



Dialogue is the Word

Cypress Cove Resident Rabbi Rudin on Decades Spent Building Positive Catholic-Jewish Relations

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How Rabbi Rudin spent decades building positive Catholic-Jewish relations throughout the world while fostering interreligious dialogue and understanding

By Nick Van Der Linden, Director of Communications, LeadingAge Florida

Rabbi Rudin meets with Pope John Paul II.

On Nov. 20, 2022, for only the third time in history, a pope honored an American rabbi with the Papal Knighthood of the Order of St. Gregory the Great.

It is the first time in his papacy that Pope Francis granted the honor to a Jewish person.

And it was the culmination of a lifetime dedicated to bringing people together for Rabbi James Rudin, a resident at Cypress Cove in Ft. Myers, who received the Papal Knighthood, the highest honor the pope bestows upon individuals, both Catholics and non-Catholics, in recognition of their significant contributions to society.

Arguably no other rabbi has made as significant of an impact on Jewish-Christian relations, traveled as widely or met with as many global leaders as Rabbi Rudin has in the second half of the 20th century.

Rudin, a prominent author and public speaker, is an international leader in interreligious relations and was a member

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of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) senior staff for thirty-two years, where he served as the organization's Interreligious Affairs Director. But his illustrious career has humble beginnings.

Dedication to Dialogue

Born in 1934, Rudin grew up in a Jewish family and spent the early years of his life in Pittsburgh before his father was called up to active duty in the U.S. Army for one year in the summer of 1941. His father was stationed at Fort Belvoir, so his family moved to nearby Alexandria, VA.

The plan was to move back to Pittsburgh in 1942, but those plans changed on the afternoon of Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. America's entry into the war meant their stay was no longer temporary, and by the time his father completed his six years of active duty, his parents decided to put down permanent roots in Alexandria.

"Growing up in Alexandria during World War II made a great impression on me," Rudin said. "There were uniforms everywhere, as you can imagine. There was a phrase that was used – no more new automobiles, no more new refrigerators. Everything was for the duration. For the Jewish holiday of Passover, we would travel back to Pittsburgh, and when we were on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, you could see the sky was bright red. The whole sky was red. That was Pittsburgh, making steel around the clock for tanks and other material to win the war.

"Living in America, I escaped the Nazis in those horrendous years. But I am forever haunted by the knowledge that had I been born during the 1930s in Transylvania in Europe instead of Pennsylvania, I would have been one of the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust."

Rudin graduated with academic distinction from George Washington University in 1955 and spent five years in seminary at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of

Religion before joining the Air Force. From 1960 to 1962, he served as a U.S. Air Force Chaplain in Japan and Korea and was the only Jewish Chaplain stationed south of Tokyo and Seoul.

His seven Christian Chaplain colleagues at his home air base had little to no knowledge about Judaism, and he found himself not only conducting services for the Jewish personnel stationed there but also spending hours providing information to his fellow Chaplains. During this time, Rudin learned about the similarities and differences among the various Christian denominations and communities, which sparked his interest in interreligious relations.

"High school is where I learned all about Christianity and Christian kids, but the military was really the place where I first learned to explain Judaism to others," Rudin said. "I also learned about Catholicism and Protestantism and Greek Orthodoxy."

Upon returning to civilian life, Rudin served as a rabbi in Reform synagogues in Kansas City, MO, and Champaign, IL.

In 1968, he joined the senior staff of the AJC, America's oldest human rights organization. As the AJC's Interreligious Affairs Director, Rabbi Rudin became a Jewish "Ambassador to Christians" in the vital work of combatting antisemitism and building mutual respect, knowledge and understanding among the world's religious communities.

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"At first, there were a lot of objections from the Jewish and Christian parents," Rudin said. "They would say they didn't send their kids to a Jewish day school or a



President George H.W. Bush poses with Rabbi James and Marcia Rudin during the dedication of an interreligious chapel at Camp David in April 1991.



Rabbi Rudin receives the medal of the Order of St. Gregory from Bishop Mark O'Connell, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Boston.

