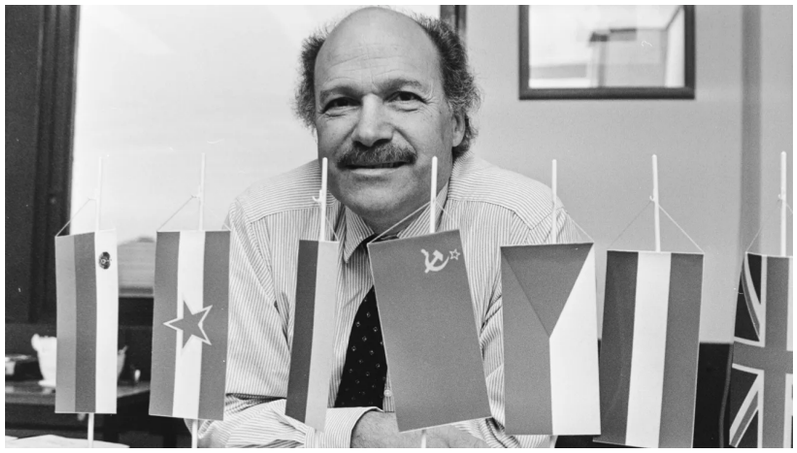
Ralph Land obituary: Russo-British trade expert

Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who worked on the world's first business computer and sold more tech to the Soviet Union than anyone else, dies aged 97



Ralph Land of Rank Xerox

TED BATH FOR THE TIMES

Wednesday September 23 2026, 12.01am, The Times

Listen • 10:11 min | Share | Save

British life has been much enriched by the contribution of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, from the abstract painter Frank Auerbach to the Nobel prizewinning bio-chemist Ernst Chain.

Arguably just as influential was the work of the twins Frank and Ralph Land, who spread the gospel of information technology from the early 1950s in very different ways.

Frank Land (obituary, June 18) became a pioneering professor of information systems at the London School of Economics and influenced the design of the first generation of personal computers. Ralph Land spent decades selling mainframe computers and other British tech to the Soviet Union and eastern bloc countries during the frostiest days of the Cold War.

Ralph Land's moustache helped people to tell him apart from his twin brother Frank

Smiling broadly underneath his shapka as he glad-handed communist officials, for years Ralph sold the world's first business computer, Lyons Electronic Office (Leo), setting up deals in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany and Yugoslavia. In doing so, he built up a £30 million-a-year business of 90 staff operating across east Europe. "We outsold all other computer companies, including America's IBM with its equivalent east

European office of 250 people," said Land, who witnessed the uprising, and its brutal suppression, in Prague in 1968 and became more convinced than ever that microchips could defeat totalitarianism.

As the east European sales manager of Rank Xerox between 1976 and 1991, Land would build up an even bigger business worth some £120 million a year, setting up a chain of shops selling and servicing photocopiers, fax machines and printers throughout the Soviet Union in partnership with its state publishing organisation.

Land overcame the lack of hard currency in east European markets by allowing his trading partners to barter. He set up a team of "middlemen" to find markets for this "counter trade" — electric motors and hi-fi equipment from the Soviet Union, portable typewriters ("there's a big demand as no one seems to make them any more") from Bulgaria, office furniture from Hungary and ball bearings from Romania, along with black and white televisions from Poland. He drew the line at bartering falcons, goat horns and racing camels. "What they thought we could do with them I don't know," he told the Telegraph in 1990.

Through it all, Land outwitted the Co-ordinating Committee of Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom) regulations, a US-led multinational agreement signed in 1949 that restricted the sale of high-tech goods to communist countries because of fears that they could be used in military applications.
Because Britain did not enforce CoCom as robustly as America, which took the view that no technological advance should be exported behind the Iron Curtain, Land was able to exploit "regulatory grey areas" where computer hardware could be presented as below "processing thresholds".

Lyons Electronic Office (Leo), the world's first business computer
SSPL/GETTY IMAGES

Above all, to beat the restrictions, no US components could be in the machines, which meant designing system architectures that relied solely on British or European manufactured parts.
Sometimes goods would be deliberately "downgraded", with capped processing power, disabled components and with storage drives omitted, to comply with technical limits. Once the mainframe was in place, the machines would be upgraded by local engineers with a little help from Land and his friends.

