

# Sempre Avanti

*The Responsibility of Privilege*

by

Richard L. Hirsch  
with Peter Weisz

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Richard L. Hirsch

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Sempre Avanti

## DEDICATION

*to Larry*

Richard L. Hirsch

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- Rochelle Hirsch, my sister-in-law.
- Larry Gross, my lifelong friend and colleague.
- Daniel, Michelle, and Adam; my children.
- Peter Weisz, my collaborator

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- Elaine Bedell, my wife.

Richard L. Hirsch

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## INTRODUCTION



hen my friend, Lee, asked for a favor it was useless to say no. With the perfect trifecta of looks, charm and wit, he was going to get his way, one way or the other, so of course I said yes when he asked if I could help his friend find an apartment to rent. It made no difference that I was busier than ever, never leaving my office before 9 PM after spending a full day in the market, or that I didn't really handle rentals, just sales. Lee said his friend needed help and that he wasn't going to let some barracuda broker take advantage of him. I asked him to tell me about his friend, and all he would share was: "He's a good man. Take care of him"

So that's how, two days later, I found myself waiting to meet Richard Hirsch in the lobby of the now defunct Mayfair Hotel on Manhattan's Park Avenue and 65th Street, where one of the only two apartments that met his needs happened to be located. I was standing near the elevators when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I was totally unprepared for the megawatt smile and robin's egg blue eyes that greeted me. He reached out to shake my hand — that quaint pre-Corona virus gesture of respect—and I noticed his elegant, well-groomed hands and how comfortable my hand felt in his. No doubt about it, he had me at "Hello."

The book you are about to read was something Richard had talked about doing since I had first met him, but you know the saying about the best laid plans of mice and men. Then, somehow, right before the pandemic gripped the world and stopped it on a dime, all the pieces fell into place. An abyss of unfilled time opened, a writer with the same vision appeared just as Richard's desire to tell his story all converged, and, Voila!: The Book.

It is my hope that those who read this memoir and who do not know Richard well will get a sense of who he is and that those who do know Richard will learn much more about him. I further hope that younger family members, who only think of Richard as that nice old guy who picks up the bills, will get an eye-opening peek at the young Richard, full of energy and passion, hard working and disciplined, funny and smart, and completely devoted to his family, his friends, his business, and his people. The good news is that he still is all of those things.

I couldn't have foreseen 30 years ago, and wouldn't have believed it if I could have, that we would end up happily married. I'm also happy to still be taking care of him, happy that he fit me into his world, and happy that Lee was right in his terse assessment of "He's a good man." A *really* good man.

—Elaine  
June, 2020

Richard L. Hirsch

## CHAPTER ONE

# LOSING LARRY

*“There is no tragedy in life like the death of a child. Things never get back to the way they were.”*

— Dwight D. Eisenhower on the death of his 3-year-old son, Ike, Jr.



At the time that I was about the same age as his stricken son, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in World War II Europe, was employing these very words to console parents of US soldiers killed on the beaches of Normandy after the D-Day invasion. Back in 1920, Eisenhower's own first-born son had suddenly fallen ill and succumbed to Scarlet Fever; a disease he had contracted from a servant. As stated, things never got back to the way that they were.

Years later, neither Joyce, my wife at the time, nor I could have anticipated that we would someday be able to attest to the tragic truth in Ike's words.

During the summer of 1972, the presidential election that would see incumbent Richard Nixon crush Democrat George McGovern was in full swing. That August, the Washington Post carried a brief page-five article about a mysterious break-in at a place called The Watergate. As was often the case in those days, I was on the road fulfilling my duties as the youngest CEO of a US publicly-traded corporation: Welbilt, a maker of domestic commercial kitchen equipment. Before I had left home this time, I was concerned about our five-year old son, Larry. He was running a temperature of 101 and exhibiting flu-like symptoms. After I arrived at my destination, Joyce called and told me she was planning to take Larry to the ER at South Nassau County Community Hospital.

When we spoke again on the following evening, I detected a tremor in Joyce's voice as she explained: “They looked him over at the hospital and they think it might be mono. They gave him some oral antibiotics. His temperature is at 100 and he says his head hurts.” This sounded serious, but not life-threatening.

Since his birth in 1967, Larry had endured a spotty medical history. He was plagued by a variety of conditions including asthma. While his younger brother, Daniel, age 3 at the time, remained at home, Larry attended the Malibu Beach Day Camp, located off of Lido Road on the opposite end of Long Beach. Our home was situated in the scenic village of Atlantic Beach, about an hour's drive from my Maspeth office in Queens. Atlantic Beach had received some notoriety during those times thanks to the GODFATHER novel and movie. Atlantic Beach was the fictional home of Sonny Corleone, the Godfather's oldest son.

“I'll be home tomorrow afternoon,” I told Joyce. “Give him a big kiss from me.”

When I landed back at LaGuardia the following day, I was met at the airport by my sister Carole and her husband, Mickey. I was unprepared for the shock they were about to deliver. Carole and Mickey had accepted the sad duty of informing me that our son had died.

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I learned that before his death, Larry's symptoms had worsened. His lips had started turning blue, he was vomiting blood, his temperature was up to 106 and he had begun experiencing mild seizures. Tragically, Larry died mysteriously after being in the hospital for less than 24 hours.

It took several months and an autopsy to discover the cause of Larry's death. I arranged to have all of his medical and autopsy records transferred from the hospital to a team of top diagnosticians at Brown University, my alma mater. After conducting an exhaustive scrutiny of the data, the doctors at Brown made the following determination: Larry's death was due to overwhelming and diffuse encephalitis. This is caused by an arthropod-borne (mosquito) virus called LACV (LaCrosse Encephalitis Virus). Once infected from a mosquito bite, the patient is most likely to come down with Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE). This is a neuro-invasive disease caused by an acute viral infection. Older children are typically able to fight it off with antibiotics, but in Larry's case, given his medical history, he simply did not have sufficient strength or resistance to combat the infection.

We surmised that Larry must have been bitten by an infected mosquito while he was attending summer day camp. In those days, each summer would see newspapers filled with headlines like: "Worst Encephalitis Epidemic in Decades Flares as States Vainly Battle Mosquitoes" In the year alone that Larry died, there were five reported cases of equine encephalitis. As is often the case with grieving parents, I sought someone to blame for this intense tragedy. I considered filing a malpractice complaint against the physician who treated Larry, but my attorney advised that we would have a difficult time making a case and so we dropped it.

Joyce and I tried to go on with our lives, but like General Eisenhower had observed, things never really got back to the way they were.

While the ensuing grief process was guided by our family's Jewish heritage (we observed the ritual seven days of *Shiva* and the thirty days of *Shloshim*), I recall that it was a particularly heart-wrenching time for my father, Henry Hirsch, to whom Larry was something more than merely a grandson. He was an emblem of our family's future in America; the beneficiary of all that our family had worked to achieve. It was, after all, for Larry and his grandchildren's future that my father had built the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Both he and my mother were beyond devastation.

It did not help matters that we were living in the Dark Ages of grief counseling. It would be five years before the very first book on the subject, THE BEREAVED PARENT by Harriet Schiff, would be published. The book was a masterpiece of inaccuracy. Schiff was not a mental health professional. She was a mother who had lost a ten-year old son and by way of therapy, had published a poorly-researched volume that generated numerous myths and misconceptions. Foremost among these was the contention that 90% of all bereaved couples experience divorce. This oft-quoted, but entirely inaccurate statistic, soon snowballed and became the common wisdom of the day. Subsequent research has categorically shown, however, that losing a child has no significant impact on the likelihood of divorce.

Perhaps it was due to this widely held misconception serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy that both Joyce and I were resigned to the inevitability that our marriage could not survive this crisis. And despite the fact that we stayed together and had two more children over the next two decades, Michelle and Adam, the dark cloud that was the loss of Larry, never fully lifted.

