a direct relationship with the most afflicted people of our day. And perhaps in the purest form of generosity, we did not need to flaunt our identity for we met our hosts on the most level of all playing fields, a common and humble humanity. Elie Weisel once told me that pain and alienation should be the strongest of bonds between diverse peoples who know suffering.

Walking Jerusalem, I thought of Jacob and Max and what they said to me about Israel. I had heard similar from others in Africa. Not an anti-Semitism, but a wonder, sometimes tinged with anger, that Jews were not on their side. How mistaken! And how frustrating! Some years later, the President of Mozambique, Samora Machel, told a visiting delegation of AJWS board members that, as a guerilla leader, Israelis trained him in the skills of liberation but now his people die from bullets provided to the racist South African regime.

What more appropriate setting than Jerusalem for the origins of AJWS?

I decided to establish an American Jewish organization. Not as a counterpoint to Israel, but an organization that will take on the mantle of *tikkun olam*, that will act in the kindness and mutuality of *Hesed*, that will work with Israelis and with diaspora Jews alike to bring relief and development to the poor world. I decided to establish an identifiably Jewish organization that will be a "Jewish Oxfam," that will work with the peoples of the world without regard to their particular identities, that will live with the poor and the outcast, with those who suffer from preventable disease, who wait for the end of war, of repression, or for political and economic liberation. And it will be an organization of people that does not ask for a return.

San Francisco, the American Jewish Committee

I just returned from Ethiopia where there's another famine. I see dying children in the corners of my eyes.

Oxfam asked me to speak at a meeting of the American Jewish Committee being held in San Francisco. I arranged this through Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum and arrived late one night at the Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill. The desk clerk informed me that they would honor my reservation for a single room by giving me the Presidential Suite as the hotel was sold out. He was surprised the next day when I asked to switch to a standard room. Working for a relief organization, the "optics," as my friend Bob Reich would say, looked bad.

Speaking that next evening to some committee within the large gathering, I urged them to take action against the famine and left the next morning. At the airport, I spied Rabbi Tannenbaum puffing his signature cigar in a phone booth in this pre-cell phone and pre-no smoking era. I gathered the courage to talk to him again as I had found him rather intimidating. We talked for awhile. I told him about my wish to found a Jewish relief and development organization and, to my surprise, he told me that this had been a dream of his for many years. "But Larry," he said between puffs, "the time is not right. The Jewish community has other priorities right now." I would hear these words again and again in the coming year.

I considered my options. I could establish an organization that would grow slowly and without the luminaries of the Jewish establishment. Or I could continue to go after the movers and shakers that could put it on the map quickly. Both paths had attractions and pitfalls.

The slower strategy, what I called an organic growth, would add one person at a time, perhaps even one synagogue at a time. I would expect to remain rather small and, in the pre-Internet era, would have to rely on word of mouth and modest mailings, visits and good deeds to launch the programs.

The luminary approach would jump-start an organization, make a splash in the Jewish press and institutions, and attract funding from high net worth individuals and corporations. Then we could back-track to include more regular folk.

I wanted the organization to pursue two aims. The first was my overseas ambition to lessen suffering. But Jews could do that even without a Jewish organization. The second aim was to educate at home about the causes of poverty and ill health among so many of the world's people. I had seen the

power of religious organizations to raise these issues with their coreligionists. It appeared to me that the organized American Jewish community needed a credible Jewish organization to bring these issues into the home and the synagogue. I chose the path of rapid growth relying on major religious and lay leaders in established Jewish organizations and on philanthropists. I knew that this luminary approach may lead me into the greater challenge of negotiating the tensions that may arise with the agendas of other Jewish organizations and with the worldview of some board members who were there for their “affluence and influence” rather than their lived experience among the poor of the world.

Naming, Waspam, 1983

I am lying in a filthy hostel along the Rio Coco on the Nicaraguan border with Honduras. I feel as if I have been trapped in Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. The contra war against the Sandinistas is building and I cannot get out for another week. I am listening to my portable shortwave radio hoping to feel connected to the outside world if I can just tune in the BBC World Service.

A name was needed for my imaginary organization. I played with words.

“American” was important to distinguish ourselves as a segment of world Jewry. It also would capture something of the aura that America still had in much of the developing world.

“Jewish” was obvious. I could have chosen other less apparent words like Hesed or Tzedakah. But it seemed important that the name be recognizable as Jewish and not be a more obscure reference to Jewish concepts of charity or justice.

