



Source: Michelmore, 10 September 1963,
UN Photo UN7717111, photographer
Teddy Chen

MICHELMORE, Laurence Victor

American and international civil servant and second
Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and
Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(UNRWA) 1964-1971

By **Michael G. Schechter** · Version 2 July 2015

Was born 25 March 1909 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States and passed away 10 April 1997 in Bethesda, Maryland. He was the son of John Coombes Michelmore, carpenter, and Lillian Eliza Elwert. On 25 November 1936 he married Janet Hunter, assistant to the director of the Detroit Bureau of Governmental Affairs, with whom he had two daughters. After her death on 27 July 1987 he married Jean Richardson on 17 March 1990. She had a son by her previous marriage to George Friedrich Hughes-Caley.

Biography

Michelmore's father was an Englishman born in Devon who worked as a carpenter for Barrett Chemical Company in Philadelphia and, when relocated to California, for Warner Brothers in Burbank. Michelmore graduated from Pasadena High School and attended the University of California, Los Angeles from 1926 to 1930, earning his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in 1930 and graduating Phi Beta Kappa. He subsequently enrolled at Harvard University, earning a Masters degree in Government in 1934 and a Doctorate in Government and Public Administration in 1939. From 1934 to 1936 Michelmore worked in local and state government, assisting the jobless in Los Angeles and administering relief to the needy in Idaho. From 1936 to 1940 he was an assistant professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he married Janet Hunter in 1936. She was born in Scotland and worked for the Detroit Bureau of Governmental Affairs. Including some sabbaticals from Wayne State University, from 1938 to 1942, he served as an analyst for the Detroit Bureau of Governmental

Research. From 1942 to 1946 he worked at the United States (US) Bureau of the Budget in Washington DC, serving as assistant chief of the International Branch, including a stay in London between 1944 and 1945. In May 1946 Micheltmore went to work at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York, where he was Section Chief and Deputy Controller in the Office of Controller (1946-1955). From 1955 to 1959 he served as Senior Director of the Technical Assistance Board and then as Deputy Director of Personnel between 1959 and 1963. Staff representatives attested to 'his fairness and appreciation of their work' (U.N. Career 1964: 13). In his personnel work he had close dealings with the UN Secretariat and made many missions overseas for the UN. He also served (1959-1960) as consultant on administrative and budgetary matters to Maurice Pace, the Executive Director of the UN Children's Fund, and in 1963 to Paul Hoffman, the Managing Director of the UN Special Fund. His most significant overseas assignment was as Representative of UN Secretary-General U Thant and head of a nine-member survey team sent to North Borneo and Sarawak in August and September 1963 to determine if the population of those former British possessions wanted to join the Federation of Malaysia. The assignment involved interviewing locals and checking voting records and was particularly sensitive, controversial and physically exhausting.

On 13 November 1963 U Thant announced that he had selected Micheltmore to succeed John H. Davis, starting 1 January 1964, as Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Davis had headed UNRWA since 1959 and had won Arab affection by his outspoken advocacy of the Arab cause in the long dispute with Israel over refugee rights. However, many Arabs 'then suspected, without evidence and in spite of denials, that the United States had used its influence to force Dr. Davis's resignation and to put Mr. Micheltmore in his place' (Refugees' U.N. Guardian 1967: 15). The position had traditionally gone to a US citizen, given that the US contributed approximately seventy per cent of the agency's budget. On the other hand, the position carried the rank of UN Under-Secretary-General and most Under-Secretaries-General were political appointments, recruited from outside the UN. Micheltmore was one of the few (no more than a handful in the first eighteen years of the UN's existence) who had risen from within the ranks of the Secretariat. While he had little experience in the Middle East prior to his appointment, he had established himself as a friend in Arab eyes during the 1965-1966 UN financial crisis when there were significant cuts in the US contribution combined with the growth of the refugee population in Africa and Asia. He had been able to get grants from a variety of countries, thus saving the refugees from a serious reduction in the agency's services. On 7 January 1964 Micheltmore left for Beirut, Lebanon. En route he stopped off in Paris, Geneva and Rome to consult with the directors of the UN specialized agencies relating to the refugee aid program. He also stopped in London, as the United Kingdom was the second largest contributor to UNRWA's budget. Chief among his initial challenges were obtaining the financing needed to maintain UNRWA's budget and ascertaining how to best use the funds to meet the needs of the 1.2 million refugees under the agency's protection. Arab states provided emergency contributions during UNRWA's particularly lean years, but could not be counted on for regular contributions, as their position held that the Palestinian refugee problem was not their fault. He also set as his goal to see the agency continue to stress vocational training programs for younger Arab refugees.

Early in his tenure as Commissioner-General, Micheltmore was confronted with a problem relating to UNRWA's use of ration cards to feed the refugees. So-called ration merchants regularly bought or rented ration cards from some of the refugees and then went to UNRWA's distribution centers in trucks, picked up many families' food and then sold this in the open market. Host states usually discouraged UNRWA from acting against the ration merchants and in Jordan, where the problem was the worst, the government opposed a census, fearing that the registration roles were probably inflated and, if there were evidence for that, donor states would hesitate to provide funds for food relief, as they preferred supporting UNRWA's education programs. In 1964 Micheltmore argued that although the ration rolls were inaccurate, the aggregate level of relief was probably appropriate and that fraud was a small fraction of the total. Yet, he pressed host states to cut the rolls, allegedly at the behest of the British and US (U.S., Britain 1965: 1), and some progress was made. Accordingly he was

in 'trouble with the Arabs' because of his efforts to halt the issuance of rations to people dead, absent or able to feed themselves (U.N. Agency Faces 1965: 11). However, they welcomed the agency's modification of its definition of a refugee (those who left their homes in Palestine and their children) to include the children's children and all subsequent generations. Because the UN General Assembly had never established a definition of who was a Palestine refugee, UNRWA officials developed their own registration criteria in an ongoing and *ad hoc* way. Still, the number of people on the ration rolls would be determined by the agency and dictated by funds available (Plea for UNRWA 1965: 9).