The impact on Joyce was profound. Although she had always been reserved in conversation, she was incredibly well-read and highly knowledgeable on a wide range of topics. After Larry's death, she became increasingly withdrawn, perhaps unwittingly erecting walls to protect herself from the inescapable pain of losing a child she so adored. In our impenetrable fog of grief, I must admit that I was of little help to Joyce. I was contending with my own pain while trying to console my stricken and aging parents. Looking back, I am only able to imagine the torment that Joyce went through daily. She had been a doting loving mother to both Larry and his younger brother, Daniel. This was her entire life. While I at least had my work to serve as a temporary distraction, Joyce, as was customary in those days, was a stay-at-home mom. She was surrounded by constant reminders of Larry's life at every turn. I was pre-occupied with building our company, going on business trips, and working late hours — even when I was in town. To Joyce's enduring credit, she did not become bitter or resentful of me. She was, and remains to this day, a wonderful mother and role model for all of our children.

Somehow we made it through those difficult years, largely due to her strength and moral integrity. Once we were certain that our children were all on a solid footing, we found that we were unable to reconcile many of our marital issues and sadly decided to end our marriage in the early 1990's. Although many of our friends presumed that Larry's death had been somehow responsible for our divorce, I do not honestly believe that this was the case.

Losing Larry did, however, become an inflection point in my own life. It provided me with a new-found appreciation for the importance of family. I was blessed to have the unwavering support of my staff at Welbilt, including a true stalwart: my Brown University frat brother, Lawrence Gross. Larry was an indispensable ally over the many years we worked together at Welbilt. He stepped up to the plate and assumed my responsibilities during my period of grief and mourning. Thanks to him, I was able to use this downtime to conduct a complete inventory of my goals, my values, and the ultimate direction of my life. It triggered my transformation from a fully focused, full-time business leader to a man who today is able to look back with fondness and pride at all three major spheres of my life: The professional, the personal, and the philanthropic.

This book contains glimpses from my life's journey — brief stories and snapshots that are intended to explore some of my life's high points as well as some of the low points. I invite you to join me on this journey to gain a glimpse of who I am and what I believe. Whether you are a member of my family, a former business associate, a community service colleague or a member of the public, I believe that you will find something of interest and something of value among these pages.

And you will also come to understand why I have dedicated this book to Larry's memory. His passing did, in fact, insure that "things never got back to the way they were." You will see that while certain things were changed for the worse, so many things in my life were ultimately changed for the better. Thank you for sharing these defining moments and memories with me.

Richard L. Hirsch

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITTLE ME

*“The hardest thing in life is knowing which bridges to cross and which bridges to burn.”*

— Bertrand Russell

# I

t did not take my family long to figure out which bridge to cross out of Brooklyn —the place I was born during America’s last summer of innocence before the attack at Pearl Harbor plunged the US into World War II. Two weeks after my birth in May of 1941, my parents, Henry and Myrtle Hirsch, headed across the Marine Parkway Bridge to put down roots in the lush lawns of Old Lawrence, Long Island.

Moving to Lawrence, a bedroom community near Hempstead, and one of the storied “Five Towns” that include Cedarhurst and the Hewletts, represented a step up the social ladder for our family. It was a declaration of sorts that the Hirsches, a first-generation Austria-Hungarian immigrant family, had “made it” in the Goldeneh Medina of America. Although some Jewish families did so, I’m pleased to report that we did not burn any bridges to our heritage.

My grandparents, Louis and Esther Hirsch, were known by the name Hirschlag, which indicated that our ancestors had originally hailed from the agricultural *shtetl* (village) of the same name in southwest Poland. Tiny Hirschlag exists today and, at last count, consists of 23 households, none of them Jewish.

Louis and Esther departed Poland in 1886, emigrating from their home in Debica (Dembitz in Yiddish) outside of Krakow in the Kingdom of Galicia. The first Jews arrived to Debica in 1675 and (according to the community’s official history) quickly began exerting a positive effect on the town’s economy. As a result of the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Debica became part of the Kingdom of Galicia when it was annexed by the Hapsburg Empire. As the Enlightenment spread throughout Eastern Europe during the 19th century, the Jews of Galicia enjoyed both the blessings and the curses of their newly-endowed citizenship. In addition to being taxed, my grandfather found that he was at risk of being conscripted into the Emperor’s army where he would be forced to serve for 25 years or until his death — whichever came first. Joining the massive first wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration, he and my grandmother decided to flee and, as depicted in the final scene of Fiddler on the Roof, set sail for America.

Having shortened their last name to Hirsch (perhaps in honor of the famed German Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, who had died the previous year, but just as likely due to an immigration clerk at Ellis Island wishing to save the trouble of writing a lengthy unfamiliar name), my grandparents settled in the New York community of East Williamsburg where they produced nine children — all boys. My father, Henry, born in 1903 was the second youngest. Henry received an upbringing that spanned World War I and prepared him well to face the Great Depression as a member of America’s Greatest Generation. He absorbed business *sechel* (wisdom) from his older brothers and an intense immersion in Jewish tradition and culture from their parents. In 1937, Henry married the woman who would become my mother. The former Myrtle Getelson, was the possessor of “movie star” good looks — she resembled a young Lauren Bacall — coupled with a vivacious and cosmopolitan charm. My sister, Carole was born soon after in 1938 and I came along in 1941, followed two years later by the birth of my younger brother, David.

My earliest memory arises from an incident some five years later, after our family again relocated from Lawrence; this time to a twelve-story Fifth Avenue high-rise on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. My parents quickly enrolled me into kindergarten at the Ramaz School, a private Modern Orthodox day school located on East 85th Street. As it did then, the school in-

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cludes grades pre-school through 12, offering secular classes taught in English and Judaic studies in Hebrew. I may only have been five years old, but I was already demonstrating signs of being headstrong and determined. And I determined very quickly that Ramaz Kindergarten was not a place that I liked whatsoever.

On the third day of classes, my mother escorted me to school and was standing in the front foyer speaking with my teacher when I decided that I had had enough of the place. I turned on my heel and scampered out the door out onto the bustling street. Looking down, my mother caught a glimpse of the closing front door and both she and my teacher gave chase. I was easily able to out-pace them and would still be running had I not been halted in my tracks by a red stop-light at the corner of 85th Street and Park Avenue. I had been trained to only cross the street on the green, so while I waited dutifully for the light to change, my mother caught up, took me firmly by the hand and brought me back to the school.

The teacher suggested that I may have been suffering from “departure anxiety,” caused by a fear that “Mommy was not coming back for me.” She suggested that for a while my mother stay with me during the day. Mom agreed and would sit in the school lounge for a few hours while I was in the kindergarten classroom nearby. After a few weeks, this was no longer necessary and she was able to drop me off and leave immediately without fear that I might run away again.

I remained at Ramaz up through the fifth grade. It was at this level that I ran into a problem with my secular teacher. I was ten years old and had become even more headstrong over the years. A few weeks after the start of the semester, I announced to my parents: “You’ve got to take me out of Ramaz. I really hate my teacher this year.” This led to some animated and agitated discussions between my parents.

“I’ve heard that Columbia Grammar School is excellent, Henry,” my mother offered.

“What about his Jewish education?” countered my dad. “He’s got to start studying for his Bar Mitzvah soon. He can’t do that at CGS.”

“We can do that privately,” she said. “and I know just who to ask.”

As my stalwart ally, a role she would often fulfill over the years to come, my mother had all the answers and, fortunately for me, in this dispute she prevailed and I was transferred to CGS. Known today as Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, CGS is the oldest nonsectarian private school in the country. Located in a brownstone off of Central Park West at 5 W. 93rd Street, it was founded in 1764 by Columbia University. That connection ended after the Civil War when the school became fully autonomous — although Columbia instructors would often teach at the school. CGS became co-ed during my freshman year when it merged with the Leonard School for Girls. I loved my new school and became an outstanding student, although I have remained friends with many of my old classmates from Ramaz to this day.

The question of my Jewish education was soon addressed when my parents hired the services of the sexton from the Jewish Center to provide me with private tutoring. Despite its name, the Jewish Center was, and remains one of America’s premier modern Orthodox synagogues. It was founded in 1918 by well-to-do Jews who were moving into Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Located in a neoclassical building on West 86th Street, the synagogue served not only as a spiritual home for the community, but also provided a venue for cultural, social and recreational activities. It was affectionately known in those days as “the *shul* with a pool.” The synagogue’s first rabbi was Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Jewish denomination known as Reconstructionism. Its pulpit was also graced by such luminaries of the Jewish world as Dr. Leo Jung, founder of Agudath Israel and Torah Umesorah, as well as Dr. Norman Lamm, future Chancellor of Yeshiva University.

