

# Chapter 1

## Hess Family

**L**eon Hess's family story is in many ways a well-worn tale of the American dream: an Eastern European Jewish immigrant comes to the United States, followed by other relatives, starts businesses to try to make a living, and leaves much of the old world behind. The family faced hardships and mishaps common from immigration in the early 1900s, including names distorted by officials who didn't speak their language, housing in crowded immigrant neighborhoods, an inability to use skills from the old country, and bankruptcy. In the second generation, though, the story takes a wild departure: filled with a unique mix of Depression-era creativity, World War II logistical knowledge, and inspiration from a powerful mentor, the youngest son would reimagine his father's failed business and establish himself as one of the richest men in the country.

In the first decade of the 1900s, immigrant families—particularly Jewish ones—flooded New York and New Jersey, overflowing available houses, apartments, and tenements from the Lower East Side to the Jersey Shore and beyond. They joined the garment industry or started small businesses as tailors, milliners, and peddlers.

The Hess family's story is in many ways indistinguishable from dozens of others: Mores Hess, a kosher butcher, came from Lithuania with little in 1904—a year that brought more than 1 million people to the United States. Like Mores, three quarters of all immigrants were bound for the New York area, while others disembarked at other large East Coast ports: Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> His ship left Europe from Bremen, a popular departure point on Germany's northern coast, and was called the S.S. *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, named for the first emperor to rule a united Germany. The other passengers were mostly men, largely ranging in age from 27 to 56. Many were German, but the ship also carried Russians, Hungarians, and people of other nationalities. They were merchants and workers, but also an actor and a jurist. The ship's manifest appears slapdash, with lots of shorthand and empty columns, like many others of its time, a product of the sheer quantity of emigrant paperwork that faced European shipping lines. The manifest suggests that Mores carried over \$50, and had never been in the United States before this passage. The exact reasons for his departure were not recorded, but can be imagined as the same ones that propelled many to leave Lithuania: religious freedom, the prospect of education for his children, and economic betterment. The wave of immigration from Lithuania to the United States had many drivers, and began before Mores headed to Bremen. The 1861 abolition of serfdom had increased the number of free people, who were able to leave the country at the same time, and the rising availability of railroads and other transit made it easier for Lithuanians to leave. A depressed farm economy and increased control from Russia also pushed immigrants out.

Two-thirds of the 1904 immigrants were male, like Mores, and 145,000 came from the Russian Empire, which then included Lithuania and Finland. Russia produced the largest group of immigrants behind Austro-Hungary and Italy. Half of those who came in 1904 had less than \$50 to their name. Of the more than 18,000 Lithuanian immigrants, Mores was one of the relatively prosperous ones—only 531 carried more than \$50. Only 18 of the Lithuanians had ever visited the United States before moving. Three quarters of the 1904 immigrants could read and write, though few spoke English. Together, the 1904 arrivals brought \$25 million to the United States, but Jewish immigrants—noted in records of the time as “the Hebrews”—accounted for only \$2.6 million

of that inflow, whereas they made up far more than 10 percent of the émigrés. Those arriving in the United States were mostly young—under 45—and considered to be in their prime for working and contributing to the economy.<sup>2</sup> They were screened at each point of the journey. Control stations had been set up in Germany's ports, aimed at preventing ill voyagers from bringing diseases like cholera, for which immigrants were blamed for an outbreak in the late 1800s. Steamship companies then reviewed the passengers' health again before boarding. Weeks later, they would be examined upon arrival in the United States, where centers like the immigration checkpoint at Ellis Island had been established to screen them. A handful were turned back for insanity, idiocy, or contagious disease. There was a pervasive skepticism about the potential ill effects of the immigration boom, so people were also turned back for being anarchists, paupers, or entering illegally. Still, the bulk of the immigrants were admitted to the United States, where a booming garment industry and other factories were ready to employ them.

The U.S. government did not expect the influx to boost the economy by much, though, as most immigrants continued to send earnings home. Like many others who arrived, Mores arrived in the United States alone and would have to work for the funds to bring in the family he had left behind in Lithuania. The manifest from the ship doesn't indicate whether he had relatives here with whom he planned to stay, or where he planned to live.

Mores was joined the next year by his wife, Ethel,<sup>3</sup> and toddler son, Henry. The immigration boom was continuing, with 10,000 people a day admitted to New York during a particularly busy season for immigration. Early records of the Hess family after its arrival are sketchy, with different spellings of the family's name and birthdates for Mores<sup>4</sup> on federal census documents suggesting that he could have been anywhere in his 20s or 30s at the time of his move. His family believed he was 34 when he arrived, which is consistent with his ship's manifest.<sup>5</sup>

A couple of years after her arrival, Ethel gave birth to their first daughter, Rebecca, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1907. The family then moved to New Jersey, where Mores started a fruit store in Asbury Park, and a second son, Harry, was born in 1909.

The 1910 census paints a sparse picture of their life: they rented a home on Springwood Avenue, a few doors down from where Mores's fruit store was located. The couple were listed as speaking Russian at

home, and Mores could read, while Ethel could not. Ethel stayed at home caring for their three children while Mores worked. The census suggests that Ethel had also lost a child during the year between Rebecca's birth and Henry's, in an era where childbirth was risky for both mother and infant.

But the census document refers to Ethel and Mores as the Mayerowitz family, and calls their next-door neighbors Lewis and Mary Hess—they, too, were Russian grocers, with a daughter called Rebecca. It is possible that the census taker confused the names of the residents of the block. There are other possible explanations: a language barrier may have caused confusion between a census taker and two related families, or Mores may have been known in some circles as Mores Mayerowitz, and had changed his name to Hess to navigate life in the new country more easily, using it on the ship's manifest and his daughter's birth certificate. While the census leaves lots of room for conjecture and interpretation, city directories, photos, and property records make it clear that Mores and Ethel became established as the Hess family of Asbury Park. If Mores chose his family name, it was his fourth child who would go on to make it famous.

On March 14, 1914, Leon was born to Mores and Ethel in Asbury Park. On the day of his birth, 600 girls working in a Newark garment factory narrowly escaped a fire—poor working conditions had been highlighted by a 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York that killed 145 workers. Standard Oil's John Rockefeller was said to plan a \$50 million donation with his newfound wealth. The British ocean liner *Lusitania*, one of the largest of the time, worked to set a new record for a speedy crossing of the Atlantic, a year before it would be sunk by the Germans during World War I.

