

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/vera-schweitzer-the-vera-institutes-worthy-namesake>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Vera Schweitzer, 1932

At the Vera Institute of Justice, the attributes of our namesake Vera Schweitzer, born in 1880, continue to influence our work: inclusiveness, compassion, generosity, and hard work. Vera's life and career were distinguished by her leadership in business, philanthropy, and Jewish causes, at a time when women's leadership was rare and resisted.

In contrast to the government response to children and families at our border and in our communities today, Vera's life's work was to help the vulnerable and those seeking refuge. The Vera Institute of Justice, co-founded by Vera's son Louis and Herb Sturznow, works to support the rights of immigrants and refugees who are in removal proceedings, ensuring their access to basic due process and an attorney.

Rebecca Vera Garbovitsky was born in Crimea, Russia in 1880 in an agrarian Jewish community. Although better off than many of the poor people in the region, she nonetheless experienced severe adversity. In the year following her birth, anti-Jewish riots swept the region. [Mobs injured, raped, and murdered hundreds of Jewish people](#) and destroyed thousands of Jewish homes, uninterrupted by the police or military.

In 1898, Vera married Peter Schweitzer, son of a Sorbonne-educated paper importer from Odessa. She had a son, Louis, in 1899. The family moved to France that same year to flee the violence in their home region. Vera had another son, William, in 1901. The family then moved to the United States, where Vera had three more children: two daughters and a son, Sarah in 1905, Elizabeth in 1908, and M. Peter in 1910. By fleeing to the United States, the Schweitzer family avoided [an even bloodier wave of pogroms in their homeland in 1903](#) and joined waves of other refugees going to Western Europe and the United States. They settled first in New Jersey, then Harlem, Brooklyn, and, finally, Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Peter worked to expand his paper business, Schweitzer, Inc., purchasing a factory in New Jersey and [a historic factory in Malaucne, France](#), that had been making paper continuously since 1545. The business thrived, and Peter and Vera in turn chose to devote time and funds to [causes of social equity and to creating a homeland and state for Jews](#), a safe haven from persecution.

In 1921, the couple traveled to Palestine where they conceived of the idea of setting up a hospital designed to benefit the whole population of this region, according to a brochure in the Hadassah archives at the Center for Jewish History. Through Hadassah, a women-led charity, the Schweitzers donated \$50,000 to lay the cornerstone of a new hospital in Tiberias. They also invested in the first ambulance service and Jewish day school in the region, helping to strengthen a breadth of social services.*

In 1922, [Peter died suddenly of appendicitis at the age of 48](#). Widowed at 42, Vera was left in charge of an international paper company, the construction of a hospital 6,000 miles away, and the care of her five children, ages 12 (Peter) to 23 (Louis).

Yet, she persisted and thrived. Vera became president of Schweitzer, Inc., and led it to continued success, ultimately passing its direction to Louis, [who had studied chemical engineering at the University of Maine and University of Grenoble](#).

In 1926, [she was knighted by the president of France with the Chevalier Prize of the Legion of Honor](#) in recognition of her charitable and business leadership including her support of the oldest Jewish synagogue in France. In 1928, the government of Malaucne declared her an honorary citizen of the town.

In the early 1920s, she joined the board of The Daughters of Jacob Home for the Aged, which was the first nursing home for Jewish people in New York City when it was founded in 1896. In 1920, the organization completed construction of a beautiful new building on a hill at the corner of 167th Street and Teller Avenue in the south Bronx. With 500 residents, [it was reportedly the largest home for the aged in the world](#). On the first floor [was a synagogue that could seat 700 people](#).

The home gave her another means to provide refuge for the many elders who had fled the same persecution that she, Peter, and baby Louis had.

Vera became president of the home in 1925 and served in that role and as its most ardent champion for 12 years. She wrote lovingly about the Home's mission: This work is far above the standards of charity as implied by that term. It ascends to the heights of love for those who made life sweet for us, love for those who taught us righteousness and virtue, who taught us the fine fundamental principles of Judaism. (CJH Archives)

Under Vera's leadership, the Home paid off its mortgage on the building by 1929 just ahead of the collapse of Wall Street and the beginning of the Great Depression. She stayed at the helm and navigated the Home through those challenging times as well. In 1933, she was able to write to the Home's supporters, My friends, in the past three years, our institution has weathered a financial storm whose merciless fury threatened disaster. Today, with the help of God, the work of our Officers, the cooperation of the Directors, members and friends we are passing through that storm unharmed; we lost in riches, but we gained in experience. (CJH Archives)

Vera also ensured the completion of the construction of the hospital in Tiberias, which opened in 1930 and was named the Peter J. Schweitzer Memorial Hospital in honor of her husband. She attended the opening and visited again in 1935; her and her family continued to support the hospital for many years. The hospital was later moved to a much larger structure in the neighboring town of Poriya. Today, the [Baruch Padeh Medical Center Poriya](#) serves the population of Tiberias, the Golan Heights, Jordan Valley, Lower Galilee including ultra-orthodox, observant and secular Jews, as well as Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Druze and Circassians . . . [Israeli Defense Forces] soldiers stationed in the region, [United Nations] forces stationed in the Golan Heights and in Southern Lebanon and 80,000 tourists (both domestic and foreign), who visit the Sea of Galilee, various holy sites in resorts, particularly during summertime.

Though the home, hospital, and Hadassah were Veras primary passions, she also dedicated time and financial support to [numerous other causes to help the vulnerable](#), especially the blind, including the American Friends to the Jewish Blind, and to a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1935, [she was honored at an event helping to raise money for Jews fleeing to Israel](#) to escape the ascendant Nazis in Germany.

When she died in 1938 at the age of 57, Vera left a legacy through her many good acts, lifelong contributions, and examples of generosity, empathy, and inclusiveness. She helped thousands of people, as well as her five children and many grandchildren.

When it came to pick a name for the urgent work of justice reform that her son Louis and Herb Sturz were leading, they picked Vera. It is a name the organization carries proudly as we seek to practice and sow the values she embodied in the work we do.

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* Schweitzer family

Coming back to life: Hadassah photos, last part, YNet News, Nadav Man Bituma Collection, November 25, 2006, <https://www.ynetnews.com/artic...>

SPECIAL REPORT (CHAPTERED)

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