

Transcript: ALBERT BARUCH MERCER, M.D. , BERNARD BARUCH'S GREAT-NEPHEW

Interviewer: BETSY NEWMAN

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Dr. Mercer begins by explaining that the reason his last name is not Baruch is that his parents divorced when he was a year old and he took his stepfather's name. His birth father was named Hartwig Baruch, and he was the son of Baruch's brother of the same name.

BN: Tell us about Simon Baruch

BM: Simon Baruch emigrated from Prussia to avoid conscription in the Prussian army, and lived in Georgetown for a very short time, then moved to Camden, where he lived with the Baums. Simon ended up going to medical school. He went with Kershaw's regiment from Camden, part of the Army of Northern Virginia. He was captured twice, once at Antietam, and of course at Gettysburg. And when he was captured at Antietam they always traded out the surgeons. The South would win a battle, Northern surgeons were captured because they would not abandon their patients, so they were left behind in any retreat. So there would be 30 Northern surgeons on one side, the South would win the next battle, theirs would be captured and they traded them out.

This is family lore. My mother sat with my grandfather Hardy Baruch, lived with him during WWII, so a lot of the stories I have come first-hand and eventually –

generally in the Civil War they wouldn't allow you to care for the soldiers of the other side but eventually they would allow him to care for the Northern soldiers because he spoke the language of the German mercenaries. So regardless of what they say that's the way it was. But I can't prove that except to say it was handed down in the family.

Simon Baruch came back to Camden after the war and was very involved in public health there, and that became part of who he was in New York. They emigrated to New York about when the boys were ten. My grandfather was born in 1867, Bernard, Uncle Bernie born about 1869 -70 and they moved to New York after that. He had a very successful private practice there for a while, but as time passed he became involved in public health, and the living legacies were buildings, public baths for people of less fortunate circumstances.

Because he understood public health from his time in Camden and his wartime experiences had given him vast experience in surgery – some abdominal surgery on a child gave him a very positive reputation. But over time he became a much more public health-involved person. Public baths, hydrotherapy – he actually became a professor at Columbia University School of Medicine and created a very powerful long-term legacy. He wrote an article for one of the papers in New York for many New York years about his thoughts on the development of the medical field, his very strong ideas on credentialing among specialists – that they be heavily credentialed. And he was a leader.

He was ahead of his time in so many ways, as Mr. Baruch would be in terms of what they would write. Dr. Simon would write in the newspaper, “We have to get these people credentialed.” Sanitation to prevent the spread of illness, because he had seen so many epidemics, as a child, in Europe. ...bacterial...and this is going into my field – he understood bacterial infections better than he did viruses. One thing where he was not right – he was against the isolation of polio victims because he didn't understand that there were viruses out there. But the cause of public health became so clear during the pandemic of 1917, the influenza virus that was pandemic

in this country – finally everybody realized that yes, public health, sanitation was so important in densely populated areas. And Simon Baruch was a leader in that thought and helped to carry it forward.

BN: Was that related to the influx of immigrants?

BM: I think so. The 1880s in New York was a wild and wooly time in so many criteria – very frontier town, with so many people coming in. But again, his legacy over 30, almost 40 years in practice, were in large part hydrotherapy, physiotherapy – mineral baths in Saratoga Springs, etc. But also his emphasis on public health was what as a physician I understood, so far ahead of its time – in his understanding of the cleanliness requirements for such a densely populated area to function.

BN: Can you make a connection to Bernard Baruch's medical philanthropy?

BM: I think it always played a role. He had said that he had considered being a physician and his admiration for physicians as they participated in difficult clinical situations, matters of life and death, and how he admired those men. And of course that resonated with me, an interventional cardiologist, I understand that. But it came from his father. Herman, finally, the third brother, Herman, had a varied career. He was a physician, trained at Columbia, but he also became an ambassador. But he was a physician – we finally got a physician in the family – and I believe also a professor at Columbia. And a long-term relationship developed Columbia University– the medical school at Columbia – between the Baruchs, starting with Simon, then Bernard Baruch and his ultimate philanthropy in other areas, where he's perhaps best known. But it was primary – Simon Baruch shared his thoughts very clearly with his sons about their responsibilities regarding philanthropy.