In 1965 Michelmores reported that the agency's financial situation was deteriorating. In 1963 expenditures had exceeded income by a half million dollars and that figure had risen to two million dollars by 1964. He began more aggressive fund raising, reduced the budget in places that he thought would not affect services and sought input from host governments as to what services could be cut with the least harm. International staff positions were dropped from 194 posts at the end of 1963 to 117 by the end of 1966. Moreover, fewer blankets and less used clothing were distributed. Shelter assistance and burial grants to special hardship cases were reduced and clothing and tool kits were no longer distributed to all students in the training centers. Youth activity programs and university scholarships shrank. Michelmores wanted the UN to put UNRWA on a firmer and longer-term financial footing, but the UN General Assembly only urged larger voluntary contributions. Donor states urged more efficiency, especially cuts in the relief budget, which host states rejected. Eventually donations increased, but the Six-Day War of 5-10 June 1967 boosted UNRWA's expenditures and workload. The conflict not only led to an increase in the number of refugees, but meant different authorities to deal with, language challenges at lower levels, changed supply routes, infrastructure challenges and new currency. The day the fighting ended in the Six-Day War, Michelmores set out with a UN military escort from his Beirut headquarters. He had cleared the trip with the Israeli government, U Thant and the Arab governments with which UNRWA dealt. His goal was to restore as quickly as possible, but this time under Israeli rule, the services that UNRWA had provided under the Egyptians in Gaza and the Jordanians on the West Bank. He said he made an on-the-spot agreement with the Israeli government (Viorst 1989: 40-41). This was ratified through an exchange of letters with Michael Comay, the political advisor to the Israeli foreign minister and ambassador-at-large. The Israeli government disparaged the idea that people could be refugees for generations, but accepted the status quo in terms of UNRWA. The agreement marked the beginning of Israel's official working relationship with UNRWA. Israel promised to facilitate the task of UNRWA to the best of its ability, subject to the upholding of the country's own security. Looking back, Michelmores claimed that he had received 'excellent cooperation from Israel's Foreign Ministry and had only occasional difficulties with the Israeli army' (Viorst 1989: 41). The Six-Day War also created two new categories of Palestinian refugees: those who were refugees a second time and those who had fled the West Bank to Jordan (thus being displaced persons).

In the aftermath of the war donor funding temporarily increased and the UN General Assembly allowed Michelmores to make financial commitments against pledged contributions rather than simply cash on hand, but still the situation resulted in a serious financial crisis by 1970. Michelmores then made clear that the only way to handle the situation was to cut educational expenditures as these amounted to 43 per cent of the budget. Educational expenditures were the most valued by refugees and by the host and donor countries. Eventually Michelmores left office with the financial crisis unresolved, leaving the problem for his successor (Schiff 1995: 121-123, 185-186). Another unresolved issue was related to the implementation of the Comay-Michelmores accords, whose military security proviso the Israelis had come to interpret quite broadly (Schiff 1995: 190). Michelmores had also complained that the Israelis were not willing to allow UNRWA's prescribed textbooks to be used in schools that the agency ran in the Israeli-administered territories (Influence of Terrorists 1970: 3). At the same time the Israelis complained that Michelmores did not give them credit for all the money they were spending in support of the refugees (Israeli Role 1968: 4). Michelmores also worried that the rise of terrorist movements in Arab countries was a serious threat to UNRWA, as well as the growing support for Palestinian politico-military organizations by the

refugee community (Influence of Terrorists 1970: 3). Even though his term of office ran until 31 March 1972, Michelmores chose to resign from his position effective 15 May 1971, emphasizing 'that his reason for leaving the post at this time is for personal reasons' (UN Press Release 1971: 1). When he decided to leave his position at UNRWA, he strongly recommended that Sir John Rennie be appointed as his successor, having been so impressed by Rennie's work as Deputy Commissioner beginning in October 1968. He was able to persuade U Thant to recommend Rennie, not an American, for appointment (Lewis 2002: B8). While living in Beirut, his wife raised funds for Palestinian refugees to purchase materials and equipment to help Palestinian women produce embroidered handbags, tablecloths and other items for sale.

After he retired, Michelmores moved back from Beirut to Bethesda, Maryland, without taking further international assignments. In 1987 his wife died of Alzheimer's disease and a vascular disorder. Michelmores remarried in 1990 and passed away in 1997. He was buried in Forest Hills Cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan next to his first wife.

Archives

Some documents relating to Laurence Michelmores's time as UNRWA Commissioner-General have been gathered in the UN archives and can be accessed online:

<http://search.archives.un.org/uploads/r/united-nations-archives/8/2/5/8256ee1ef93bf3ee9acb6c969edc9afe723fc3f137c82dfd4c6dd06d81d77a91/S-0857-0001-07-00001.pdf>

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