“World Service” came directly from the BBC. I used to listen to shortwave BBC World Service broadcasts when I worked in Latin America and Africa and loved the sound of those words when they came over the airwaves. I always imagined the announcer saying “This is London” while German bombs dropped overhead.

The words “world service” conveyed something important to me. The concept of “service” went far beyond that of charity. To serve requires an act beyond generosity. It is a personal commitment that must have a direct interface with those being served. There is no shielding here. To serve faithfully requires humility and self-sacrifice. Serving the world’s poor and vulnerable has to be based on a more direct experience than writing a check.

I also respected the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker organization with which I have collaborated over the years, and also the Seva Foundation (“seva” is Sanskrit for service). So the word service stayed in the name.

I had a name but was still alone in my new organization.

Turning to friends and acquaintances, late 1983-84

My idea for the organization needed to be tested with various constituencies. I visited Jewish temples in the Boston area and found a warm reception. They were hungry for ways to connect with the world of “the other” as well as with unaffiliated Jews. I spoke to the Jewish Advocate, to professors at Brandeis University and to my colleagues at Oxfam America and other development organizations. I phoned Jewish donors I knew through Oxfam to ask their opinion. Many were encouraging. I decided that I had to make a decision as about those two strategies for building the organization: the grassroots strategy or the luminary approach.

I was spending my own money on travel and could not afford much more. Frankly I also worried that my own Jewish “credentials” might not be enough to launch an overtly Jewish organization. I felt that I needed a strategic partner who was tied into established national Jewish organizations and could also raise funds. Whatever the outcome, that was the path I chose.

I wrote to Larry Phillips, of the Phillips Van Heusen Corporation, who I knew from his brief membership on the Oxfam America board. He was connected to the American Jewish Committee and had money and contacts in corporate America. I wrote him a letter (a photo of the carbon copy of the typed letter is attached) and told him about the American Jewish World Service, as yet unincorporated but very much in formation. I asked him to consider being Board Chair. In a few days I phoned him and was disappointed by his initial reaction but kept talking and wound up with an invitation to visit him at his office. I did and he agreed.

I appreciated how quickly he invested himself in AJWS. At first he asked to be called President and for me to be Executive Director. I declined as I believed that it was important for the credibility of AJWS for the President of the organization to be a professional in international development. Larry agreed to the title Chairman.

Holding my breath, I hoped for the best. The strategy of affluence and influence was off and running. Attorney Herb Weiss and I filled out the papers incorporating the organization in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts where its first office was listed with the Attorney General as my home address on Oxford Street, Cambridge. I turned my living room into its command center. Phillips started to raise money while I started to develop our initial partnerships abroad and our outreach strategy for constituency development at home. I also forged

ties to the Israeli Foreign Ministry and to numerous research organizations in Israel. A forthcoming section of this history will detail the first overseas work.

We rented a hall at the New York Hilton and invited the press, representatives of Jewish organizations and international development agencies, potential donors and others to the launch. Elie Wiesel was our headliner of that night and the crowds came. Both Larrys spoke about the new organization and Elie, as always, spoke from his heart and moved the audience to a higher plane.

Portraits to come

In looking back over the five years I was President, I remember the people who enriched my life immeasurably. Elie Wiesel whose conversations I will always cherish; Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, one of the wisest men I know, who urged fellow board members to listen to the sages who would “come down on the side of life”; Larry Brilliant – once M.D. to the Black Panthers and a leader of the smallpox eradication campaign in South Asia, who said that only those who have had diarrhea in a refugee camp should make policy for refugees; Rabbi Ben-Isaacson of South Africa, then in exile in Harare whose home was an ANC safe-house where we would sit long nights and drink Manischewitz grape wine; Bishop Antonio Fortich of Negros, the Philippines, from whose bombed-out residence I made a crucifix of charred nails that still hangs in my study; the saintly Serge Cherniguin of the National Federation of Sugar Cane Workers who thought his father was a Russian Jewish Merchant Mariner and whose calm and steady hand kept the “social volcano” of Negros from exploding; Shlomo Navarro and the late Jonathan Donahaye, Israeli scientists whose work on hermetic grain storage for developing nations may ultimately be the greatest gift AJWS or I will have given to the world; and so many others about whom I must write.

The life of any organization is intimately tied up with the personal journeys of its leaders. As founder of the American Jewish World Service, this will be my story.