Leon's first few years were spent in Asbury Park on the shore, where his father continued to work as a produce man and, eventually, as a butcher. While many immigrants in the New York area coped with cramped quarters and extended families lived in two-room tenements, Mores was successful in improving the accommodations for his family, buying a house by 1920 and arranging for all of his children to go to school, at a time when many others were forced to work from a young age.

On the eve of World War I, the United States still had an optimistic outlook, with President Woodrow Wilson expecting an economic revival

in 1914, easing worries of an early depression.<sup>6</sup> On a more local level, Mores's family likely had a positive outlook, too—10 years after their arrival in the United States, they had their own home and a profitable business.

The family survived traumas both local and international—the Hesses were insulated from a 1917 fire, which started in the swimming center on the boardwalk on Asbury Park's Ocean Avenue and swept through the town, fueled by 60-mile-an-hour sea gales. The damage encompassed a dozen blocks, and major hotels and boardinghouses were flattened, some by the flames and others by dynamite, as firefighters blasted homes to contain the blaze.

A 1918 outbreak of Spanish influenza infected more than a quarter of the U.S. population and killed half a million people, particularly in immigrant neighborhoods where residents were crammed especially close together. Just south of Asbury Park, 3,000 people were diagnosed in the town of Camden in a single 24-hour period in September.

Mores's family may have been infected, but there was no reported mortality from the epidemic. While the family was by no means rich, they had better living conditions—and possibly better luck—than some of their peers. Mores was seen as strong-minded, and thought highly of his own abilities, to a point at which family members said he acted like he knew more than the rabbis of Asbury Park.<sup>7</sup> His confidence was reflected in the many business ventures he would try his hand at after settling in New Jersey.

By 1920, his father, Joseph, a widower who had immigrated around the turn of the century, lived with them and worked as a butcher. But even as they became more involved in Asbury Park, which had a large Jewish population, in the wider world many viewed the family as outsiders: a 1920 census refers to their language merely as “Jewish.” One longtime friend said the family spoke Yiddish at home.

Mores became a naturalized citizen along with his wife, father, and eldest son, and registered with the Army as America faced World War I, but remained at home. Amid the hubbub of Asbury Park, Mores began a nondescript coal distribution business along the Jersey Shore, an effort that would be transformed into something incredible by his youngest son. Mores continued to work through the war, opening his first butchery down the street from where his father had worked. His children were

taught in the public school system of Asbury Park, with life continuing normally in their increasingly crowded neighborhood, where houses and store fronts were being built up.

The Hesses now resided on Asbury Avenue, which was a haven for immigrants. By 1920, Russian and Swedish were both spoken on the 1100 block, where the Hesses lived. Their stone house, one down from the corner, stood a proud three stories tall with a welcoming porch.

Mores's business expanded as he opened two stores and built another house on Asbury Avenue, delving into real estate. While Mores dabbled in many things but never had great success at any of them, he had strong entrepreneurial energy, trying his hand at produce, then the butchery, real estate, and ultimately coal. By 1926, Mores had moved completely into the coal industry, serving the city's growing needs. Though somewhat erratic, Mores's business endeavors likely set the tone for hard work and self-reliance for his sons and daughter.

Meanwhile, Asbury Park was changing. Cars were becoming popular, bringing the wealthy from the cities to the summertime resort, as the New York and Long Branch railroads continued to cart large crowds from New York City and Philadelphia. The Hess family grew up as the area was in flux, with 13 miles of streets being paved, encompassing most of the city's major intersections. The crowds—which during the summer could reach 200,000 or more—flocked to the beach and to other entertainments, including local carousel rides and amusement parks. Even as they were buoyed by the incoming tourism, residents complained that the growing fleet of vehicles eroded the gravel roads when it rained and brought traffic accidents. Drains were placed around town so that gravel roads could be crossed in heavy rain. Growing traffic also demanded a paid fire department and a police department with a special traffic squad. Just blocks from the Hesses' home, the first "Hertz you-drive-it" opened, the birthplace of the eventual car rental giant and a symbol of the car's growing popularity. By 1928, the stultifying traffic congestion required Monmouth County to begin construction of a new highway to avoid a bottleneck in the center of Asbury Park.<sup>8</sup>

The crowds were not looking only for amusement park rides. On the glamorous beachfront, which had been redeveloped since the damaging 1917 fire, the nine-story Spanish-style residential Hotel Santander was built in 1928, next door to the estate of city founder James Bradley, a

manufacturing magnate. Screen actress Myrna Loy took up residence in the penthouse, while Eleanor Roosevelt was rumored to have rented a floor.

The stock market crash of 1929 didn't immediately bring the good times to an end for the beach town. While Wall Street faced panic and a selling off of assets 50 miles to the north, Asbury Park saw itself as a still-prosperous seaside retreat. The town was booming, with three local banks seeing their holdings rise to six times their value by 1931. To some degree, Asbury Park and its residents were initially insulated from the country's economic panic.

"A summer week-end in the city finds upwards of 100,000 motor cars within a square mile, a problem with which other cities much larger than this would not desire to contend," said a guide published in 1931, praising the city's advances. Municipal garbage collection was starting to cut down on dumping in the city, with ten trucks carrying trash to an incinerator plant. Phones were becoming popular, with 4,130 private lines and 7,120 pay stations in the city by 1931. Gas lines were laid beneath the city, with the gas customers rising 61 percent from 1930 to 1931. Despite the city founder's preference for gas lights, the Eastern New Jersey Power Company increased electrical output and built an 11-story office building, the Jersey coast's tallest building.



As Asbury Park's tourism boomed, Henry Hess, Mores's oldest son, became a manager at Shore Amusements. Eleven years older than Leon, Henry was the first out of the house as Leon graduated from high school.<sup>9</sup> The Great Depression would eventually reach the family. Leon would discuss going to the shore in the summer during low tide to dig up clams to sell to local restaurants and bars. The boys were lucky to make 50 or 75 cents a day from the digs. But it was another example of the family's work ethic and the hardships they endured. While tourists all around them enjoyed the beach and holiday fun, the Hesses found themselves struggling to make ends meet in the 1930s. As his high school years were drawing to a close, Leon was brought in to help with yet another of his father's fledgling businesses. The family was unable to send the youngest son to college, although the three oldest children had completed school. Mores went bankrupt during the Depression, and Leon hauled coal to families poorer than their own.<sup>10</sup>

The hard labor at the coal yard helped shape Leon's ethic of working long hours as he made deliveries through the weekends. "I worked for my father in a coal yard delivering coal," Leon recalled in a deposition five decades later. He would later joke in a rare interview that he got into oil because he was "basically lazy" and didn't want to carry around 100-pound bags of coal,<sup>11</sup> which were used for heat and power in the area.

