

## GEORGE ZERDIN MEDALIE, 1883-1946

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**I**N the early morning hours of March 5, 1946, Judge George Zerdin Medalie died in Albany, New York, of complications following a heart attack.

Death claimed George Medalie, lawyer, jurist and citizen-statesman, while he was at the zenith of his long career as a public servant; in this circumstance, at least, his friends and relatives could take some small measure of consolation to offset such a deeply felt loss. They knew that in his brief service as a judge of New York State's highest Bench, the Court of Appeals, to which he had been appointed only a little more than five months before, he had found a contentment and happiness surpassing anything he had yet enjoyed in his many public capacities.

### I

Like so many others who have fallen into the focus of public consciousness, George Medalie was born on the lower east side, on Henry Street in the year 1883. The son of Russian immigrant parents, Rabbi Aaron Medalie and Rachel Zerdin, he learned early in his days to be a Jew and an American, two heritages which as the years passed blended and fused into making the man. Of his Judaism and his Americanism he was ever proud, and he conducted himself in all his affairs with the dignity fully commensurate with this pride.

In material resources his parents were poor, and perhaps in compensation for this worldly lack they felt an added obligation to imbue their young son with the full richness of their culture, their traditions, and their character. And

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despite the fact that he reached financial comfort in later years, George Medalie will never be remembered, as are many, because he had achieved wealth and means. Rather he will be remembered for being first and foremost a servant to his community, to his people, to his state and nation, for being in all of his multi-faceted life a man of unequivocal integrity and of unfailing devotion to justice.

While still a boy he had his first contact with an institution—The Educational Alliance—that was in later years to become part of the great network of Jewish welfare agencies which he was to head. Here he spent much of his spare time participating in sports, social and club activities, and here, too, were lodged many sentimental attachments, for it was at the Educational Alliance that he first met his wife Carrie Kaplan, whom he married in 1910.

A student at Public School Number 2 and DeWitt Clinton High School, he was deemed worthy enough in his pursuits to be chosen for a Pulitzer scholarship, which enabled him to enter Columbia University. He was graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University in 1905, and then he attended Columbia Law School for two years, passing the Bar in the same year in which he finished his studies.

Pressed with the urgent necessity of making his own way, he took to teaching commercial law and other subjects at night school, while starting the beginnings of his own practice. Then, in 1910, he was appointed an assistant District Attorney on the staff of the then District Attorney Charles S. Whitman, who was later to become Governor of the State of New York.

After five years in this position, he joined with Isidor Wasservogel in the firm of Wasservogel and Medalie which was to continue until 1920, when Wasservogel began the judicial career which took him to the State Supreme Court and then to the Appellate Division.

George Medalie had his first taste of "politics" in the very literal sense in 1915 and it is a safe assumption that his appetite for the particular brand he had encountered was not whetted. Quite to the contrary, the "politics" he met in his youth was something he fought from that day on. The precise circumstances of his 1915 lesson deserve to be



recalled. He was nominated and ran for Municipal Court Justice on the Republican ticket. According to the official count, which was supervised by the local Tammany leader, George Medalie did not win. But to many who watched the vote, the defeat of Medalie was a fiction of his opponents.

Few remember the name of the man who defeated George Medalie in 1915. But, perhaps because of the limelight in which his defeat placed him, George Medalie rose rapidly in the legal profession, causing the Tammany district leader on one occasion to invest himself with the honor of giving the rising lawyer his start. "I'm responsible for your success," he is reported to have told Medalie, and in all fairness to the politico there is a shade of truth in his claim.

But George Medalie would have risen to great heights, no matter. His first defeat, however, had given him a first-hand experience in the intricacies of ballot counting, and time and time again during his long career he was called on to prosecute, investigate, or serve in some capacity to protect inviolate the greatest weapon of American democracy.

It was without malice or vengeance, for these were qualities not to be found in George Medalie, but certainly it must have been with a genuine pleasure that he served without compensation in 1926, '27, and '28 as a Special Assistant Attorney General in charge of ferreting out and prosecuting fraudulent election activities in Manhattan and the Bronx. There was fertile ground for a man who could dig deep, and George Medalie knew how to dig.