Attached: letter of invitation to L. Phillips

Laurence R. Simon 110 Oxford Street Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138 (617) 492-5929

MEMORANDUM

(212) 541-5200

October 8, 1984

To: Larry Phillips
From: Larry Simon *LS*
Subject: An organized Jewish response to world poverty.

I am sending you the enclosed prospectus for an organized American Jewish response to the crisis of world poverty because of our previous discussions on this topic and in recognition of the important role you have assumed re: Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and other areas.

For reasons developed in the prospectus, I believe we should mount an effort which would both make a meaningful contribution to the alleviation of world hunger and at the same time address the problem of a nascent anti-Semitism in areas of the Third World. Early discussions I have held in the past four months here in the U.S., and during visits to Israel, Southern Africa and Central America, have encouraged me that the idea deserves and will receive the most serious consideration.

We need to talk much more about this but I would like you, Larry, to consider becoming one of the founders of this organization. Having gained much respect for you during our association through Oxfam, I am confident that we could together build an important contribution to peace and understanding.

I am now on leave from Oxfam and willing to devote much time to testing the potential of the idea. Any and all suggestions and guidance you can give me would be most appreciated. I can be reached at the above number. I hope to see you this weekend if you are coming to the Oxfam Board meeting or in New York before too long.

10/31/84 1 Phillips phoned. Said to use his name on any piece but I want to be on the Board.

11/14/84 2 P. calls to ask about Max Tannenbaum. She checked the list of members - Tannenbaum? It said he was from San Francisco. Comm. 600-... said he would tell Tannenbaum that as the general idea.



More than two years after he began an organizing effort to found the AJWS, President Laurence R. Simon announces the official launch of the organization at the New York Hilton, May 1, 1985. Attending are founding members of the board, leaders of Jewish organizations, representatives of international development organizations, guests and members of the news media.



Elie Wiesel, founding member of the board, speaking at the official launch.



AJWS President Laurence R. Simon speaks to the Live Aid Concert, Philadelphia, July 13, 1985.

“A few months after I founded the AJWS, Bill Graham, the famous rock concert promoter, organized the largest rock concert in history. Called Live Aid, it was to benefit the poor and hungry in Sub-Saharan Africa. A week before the concert, when AJWS was still run out of my living room in Cambridge, I phoned Graham and try to see if he would announce our airlift of medical supplies to Mozambique. This was my first major operation at AJWS and I doubted that I could even get though to Graham. I had one staff person at that time, Dena Wortzel, and I asked her to place the call – thinking that it might sound more official. She left a message that the President of the A.J.W.S. wanted to talk to Bill Graham and, that afternoon, he actually returned the call. I was dumbstruck. Within the course of two minutes he invited me to make the announcement on stage at the JFK Stadium in Philadelphia.