And if you look at Bernard Baruch, he basically made a large amount of money but he left this world having given it all away. And I think that's one of the strongest positive statements that can be made for the man – a complex man, a man larger than life in many ways. But he did give everything away at the end. For example, Baruch College, I think basically it was naming rights. The agreement was that whatever was left was given to them, though the Institute for Physical Health and Rehabilitation got some, but in the end he had given it all back – and very few people can say that.

But it came from his father, and from his mother. His mother made a very strong statement that he was to – that care and maintenance of their Southern Jewish heritage belonged to the family. As you can imagine in any Jewish family, she did not sit docilely by. She was a very powerful force in the lives of her 4 sons, including Bernard Baruch.

BN: Bernard Baruch didn't move back to Camden, but had a strong interest in it?

BM: His mother of course is from Winnsboro, not too far away, and you know about his philanthropy there – I won't be redundant. It was a family thing. But he had good friends there – Secretary Byrnes – he maintained an interest in South Carolina all his life and didn't mind identifying as a South Carolinian in many circumstances and among many people. For instance – the golden anniversary at the hotel...

BN: Tell the story...

BM: There are a thousand people there – it's Simon Baruch's 60th anniversary – his sons are there. They come in late – the Baruchs are always late – make a grand entrance – that's the way these boys were – and my grandfather was a big, sturdy,

kind of barrel-shaped guy and Bernard Baruch was tall and elegant – we never figured out where the tall gene came from, but anyway. They played Dixie in front of a thousand people. They played Dixie and gave the Rebel yell, five men, including Dr. Simon, - in front of a thousand people, or however many people – there were a lot of people – they were not shy about their Southern heritage at all. So – it’s just how these guys were – and it also gives you an idea of how their parents taught them to stay together. Because when they first came to New York, 1880, it was a rough and tumble crew – they tell the story of how Bernard Baruch got his ears cuffed walking to school – that’s how he began his boxing interest, was getting beat up by some other children. And Hardy came and protected his little brother.

My grandfather was initially an actor and then took up – actually the first Baruch seat on the New York Stock Exchange – Bernard Baruch was said to have bought that for my grandfather. So they had 2 seats on the NYSE when there were very few – probably not 20. The point of the story – how close they were.

He’s in public affairs now – 1917 is the First World War. About 1919 he’s on the War Munitions Board – you can’t really be in the stock market and running procurement for all the resources in the country, the war effort, so he divested himself. But still his brothers were in the business, but his fortunes – nobody knows, part of the family, not important to what we’re discussing here.

BN: How do you characterize his legacy?

BM: I think he taught us all the value of public service and involvement in the political arena. He felt that was a very worthwhile place to spend your time and energy – that public service had great value. As best I could read at least, he gave relatively selflessly in that matter. The value of public health – correction, the value of public service was paramount in the latter part of his life – really in the last 50 years of his life he was involved in public service and yes he used his financial abilities to give philanthropically. And we can discuss that a bit. He gave either to

medicine, to personal or to education – those were his philanthropic goals and directions. He was interesting – the institute for physical rehabilitation that he started at Bellevue Hospital.

It was 1950 that they laid the cornerstone. But it had – he started his gift in terms of that, physical rehabilitation as his medical focus for his giving, as far back as 1942 when he was announcing his thoughts about giving a significant amount of dollars, a million, one hundred thousand dollars was given to Columbia University to fund fellowships. He believed very strongly in investing in people and programs in research and education in those areas of physical rehabilitation and such.

The day it hit the newspaper, the *New York Times*, was actually when Bernard Baruch was in the house at Hobcaw Barony, on or about April 30 1944. There was a lot going on at the house, as you know. Roosevelt was still here, though he was nicely recovering from malignant hypertension and congestive heart failure – but it came out that Bernard Baruch was giving a million, one hundred thousand dollars during wartime, during the time that FDR was here at the house – I think it became more of a thing in the *New York Times*.

He funded research fellowships through Columbia and Medical College of Virginia. Simon Baruch spent some time there. There's a building there with his name and he's hopefully remembered there in that context. But – a million, one hundred thousand was a lot of money at that time, but again initially at least it was given to Columbia to establish fellowships, learning programs, etc. He was really a hands-off type of person in terms of his medical giving – something that he didn't know a lot about, he trusted those people. Bernard Baruch was not however a very patient man and now in 1948 he's getting older – he's in his '70s and he wants to see physical and tangible evidence of it, so that's where the Physical Rehabilitation Center at Bellevue Hospital came to fruition. He funded bricks and sticks, if you will, perhaps \$450,000, laid the cornerstone in 1950, for that facility – I think 85 beds. So that – Bellevue was just for citizens of New York – he wanted a place where people

from around the world could come, patients and physicians to learn. So that was – Howard Rusk, I believe, came out to be the head. But he had a vision for rehabilitative medicine. If you think about our wounded warriors today who come back and try and regain their lives – that was a very important legacy (takes paper out of his pocket).