My tutor, the Reverend Henry Julius, would visit several times a week shortly after I arrived home from school in the afternoons. After making sure I was wearing my kipa (skullcap), he would always light up a huge cigar before embarking on our studies — stinking up our entire apartment. To this day whenever I smell pungent cigar smoke, it invariably invokes the memory of those late afternoon lessons.

Eventually we turned to my bar mitzvah preparation. These days kids are typically asked to read excerpts from their assigned *Sidra* (a weekly portion from the Torah that is read during Shabbos services), but back then we were expected to read the entire *Parsha* (same as *Sidra*) aloud in Hebrew directly from the Torah scroll. Because my thirteenth birthday fell between two Shabboses I was offered a choice between the two Sidras. Not surprisingly, I chose the shorter one called Behar which comes from Chapter 25 of the Book of Leviticus. Interestingly, Behar lays out some of the ancient Israelite laws of a practical nature that would evolve into part of today's commercial code. It deals with property rights, the transfer of land, expounds on the Sabbatical seventh year and forbids any acts of fraud and usury.

My bar mitzvah took place in 1954 at Congregation Zichron Ephraim (today known as the Park East Synagogue) on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The synagogue was established in the late 19th century as an Orthodox bastion against encroaching Reform Judaism that was making inroads in the area's affluent Jewish community. The building is known for its moorish revival architecture and its remarkable pair of asymmetrical twin towers on either side of a prominent Rose Window. My bar mitzvah ceremony was officiated by Rabbi Zev Zahavy, a dynamic speaker whose sermons appeared regularly in the pages of the New York Times. The synagogue has been home to numerous celebrated congregants over the years including Edwin Schlossberg, husband of Caroline Kennedy.

On that Saturday morning my mother, noticing my understandable nervousness, offered me one of her phenobarbital tranquilizers. It did the trick. I sailed through the service without a glitch or a flutter. As I said. She was my eternal ally.

Unlike many of the other bar mitzvahs at the time (as well as these days), there was no lavish blow-out celebration on Saturday night. My father, a believer in humility and modesty, had arranged for a meaningful and dignified reception that afternoon in the synagogue. He had imported a special Jewish choir whose spiritual singing everyone enjoyed. My father did not wish to put on a big show in front of the several area rabbis whom he had invited to our *simcha* (joyous event). I believe I learned more from his example than from the Torah teachings I had been studying for my Bar Mitzvah.

As I mentioned, our high school merged with a girl's school during my freshman year. It was then that I began thinking more about my image and how I appeared to my fellow classmates, both male and female. I began to realize that I was among the more privileged members of the student body which contained kids from various socio-economic backgrounds. My father had arranged for me to be delivered to and picked up from school in his private limo. I convinced the chauffeur to drop me off and pick me up several blocks away from the entrance to conceal this fact. Even at that early age, I was sensitive to being pointed to as "that rich kid" and simply did not wish to be perceived as bragging or showing off our family's wealth. Despite my efforts at trying to be viewed as just a "regular guy," the nickname I was branded with by my classmates was "Bucks," as in money.

With no more than fifty kids in each grade level, I grew to develop lifelong friendships with many of them. Eighteen graduates of CGS's Class of '59 gathered for our 60th reunion in 2019. I was recognized at that event, not only for having received a Good Citizenship Award at graduation, but also for earning the rank Salutatorian (academically second highest) of our graduating class. That meant that I was required to deliver a Salutatory Address during our commencement

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exercises held in Carnegie Hall. I recall that I had some help with that speech from a very special CGS teacher, Mr. George Gordon, who still lives fondly in my memory.

Mr. Gordon sort of adopted me when I was in Middle School and I stayed under his wing till my graduation from high school. He was more than a mentor. He became a true friend and was simply an all-around terrific guy. I admired him for not only the strength of his thinking, which was substantial, but also for his quirky sense of humor. I still recall the day he arrived to Biology class carrying two dozen eggs.

"Today," he announced, "I am going to show you that you are not as strong as you think you are. I need three volunteers to come forward."

After demonstrating that the eggs were raw by cracking one into a glass bowl, Mr. Gordon then placed an egg into the palm of the first student's right hand. He folded the student's fingers over the egg. Next, he placed another raw egg between the forefinger and thumb of the next volunteer; one finger pressed against each end of the egg. Finally, he simply handed a raw egg to the third student with the words: "Here. Hold this in your hand and put your hand over the bowl."

Mr. Gordon then instructed the first student to squeeze the egg. He did so, but the egg did not break. He next told the second student to squeeze. Again, the egg remained intact. Finally, he told the third student to squeeze and the egg cracked, getting raw egg all over the student's hand before it was caught in the glass bowl.

Mr. Gordon explained that a hen's egg is a marvel of nature. Strong, yet fragile at the same time. "How else," he inquired, "could an egg support the weight of a big fat mother hen sitting on it without breaking? Yet, when a little baby chick wants to come out, he is able to crack the shell with just a few pecks of his tiny egg tooth." Gordon went on to explain mathematically how the shape of the egg allows for it to resist being damaged when pressure is applied evenly, as in the case of the first two volunteers, yet breaks easily whenever uneven pressure is applied.

This lesson was one that has stayed with me and one that I have relied upon over the years in my negotiations with suppliers, competitors, labor unions and others. If I am being pressured in one direction, I try to find another source of pressure in the opposite direction. In this way, I am less likely to crack.

Although I did not become aware of it until many years later, at the same time that I was welcomed to a life of comfort and privilege in America, Jews in Europe were undergoing a lethal pressure of the worst kind. I recall, as an adult, looking at a list of Holocaust victim's names at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. I spotted one, Juta Hirsch, who was born the same year as I was in 1941 in a town called Skole in the former Kingdom of Galicia. Was she a relative? Who knows? Juta was murdered at age two, along with her parents, in a concentration camp outside of Lvov. She was killed for only one reason. She was born a Jew. But for the grace of God and the fortitude of my grandfather, that poor child could have been me. As I write these words today, I understand more fully than ever before, that the blessed life I was born into comes with an obligation. A moral imperative to not only remember, but also to actively assure that such things do not happen to our people ever again. This, then, is the true "Price of Privilege."

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE COLLEGE KID

*“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”*

— Aristotle

## I

am not sure if I was an early bloomer or a late bloomer, but I know for a fact that I bloomed at CGS. After my Bar Mitzvah, a time when some young teenagers start to slack off, I went the other way, studying Latin and French and earning top grades.

Being one of the tallest kids in the class, I played a lot of basketball and I loved the game. But, as it would do often during my formative years, my Jewish observance created complications. Most of the games were on Friday night, Shabbos. While a rabbi might find it objectionable, my parents did allow me to play basketball on Friday afternoons after school. But I was not permitted to violate the sanction against riding in a car from sunset on Friday through sunset on Saturday. This prohibition is based on the fact that igniting a fire on Shabbos is strictly forbidden and by driving a car, you are causing the spark plugs in the engine to create combustion.

While I was able to ride public transportation or be transported by car to various venues to play in the Friday afternoon basketball games, I was unable to ride home since it would be dark by the time the game was over. Hence, I was forced to walk home from each basketball game — often between twenty and thirty blocks — to join my family for Shabbos dinner.

I was taught to be “*Shomer Shabbos*.” The term means “Watchman of the Sabbath” and it refers to Jews who observe *Halakhic* law strictly in terms of the Shabbos, *Kashruth* (dietary laws) and all the *mitzvot* (commandments). This meant sacrifice. I was unable, for example, to attend my high school graduation party since it was held on a Friday night. While CGS was mostly populated with Jewish kids, only a handful, like me, were *Shomer Shabbos*.

