



Charles Crane

Charles Crane was born in Baltimore to a family of poor Jewish immigrants on September 26, 1907. When he died in March, 1994, he had capped his career as a very successful real estate developer by becoming a prominent philanthropist. Since then, the Charles Crane Family Foundation has donated millions of dollars, mostly to THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, Mercy Medical Center, Jewish educational institutions, and programs to prevent youth violence, primarily in Baltimore.

Mr. Crane's parents, Philip and Sarah Cohen, came separately to America from Lithuania in the late 1890s. Sarah Cohen¹ was one of six children, and her mother died when she was very young. Sarah had no formal education in Europe, and did not go to school even after she came to the United States, at age 13 or 14. She first worked as a sewing machine operator, and later in a cigarette factory. She worked five days a week, from 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., earning \$5 a week. Workers who arrived late were locked out and docked half a day's pay.

¹ Mrs. Cohen discussed her early life in a taped interview on her 97th birthday in 1982, which is available at the Jewish Museum of Maryland.

Mrs. Cohen was introduced to her husband by a fellow worker. After the young couple married, they lived in an apartment over the small store they owned. The store, which made about \$2 a day, sold a variety of items, including cigarettes, soda water, coal, wood and kerosene. Reminiscing about it, a younger cousin of Charles Crane² described it as a "department store," because it also sold shoes. The couple had four children: Leon (born 1904), Charles (b. 1907), Bertha (b. 1912) and Jeanette (b. 1917.) Although Mr. Cohen had what his wife called a "sick stomach" that required her to "feed him like a baby," the couple managed to acquire enough money to begin to buy real estate.

The Cohens were active in the early history of the Beth Tfiloh Congregation. Mrs. Cohen, who continued to attend the synagogue for the duration of her long life, recalled that one way the fledgling congregation raised funds was by selling 50 cent tickets to concerts by the internationally famous cantor, Yossele Rosenblatt, when he came to Baltimore to visit his son, the congregation's young rabbi.

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Charles attended high school at City College of Baltimore, graduating in 1925, and later graduated from the University of Maryland Law School, following in the footsteps of his brother, Leon. Unlike Leon, however, he did not take the bar

² Doris Crane Margulis (1916-2011). Mrs. Margulis was an actress who also trained Special Forces Troops in interrogation in the 1960s.

exam, but joined Leon in the real estate business, which they began to build up by buying many ground rents³ in properties around Baltimore. By then, Charles Cohen had changed his surname to Crane⁴, a step commonly undertaken in that era, when discrimination was rampant against those with easily-identifiable Jewish names.

In 1942, Charles was drafted into the U.S. Army, where he served for about two years. He did not enjoy the Army, and, at some point during his term of service, he married (in Virginia or West Virginia), but the brief marriage was unhappy. The couple divorced, and Mr. Crane never remarried.

After the war, Mr. Crane returned to work in the real estate business in Baltimore, which was rapidly expanding. His long-time secretary, Mrs. Frances Weitzel, who joined the firm in 1947, recalls that there were about 30 salesmen seeking tenants for the many apartment buildings already owned by the Cranes. Philip Cohen had passed away some time earlier.

At first, the Cranes bought residential properties that they remodeled and rented. Charles persuaded Leon that the company should expand by acquiring undeveloped land in Baltimore City and County. They proceeded to do so during the 1940s and 1950s, and began to develop many of these properties as family houses, apartment complexes and shopping centers, often in partnership with other developers, including David S. Brown and Herman and Walter Samuelson. Over the following decades, the value of these properties increased dramatically, particularly after Howard Brown (son of David) became actively involved in developing them.

³ Ground rent is an institution frequently found in Baltimore City residential real estate. The owner of the house does not own the land on which it is built, and if he does not pay the annual "ground rent," the ground rent owner has a lien on the entire property for the amount of ground rent owed, and may foreclose on this lien just as a mortgage owner can.

⁴ It is uncertain when he changed his name. Baltimore City College alumni records for 1925 graduates include the name Charles Crane. However, in the 1930 Federal Census records, he is still listed as Charles Cohen.