Disheartened by the coal business, where the returns for hauling 100-pound bags were slim, Leon made a critical switch to delivering fuel oil. He saw an opportunity and bet on oil instead of coal as the more economical way to get energy. He would find buyers for the residual oil that refiners didn't want. So, in his own words, he started a "little oil company" in 1933, when he was just 19 years old.

"I bought a secondhand truck, an oil truck, for \$350, in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and started a heating oil company and built it up over a period of years," he said, reflecting on his early days in business during a 1986 deposition. Some other accounts peg the truck at even more of a steal—according to some, he bought the truck in North Carolina, for just \$24.60. Whether it cost just \$25 or more than 10 times that, the truck became the most widely recognized hallmark of his business. He would have a miniature version of it in his office, and it would be the first of the Hess toy trucks that would become ubiquitous in some family households. Ninety years later the truck would be fully restored and polished, and stand as a reminder of the past in the lobby of his multibillion-dollar company's headquarters.

Leon had a vision that New Jersey's steel companies, its manufacturers like Johnson & Johnson, and the state's other prominent businesses could use Number 6 fuel oil, a product much like today's residual oil, that others were just dumping. With just a little boiling or light refining, he found, the oil could fetch a premium price. The seven-year-old 615-gallon truck would be used to collect the fuel—which was also known as black oil—from area refiners and repurpose it as a cleaner alternative to coal.

As New Jersey faced the economic depression, Leon was among millions struggling, trying to launch his fledgling fuel delivery business. With his strategy in place for getting residual oil on the cheap to customers, he was able to turn a profit and buy up more trucks.

By 1938, Leon had amassed about 10 trucks and moved the business to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, where he bought a piece of land on the



waterfront, purchased some secondhand oil storage tanks, and started an oil storage terminal on the Raritan River.

The Hess family moved from Asbury Park to nearby Loch Arbour, buying a \$16,000 house. His sister, Rebecca, then called Betty, worked as a teacher, and Leon and Harry continued to live at home. Henry, the eldest, had moved to New York City, where he worked as an insurance counselor and lived with his wife, Ada, and son, Robert.

As Leon's business empire expanded in Middlesex County, New Jersey, he met David Wilentz, who was becoming a political heavyweight in the region. Leon respected the man greatly, called him governor<sup>12</sup> (an elected position he toyed with running for but never actually achieved). Leon's connection to Wilentz was critical in helping to shape his success. Wilentz would become his friend, adviser, and, ultimately, father-in-law and help support Leon's transformation from "lazy" coal-hauler to oil baron.



Against a backdrop of unemployment and breadlines, voters were incensed by headlines insinuating that the Republican-dominated Middlesex County Board of Freeholders, a local governing body, was corrupt and misspending the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

Behind the headlines in local papers was David Wilentz, a 35-year-old Democrat who had taken over a fairly hapless political organization, the Middlesex County Democratic Party. The son of Latvian immigrants who owned a wholesale tobacco business, David had a passion for making the political system more just. The third of six children, David had grown up in Perth Amboy. After finishing high school, he worked for a local newspaper as a copy boy and sports reporter. Commuting at night to New York University, he studied law and was admitted to the bar. He served in World War I as an Army lieutenant. Upon returning from the war, he immersed himself in the world of New Jersey politics and married Lena Goldman, the daughter of Russian immigrants.

In 1929, Wilentz, who was elected the county's Democratic chairman, ordered an audit of the Republican Board of Freeholders' expenditures, which was then reviewed by a grand jury. The grand jury failed to return indictments of any of the politicians.

Still, the whiff of corruption was strong and roiled the dissatisfied public. Wilentz, who at that time was serving as the city attorney of

Perth Amboy, leveraged this dissatisfaction to his party's advantage in the 1929 election. He seized upon a small detail to paint a picture of a political elite that was out of touch with the populace: the freeholders had been giving away engraved fountain pens with their own names on them—an expense that Wilentz made sure was perceived as frivolous.

The fountain pen scandal led his party to victory in the county. This 1929 success was an early building block of a political machine that would last for 50 years, during which only one Republican, Dwight Eisenhower, ever won an election in Middlesex County,<sup>13</sup> where Wilentz anointed local politicians, governors, and even senators.

As a result of Wilentz's efforts for the party, Hudson County Democratic boss Frank "I am the law" Hague recommended him for appointment as attorney general by Governor A. Harry Moore.<sup>14</sup> Moore appointed Wilentz to succeed William Stevens as attorney general in January 1934. In a political system in which the currency was a few words from the right person, the value of Wilentz's network was rising. He and his wife, Lena, and their three children, Robert, Warren, and Norma, moved to a larger house in Perth Amboy. While David's parents had immigrated, and he was just one generation removed from the experience similar to the one Mores Hess had, Lena's family was more established, and together, the Wilentzes developed a comfortable home life.

Upon his appointment as attorney general of New Jersey, he began immediately to make his mark on the state's political landscape. He wielded wide-ranging power, naming lawyers to boards like the state highway commission, as he became a kingmaker in the party, able to boost or halt political careers. Following an investigation into prosecutorial failings, Wilentz was also appointed to serve as prosecutor of Monmouth County, replacing Jonas Tumen, who was charged with "misdemeanors and nonfeasance."

Just a year into his tenure as attorney general and months into being Monmouth's prosecutor, he was in the courtroom trying his first capital case—the kidnapping of aviator Charles Lindbergh's 20-month-old son from his home in Hopewell Township. The child had been abducted from Lindbergh's home, and posters of the dimpled baby were highly publicized during a 10-week search for the boy. The family paid a huge ransom—\$50,000—in exchange for false information on the child's

whereabouts. Ultimately, he was found dead in Hopewell Township. A nation that had celebrated Lindbergh as a hero just a few years before was in shock. Wilentz was tapped to try the case, and he would become a celebrity in the process.