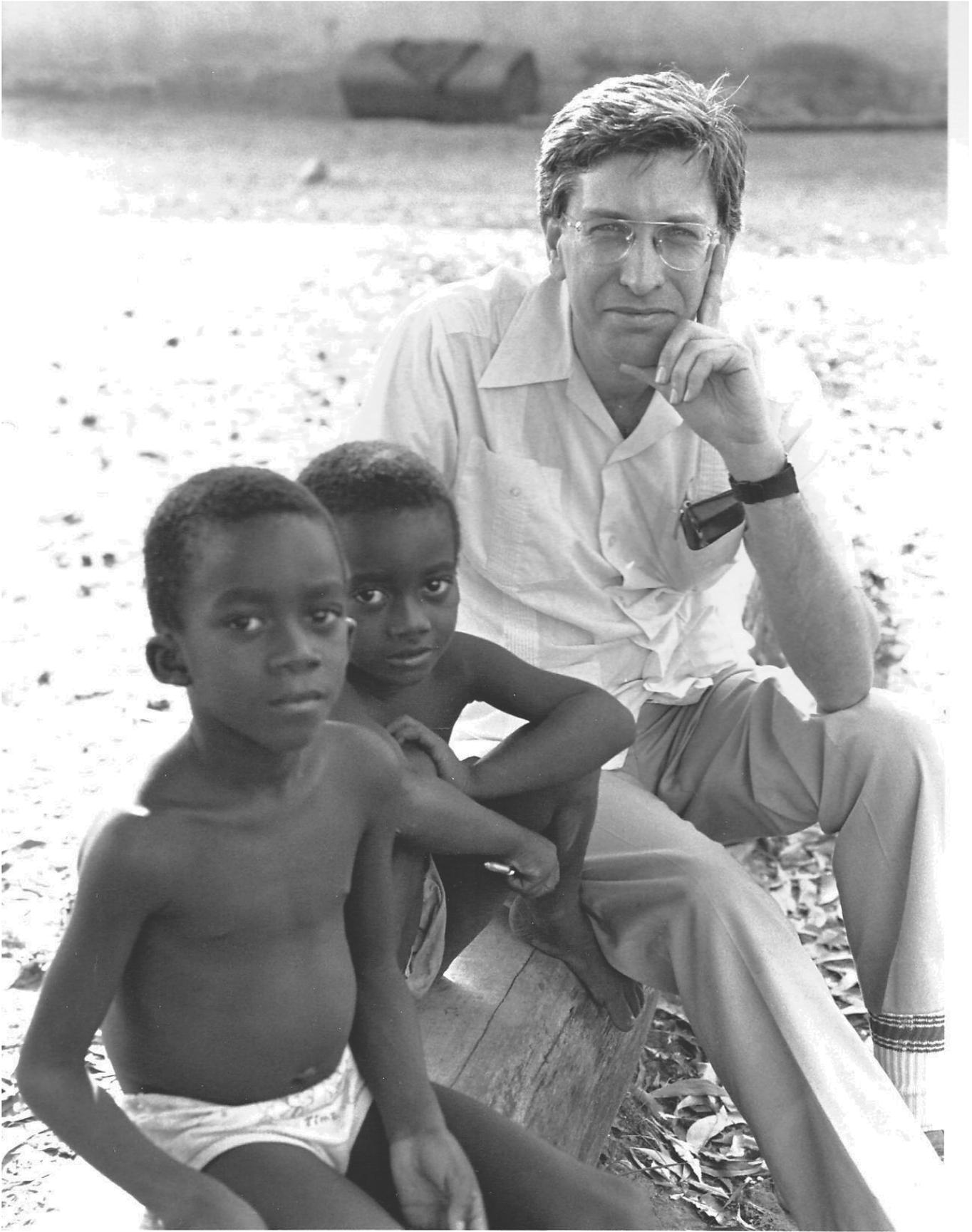
The chairman of the board, Larry Phillips, wanted me to arrive in rock-star style so he arranged for a stretch limo to meet me at the airport. Well it certainly meant that I was waived through the crowds at the approach to the stadium. Standing back stage, Graham’s staff kept telling me that they were running two minutes late and couldn’t get me on. They were coordinating with a sister concert in London and a live worldwide satellite hookup. But Graham kept running past me and telling me to stay put. After a while, he motioned for me to come on stage and said to speak slowly for it was a stadium loudspeaker system. So there I stood and announced the airlift to the cheers of

90,000 people at the stadium and to the millions watching around the world.

Afterwards I realized that mine was the only aid organization permitted to speak at Live Aid and I asked his staff why that was. Graham’s assistant hesitated for a moment and then told me that Bill was born in Berlin and was placed in an orphanage to protect him from the Nazi’s and eventually smuggled out of Germany. His mother was killed in Auschwitz and he was moved when I told him on the phone of a Jewish organization that would work on behalf of the world’s oppressed. I never saw Bill Graham again. He was killed a few years later in a helicopter crash.



Laurence Simon (center) in Maputo, Mozambique receiving airlifted medical supplies with AJWS board members Attorney Herb Weiss (left) and Warren Eisenberg, director, B'nai B'rith International. We were received by the country's President, Samora Machel, and held the first Rosh Hashanah dinner there in a hundred years. Attending was Albie Sachs, the representative to Mozambique of the African National Council of South Africa (still a liberation movement in exile), who was subsequently the target of an assassination attempt that maimed him for life. In the post-apartheid era, Albie (who is Jewish) became a judge on the Constitutional Court of South Africa and recently retired. He still remembers that Rosh Hashanah dinner.



Laurence Simon at the Bengha Camp for Displaced People, Mozambique



Laurence Simon in Wedza, Zimbabwe, December 1988, discussing needs with local farmers.



Laurence Simon., December 1986, with one of the earliest savings and micro-finance organizations in the Philippines. "AJWS had a seminal role in micro-finance," Simon says, "having brought Mohammed Yunis, founder of the Grameen Bank (Bangladesh) to the U.S. for the first time."



Laurence Simon with Sonny Alarvez (center), Minister of Agrarian Reform, Philippines and Daniel Freeman of the Settlement Study Center, Israel.



