

APPRECIATION: EDGAR BRONFMAN, 1929-2013

How Edgar Bronfman changed my life (without meeting me)

I spent six weeks in Israel on a high school program he founded to ensure kids like me gained access to our complex Jewish world. Six defining weeks

By **MATTI FRIEDMAN**

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In the summer of 1994, when I was 17 years old, Edgar Bronfman changed the way I think and the way my life turned out, without meeting me or knowing my name.

I did not appreciate the significance at the time. I was in Israel with two dozen other Jewish kids from across North America, meeting some of the most interesting people in the country and learning from some of the smartest teachers the Jewish world could produce, with all expenses paid, and when you're 17 this seems like the kind of thing that might happen all the time when you grow up. But of course it is not, and as time has passed since that trip I have come to understand the deep thinking and generosity that produced that program and many others, and to appreciate the personality at the center of it all.

Bronfman, who died this weekend at 84, embodied the breed of Jewish-American entrepreneurs and philanthropists who witnessed the great events of the 20th century — he was tough, unapologetic about his Jewishness, and insistent on his place in the mainstream. (And yes, I know he was from Canada, as so many good things in this world are, but he told me he associated Canada with his father, with whom he had a relationship that could politely be described as “fraught.” He moved to New York as a young man and considered himself an American.)

After a childhood spent as heir to the Seagram's fortune and adulthood as a liquor executive shuttled around by limousine and helicopter, Bronfman discovered his Judaism late and decided to make it the focus of the rest of his life.

One of the programs he founded was called the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel, to which I applied after happening to see an ad for it in our local Toronto Jewish newspaper. (The program was then in its 8th year, and is now entering its 27th.) That summer I met the poet Yehuda Amichai and the writer A.B. Yehoshua, visited a kibbutz and an Arab town, and was exposed to a poem by Haim Gouri that I have not forgotten to this day. I encountered educators who filled my head with fascinating and worthwhile things and showed me a complex Jewish world accessible through many different doors. Among the other kids were some of the most impressive people I have ever met, some of whom are still my friends two decades later. And that summer I decided I would come back to Israel as soon as I finished high school, and I did, and stayed.

For a long time I was a bit embarrassed to admit to what extent I was affected by a six-week summer program, but that has passed. Now I understand how important it was to be shown these things precisely at that time. And I understand that I was shown them only because Edgar Bronfman thought that was a good idea.

I was lucky enough to finally meet him at his home in Manhattan last year, and found a wry and elegant storyteller with a sharp sense of humor, someone against whom old age seemed to have little chance of prevailing.

Few of us will leave behind so many people altered by them and grateful to them. May his memory be a blessing.

Matti Friedman is the author of [The Aleppo Codex: In Pursuit of One of the World's Most Coveted, Sacred and Mysterious Books](#), which won the 2014 Sami Rohr Prize. He lives in Jerusalem.