An elaborate case with over 100 witnesses and truckloads of evidence, this was the prosecution that would make Wilentz's career. Bronx housepainter and carpenter Bruno Richard Hauptmann stood accused of the 1932 crime, after he was linked to ransom money that Lindbergh had paid. While Hauptmann repeatedly proclaimed his innocence, Wilentz described him as "Public Enemy No. 1, an animal lower than the lowest form." Lindbergh, who became world-famous in 1927 with his solo flight from Long Island to Paris, brought star power to the trial, which garnered national and even international attention, and was called "the Crime of the Century" (an overused term, to be sure, but this was one of the first trials involving both a horrific act and a celebrity in an era of rapt media attention). In a statement in court that was printed in full, spanning two pages of the *New York Times*, Wilentz called for the death penalty for Hauptmann. "For all these months since October 1934, not during one moment has there been anything that has come to the surface of life that has indicated anything but the guilt of this defendant, Bruno Richard Hauptmann, and no one else. Every avenue of evidence, every little thoroughfare that we traveled along, every one leads to the same door: Bruno Richard Hauptmann."

Wilentz gained notice for his aptitude and zealotry in the courtroom. He ultimately won the conviction that sent Hauptmann to the electric chair in 1936. The case was widely examined by legal scholars in the generation that followed, as Hauptmann's widow continued to insist upon his innocence. But Anna Hauptmann's attempts to overturn the verdict after her husband's death—the last of the cases decided by a federal court in Philadelphia just hours before Wilentz died in 1988—were all unsuccessful in reversing the verdict.

Wilentz and his wife, Lena, were celebrities after the trial, with their photos appearing in newspapers all over the country as they traveled. Speculation arose that Wilentz would run for governor, but he insisted he would prefer to stay behind the scenes. New Jersey, he quipped, was not ready for a Jewish governor.

Instead, he was appointed to a second term as attorney general. Even after he left office to establish his own law firm, many people still referred to him as “general.” For his party, he was a commanding officer, pulling people aside and telling them to run for office, and discovering untapped political talent in hidden corners.

Beyond his sharp rhetoric, Wilentz had gotten a reputation during the trial for cutting a conspicuous figure, with cameras outside the courtroom capturing his sassafras-colored felt hat. Wilentz stopped nearly daily for a shave and a shoeshine at Sikes Pharmacy in Perth Amboy<sup>15</sup> and demanded that those around him rise to the occasion in their dress as well. When he backed Richard Hughes for governor, he joked that he could get the former judge elected if he bought a blue suit, black shoes, and white shirt. “I told him he had to throw those damned brown shoes away,” Wilentz said.<sup>16</sup>

Funded by David’s success, the Wilentz family had hired a live-in maid, and now lived in relative comfort on a street that also housed the head of one of New Jersey’s chemical companies. In the summer, the family would go to Deal, near Asbury Park, where they had a summer house and would hobnob with others in New Jersey’s upper echelon. The family had membership to the Hollywood Golf Club—which was quickly gaining stature and land as the nearby Deal Golf and Country Club faced financial difficulties and was forced to sell its fourth, fifth, and sixth holes to its neighbor in 1910. The club membership included families from New York who worked for Wall Street firms. In 1938, Wilentz relinquished one of his many roles, giving up the state Democratic party chairmanship, but still maintaining his role as attorney general and serving as a critical cog in the party’s machine.

David’s sons, Warren and Robert, attended Princeton and the University of Virginia, while his daughter, Norma, went to Wellesley. At the time, Norma Wilentz had a reputation for being a very bright young woman, known for being outgoing at the club. She had a circle of summer friends, and a lifestyle that was focused upon making her an ideal wife for a leading doctor or a lawyer, like her father, while her brothers were trained in the law.



Leon had already begun expanding his business beyond trucks when he joined the Army in 1942, one of millions of men who signed on to the

war effort after Pearl Harbor. David offered to watch over Leon's terminals in his absence, and make sure that they were well cared for.<sup>17</sup>

Wilentz was widely known for his role in counseling politicians and luminaries across the state. He had gone from being an environmental lawyer to becoming a trusted adviser and caretaker of the business for Leon, who was 20 years his junior. Both men loved spending time at the Monmouth Park racetrack, where Leon would often breakfast while the trainers put the horses through their morning workouts. When Leon took an ownership stake in the racetrack, a room was eventually named after Wilentz.

Both shared an attention to detail in their own and employees' dress, at times pushing their own fastidious need for order onto others (Leon more than once gave his executives new socks after noticing their sagging hosiery). Both balanced long hours with significant time spent with family—for Wilentz, the dedication was shown by being home for nightly dinners. Leon was remembered as an available ear for his children and even grandchildren. Both were able to use their political skills to enrich themselves.

But both shared, perhaps more than anything, the ability to talk with anyone, whether it was a Republican foe, a taxicab driver, or a dictator halfway around the world. Through this candor, they were able to connect with those who ultimately helped them leave striking legacies. Both men created webs of connections across New Jersey and, in Leon's case, around the world, which helped them succeed.

Possibly with Wilentz's help, Leon garnered attention from Chase Manhattan Bank. He gave his underwriting business entirely to the firm, run by David Rockefeller. He was exclusive, he later said, because of the effort they put into the relationship. "They're the only ones who ever paid any attention to me," Leon said later. "The rest never took me seriously."<sup>18</sup> The bank loans from Chase helped back Leon's earliest truck purchases as he expanded.



While Leon became far better traveled and connected than his own father ever could have imagined, he retained a deep love for New Jersey.

"While his work took him all over the world, the place he loved best and where he always came back was the Jersey Shore. Asbury Park,

where he was born, Loch Arbour, where we would drive from Perth Amboy every Sunday to visit his parents, and in the summers, the house on Roosevelt Avenue in Deal, where he could smoke his cigars and barbecue every Sunday night,” his daughter Constance said in a 2011 speech upon his posthumous induction into the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

“Dad is now buried in the shadow of the symbol of what he created, the Hess building in Woodbridge, near his refinery and in New Jersey.”