Laurence Simon and AJWS board member Warren Eisenberg, director, B'nai B'rith International, conferring with Philippine President Corazon Aquino.

“Early in her presidency, Corazon Aquino invited me to visit the island of Negros in the Philippines in order to advocate for a multilateral aid program that would help Negros plantation owners diversify their crops and reinvigorate the Negros economy that had been hard hit by the collapse of the international market price for sugar. Her minister for agrarian reform, Sonny Alvarez, urged support for a modest land reform that would give plantation workers access to small plots of land but would keep the vast majority of the plantations in the hands of the wealthy and politically powerful owners. What I found was shocking. Even before the crash, children died of what the cane cutters called the sweet sickness – the 6 months each year when the workers had no wages

and their children were hungry. The proposed plan would have given the workers tiny kitchen gardens and subjected them to another hundred years of gross exploitation by some of the wealthiest landowners in the Philippines. I reported my findings to President Aquino that I could not support such an aid program. Furthermore, we had found that the landowners had mortgaged their lands to banks that they owned and never bothered to repay the banks – the very banks that she had nationalized. So I urged her to let the banks do what banks normally do – and foreclose on those plantations giving her a sweeping land reform without either a presidential decree or even legislation. She subsequently took no action and the plantation economy today in Negros Occidental is just as backward and exploitative as before. One upside was that we succeeded in convincing Israel that it should side with the landless poor and not provide aid for diversification.



Laurence Simon with Serge Chernigun, director of the National Federation of Sugar Cane Workers, Negros, Philippines. Chernigun was one of the saintliest men I've ever met. His life was in danger for the work he did. He once took me to meet Antonio Fortich, the Bishop of Negros. I arrived just days after his house was bombed and burned to the ground by the landowners for siding with the poor. I still have the charred nails I picked up on the ground and made into a crucifix to remind me of the extraordinary selflessness of three Bishops I have known in my career – Antonio Fortich of Negros; Oscar Romero of El Salvador who was shot to death in church after giving his homily urging the National Guard to stop the killing; and the greatest influence on me of all, Helder Camara of the Northeast Brazil who famously said that “When I feed the hungry, they call me a saint, but when I ask why they are hungry, they call me a communist.”





“In a still hungry world, it should be easier to expand food security by eliminating 10 to 30 percent losses of grain and paddy harvests that to expand production,” Founding President Simon recalls. “In relief operations, often 50 percent of incoming emergency grain was lost to rodents, insects and moisture for lack of adequate storage. So after starting AJWS, I visited Israeli scientists working on health and agriculture but much of what I saw was too high tech, costly or requiring high levels technical expertise. But I settled on one breakthrough technology that was just stunning. Israel had developed in the 60s and 70s completely air-tight or hermetic storage for durable grains. This allowed them to store with zero losses for indefinite periods of time without the use of any chemical fumigation. Completely organic. But their hermetic silos were far too large for most third world applications.

This began my friendship with Shlomo Navarro and Jonathan Donahaye, scientists at the Agricultural Research Organization of the State of Israel. I took them across Africa and parts of Asia to see the challenges at the farm level, at government buffer stocks, and in international relief operations. Eventually we redesigned the large-scale Israeli technology for these applications and created the first truly portable grain storage that today is used throughout the world and was the first to meet the terms of the Montreal Protocol that phased out the use of the ozone-depleting methyl bromide. Jonathan passed away three years ago and I cherish his memory and contribution. Shlomo is working hard around the world on reducing post-harvest losses. This work may ultimately be the greatest gift AJWS and I will have given to the world and it is carried forward now by GrainPro, Inc.



Dr Shlomo Navarro was raised in Turkey and came to Israel as a young scientist. He is arguably the world’s most important specialist on post-harvest storage of durable grains.



AJWS supported curable blindness programs in India and Nepal through the Seva Foundation

AJWS President Laurence Simon with Rabbi and Mrs. Cyril Harris. Rabbi Harris, who was Scottish, was the Chief Rabbi of South Africa. Rabbi Harris was described by President Nelson Mandela as 'my Rabbi'. Harris gave a blessing at Mandela's wedding to Graça Machel (widow of Mozambique President Samora Machel) in 1998. "I was greatly impressed with their vocal opposition to apartheid" Simon recalls. "Mrs. Harris told Jewish women that the end of apartheid starts with treating their domestic servants with respect and paying them fair wages. "



Left to right: Marion Wiesel, Laurence Simon, Elie Wiesel, Carrie Harris