Land was happy to oblige when summoned to MI6 to give occasional briefings on his activities. And if he bent or broke the odd rule, he felt justified in the strong belief that opening up the Soviet bloc to western influence was the best way of winning the Cold War.

Thus, by the end of the Eighties, he felt vindicated, describing the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 as "perhaps the greatest moments of my life".
By then in his early sixties, he thought it an apt moment to retire but was persuaded otherwise by Rolls-Royce, with whom he served as director for eastern Europe between 1991 and 1995, selling aero engines and turbines for gas pipelines.

Considered one of Britain's foremost experts on trade with the former Soviet Union and eastern bloc countries, he fervently believed that Britain should take advantage of that vast hinterland of opportunity. As such, Land served as chairman of the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce and was a key adviser on trade with eastern Europe to both the UK government and the EU, leading many trade missions.

By 1997 there were 300 British companies with offices in Moscow, many of which sought the advice of Land, who was appointed CBE in 1996 for services to British exports.

Rolf Landsberger was born into a Jewish family in Berlin's Charlottenburg district in 1928, 20 minutes earlier than his identical twin brother, Frank. His father, Louis, ran a prosperous business manufacturing air compressors. His mother, Soscha (née Weinberger), was an artist and craftswoman.

Louis believed that Hitler's persecution of Jews would pass, but the burning and looting of Jewish synagogues, shops and businesses on what became known as Kristallnacht in 1938, convinced him otherwise. Rolf never forgot seeing a woman covered in blood running down their street; not long afterwards Louis's business was expropriated for a single mark.

The family left Germany after one of Rolf's uncles, who had won an Iron Cross for bravery during the First World War, was sent to the Dachau concentration camp near Munich.

In April 1939 the family escaped to Britain thanks to Louis's older brother Frederick (Friedrich), who had settled there several years before, providing an income guarantee. Rolf's name was anglicised to Ralph. They settled in a small flat in Kilburn, northwest London. Wearing matching pairs of plus fours and with only a few words of English, the twins were bullied at Essendine Primary School in Maida Vale.

The twins were evacuated to the village of Bedmond in Hertfordshire, arriving as part of a big group of children organised by the Women's Voluntary Service. "In a crocodile we walked up the village," Ralph recalled. "They knocked at each door and said, 'I think you agreed you'd have two boys.'" Nobody had agreed to have two German boys. So we were left to the end. We came to the last house of the village. And the husband was away. The wife took the risk on taking us. It was a brilliant success."

Ralph's father struggled to adapt to life in Britain, but his mother had a plan. "She made these handbags. Brilliant things. She designed them and cut the cloth and then went out into fashion shops in Mayfair and in Regent Street and showed them," Ralph said. Later she launched a business with her husband selling dolls' clothes to Woolworths.

The twins excelled at Willesden County Grammar School and in 1947 gained entry to the LSE, where both studied economics, international trade and transport.

When Frank joined J Lyons & Co in 1952 it was inevitable that Ralph would follow. So it proved as Ralph started as a trainee management accountant for the company's 250 tea shops and other food and catering businesses. The twins joined as the company was developing Leo. Calculating employees' pay had taken an experienced clerk eight minutes per employee. Leo did the job in one and a half seconds, a big saving for a company that employed about 30,000 people, including its famous waitresses.

Both were seconded to the project, even though neither of them knew anything about computers. They soon learnt. Frank was detailed to write programs for the company's mainframe computer. A natural salesman, Ralph liaised with company clients that were queueing up to use Leo and was soon put in charge of export sales, promoting Leo, and from 1964 selling computers to the communists after Lyons merged its computer business with English Electric Computers and then Marconi to form English Electric Leo Marconi. He went on to work with ICL as managing director Germany before joining Xerox.

As the Iron Curtain fell, Land advised on joint venture agreements between companies in the West and new ventures in former communist states that were springing up — there were about 1,000 in the Soviet Union by 1989.

He went on to advise a BBC World Service initiative to aid the transition of eastern Europe into the post-communist world, described by its former managing director John Tusa as a "Marshall Plan of the mind".

