

Leon H. Charney, Investor, Cable TV Host and Peace Broker, Is Dead at 77

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL MARCH 22, 2016



Leon H. Charney accepting a New York Emmy Award in 2014. Neilson Barnard/Getty Images

Leon H. Charney, an entertainment lawyer who expanded his portfolio to become an author, a television host, a real estate mogul and a back-channel peace broker between Egypt and Israel, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 77.

His death was confirmed by his wife, Tzili Charney, who said he had had several seizures.

Mr. Charney had hosted “The Leon Charney Report,” a weekly public affairs program on cable television in the New York area, since 1998. His law clients included the comedian Jackie Mason and, briefly, the convicted Israeli spy Jonathan J. Pollard. A self-made billionaire, he bought and developed storied Manhattan properties, wrote several books and donated millions to hospitals and other charitable causes.

But his most celebrated role was as a “spy for peace,” as he described himself, helping President Jimmy Carter broker the Camp David peace accords that ended hostilities between Israel and Egypt in 1978. Mr. Charney helped arrange the secret talks that brought together the Egyptian president, Anwar el-Sadat, and the Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, to forge the historic agreement.

Mr. Charney had gotten to know foreign officials while counsel to Senator Vance Hartke, an Indiana Democrat, and had worked with Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel to help hundreds of Jews emigrate from the former Soviet Union. Based on the contacts he developed, he said, he was asked by Mr. Carter to help negotiate the first pact between an Arab state and Israel.

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In his first book, “Special Counsel” (1984), Mr. Charney wrote, “Most people think of policy-making flowing like quiet water with sober men smoothly producing wise decisions.” But, he said, that notion missed “the gap between the public image and the private reality” — the “informal and unpublicized backdoor channel” between the White House and foreign governments.

He expanded on his peace-brokering efforts in 1993 in the book “A Spy for Peace.” In 2014 he won a New York Emmy Award for his involvement in “Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace,” a documentary about the Camp David process.

The Middle East was also often on the agenda during Mr. Charney’s cable TV program. His guests included Mr. Carter as well as Israeli leaders and United Nations officials.

He kept a quotation from President John F. Kennedy framed in his Times Square office. It read, “When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters — one represents danger and the other represents opportunity.”

Mr. Charney was born on July 23, 1938, in Bayonne, N.J., and grew up poor, the son of a sewing supplies salesman who died young. He worked his way through Yeshiva University and Brooklyn Law School, gaining admission to the bar in 1965.

That year he made a run for public office but lost a Democratic primary for an Assembly seat from Manhattan.

Mr. Charney dabbled in politics again as treasurer for Assemblyman Herman D. Farrell’s 1985 campaign for mayor. But when Mr. Farrell, the Manhattan Democratic leader, accepted the support of the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, who had angered Jews with comments some called anti-Semitic, Mr. Charney quit in protest.

As an entertainment lawyer, he represented Jackie Mason in the late 1960s, after the entertainer ran afoul of Ed Sullivan by making what Mr. Sullivan considered an obscene gesture on his live television variety show. Among Mr. Charney’s other clients was the Broadway star John Raitt.

In 1995, Mr. Charney was among the lawyers defending the district attorney of Rockland County, Kenneth Gribetz, who had been accused of lavishing public funds on a mistress. Mr. Gribetz later pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges and was sentenced to probation.

Mr. Charney was dropped from Jonathan J. Pollard’s defense team after saying he would ask a federal court to deport his client to Israel. Mr. Pollard was convicted of spying for Israel, becoming the center of a 30-year diplomatic struggle between Israel, which demanded his release, and Washington, which refused. He was [released on parole](#) from a North Carolina prison last fall.

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A leading real estate investor, Mr. Charney in 1981 represented the Swiss buyers of One Times Square, the original Midtown home of The New York Times; it was sold to new buyers a year later. In 1992 he bid unsuccessfully for the bankrupt news agency United Press International.

The next year, with the owner of The New York Post, Peter S. Kalikow, in personal bankruptcy, Mr. Charney appeared in court offering to buy the paper's land and building for \$15 million. Instead, The Post went — briefly, as it turned out — to Abraham Hirschfeld, the quixotic parking garage kingpin.

Mr. Charney had parlayed what was a \$200 bank account when he was a young man into a fortune that Forbes at one point put at \$1 billion, ranking him No. 509 on the magazine's list of the richest Americans at the time.

As a philanthropist he donated \$10 million to the Division of Cardiology at New York University School of Medicine in 2002. It was renamed the Leon H. Charney Division of Cardiology. He also donated more than \$100 million to Haifa University in Israel.

Among his books was "The Mystery of the Kaddish" (2006). He was also an accomplished cantor.

He married Tzili Doron, an Israeli-born costume designer, in 1991. Besides his wife, his survivors include their twin sons, Mickey and Nati, and a sister, Bryna.

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