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Hundreds turn out to funeral for former mayor Simon Lakritz

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Simon Lakritz, a teacher-turned-politician-turned activist who became a household name in Hanford, was remembered at his funeral Monday for his passion and determination for making the city a better place to live -- a man who was an inspiring figure in his politics as well as in the educational arena.

Lakritz, former mayor of Hanford, died Sept. 17 at age 78 at a Visalia hospital with family members at his side.

The memorial -- officiated by a rabbi in honor of Lakritz' Jewish roots -- was held at the Civic Auditorium, where he spent countless hours as a decision-maker for Hanford during his younger years while leaving an indelible mark on the city's history.

"To us, my family, he was Mr. Hanford," said Andrew Lakritz, eldest of Simon's four sons, as he listed numerous community organizations he had been involved with and described how his father's home is plastered with plaques of recognition and photographs signifying his presence in the city.

The audience responded with quiet laughter -- the kind of laughter that everybody agreed.



"I think he had a passion for Hanford, and that passion and love was returned by the community," Andrew Lakritz said.

About 350 people, including friends, family members and former colleagues, gathered at the heart of the city Lakritz called home to remember the man who was so many things to those who knew him. Among the attendees were two city council members, Marcie Buford and Dave Thomas, as well as three Supervisors, Joe Neves, Alene Taylor and Tony Barba.

An "educator," "city leader," "community activist," "mentor" -- Lakritz is known to this community for many things, most notably as a longtime council member who also served as mayor. He served on the council from 1974 to 1986 and again from 1988 to 2000. He also served on the Hanford



Joint Union High School District board from 2002 to 2006.

In addition, Lakritz mentored teachers at Chapman University.

Simon Lakritz's body is moved to the Hanford Cemetery after his memorial service at the Hanford Civic Auditorium on Monday. (Apolinar Fonseca/The Sentinel)

Lakritz is known in Hanford as a civil rights advocate and an outspoken liberal who drew respect from all facets of the community. On Monday, Lakritz was most frequently, and affectionately, monickered as "Mr. Hanford" by those who spoke about his life.

Jimmy Williams, an African-American minister in Hanford and a fellow member of the NAACP, said Lakritz was instrumental in the organization's effort in 2006 to pressure the city council to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day as an official city holiday.

"This was a man of principle. He didn't back down although he was a minority among conservatives. He stood his ground," Williams said. "I respect Simon as a man of principle ... He truly was Mr. Hanford, and his legacy will live on. His sons will carry on what he represented."

Bill Hazen, a former social science teacher at Hanford High School, said Lakritz was an "inspiration." Hazen had his first encounter with Lakritz in 1964, when he came to Hanford as a young, freshman social science teacher. At that time, Lakritz was teaching world geography.

Hazen also recalled Lakritz for having a fervent penchant for all things related to politics.

"If you spoke to Si of politics, he'd get twinkles in his eyes and a smile on his face because he loved politics," Hazen said. "When he saw someone that is pursuing his selfish interest above public input, Si would roll his eyes and say, 'That guy just doesn't get it.' I think the city of Hanford and all of us owe Si Lakritz a big thank you."

Speeches were followed by the singing of Lakritz's favorite songs, performed by his friend Sonya Diane Jones.

As the rabbi recited a prayer in Yiddish, the somber sound of the bell tolls rang out at the auditorium. Lakritz's casket, draped in an American flag, was carried out by his four sons, Andrew, Jeffrey, Bradley and Thomas, and his relatives.

The memorial was immediately followed by a brief yet memorable graveside service at Hanford Cemetery.

Lakritz was also remembered as a patriotic veteran of the U.S. Army during the Korean War, with a California State Honor Guard participating in the ceremony by giving a three-volley salute and playing taps.

Under the spotless autumn sky, relatives and friends bid their final farewells to the Lakritz, encased in a wooden coffin bearing the Star of David.

After "Kaddish," or a prayer in memory of the dead, was recited, each of the mourners follow the Jewish tradition and symbolically completed the burial by shoveling dirt into the grave.

But the shovels were turned upside-down, by the instruction of the rabbi, looking as though it signified the sorrow and reluctance among the mourners to bid their final farewells.

A posthumous recognition was given to Lakritz on Monday from the League of United Latin American Citizens for his activism during his life.

The reporter can be reached at 583-2429.

(Sept. 23, 2008)

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