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Max Fisher, Detroit benefactor, dies at 96

March 4, 2005

BY BILL MCGRAW

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The intensely driven son of poor immigrants, Max Fisher combined an adroit business vision, moderate politics, aggressive philanthropy and a keen sense of power to become one of the wealthiest and most influential Detroiters ever.

Despite his riches, global clout and range of interests, Fisher maintained such a low profile that he was unknown to many metro Detroit residents. Yet for years, corporate chieftains, U.S. presidents and prime ministers welcomed him into the corridors of power on three continents. His death Thursday -- at 96 -- will be mourned from Michigan to the Mideast.

Fisher died peacefully surrounded by his family at his home in Franklin at about 11:30 a.m., said his son-in-law, Peter Cummings. Doctors did not immediately give the family a cause of death. Cummings said Fisher had been struggling since breaking his hip in December 2002. Fisher had been at his home in Palm Beach, Fla., until Feb. 22, when his wife, Marjorie, brought him back to Detroit. He entered Beaumont Hospital for a few days before returning to his Franklin home last Friday.

His life was as extraordinary as it was long.

At home, after making his fortune in the oil business, Fisher changed the face of the city and its suburbs. He raised millions for local charities, and nurtured relatives and acquaintances -- including A. Alfred Taubman -- who continue as major players in metro-area business and culture.

"Today I lost my best friend, and so did Detroit," said Taubman, the Bloomfield Hills shopping mall magnate.

Away from Detroit, Fisher constantly traveled the world, handing out advice and cutting deals, from Wall Street to the Oval Office to Israel. A fervent Zionist, Fisher served as a counselor to Israeli prime ministers and a philanthropist who delivered hundreds of millions of dollars in charitable funds to Jewish causes.

The late Jacob Javits, the longtime U.S. senator from New York, once called Fisher "perhaps the single most important lay person in the American Jewish community."

An unassuming six-footer known for being constantly on the phone and always on the go, Fisher worked in the 27th floor of the Fisher Building, which



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was built by the Fisher automotive family, though Max Fisher -- who was not related -- owned the architectural gem in the 1960s and 70s.

Fisher became a confidant of Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and emerged in the 1960s as one of the nation's most prolific Republican Party fundraisers. He led numerous American Jewish causes, and became an unofficial ambassador between the White House and Israel, conducting sensitive diplomatic missions during flashpoints in the Mideast conflict.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoirs that Fisher "performed yeoman service as an informal liaison between the White House and the American Jewish leadership under both Nixon and Ford."

Fisher was a friend of longtime Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and an ally in Young's efforts to rebuild Detroit. Fisher and Taubman, working with a tax break from Young, built the Riverfront Apartments in the 1980s next to Joe Louis Arena. At the time, most Oakland County-based business people were shunning Detroit, though Fisher also helped fuel the growth of suburbia by making major investments in such projects as Somerset Mall and the Somerset Park Apartments in Troy.

Fisher also was credited with helping make Detroit's United Fund drive the most successful consolidated charitable appeal in the nation. More recently, he encouraged Detroit Symphony Orchestra officials to think big when planning to expand Orchestra Hall. Fisher made a critical \$10 million donation, and the \$60 million building ended up being called the Max M. Fisher Music Center, or simply, The Max. It opened in 2003.

Fisher did not seek fame and rarely was quoted in the media. He was a quiet man who had a tendency to mumble. Many people outside of Detroit's Jewish community assumed over the years that he was a member of the Fisher automotive family that made its fortune building auto bodies and is the freeway namesake, though there is no connection.

His wife of 51 years, Marjorie, is widely known as a vivacious hostess, and one of his children, Mary Fisher, gained international fame after she became a leading AIDS activist in the 1990s. She had contracted HIV from her husband.

Despite his public reticence, Fisher, paradoxically, made sure the world would not soon forget him. He left an authorized biography, the 564-page "Quiet Diplomat," by Peter Golden, and an archive of more than 300,000 items, including letters, maps, memos, photos and cancelled checks.

Fisher remained active well into his 90s, and it was his efforts to repair the damage from his close friend Taubman's business scandal that turned into one of Fisher's last hurrahs.

In 2001, according to Fortune magazine, Fisher played a key role in solving the seemingly intractable problems of class-action lawsuits against Sotheby's, the New York auction house whose controlling stockholder was Taubman.

Fisher, a Sotheby's board member, suggested Sotheby's approach its rival, Christie's International PLC, to team up on a \$512-million settlement with 100,000 clients who had been defrauded in the price-fixing scheme in which Taubman was convicted in 2002. That plan eventually was enacted.

"Fisher has a bear trap for a brain and smells B.S. a mile away," one Sotheby's board member told Fortune.



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Fisher's father and mother, Velvil Fisch and Malka Brody, emigrated from Russia to escape religious persecution. His father, who arrived first, settled in Pittsburgh, changed his name to William Fisher and became a traveling peddler. In 1907, he sent for his wife, who changed her name to Mollie. Max Fisher was born July 15, 1908. The family moved to Salem, Ohio the next year.

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"I was insecure when I was a kid," Golden quoted Fisher as saying. "I was driven to be a success. I wanted to make my mark."

Fisher won a football scholarship to Ohio State University, but an injury ended his playing career before he could earn a letter. He was an aggressive player: He once blocked a punt with his mouth and lost four teeth.

