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## “Take Care of Our City”

When Lew Rudin died in September 2001, after a battle with cancer, his pronounced civic passion was highlighted over and over again at his funeral service at Central Synagogue on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The service also underscored the extent to which the Rudin family and their concentric circles of friends had cherished his warm and caring nature. That he died less than two weeks after terrorists struck down New York’s World Trade Center made the loss for many of the attendees even more poignant.<sup>1</sup>

The 9/11 attacks on New York City, which destroyed thousands of lives while threatening to topple the city from its preeminent position as the financial capital of the world, had left Rudin’s hometown reeling from shock, grief, and anger, and made many fearful of a repeat attack. Ground Zero in Manhattan was a smoldering pile of wreckage, swarming with firefighters and others searching for survivors and human remains. Ever watchful after 9/11, U.S. fighter jets streaked through the skies. National Guard members directed traffic. Police in riot helmets toted high-powered weapons; others guarded transit terminals and tourist destinations. New Yorkers of every class and ethnic grouping felt a keen sense of vulnerability and kinship in ways they had rarely experienced.

In his active and fruitful years, Lew Rudin had moved others to act on behalf of his greatest love—the City of New York. His ideas, zeal, and bullishness in battling for the city’s advancement were well known. During the 1970s fiscal crisis, for example, he and a few of his friends in the real estate and tourism sectors detected early, and responded to, serious threats to the long-term economic competitiveness of the city.<sup>2</sup> They partnered with local and state government to fight the rising tide of troubles. At his core, Rudin believed that what was harmful to the business climate was also not good for the city as a whole.

But now he was gone, and to the people in the historic synagogue who testified to his character and had been touched by his generosity and unremitting sense of purpose, and who were at times struck by his usually unassuming manner, his death seemed, for the moment at least, almost impossible to imagine.

Known widely as “Mr. New York,” Rudin was an ardent defender of cities in an era of urban decline and suburbanization. He was, above all, a New York City stalwart when the city was, especially to many conservatives around the country, the poster child for everything wrong with government and the nation—whether it was overcrowded schools, aging transportation systems, or racial tensions and riots, among many other serious challenges. Many will remember Rudin for handing out tiny golden apples to almost everyone he met when the Big Apple was struggling to pull itself out of periodic recessions and crime waves, pinning the ornaments on taxi drivers, teachers and ordinary citizens. Along with the golden apples, he freely offered advice to elected officials, from borough presidents and mayors, to governors, U.S. senators and even the

president of the United States. Some will recall his assistance in popularizing the commercially devised, state-promoted “I Love New York” slogan, or the “New York is a Great College Town” banner that the Koch administration promoted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Such spirited efforts represented a strong and principled counterstatement to the widespread reputation of the city in those years as dangerous, and dying, and were characteristic of Rudin’s civic influence and impact.

Lew Rudin was seventy-four and had suffered from glaucoma for most of his life, making him almost blind at his death on September 20, 2001, though he had become surprisingly adept at recognizing and distinguishing the voices of close friends.<sup>3</sup> In his last days, at his own request, and after talking it over with his family, he left the hospital to return home. His son Bill wondered how or whether he would deliver the news of the 9/11 attacks to his extremely fragile father. But his dad, never out of touch with the galloping pulse of New York City developments, had already heard of the Trade Center attacks. While for many people, the waning days of one’s life is a time to draw the curtain of privacy, Lew Rudin was always a public-minded figure, trying to connect with others to the very end, and he wanted to see his friends and those who mattered to him one last time.

