

The Alexandria Chronicle

A publication of monographs about historical Alexandria, Virginia.

*A*LEXANDRIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. 201 South Washington Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Linda Greenberg Editor

Fall 2015

A Decade that Shaped My Life

By A. James Rudin, D.D.

Mention my hometown, Alexandria, Virginia, to most people and the usual comment is, “Oh yes, it’s part of Washington, D.C.” And indeed it is a suburb of the nation’s capital, with its own Georgetown-like “Old Town” that includes a collection of charming Colonial and Federal period townhouses. Today Alexandria’s population is over 150,000 and its real estate is considered hot property drawing new residents from around the world. But it was no always so.

When I grew up in Alexandria during the 1940s it was a small town dominated by a distinct Southern ethos. Its 30,000 residents were incredibly conscious of their community’s long history. It was founded in 1749, nearly a half century before the establishment of America’s nearby capital city named for Alexandria’s most famous neighbor George Washington. Another well-known Alexandrian was Robert E. Lee who as a youngster lived with his family during the early 1800s on both Cameron and Oronoco Streets.

Alexandria’s street names are a pleasant historical mixture. King, Queen, Duke, Prince, Princess, Royal and Pitt Streets along with Braddock Road and reflect Alexandria’s Colonial past, while Mt. Vernon and Commonwealth Avenues along with Henry, Washington, Monroe and Lee Streets reflect post-1776 America.

While John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford also lived in Alexandria when they were members of Congress in the years following World War II, they were clearly not members of the F.F.V. (First Families of Virginia). But then neither were the Rudins of Pittsburgh who migrated to Alexandria in August 1941.

My father, a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh Dental School, loved and owned horses. In 1932 he joined the U.S. Army Reserves as a cavalry officer

and each summer for the next nine years he closed his Pittsburgh dental office for two weeks in order to fulfill his military duties at the Carlisle Barracks Medical Field Service Hospital near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Carlisle also housed a cavalry unit in those years! The American military still rode horses in the 1930s. Philip Rudin had a “twofer” at Carlisle: he was a dentist and rode Army horses.

Years later, he liked to tell my brother Bert and me that he volunteered for military service in the 1930s as a direct response to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. “What else could an American Jew do?” he would say. Maybe so, but I will always believe the opportunity to wear a dapper officer’s uniform that featured a Sam Browne belt pulled across his right shoulder and chest attached to a saber was of equal importance.

The belt, made famous by General John J. Pershing in World War I, went out of fashion in 1940 when the U.S. Army abandoned the saber. I treasure a 1930s photo of my father in complete military garb as a captain sitting atop a large steed. In the picture my dad was wearing his “Sam Browne” belt and long saber.

Although World War II began in 1939, America during the summer of 1941 was not in the conflict. Things became worrisome for our family when my father was called up for a year’s active duty and assigned to oversee some dental clinics at Fort Belvoir located a few miles south of Alexandria on U.S. Route One.

However, Beatrice Rudin, my Pittsburgh born and bred mother, was certain we were temporarily camping out and would return in 12 months to our large extended family in what was then called Steel City. In September 1941, when I enrolled as a second grader at Alexandria’s Maury School located at 600 Russell

Road, my mother assured me I would be back at my Pittsburgh grade school for grade three.

Because the four Rudins believed they were merely camping out, my parents rented a small red brick house at 127 East Walnut Street in the Rosemont section of Alexandria. Built in 1935, the house was only 1,100 square feet in size; half the area of our home on Bartlett Street in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill district.

My first Alexandria home still stands between two other nearly identical houses near the main north-south railroad tracks that were used by the Southern Railway, the R F & P (Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac) Railway and other major lines of the era. During World War II, I vividly remember both the loud noise and the many lengthy trains that carried troops, tanks, trucks, half-tracks, armored cars, ambulances, and huge amounts of other war materiel—all clearly visible from Walnut Street. A constant stream of trains passed our house day and night, and visitors slept fitfully because of the noise.

The certainty of our return to Pittsburgh ended on the afternoon of December 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

On that fateful Sunday the Washington Redskins were playing the Philadelphia Eagles at the now demolished Griffith Stadium in Washington, DC. We were all listening to the game on our radio when the announcer interrupted to announce the Japanese had bombed Hawaii. Amazingly, the Redskins' owner at the time, George Preston Marshall, kept news of the attack from the crowd of 27,000 who attended the game. Marshall, always a controversial figure, later defended his action by saying: "I didn't want to divert the fans' attention from the game." It has been called the National Football League's most forgotten game. For the record, the Redskins won 20-14.

