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# USC **LAW**



The stories of four immigrants  
whose journeys to the land of opportunity  
brought them to law school and USC

by Associate Dean John G. "Tom" Tomlinson

# Four dysseys, One Law School



PHOTOGRAPH BY CORBIS IMAGE



When Leon Altman received his law degree from the University of Southern California Law School in May 2000, the Soviet-born law graduate concluded a geographical and intellectual odyssey that is as improbable as it is venerable, as singular as it is traditional. The young Russian's graduation ceremony located him at the intersection of two grand American traditions, those of the successful immigrant and the well-trained lawyer.

Thus far, Mr. Altman's brief life in America affirms a central fact of the American experience: For some, America is a place of opportunity where individuals can transform lives. The historical experience of those immigrants who have passed through the USC Law School confirms this myth. Over the past century, the Law School has graduated a skein of foreign-born students whose success in legal education and in the practice affirms the notion that a mixture of intelligence, education and tenacity can overcome language barriers, cultural differences and even the anti-immigrant attitudes and acts that characterize American immigration's dark side.

Leon Altman's experience and those of three other law school graduates — Arakelian M. Astor '16, Ruth Jacobson Lavine '43 and Joyce Luther Kennard '74 — illustrate both the similarities and the differences of several successful immigrant-law student experiences. Now, in launching its new immigration clinic, the Law School is also taking an active role in assisting immigrants in their passage into American society. This article recognizes and celebrates the many ways in which the USC Law School has shaped and been shaped by the lives of its immigrant students.

#### From Russia, With Love

Although Leon Altman's story is in many ways that of every immigrant, his path to the study of law was his own. Born in Moscow in 1971, the only son of two well-educated Russian Jews — his father a mechanical engineer, his mother a mathematics teacher —

Mr. Altman studied at the Moscow Institute of Radioengineering, Electronics and Automation. But entrenched Russian anti-Semitism, which restricted the careers of Jews, and the relentless persecution he suffered at the hands of some Muscovite thugs, pushed Mr. Altman and his parents and grandparents to Los Angeles, where an aunt had previously settled.

By waiting tables in a Hollywood Russian restaurant, Mr. Altman generated the money necessary to enroll at West Los Angeles Community College and study English; soon he entered a paralegal program. Within a year, he gained employment in the Los Angeles public defender's office. In 1994, Mr. Altman found work as a paralegal with a Russian lawyer whose practice included immigration law. The same year, he opened his own business, the Russian Documentation Center, preparing documents and serving as a clearinghouse for materials related to Russian immigration and commerce.

By 1996, Mr. Altman's company had opened an office in Moscow. Here he completed the paperwork that enabled his fiancée to leave Russia. In 1997, married and again living in Los Angeles, Mr. Altman matriculated at the USC Law School. Supported by his wife, loans and scholarships from Jewish Family Services, the Class of 1954 scholarship fund and the Richard and Ruth Lavine Foundation, Mr. Altman enjoyed three years of academic success. His accomplishments included serving as editor of the *Interdisciplinary Law Review* and graduating Order of the Coif. Eight months after graduation, he was admitted to the California Bar; he is now an associate at Latham & Watkins in Los Angeles.

#### Old Cultures, New Lives

Representative of the earliest political émigrés

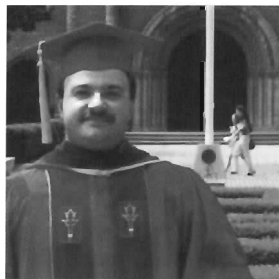
drawn to America and the study of law at USC was Arakelian M. Astor '16. Born in Kharpert, Turkey, Arakelian (1889-1986) was orphaned at age 6 after his father's death in a massacre of Armenians. Somehow, he survived a fluid childhood living in a series of informal foster homes that constituted the Armenian community in Kharpert. Although he moved from family to family, he distinguished himself as an able student and graduated from the American missionary school, Euphrates College.

Imagining a career in law representing a socially repressed Armenian community, but mindful that few Christian Armenians were accepted into Muslim Turkish law schools, Mr. Astor bribed his way onto a German freighter headed for the United States. He joined a brother in Virginia but moved to Los Angeles around 1912. Here he ran a fruit stand and, following in the footsteps of countrymen J. George Ohannessian '09 and Aram Ohannessian '10, enrolled at the USC Law School. He studied in the company of another Armenian, Matthew Farriahian '16, who also graduated to a life of prominence in the California Armenian community.

