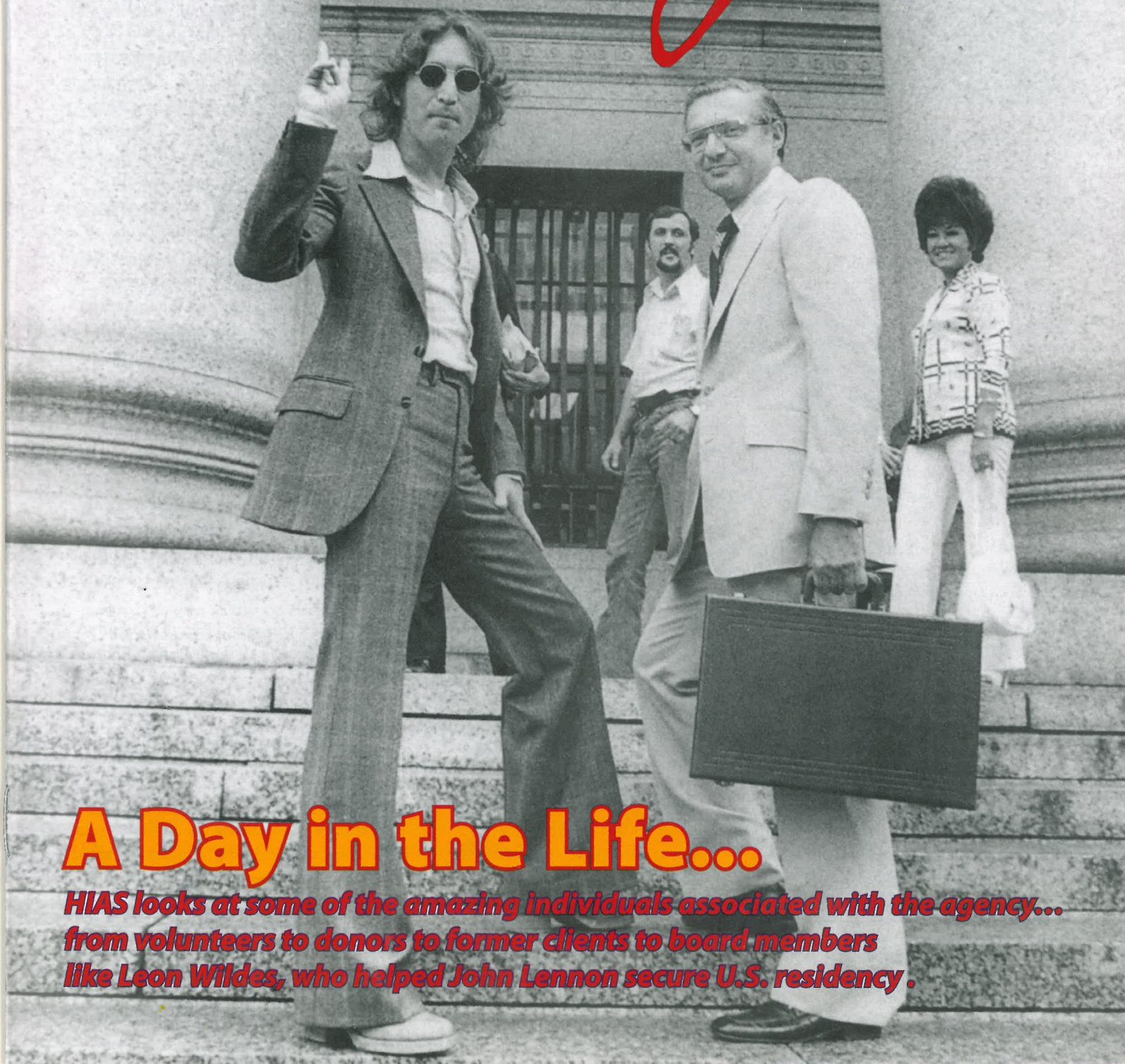


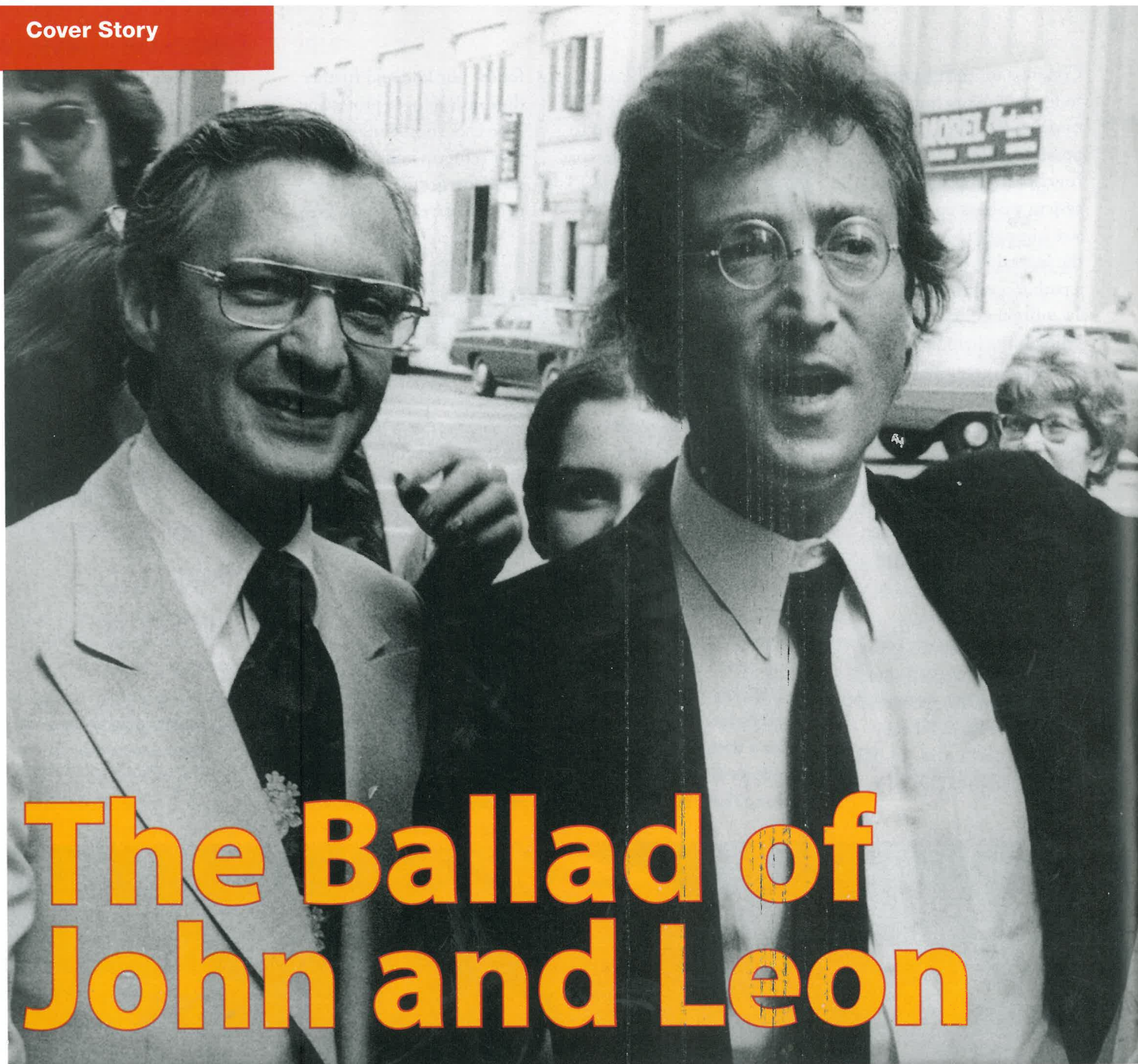
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Messages



A Day in the Life...

HIAS looks at some of the amazing individuals associated with the agency... from volunteers to donors to former clients to board members like Leon Wildes, who helped John Lennon secure U.S. residency.



The Ballad of John and Leon

Leon Wildes sits in a polished conference room on Madison Avenue, where the walls are festooned with news articles and enlarged photographs of John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and...Leon Wildes. He may not be the fifth Beatle, but it was the legal artistry of this HIAS board member that secured Lennon's U.S. residency back in 1976.