America's entry into war meant we were no longer camping out in Alexandria. We lived at 127 East Walnut Street until 1947 when my father completed his six years of active Army duty. By that time, my parents decided to put down permanent roots in Alexandria and purchased a house at 3412 Halcyon Drive in the Beverly Hills area of Alexandria for \$17,000 (about \$180,000 today). I thought having one and a half baths in our new home was a great luxury even though Bert and I still shared a bedroom akin to East Walnut Street.

1947 was also the year I began my freshman year at George Washington High School on Mt. Vernon Avenue. Like thousands of other families who came to live in Alexandria just prior to or during World War II, we became Alexandrians. Today, the fourth generation of Rudins resides in either Alexandria or its environs. At the same time my father opened his dental office at



James Rudin, at age five, a year before his family moved from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Alexandria, Virginia, in August 1941.

910 King Street next door to the Montgomery Ward department store. In 1954 he retired at the early age of 52, and turned his practice over to my brother, also a Pitt Dental School graduate. Bert moved his office to 833 South Washington Street.

But in 1942 there was little thought of civilian life. In that year my father was promoted to the rank of major and to most of our neighbors he was neither Phil nor Dr. Rudin, but "The Major." Almost every Sunday during the war we drove the short distance from Alexandria to Fort Belvoir where my family and I spent the afternoon and early evening at Mackenzie Hall, the post's Officers Club.

The club, built in 1935, was a Colonial red brick building and provided enormous fun for officers' children because it had wonderful food, a large swimming pool and a number of pool/billiard tables. On some of those joyous Sundays, Bert and I were allowed to visit one of the dental clinics my father supervised. Because they were closed on Sundays, we had free rein and we played being dentists. Perhaps that was one reason my brother followed in our father's professional footsteps.

A highlight of our wartime Sundays at Fort Belvoir was seeing the latest movies as part of an appreciative audience of Army personnel and their families. In the early months of 1942 when the war was going badly for America and its Allies, Hollywood pro-

vided a needed respite from the grim news about Bataan, Corregidor, Singapore, Russia, North Africa and other military defeats. Still buried deep in my memory are three films I saw at Fort Belvoir. The trio all had martial themes: "They Died With Their Boots On," with Errol Flynn as the doomed General George Custer, "Hangmen Also Die," recounting how Czech resistance fighters in Prague killed Reinhard Heydrich, the horrific Nazi "Reichsprotector" of German-occupied Czechoslovakia, and "Sergeant York," Gary Cooper's portrayal of America's most decorated and celebrated World War I hero.

While I was playing pool at Mackenzie Hall, Jewish children were trapped in Nazi-occupied Europe. Their terrifying existence included brutal arrests, transports to German death camps in filthy crowded railroad box cars, enduring grisly medical experiments, living in wretched ghettos, suffering wide spread disease, and for most of the Jewish youngsters, death by poison gas, starvation or bullets. 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 instead of Pennsylvania, I would have been one of the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust.

The scariest moment of my youth came in early 1942 when my parents told my brother and me the United States could lose the war and the Nazis might occupy Washington, DC and Alexandria. After he described this grim possibility, my father said that as an American officer he would stay with my mother and fight the German invaders. However, he wanted Bert and me to survive by escaping from Alexandria and "heading to Colorado." He never explained how his two young sons would get to the Rocky Mountains nor did he explain why the Germans or perhaps the Japanese would not conquer Colorado. That ominous conversation with my parents has never left me.

The war news was grim before the tide turned with the British victory at El Alamein in Egypt in November 1942, the successful American landing in North Africa that same month, and the Russian triumph at Stalingrad in early February 1943. My brother and I possessed large flat maps of the world and each day we would move our colored pins to indicate the locations of both the Allied military advances and the increasingly few retreats by our forces.

Much has been written about World War II and what Tom Brokaw has called "The Greatest Generation" of Americans who fought in that titanic global conflict. Because my family lived near the nation's capital and because I spent much time within Fort Belvoir, I still visualize the men and women in uniform on Alexandria's

streets, on buses (there was no Washington Metro system until the 1980s), in movie theaters, cars, restaurants, libraries, shops and stores.... uniforms, uniforms everywhere all the time.

In addition to my father, nearly every male in our family above the age of 18 was in the service serving in such places as Iwo Jima, Kasserine Pass in Tunisia (one of my uncles was wounded there in the February 1943 battle with the German SS forces), Iceland, France, Belgium, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. But our family was not unique; millions of other American families had similar stories.

