GARY ROSENBLATT

by BARBARA KESSEL

The offices of *The Jewish Week* (New York) are based in the Times Square area of Manhattan, the communications nerve center of the nation – an appropriate address for possibly the most influential Jewish newspaper outside Israel and certainly the largest, with a circulation of ninety thousand.

Gary Rosenblatt has been the editor and publisher of *The Jewish Week* since 1993. From his vantage point, Rosenblatt surveys the New York Jewish scene and beyond, reporting on everything from local community events to national and international trends, including groundbreaking reportage on highly sensitive topics.

Rosenblatt, who has spent almost all of his career writing for Jewish newspapers, has established a reputation as a master of balanced reporting who stands by his stories – even those that are controversial or portray the Jewish world in a negative light. A Pulitzer

Prize finalist who is involved in several initiatives aimed at strengthening both journalism and the Jewish community, Rosenblatt is an Orthodox Jew who is fiercely dedicated to the community, and a journalist who is just as determined to expose those stories that need exposure.

"Community is a huge benefit of being Jewish. There is so much *chesed* [kindness]," Rosenblatt says. "Part of the appeal of Jewish life is that it provides meaning. Why are we here? It gives a framework and historical context, a values set to grapple with."

Rosenblatt, born in 1947, spent his early years in Annapolis, Maryland, where his father was an Orthodox pulpit rabbi. "In the fifties, outside New York, if you wore a *yarmulke*, they didn't beat you up, but they thought you were an alien," he recalls. "I didn't know what my father's profession was. I just knew he visited the hospital and put a *mezuzah* on some guy's house and spoke in shul. I didn't know that was a job – I just thought he was being a nice guy."

Being the son of a rabbi may have been good training for becoming the editor of a highly visible newspaper. "I always felt it was tough to be a rabbi in a small town," Rosenblatt says. "You're the role model. And there is a stigma to being the rabbi's son: everyone knows everything about you. In later years, my father used to tease me when I got angry letters to the editor. He would say, 'I only have to worry about my *baale batim* [key members of the community]; you have to worry about everybody.'"

In a sense, Rosenblatt had a second set of parents – he lived with his maternal grandparents during the week from seventh through twelfth grade, when he attended the Talmudical Academy in Baltimore. "My *zaidy* was very short but very imposing. His daily routine was to get up at four A.M., learn downstairs in the shul until *shacharis* [morning prayers], have lunch, nap, learn, go to shul and go to sleep at ten or eleven," Rosenblatt recalls. "My grandmother was a real life force. She was a beautiful woman with a great voice, very loving, really funny. I have lots of *bubby* routines, all of them true. She liked to listen to the radio. When they gave the weather, they'd say, 'Here is the weather for Baltimore, Washington and vicinity.' I'd

come into the kitchen and she'd ask me, '*Vu iz Vicinity*?' Where is Vicinity?"

With his grandmother's quick wit as inspiration and model, Rosenblatt once considered becoming a stand-up comedian, but turning down Friday night and Saturday gigs dead-ended that career path. Now, his main comedic outlet is the annual Purim issue of *The Jewish Week*.

Rosenblatt worked on the school paper all four years at Yeshiva College and found that he loved journalism. He went on to earn a graduate degree in journalism at the City University of New York. While still a student, working as a counselor in the summer of 1968 at Camp Hillel, Rosenblatt met his future wife, Judy, who was the drama counselor. His buddies ribbed him, "Rosenblatt, this is camp. You don't marry your summer girlfriend. It isn't done." But it was too late. "If I'd met her in camp at age eleven, I would have been married at twelve," he says. Rosenblatt and his wife are the parents of three children and grandparents of two.

After graduate school, Rosenblatt freelanced for almost a year. One of his first jobs was at *TV Guide*. "Working at *TV Guide* cured me of the notion that writing for a large audience is appealing in and of itself. I was writing mostly about sports, like getting the numbers right at the Rose Bowl."