Once I realized that my basketball skills on the court were not good enough to be awarded an athletic scholarship, I began to lose interest in the game. By my senior year I was no longer a member of the varsity team and like most high school seniors, I was, by that point, concentrating on getting into college. I also faced an obstacle on this front. That obstacle was my dad. He wanted me to stay in New York at all costs and, in deference to his wishes, I applied to Columbia. But at the same time, I also applied to Yale, Brown and U. Penn (the University of Pennsylvania) in addition to my anchor schools, Franklin and Marshall. I didn’t really demonstrate a great interest in the latter two, so, not surprisingly, they rejected me.

I vividly recall sitting for my interview on a Thursday in the Columbia Admissions office. The following Monday I received a phone call that I had been accepted! Not only was I contacted by Columbia, but, in a highly unusual move, they contacted the principal at CGS and said: “Richard Hirsch. We want him.” Although I have no direct evidence, it appears in hindsight that my overnight acceptance by Columbia had been pre-arranged by someone pulling the strings behind the scenes. Someone, such as Hen-

ry Hirsch, who wanted his son to remain in New York and had the clout to see that it got done.

My mother, always my advocate, did not share my dad's desire to keep me close to home. Plus she was good friends with a professor at Brown. I was accepted there and decided to attend since its location, in Providence, Rhode Island, was only a two-hour train ride away. This was important because it meant I was able to often travel home for the weekend. During those times, my father was adamant about me being in synagogue on Saturday morning. As the synagogue's founder, he had a seat of honor near the Eastern wall close to the bimah. He would often twist around to make sure that his college kid son had made it to services on time.

My most salient memories of my freshman year at Brown are painful ones. I was in a bad situation that resulted in a good deal of misery and depression. I had been assigned to a room with two other freshmen who may have been Jewish, but, if so, they were so highly assimilated and non-observant that one could not easily tell. This made meal times problematic. Brown, of course, is not a Kosher school. So this meant I could not consume most of the menu items offered on the student meal plan. This also meant I had to obtain food from alternate sources and not break bread with my classmates. This alienation was heightened by the fact that I was in the habit of donning my *t'fillin* (phylacteries) and praying every morning. I wound up being forced to *daven Shachrit* (the morning prayers) every day hidden away in a staircase or an isolated corner of the hallway. The whole situation was awkward and uncomfortable.

Due to my religious observance, I refrained from taking courses that offered classes on Saturday and this fact resulted in non-stop academic issues. For example, several of the classes I did take scheduled final exams on Saturday. In consideration of my observance, I was permitted to arrange for each exam be administered on Saturday night after sunset. I would be placed into a room all by myself where I would remain until I completed the test.

By comparison, keeping kosher in this environment was a much bigger challenge. But little by little by little, and through the help of others, I met the challenges and managed to remain at Brown for four years without starving to death. One source of assistance was the local chapter of the Jewish student association known as Hillel. Hillel had an off-campus house with a small cooking area, but it was not a kosher kitchen. Fortunately, my father's company, Welbilt, was in the commercial kitchen equipment business, so he quickly arranged to have new stoves, ovens and refrigerators installed at the Hillel House. My mother located a Kosher chef who was hired to come to the Hillel kitchen once a week to prepare my week's evening meals and store them in the refrigerator. This was before microwaves became popular, so I ate most of my suppers cold. Of course, the Hillel meal was only one meal per day. For breakfast and lunch I had to fend for myself, selecting my food very carefully in the communal dining hall.

Shabbos was another story. I'm not sure how they made the connection, but somehow my parents contacted a well-known Jewish lawyer in Providence named Archie Smith. Smith also had a child enrolled at Brown and the family all kept Kosher. The Smiths lived two blocks from the Brown campus and they would invite me to join them for Friday night Shabbos dinner as well as lunch the following day. They essentially adopted me as their Shabbos son and for the four years I attended Brown, I could invariably be found at the Smith house on those weekends that I did not go home to New York. The Smiths became my surrogate religious parents and I will never forget the debt I

owe them for their kindness and for making it possible for me graduate from an Ivy League college as an Orthodox Jew.

As mentioned, I was unable to take all the classes I wished because of the Saturday restriction and so, academically, I was just getting by. On top of that, I wasn't around the campus that much. I would travel home for every Jewish holiday, secular holiday and many weekends. This resulted in my earning poor grades during my Freshman year. Towards the end of the year, it was time for the traditional fraternity rushing rituals. I had made some friends and they encouraged me to try to get in to one of the better frat houses, Pi Lambda Phi. The problem was that the house was very exclusive and typically only accepted a handful of boys as pledges. With my lackluster grades and lack of social or athletic involvement, getting into Pi Lambda Phi was next to impossible. Guess what. I got in. I suspect they checked out our family's net worth and determined that accepting me might result in a sizable pay off down the road. They weren't wrong.

Pi Lambda Phi, or PiLam, as it was known, was founded at Yale at the end of the 19th century. It opened a chapter house at Brown in 1929 that remained open through 1963. During my junior year, my frat brothers and I became unhappy with the national PiLam organization and decided to disaffiliate. While not a Jewish fraternity, *per se*, there was a large contingent of Jewish students both back then as well as today. Some of the more illustrious PiLams over the years included sportscaster Howard Cosell, filmmaker Stanley Kramer, composer Richard Rogers, Senator Arlen Specter, Baseball Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax, businessman Mark Cuban and Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig. We eventually re-affiliated with another national fraternity, Alpha Pi Lamda. Hence, today I am the proud owner of not one, but two engraved fraternity paddles.

I moved into the PiLam house at the beginning of my sophomore year knowing only one other pledge. I had previously selected him as my roommate during my freshman year. As it turned out, my-roommate-to-be did not return to Brown in the fall, so I was left unattached. There was only one other pledge who likewise had lost his roommate resulting in the two of us "accidentally" bunking together. This was my "*shiddach*" with the person who would eventually become one of my closest friends and my most trusted business colleague, Larry Gross. Ironically, at the end of my sophomore year, when everyone was afforded the opportunity to switch and pair up with a new roommate, the only two fraternity members who opted to remain together were Larry and me.

It did not take long to discover that Larry was not only incredibly intelligent, he was a person of great integrity. He and I formed a bond that was strengthened as we both became highly involved in the affairs of the fraternity, both serving as officers. Larry was elected president of the Faunce House Board of Governors, Brown's student union, and an officer of the student government. He was very helpful to me when I was setting up the kosher kitchen at Hillel, as I'll explain a bit later. Larry and I found that we worked well together on projects and programs and often spoke about joining forces in the business world later on. Meeting Larry Gross was undoubtedly one of the most positive outcomes of my attending Brown University.

Larry's father was a journalist and a member of the Washington press corps. He was also a Navy man and had encouraged Larry to apply for a Naval ROTC scholarship, which resulted in the Navy paying for Larry's college education. Upon graduation, Larry received a commission in the regular Navy and served for two years aboard the

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famed naval destroyer, the USS The Sullivans. He spent the remaining two years of his service working in communications security at the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington DC, during which time he was able to attend Georgetown University law school. It was during those years that Larry developed and honed his considerable organizational and management skills.

I had stayed in communication with Larry during his Navy stint and when he was discharged in 1967 I presented him with an offer. At that point I was pretty much running the show at Wellbilt and I explained to him that the company was in dire straits financially. I told him I needed a capable team to help me turn things around, and asked if he would consider moving to New York to join me. To my good fortune, he agreed.

Larry's first assignment was in Human Resources where he gained an overview of our company's operations which at that time consisted of a one million square foot metal-bending factory in Queens with a workforce of 1100 employees. He deftly handled our collective bargaining negotiations with the Teamsters and the various other labor unions we were required to deal with. These skills would become vital in later years as together we negotiated mergers and acquisition deals that would result in our company's rapid growth.

The following year, after I had assumed the CEO title, I realized that if I was going to be successful without burning myself out, I would need someone capable and trustworthy to serve as my right-hand man and occasional surrogate. I immediately decided on Larry and asked him to assume the title of Assistant to the President. Happily for me, he again agreed. Larry and I would go on to successfully run Welbilt together for many years and I am proud to say that his ability and friendship were key to our many achievements and our ultimate success.