My late brother, Dr. Berton Rudin, born in 1929, was too young to serve in the military during World War II. However, during the summer of 1944, he worked in the Alexandria torpedo factory on Union Street near the Potomac River. The U.S. Navy began construction of the factory in 1918, and during the 1940s it produced a large number of torpedoes including the Mark XIV, one of which is on permanent display at the factory.

In 1974 the factory was converted into an art center with numerous studios, galleries and workshops. Sadly, my brother never lived to see his wartime work place become a place of artistic creativity. He died in March 1974, from Hodgkin's disease, and is buried in King David Memorial cemetery on Lee Highway in Falls Church.

Philip Rudin, who remained in the Army Reserves after the war and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, died in 1988, and Beatrice Rudin who once believed we were camping out in Alexandria died in 1989. Both are buried at Arlington National Cemetery, their eternal Virginia home.

My four years, grades 2 - 5, at Maury School were a combination of high achievement, acute embarrassment, and the start of a special unique friendship. The school was named for a Virginia hero: Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873) who served in both the U.S. and the Confederate Navy. His book, "Winds and Currents of the Oceans," remains a classic nautical study.

The Maury building was constructed in 1929 and originally consisted of only six classrooms and an auditorium. Three new classrooms were added in 1941 to accommodate the influx of families with school age children who arrived to work in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's many New Deal programs.

In addition, the construction of the Pentagon, completed in January 1943 in nearby Arlington, brought thousands of military personnel and their families to Northern Virginia, including Alexandria. In an ironic twist of history, ground was broken for the Pentagon,

the home of the U.S. Department of Defense, on September 11, 1941. Exactly sixty years later, Islamic terrorists hijacked a U.S. commercial airliner filled with both innocent people and 10,000 gallons of explosive jet fuel and crashed the plane into the monumental five-sided building killing 189 people.

The Alexandria public schools in the 1940s were racially segregated and because of budget constraints there was no eighth grade for either white or black students. As a result, I attended elementary school through the seventh grade; always sitting in a single classroom with one teacher who covered all the basic subjects except music. Upon completing grade seven, Alexandria's white students entered George Washington High School on Mt. Vernon Avenue, not far from East Walnut Street. Black students went to Parker-Gray High School located on Wythe Street.

Like thousands of other Southern communities, Alexandria back then was segregated. But it carried out racial segregation with a certain patrician élan. After all, as I was repeatedly told in school, colored people had lived in the town for 200 years; they had once been the slaves of Washington, Lee and other white families.

So while the blacks of Alexandria were tolerated, they were also legally excluded from the white schools, hospitals, libraries, swimming pools, playgrounds, restaurants (except as cooks and waiters) and many other public facilities. (Our neighbor's dog on East Walnut Street was trained to bark at a black passerby.) And the infamous Virginia poll tax effectively prevented many blacks from voting.

One of the first students I met in second grade at Maury School was a tall seven-year-old named Willard Scott who lived in Rosemont at 125 Commonwealth Avenue, not far from the Alexandria railroad station. We instantly became friends, and our close personal relationship has lasted nearly 75 years.

Willard once told me that he wanted to become a minister, and I told him I wanted to be a radio announcer (television was not part of our lives in the mid-1940s). He became a national TV star on the NBC "Today" show and I became a rabbi. Obviously, as youngsters Willard and I had the right script, but had recited each other's lines. And by coincidence, today we both have homes on Sanibel Island, Florida.

In either the second or third grade at Maury School, our teacher insisted on reading a selection from the New Testament every morning. Concepts and principles such as church-state separation and the First Amendment were not her "first principles."

My parents sharply protested the New Testament readings, but the teacher's response was to make me and the two Catholics in our class leave the room



The Maury School on Russell Road, today. Jim stood on the same steps as captain, School Safety Patrol, with white Sam Browne belt and blue captain's badge.

while she read to the remaining Protestant students, who were mainly Southern Baptists. It seemed she did not consider Catholics fully "Christian." We three exiles comprised ten percent of the class and felt humiliated at being singled out for special treatment. Each morning we were forced to stand together outside the classroom door while the New Testament verses were read to the 27 other members of our grade.

The Maury School principal, also a Southern Baptist, quickly intervened when she learned of my parents' displeasure and the complaints from the Catholic parents. In a meeting with the upset parents, she reprimanded the teacher: "You mustn't separate children based on religion. Everyone's equal here, and besides Bible reading is for church and home. You know we Southern Baptists don't believe it belongs in the schoolroom. Mr. Jefferson taught us about the wall of separation between church and state." Invoking the name of Thomas Jefferson was almost equal in sanctity and power to quoting something written by George Washington. The exiles were exiles no more and the New Testament readings ceased.