Mr. Astor's Armenian language skills landed him part-time work as a courtroom interpreter. Admitted to the bar in 1915, a year before graduation, he practiced in Los Angeles, Fresno and San Francisco before returning permanently to Los Angeles in 1927. Gratified by his life as a litigator, Mr. Astor encouraged his son Harry to study law. Harry graduated from the USC Law School in 1948; for three years, father and son practiced together in Los Angeles. Mr. Astor retired in 1965.

Armenians and Armenian institutions were Mr. Astor's chief clients. His pro bono work for the Armenian General Benevolent Association, the Armenian Citizens League of

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Leon Altman '00



Arakelian Astor '16



Ruth Jacobson Lavine '43



Joyce Luther Kennard '74

California and many Armenian churches made Mr. Astor one of the most respected men in the American Armenian legal world. Like many immigrants, he balanced several cultural lives, serving fellow Armenian immigrants and supporting the Armenian institutions that served them while at the same time embracing integration into American society. And, for much of his life, he tirelessly advocated for an Armenian state independent of Turkey.

Mr. Astor and his Armenian classmates were not the only immigrants who populated the Law School during its first decades. School records suggest students from Turkish Armenia, Russia, Japan and the Philippine Islands also attended. Some were admitted to the California Bar and practiced in California; others took on resident-alien status and never practiced. Still others, particularly Japanese and Filipino graduates, returned to their native countries. One ambitious student, Motohiko Miyasaki, earned two degrees, an LL.B. in 1913 and an LL.M. in 1914. He returned to Japan to pursue a career in the Japanese diplomatic corps. What brought these Japanese students here is unknown, although the Japanese government regularly sponsored young Japanese scholars' studies at American universities. Filipino students, perhaps, were eager to learn the American legal system as a means of securing positions of wealth, status and influence in a Philippines then occupied by the United States. This may have been the case with Mariano M. Ilano '15, who practiced briefly in California before returning to the Philippines.

### Sisters in Law

Throughout the century, politics and persecution remained the chief provocations to emigration. Ruth Jacobson Lavine '43 and her sister Leonore Jacobson Kunz '44, German Jews born in Hamburg in the early 1920s, left Germany for Holland with their highly educated parents on April 1, 1933, two

months after Hitler's appointment as chancellor. The sisters studied in England and Switzerland, mastering English and French, until the family immigrated to Los Angeles in 1938.

Ruth Jacobson's excellent academic record in England gained her admittance to Oxford, a fact noted by USC when it offered her admission the same year; she matriculated at the Law School in 1940 and was admitted to the bar in 1944, after becoming a United States citizen. The same year, she married fellow law student Richard Lavine '42. For the next 15 years, Ruth Lavine practiced part time while raising a family. She returned to full-time practice in 1959 when she joined Nossaman, Thompson, Waters & Moss. Robert Thompson, later Justice Thompson, was a 1942 graduate of the Law School. Laughlin Waters, now Judge Waters, graduated in 1948, Conrad Moss in 1949.

Ruth Lavine practiced with Harry Fain '46 and her husband until Gov. Edmund G. Brown, Jr. appointed the latter to the bench in 1980; she retired as a solo practitioner in 1990. Still, her engagement in the legal culture of Los Angeles continues; although she no longer practices, she remains active in the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, where she is past president and a recipient of the Ernestine Stahlhut Award. She also is past president of the Los Angeles County Bar Foundation. And, she is a philanthropist. Through the Richard and Ruth Lavine Family Foundation, she provides scholarship assistance to USC law students. During the 1999-2000 academic year, the Lavine Family Foundation provided a scholarship for Leon Altman.

Like so many successful immigrants, Mrs. Jacobson Lavine preserves a piece of her emigrant past: She is a regular at the Jewish Club of 1933, an organization comprised of people who left Germany that year.

Leonore Jacobson emulated her older sister's successes at USC and in its Law



School. She, too, qualified for admission to the Law School after her junior year and proved to be an excellent student. Graduating in 1944, Leonore Jacobson passed the bar and moved to the appellate department of the Superior Court as a research assistant for three years. A tragic automobile accident terminated her all-too-brief life in 1953.