Living in the frat house did not make the challenge of keeping Kosher any easier. Once again, my father came to the rescue. He wanted to make sure that I was able to stick with the dietary laws and not be tempted to give them up at college. As mentioned earlier, Henry had a close relationship with Cantor Bernard "Barney" Bloomstein at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Cantor Barney, who worked for free at the synagogue, was the owner of Bernan Foods, a manufacturer and purveyor of Kosher canned foods such as stuffed cabbage. My father had arranged for Barney to send me regular care packages in the mail filled with Kosher food items that I could store in my room. This at times proved humorously problematic. I remember being called to the house telephone.

"Is this Richard Hirsch?" asked the distraught voice. I said that it was.

"This is Mr. Carlyle at the post office and we received a package addressed to you," he stated hurriedly.

"Do you want me to come down and pick it up?" I asked.

"No, you can't do that," he replied.

"Why not?"

"Because it exploded," he exclaimed. "We've got this damned gunk all over the post office (referring to the stuffed cabbage) and it stinks to high heaven. We'll get it cleaned up, but tell whoever sent that to you not to send stuff like that in the mail anymore."

I agreed to do so, but I knew they would keep on sending it anyway.

In addition to the care packages from Barney, I would also bring back boxes of food after each visit home. My parents had a live-in cook who would prepare meals for me that I would wrap up and bring back to my frat house room. The problem is that in the beginning I had no access to a refrigerator and I was afraid the food might spoil if it wasn't kept cool. So since it was winter, I decided to place some of the food outdoors on my window sill, hidden out of sight under some tree branches. But I would not always remember to bring the food back in.

I recall getting a call from the school groundskeeping office in the spring. Someone had complained about some debris stuck to the outside of my window at the PiLam house. Evidently I had forgotten some packaged food items outside and the birds had eaten it, leaving behind the wrappers which had become frozen to the famous ivy vines that covered the brick walls of our building. I managed to clean up the mess and swore to get my hands on a proper refrigerator.

Over time I began to build up a support structure that I would rely upon to make it possible for me to matriculate as an observant Jew at Brown. Among the most supportive was one of the school's pastors, Charles Baldwin. Pastor Baldwin had a great deal of respect for my adherence to Jewish law and he sort of took me under his wing during my years at Brown. He was extremely helpful when I needed to arrange for time off to observe Jewish holidays, for example. He had an inside track with the school administration and could get just about anything done.

Many years later, in the 1990's, Hillel wanted to recognize me for my support and proceeded to dedicate a kitchen in my honor. I decided to express my gratitude to Charles Baldwin by placing his name on the dedication plaque. He had retired from Brown by this point, but he somehow heard about my gesture and sent me a beautiful note of gratitude.

Not everyone was cooperative, however. The head of the Hillel program was not all that crazy about the new Kosher kitchen equipment we had installed. But in the end we convinced him we had done the right thing. Whereas we started out with only three students: a Brown guy, a Bryant College student and me, eventually they were attracting dozens of kids to the best Kosher kitchen in town. Although the Kosher kitchen has expanded over the years and is still active today, it did so despite, not because of, the support of the Hillel administration.

My years at Brown were devoted to obtaining a classical liberal arts education. My major was Philosophy which was also filmmaker Woody Allen's major, at CCNY.

"I got kicked out of college," he quipped, "because during a Philosophy exam I was caught looking into the soul of the student sitting next to me."

Because of my screwed up schedule, twisted to accommodate my Shabbos observance, it was necessary for me to attend summer school at Harvard to make up some classes, such as chemistry, that I needed for my degree.

What I found at a Harvard was a very different sort of chemistry. I'm referring to the type of chemical reaction that occurs when man meets woman and heat is generated. More about this in a future chapter.

Richard L. Hirsch

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE PRICE OF PRIVILEGE

*“The more privilege you have, the more opportunity you have. The more opportunity you have, the more responsibility you have.”*

— Noam Chomsky

**D**ue to an erratic schedule caused by my commitment to religious observance, I found myself needing to catch up academically after my freshman year at Brown. I had the good fortune, if only for a short time, to attend Harvard to try and make up some needed credits. I learned that if I signed up for Chemistry during summer school at Harvard, and passed the class, I would not need to take Chemistry at Brown. I wasn't very fond of Chemistry or Biology, so this solution appealed to me.

As luck would have it — bad luck, that is — I was placed into a class filled with Harvard pre-med students who all simply sparkled at Chemistry. I was struggling along, lost in a sea of bunsen burners, test tubes and over-achievers. I managed to finish the course, but was in so far over my head that I decided to throw in the towel and skip the final exam. Astonishingly, Brown decided to accept the credits from Harvard based on the fact that I had survived the entire tough, pre-med chemistry course. I'm happy to report that good luck also prevailed during my Harvard summer, as it was there that I met the future Mrs. Hirsch. Like me, Joyce Finker was taking a summer class at Harvard to supplement her studies at Syracuse.

One day I noticed a very striking girl sitting on the steps of the Harvard Library talking with a friend. Although I walked around them several times and was clearly noticed, I was ignored by both. Fortunately, a short time later I attended a mixer and both of the girls were there as well. Joyce was tall, very attractive, and had a certain presence that made her stand out in a crowd in an elegant way. I struck up a conversation with her and learned that Joyce's friend was a girl named Fran, who was seeing a fellow named Benji Brown, a good friend of mine from New York. It wasn't long before we were all double-dating. In those days, our family would spend summers in Atlantic Beach and Joyce's family lived in the scenic Five Towns community of Hewlett Park nearby. This allowed us to connect repeatedly over the summer breaks. During school semesters, we maintained the relationship on a long-distance basis, cemented by Joyce's beautifully hand-written letters.

Joyce was a true academic achiever and managed to obtain her bachelor's degree in just three and a half years. As my own graduation approached, I naturally began giving some thought to my future. I had a good-looking girlfriend and an Ivy League education. What more could any guy ask for in life?

My father and I were not in the habit of having heart-to-heart discussions, so I was a bit surprised when he informed me that he wanted to have a talk one Shabbos after services. He got right to the point.

“So, Richard. What are you going to do now?”

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"Well, Dad," I replied, "I'd like to take some time off and travel. You know, see the world." This was a few years before the Vietnam-era military draft got rolling, so I was not at risk of seeing the world from the inside of a Humvee in Danang. "You don't need to do that," he said, sweeping the idea aside dismissively with his hand. "Come to work at Welbilt. Full-time."

I had worked at the commercial kitchen equipment company my father had founded during a portion of my Junior year and I found that I liked it. The work was interesting and there was little pressure.

"That sounds fine, Dad," I said. "But I'd really like to take some time off before settling into the job. You understand." He pondered this a minute as if this statement somehow "did not compute" with his ingrained work ethic. Finally, he said:

"Okay. Take two weeks off and then report to the plant." And that was that. End of chat.

The Welbilt Stove Company was founded in 1929 in Maspeth Queens, New York by my father, Henry Hirsch and his brother, Alexander, known by everyone as A.P.. The company achieved stunning growth through expansion and acquisition so that by this point, in 1963, it was producing equipment under such brand names as Frymaster, Delfield, Merrychef, and Merco. In 1955 Welbilt had acquired the nearly 100-year old stove-maker, Garland, making Welbilt the oldest player in the industry. A few years later, Frymaster landed its first food chain account with Kentucky Fried Chicken and has been making the Colonel's deep-frying equipment ever since.

When I arrived through the doors of its main facility, I was directed to the shipping department in the basement. It appears that my dad had recently seen the Broadway show *"How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying"* which recounts the meteoric rise of an ambitious corporate climber all the way to the top spot as CEO. Hence I was to begin my orientation at the bottom of the totem pole in the shipping department. I again found the work enjoyable and interesting and after five months I was moved to another department. All part of my on-the-job orientation.

As I moved from department to department, I got an intimate glimpse of the inner workings of a large and complex industrial operation. Predating the show *"Secret Boss,"* I did not reveal my identity to my co-workers for fear that knowing I was the boss's son would prompt them to treat me differently. Despite my wish for anonymity, my co-workers would sometimes figure out my true identity and then the fawning behavior would begin.

