

About Samuel M. Melton

Philanthropist of Jewish Education

By Barbara Sofer / Special to the *Jerusalem Post*

He is impeccably dressed in a stylish beige shirt and trousers, and, although in his ninth decade, he has the grace of a former athlete. His name is associated with the projects he sponsored—the Melton Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, the Melton Building at the Hebrew University, the Melton Research Center in New York, the Melton Journal, the Melton Fellowship, the Melton Community Center in Columbus, Ohio, the Melton Vocational High School in Bat Yam, near Tel Aviv, the Jewish History and Studies Center at Ohio State University.

Samuel Mendel Melton has probably contributed more to Jewish education than any other individual. Sources close to him estimate that he has given \$15 million.

He himself had no more than a brief formal Jewish education, and yet he set out with confidence to change the state of Jewish education, even if it meant establishing institutions and footing the bill himself.

No one solicited funds from Sam Melton. It was Melton who went off looking for an appropriate framework to introduce his ideas.

Sam Melton arrived in the US from Austria-Hungary in 1904, a four-year-old in the company of his mother, Sarah Mendlowitz. His father was in Toledo, Ohio, peddling fruit and vegetables.

While in elementary school, he worked afternoons and summers at his father's cart; in high school, he worked in shoe stores, a grocery store and a photographer's shop.

At nineteen, he went to Ohio State University, where a course on the prophets changed his views on what studying Judaism could be like. He wrote the best paper of his college career on prophets, but his real love was chemistry and engineering. When his non-Jewish college adviser told him that a Jew could never get a job in engineering in Ohio, he switched to accounting.

"Did I resent it? Certainly not. He saved me many painful years. As it turned out, I found my engineering background very useful in my business."

When Melton's cousin offered him a job as a bookkeeper in his plumbing company, the graduate accountant quickly accepted. It was to be a short career.

"I soon realized that one item, surplus pipe couplings, had a particularly high profit margin. Couplings came on pipes and were often discarded by plumbers. Usually around Christmas, plumbers would take the trouble to sell the couplings to pick up a little extra money. Then my cousin would resell them at great profit to conduit companies. My cousin said he wasn't interested

in pursuing the matter further, but when I persisted, he said that if I was so interested I should go out and get couplings myself.

"My cousin worked New York and Pennsylvania only. I started with Chicago, Milwaukee, through Illinois to St. Louis, shipping tons of pipe couplings to Cleveland. After two weeks, I received a call from my cousin advising me not to send more—the specifications had changed. So I shipped the surplus to my father's garage. That was the beginning of Capitol Supply company."

Making use of his engineering skills, Melton gambled that he could alter the couplings to meet the new specifications. He invested all his savings, which amounted to \$300, and borrowed another \$300. With this money, he bought equipment and built a small plant. Business was so brisk that he soon needed to manufacture new couplings to meet the demand. Later, he started on pipe nipples. Almost every year he doubled the size of his factory.

In 1938, Sam Melton married Esther Cobey, and he and his Zionist bride sailed to Palestine for an unusual honeymoon.

"When we got to Haifa, there were a lot of Arabs and not so many Jews. It felt the same in Jerusalem. But when we got to Tel Aviv, I was overwhelmed. There was a whole city full of Jews. I felt at home immediately. And I noticed that there was almost no industry. On the spot I decided to send a pipe manufacturing plant like the one I had started at home."

Melton made good his promise to send a pipe plant to Israel. In 1949 he personally supervised the installation of the Capitol Manufacturing and Supply Company near Tel Aviv. The plant had been shipped complete, down to the last nut and bolt. Sam's share of the profits was divided among the Hebrew University, the Technion, the Weizmann Institute, and Meir Shefeah Village, where the Meltons' cousins took care of homeless children. Melton subsequently turned over the management and ownership of the company to his cousins.

Capitol Supply grew so fast in the US that by 1959 Melton could hardly keep up with it. New plants were opened and demand outraced supply.

"The business called for constant expansion, and I decided to sell it to a large company that would be better able to handle that."