While Leon Hess left a deep legacy in New Jersey—with his name across oil terminals, gas stations, and a refinery, the town he hailed from now stands as a shadow of the way it looked when he was growing up. No longer a vacation getaway for elite New Yorkers, the town shows signs of wear, from the carousel on the shore to the house Leon lived in. If Asbury Park is known now, it’s primarily for the Stone Pony bar that helped make Bruce Springsteen a music superstar.

The Santander Hotel and other buildings stand covered in scaffolding now, as an effort is under way to renovate the area, parts of which fell into disrepair in the decades that followed the progress of the seashore town in the 1920s and 1930s. The area still shows signs of damage from Superstorm Sandy.

On Asbury Avenue, where Mores Hess first saw his family and businesses grow, it’s hard to imagine the decades of hard-won success he found here. Today, some driveways are filled with old mattresses, discarded couches, and other refuse. Windows are blocked with plywood, the results of Sandy, which tore through the area in 2012, and of neglect.

Two houses have been torn down, recalls Josephine Hammary, whose family moved onto the street in 1957. “White Italians and Jews lived here,” but the property values sank over the years and those immigrant groups moved out, ceding their houses to rentals and Section 8 tenants who failed to maintain them, she said.

The Hess family sold their house to one of Hammary’s relatives, and moved on.



Leon stood next to his son, John, at his wedding to Susan Kessler. It was 1984 and the ceremony was in the family’s New York apartment. Leon wasn’t only the groom’s father, he was also his best man, one sign of the

close ties that remained between Leon and his only son—a bond that still showed years after his father’s death, with a son who has been known to get his Starbucks coffee order as “Leon.” He would leave his father’s office untouched for a long time after his passing, a living historical record of Leon’s last day in the office.

Leon’s brother Henry had served as best man for his own son Robert, when Robert married nearly 25 years earlier. The Hesses were a close-knit family—they spent time together not out of obligation but out of general affinity, and they were fiercely loyal to one another. For Leon, his life’s ventures were centered on family, whether it was the family business he created, the fatherly approach he brought to the New York Jets football team, or his actual family, who remain intensely protective of his memory and his legacy.

Leon made sure that all the Hesses gathered at least twice a year without fail: once in the spring for Passover, recognizing their Jewish heritage, and in November at Thanksgiving, celebrating the American traditions of football and turkey. While there were other vacations—in the Bahamas in the winter or on the Jersey Shore for summer months to escape sweltering Manhattan, holidays with the in-laws or trips with grandchildren to London—the major Passover seder and Thanksgiving celebration showed the Hesses as a unified whole, generations assembled together.

Through these gatherings, Leon passed along the lessons he had learned from his father-in-law and father to his children, and eventually, grandchildren. He strove to impart a sense of loyalty, the value of hard work, and humility. While Leon managed a company that was growing into a multibillion-dollar enterprise, making him one of America’s richest men, he still found it important to bring his family together. He created a family atmosphere at the company, where it was clear to all who worked there you had to be well dressed and clean-shaven to please the boss. That family approach extended to the football team, where Thanksgiving gatherings after practice eventually expanded to include Jets players and staff along with their families. Leon played the role of patriarch across several platforms.

“He was an extraordinary father and role model,” Marlene Hess, his second daughter, remembered in her eulogy for her father. “His standards for himself and for our family were high. He couldn’t tolerate ‘deadbeats’

or liars. He was a man of his word, so we had to be, too. He expected the best of himself and also of all of us. He worked hard—[and] so did we. He cared deeply for his fellow man, and instilled that in us, too.” The lessons, daughter Constance Hess remembered, were clear: Treasure a good name. Hold your cards close to your chest. Love is unconditional. If you have to talk to the press, make sure that you aren’t the story.

Rarely photographed by the press and not quoted in profile pieces, Leon tried not to call attention to himself or to his family, though he would speak about his business. “He worked hard to keep his personal life private,” Constance said in a 2011 speech.

Leon combined his father’s entrepreneurial spirit, his father-in-law’s political savvy, and his own smarts to succeed in a hardscrabble business at a time when many were failing. But perhaps the role he enjoyed most of all was that of father figure, creating new families beyond just his immediate relations.



While it was Mores Hess’s financial struggles and failing coal business that opened the door to the oil business for Leon, Mores’s earlier efforts starting shops in Asbury Park and trying his hand at real estate showed a willingness to try anything. That sense of daring, that willingness to innovate, the vision to see opportunities others had missed or weren’t bold enough to exploit—just the sheer chutzpah of believing in yourself enough to risk your livelihood on what you could dream possible—that was something Leon inherited in spades. While other boys might’ve looked at the many ways Mores tried his hand at business after business and blanched at the risk, Leon was brave enough to pick up the entrepreneurial torch, striking out on his own even in the depths of the Great Depression. Where did he get such confidence? Some who knew both Leon and his son, John, say that John is less of a risk-taker than Leon, perhaps a natural outcome when you are trying to preserve wealth rather than building it.

But Leon was not only an innovator, he was also extremely focused on details and appearances. “The first thing I look at on a tanker is the engine room bilge,” he told a reporter for *BusinessWeek* in 1987. “Clean bilges denote good housekeeping.” Right from the start, he made sure his trucks were kept clean, and employees learned early that working at



a Hess facility meant painting and repainting to make everything look like new, whether it was huge storage tanks or the white curb on the Hess service stations. Leon realized early on that having the cleanest, safest-seeming gas stations was not only aesthetically pleasing, it could also provide a business advantage. As the family car and car trips were becoming more prevalent, and as women began driving more, it could be an easy choice for those looking for quick service and clean bathrooms, giving him a potential leg up on rivals who did not put as much emphasis on appearances.

Mores also instilled family loyalty in his sons—unlike his brothers, Leon turned down a scholarship to college to work for the family business, bringing it back to profitability after his parents' bankruptcy. In turn, Leon made sure that Mores always had a role in his business—his father was employed by Hess Corp. into the 1950s. Even as his father aged, he still wrote checks for the company—which sometimes had pitfalls. One accountant remembers when an elderly Mores signed all of the week's checks on the wrong side, forcing them to all be redone.