I was living at home with my parents during this period and spending all my free time with Joyce. But pretty soon, the Selective Service began rearing its ugly head. Not long after assuming the presidency in 1963, after the JFK assassination, Lyndon Johnson began his escalation of US troop levels in Vietnam. This required ramped up manpower and hence the draft was re-instated to fill the void. I soon felt the hot breath of the US Army breathing down my neck.

At that time, the Selective Service offered deferments for a variety of circumstances. I had graduated out of my undergrad student deferment, so one of my only options was to secure a marital deferment. Uncle Sam was only drafting young single men at that time. If you had a spouse, you were safe...for now. Joyce and I had spoken about getting married in a few years, but with this development we decided to move things up a bit and have the wedding sooner rather than later. Uncle Sam was my best man.

There was no formal “down on one knee” proposal. Everyone had assumed for years that we would be married, so it was sort of a given. Among these was Joyce’s father who, sadly, passed away shortly before our wedding and was unable to walk his daughter down the aisle. Nevertheless, the wedding was a joyful affair despite the circumstances, held on the Ides of March, 1964 at the renowned Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. Of course, in consideration of the fact that my bride was still observing the traditional year of mourning the death of her father, there was no orchestra or music of any sort.

Our first home was on Yellowstone Boulevard in Forest Hills, just over the Queensborough Bridge, near the Welbilt facility in Maspeth where I worked. And a mere twenty minutes from my parents’ home.

I was definitely learning the ropes at Welbilt, but I was learning something more. I was now privy to seeing how my father spent his days. As mentioned earlier, these were the years of prime involvement with Fifth Avenue Synagogue. So I was not surprised to see him come in at around 11 am, after having spent four hours at the synagogue helping to run the place efficiently and effectively. Occasionally, I would stop by his office and observe how a good portion of his time was spent devoted to Jewish causes. As his reputation as a philanthropist grew, more and more solicitors would come through the door. Among these were the steady stream of *shnorriers*. These were the bearded, black-hat rabbis who came seeking a handout on behalf of their impoverished yeshivas back in Israel.

Perhaps my father’s most favored charitable cause, before founding the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, was a school in the Kensington area of Brooklyn called Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. Billing itself as “the mother of the Yeshiva movement in America,” YTV has been providing Torah-true education for more than a century. At the time my father became involved, the school was situated in a single building and had an enrollment of 150 students. Today, it occupies three hi-rises in Flatbush, while operating satellite programs in Monsey, Marine Park and Boro Park, and enjoys an enrollment of more than one thousand pre-school, elementary, high school students and rabbinic candidates.

My father became involved with Yeshiva Torah Vodaath through his friendship with two celebrated figures from that era: the well-known accountant, Louis Septimus, and a financial wizard who served as the regional director of the IRS in the 1920’s, Harry Herskowitz. Herskowitz literally dedicated his life to the vision of building a Torah community in the United States and convinced many, such as my father, to join him in this crusade. Today the school is housed in the Harry Herskowitz School campus. It contains a dormitory that was underwritten by my father and dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Louis Hirsch.

Another influencer who attracted my father to Yeshiva Torah Vodaath was the esteemed Lithuanian Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky who served as the school’s *Roish* (principal) from 1945 to 1968. Reb Yaakov (as he was affectionately called) led American Jewry in issues of *halachic* (legal) and spiritual guidance until his death in 1986, when he was bestowed with the title of “*Chakima D’Yehudai*” (the wise man of the Jews). Today, Rabbi Kamenetzky’s grandson, Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky serves as the *Roish* of the prestigious South Shore Yeshiva and Mesivta Toras Chaim in Hewlett, New York.

My mother was also deeply involved with Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. She had established a foundation in her mother’s name, The Rose Getelson Sunshine Fund, whose purpose was to operate the school’s summer programs as well as other projects. She,

along with two of her friends, would put together the summer programming each year. Bear in mind that neither of my parents attended this school, nor did any of their children. Yet, they became one of its primary benefactors.

My father's reputation for philanthropy preceded this period and even preceded my birth. He was so well known as a Jew of means and a willingness to help, that a non-stop flow of letters arrived to his door daily during World War II. Each letter contained a plea for his help to rescue a child, a family, or a community from the clutches of the Nazis. I recall him showing me one such envelope that contained a desperate plea from Europe. The sender did not know his address so he addressed the letter only to Henry Hirsch, USA. And it reached him.

My father had established a charitable foundation that he would employ to distribute gifts to those causes he supported. His greatest joy was sending out checks to people who contacted him for his help. He worked with many of the rescue organizations and those offering sustenance to Jewish refugees in displaced persons camps in Europe. While he never spoke about it, I suspect that he was involved in some clandestine operations below the radar, during and after the war, that sought to get Jews out of Europe and into Palestine.

During those years, my mother was a very effective fund-raiser on behalf of Jewish rescue causes. With her stunning good looks and sublime fashion sense, women would attend her functions just to see what she was wearing. Unlike my father, she was committed to more than the religious side of Judaism. She was more of an all-purpose Jew. Her support for Jewish causes often tended to lean towards the secular and domestic. She was very active in what was then known as the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) that raised money for Jewish social service programs in American communities. One of her pet causes was Project Renewal which, despite her non-Zionist leanings, she found meaningful. The program was jointly created in 1977 through the Israeli Government and the Jewish Agency under the leadership of Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Project Renewal had connected prosperous American Jewish communities with 140 disadvantaged ones in Israel. Donations collected would go directly from the US community to the Israeli one to which it had been linked. This project has since been dissolved.

Foremost in her work on behalf of Project Renewal was my mother's dedication to the community of Miftan Alon, outside of Tel Aviv. My mother was recruited as a Miftan Alon advocate by legendary Tel Aviv mayor, Shalom "Cheech" Lahat. Our family had issued a grant to Miftan Alon High School, an institution that caters to distressed students, ages 14 to 18, who have left, been expelled or have given up on the formal education system—some of them having emerged from prison. Through its educational, therapeutic, and rehabilitation programs, the school serves as a safety net and fosters students' vocational skills at a Function Center called The Lion & The Turkey. We were able to supply their training kitchens with high-quality institutional kitchen equipment. In addition to providing underprivileged kids with job training in such areas as event planning and banquet cooking skills—skills they need in order to join the workforce—vocational training also empowers students by cultivating a sense of confidence, responsibility, decision-making and other life skills. An after-school program called Pure Expressions also teaches students how to create beautiful Judaica items and jewelry.

The school features a full-service beauty salon used to train future stylists and beauticians. The facility was donated, at my mother's suggestion, by industrialist Ron Perel-

man, who at the time, was a member of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue and a true friend of the family. Ron's support was very much appreciated.

In addition to vocational training and offering psychological therapies, the school also engages in preparing at-risk teenagers for military service. Without the benefit of such training, most of these kids would not be acceptable by the Israeli military (IDF). The school is sending dozens of students per year to the military and most are able to get their lives pointed in the right direction while in uniform. This innovative program proved so successful that it has been adopted all across Israel.

Miftan Alon was regarded as one of the crowning achievements of the Project Renewal program thanks to the efforts of Mayor Lahat and my mother. It still remains a very viable institution today, helping many underprivileged and abused students. My mother's dedication was recognized by the community when the names of my parents were affixed to a new community center. I recall traveling to Israel for the dedication ceremony as a teenager and listening to my father explain to me privately:

"I don't usually like them to put my name on places I give money to," he counseled me. "I don't like it for two reasons. First of all, it's not the Jewish way. The highest form of charity, *tzedakah*, is when both the giver and the recipient don't know who the other is. The other reason is if they put your name on a building, once you're dead they take it off and replace it with somebody else's name. But I made an exception here because of your mother. She put so much hard work and energy into making this happen, I just couldn't say no when they came and asked me if they could do it."

Sure enough, my father's prophetic words came to pass. The community fathers did, in fact, recently remove my parents' names from the building. When I inquired about it, I was assured that this was done only for renovation purposes and there was no intention to permanently replace their names with those of others. Happily, a short time ago I received word that their names had been restored to their appropriate places, hopefully to stay.