New York Medical Society address, 1947. Bernard Baruch was asked to speak – this is a lay person, not medical – he had 15 points he thought would be valuable for other people to consider. This is a man who in 1947 was saying things like we need universal health care coverage – 1947. That there are so many people in this country who will never be able to get the kind of health care they need. And this man is insightful in his view of the world. He trusted government to provide health care for people, just as he trusted government to help with education and housing. Those were statements that he made.

Further, in lectures that he gave, he advocated for a new veterans service. And in those veterans services he wanted to have community places where men came in dignity, not looking for charity, where veterans can come and be in a place for common interest and common goals for them, and saw the great need for mental rehabilitation as well as physical rehabilitation for people who had participated in our military and in our wars. This is 1947 and I admire greatly his insight, this family member of mine, his great insight into the needs of people who had been in wars. And that came of course from his dad, and from the experiences that he had in France during the First World War, where he saw the incredible devastation in France, literally with smoke still rising from the battlefields of France.

It continued through the Second World War, when he acted in an extremely high level of influence with Churchill, his close friend, all the way from 1919 through 1965. AS you know, Churchill's last visit to the U.S. was to see Baruch. Interestingly, they were on Aristotle Onassis's yacht anchored in New York Harbor, and Maria Callas was there, and apparently Churchill turned down a visit offer from President Kennedy. But actually this I guess was '62, don't have the dates perfectly. But he

drove out to Idlewild Airport, now Kennedy, and saw his old friend away for the last time.

BN: Was he instrumental in setting up the Veterans Administration?

BM: I don't think so – I think it was more initiative, understanding. He gave voice to the concept of the care and needs of the veterans. I'm not sure if he was the first and probably wasn't the last, but he was such a powerful public figure, that for him to give voice to those matters, gave it a resonance, created infrastructure, made it part of the discussion in the country. A lot of things don't happen overnight. For example, Medicare, to provide medical care for the elderly, came – it took 18 more years, 1965, before it happened. But the vision was articulated by one of the most famous men in the country and that gave it credibility. A lot of these ideas probably weren't his alone, but his ability to articulate them and to advocate them gave them life and gave them – created public discussion because Bernard Baruch, a very well-known man gave voice to these issues. Perhaps they weren't his initial thoughts but he certainly gave them relevance in the context of who had spoken the ideas.

Perhaps his greatest gift was his ability to articulate ideas of great value – that he would use his fame in this country, his universal respect among a lot of the population. He never really ran for anything because it never allowed for anyone to speak against him. There was no debate, there was no rancor. As well as anything in his later years there was – no one could see any value or gain that this elderly gentleman who had everything could have gained from saying that we needed public health, we needed public education, that there needed to be veterans' centers where men who were coming back from war with issues they couldn't deal with – physical rehabilitation, or mental – had a place to go, and that those needs would be long term, they would be permanent. That this man would give voice to concepts and ideas that were new and would have to be further discussed – we're discussing universal health care in 2011. His was not the first voice but certainly it was a voice

that clearly stated and articulated issues on the domestic front. He had a role in the Atomic Energy Commission

One of the people who influenced him greatly in his philanthropy early on was Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt saw the poverty in this country during the Depression. She saw it up close. And one of the roles she took on was to become an ambassador of the poverty in this country. And she took these men to these places. It resonated with them. They took them to towns in West Virginia – the Guggenheims, the very wealthy in this country, including Bernard Baruch, were taken to the places where the poor lived with no running water, no food, and no one of good heart could have seen that without being changed. And so her role in helping to define his domestic philanthropy has to be understood. He had long term relationships with these outstanding people, but it affected him and he had that opportunity. My grandfather, and Herman, these were Wall St. guys – they had very structured lives. But Bernard Baruch had the opportunity to learn and grow that many people don't, but doggone it he sure gave it back and he sure tried to advocate, in his later years, when life has taught us a lot of lessons – he learned a lot and he gave a lot – I'm very proud of him.