GLORIA SELF: ALL THAT PARIS FASHION JAZZ

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A Gallery of Greats

The amazing portraiture and life of Bern Schwartz

The Schwartzes met Pope Paul VI at the Vatican before a portrait sitting in 1978.

by Mike Cline

Bernard Lee Schwartz began a career in portrait photography when he was 60. Before the end of that career, at 64, he managed to take pictures of an unprecedented variety of well-known people throughout the world, and became one of the more important photographers of his time. Some of the best of these portraits will be on display in the East Room of the Mandeville Center, UCSD, from October 6 through 31.

FROM beginning to end, the life of Bern Schwartz seems one long and improbable success story. It's Horatio Alger done one better. He came from some of the most modest beginnings to achieve celebrated status in both business and art. Schwartz made several fortunes in a variety of ventures, and after retirement gained renown worldwide for his photography, only to have his new career cut short soon after it began. In their dramatic oceanfront La Jolla home three days after Christmas 1978, Bern's wife Ronny read him the foreign reviews of his first book of portraits, *Contemporaries*. The Edinburgh Evening News called him "one of the greatest photographers in the world." And the World Times concurred. "Schwartz's uncanny ability to catch the essence of a life makes him one of the most significant photographers alive."

But two days later he was no longer alive. Inoperable cancer had taken him only six weeks from the date of discovery. Thus ended the four-year whirlwind odyssey that had brought Bern Schwartz to the peak of his success in photography.

His entry into the public eye, surprisingly, came far from home. In 1977 he traveled overseas and photographed a personal friend, Maurice Edelman, a member of Parliament. The portrait was so successful that several other members of Parliament were persuaded to sit for Schwartz, and as his reputation snowballed he found himself photographing famous personalities throughout Britain. Eventually the list included such luminaries as Prince Charles, Margaret Thatcher, Lord Mountbatten and Laurence Olivier.

One contact led to another, and before long he was invited to Israel where he photographed former Prime Minister Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem and many others. He traveled to Washington, where he arranged sittings with

Andrés Segovia

Actress Gemma Jones

Justice Lord Denning

Laurence Olivier

Henry Kissinger and the Librarian of Congress. On the strength of these and scores of other portraits, he was invited to the Vatican to take what was to become the last official portrait of Pope Paul VI.

In all these portraits the common factor was the uniquely natural appearance of Schwartz's subjects. As soon as the date of a sitting was set, Bern and his partner, Ronny, would dig up every bit of information they could for crash courses in familiarization. When the day arrived, Schwartz would go early to the shooting location, always in the subject's usual surroundings, to carefully set up lights and camera. But during the session, he would strike up a knowledgeable conversation, be it with Twiggy or Lady Diana Cooper, and wander about the room ignoring his equipment as much as possible and snapping the camera shutter with a 12-foot control cord. Since he sometimes shot as many as 100 frames over an hour and a half, even the most self-conscious subjects would lose themselves in conversation and let guarded emotions bubble to the surface to be captured in wonderfully flattering poses.

"Why make people look ugly?" he would ask. "I like a picture which pleases me and pleases my sitter. I don't feel I'm being dishonest. I just wouldn't want to take an ugly picture."

His success is obvious, but the history behind it is not. Bradley Smith, a prominent photographer, writer and friend, remembers Schwartz this way: "He was an unforgettable character. He was so intently interested in becoming a great photographer that he forgot pretty much everything else." And the qualities that made it possible? "I think perseverance and getting along with people . . . He was a charmer."

Schwartz credited much of his success to his ability to relate. In the tradition of Will Rogers, Schwartz was in the school of people who never met a man they didn't like.

"Look," he would explain in a soft and sincere tone, "salesmanship was a major part of my business career. I started selling in the Depression. I've never allowed myself the *luxury* of disliking people."