Mr. Crane had a unique style of management. Rather than using conventional filing cabinets, he would keep his papers in a plethora of shopping bags, many of which he acquired during trips to the Mary Mervis delicatessen in the Lexington Market close to his office in the Walbert Building at 1800 North Charles Street. He was reluctant to discard any documents, and dealt with the rapidly accumulating volume of paper by setting aside rooms in his other buildings for additional storage.

When Mr. Crane hired new staff, if he found their work was satisfactory, he treated them well, and expected them to stay on with the company over the long term. He used to say "I am married to my employees," and felt a sense of betrayal if they left.

At a time when racial discrimination was common, the Cranes did not restrict their hiring to whites. One of his early employees was Jacques Leeds, a young black law student, who recalls that Mr. Crane asked him about his expertise. When Mr. Leeds responded that he had essentially no experience but was willing to learn, Mr. Crane hired him on the spot. Mr. Crane gave him the use of a car in exchange for driving him around (often to the racetrack, much to Mr. Leeds' pleasure.) Mr. Leeds recounted one occasion when he accompanied the Crane brothers as they inspected possible new acquisitions. At one restaurant where they went to eat, a black worker behind the counter signaled to him that the restaurant would not serve him. Mr. Crane ignored this caution and went to the table together with Mr. Leeds. When the manager made it clear that Mr. Leeds was not welcome, Mr. Crane asked him, "Do you know who we are?" and added "We are the Cranes, and we own half this neighborhood." They were then served.⁵

⁵ After Jacques Leeds graduated from law school and left the Crane Company, he was appointed Maryland's first black assistant attorney general, and later occupied other government positions.

Mr. Crane spent a great deal of time on the telephone, keeping Frances Waynesboro, the company's long-time switchboard operator, very busy. Outside the office, in the pre-cell phone era, when he was being driven around, he would ask his driver to stop at every public telephone they passed so he could check up on the business and make any more calls he felt were needed.

In addition to working long hours, Charles Crane was a bon vivant who enjoyed eating, drinking and entertaining. He habitually wore custom-made shirts, but on one occasion when he was shopping and found that a certain store carried a line of shirts that appealed to him, he bought the entire stock of shirts in his size. His former employees recall that he purchased season tickets for them to concert performances, and that when Mrs. Weitzel's father visited Baltimore, he would welcome him with a bucket of crabs.

Mr. Crane had a wide range of interests and liked to meet people with diverse backgrounds. He also read widely, and was just as reluctant to dispose of any of the massive amount of reading material he acquired over his long lifetime as he was to discard any of his business records.

Nevertheless, he was a lonely man. Howard Brown recalls how he would often receive calls from Mr. Crane in the early morning hours when he would discuss his worries. His long-time attorney, Lee Sachs, who lived in the same apartment building (Ingram Manor in Pikesville), reports that he used to sit with him on a bench in front of the building for hours while he told stories. Mr. Crane's closest relationships were with his mother and his brother. His relationship with Leon was marked by frequent quarrels that were rapidly repaired. After Leon died in 1979, Charles went into a deep depression for four or five years, during which he moved temporarily to Florida.

He was personally generous to his staff, and became involved in major philanthropic activities later in his life. Among his first large contributions was a donation toward the Winands Road Synagogue in Randallstown, where he was a large-scale developer of residential housing. Following the example of Howard Brown, he made substantial contributions to Beth Tfiloh, then to Sinai Hospital, the Kennedy-Krieger Institute and Ner Israel Rabbinical College. His largest donations were to Mercy Hospital. Sister Helen Amos of Mercy Hospital relates that Mr. Crane was so grateful for the personal attention he received from the nursing staff during a stay in the hospital related to cardiac problems in 1992, that he spontaneously presented the hospital with a check for \$250,000, which was used to modernize and expand the cardiology department. When he was honored by the hospital, he said, "I had pleasure in earning money, but greater pleasure in giving it. The pleasure and satisfaction of giving this gift is wonderful for me."

In his will, after giving personal bequests totaling \$220,000 to his sisters and three of his employees, he left the rest of his estate to the Charles Crane Family Foundation. At the time of his death, his estate was valued at close to \$15 million. Since then, it has expanded to a worth of about \$51 million, and its grants now total over \$2 million a year.

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