My fifth-grade teacher at Maury School was from Georgia, and she was either unable or unwilling to pronounce the name "Abraham Lincoln." When we studied The War Between the States, a/k/a "The Civil War," she always called Lincoln "The 16th Federal President." However, she had no trouble mentioning the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, by name.

She once asked us to interview older members



Our “temporary” home at 127 East Walnut Street became our permanent home in Alexandria. The house then looked the same as it does today except that today the front door is new.

of our families in order to learn how they or their ancestors had survived the Yankee aggression in the South that took place eight decades earlier.

I was spellbound as my 10-year-old classmates proudly recounted how members of their families, usually great-grand parents, had outwitted the fiendish Northerners in Virginia and other Southern states. Especially gripping was my teacher’s own tale of how her Georgia relatives had escaped the destruction and killing carried out by General William Tecumseh Sherman’s troops including the bloody march from Atlanta to Savannah in 1864.

When I reported on my own historical research (limited to interviews of my parents), I quietly said my ancestors in the 1860s were living somewhere in Poland or Russia. But in a louder voice I added that they spent a lot of time avoiding the Tsar’s cruel secret police. I also noted that many young Jewish boys were drafted into the Russian army for a 25-year tour of duty.

Finally, in an even louder voice, I said my Army father told me Adolf Hitler is much worse than General Sherman. It was the autumn of 1944; a time I later learned was the deadliest year of the Holocaust. My teacher nodded her head in approval, but then she scowled a bit and in her thick Georgia drawl gently said, “Jimma, that was a good report, but where exactly are your parents from?” I mumbled, “Pennsylvania.” “Oh, that explains everything,” she said with a smile.

Because Maury School was located not far from 127 East Walnut Street, I was able to walk home for lunch almost every day. When I told that fact to my

daughters and granddaughter, they were incredulous. “You actually walked to and from home alone and walked home for lunch?” they asked in amazement. I recently retraced the half mile route by first heading south on Russell Road, past West Oak Street and then making a left turn on West Walnut, crossing Commonwealth Avenue, and quickly arriving at our home: two or three minutes by car, a bit longer on foot.

I mention these details because it was during one particular walk after school when I learned of a major event in world history: the death of President Franklin Roosevelt at age 63 on Thursday afternoon, April 12, 1945. By the time I started for home that day around 3:30 PM, the official announcement had been made: “The President is dead.” As I made the short journey, I heard the radio reports blaring from every house on Russell Road and Walnut Street. It was an eerie unforgettable experience for a history-minded fifth grader. That same school year, 1944-1945, I was chosen to serve as the captain of the School Safety Patrol at Maury. The American Automobile Association sponsored the group and equipped us with shiny metal badges and white Sam Browne style belts. Our job was to stand at the street corners near the school and allow our classmates to cross the streets in safety. We were taught how to halt auto traffic and other measures to insure student safety.

It was an honor to lead the school patrol, and I proudly wore the blue badge. My predecessor as captain was Morton Bregman, who lived on Masonic View Avenue, adjacent to Maury School. At a George Washington High School reunion 65 years later, I met Morton, also Jewish, and we reminisced about being student captains. We both served in the U.S. Air Force. He became a Colonel. I was a USAF Chaplain in Japan and Korea after finishing my studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. And similar to my earlier stint as a school patrol leader, I once again attained the rank of captain.

When I finished fifth grade, it felt sad to leave the comfort zone of Maury School where I had, along with Willard Scott, become “Masters of Our Universe.” He had already developed the voice and personality that later propelled him into a radio and television career. As Safety Patrol captain, an honor student and a good public speaker, I was sure only good things lay ahead as we prepared to enter Jefferson School on West Street for grades six and seven. But both Willard and I, “good ole Rosemont boys” emerging from tranquil Maury School, were in for a shock.

My new school, like Maury, was only a short walk from our house. But to reach Jefferson School I had to walk under the nearby railroad tracks and enter

an older and grittier section of Alexandria that included the red brick John Roberts (not be confused with the current Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court) public housing development of 90 units. The complex was built in 1941 and, as one critic noted, the buildings were meant to look poor and they did.