From the midtown law firm that bears his name, Wildes explains that in 1972 a law school classmate asked him to look into the U.S. government's case against the former Beatle, who was facing deportation stemming from a cannabis charge back in England.

"I wasn't very familiar with the Beatles," says Wildes, an opera fan from a small Pennsylvania town. "The night I met the Lennons to discuss their legal situation, I went home and told my wife that I had met with Jack Lemmon and Yoko Moto." His wife instantly—and exuberantly—corrected him.

By the time Wildes agreed to represent the couple, the Lennons had two weeks to prepare for John's deportation hearing. Thus began a five-year bureaucratic odyssey, during which Wildes battled the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, won four rounds in federal court, and vanquished a goliath

called the Nixon administration.

The year 1972, Wildes explains, was the first time that 18 year olds could vote in a U.S. election. John Lennon, a voice of the anti-Vietnam War movement, was an influential figure for millions of newly minted, draft-eligible voters.

"He called Vietnam an immoral war, and young people flocked to him to hear what he had to say," Wildes remembers. When President Nixon learned from Senator Strom Thurmond that the former Beatle could be a problem for his re-election campaign, the President took swift action to make "the Lennon problem" go away, Wildes explains.

At left, Leon Wildes, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono
Photo by Bob Gruen



As Wildes fought for Lennon's residency, wading deeper into a sea of legal complexities, he encountered obstacles indicative of the paranoia of the times. Petitions that he had filed would be hidden away, so that they could not be adjudicated. The U.S. government would serve successive rounds of papers to the Lennons, with impractical deadlines.

"The Nixon administration wanted to move the Lennons out of the country quickly," he says. And then there was the matter of surveillance.

"Yoko advised me that if I heard a screeching sound on my telephone, it was a sign that my line was being tapped," he

remembers. Sure enough, Wildes would hear the distinctive wiretap noises when he used the phone in his office during the day, and on his home phone line at nights and on weekends.

"I used to call my father in Pennsylvania and speak to him in Yiddish," he says. "I'd joke with him that some nice, older Yiddish-speaking gentleman would probably be hired by the government to translate what we were saying. Then I'd toss something in about the First Amendment."

Finally, after a five-year strategy of intricate and exhaustive appeals, Wildes emerged victorious in the precedent-setting *Lennon v. United States* decision, and John was permitted to remain in the country.

"There's a lot of 'law' to be gained from the Lennon matter," says Wildes, who has been teaching at Cordozo School of Law for 31 years and gives an annual lecture about the case. "Students wander in from other classes to listen to the discussion because I'm likely to reveal unpublished aspects of the material as my memory is jogged."

Even before the landmark decision, Wildes explains, he was fascinated with immigration—dating back to his undergraduate days at Yeshiva University.

"Historically, Jews have been chased from one place to another. But they always had some form of involvement in their own resettlement. It was essential to their survival." Wildes did some jumping around on his own. He followed his interests into law school and beyond, taking his first real "establishment job" working for HIAS for a year. After starting his own practice, he promised himself that when he grew older, he'd serve on the HIAS board of directors. Wildes, now in his ninth year as a board member, sees the role of HIAS as more vital than ever.

"HIAS can handle an immigration emergency anywhere in the world," he says, pointing to how the organization

is resettling Jews, Christians, and Baha'i from Iran. "It's important that if we ever need representation in the future, we have HIAS' expertise and facilities internationally."

Now in the U.S., we're facing a new era of controversial immigration policies that would have incensed his famous client, he says, pointing to the Arizona initiative to curtail undocumented residents.

"Lennon would have been outraged by the treatment of illegal aliens and how they're used as political footballs," he notes. The press, he explains, would have eaten it up. "Lennon had a way

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of expressing himself that appealed to the way the average person feels about unfairness in the system."

Closer to home—namely, in the states of New York and New Jersey—Wildes continues to enjoy a busy immigration practice, which he shares with his son, Michael. (His other son, Mark, is also a lawyer, as well as a rabbi.) And while Wildes' work—through his law firm and with HIAS—is guiding immigrants and refugees through today's legal hurdles, he often thinks about his client and friend.

"John was brilliant," he says, adding that he still keeps in touch with Yoko. "It's a tragedy that we don't have him around to speak up respectfully against the injustices of immigration law or the way it's carried out. He had that gift." 