Just about that time, the Melton twins, Minna and Michael, were preparing for their bat and bar mitzvah ceremonies at the local Columbus Hebrew School.

"The twins were always complaining about Hebrew school—that it was boring and irrelevant. The teachers were not qualified, and the lessons were not much different from what I had received and hated fifty years earlier," he said.

A practical man, Melton felt that something could be done about the school. Perhaps, like his couplings, it could be refitted to suit the children.

Inquiries about Jewish education led him to the portals of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Officials there did not know how to react to this down-to-earth businessman who wanted the seminary to improve the Columbus Hebrew School.

"It was clear right away that this was an extraordinary person who believed strongly that an individual can make a difference," recalls Prof. Seymour Fox of the Hebrew University. Fox was then a twenty-nine-year-old seminary staffer given the task of discussing ideas with Melton.

The seminary had never taken on such a project, but if Melton was going to foot the bill, they were willing to try. Melton's visit to New York resulted in setting up a pilot school project in Columbus. The school would be run by educators from New York who would form the nucleus of what was to become the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, the first major institution to deal solely with improving Diaspora Jewish education.

Within a few years, the Columbus school changed from a sleepy framework for bored pre-bar mitzva youngsters, to a testing ground for new ideas. Educators of the caliber of Abraham Joshua Heschel were brought in for consultation.

"The community was mostly Hungarian and had reacted strongly against their Orthodox past," said Prof. Sol Wachs of Gratz College in Philadelphia. Wachs served as educational director of the school for several years. "Anything that had Jewish 'content' smacked of Orthodoxy and frightened them. Sam's prestige in the community, however, allowed us to make enormous changes."

The lack of professional staff for such projects as the Columbus pilot school inspired Melton in 1963 to set up the Melton Fellowships. They enable talented young men and women to work in Jewish education.

"For me, the Melton Fellowship was the equivalent of getting a Woodrow Wilson," said Prof. Barry Chazan of the Hebrew University, the first recipient of a Melton Fellowship. "I simply would not have been able to work in Jewish education without it. And that's true of most of the recipients."

Melton was worried also that too few university students studied Jewish history and culture. With some difficulty he managed to fund a chair in Jewish history at his alma mater. It became one of the largest university centers of Jewish education on any US campus.

Melton realized in the 1960s that, if he were to have a real impact on Jewish education, he should encourage work to be done in Israel on Jewish education. Many of the educators he had worked with had immigrated there. "The more involved I got, the more I realized that the center of Jewish education had to be in Jerusalem, the natural center of Jewish culture and history."

So he funded a building on the Hebrew University's new Mt. Scopus campus, and endowed the fledgling Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora. That center now has a staff of sixty, and

runs projects in Israel, the US, Canada, south and Central America, Australia, England, Europe, and South Africa. All are funded in part by Sam Melton.

Esther Melton, who had supported him in all his projects, died in 1966. Sam Melton then married Florence Zachs, a fellow inventor and industrialist. She had invented the removable shoulder pad in the 1930s and, when interest waned in the pad, she invented rubber-sole slippers (the basis of the R. G. Barry Footwear Company). The Meltons have a shared interest in Jewish education. Florence Melton, who is particularly interested in pre-school and adult education, sponsors a network of adult mini-schools in the US.

According to Jewish tradition, a man is wisest at seventy. At thirteen he assumes his responsibilities as a Jew. And eighty-three, the sum of those two, is the time for a second bar mitzva. Recently, Sam Melton celebrated it at the Mount Scopus Campus.

How does he see his work in education?

"I have to ask myself if the investment was worthwhile. On the whole, I'm pleased, but I still feel more could have been accomplished. Education is not the same as industry, where you create a product and make sure it works. It took me a long time to learn that lesson."

Sam Melton's teacher would pull his ear every time he made a mistake preparing his Torah portion. As I leave the Meltons, I cannot help thinking that even Sam Melton's sour-faced teacher would have smiled as his pupil—seventy years wiser—was called to the *bima* for his second bar mitzva.