All of Mores and Ethel's children went on to successful careers, some of them in New Jersey, some heading elsewhere to try their luck. Henry Hess, the oldest, had two children and moved to Miami Beach, where he worked as a salesman, and then vice president of an insurance company. His son Robert would attend Yale for his undergraduate and doctoral degrees, and became a scholar, specializing in African studies. Robert would eventually rise to become president of Brooklyn College, a position he held from 1979 to 1992. Robert was brought in to lead the public college after his predecessor was ousted. The prior president had served through a decade of upheaval—the college's enrollment had risen to 35,400 students because of an open admission policy that lasted until 1974, and then crashed to just 17,500 two years later.<sup>19</sup> Robert acknowledged that the college was a mess when he took over in 1979, and led it to a dramatic resurgence, working to smooth racial tensions and improve its academic offerings. Robert died of lymphoma in 1992.

(Beyond his tenure at Brooklyn College, Robert and his wife left the physical gift of The Hess Collection on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa and the Robert L. Hess Collection on the Continent of Africa, both of which were donated to the school's library after his wife's death in 2015. Robert's own children followed that more academic tradition, with two

becoming professors, and one a teacher, while only one pursued business, going into accounting.)

Harry, the next eldest son, remained in New Jersey and had one daughter before eventually retiring to Florida.

The sole girl in the household, Rebecca, known as Betty, lived in Asbury Park and Deal for most of her life. She married Joseph Gilbert, and she became a teacher. Joseph and Betty had one son, Miles.



While Leon may have shared many of his father's traits, the role-model who had the most influence over his life and his fortune was David Wilentz. A consummate politician and talker, David had the connections and the ability to show Leon the many ways in which the political system could be used for gain. Leon relied on David as one of his most trusted advisers.

When Leon left for World War II, putting David in charge of his business, David's daughter Norma was newly married to Samuel Feder, a Philadelphia native who had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard College before attending Harvard Medical School. Samuel served as Chief of Medicine at a station hospital on the Pacific front during the war. While Leon was in his early days of launching his fuel business, Samuel was a pathology fellow and medical and radiology resident at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, before doing a fellowship in psychiatry, the field he ultimately chose. The couple had one child, Constance, born in 1944.

Norma's marriage to Samuel failed, and not long after the war David introduced Norma to Leon. He would later tell stories of borrowing the money to pay for a suit for their first date. The daughter of the attorney general, who had grown up with a great deal of privilege, was of a different class from the owner of the fledgling fuel business. But the two quickly bridged the gap, and David had blessed their union. A contemporary of Norma's remembers that at the time she met Leon he was driving an oil truck, but was welcomed by the Wilentzes.

Leon married Norma in 1947, and they maintained a close relationship with her parents, taking vacations together and including them actively in their lives. Leon's respect for David Wilentz was shown in business as well, where the father-in-law was brought on as a board member.

This second marriage for Norma, who was seven years younger than her husband, would be a lasting union. She was known for her intellect and strong support of Leon. New York Jets executive Steven Gutman tells a story about attending a play with Leon and Norma, and Leon becoming particularly animated when he was introduced to one of the comely ladies starring in the production. When he turned back to his wife as the starlet walked away, Norma said simply, with a smile: “I forgive you, Leon.”

“If Norma had been born in the era that we’re in today, no glass ceiling would’ve kept her from being whatever she wanted to become,” said Gutman, who socialized with the couple outside of his Jets responsibilities. Norma, he recalled, was the most outstanding of David’s three children, though her brothers had more celebrated careers.

David’s two sons were close to their father and their brother-in-law, Leon, as well. After graduating from Perth Amboy High School, Warren Wilentz, the elder son, attended the University of Virginia, interrupting his college education to fight in World War II, where he served in France and Germany before returning to school and graduating in 1946. He went to Rutgers for law school, and launched a career that resembled his father’s—by 1956 he was prosecutor for Middlesex County, New Jersey. Like Leon and David, Warren joined in the singing at family gatherings and was known to serenade the crowd with renditions of “Yea Boo” and “Heart of My Hearts.”

While starting to stake out his place in the political machine that his father had run in New Jersey, Warren was known for getting people jobs, occasionally passing them along to Hess Corp. When his cousin, Seymour Miller, approached him, looking to get out of routine accounting work and into something more interesting, Wilentz told him that his brother-in-law Leon was hiring and connected the two—Seymour would stay with Hess for four decades, serving in financial roles at the company. Warren later went into private practice, joining his father’s firm at Wilentz, Goldman and Spitzer. In that capacity, he became a trusted adviser to Hess Corp., providing legal guidance as needed.

David’s younger son, Robert, attended Princeton, taking two years off for the Navy, and then graduated from Harvard and Columbia Law School. Like his father and brother, he initially pursued politics, before going into law. Robert N. Wilentz was elected to the New Jersey Assembly

in 1965 and served until 1969. Like his father, Robert considered running for governor, but opted against it in 1973.

Instead, Governor Brendan Byrne appointed Robert in 1979 to be chief justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey, despite never having been a judge before. He held the position for nearly two decades, arguing for fairer courts free of gender discrimination. “There’s no room for gender bias in our system,” Justice Wilentz said. “There’s no room for the funny joke and the not-so-funny joke, there’s no room for conscious, inadvertent, sophisticated, clumsy, or any other kind of gender bias.”<sup>20</sup>

Robert’s court was known for its fairness and effectiveness in generating regulations (and getting the political machinery to support his decisions), and also for the consensus he was able to build. Through Robert’s smarts and persuasive demeanor, he was often able to achieve unanimous decisions. “Many consensuses were reached during 10-hour discussions in the Chief Justice’s chambers, in which he would ply the justices with pickled herring, lox, and coffee cake,” the *New York Times* wrote at the time of his death.

Robert’s effectiveness as a leader drew on the Wilentz family’s tradition of political leadership—Constance quipped that it was inherited, either through genes or cigar smoke. While Leon was never a politician, he also appropriated some of David’s leadership style, whether it was attention to sartorial details, a penchant for hard work and long days, or the ability to balance family and an all-encompassing job.

David and Leon continued to share a deep connection until David’s death in 1988, when those who remembered him recalled their special bond. “He didn’t mind rich people. He liked them, but the ones he really liked started out poor, like his son-in-law Leon, whom he loved,”<sup>21</sup> said Robert Wilentz, speaking in a eulogy for his father.



Hess Corp. was fully established as Leon’s first child before he met Norma, and he spent long evenings and weekends dedicated to the company’s birth and early upbringing. At the time of their marriage, Ethel, Leon’s mother, was said to have warned Norma that “All Hess men are strong, so don’t let him get away with anything.”<sup>22</sup> In their marriage, though, he adopted a more Wilentz-style balance of family and career.

