

Alumnus tells a whale of a tale

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Tulane alumnus Rich Cohen's new book, *The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King*, tells the colorful story of Samuel Zemurray, the New Orleans philanthropist who made his fortune in the banana business in the first half of the 20th century.



In his latest book, 1990 Tulane grad Rich Cohen tells the colorful story of New Orleans philanthropist Samuel Zemurray, the “banana king.” (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

“I feel like I've been working all of my life to write about Sam Zemurray,” said [Cohen](#), a 1990 graduate who is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone* magazines and has published nine books. “If you're going to write about Sam Zemurray, it has to be interesting reading, like a novel. You have to write it with the energy with which he lived.”

During a recent stop in New Orleans to promote the book, Cohen said that Zemurray, like Cohen's grandfather, Ben Eisenstadt, was a once-essential type of American that has largely vanished. Both emigrated from Russia as poor Jews at age 14.

While Eisenstadt, the subject of Cohen's book *Sweet and Low*, made money through his invention of a sweetener sold in little pink packets, Zemurray grew bananas on plantations in Central America and sold them to a growing market.

In his pursuit of profit and power, Zemurray orchestrated the coups of Honduran and Guatemalan governments, and he was influential in the birth of Israel.

In 1948, Zemurray “worked the phones” from his mansion at No. 2 Audubon in New Orleans during voting at the United Nations on the creation of a Jewish state. He persuaded several Latin American leaders to support the formation of Israel, said Cohen.

“Without Sam Zemurray, maybe there wouldn't be an Israel. He believed if something gets done, you do it yourself.”

Zemurray died in 1961, and his family donated [No. 2 Audubon Place](#) to Tulane University, among their many contributions. The house is still in use today as a residence for the Tulane president.