The ebb and flow of visitors to the Upper East Side penthouse apartment he shared with his wife, Rachel, included Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York’s new junior senator. “He held her tightly by the arm and said, ‘Take care of our city,’ ” Bill recalled.<sup>4</sup>

So it was that Rudin was eulogized with genuine affection at Central Synagogue, the Moorish, twin-turreted house of worship on Lexington Avenue at East Fifty-Fifth Street where he

had been a congregant. The synagogue, within walking distance of both his home and his office and where he had also served as a trustee, exudes history and permanence, a national landmark so designated in 1975. It offered a sorely needed moment of contemplation to the hundreds who came to pay their respects, and not surprisingly, they were a veritable *Who's Who* of New York movers-and-shakers in culture, politics, business, labor, medicine, education. Some attendees headed nonprofits that aided the poor and sick, which the Rudin family had supported generously and quietly over the years. Others were recognizable from sports and entertainment. There were also some who were not known for their influence or wealth—secretaries, doormen, and long-time Rudin Management tenants who knew Lew as both a prominent person and someone who remembered and knew the names of his employees as well as their spouses or children, who telephoned or sent a handwritten note when someone in their family took ill, and treated people of all stations of life with courtesy and respect.

He treated the metropolis, too, as if it were a friend or family member, dropping everything and charging into often-contentious issues, believing he had a duty to contribute his ideas and if necessary his money to aid New York when it was in trouble. A tall man, usually wearing aviator glasses, his occasional bluntness and gruff demeanor only belied his “pussycat” nature, said a close friend. Another said he did not pick fights or harbor grudges. He practiced persistence, but his basic approach was to negotiate civilly rather than to confront with threats or blame. To the very end, he looked for ways to make a positive contribution, and enlist like-minded citizens in his latest cause.

Weeks before his death, in fact, an ailing Rudin managed to attend the re-dedication of the same historic synagogue

where his funeral service would be held. He arrived at the re-dedication ceremony in a wheelchair, wearing an oxygen mask, and joined fellow congregants in marking its reconstruction from a devastating 1998 fire, a project for which he had donated much financial support.

If for that cause very late in his life and so many others before it Rudin acted as a kind of community organizer, albeit in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the country, then those who gathered for his funeral were his committed allies. Speakers recalled him in various ways as a man of action with firm persuasions, a builder, a salesman, a numbers guy, a landlord, a golfer, a devoted son, husband, father, grandfather and brother, and someone committed to the Jewish people and Israel and, above all, New Yorkers of all creeds, races, and religions. Former president Bill Clinton said during the funeral service that Lewis once introduced him to an audience “by saying I was younger than him and better looking than him, but he was richer. When I spoke to him last week he said I wasn’t president anymore, I was older than I used to be—and he was still richer than me! Being in Lew Rudin’s life was like being in a magnetic field. You were always being pulled somewhere whether you wanted to go or not.”

Rudin’s daughter, Beth Rudin DeWoody, who, like her brother Bill, now holds a senior position in the family business along with overseeing the family’s three philanthropic foundations, said her father was going to be buried with an upholstered pillow on which was emblazoned a favorite phrase, “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished.” She joked that when she was born, a friend told her father to buy his baby girl some blocks. “So he bought me Fifty-First Street and Fifty-Second Street,”<sup>5</sup> she said, brushing her tears.

The actor Sidney Poitier said Rudin, a close friend and golfing partner, had called him the previous Monday and asked him to say “goodbye” on his behalf to the City of New York.

“Rest easy, Lew,” Poitier said softly. “The City of New York has your love wrapped around its heart.”<sup>6</sup>

The words that brought the crowd to their feet were spoken by then-Governor George Pataki. Referring to 9/11, Pataki said, “We will rebuild our city. We have no choice because this is Lew Rudin’s New York.”<sup>7</sup>

Draped by an American flag, the casket was carried out of the sanctuary by pallbearers, and his grandson Michael carried Lew’s gold clubs while caddies held other golf clubs aloft, the gift of Deepdale Country Club at Lake Success in Nassau County, N.Y., where Rudin loved to tee up. Golf was the sport he enjoyed most, next to schmoozing.<sup>8</sup>

“His memorial service was like a funeral for a Jewish Kennedy,” read a column in *New York* magazine a year later.<sup>9</sup>

Who, then, was this gravelly voiced, third-generation leader of a major Manhattan real estate family and New York power broker who attracted so many friends—and in a city where the real estate business is sometimes cutthroat and litigious, and where some people accord their landlord the same level of warmth they might have for a uniformed officer giving them a parking ticket?

Yes, he was a good man who supported a lot of worthy causes. But why did he matter, and why might the story of his notable civic involvement still matter?