The family has continued its support for this community to this day. We were instrumental in setting up an endowment fund at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue that purchased some property near the community center. Thanks to the congregants' contributions to this fund, the synagogue was able to turn the property into a beautiful park, just a short walk from the community center.

Although he respected her dedication, my father was not at all supportive of my mother's involvement in secular Jewish causes. His focus was on supporting the religious institutions, schools and synagogues, that were entrusted with passing our faith heritage on to the next generation. Myrtle would typically wait until Henry was out of the house before she took off for the UJA office. She also did not leave UJA literature lying around the house. She was not doing her charity work behind his back, exactly. But she simply did not wish to provoke any unnecessary arguments. The inverse was not the case, however. My mother was always extremely supportive of all of my father's philanthropic efforts.

It was in this way, via input from both of my parents, that my attitudes about the importance of philanthropy were shaped. Through my father I gained a deep appreciation for the sacred side of Judaism, while through my mother I was exposed to our culture's more secular dimension. I feel fortunate that I was provided with both sides since it allowed me to maintain a stabilizing balance in my own philanthropy — directing sup-

port to both religious and to social welfare causes. I consider them both equally vital to the future of the Jewish people.

Even though my mother never attended college, she was a brilliant writer. And I mean that in the literal sense. She had a beautiful cursive handwriting. I recall sitting with her on Sunday afternoons, going over my essays in preparation for school the following day. She would write a sentence in her gliding script and then I would copy it onto my paper. It was my work, but with a little help from my mom.

While my father never graduated from high school, he managed to climb to great heights of achievement thanks to his own hard work and tenacity. He brought these same skills to bear when pursuing his communal activities. Given his stature in both the business realm and the philanthropic world, my parents would often host dignitaries at our home for dinner. The meal would be served by members of our live-in staff and unlike some parents might have opted to do, my folks never banished us from the dinner table when VIPs were invited. In fact, they would always encourage us to join them and participate in the conversation. Whether it was the mayor from an Israeli town, an Ambassador from another country, businessmen, writers, musicians, old friends, new friends or just extended family, we were always made to feel welcome.

I recall how, over a time period spanning fifteen years, my parents would host a huge Passover Seder each year at Grossingers, the famous Catskill resort. We would all be called to the table to begin the service, but while the men would take their seats, many of the women would linger behind in the lobby, waiting for my mother to regally descend the staircase. They were excited to see what she was wearing, and she never disappointed them.

While it was Grossingers for Passover in the spring of every year, we did not go there during the summer months. This was because we owned a sprawling thirty-five acre estate in scenic Ossining, New York and spent our summer holidays there. It was jointly owned by my father, his brother A.P. Hirsh and General Instrument CEO, Mike Benedict. It was a truly beautiful, fully appointed facility with a tennis court, a two-hole golf course, and arguably the largest privately owned swimming pool in New York, all situated on perfectly manicured grounds with formal gardens and groomed pathways connecting the residences. It also boasted a greenhouse that provided vegetables all summer long. My uncle A.P. and his family lived in the large manor house while we lived in a slightly smaller abode with a great view of the Hudson River. The Benedicts also lived in another house on the grounds.

There was one more structure on the estate. It was originally intended to be a guest house, but my father decided to use it for something special. He converted it into a *shtiebel*, a small synagogue used for prayer and occasional Shabbos services. Of course, this sometimes presented a challenge. In order to hold a service involving the Torah, it is necessary to convene a *minyan* (quorum) of at least ten Jewish men over Bar Mitzvah age. If there were only nine or fewer present, the Torah could not be opened and the service could not take place. While all three of the property owners (Hirsch, Hirsch and Benedict) were Jewish, they at times had to scramble to come up with the needed additional seven. Usually, guests would visit over the weekends and the *minyan* threshold could be reached. But sometimes, they were forced to call the cops. My father had made friends with Officer Sam, a Jewish motorcycle policeman who patrolled the area. If they were a man short for a *minyan*, Henry would ring up

Officer Sam and within a half hour, he would be there, *davening* in my father's private synagogue.

Being a police officer in Ossining was something of a distinction because the town served as home to the infamous federal prison known as Sing-Sing. This fact came into play when in June, 1953, the so-called "atomic spies," Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were executed via the electric chair. I know this sounds like a scene from a movie, but I swear I remember the lights dimming in our house as the switch was thrown. Some claimed that the Rosenberg's were victims of antisemitism and, had they not been Jews, they would not have received such a harsh punishment. Historians today, however, agree that the Rosenbergs were truly guilty of espionage that channeled secrets about the US nuclear program into Soviet hands and it was this information that enabled the Russians to construct nuclear weapons that greatly exacerbated the Cold War threat of worldwide destruction.

But such worries were not on our minds during those lazy summers of my admittedly privileged youth. The place still shimmers in my memory as a sort of private country club. In fact, when they put it on the market in 1955, it was sold to an actual country club. Our family had gotten tired of the two-hour drive to Ossining and found a summer spot closer to New York City.

The one over-arching theme that identified my father, from the Ossining estate to his office in Maspeth, was his unwavering belief in the price of privilege. Whether it was helping refugees escape from terror in Europe or writing a check to a needy orphanage in Israel, my father paid that price often, and always in a modest non-public manner. He had been afforded many blessings thanks to his hard work; thanks to the liberty and opportunities he found in America; and thanks to the grace of God. Such blessings came with a price tag that my father never hesitated to pay. These were values that I absorbed in my youth from both my parents and that have served me well throughout my life.

Richard L. Hirsch

## CHAPTER FIVE

# MY FATHER'S HOUSE OF WORSHIP

*"For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."*

— Isaiah 56



s recounted elsewhere in this book, my father, Henry Hirsch, achieved spectacular financial success despite the Great Depression that held the American economy in its grip throughout the 1930's. One aspect to which he would often point as being responsible for his "Only in America" rise to riches was his close affinity to Judaism.

The more successful my father became, the more involved he became in Jewish affairs — both communal and spiritual. During the first five years of my life, when we lived in Lawrence, Long Island, my parents would, for example, host the Kiddush reception every Saturday after the Shabbos services at our local synagogue. By the time we left Lawrence after the war and moved to Manhattan, Henry was already well-known as a serious Jew who knew how to direct his generosity towards the synagogue. Hence, the leadership of the various congregations that dotted New York's Upper East Side soon came knocking on the door. After conducting his due diligence, my father decided to join Congregation Zichron Ephraim which is today known as the Park East Synagogue on 67th Street.

As recounted in earlier, Zichron Ephraim was founded in the 1890's as an Orthodox synagogue intended to counter-balance the rising number of Reform synagogues that had popped up to accomodate an influx of well-to-do German Jews who had moved into the area in order to flee the wave of recently-arrived "Oesten-Juden" (Jews from Eastern Europe). Joining with notable congregants such as author Herman Wouk, my parents and their cohorts, Leib and Hermann Merkin, led the synagogue through a period of rapid growth through the 1950's. But in 1958 the synagogue was rocked by one of Judaism's most venerated traditions. Divine Disagreement. It is this tradition of dispute and dissatisfaction that has accounted for the creation of almost every new synagogue in America. A group of congregants are unhappy with the this or that religious practice and decide to form a splinter group and thereby go on to found a new congregation.

This point was driven home to me in a most likely apocryphal story my father would often recount. It seems that the "Alte Rebbe" (old rabbi) was visited in his sickbed by a delegation of lay leaders from his synagogue. The president of the congregation spoke first.

"Dear Rabbi, we apologize for bothering you, but a matter of such urgency has come up that we have no choice but to turn to you in order to settle the matter." The old man's eyes opened as he nodded for the president to continue.

"Here's the problem. During every Shabbos service, when we get to the recitation of Sh'ma (Judaism's holy creed declaration), half the congregation stands up while the other half stays seated. The half who stand up yells at the sitters to stand and the sitters

yell at the standers to sit down. It's a mess. So we decided to come to you to learn what is the tradition. I, for one, believe that you should stand. Am I correct, Rabbi?"

The feeble clergyman struggled to prop himself up on one elbow and managed to say, as he waved a finger back and forth: "That is not the tradition."