He applied to *The Jewish Week* in 1972, looking for freelance work, but editor Philip Hochstein told him there was none to be had. "As I was leaving, he added, 'But would you be interested in a full-time job?'" Rosenblatt stayed for two years. Once he started at *The Jewish Week*, he realized he had found his vocation: Jewish journalism. "Joining *The Jewish Week* meant I could write about what mattered to me. It combined my two loves: Jewish life and writing."

In those days, *The Jewish Week* was a very different paper than it is today. It was small and privately owned. "I was about fifty years younger than the next youngest editor. These were seasoned guys who had covered World War II. I was probably the only one there who didn't have a prostate condition. I got to do every story that involved leaving the office. It was a great initiation in that sense." But

it flew low on the journalism radar. "We had a scoop on Conservative women being counted in a minyan two weeks before the *New York Times* picked it up. When we ran the story – no reaction. They get hold of it and it's all over the world."

In 1974, when the paper shut down temporarily for financial reasons, the Rosenblatts moved to Baltimore for what was to have been a two-year stint at the *Baltimore Jewish Times*. It lasted almost two decades. Publisher Chuck Berger had boundless confidence in his protégé's ability. Because he owned the paper, he was able to let Rosenblatt run with any story he chose, without a bureaucracy to inhibit the process. Berger's criterion was he wanted a paper he could be proud of, and Rosenblatt delivered.

Ten years into Rosenblatt's stay, Berger bought the *Detroit Jewish News* and Rosenblatt started commuting to edit that paper as well. For nine years, he would fly out on Thursday mornings and return on Friday afternoons, armed with the mandate to give that paper a distinct vision and hire writers who could translate that vision into print.

As his career matured, Rosenblatt began taking on more complex topics, even when they challenged the Jewish establishment. A milestone in his career was his 1980 article "The Life and Death of a Dream" for the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, a lengthy investigative piece on the failure of the Institute for Jewish Life. The article, which garnered considerable attention, is still discussed in public forums such as the 2005 Limmud Conference.

The Institute was conceived in November 1969 at the annual General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) by two unlikely parents who subsequently separated: the Concerned Jewish Students, an activist organization, and the CJF. It was to have been a one hundred-million-dollar, five-year laboratory for innovative projects that would engage disenchanted Jewish youth and their families, and ensure the future of the Jewish community.

The Institute officially began operations on May 15, 1972 and ran into difficulties almost immediately, some of them budgetary. "At the end of the first year, the official deficit for the Institute

was $81,000, and money – or the lack of it – had become an issue of bitter contention," Rosenblatt wrote. Financing alone, however, was not the critical issue. The Institute was ultimately paralyzed by tensions between the young independents seeking alternative ways to bolster Jewish identity and the establishment that was invested in the status quo. Rosenblatt was able to unearth and articulate these conflicts by conducting insightful interviews with individuals central to the Institute's development and, ultimately, its dissolution.

He saw in the demise of the Institute a story larger than just the unraveling of one initiative. As he put it in the article, "The problems the Institute for Jewish Life faced are still with us today and shed light on the dynamics of power, on how funds are raised and priorities set, how local and national Jewish goals differ and are resolved, and how the Jewish community responds to creativity and challenge."

Rosenblatt's article chronicling the Institute's decline was emblematic of the kind of thoughtful, balanced investigative journalism at which he would excel. It was no small thing to take on the Jewish establishment by tackling a project it had funded and nurtured, but Rosenblatt did not shy away because he sensed that it spoke to a central theme in American Jewish life. This was to become his *modus operandi*.

Rosenblatt was not simply building a career, but working to move the paper to a new level. "We were trying to make a national reputation for the paper. I went to Israel once a year and wrote about it. I went to conferences in New York or elsewhere that normally only the local paper would cover, if at all. We were looking for broader content, like the 1977 Nazi march in Skokie. Our goal was, you didn't have to live in Baltimore to read the *Baltimore Jewish Times*," he explains.