In the early years, Roberts' residents were all white, but by the 1980s, most of the 240 people who lived in the housing development were black. Following a widely reported public controversy, the units were demolished, and the uprooted residents were moved to other housing facilities in Alexandria. In 1990 the affluent and elegant Colecroft Station Condominium that is advertised as a "Desirable and Well Maintained Community" replaced the forty-year-old development. But, of course, all that was in the far future when I began my two years at Jefferson School.

Many of my new classmates lived in Roberts while others came from Lee School located on Prince Street between Patrick and Henry Streets in what later became part of upscale Old Town. But in September 1945 neither the Roberts houses nor the Lee School area were fashionable, swank or chic. For me, after four years in serene Rosemont, it was Terra Incognita.

Sixth and seventh graders begin to mature in all the usual physical and emotional ways and I was no exception. My two years at Jefferson School accelerated those changes. On the physical side, there were fistfights almost every day in the school playground during recess periods. Most of the bare-fisted participants came from Lee School and many carried grudges from earlier years. Because I wore glasses, I was called Four Eyes and other epithets. I tried to avoid fights. However, several times I was forced to defend myself, especially from a boy named Eddie.

My parents thought the fights were about my being Jewish, but that was not the cause. Rather, all former Maury students, including Willard Scott and me, were considered sissies by some physically aggressive kids from Lee. Fortunately, I had earlier learned basic boxing skills at the Alexandria Boys Club located at 401 North Payne Street. Those lessons held me in good stead and in time Eddie and his friends moved on to other targets.

Looking back across the decades, my two rough and tumble years at Jefferson School represented what we today call a culture clash. The fact I was an excellent student was a negative attribute in the eyes of some students. Serving as the captain of the school patrol was perceived as a sissy's job and because Willard Scott and I had interests other than seeking fights or stealing merchandise from the local Peoples Drug store and Safeway super market, we became "The Other."

The mid-1940s was the era of recreation rooms usually in a home's basement. Many "rec rooms" in Alexandria had knotty pine walls, ping-pong tables, radios, and comfortable couches and chairs. I remember many Saturday nights when I attended parties in my friends' subterranean lairs. I could never reciprocate the hospitality since our tiny Walnut Street residence had no rec room.

Those basement rooms often lacked windows and when the lights were turned off, it was very, very dark. And that was when we sixth and seventh graders played Flashlight and Post Office, games that taught me how to properly kiss a girl and even to begin ever so slightly an exploration of female anatomy.

Most of my fellow students and I obtained a Virginia driver's license at 15. Once we were equipped with the legal authority to drive and the use of a family car, we no longer were constrained to family rec rooms. We were literally and figuratively "off to the races." Two couples, on a Saturday night double-date, would see a movie at the Reed Theater on King Street, and then neck (such a quaint term!) in a parked car on Mt. Vernon Boulevard (the route between Alexandria and George Washington's estate) overlooking the Potomac.

We called such nocturnal activity "Watching the Submarine Races." The evenings often ended with four exhausted people sitting in a restaurant booth eating fried onion rings, hamburgers, French fries, milk shakes at the Marriott Hot Shoppe restaurant on North Washington Street in Alexandria.

Alexandria's most revered monument was a statue of a Confederate soldier standing tall at the intersection of South Washington and Prince Streets. In the mid-1920s, the six-story George Mason Hotel was built on that corner and remained for many years Alexandria's only major hotel and the scene of my Bar Mitzvah dinner and party. The 106-room hotel designed by the architect William L. Stoddart is now an office building. The statue faced south toward the Confederate capital city of Richmond, less than 100 miles away. I remember intense community embarrassment when an automobile smashed in the statue's base, accidentally turning the soldier northward. A repair crew quickly restored Alexandria's Johnny Reb to his traditional southern exposure.

In addition to Sundays at the Fort Belvoir Officers Club, my family often visited an 85-year-old Jewish woman who had been born in Alexandria about eight years before President Lincoln was assassinated. Miss Amelia Ginzburger had a small apartment in the historic Marshall House, a building that has long since been demolished. It stood for many years at the corner of King and South Pitt Streets. Her father, one of the founders



Confirmation Class of 1950, Congregation Beth-El of Alexandria. From left to right, Rabbi C. Melvyn Helfgott, Inga Rosenbaum, James Rudin, Steven Levy, Ronald Kintisch, Howard Bloch, Sally Baker, and Emanuel Kintisch, Confirmation Class Teacher. Photograph taken in the spring, 1950, at the original Beth-El building, at 206 North Washington Street.

of Alexandria's Temple Beth El, had once owned a retail store on the street level, and she was born in that building and lived there all her life.