As a special deputy attorney general in 1928, Medalie's name graced more headlines and his reputation for defending the honesty of public life gained further substantiation. He was placed in charge of prosecuting Mrs. Florence E. S. Knapp, Secretary of State, on charges of mis-administration of the State Census Fund by padding payrolls, and, as one might have expected, obtained a conviction.

He was called next by the joint committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York and the New York County Lawyers Association, two organizations to which he devoted much time and effort during his lifetime, to investigate the affairs of General Sessions Judge Francis X. Man-



cuso in relation to the City Trust Company. Again as counsel for the Bar Association, he later conducted the proceedings which served as the foundation for the removal by the Appellate Division of Magistrate Albert A. Vitale. In these as in many other affairs, including his service as counsel to a committee of the State Legislature investigating tax frauds, he was a zealous defender of honest dealings.

In 1931, President Hoover appointed George Medalie United States Attorney for the Southern District, which includes all of New York except Brooklyn and Queens, a position in which he was later asked to remain by President Roosevelt. Medalie proceeded vigorously to uphold the calling of his office, clearing the Federal Building of bail bondsmen racketeers, cracking down on a bankruptcy ring, destroying a powerful alien smuggling outfit, and generally making life short and unpleasant for racketeers. In carrying out these tasks, he surrounded himself with a group of bright young lawyers, "Medalie's boys" as they were to be called, including Thomas E. Dewey, J. Edward Lumbard, Jacob Grumet, William B. Herlands, Arthur H. Schwartz, Murray Gurfein, Samuel C. Coleman, Jacob J. Rosenblum, and others, all of whom received their start towards prominence from him. Retiring from office, he suggested Thomas Dewey as his interim successor thereby giving further impetus to a political career that still flourishes.

George Medalie himself suffered his second defeat in a bid for elected office when he ran as Republican candidate for the Senate in 1932. Returning to private practice in 1933, he left it not until 1945 to accept his appointment as Judge of the Court of Appeals, a designation which met with the overwhelming approbation of the judiciary, the legal profession, and the general public, including his political opponents.

Judge Medalie loved the law; he was proud to serve on a Committee appointed by the Supreme Court of the United States to investigate rules of criminal procedure; he thoroughly enjoyed speaking before young law students and imparting to them his knowledge as well as his enthusiasm for the law. As president of the New York County Lawyers Association, and chairman of its Committee on National



Defense, as president of the Alumni Association of Columbia Law School, as Vice-President of the Association of the Bar, and chairman of its committee which, at the request of the government investigated and passed on the qualifications of lawyers for service with governmental agencies, including the Judge Advocates office, he gave splendid service to his profession.

But with all of his duties as a trial lawyer, a public prosecutor, a leader and active member of many committees of New York County Lawyers Association and the City Bar Association, and then as judge, George Medalie still found the energy throughout his mature years to play a prominent role in the philanthropic side of civic life.

In this, as in other public services, he was a man sought after, for he brought to any activity he undertook a perceptive intelligence, a quiet statesmanship, a dynamic leadership.

## II

His charitable activities were a sincere expression of his innermost feelings, for although he was not given to visible manifestations of sentiment, he was deeply concerned about man's welfare and man's relationships to his fellow man. He was not one to fear difficulties of any sort, but he was nevertheless one who was sensitive to difficulties and troubles, one who felt impelled by the tradition of his religion and the understanding of his own place in the realm of things, to do for the less fortunate that which was within his scope.

There was no letterhead leadership in George Medalie. As he was designated or elected in philanthropic life, so he served, and in his service he enriched the lives of many. He was consultative counsel to the B'nai B'rith, a member of the Mayor's Committee on Unity, and an active worker promoting better relations between the faiths. He was president of the Washington Heights Young Men's Hebrew Association, vice-president of the Greater New York Fund, a member of the executive and administrative committee of the American Jewish Committee. As director of the Joint Distribution Committee and the United Jewish Appeal, and



as chairman of the overseas committee of the American Jewish Committee, he gave willingly of himself to help relieve the tortured Jews of other lands. He was also a trustee of his synagogue, Temple Emanu-El, chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment Relief during the dark days of the depression, and president of the Jewish Board of Guardians, where he gave tremendous encouragement to the development of psychiatric casework.