A piece Rosenblatt wrote in 1984 for the *Baltimore Jewish Times* was a Pulitzer Prize finalist – one of two finalists in the category of Special Reporting. "The Simon Wiesenthal Center: State-of-the-Art Activism or Hollywood Hype?" is an incisive article about the phenomenally successful Holocaust Center in Los Angeles and the differences in style and goals between its publicity-savvy director, Rabbi

Marvin Hier, and its down-to-earth namesake, Simon Wiesenthal. Addressing the question of whether the Center capitalizes on Jewish suffering, the piece closes by remarking that, "If…the Center is keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive to prevent its recurrence, it will fulfill its mandate – to transform the ashes of tragedy into the fire of commitment."

Being a Pulitzer finalist was a first for an article in a Jewish publication and a serious accolade for Rosenblatt, but it did not spur him to seek a different type of job. "My friends asked me, if I had won, would I have gone to work at the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, but by then I was a great believer in Jewish journalism," he says.

The article that far and away has drawn the most attention in his career to date is "Stolen Innocence," Rosenblatt's exposé of allegations of child sexual abuse by Rabbi Baruch Lanner, an educator in the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, and the organizational awareness and denial that protected the rabbi for years. With a supportive board of directors in his corner, Rosenblatt published "Stolen Innocence" in *The Jewish Week* on June 23, 2000, and blew the lid off the topic of sexual abuse of children in the Orthodox community with a force that continues to reverberate.

The decision to print the article was difficult but, Rosenblatt felt, inevitable as the evidence mounted. Rosenblatt did not make his decision lightly. Sensitive to the Jewish prohibition against *lashon hara* (malicious gossip) and under pressure from the Orthodox Union to keep the story quiet, Rosenblatt consulted a rabbinic authority. The rabbi's ruling: If this article will prevent future abuse, one is not only permitted to print it but one is so obligated. "To show you how clueless I was, I said to Judy when it was finished, 'Well, that's the end of that story,'" Rosenblatt recalls. Instead, to his astonishment, it provoked an explosive reaction. Letters to the editor began streaming in. "Destroying a person as you have is not merely distasteful but against Torah teachings." "At what point did *The Jewish Week* assume the role of criminal investigator, district attorney, judge and jury?" "I will only say this once: If the article on your Web site is not removed, you will lose at least fifteen ads per week, forever."

There were positive responses as well. *The Jewish Week* received over a thousand letters, e-mails and phone calls, with the vast majority thanking Rosenblatt for bringing this problem to light. "The support from *amcha* [the general public] was overwhelming, but I found it galling that institutions and rabbis were accusing me of lashon hara. It was topsy turvy," Rosenblatt says.

A month later, on July 20, Rosenblatt followed up with an article entitled, "Lessons from the Lanner Case," in which he urged the Jewish community not to "ignore, dismiss or cover up potentially embarrassing problems…They won't go away on their own, and by pretending they don't exist, we only erode our values and endanger our children."

The fact that the rabbi was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison was a vindication of the decision to print the story. Ultimately, "Stolen Innocence" was a watershed that went beyond the individual incident. "Different standards have been set about how to deal with these things. It makes it easier incrementally to take on tough issues," Rosenblatt says.

Stories of rabbinic sexual abuse of children and adults have come out since "Stolen Innocence," and Rosenblatt has had the support of his board of directors, which he apprises of sensitive stories before they appear in print. Mark Charendoff, *Jewish Week* board member and president of the Jewish Funders Network, credits Rosenblatt with tackling difficult subjects. "I think there is an enormous amount of frustration in certain areas of the Jewish world about the lack of opportunity for honest dialogue. Rosenblatt does it out of a genuine dedication to the Jewish people and to using his vocation to do good. That can be a hard and lonely thing to do. It's very easy to be brave if there's no consequence to what you're writing, but he's writing in the largest Jewish weekly in North America to a very affluent audience. With all of that, to have the courage to take on decidedly unpopular issues because they need to be taken on, and not become cynical and not become irresponsible is difficult. He really pulls it off with grace."

Rosenblatt himself says that while he tries not to sound self-

righteous, there are topics that need to be aired, including further exposure of sexual abuse. "It's still a problem, still being swept under the rug," he says, "but I think the community is starting to deal with this stuff. There is more awareness and other rabbis have written about it. It's out there and people can find out about them [educators accused of abuse]."

