

Donald S. Harrington, 91, Liberal Crusader, Dies

By SAM ROBERTS

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The Rev. Dr. Donald S. Harrington, a Unitarian minister who crusaded for social justice and was the public face of New York's Liberal Party in its heyday as a candidate for public office and its titular state chairman, died on Friday in Romania. He was 91.

His death was announced by the Community Church of New York, the Unitarian Universalist congregation, where he began preaching in 1944 and had been minister emeritus since his retirement as senior minister in 1982. His successor, the Rev. Bruce Southworth, said Dr. Harrington had never fully recovered from gall bladder surgery last spring in Romania, where he worked with his wife, also a Unitarian minister.



Dr. Harrington was an apostle of liberalism from the pulpit of the interfaith, interracial congregation he helped build on East 35th Street in Manhattan. But it was through his commitment to the Liberal Party and his support for its candidates, including John V. Lindsay, Charles E. Goodell, Jacob K. Javits, Hugh L. Carey and Mario M. Cuomo, that he was afforded a loftier platform.

He was Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.'s running mate for lieutenant governor in 1966 - a ticket that split the Democrats and all but guaranteed the re-election of Nelson A. Rockefeller, the Republican governor. Four years later, Dr. Harrington briefly ran for governor on the Liberal line before deferring to a Democrat, Arthur J. Goldberg.

But Dr. Harrington was widely regarded as a figurehead for Alex Rose, the hatters' union leader, who leveraged the tiny party for an ideological agenda as well as for patronage for faithful Liberals. Mr. Rose's title as one of several vice chairmen of the party belied the iron-fisted control he wielded through the velvet glove he bestowed on Dr. Harrington. That their relationship was so lopsided became apparent not long after Mr. Rose died in 1976. No longer satisfied with his behind-the-scenes role, Dr. Harrington sought to assert leadership.

"After 16 years as state chairman, a person might come to believe that he is the state chairman," Henry J. Stern, a Liberal member of the City Council from Manhattan, said at the time. Asked then who really headed the party, Mr. Stern, who was aligned with another faction and is now the state chairman himself, replied, "The brain is dead, but the mouth lives on."

Dr. Harrington was rebuffed by Raymond B. Harding, another Rose acolyte, whose long march to unseat the Harrington faction succeeded in 1986. The party helped elect Rudolph W. Giuliani, a Republican, as mayor in 1993, but lost its automatic ballot line after the 2002 campaign for

governor - finally fulfilling the derisive appraisal by regular Democratic and Republican politicians that despite its idealistic cloak, it was, after all, neither liberal nor a party.

Donald Szanthy Harrington hailed from an old New England family. He was born July 11, 1914, in Newton, Mass. After graduating from the University of Chicago, he was ordained in 1939 and served the People's Liberal Church on Chicago's South Side. That same year, he married a fellow seminary student, Vilma Szanthy, who was said to be the first woman ordained to the Unitarian ministry in central Europe. He and Vilma Szanthy had two children, Loni Hancock, who was mayor of Berkeley, Calif., and is now a California assemblywoman, and David Harrington, a surgical nurse in Santa Fe, N.M.

Dr. Harrington was among the founders of the American Committee for Africa, a prominent anti-apartheid organization, delivered a presidential nominating speech for Norman Thomas, the Socialist, in 1948 and was an early opponent of the war in Vietnam. In New York, he joined the Liberal Party, whose core was the Jewish trade unionists who split from the Communist-tinged American Labor Party and who preferred the public face of a non-Jew as chairman. Dr. Harrington succeeded Timothy J. Costello, who became a deputy mayor after Mr. Lindsay was elected in 1965.

Vilma Szanthy died in 1982. In 1984, Dr. Harrington married her niece, Aniko Szanthy, who was ordained a Unitarian minister in 1990. She served several village congregations in Transylvania, where Dr. Harrington remained active in economic development.

In addition to his daughter and son, Dr. Harrington is survived by five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. A memorial service is planned this fall at Community Church, where Dr. Harrington often preached a separation of church and state.

"The Liberal Party is a religion for a lot of people," he once said, "but I think religion has to be much deeper than that.

[Picture by John Sotomayor/The New York Times, 1989]