

# Samuel Bronfman: The Life and Times of Seagram's Mr. Sam

Michael R. Marrus



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The irascible son of a Jewish pioneer from Czarist Russia whose business acumen built an international company renowned for the quality of its products. Samuel Bronfman's father failed as a wheat farmer and then found success selling frozen fish, firewood, and horses. At this point young Sam observed to his father, "The bar makes more profits than we do. Instead of selling horses, we should be selling the drinks." And thus began what was to become the Seagram whiskey empire. Sam's insight and timing were right as Canada, and especially the United States, were coming under the influence of the temperance movement. While legend often places Sam in the thick of Prohibition era bootlegging and rum running, in fact he built for the long term and kept his operations within both the law and its loopholes as he supplied American bootleggers. Sam demonstrated his marketing genius by insisting on quality in a business notorious for cutting corners and thereby set the standard for the industry in the decades to follow. Sam's success in penetrating the American market was such that after Prohibition his competitors lobbied the federal government for protection. While Samuel Bronfman is a classic rags to riches tale, it is also the story of a Jew who remained in many ways outside business and social establishments even after becoming internationally famous. Commuting every week between his Montreal and New York office, his was a private life centered on his family and their home in Montreal and summer places such as Tarrytown, New York. In the 1950s Sam, under instructions from his daughter Phyllis Lambert, commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design a new corporate headquarters, the Seagram building at 375 Park Avenue, a landmark on the New York City skyline. As a leader of the Jewish community Sam was elected president of the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1939, and went on to organize financial aid to the fledgling state of Israel, beginning decades long involvement in Jewish



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