Despite his convictions, it is still painful for him to be vilified in his own community – some in the Orthodox world accuse Rosenblatt of conducting witch hunts against his peers. "It's such a nuanced issue," he says. "The Orthodox community is a geographic neighborhood. People are vested because they're visible. They are scrutinized more closely and hold themselves to a higher standard. So when there's abuse, it's more of a story. And people have selective memories. They remember the one negative story instead of the five positive ones."

Being enmeshed in the community one writes about has other challenges as well. People in his hometown of Teaneck, New Jersey know who Rosenblatt is. "Writing about the community you live in heightens expectations. I get people calling me at home telling me they didn't get the paper. 'I've had a prescription [*sic*] for twenty-three years!' 'Should I bring it to you?'" Rosenblatt remarks that there is little separation between his personal and professional life. "If people don't *hock* [pester] you in shul, you worry they're not reading it…Sometimes they give you 'the look.' 'Aren't you…? You look so much bigger in person than your picture.' They must think I'm six inches tall."

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These days, much of Rosenblatt's writing is in his weekly column, which ranges from the introspective to the political to the personal. He is as likely to write about his participation in the June 2005 World Jewish Forum in Israel as he is about the death of his father in a hit-and-run accident over twenty years ago. The fact that the driver was acquitted has caused Rosenblatt to struggle "with a sense of existential injustice and with the legal system," he says.

In addition to writing and assigning editorials, Rosenblatt holds a staff meeting every Monday morning at which *The Jewish Week* writers bat around story ideas, talking through "front-burner" topics to find a fresh angle. He also chooses the letters to the editor, which takes time and judgment, according to Rosenblatt. "How long do you let a story simmer? How many letters do you print on a given subject? How do you avoid being nasty to others?"

Because his managing editor, Rob Goldblum, undertakes the nuts-and-bolts of getting the paper out each week, Rosenblatt has the opportunity to pursue the special initiatives that reflect his commitment to professionalizing Jewish journalism. Nine years ago, he helped found the Gralla Fellows Program, through which young journalists spend the better part of a week at Brandeis University taking courses in Judaism and journalism, and examining where the two intersect. He is chairman of the Fund for Jewish Investigative Journalism, which has made possible articles on Jonathan Pollard, French anti-Semitism, and why Israel is losing the media war. In keeping with his concern for both Jewish youth and Israel, he founded and directs "Write On for Israel," a *Jewish Week*-sponsored advocacy journalism program for high school students, in addition to "Fresh Ink," a student-written supplement to the paper.

Rosenblatt's communal involvement is not restricted to journalism. He is undertaking a proactive role in helping "define the agenda for American Jewry." One of the most exciting ventures he has conceived is The Conversation: Jewish in America, an annual three-day retreat that began in the fall of 2005, hosting about sixty-five participants each year that brings together Jewish professionals who are prominent in their fields.

Writers, filmmakers, academics, philanthropists, comedians and musicians are invited to each retreat. "We had no planned outcome but we encouraged people to network and let us know what, if anything, tangible came of their being there. What they loved the most was the mix of people and that it was a totally level playing field with no panels. You weren't being lectured to. A couple of projects have started from it," Rosenblatt explains.

A sought-after speaker on campus, in high schools, at Jewish community centers and organization meetings, Rosenblatt's lecture topics reflect his primary interests and include: "Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror: Jews and the Media," "Doing the Right Things: Ethics and Jewish Journalism," "Israel and American Jewry: Is the Gap Widening?" and "Can We Still be One? Advocating Unity in a Divided Community." He finds that speaking throughout the country gives him an opportunity to take the pulse of the many host cities he visits.

While not the oldest editor in American Jewish journalism, Rosenblatt is certainly the most senior, having spent more than half his life in the profession. After his Pulitzer Prize nomination, Rosenblatt was asked where he wanted to go in his career. His reply is the same today as it was then – "I consider myself fortunate to be right where I am, doing what I love."