What does the example of a successful businessman’s unusual commitment to his city, state, and country say at a time when the nation is divided deeply by ideology, race, and region, an era when small armies of lobbyists and special

interests dominate national and state legislatures, and modest regulations risk distorting elections and legislative processes? In a time when cynicism runs rampant about government at virtually all levels, Wall Street, and the “one percent” of the nation, what did Rudin do to become a force of progress?

Lew Rudin believed, firstly, that business, labor, and government could and should partner in the public interest, and his life was filled with examples of acting on this instinct and impulse. In fact, he lived them out and invariably found a way to reconcile competing and even hostile interests rather than riding roughshod over those which at first may have appeared irreconcilable with his own. Rarely did he let much more than an hour or two pass without phoning or meeting others to refresh the bonds of friendship. He never seemed to care what people’s politics were—some, in fact, had no idea if he was a Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative. He just liked being in continuous touch with those who were trying to make an honest deal or a difference, and loved to know what was going on in their lives and happening all across town and down at City Hall. When there was a public problem—there were always plenty of them to go around—he sought to know whether he could help, and if so, how, and how soon.

A native of New York City, Rudin understood that sometimes he could develop more stimulating, interesting, and useful contacts simply by loitering at a single intersection in Manhattan—say, the corner of Fifty-Second Street and Park Avenue, where he liked to buy a hot dog from the street vendor—than anywhere else in the country. (In 2002, East Fifty-Second Street between Park and Lexington avenues was dedicated in Lew’s memory as “Lew Rudin Way.”) He

appreciated the idea and power of “intersection” that his 24/7 city of doers and thinkers offered, and the value it brought to his personalized way of conducting business. He was interested in interacting with others all the time, given his tendency to consider diverse points of view. Once, he visited a political science class on Marxism at New York University to make the argument in favor of capitalism at the invitation of the professor, Bertell Ollman, a respected scholar, who viewed history and political economy through a lens of class conflict and struggle.<sup>10</sup> On several occasions, he went on television to debate leading advocates of local rent control and rent stabilization laws, the bane of New York City landlords.

“He was probably one of the most effective salesmen that there was,” the late Walter Wriston, CEO of Citibank and one of the nation’s most powerful bankers in the 1970s, once said, referring to Lew’s relentless defense of and advocacy for the city during New York’s financial troubles in the mid-1970s. “Bear in mind,” Wriston went on, “when he was doing it nobody was buying.”

It was in the 1970s that Rudin emerged as the public face of the New York real estate sector and became a compelling salesman for civic betterment when the city seemed to need outside help more than at any time since at least the Great Depression. In 1971, together with businessman Preston Robert Tisch, real estate executive Irving Schneider, banker Rexford Tompkins, real estate developer Charles Benenson, and publicist Howard Rubenstein, among others, Rudin helped found the Association for a Better New York, or ABNY, which endures to this day under Bill Rudin’s leadership. After devising and pushing through a way for the cash-strapped city to collect property tax revenues from major property owners



in the city earlier than scheduled, and thereby helped keep it out of bankruptcy, Lew Rudin, Howard Rubenstein, and other well-connected New York businessmen helped convince Democratic Party leaders to hold the party’s nominating convention at Madison Square Garden in New York in the bicentennial year of 1976.

Presidents, governors, and mayors knew Lew by his first name, and U.S. senators and representatives almost always returned his calls. Leading politicians, presidential cabinet appointees, and business executives attended evening parties at his home as well as ABNY’s prominent, usually packed breakfast forums. Former mayor Ed Koch put it this way in 2012: “There are families in every city that have nobility attached to them. The Wagner family is one of them. And the Rudin family is one, too. They take the position that the city is bigger than all of us and needs all of us to attend to its needs.”<sup>11</sup>

“It wasn’t just his wealth,” said former New York City public advocate Betsy Gotbaum, who headed the Police Foundation of New York in the late 1970s, when Rudin was serving as a member of its board. “It was that he was involved in *everything*, and if he believed in what you were trying to accomplish, he would never turn you down.” One issue that she vividly recalls was how helpful he was when she and others raised the topic of the need for bulletproof vests for New York City police officers.<sup>12</sup>