On May 24, 1861 Major Ephraim E. Ellsworth of the Union Army, a close friend of the newly inaugurated "16th Federal President," became one of the first casualties of the Civil War. James Jackson, the Marshall House hotel owner and a strong Confederate supporter, shot Ellsworth dead on the building's staircase.

On my first visit to that same staircase about 80 years after Ellsworth's death, Miss Ginzburger told my family every detail of that historic day. When she was done with her story, I asked if any of the major's blood still remained. Miss Ginzburger told me her mother had cleaned the floor immediately after the shooting and then declared: "My parents always tried to be neat."

Every January 19th Miss Ginzburger allowed me and some of my grade school friends to use her apartment to view the highlight of Alexandria's year: the King Street parade marking General Lee's birthday. It was a school holiday, while February 12th, Lincoln's birthday, was not. Sometimes one of Virginia's U.S. Senators -- Harry Byrd or Pat Robertson's father, Willis Robertson -- participated in the parade.

Temple Beth El, the Alexandria congregation my family supported with great fervor, was founded in

1859 by a group of Jews from Germany who came to the United States following the unsuccessful 1848 revolution in Europe. The Temple, as we called it, was housed in a small two-story red brick building built in 1871 at 206 North Washington Street, a half block from the well-known Episcopal Christ Church where Washington, the Lees and other famous folk worshipped. I remember one Sunday morning in early 1942 when, for security reasons, our Hebrew school class was canceled because President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill were attending services at the historic church.

Our congregation's first full time rabbi, Hugo B. Schiff, and his wife Hannah were rescued from Nazi Germany in 1938 and came to Alexandria the following year. Dr. Schiff, as he wanted to be called, had earned his Ph.D. in 1920 at Erlangen University in Germany; surprisingly, his thesis focused on the transcendental philosophy of an American: Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Dr. Schiff and his wife lived in a tiny apartment above Bradshaw's shoe store at 508-512 King Street that was owned by a Beth El member. The Schiffs were always grateful to the Alexandria congregation that saved their lives; he had been briefly interned at the Dachau concentration camp near Munich following Kristallnacht in November 1938. Dr. Schiff, a poorly paid rabbi, augmented his salary by teaching religion courses at Howard University in Washington.

Dr. Schiff, his wife, and other refugees in our congregation frequently spoke about the evils of the anti-Semitic German regime, but it was not until after the war that our congregation first heard about the murderous Nazi atrocities against Jews; the mass murder of six million men, women and children. Neither the term Holocaust nor the Hebrew word Shoah was yet in our lexicon.

My family attended Sabbath services almost every Friday night in the 1940s. During the hundreds of services I attended in those years, I frequently stared intently at the large marble plaques that flanked the Holy Ark containing the sacred Torah scrolls. The panels contained the engraved names of deceased Beth El members and the dates of their deaths; I still remember the

“Ludwig” and “Hedwig” first names and the Germanic last names with the added letter “n” as in Mann. Prominent Temple members of the era included Alexandria Mayor Leroy Bendheim who later served as a State Senator and Maurice D. Rosenberg, elected to the State House of Delegates.

Every Friday night following Dr. Schiff’s Benediction, members of the congregation would gingerly walk down the two narrow rickety staircases located at the front of the sanctuary in order to reach the small first floor social hall. The post-service reception featured coffee, tea, and cookies.

Latecomers to Beth El services would have guilty expressions on their faces because they had to trudge up the shaky steps in the front of the sanctuary and arrive in full view of the worshippers in the pews. No one could sneak in from the rear. In the late 1950s, the large, modern Temple Beth El building was constructed at 3830 Seminary Road across from the Episcopal Seminary campus.

While my family played the most important role in shaping my beliefs and values, Temple Beth El of the 1940s also had an extraordinary impact on me: its Hebrew school, being part of a caring community, the superb academic teaching and spiritual leadership of Dr. Schiff, an active Temple Youth Group for the congregation’s teenagers and Beth El was the synagogue where my Bar Mitzvah took place. The small congregation has produced two rabbis: Stanley Funston and myself...not too shabby for a synagogue that in the 1940s had just 37 religious school students and a membership of less than 100 families.

The four years I spent at George Washington High School (GW) was the other significant influence in my teen years. In my student days, Alexandria had no junior high or middle school. High school classes with a variety of teachers, a myriad of subjects and a large diverse, albeit white student body, was a form of liberation for me.