The Jacobson sisters were neither the only nor the first Jewish imigres who migrated to the Law School to escape the persecution of the early 20th century. At least 15 others made new lives for themselves as USC law students before and during the pogroms in Russia and the advent of Hitler in Germany, among them Chaim Shapiro '12, Nathan Nagel '26 and Max Finkelman '29. But Harry Salinger's is perhaps the most extreme story. Elegantly educated in three German universities, fluent in three languages, he was an appellate court judge in Berlin before Hitler dismissed him in 1935. In 1938, after a year spent learning English at Hollywood High School, he enrolled at the USC Law School at the age of 44; he graduated in 1941.

### Wilhelmine's Choice

Untenable social and political conditions provoked the Jacobson family, Arakelian Astor and Leon Altman to emigrate, but economic duress and a paucity of educational opportunity inspired many others. Wilhelmine Luther traveled around the world to secure a solid education for her daughter, Joyce Luther Kennard '74. Although Joyce Luther was the one who studied law, her success was very much secured by her mother's example and sacrifice.

Born in the Japanese-occupied Indonesian state of Java in 1941, Joyce spent the first years of her life in a protective war compound for women and children. Her father, a Dutch-Indonesian, died in a prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, her mother, of Dutch, Indonesian and Chinese descent, gained clerical work with a Dutch oil company in New

Guinea. Here, Joyce experienced racial exclusion — the origin, perhaps, of her keen sense of justice. Although they held Dutch passports, mother and daughter were also Indonesians and lived in a racially segregated area. At a missionary school, Joyce was exposed to her third language, English, through popular tunes broadcast by Radio Australia.

At 14, Joyce sailed with her mother to Holland and the promise of a better education. Wilhelmine's successful efforts at securing her daughter a place in a university-track lyceum were dashed when the young woman's leg was amputated to remove a life-threatening tumor. An extended recuperation required Joyce to abandon the university track so covered by her mother; undaunted, the teenager attended business school, where she acquired secretarial skills and Dutch-English interpreting skills.

When the opportunity to immigrate to the United States arose in 1961, Wilhelmine insisted her daughter go to the Los Angeles residence of an uncle. In Los Angeles, the young Ms. Luther quickly found work as a secretary. In 1968, Wilhelmine died, leaving her life savings — \$5,000 — to her daughter, who describes the inheritance as "the key" to her education. The sum enabled Ms. Luther, by this time an American citizen, to graduate from Pasadena City College in 1969 and Phi Beta Kappa from USC in 1971. Encouraged by her attorney employer, she enrolled in the Law School and USC's school of public administration, graduating from both in 1974. Ironically, Ms. Luther imagined she would earn a livelihood from her work in public administration; it seemed more practical than law, and her thesis won a best-thesis-of-the-year award from USC. Only after passing the bar did she allow herself to think about a life in the law.

Her meteoric rise to the bench began with

an appointment in the state attorney general's office. After four years, she joined the California Court of Appeal as a research attorney. In 1986, she was appointed to the Los Angeles Municipal Court; the next year, to the Superior Court. In 1988, she was on the California Court of Appeal; in 1989, she was appointed associate justice of the California Supreme Court, a position she holds today.

Justice Kennard is known for her extraordinary work habits, particularly the seemingly tireless attention she gives to her writing. Her opinions are honed in concise language, revealing much about a life of cultural assimilation through ceaseless effort.

Though separated by decades, continents and personal situations, these four individuals who traded their homelands for the prospect of better lives in the United States are bound by three experiences: emigration, immigration and the study of law at USC. For Mr. Altman, Mr. Astor, Mrs. Jacobson Lavine and Justice Kennard, the USC Law School offered opportunities to pursue lives of idealism and practicality. For some, a legal education was a means of ensuring income; for others, it was a way of gaining the knowledge and authority needed to rectify political, racial or economic injustices of past lives. For all, the adventure of law school acculturated them to the intricacies of American legal institutions and American values. Their lives were defined by the immigrant experience, but refined by the experience of the USC Law School. Theirs' are representative lives of those immigrants who preceded them, who studied with them and who will follow them. And they suggest the diversity of persons and experiences that constitute the history of the USC Law School and, indeed, the history of the United States.