Lew’s desire to stay connected to the most compelling and influential New Yorkers was also reflected by the interfaith rapport he and his brother Jack, his lifelong real estate partner, enjoyed with the Catholic Church of New York. Jack initiated and maintained meetings and a dialogue with successive Roman Catholic archbishops of New York. The ties started

with John Cardinal O'Connor in the 1980s. Jack was so fond of Cardinal O'Connor that he went on to send a delivery of bagels and lox each and every Friday morning to St. Patrick's Cathedral for Cardinal O'Connor and his staff to enjoy.

According to Jack Rudin, his wife, Susan, and Lori Barclay, a Rudin Management vice president and Lew Rudin's assistant, the habit of providing a Friday morning breakfast to the reigning archbishop of New York continued with Cardinal O'Connor's successor, Edward Cardinal Egan, and most recently with Timothy Cardinal Dolan.<sup>13</sup> The family's ties to the church, though, stretched back to a previous generation, as Lew and Jack's father, Sam, had been friendly with Francis Joseph Cardinal Spellman.

Lew Rudin also annually held a party at the Regency Hotel to mark the end of Yom Kippur for 250 relatives and friends, regardless of their religion. He rented apartments and offices from his family's real estate portfolio to many former local, state, and federal public officials and high-level government appointees newly retired from their taxpayer-furnished homes, among them former mayors William O'Dwyer, Ed Koch, and David Dinkins. Lew, according to his son, never cared what office a politician held or what his record on any particular issue was when a current or former official was hunting for an apartment to rent. For Rudin, his company's assistance was a reflexive gesture of respect for those who had held public office, his son said.

In a similar gesture of respect, Rudin also attended the funeral of Henry Kissinger's father in 1982. The former secretary of state and advisor to presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford recalled in an interview that Lew Rudin told him that he had read Louis Kissinger's obituary in the morning

newspaper and just felt that he needed to show up and pay his respects. Kissinger noticed Rudin’s presence at the funeral service and was moved. “I can’t remember him ever asking me for anything,” Kissinger said in response to an interviewer’s question many years later, adding, “I thought of him as part of the solution, not as someone who needed to be placated, and as a great public servant.”<sup>14</sup>

Rudin brought together former and current elected and appointed officials, Kissinger included, to speak at his ABNY’s monthly morning forums, seating the more prominent ones at the head table, willfully oblivious to their sometimes intense rivalries or grudges of the moment. Rudin felt they could, and should, get along and work together for the good of the city, or at the very least be civil toward each other publicly.

The monthly ABNY gatherings began with one hundred or so attendees and grew to include hundreds more on a regular basis by the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, becoming a mandatory stop for politicians and others wishing to be seen and heard by New York’s business and political elites and press. Among the many people taking the microphone at various times were George H. W. Bush and his son, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, Bob Dole, Ted Kennedy, Al Gore, Jack Kemp, and General Colin Powell, each one introduced with humor, breeziness, and warmth by the bespectacled “Mr. New York.”

At one point, while Bill and Beth were youngsters, Rudin frequented the iconic East Side pub P. J. Clarke’s on Sunday afternoons. Sometime the children were dropped off there by their mother, Gladyce, Lew’s first wife, after religious school. They ate burgers and fries and listened politely in P. J. Clarke’s, if not always able to comprehend fully the banter and laughter

about real estate closings, local and state politics, and sports. Friends dropped by throughout the afternoon, knowing Rudin would be there, holding court in the same genial, unaffected way he came to emcee the ABNY power breakfasts.<sup>15</sup>

For all his usual informality, the developer was no-nonsense when he detected a slight against his hometown. He rarely passed up a chance to phone the *New York Times* or some other media outlet, large or small, to grouse about an article or a newscast he perceived as having placed New York in an unfair light. Responding to a 1990 newspaper column about a woman who left the city because of the cost of living, drug problems, and crime, Rudin fired off a letter to the editor urging her to return “to the Big Apple and help us solve not only New York’s problems, but all of the social problems of this great country.”<sup>16</sup>