

## **Leo Berger, 78, a Force in U.S. Merchant Marine**

The New York Times

July 31, 1999, Saturday, Late Edition - Final

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**Distribution:** Business/Financial Desk

**Section:** Section B; ; Section B; Page 7; Column 4; Business/Financial Desk ; Column 4; ; Obituary (Obit); Biography

**Length:** 516 words

**Byline:** Leo Vladimir Berger

By SHOLNN FREEMAN

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### **Body**

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Leo Vladimir Berger, a Hungarian immigrant who spent much of his childhood in New York orphanages before becoming one of the country's largest shipping magnates, died on July 24 at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach. He was 78.

The cause was a heart attack, his lawyer, Harvey Schwartz, said.

Mr. Berger had been hospitalized for 10 weeks after breaking a hip in a fall at his home in Bal Harbour. He was a donor to the hospital and had recently dedicated a cardiac wing at the medical center.

With the help of Federal subsidies, Mr. Berger worked to revitalize America's dying international merchant marine fleet, which had trouble competing with foreign rivals. He began in 1967 with the purchase of an oil tanker for \$1.5 million and over the years built up his privately held Apex Marine Corporation of Lake Success, N.Y. At its high point in the mid 1980's, Apex Marine's fleet numbered 24 ships and the company had an estimated \$100 million a year in revenue.

A nephew, Clifford W. Spelke, who bought Apex from Mr. Berger last year, said he believed that every big carrier of dry goods flying an American flag today was at one time owned or managed by his uncle.

Mr. Spelke said his uncle had a canny sense of when to buy ships and when to dispose of them. Over the last several years, as the market soured, Mr. Berger began selling ships. He sold two to the United States Navy and then helped transform them into 1,100-bed Naval hospitals that serve American troops. The ships are still in service.

Mr. Berger often testified before Congressional committees in behalf of the United States Merchant Marine fleet. "He was very patriotic," Mr. Spelke said.

Mr. Berger was born in Hungary on Sept. 1, 1920. He came to the United States with his parents and five brothers and sisters in 1928. His parents, who settled in New York City, could not afford to take care of the children, and they spent much of their youth in orphanages and foster care, Mr. Spelke said. Later in life, Mr. Berger donated heavily to Jewish organizations, including Boys Town Jerusalem.

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Mr. **Berger** attended Cornell University on scholarship and earned a Bachelor of Science in 1942. He then attended the **United States Merchant Marine** Academy, at Kings Point, N.Y., graduating with his third mate's license in 1943. He sailed as a cadet, third mate, second mate and chief mate during World War II and later joined the Triton Shipping Company. He returned to Cornell, earning a law degree in 1957, and formed Apex in 1967.

He was named the **United States Merchant Marine** Academy's alumnus of the Year in 1985 and last fall was inducted into its Hall of Distinguished Graduates. In 1948, during a vacation from his ship, he married Arvilla Sheheen.

His wife, of Bal Harbour, survives him, along with a daughter, Phyllis Sepe of Miami, four grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. He is also survived by two sisters, Eva **Berger** of Boca Raton, Fla., and Judith Spelke of Delray, Fla., and three brothers, Martin of North Miami Beach, Fla., Frederick of New York, and Victor of Delray, Fla.

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## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** ORPHANS (89%); CHILD RESIDENTIAL HOMES (89%); GOVERNMENT GRANTS & SUBSIDIES (89%); MILITARY SCHOOLS & ACADEMIES (86%); IMMIGRATION (78%); CHILDREN (78%); LAW SCHOOLS (77%); NAVIES (74%); PRIVATELY HELD COMPANIES (73%); HEART DISEASE (72%); BONE FRACTURES (71%); ALUMNI (71%); LAWYERS (70%); WORLD WAR II (69%); US NAVY (69%); ARMED **FORCES** (69%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (63%); JEWS & JUDAISM (60%)

**Company:** **MARINE** CORP (69%); **MARINE** CORP (69%); **UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE** (90%); **UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE** (90%); US NAVY (54%)

**Organization:** **UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE** (90%); **UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE** (90%); US NAVY (54%); **UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE** (90%); **UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE** (90%); US NAVY (54%)

**Industry:** MILITARY SCHOOLS & ACADEMIES (86%); **MARINE** SHIPPING (78%); MILITARY HOSPITALS (77%); HOSPITALS (77%); LAW SCHOOLS (77%); NAVIES (74%); OIL & GAS **MARINE** TANKERS (74%); **MARINE** TANKERS (74%); LAWYERS (70%); US NAVY (69%); ARMED **FORCES** (69%)

**Geographic:** MIAMI, FL, USA (79%); NEW YORK, NY, USA (79%); NEW YORK, USA (92%); FLORIDA, USA (79%); **UNITED STATES** (96%); HUNGARY (73%)

**Load-Date:** July 31, 1999