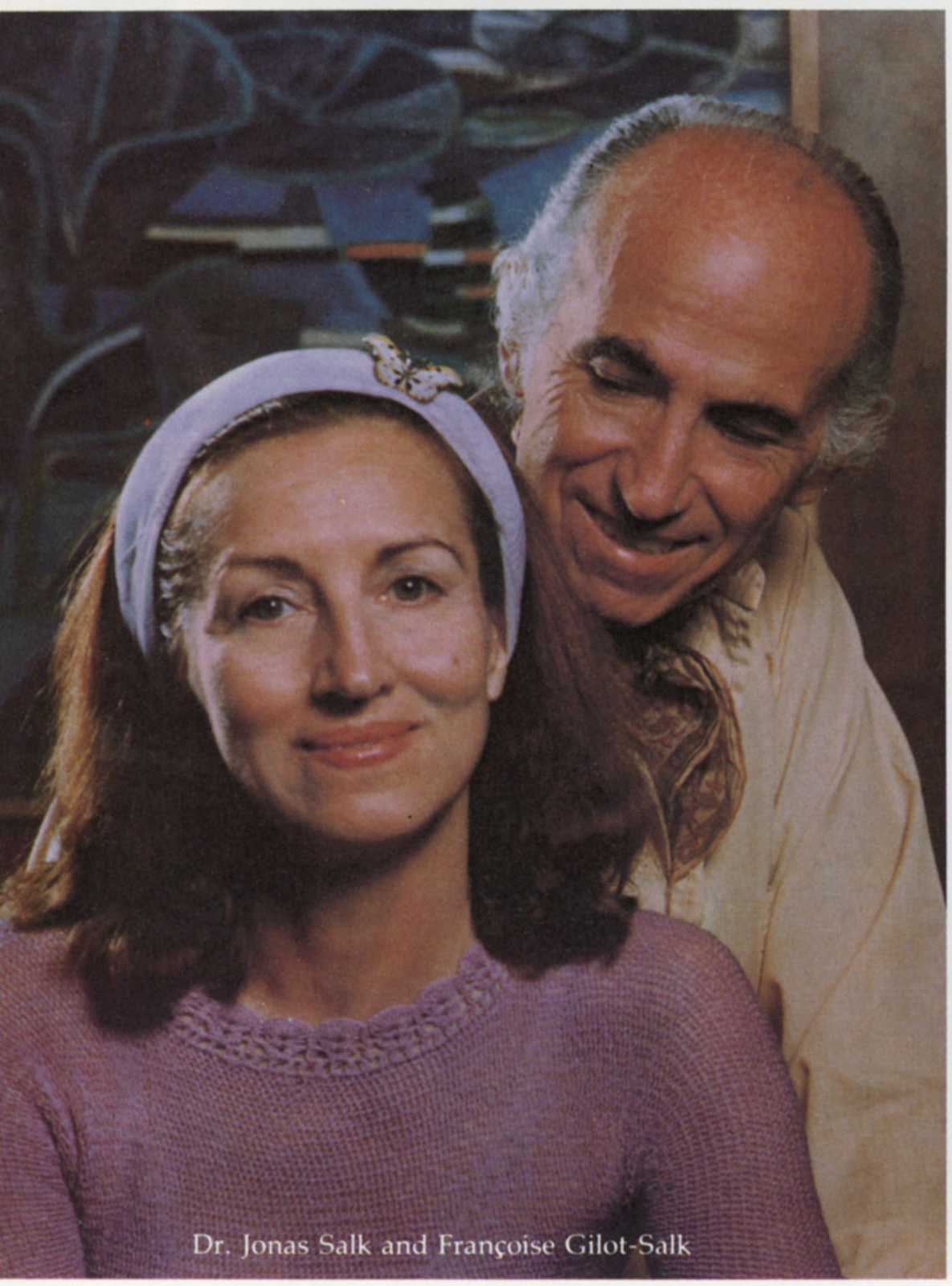
That career began abruptly in 1932 when, after a single year of college, Schwartz was forced into a cramped New York job market following the death of his father. One of his first jobs was as a shoe salesman, and he took work where he could find it until he opened his own advertising display company

Ralph Richardson

Alastair Cooke

Twiggy

Golda Meir



Dr. Jonas Salk and Françoise Gilot-Salk

Irwin Shaw

at age 23, the beginning of a long string of financial successes. In 1940, the company converted to making electronic equipment and at the end of World War II Schwartz founded Pilot International Corp., a world-wide trading company.

In 1954, Schwartz acquired control of the Patchogue Plymouth Company and patented the first synthetic tufted carpet backing; 14 years later he sold the firm to Standard Oil of Indiana. Meanwhile, in 1960, he acquired the Sherman Clay Company, which became the largest retail chain selling keyboard instruments.

Still, he wasn't satisfied.

"Suddenly at the age of 60 he decided he'd had it," remembers Ronny Schwartz. "He wanted to do what he'd always wanted to do—and that was photography."

