

Esther Leah Medalie Ritz

May 16, 1918–December 26, 2003

by [Peggy Brill](#)



A civic leader par excellence, Esther Leah Ritz directed and supported numerous local, national and international organizations and causes, ranging from the Milwaukee Jewish Federation to the Democratic Party to Middle East peace efforts, and including hundreds of programs to protect the rights of the disenfranchised.

Photographer: Tom Bamberger, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Institution: Peggy Brill

In Brief

While attending the University of Minnesota, Esther Ritz was the first female member of the editorial board of the *Minnesota Daily*, the largest student newspaper in the United States at the time, and wrote editorials on international relations and race issues. After graduating she began an international relations program at Duke that was discontinued after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. She married Maurice Ritz in 1945, staying home for several years to raise their three children but later returning to volunteer and advocacy work, which she would continue for the rest of her life. She became the first woman president of the Milwaukee Jewish Community Center and the Milwaukee Jewish Federation and supported numerous local, national, and international organizations and causes, ranging from Planned Parenthood to Middle East peace efforts.

Contents

- [1 Early Life and Education](#)
- [2 Family and Philanthropic Work](#)

"I am convinced that if injustice is the product of humankind, so are justice and compassion, and that they can be mobilized as change agents. ... All any of us can hope for is that the bit we do, combined with the efforts of many, many others, can add up to solutions that go to the root. To that end, I pledge myself to continue active and angry; and I urge upon all of you, the divine discontent—the rage, if you will, that will produce a better world."

- Esther Leah Ritz, May 1977, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (Excerpt from her acceptance speech upon receipt of the Community Service Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Wisconsin Region.)

Early Life and Education

Esther Leah Medalie was born in Buhl, Minnesota, on May 16, 1918, the first child of Jeanette Florence (Lewis) Medalie (1895–1928) and Matthew Abram Medalie (1885–1968). Her father, a small businessman who was born in a village near Riga, Latvia, in 1885, immigrated successively to South Africa, Russia, and England before reaching the U.S. around 1910. He died in 1968. Her mother, a homemaker, was born in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, in 1895, studied for three years at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and died in 1928. After her death, Esther Leah, her brother Yale (1919–2005) and sister Louise (b. 1921) were raised by their father and maternal grandmother, Sarah (Simonsky) Lewis (1863–1965), an immigrant from Slonim (Belorussia) who was a fierce advocate of education and communal responsibility.

At the University of Minnesota between 1936 and 1940, Esther Leah was the first woman invited to join the editorial board of the *Minnesota Daily*, at the time the largest student newspaper in the U.S. with a circulation of over 40,000. She specialized in writing editorials on international relations and race issues and attended interracial political organizing camps, unusual for that period. While still a student, she briefly joined the Communist Party to advocate for a united front in the war against fascism.

Family and Philanthropic Work

After graduating summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Minnesota in 1940, Esther Leah entered an international relations graduate school program at Duke University.

From the Blog:

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the program was discontinued and she went to work for the Office of Price Administration in New York City. When she transferred to the Washington D.C. office, she met a young accountant, Maurice Ritz (1911–1977), also from the Iron Range of Minnesota. In 1945 they married in Chicago while Maurice was stationed at the Great Lakes naval base. Through the 1950s Esther Leah stayed at home with her children and helped her husband build his accounting firm. She also became a competitive golfer, participating in tournaments and heading various golf associations.



The Personal is Political: What I've Learned from a Lifetime of Rejecting

As her children grew older she became involved in volunteer work and rose to prominence as the first woman president of the Milwaukee Jewish Community Center and the Milwaukee Jewish Federation. She held numerous elected positions in the national and international Jewish communities, among them president of the Jewish Community Centers Association, chair of Friends of Labor Israel, vice president of the Council of Jewish Federations and vice-chair of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University. She served on numerous boards, including those of the Jewish Agency for Israel, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Clal, the United Jewish Appeal, and the Mandel Institute. She remained involved on the boards of Americans for Peace Now, the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the National Jewish Democratic Council, and the Shalom Hartman Institute until her death.

Esther Leah played the piano throughout her life, particularly fourhanded piano. She was a patron and devotee of the fine arts including opera, chamber music, symphony, ballet, art, and theater. The German Expressionist art that Esther Leah and Maurice collected over a lifetime has been donated primarily to the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Political Advocacy

As an early proponent of Middle East peace efforts in the 1980s, Esther Leah was frequently invited to international peace conferences and worked closely with the leading politicians, activists, and academics advancing these efforts. She was also a participant in the first dialogue involving native and [Diaspora](#) Palestinian and Jewish women leaders.

Active in the Democratic Party nationally and locally, her civic involvements also included the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, the Mental Health Planning Council of Milwaukee County, Planned Parenthood, United Way, the Legal Aid Society and many leading civic

and cultural institutions. For decades, she supported hundreds of civil rights, human rights, and consumer rights efforts as well as women's advocacy and mentoring, grass roots organizing, and environmental protection programs.

Awards, Honors, and Legacy

On December 26, 2003, Esther Leah Ritz died of pneumonia at the age of 85. She is survived by two sons, Peter (b. 1950) and David (b. 1949), and a daughter, Joyce (b. 1943). Among the many honors accorded her in her lifetime were the Philip E. Lerman Racial Justice Award of the YWCA (2001), the Isaiah Award of Americans for Peace Now (1997), the Margaret Miller Award of the Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin (1994), the Telesis Award of Alverno College, Milwaukee (1984), and the Community Service Award of the Wisconsin Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (1977).

In *Jerusalem Colleagues Remember Esther Leah Ritz*, a video production of Moving Portrait Productions produced by Paula Weiman-Kelman and Peggy Brill in April 2004, Rabbi David Hartman eulogized her thus:

"Esther Leah, this secular Jew, deeply wanted a Judaism that was not anti-egalitarian, anti-peace, anti-social justice. ... Her involvement was always passionate, intense, and caring ... this ability to empathize with all the downtrodden, the beaten, the displaced ... she had a soul to embrace them all, so in a way to meet Esther Leah, was to meet the world and bear witness to caring."

[Have an update or correction? Let us know >](#)