After they wed in 1947, Norma supported his career while prevailing upon him to spend more time with their family, which at first included Constance, Norma's daughter from her previous marriage. Their family then grew with the birth of Marlene in 1948 and John in 1954. All three were treated equally as Leon's own children. "If you were with Marlene and Connie and John, those were his children. The fact Connie was not his biological child didn't matter to him," said Gutman.

Just as David Wilentz had balanced a demanding career with dinner at home each evening, Leon strove to do the same, sometimes returning to his office for long hours at night after spending time with his wife and children. Norma and Leon formed a partnership in which she was his closest, most trusted partner in navigating problems, even in business.<sup>23</sup>

"You knew when you were in their presence that they were a team and that there was a great deal of love and respect between them," Gutman said. "She could count on Leon for being a kind of father and provider and life creator. And he could count on her for making sure she took care of all the family-related obligations and represented them well."

As a young girl in the 1950s, Marlene said she remembered wearing her pajamas, robe, and slippers and returning to Leon's office with him after dinner. This was before the company's headquarters had moved to Woodbridge, and it was still based in trailers in Perth Amboy. He would let her sit at the desk of Bernie Deverin, the company's vice president who shared an office with Leon, and play with the adding machine. Then he would nod at her, and she would get them each a bottle of Coke for a dime out of the building's vending machine, and then they would talk while drinking the cold soda.<sup>24</sup>

The company remained in the background of the family's activities, with Hess corporate values and Hess family values of philanthropy, hard work, and total commitment deeply intertwined.

For his role as a father, the billionaire magnate is remembered for highly ordinary things: taking his children to the office, attending swim meets, and making a legendary fish soup at holiday celebrations—a family secret combo of the freshest catch from the New Jersey docks, for which there is no exact recipe. The family would spend every Sunday afternoon together, either driving to visit the Hesses in Loch Arbour or going to the rides, one of which was operated by Ethel Hess's relatives. The family would also go on vacations, joining David and Lena Wilentz.

Outside of the office, Leon impressed those around him with his ability to be there for his children while still running an increasingly major company—at summer swim meets, he would arrive at the beach club just in time to see John swim, and would then get back into his car, where a driver was waiting to whisk him away. The ability to coordinate timing impeccably in an age before cell phones or text messages was perceived as unique, and created a mystique around Leon as he balanced parenting and corporate life.

Leon had a lighter side at home, too: home from college on vacation, Marlene came in to find her bed shortsheeted (a practice that involves folding the sheets in a way that the unsuspecting sleeper is unable to fully stretch out in bed). She assumed her brother John was responsible for the prank, but didn't complain. The next night, it happened again, and she confronted John, who denied it. The third night, her bed was again shortsheeted, and the lamp from the bedside table was tucked into the sheets. "I started to plead with John to stop the torture, only to realize that the newspaper was shaking in my father's hands and he was laughing hysterically. I couldn't believe it—and always wondered where he learned to shortsheet a bed," Marlene said in her reminiscences about her father.

Despite their relative privilege, his children recall a normal home life, with regular generational struggles. Constance remembers challenging his beliefs in the 1960s. He would get angry, and send his children to their rooms, but later would always come to apologize following one of his favorite lessons: "Turn the page."<sup>25</sup>

On weekends, Leon sometimes made time to go to the Hollywood Country Club in Deal, where he had a standing 10 A.M. Sunday appointment with the pro—the spot was his whether or not he was able to go, and the pro was his main opponent, as he didn't often play golf socially, according to club members. He would occasionally join John for a round of golf, but he never became a regular player.

Leon also made time for religion. "Leon Hess loved coming to the synagogue and participated in a major way in our endeavors. Whenever I called on him, he would say, 'What's on your mind, rabbi?' The truth is, whatever the request, the result was kindness, compassion, and generosity," said Senior Rabbi David H. Lincoln of the Park Avenue synagogue.<sup>26</sup> The synagogue, where Ralph Lauren is a congregant, has a

dress code described as “Chanel,” and membership dues that can exceed \$5,000 a year per family, for those who want access to prime seating at holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Leon was known to be in temple for all of the high holy days on the Jewish calendar. Writer Earl Ganz tells the story of the ribbing he took from a group that included Leon and David Wilentz (who met for coffee at a back booth in the Busy Bee diner) for not knowing what tefillin were. The group ended up walking Earl to a nearby synagogue and solemnly wrapping the straps that held the small leather boxes used for morning prayers around him with a prayer shawl. “With that beard he looks more Jewish than any of us,” Leon said.<sup>27</sup>

Leon and Norma would also go to horse races at Monmouth Park, joining her parents, and ultimately bringing their children and grandchildren. One report tells of Leon betting \$3 or \$4 on a race and giving away the tickets. While Leon was a big supporter of the arts, including making large donations to Lincoln Center, his visits to the Metropolitan Opera were punctuated, during football season, with intermissions spent tuning in to the radio to catch sports scores.

The Hesses’ social life largely spun around Leon’s growing business network, as they entertained bankers and colleagues at home, indoctrinating their children—especially John—in the corporation’s culture and preparing John to run the rapidly expanding business.

It was fitting that for a 1962 costume party, Leon and Norma arrived dressed as Hess terminal employees, complete with starched white uniforms and hard hats. While the couple was often at the center of social events, Leon wasn’t shy about wrapping up evenings singing “Good-night Ladies” to signal guests that it was time to leave, a tradition he had appropriated from David Wilentz.

From an early age, John was brought in as the heir apparent of the company. By the time John was a teenager, Leon was showing him the ropes of the company more actively. On one occasion, Norma called the mother of one of John’s friends, inviting him along on a trip to see oilfields and equipment. He joined, and the pair flew across Oklahoma, staying in hotels and going with Leon to review oil wells during the day. As the company grew, John was sent to the Hovensa refinery, where he rotated through various departments at the Caribbean plant.