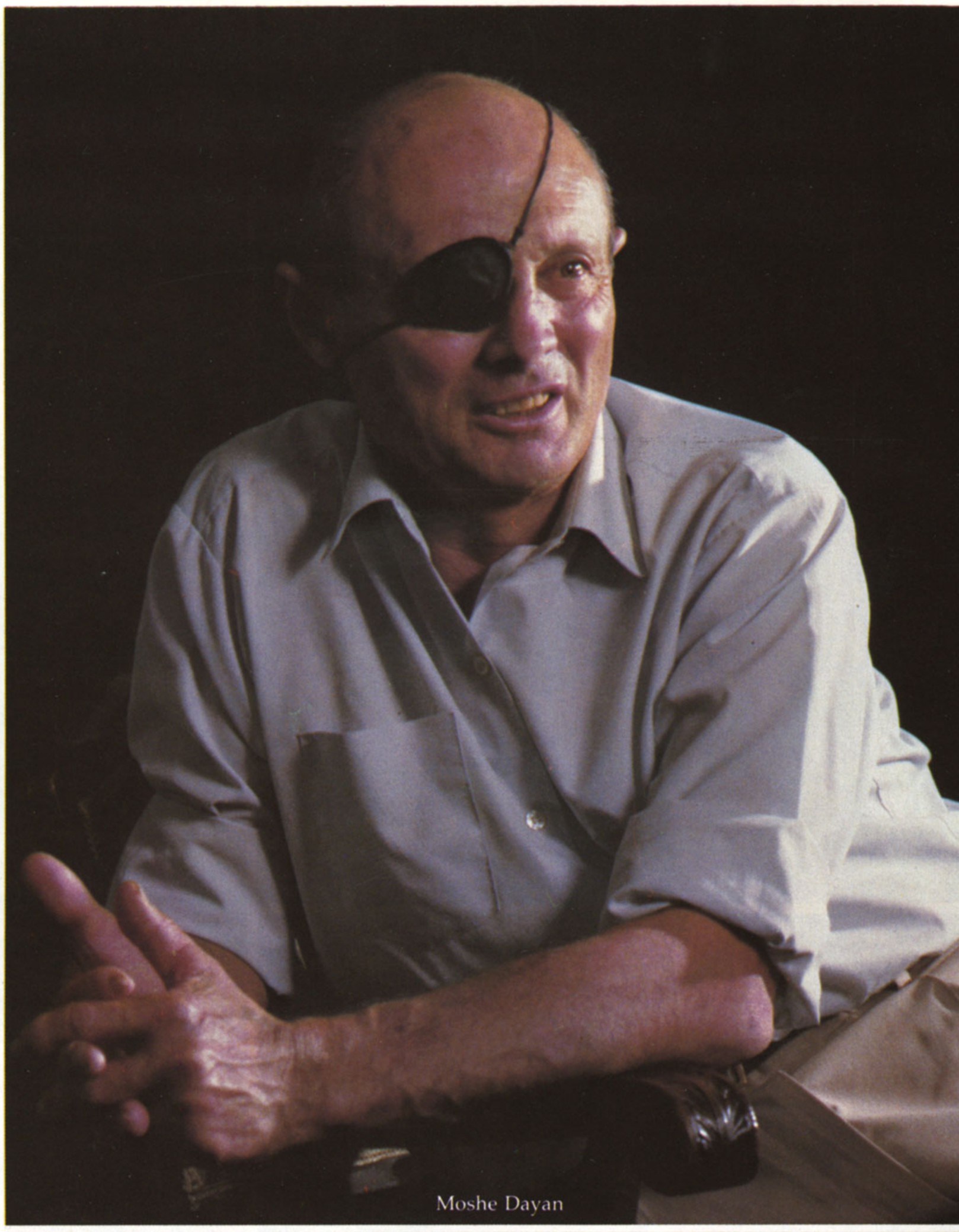
He obtained his first camera, a folding Kodak, as a teenager, but only dabbled in photography before his retirement. Then he took on his former hobby with a vengeance. He shared a studio in La Jolla and learned the basics of portraiture with noted photographer Anthony Di Gesù. Schwartz then managed an introduction to Philippe Halsman, who, among other distinctions, shot more covers for Life—101—than anyone.

Schwartz innocently invited Halsman and his wife to a ballet performance with Nureyev, an evening Halsman would fondly remember. "Nureyev was indisposed but Mr. Schwartz was in great form. Before we parted he rather timidly asked me whether I would consider giving him a lesson in photography . . . By choice I had never had a single private student, but how could I say no to this friendly and kind person?"

So began a friendship in which Halsman supplied Schwartz with the lessons of almost 50 years as a photographer, letting his protégé use them in his own way. "I never had a more enthusiastic or dedicated student," Halsman wrote. "I remember how often Bern would exclaim: 'I can't wait till I try out what I just learned!'"

After a year and a half with Halsman came the fairytale trip to London. Schwartz's string of photographic successes led to an exhibition of nearly 100 of his portraits in the Colnaghi Gallery for the benefit of the Queen's Silver Jubilee Fund, and, finally, to the publication of his book.