Because George Washington was the only white high school in Alexandria, it drew students from the entire community: from Jefferson and from George Mason School on Cameron Mills Road in Braddock Heights and from Mt. Vernon School in Del Ray. I thrived in the larger scholastic environment, and I look back at my high school years with a sense of joy, appreciation and fulfillment.

There were many gifted teachers, but three were special: the legendary Mr. Irving Lindsey who taught algebra, geometry and advanced mathematics compelled his students to fully understand and explain a theorem, equation or other difficult calculation. Anxious students had to stand at the blackboard in front of

the class almost daily and explain and defend their results and answers in the face of Mr. Lindsay’s sharp sometimes withering questioning. His demanding teaching style and knowledge of his subject was the equal of any professor I later encountered in college, graduate school or rabbinical seminary.

Miss Unis Woodward taught me the intricacies, power and beauty of the English language. She was relentless in forcing her students to avoid grammatical errors and she was fearsome in critiquing student essays and other compositions. Her expert knowledge and love of great literature was contagious.

Finally, Dr. Dorothy Torpey, one of the few GW faculty members with a doctorate, made history classes exciting and unforgettable. Her unique approach to history remains indelibly etched in my mind. She was always more interested in the “Why” and “How” of history, and less in the “When.” Whenever I venture into historical writing, Dr. Torpey is with me in spirit as both muse and critic.

Many high school classmates continue to be life long friends. They have excelled as physicians, dentists, research scientists, university professors, political leaders, TV stars, psychologists, psychotherapists, and lawyers.

Willard Scott was our George Washington’s class president for all four years, and I had the good fortune to be elected by the entire student body as a vice president of the Student Council. The other Veep, was Patricia Smith who is better known today in Alexandria as Patsy Ticer, a former Mayor and State Senator.

I remain in touch with Patsy and four other GW cheerleaders who were my classmates: Dr. Sally Baker Canestrari, Lee Everitt Kostel, Elizabeth Bear Randolph, and Martha Jordan Stringer. I also treasure my friendship with Dr. Steven Levy, Dr. Kilmer McCully and Dr. Joan Wharton Witkin.

During my high school years, I was part of a group of students that presented live broadcasts of children’s stories and plays each Saturday morning on WPIK, Alexandria’s local radio station. Each Thursday evening, we would meet at the studio to receive our scripts and rehearse for the upcoming program. The regimen of speaking clearly and delivering the words of a new character each week into a microphone was excellent training for a future rabbi.

In addition, several students joined Willard and me at his home each weekend as the “staff announcers” of WSSD, our own radio station that was powered by an oscillator that aired our programs to a number of Rosemont homes. We were amateur newscasters, disc jockeys, weather reporters and sportscasters. I had fun as the host of a program called “Rudin’s Portfolio.” It

was my analysis of the week's national and international news.

WSSD was so professional that many listeners in the neighborhood believed it was an authentic commercial radio station. But it came to an abrupt end when someone from the Federal Communications Commission came to our "studio" and demanded we immediately cease using the oscillator transmitter. It seemed our station was interfering with the radio frequency airplanes used for approaches at nearby Washington National Airport.

It was during my high school years that I had my first two paying jobs. In the summer of 1950 I assisted my brother at Dr. David Witter's veterinarian hospital located on Duke Street Extended. I worked Monday through Friday, 40 hours a week, at \$.50 an hour (the equivalent today of \$4.85). It was hard work giving baths to dogs, holding the animals while my brother provided haircuts and grooming, cleaning up the distemper ward, and clipping the ears of pigs after Dr. Witter gave them anti-cholera shots.

I spent the following summer as a movie usher at the Vernon Theater at 4707 Mt. Vernon Ave. The building has been demolished, but a picture of the Vernon is on the Internet. Ushers used flashlights to escort people to their seats in a darkened theater and we climbed tall ladders to change the large marquee that announced the current film.

I worked both the weekend matinees as well as evenings. Because they were so popular, two films remained a long time at the theater. I saw both Alfred Hitchcock's "Strangers on a Train" and M-G-M's "Show Boat" at least 15, maybe 20 times. But, hey, I made \$.60 an hour; equal to \$5.41 today.