Catholic parochial school to have a Catholic priest or rabbi come in and proselytize and try to convert,” Rudin said. “And that was not it at all. The program was a collaboration between Cardinal O’Connor and me, and it was his clout that helped with the breakthrough. It was about learning there are people with other religions out there and people with no religion. And these are all Americans, and we have to live together. That was the spirit behind it, and the program ended up becoming a success.”

During his AJC tenure, Rudin met 12 times with Pope John II (at the Vatican, in the U.S. and in Israel) and Pope Benedict XVI twice (in Washington D.C. and in Israel).

He served as the only Jewish member of a committee that raised private funds to build the interreligious Evergreen Chapel at the Camp David Presidential Retreat, and he also played a critical role in the

final design of its eight stained glass windows, something he considers one of his great achievements.

“We had artists come in with plans for the stained glass windows. One window was given the logo of the Episcopal Church, window two was the logo of the United Methodist Church, logo three was the Presbyterian Church,” Rudin said.

“The next one was the Congregational Church. The Catholics got about a half a window, the Jews got half a window, and everybody loved the idea but me. I said this chapel is also for foreign visitors, atheists and agnostics. This chapel is also for people who are Hindus, maybe from India. And maybe they’re Shintoists from Japan. Maybe they’re Muslims from Saudi Arabia. I convinced my committee colleagues, all of whom were Christian, to scrap the original window designs. Finally, the artists came back with a completely different set

of designs that reflected a more universal and welcoming religious message.”

Rudin also played a pivotal role in resolving an issue involving the relocation of a convent inside the Auschwitz Nazi death camp, which he considers another of his key achievements.

“Polish Catholic Carmelite Sisters set up a convent inside Auschwitz, which of course, is the symbol of the Holocaust, the vortex of evil,” Rudin said. “It’s where one and a half million Jews were murdered, where I would have likely been murdered and where my wife would have been murdered. The nuns established their convent with good intentions, and the Jewish community certainly had no objections to the Carmelites having the convent, but the issue was that it was on the original property, in the very building that stored the poison gas used to kill Jews. I strongly believed the Auschwitz death camp should be left intact,



as it was, a permanent reminder of radical, lethal evil.”

The issue energized the Jewish world and became a major controversy in Jewish-Catholic relations, overshadowing all other aspects. Rudin said that after roughly eight years of difficult work, intense consultations, several trips to Poland, working with the Polish Catholic hierarchy and the government, and finally, after a letter to

the nuns from the pope, the Carmelites agreed to move to a new convent location just outside the boundaries of the camp, and Jewish-Catholic relations returned to normal.

“Dialogue—dialogue is the word,” Rudin said. “There are so many monologues where people simply yell at one other. But in an authentic dialogue, you don’t know where it’s going to go. It requires mutual respect on both sides. Religion is not patty cake; let’s make nice. It’s not tea and sympathy. It’s sometimes very difficult stuff. Because you’re talking about people’s deepest feelings of faith, their childhood, their parents, their grandparents. It runs very deep.”

“However, if these two ancient religious faith communities, Christianity and Judaism, can begin the process of reconciliation, of coming together without surrendering their deepest beliefs, and build bridges—I call them human bridges of trust, mutual respect and mutual understanding. If we can do that, after 2000 years, maybe it’s a model for other groups and political and national entities to do the same.”

Investiture Ceremony

On Nov. 20, 2022, Cardinal Sean Patrick O’Malley, OFM, of the Archdiocese of Boston, represented Pope Francis and conducted Rudin’s investiture ceremony at Saint Leo University.

Rudin, extremely honored to have received the award, now enjoys his retirement together with his wife Marcia at Cypress Cove in Ft. Myers. He is an avid crossword puzzle devotee and a Washington Nationals baseball fan.

“I get up every morning, and to get my brain working, I do Wordle,” Rudin said. “I compete with one of my daughters. I do it in the morning, and she does it in the evening, and we see if we can solve it in three, four or five tries.”

Rabbi Rudin and his wife Marcia married in 1969 and are the parents of two adult daughters: Eve, a rabbi in Larchmont, NY, and Jennifer, an animation entertainment agent with the Agency for Performing Arts (APA). The Rudins have one granddaughter, 22-year-old Emma Mollie.

His latest book, published in March 2022, is “The People In The Room: Rabbis, Nuns, Pastors, Popes, And Presidents” (IPubGlobal Communications).

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