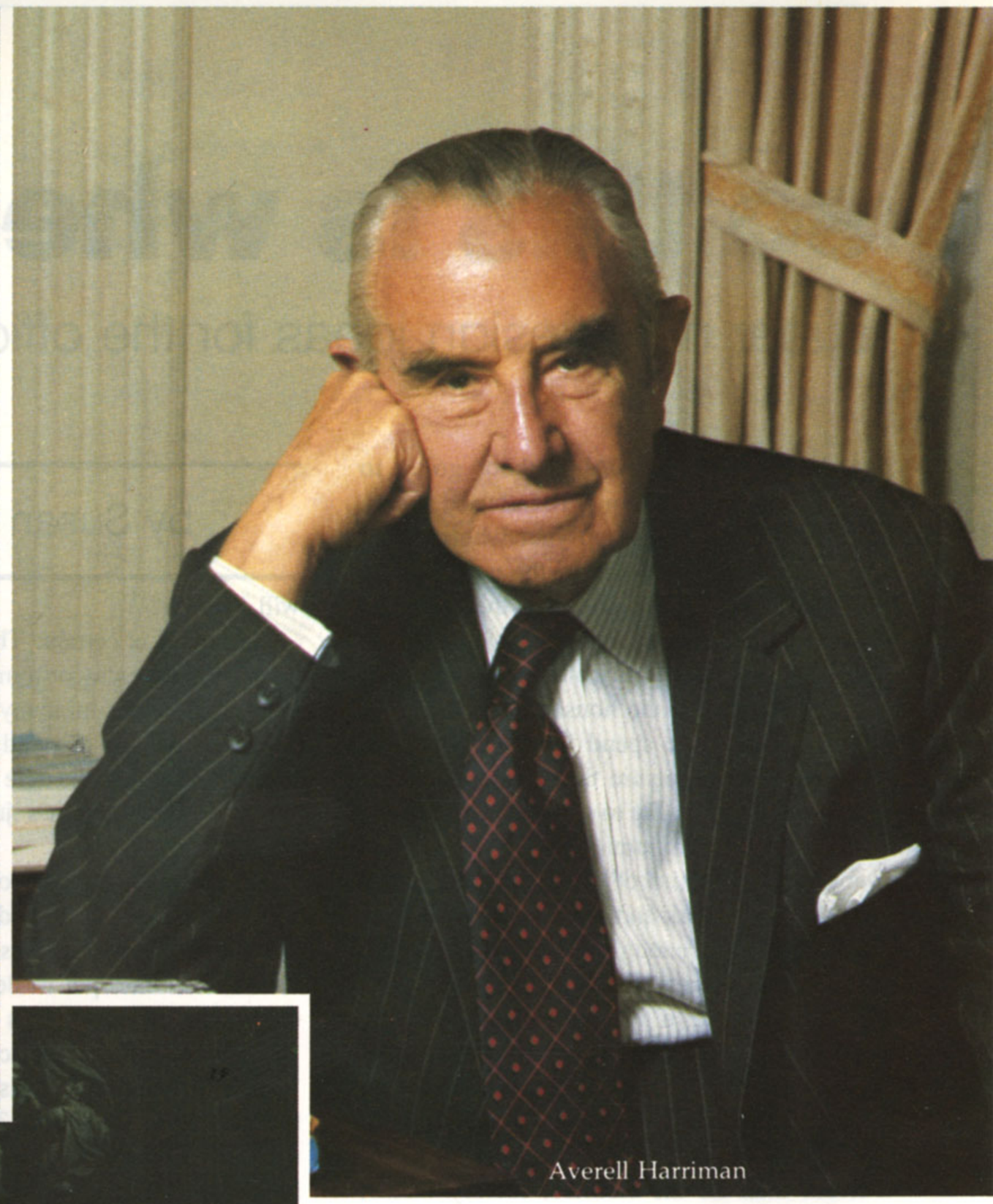
Schwartz never realized his wish for an exhibit in his native United States before his death, and cancer left him too weak to take



Moshe Dayan

Sheikh Hilmi al Mukhtarsib, Sheikh Rajab Tamimi and Sheikh Sufyan Khalidy of the Supreme Moslem Council in Jerusalem.

Pope Paul VI



Averell Harriman

The Duke of Marlborough

advantage of an invitation to take the first portrait of Pope John Paul II. But during the final weeks, when Schwartz relaxed at home with his two sons and daughter, Ronny Schwartz relayed this message to the Halsmans: "Bern and I have discussed the situation, and we have come to the conclusion that Bern got out of life everything that he was after. He is at peace with himself." The final pieces had already fallen into place.

In the introductory note to *Contemporaries,* Schwartz wrote this about his photography: "My goal is to create pictures that are true to the personality of each subject and will stand the test of time, both for what the subjects have accomplished and because of the manner in which I have been able to present them by means of my camera."

Many successful men, late in life, seek to be remembered not for what they gained but for what they gave. Bern Schwartz gave his art.#