Upon graduation in 1930, the first full year of the Depression, Fisher had planned to drive his 1916 Ford Roadster to Cleveland to start a full-time job at a clothing store.

Instead he drove to Detroit, where his father already had moved his wife and three daughters so William could pursue business interests. They lived on Collingwood Avenue on the near northwest side.

The Depression staggered Detroit, but Fisher flourished as a salesman in his father's Keystone Oil Refining Co., which reclaimed used motor oil from gas stations and sold it.

Fisher learned everything he could about the oil business, even taking night courses at the University of Michigan and hiring a tutor. He drove around town with samples of oil in the backseat and took dates to see the refinery in southwest Detroit. Once, dressed in a suit, he closed a deal with a distributor who was hunting geese in a muddy meadow.

Fisher eventually joined a Swiss-born Detroit businessman who co-owned the Aurora Gasoline Co.

Thanks to Fisher's planning and deal-making, Aurora prospered during World War II, fueling a significant portion of the armament-producing factories that made Detroit the nation's Arsenal of Democracy.

In 1959, the partners merged Aurora with its former partner, Ohio Oil, a deal worth more than \$15 million to Fisher. Ohio Oil became Marathon Oil in 1962. When U.S. Steel purchased Marathon in 1982, Fisher's 665,115 shares of stock brought him more than \$83 million, according to his biography.

Among Fisher's other notable business ventures was a stint as head of United Brands Co., a multi-national food products firm, in which Fisher also was a large stockholder. Fisher, then almost 67, became chairman during a crisis in 1975 and steered the company through three years of restructuring.

In 1977, Fisher joined Taubman, another close friend, Henry Ford II, and other investors in outbidding Mobil to buy the 77,000-acre Irvine Ranch in Orange County, Calif., for \$337 million. At the time, it was said to be the largest real estate transaction in U.S. history. The Detroiters sold their share in 1982. Fisher walked away with a \$100 million profit.

Fisher made his first visit to Israel in 1954, and over time became a involved in the leadership of several important Jewish-American groups.

Perhaps his most important moment took place during the Yom Kippur War, when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in October 1973. The Israeli army

suffered serious losses, but fought back. It quickly needed arms and fighter planes from the U.S. as the battles dragged on.

With American officials debating the strategic consequences of becoming involved in the war, Fisher worked around the clock, pressing members of the Nixon administration to re-supply the Israelis. Having helped Nixon win two elections, Fisher presented Nixon with a letter in a White House meeting.

"I've worked hard for you and I've never asked for anything for myself," Fisher was quoted as writing in his biography. "But I'm asking you now. Please send the Israelis what they need. You can't let them be destroyed."

Leonard Garment, a Nixon aide, told *Monthly Detroit* magazine in 1980 that Fisher was instrumental in convincing Nixon to start a procession of cargo plane transports to Israel.

"He was all over the place, quite literally," Garment said. "I know he talked to everyone, pressed every button, called every card."

Fisher got interested in domestic politics and fund-raising in the early 1960s and played a key role in Nixon's 1968 campaign. Working with John Mitchell, Nixon's future attorney general, Fisher and the Nixon campaign established a "Jewish desk" to coordinate outreach. Fisher barnstormed the country, urging traditionally Democratic Jewish groups to support Nixon and band together for longer-term lobbying to support Israel.

After Nixon became the only president to resign from office, Fisher remained faithful, telling him in a letter that "history will record the great contribution you have made to the world." Nixon replied: "In the world of politics, this kind of friendship is very rare and therefore deeply cherished."

Fisher's relationship with the next president, Gerald Ford, a Grand Rapids Republican whom he knew well, was even closer. Ford invited Fisher to attend his swearing-in ceremony, and during Ford's two-year presidency, Fisher visited the White House 25 times and talked to the president almost as often on his private phone line.

Fisher, a moderate, was never comfortable with the right-wing faction of the Republican Party personified by Ronald Reagan. Even though he campaigned for Reagan and dealt with him on Middle East issues, Fisher never regained the Oval Office access that he had enjoyed under Nixon and Ford during the 12 years of the Reagan and George H.W. Bush presidencies.

Fisher was a great friend of Detroit, especially as the city's perpetual crisis began to intensify in the 1960s.

After the 1967 riot, he headed New Detroit Inc., the business-civil rights coalition, and later twisted arms to establish Detroit Renaissance, the elite civic organization made up of top executives; Fisher headed it from 1970 to 1981 and from 1983 to 1986.

Fisher is widely credited with helping to convince Henry Ford II to initiate the building of the \$337-million Renaissance Center, which helped boost Detroit's sagging spirits in the mid-1970s, even though the project turned out to be a financial failure.

Beyond Taubman, Fisher influenced numerous people in metro Detroit, including his son-in-law, Peter Cummings, a civic-minded real-estate developer and Republican activist, and a nephew, Stephen Ross, who last year donated \$100 million to the University of Michigan Business School.

Fisher's first wife, Sylvia Krell, died in 1952.

In addition to his wife Marjorie, and daughter Mary, Fisher is survived by daughters Jane Sherman, Julie Fisher Cummings and Marjorie Fisher; a son, Phillip Fisher; two sisters; 19 grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren.

As he grew older, Fisher grew accustomed to receiving praise and took it in stride.

In an interview in 2003 before the opening of The Max, Fisher was typically self-effacing.

"Look," he said. "I don't think it's good taste to talk about what you think you've done. Do what you think you'd like to do. That's it."

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