But perhaps his greatest service in the entire field of communal philanthropic activities was as president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. From 1930 until his death he was a member of the board of trustees of Federation, and in 1940 he was campaign chairman of the merged appeal for funds of the N. Y. Federation and the Brooklyn Federation. In 1941 George Medalie was elected the eleventh president of the Federation and served for four successive terms until 1945.

For many years before, the problem of city-wide responsibility for the financing of the 25 health and welfare agencies in Brooklyn had been recognized. The bulk of the money to finance these agencies had to be sought in Manhattan, if they were to continue their operations—and continuance of their operations was daily becoming more and more important for the Jewish community as a whole, for increasing numbers of Jews were making Brooklyn their residence. As a partial answer to this condition, the New York and Brooklyn Federations had merged their fund-raising appeals, but even this did not fully answer the problem.

George Medalie cut through to the heart of the problem. He was quick to see that what was required, for the best interests of the New York Jewish community was the total merger of the two Federations, the twenty-five agencies in Brooklyn with the ninety-six in Manhattan and the Bronx. And under his leadership and during his presidency, this merger was consummated and the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York came into being, making possible on all levels the much-needed broad community planning on a city-wide basis, a concept that since Medalie's tenure of office has gained great impetus in Federation. In his last annual report to the Federation, Medalie summed



up his four years as president of Federation "as the most eventful and gratifying of my life." Those of us who worked with him, and knew of the devotion he gave to his work, could well understand the deep feeling with which that phrase was uttered, and if George Medalie were given the choice of selecting the one thing for which he would prefer to be remembered, it is quite possible that he would select, even above and beyond his intense love of the law, his service as President of the Federation.

The life of George Medalie is replete with contradictions, but this is perhaps the way of all life, and out of these dichotomies emerge the man.

He was a Judge of the highest Court of the State, but he will be remembered rather for his service on the other side of the Bench, as trial lawyer and public prosecutor. But, here again, there is a contradiction. In private practice, driven by the impelling urges of his professional duty, he defended such men as Jack "Legs" Diamond—racketeer operator of the roaring twenties, and Arnold Rothstein, big-time gambler. As U.S. Attorney, he prosecuted Diamond and obtained his conviction, the only one that had ever been returned against the racketeer despite the fact that he had been arrested twenty-eight times. As a special deputy State Attorney General, he obtained the conviction of State Secretary Knapp for padding payrolls, and in private practice years later he defended Chief Probation Officer Edwin J. Cooley on a similar charge and not only won his acquittal but the implied approbation of the jury.

And then, of course, there is perhaps his greatest contradiction. He was a political statesman, and has been called the "mentor," the "behind the scenes" advisor, of Governor Dewey, yet he himself was never elected to a single political office and twice was defeated. His defeats, however, never embittered or disturbed him, for he had found many, and even more substantial ways, of giving public service.

George Medalie was a great trial lawyer, an exciting racket-buster, a fierce partisan of the honest judiciary, yet he was unlike the common conception of all these things. He was not bombastic, oratorical, overwhelming. In all of his activities, legal and philanthropic, he was quiet, confident,



a man of considered judgment, incisively brief. He could demolish an argument with a phrase; win his point with a sentence. He had the broad view, but he used it to cut deep into the substance.

He believed that a man must do right according to his own conscience, and he won the respect therefore of both advocate and adversary, for all knew that George Medalie was unswervingly honest, in conviction and in method.

He was a man, for all of his practicalities, not without the vision of the idealist. As his friend, State Supreme Court Justice Bernard Shientag said of him: "A man of action and decision, he never suppressed his idealism; he knew how to compromise not with ideals but with the tempo of their fulfillment."

He was a man who sometimes appeared cold, but his coldness was only the outward reflection of his calmness, the consideration he was giving to the discussion on hand. He combined his outward serenity with an intense love of people and of humanity. He was, despite his ability to fight vigorously and bravely, a gentle man.

He was a man who devoted to the community welfare, a tradition of Jewry second to none, a man who held sacrosanct the elements of righteousness and justice, a man who was an ardent believing Jew.

He entered this world a humble man. He left it a great man. Judge George Zerdin Medalie will long be remembered.