Our class demanded that our Senior Prom, a significant rite of passage for teenagers, be moved from its long time venue, the dreary and sweaty school gymnasium to a more glamorous site. The 1951 Prom took place in the popular Terrace Room at National Airport. In 1951, National Airport was a destination for sight-seeing and dining. The elegant Terrace Room with



1951 George Washington High School of Alexandria, VA, Senior Prom, at the Terrace Room, Washington National Airport, Seated from left to right: Unknown Person, Michael Martin, Frances Stewart, James Rudin, Anne Williams, Joan Wharton and Thomas Knight. Standing are Martha Jordan, Kilmer McCully and Alan Thompson. Seated, in background, are Thomas Foard and Mary Jane Compe.

panoramic windows was the place for cocktails and dinner. Diners would watch in comfort as the planes took off and landed.

During the same week as the Prom, three other couples celebrated graduation by hearing Nat "King" Cole sing his romantic songs at the Casino Royal nightclub at 14th and H Streets, NW in downtown Washington, DC.

As underage minors, we could only order soft drinks, but the three minors shared the "adult" check that with a cover charge, Coca Colas, and tip came to a costly \$18.98. That figure today would be about \$170. I love school graduations and sometimes cry at the sound of Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" march because such moments represent both achievement and transition. I participated in graduations from college and rabbinical school, and received three honorary doctorates, but no graduation ever equaled the joy I experienced that night in early June 1951 when, at 16, I joined 229 other students in our last moments together as a class.

High school graduates will never again know as much, be as self confident, or have such certainty about a successful future as the moment their names are called to receive their diplomas. I believed Alexandria had provided its final gift to me. I was ready to move on, and looked forward to starting college at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

But I was wrong about the continuing influence of my hometown. The long ago Alexandria of the 1940s and 1950s with its rich history, culture, geography, people and memories has remained embedded within me. Although I was never again a permanent resident of Alexandria after 1951, this much I know: you can take the boy out of Alexandria, but you can never take Alexandria out of the boy.

The author, **James Rudin**, attended Wesleyan University and graduated from George Washington University. After his rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1960, he was an Air Force chaplain in Japan and Korea and later a rabbi in Kansas City, Missouri, and Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Rabbi Rudin was a member of the American Jewish Committee's professional staff for 32 years where he served as the organization's Interreligious Affairs Director. He is currently the committee's Senior Interreligious Adviser and Visiting Professor of Religion and Judaica at Saint Leo University.

In addition, he has authored and edited 17 books. Rudin and his wife Marcia live in New York City and Sanibel, Florida. When in Sanibel he and his wife enjoy visits with Willard Scott; when they visit they reminisce about their childhoods in Alexandria and still refer to themselves as "The Boys from Rosemont."

Alexandria Historical Society

Officers and Board of Directors

Officers:

President Debra P. Ackerman
Vice President Audrey Davis
Secretary Catherine Weinraub
Treasurer Tal Day

Board of Directors:

Jamie Bosket
Katy Cannady
Jackie Cohan
Sarah Coster
Dennis Hensley
Patrick Ladden
James Mackay
Julie Randle
Mark Whatford
Helen Wirka

In addition:

Katy Cannady is the representative to *Alexandria Archaeology*

Jackie Cohan is the *Newsletter* Editor

Dennis Hensley is the representative to the Historic Alexandria Resources Commission

Helen Wirka is the editor of the *Alexandria Chronicle*

To join the society, submit your check made payable to the Alexandria Historical Society, together with your name, address and telephone numbers, to the Alexandria Historical Society, 201 South Washington Street, Alexandria VA 22314. Or, join on-line using Paypal at www.alexandriahistorical.org.

Membership Dues are due and payable on July 1st of each year.

There are six membership levels:

1. Gift
2. Student \$10
3. Individual \$20
4. Couple (up to two members) \$30
5. Sustaining (up to two members) \$50
6. Patron \$100

The Alexandria Chronicle

A publication of monographs about historical Alexandria, Virginia.

*A*ALEXANDRIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. 201 South Washington Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Editor Linda Greenberg

Fall 2015

Address Service Requested

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Alexandria VA
Permit No. 64



The Terrace Room, Washington National Airport. James Rudin, author of *A Decade that Shaped My Life, 1941 - 1951*, describes life in Alexandria, a small, "Southern-style" town. Rudin attended the Maury School, Jefferson School and George Washington High School and graduated from George Washington in 1951. The Senior Class Prom was in the lovely Terrace Room at National Airport with a panoramic view of plane arrivals and departures.

The mission of the Alexandria Historical Society is to promote an active interest in American history and particularly in the history of Alexandria and Virginia. For information about society lectures and awards presentations and for past issues of the *Alexandria Chronicle*, please visit the society's web site: www.alexandriahistorical.org. The *Chronicle* is published through the support of the J. Patten Abshire Memorial Fund.