In college, John studied Arabic and Farsi, preparing for a career leading a multinational oil company, ready to jump into international negotiations and maintain the connections his father had first made, despite his Jewish heritage, in the Arab world. After getting his undergraduate degree at Harvard, John attended business school, striking up connections that would help him guide the company, taking an energy economics class that included energy economist Daniel Yergin, who would later write a seminal history of the oil industry. He also met Andrew Tisch, son of Laurence Tisch, another self-made millionaire. After finishing school, John went directly to Hess, and began working 12-hour days alongside his father. John and his wife, Susan (who, like her mother-in-law, would marry a Hess after a first marriage failed), had three children of their own.

Like Robert Wilentz, Leon valued women's rights even if he wasn't exactly a feminist. He was supportive of Constance's and Marlene's careers, though it was always clear that John would take over the family business. His daughters captured two other values of the Hess and Wilentz families: public service and philanthropy.

Constance graduated from Barnard, and then worked at a stock photography company. She married Sankey Williams, a doctor. She returned to school, earning an MBA at the University of Pennsylvania, and then waited for her daughters to graduate from high school before diving into politics.

She ran successfully for a seat in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in 1997. She served one term, and was elected to the Pennsylvania Senate four years later.

While in the House, Constance was seen as a champion of children's causes and an advocate for education spending. Like Leon, Constance was connected in political circles, serving as the Pennsylvania co-chair of Bill Bradley's 2000 presidential campaign. Also like her father, she was known as a moderate, and although she was a Democrat by party affiliation, she got Republican support and campaign endorsements because of her bipartisan record.

When taking the oath of office for the senate, she was joined by family members, including Wilentz and Hess cousins, as well as Norma, Marlene, and John Hess, who was CEO of Amerada Hess at the time, but still attended his sister's swearing-in. His presence was more evidence of the family's extended commitment to one another.



Marlene went to Mills College in California, and then joined Cannon Properties, a company that developed screenplays for motion-picture producer Cannon Group. She had a son and daughter before divorcing her husband. Marlene became a vice president of corporate communications and the manager of public services marketing at the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York. During her time as a single mother, she credits Leon with special support. She married James Zirin, a lawyer, in 1990. Marlene became director of not-for-profit relations at Chase and then managing director of global philanthropic services at JPMorgan.

At the bank that had first extended a hand to her father, she became the face of charitable giving, forming partnerships with the nonprofit sector, working with the Children's Defense Fund and New York City Department of Health to found a child vaccination program. Her personal philanthropic endeavors are extensive and range from membership on the boards of the Museum of Modern Art, Sesame Street Workshop, and organizations her father also supported like Rockefeller University, Lincoln Center Theater, and the Metropolitan Opera.



Leon worked to instill commitments to philanthropy and public service in his grandchildren, as well—the group includes a teacher and several who are trying their hand in real estate or finance. But this generation has come of age in a world far from Leon's own Depression-era New Jersey. And while John faced a smooth path to ascension at Hess, the path at the company for his son Michael is more complex.

“Grandpa did more than just hold you up. If he loved you, he included you in his day-to-day life,” remembered Marlene's son, Peter Hess Friedland. Peter recalled a grandfather who encouraged close familial ties, and cultivated a genuine friendship with his grandson, watching sports broadcasts over deli pickles and pastrami, either in New York, Deal, or even on annual trips to the Bahamas.

While the grandchildren's world was far removed from his own tough childhood, he managed to connect with them, becoming known as a genial jokester at brunches, football games, and through letters that he signed with a smiley face. Each was left a substantial inheritance: a million dollars in cash as well as other gifts controlled in trusts in both Leon's and Norma's will.

Peter, the oldest grandson, has tried his hand at a real estate venture and has begun to raise his own family.

John's son, Michael, followed in his own father's footsteps and is being groomed to take over the family business, which had grown by the time he was born to an enormous enterprise stretching through more than 20 countries and multiple U.S. states.

Michael and his two younger brothers went to Deerfield Academy, an elite boarding school in western Massachusetts. Once there, all three Hesses played an active role in the school—John's youngest son, William, was made "Captain Deerfield" for his school spirit and recalled being attracted to the intense sense of community. One of his brothers, he said, had a computer background of himself painted green, being driven around by the school's headmaster.<sup>28</sup>

After Deerfield, Michael and William went to Harvard while David attended Brown University. At Harvard, Michael attracted attention when he invited Paris Hilton to be the first woman of the year for the Harvard Lampoon's initial spoof of the traditional Hasty Pudding Woman of the Year event. The hotel heiress said at the time that Michael was a friend. He served as treasurer of the Lampoon, a semi-secret society that previously published a humor magazine.<sup>29</sup>

Michael then attended Harvard Business School, graduating in 2013, just as the school came under scrutiny in the *New York Times* for rifts between the haves and the have-nots. Michael's social media feeds, which included photos of lavish trips around the world, photographs of singer Mick Jagger close-up in concert, and courtside seats at a Knicks game, were among the evidence that some students used to prove a growing class divide at the school. Michael, whose father was particularly active in fundraising for Harvard Business School, became a target in these discussions about class differences, and others suspected he was a member of Section X, an elite group of students who took particularly lavish vacations and threw storied parties.

Still, those who know Michael say that many of the trips were related to efforts to prepare him for leadership at Hess. Like his father, he is being schooled alongside other young scions of fortune—he is often pictured with the son of Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein (Goldman has been the main bank for Hess under John's tenure). Beyond his graduation coinciding with class concerns at Harvard, it also

came as Hess was reorganizing under pressure from investors like Elliott Management. These factors might have influenced the decision to have Michael seek employment elsewhere, rather than going straight to Hess after business school, as his father did.

John would buy a \$5.6 million three-bedroom apartment for Michael to use for a time in Tribeca. John himself resides at 778 Park Avenue, where residents have included Brooke Astor and William F. Buckley. The address is not far from his father's last Manhattan apartment, at 625 Park Avenue, which sold for upward of \$17 million after Leon and Norma died.

Michael spent time working as an associate at private equity firm KKR & Co. in New York (his father serves on their board), and holding junior positions at Goldman Sachs. Michael has also joined the board of a private school in the Kingdom of Jordan. "Michael is a young gentleman with an amazing personality and a great network whom we believe will add a youthful perspective to our board," Kings Academy Chairman of the Board of Trustees Karim Kavar said in the announcement of Michael's promotion to the body. Michael was also recognized for his knowledge of Jordan, finance, and Arab culture.

While succession plans for after John retires remain in question, many at Hess still think Michael will be a viable candidate to succeed his father.