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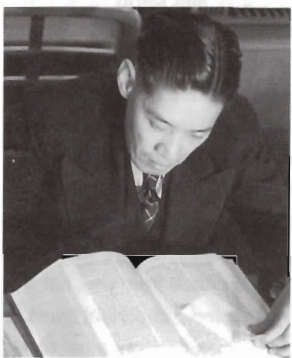
## Early Grads Recognized As Pioneers in Legal Profession

**Mabel Walker Willebrandt '16** and **Y.C. Hong '24** were among the Law School's most prominent alumni in their day, and both have been recognized of late as pioneers whose work as attorneys and leaders cleared the way for others.



In a July 2000 "L.A. Then and Now" column, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Cecilia Rasmussen wrote of Ms. Willebrandt's "pioneering career" as a public defender and assistant attorney general. Raised in Missouri and Michigan, Ms. Willebrandt came to Los Angeles in 1912 with her tubercular husband. She supported her husband and his mother by working as a principal and teacher; at night she studied law at USC. Four years later, newly divorced, she was the first female public defender in Los Angeles.

In 1921, at age 32, Ms. Willebrandt was recommended by her former professor, Frank Doherty, to serve as assistant attorney general under President Warren G. Harding. She moved to Washington and was immediately assigned the task of enforcing Prohibition. In the media, she was referred to as "Prohibition Portia," "Deborah of the Drys" or "Mrs. Firebrand." After a rocky tenure, she returned to private practice in 1929 and pioneered the fields of aviation and radio law, representing high-profile clients such as Aviation Corp. of America, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and the Screen Directors Guild of America. She died of lung cancer in 1963. Her lifelong friend, future federal Judge John J. Sirica, later said of her, "If Mabel had worn trousers, she would have been president."



Mabel Walker Willebrandt is still making headlines; Y.C. Hong's work for Chinese American rights was honored in a major exhibition.

Y.C. Hong didn't achieve such political notoriety, but his work as one of the first and most prominent Chinese American attorneys helped gain immigration and civil rights for Chinese Americans who suffered from exclusionary laws enforced in

California during the early years of the 20th century. Mr. Hong's life and work were featured in "On Gold Mountain," a major exhibit about the Chinese American experience in California mounted last year by the Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles.

The son of 19th century immigrants, Mr. Hong's interest in immigration law stemmed from his work as a translator for the U.S. Immigration Service. By the time he was 30, he had testified before the U.S. Senate, arguing for repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and was elected president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. Throughout his career, he was actively involved in the Chinese American community, and he provided crucial legal advice and investments that helped build New Chinatown in Los Angeles in the late 1930s. His former office building still stands there today.

practicing law fifty years later are **Paul Riles**, **Sheldon Caplow**, **Roy Mann**, **Joseph Ventress**, Harold Wax (partners with his son) and, of course, **George DeRoy**. **Michael Franklin** recently testified as an expert witness in an entertainment industry arbitration. **Nathan Goller** has opened a nightclub in West Hollywood, a nice change of pace. In the following-in-our-footsteps department, **Bill Burge's** grandson is a freshman at USC; **Dan Leedy** has a grandson in law school at the University of San Diego ("his choice, not mine."). You will remember that when asked to suggest which laws we would most like to see repealed, responses included drug laws, tax loopholes for the super-rich (anyone richer than we are), the estate tax (a favorite), solicitation of prostitution (?), Second Amendment, the Endangered Species Act, income tax, and the law of diminishing returns (**Art Wasserman's**). Now recommendations for new laws include: a tax break for attorneys who have practiced in California for 50 years or more; require presidential candidates to take an I.Q. test with results made public; a 10-year moratorium on new laws, state and federal; a permanent moratorium on new laws; publication of new laws with summary of their expected impact; a constitutional amendment providing for election of the President by popular vote; and, the ever-popular repeal of death taxes. The latter, of course, is not really a new law, but it is such a good idea we are going to allow it. Finally, we pass on with deep regret the reported death of **Bill Jekel**. Of that notable firm of Finch, Bell, Duitsman & Jekel, that leaves only **Roger Duitsman**. We will have to close ranks and console each other. We will, of course, do that, among other things, at the 50th year reunion.

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### > Class of 1952

There should be no dissent from the proposition that one of the first things we learned after law school, was the truth of this observation by Justice William O. Douglas: "The law is not a series of calculating machines where definitions and answers come tumbling out when the right levers are pushed." (*The Dissent*, a Safeguard of the