Ralph Land

A man of prodigious energy, infectious enthusiasm and broad interests, Land was deputy chairman of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which advised east European countries on democratic reform, and was president of the Rotary Club of London. He continued to be in demand as a consultant well into his eighties.

Land married Jacqueline Bourdin, a French artist, in 1954. She died of cancer in 2009 and he is survived by their sons, Bryan and Anthony.

He spoke to his twin every night on the phone; people could only tell them apart because Ralph sported a moustache. On his 82nd birthday in 2010 Land skydived at 12,000ft in tandem with his brother to raise money for Cancer Research UK. Ralph landed heavily and broke his ankle, but that did not stop his broad smile breaking out on reaching terra firma.

Ralph Land CBE, Russo-British trade expert, was born on October 24, 1928. He died on July 23, 2026, aged 97

Related articles

Frank Land, programmer of the first business computer

Comments (12)

Comments are subject to our community standards and participation guidelines policy, which can be viewed here. By joining the conversation you are accepting our community rules and terms. Update your commenting notification settings here. Our policy is for readers to use their real names when commenting, find out more here.

Vincent Bodsworth

V Add to the conversation...

Sort by **Recommended**

D **D J Makinson**
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026
Fantastic obituary, thankyou. A great life and a chronicle of the twentieth century.
Reply • Recommend (25) • Share

J **j betts**
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026
An amazing tale of fortitude, resolve, intellect and hard work. A life very well lived indeed. May his memory always be a blessing.
Reply • Recommend (20) • Share

P **Paul Lawrence**
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026
Fascinating obituary and like his brother he made such a contribution to British Life. May his memory be a blessing.

The first 2 paragraphs of this obituary are very poignant and yet life for British Jews in this country is uncertain.

In this special week, the fact we need the Police to protectct s...**See more**
Reply • Recommend (18) • Share

N **Nathan Brown**
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

How their lives changed, with what they went through. May his memory always be a blessing.

Reply • Recommend (14) • Share

Lawrence David Hurst
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

What a wonderful story of triumph over adversity.

Reply • Recommend (13) • Share

Chris Yapp
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

He was a wonderful , thoughtful and engagingg colleague up at ICL. This captures him well

Reply • Recommend (12) • Share

Harris Raphael
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

Yet again, another superb obituary of a Jewish person who came to our country as a true refugee, and who integrated into and contributed to our national wellbeing in the best ways. It is madness that our Jewish community is now living in fear because successive governments, fearful of losing muslim...**See more**

Reply • Recommend (12) • Share

Keith Goodman
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

What a wonderful and inspiring innings. Rest in Peace.

Reply • Recommend (5) • Share

Geoffrey Coles
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

Fabulous obit

Reply • Recommend (4) • Share

Dr A O Staines
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

I agree with all of the above, but when did Ernst Chain become a physicist.

Reply • Recommend (3) • Share

Amy Caldovida
23 SEPTEMBER, 2026

Quite he was a bio-chemist. *(Edited)*

Reply • Recommend (3) • Share

Ian Brotherston
24 SEPTEMBER, 2026

I remember reading his brother's obituary earlier this year. What a great asset to this country they both were. I could go on but I won't about our current attitudes and what we have lost. But this is a comment on an obituary of a inspirational man. If there is an after life I hope he's reunited wi...**See more**

Reply • Recommend (2) • Share

OpenWeb

Feedback

Classified advertising
Display advertising
The Times corrections
The Sunday Times corrections
Careers
Newsletters
Best Places to Live
Best Places to Stay
Best British Makers
Best Law Firms
Podcasts
Times Luxury
Sportswomen of the Year Awards
Best Places to Work
Puzzles
TV guide
Times Radio
The Sunday Times 100
Times Bookshop
Times Financial Partners
Times Appointments

More from News Corp

The Australian
Barron's
Dow Jones
Financial News London
Investor's Business Daily
Mansion Global
MarketWatch
Realtor.com
The Sun
Times Literary Supplement
The Wall Street Journal
talkSPORT

© Times Media Limited 2025.
Registered in England No. 894646. Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

Privacy & cookie policy Generative AI editorial guidelines Licensing Cookie settings Site map Topics Puzzles Archive Authors Commissioning terms Terms and conditions