"Aha," blurted the Chairman of the Men's Club. "You see. I was right. The tradition is for us to remain seated during the Sh'ma."

Again, the rabbi sat up a bit and muttered: "No. That also is not the tradition."

The three leaders looked puzzled at this and finally the head of the Women's Auxiliary spoke up: "But , Rabbi. It must be one way or the other. If we don't get this resolved we will continue to have complete chaos with half the congregation yelling and screaming at the other half all the time."

The rabbi sat up at this and announced: "Yes! THAT is the tradition."

The cause of the dispute at Congregation Zichron Ephraim was not about *when* to sit, but rather where to sit. When my father joined the synagogue, the area for women to sit during services was in an upstairs balcony. As the congregation grew and wished to appeal to younger, more liberal families, it was decided to permit women to be seated on the first floor as well as the balcony. Of course, men and women would still need to be separated via a partition wall, called a *mechitza*, that ran down the middle of the sanctuary. The purpose of the *mechitza* was to keep the worshippers focused on their prayers and avoid the distraction caused by a clear view of the opposite sex. Of course this introduced the perplexing problem of how high to make the *mechitza*. Should it only block the view when the congregants were seated or should it be tall enough so no glimpses may be gained even while standing? My father and his small crew argued vehemently for the taller partition, but in the end they lost the battle of the barrier. There was only one thing to do. Start your own synagogue.

Actually, by this point, my father was not particularly happy at Zirchon Ephraim and felt that belonging to a synagogue in a more upscale, secure neighborhood would benefit our family. He was not motivated in this regard by any sense of snobbery, but because he always fought to deliver the best of everything to his family. So he, along with a couple of his building buddies, went shopping for some suitable synagogue space. They found the perfect spot on East 62nd Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues.

When my father's group broke away in 1958 to found what would become the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, it was not only other lay leaders who joined him. The spinoff group also included the synagogue's cantor. Cantor Bernard Bloomstein, known as Barney, was a close friend of my father's and when it came time to jump ship, Barney was definitely on board. In addition to chanting the liturgical prayers during services — on a strictly volunteer basis, by the way — Barney was also a successful businessman. He owned and operated a kosher canned food operation. My father had often assisted Cantor Barney in his business ventures and hence had earned the hazzan's loyalty and deep friendship.

My father, Henry Hirsch, is listed as the visionary founding chairman of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, while my mother, Myrtle was the founder of the Women's Club. They, along with the Merkin family, sought to create an institution that would embody the idealized values of Orthodox Judaism. But synagogues in those days fulfilled more than a spiritual mission. These founders wished to create a synagogue that would appeal to modern Jews who were immersed in the life of contemporary America. They

wished to create an aesthetically-pleasing ambience that would provide space for social, educational and cultural activities as well as prayer.

Jewish tradition is guided by the principle of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, which translates as “Scripture and the way of the Land.” It is the title of a well-known 19th century book by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (no relation) and promotes the idea that a synagogue must go beyond serving as merely a venue for *t'fillah* (prayer) and stretch to serve the educational and social needs of its congregants. It is this foundation upon which my father and the others built the Fifth Avenue Synagogue.

For the position of chief rabbi, the group attracted no less of a figure than the Chief Rabbi of Ireland, Dr. Immanuel Jakobovits. After leaving Fifth Avenue, Rabbi Jakobovits went on to serve as the Chief Rabbi of England, where he was knighted in 1981 and, in 1988, entered the House of Lords as Baron Jakobovits. Rabbi Jakobovits was succeeded by Dr. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, the future Chancellor of Bar Ilan University in Israel.

There was an interrum period after the group left Zichron Ephraim but before the building on Fifth Avenue was ready for occupancy. During this time the new group met at the facility operated by the New York Board of Rabbis. The founders retained the services of noted architect Percival Goodman to design their new home. A home they wished to become a New York City landmark location. Goodman was known as the “Father of the Modern Synagogue,” having designed more than fifty Jewish houses of worship during the mid-twentieth century. He was described by his peers as the leading theorist of modern synagogue design and was, by all accounts, the most prolific architect in Jewish history. While not originally an observant Jew, he eventually devoted his life to creating magnificent Jewish spiritual edifices. “I was an agnostic who was converted by Hitler,” he would often quip.

Goodman’s primary challenge was constructing a synagogue with a large sanctuary on a lot that was very deep but much too narrow. His solution required that he borrow a layout from the Sephardic tradition which placed the bimah and the ark in a central area and featured facing sections of worshippers. Of course, the layout included an *Ezrat Nashim*, the Court of Women in the balcony. The ingenious floor plan has been admired ever since, not only for its inventive use of space, but because, as an Orthodox synagogue, it is wholly Halakhically compliant.

One of the reasons my father selected the Fifth Avenue location for his new synagogue was its proximity to our home, only ten short blocks away. During those days, Henry would stop in at the construction site every morning to oversee the progress, arriving at his office at Welbilt well after ten am. I still recall accompanying him every Sunday morning and walking the ten blocks to meet with Barney Bloomstein at the construction site. While the finished building remains a striking piece of post-modern architecture to this day, it was not to everyone’s liking. There is a scene in the 1986 Woody Allen film, *Hannah and her Sisters*, that pans across the synagogue’s face as a voice-over actor criticizes its architectural incongruity. “That’s disgusting. That’s really terrible,” he says, clearly upset that the building disrupts the consistent facades of the rest of the block.

Despite such parochial snobbery, the Fifth Avenue Synagogue became home to many of the community’s cultural and even athletic activities. In a nod to me, and as a tactic designed to attract young men to the synagogue, my father had insisted that the build-

ing include a full-court basketball facility on the sixth floor. It was later converted to a nursery pre-school.

My earliest recollection of attending a function at the new synagogue was my sister Carole's wedding which was, in fact, the very first social event ever held there. Today, the Fifth Avenue Synagogue is home to a thriving congregation and is often a stop for visiting Jewish dignitaries. Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel was a frequent worshipper who, like conductor Leonard Bernstein — who often attended during the High Holidays — commented that he was attracted by the synagogue's celebrated cantor, Joseph Malovany.

Possessor of a powerful *spinto* tenor voice, Cantor Malovany was originally hired by my father, and as of this writing, continues to serve as the synagogue's world-renowned cantor. Writer Herman Wouk, author of *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Winds of War*, and one of the synagogue's founders in the 1950's, retained his affiliation till his death at age 103 in May of 2019.

My mother's role in the establishment and growth of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue cannot be overstated. Listed as one of the synagogue's founders, Myrtle's stylish elegance and keen fashion sense served to attract the finest ladies through its doors. Over the years, she served in almost every capacity from Board member to president of the Women's Club to the director of programming. It is no overstatement to say that the Fifth Avenue Synagogue was a shared passion that served to solidify and strengthen my parents' marriage.

Although he was too modest a man to receive any recognition during his lifetime for it, it should be noted here that the Fifth Avenue Synagogue would never have gotten off the ground without a deep financial commitment made by Henry Hirsch. The synagogue's role today, as Manhattan's pre-eminent Jewish house of worship, was envisioned by its founders early on. They knew that creating a synagogue of such scope and breadth would require substantial funding. To his enduring credit, my father quietly secured both the construction loan and the permanent mortgage for the synagogue with his personal negotiable assets. The notes were paid off in time, and his collateral unencumbered. When, years later, I inquired about why he was willing to take on such risk, he told me: "Richard, that was the best investment I ever made."

At the occasion of the Fifth Avenue's Synagogue's 25th anniversary in 1983, Wouk was invited to offer a few words of reflection about the rededication of this beloved house of prayer that he and my father had created. Here are a few of his eloquent words:

"And so, week in and week out, year in and year out, the Fifth Avenue Synagogue has been diffusing tradition in the elegant heart of New York as Jewish men and women have been *davening* and learning in the old way. The members and the visitors have become, over the years, a Who's Who of World Jewry.

The pattern is single and clear: Torah Judaism is stepping forth into new times and assuming new leadership tasks. That is, I suggest, the secret of secrets of our tradition; that in all times and places, re-dedication works."