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Simon Konover

By Laurence D. Cohen

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So you're all set to build a major office tower in a cool, university town. And you're so darn smart that not only have you arranged solid mortgage financing from a friendly bank — but the bank also has agreed to move in and become your major tenant. You're good. You're very good.

The steel goes up, you trot on over to the bank to draw down some cash...Oops. The FDIC sort of meets you at the door, pats you on the head, and sends you home. No mortgage. And, by the way, no bank to move into your office tower.

Of course, that didn't stop the juggernaut that is the Konover Group, one of the Northeast's most successful real estate organizations. Simon Konover shrugs off the weirdness and ups and downs of the real estate business with a smile. That tower still got built. It's Century Towers, on Church Street in New Haven.

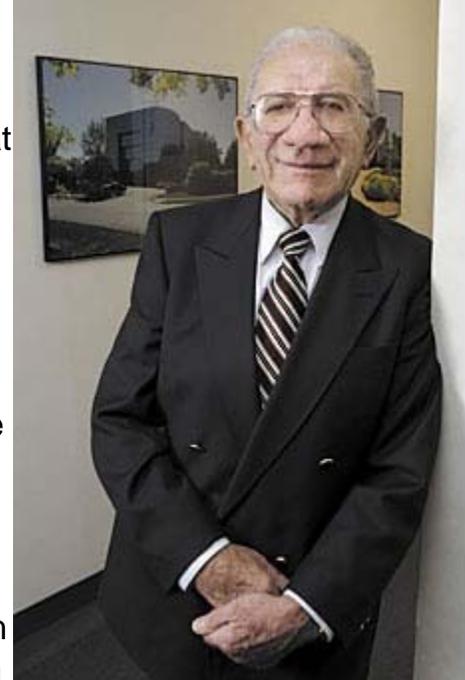
From one tiny motel in the North End of Hartford, Simon Konover has crafted a major real estate behemoth, with commercial and residential construction, development and management; and a hotel ownership and management wing, stretching across the Northeast and Midwest.

At age 88, he comes to his West Hartford office every day, offering up a calm, measured approach that revels in the joy of making a few bucks, loving the creation of new projects, as if they were his children, and, oh, also getting a kick out of making money — and then giving quite a bit of it away.

He is a blend of hard-nosed negotiator, compassionate donor and seer; and bemused observer of markets and money — the kind of gentleman who deserves that old label 'comfortable in his own skin.'

When hospitalized years ago, he received a phone call from U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman, wishing him well. Even from bed, Konover didn't forget who he was: "Don't worry about me, Joe," Lieberman remembers being told, "my creditors can't afford to let me die."

The key to his business success in the real estate business has been diversification, he says. Strip malls, for example, are a fine investment — until stores don't want to



PHOTO/STEVE LASCHEVER

expand, or the economy discourages new folks from opening their doors. Condo markets can be balanced with apartment projects; officer towers are different than hotels — and ownership is different than a management contract. To Konover, the menu of options is what excites him each and every day.

“I love what I’m doing,” he says. “I like people and I like to make deals.”

Konover is a poster child for what the politicians love to describe as the “American Dream” — and he is happy to embrace that notion. He was a penniless young Jewish boy who escaped the Nazi horrors in Poland and the Russia — and made it to Ellis Island, via Cuba.

“My first choice was Palestine,” he confesses. “We (the Jews) had our own country.”

When he first saw the Statue of Liberty, he knew he had found a home. “I felt I could do anything I wanted; I had nothing to lose. I was just so excited; here I am, I can do anything I want. I can make a life for myself.”

Konover has little patience for negativity about the importance of America as a symbol of freedom and opportunity. “The people who are born here take it for granted.”

If there is a “second half” to a life such as Konover’s, it is the instinct to use his wealth, his intelligence, and his personality, to, as he puts it, “do something for people.”

He has been a major donor to causes related to Israel and Jewish charity and education; to higher education and other projects as well. He has been a champion of non-profit and low-and moderate-income housing in the region — and he was a key player in the creation of the late Paul Newman’s ‘Hole in the Wall’ camp in Ashford.

In his own direct, unblushing way, he says that he “taken care of his family” (a son and daughter are senior executives of the company); that he has plenty of money for himself — and that he wants to use his resources to continue a kind of Jewish-inspired charity and compassion that he learned from his parents, victims of the Nazis, who had little money, but a strong instinct to share.

“As I got older, I’ve done quite a lot for Israel and the Jewish people,” he says, as well as using his real estate skills to assist housing advocates in their important work — and financial and intellectual encouragement for enhancing higher education.

“Simon Konover is a wise, kind man who is one of the most savvy business people I’ve ever known,” explains Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford.

“He’s a wonderful man with a wide range of philanthropic interests,” notes Robert Fishman, executive director of the Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut.

Down the street from Konover’s offices in West Hartford is “Federation Housing,” a Section 8 project that Konover spent time, money and negotiating skills helping the

Jewish Federation create. The Federation was going to name the project 'Konover.' He said, no. Konover owns the project, but he wanted the Federation to have the credit for the groundwork and inspiration

Scores of other worthy causes have benefited from Konover's generosity — like the University of Connecticut's Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, and the Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life; and the University of Hartford.

Still, it is those housing and other construction efforts which, perhaps, best show his flexibility and resourcefulness. Sometimes the Konover team donates land. Sometimes, Konover is the developer, or the manager, or the construction advisor. At the end of the day, when Konover takes an interest in a just cause, he won't go away until the job is done.

State Rep. Dan Baram of Bloomfield, who has worked with Konover on several projects, confirms his tenacity and kind heart: "When you identify a need, he has always been most generous."