

Jake Superstein: A Man for All Faiths

By Debby Shoctor

During one of the most tumultuous times in European history, Jake Superstein was born in Pinsk, Poland, into an Orthodox Jewish family in 1915. It was during the Great War, just before the Russian Revolution, and a time of violence and prejudice for Poland's Jews. As a result, Jake's parents, Leyzer and Hannah, decided to seek a better life in the new world. Leyzer left first, as did many men of that era, arriving in Canada in 1927 behind several of his brothers. Ten months later, he sent for Hannah and their six sons: Eddie, Max, Jake, Jack, Larry and Albert.

They settled on 95th street, in the heart of the immigrant neighborhood. Leyzer opened two stalls in the City Market, and later, he and his sons founded the Edmonton Produce Company in 1935, which grew into one of the largest wholesale poultry companies in Canada. During WWII, the company supplied powdered eggs to Canadian troops in Europe, and Jake Superstein was the Alberta representative of the Canadian Produce Council and an advisor to the federal government's Stabilization Board.

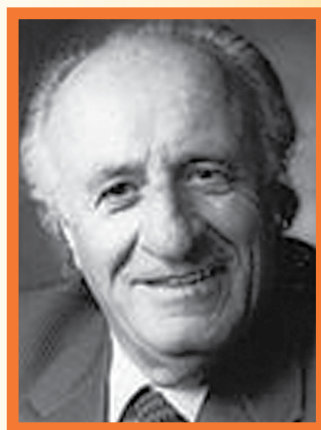
It became known that the boss of the poultry company was always willing to donate extra food to those in need, and in the 1950s, the Fathers from St. Mary's Silesian Boys' School approached Jake, asking for help with a special Christmas meal.

"I went to the school to see for myself what was needed. When I looked at the boys, I didn't ask what race or colour or creed they were. When I see a need, or I'm called to help, I'm there."


This began a life-long relationship with the school, and he served on their board of directors for over 30 years, nine of them as chairman. Before joining the Board, he made sure the school was inter-denominational. It also began a Superstein tradition of giving away about 100 turkeys to various charities every Christmas, including the Boyle Street Co-op, the Marian Centre, Bissel Centre, Operation Friendship, Urban Manor, the Edmonton Food Bank and others, providing about 1200 Christmas dinners every year.

In the office beside his home, each year Superstein would count and crate the turkeys himself, then he and his driver would load the turkeys into the car and personally deliver them to the organizations. "My wife, Ruth, writes a card to go with each turkey. I like to send greetings from my family," said Jake. "Sure, I'm Jewish. But I'm also a citizen," explained Superstein. "It's part of my faith to give. And it's also unethical for a society not to help their hungry people."

In the mid-1980s, inspired by the work of Edmonton's fledgling Food Bank, Jake helped to found the Joy of Sharing Society, along with 10 city congregations. This Society grew out of a meeting that he and then Rabbi Haim Kemelman of the Beth Shalom Congregation, had with the neighboring parish of St. Joseph's Cathedral. The Society was formed to put together a concert to raise funds for the Food Bank



Mr. Jake Superstein



at the Jubilee Auditorium, featuring the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Israeli conductor Uri Mayer, amongst others. The sold-out concert raised about \$50,000 for the food bank, and brought together many of the city's congregations, including: Beth Shalom, St. Joseph's, the Ahmadyya Muslim Association and Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican and United Church congregations.

According to Jake, one of the projects he was most proud of was spearheading a fund-raising drive that, with a matching provincial grant, raised more than \$300,000 for the Friends of the Catholic University in Lublin, Poland.

In 1985, Jake Superstein, an Orthodox Jew, was awarded a Medal of Merit from the Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. "It may seem unusual that someone of the Hebrew Faith was presented with the award, said Christian Graefe, Prior of the Order, "But it seems that wherever we turned, whether it was for a project to re-equip a children's hospital or something else, the name of Superstein popped up." In 1986, Superstein was awarded the City of Edmonton's Silver Ribbon Award for improving Edmonton's quality of life. A year later, he was awarded the Order of Canada, and in November, 1995, the University of Alberta awarded him an Honorary Doctorate of Laws. He also served on the boards of the Edmonton General Hospital, the University of Alberta, the Boyle Street Co-op, the Marian Centre and the Salvation Army.

When asked in 1995 why he helped people of other faiths, Superstein said, "The Bible tells us that when God created the world, He created one man whose name was Adam. He was the first man – not the first Jew, Catholic or Protestant, not the first white, black or yellow man. In the words of Scripture, he was the first Universal Man, the father of all God's children." He added, "I cherish the ground I walk on in Alberta with my family. I love the freedoms we have from the freedom of worship to the freedom of being able to debate and agree to disagree."

Jake passed away in 2005 at the age of 90, leaving behind his wife Ruth, son Don, and daughters Shelley and Marlene. At his funeral, a booklet of his quotations was passed around. Speaking about Canada, Jake said, "There are few lands in the world blessed by God and men of good will where people of all faiths, cultures and all races can get together in the spirit of true and sincere brotherhood. I, as a loyal and proud Jew, am happy to take part in these festivities among friends of other faiths. This is indeed a shining example in a world torn by prejudice and racial hate."