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# Attending the Annual Meeting of the SAHS in Washington, D.C.: An Exaggeration

*by Albert Winkler*

As president of the Swiss American Historical Society last year, 2022, it was my pleasure to attend the Society's annual meeting in Washington, D.C. I always go anyway. The thought of trying to be charming, clever, and insightful at the meetings was just too much for me to bear alone, so I groveled at the feet of my son, Kurt, and his wife, Razil, to go with me. Rather than watch an old man cry, they agreed to go too if I paid. What a deal! We got on the plane in Salt Lake. I can still remember when you had to amuse yourself on flights, but they now have screens on the seat in front of you, so you can watch movies. I caught "Top Gun: Maverick," and it is a pretty fair action flick.

I lived in D.C. and surrounding area for three years back in the 1970s, and I can still remember how to get around, so it was not difficult to get on the Metro (subway) and get to our hotel. We checked in to the Rat Hole Hotel, also known as the Hotel Harrington. It was built in 1914, so it is pretty old, but it was very cheap and at a great location.

It was dusk when we arrived, and to use our time wisely, we headed out. We walked past the Washington Monument, went through

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<sup>1</sup> For decades, I have written weekly letters to missionaries, people in the military, in jail, or just away from home. I try to enliven their day just a little and let them know someone cares. In the letters, I make myself the brunt of the jokes. I wrote about 850 letters before I started numbering them. The material for this article came from letters 1094, 1095, and 1096.

the World War II Memorial, and ended at the Vietnam War Memorial, where I pooped out. We took an Uber back. Years ago, I walked much farther along the tidal basin and was quite surprised to see a big rat run in front of me and dive into the water. Instinctively, I called out, “Senator Jones, might I have a word with you?” I then caught myself, but it was an honest mistake. Any rotten, stinking, filthy, low-down vermin in D.C. must be a politician. This reminds me of a joke in the comic strip, *Crock*. The comic is about some loveable losers in the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara Desert led by the evil commander, Vermin P. Crock. Two troopers observe. “Isn’t that Crock with his pet rat? What a filthy, stinking, disgusting choice for a companion!” “Yeah, everyone has mentioned it to the rat.”

I enjoyed the trip, and we were busy trying to see as much as possible, but there were times when I was in my room late at night with no means of distracting myself because I had already read the comics in the newspaper. In utter desperation, I watched some local news on the Idiot Box with commercials. It was just too much. The pain got unbearable, and I screamed, “I don’t deserve to live!” We were on the tenth floor, and the drop would have been merciful, but with my luck, I would only have been badly maimed. At least, I saw more comics the next day. I once saw a flick in which a guy fell to his doom out the window of a high building. A dude on the ground observed. “If I had enough guts to jump out that window, I would have had the guts to go on living.”

I am not social, and when I am around people, I carry a sign, “Don’t nobody talk to me,” but it didn’t work this time. All the officers of the Society went to dinner at a Swiss restaurant to talk things over. Everyone was a perfect example of cool, class, style, and charisma, and I could not measure up. But everybody was very nice to me, the conversation was pleasant, and I had a good time. I looked at the menu, and I could not eat anything on it because I am on a restricted diet. But the café took pity on me and steamed a few vegetables for me to eat.



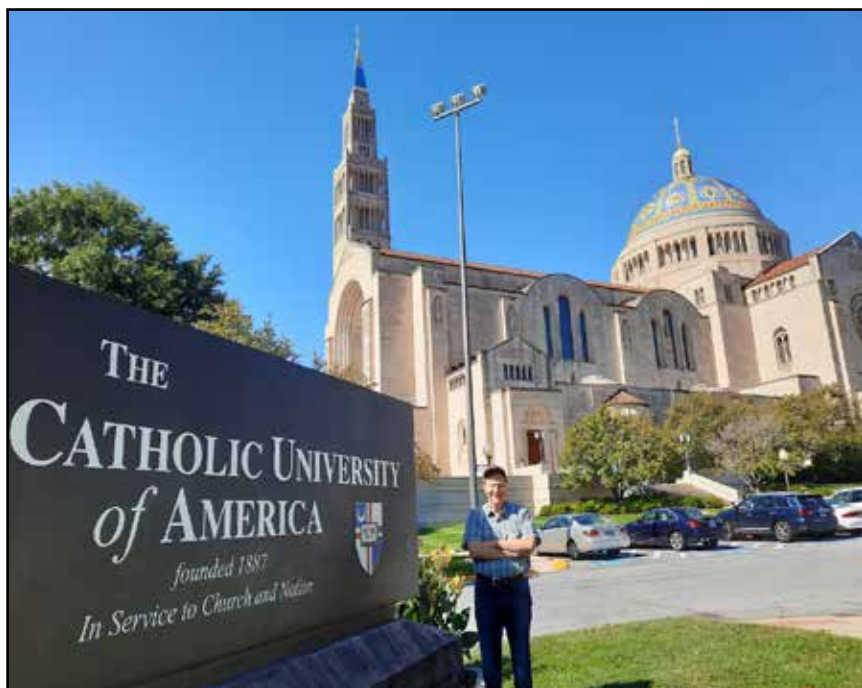
*Martin Luther King Library.*

I had the honor of conducting the annual meeting the next day, and it was super cool to meet with such charming people who share an interest in the Swiss and their contributions. We met in the Martin Luther King Library downtown—a great place. In the morning, we had the business meeting, and only thirteen people showed up, but the activists waved their signs. “Free the dog!” “Pardon the Pig!” “All power to the pimple!” I have been lecturing over 40 years, so making a fool of myself is second nature, and I hardly flinched until they brought out the pitch forks, torches, and tar.

The meeting was very challenging for me because of my lack of skill until they replaced me as president of the Society. Thank you,

Lord! Then birds sang, flowers bloomed, and everything was right with the world! As president, I had been very stressed out for months, and my worries kept me up at night. Replacing me was an act of mercy, and my gross incompetence had nothing to do with it. Yet I remain the editor of the *SAHS Review*, and I still have to worry about finding good articles for the *Review* and getting it published on time. But life is much better now.

A few college students came to our meetings, and they brought charm and intelligence with them. One of them even interviewed me for a podcast for one of her classes. The afternoon meeting included presentations from scholars about the Swiss, which were informative and entertaining. I finally decided to dredge up what little cool I had, and it is always a pleasure to be among friends. I worked the crowd praising everyone, congratulating everyone, and asking everybody to submit articles for the *SAHS Review*.



*At CUA before the dogs got me.*

I traveled around town with Kurt and Razil as much as possible, and we hit a bunch of museums, but the architecture was the big hit. We took the Metro to my old school, the Catholic University of America. I thought after 45 years they would have forgotten, but I was wrong. When I set foot on campus again, they yelled, “The weirdo is back! Call out the dogs!” The Basilica of the National Shrine is next to campus, and it is a brilliant Byzantine building with magnificent domes and mosaics. I used to spend a lot of time there, and I have always loved it. When I was driving to campus in the winter time, I parked in the parking lot and cut through the building to get a little warmer on the way to class and to admire the art.

We took the Metro way out of town, and we then took an Uber to the Washington, D.C. Temple. I spent a lot of time there back in the day. I



*Razil and Kurt at the Washington Cathedral.*

was on the baptismal team, and they really liked me because I talked fast. In fact, I tied the all-time record of 8½ baptisms each minute. I was also a whiz on confirmations, and I was a scheduled veil worker. When Razil was in Sunday School, they showed her a picture of the D.C. Temple, and she always wanted to see it. When we got there, she was almost giddy with joy.

The super treat was the Washington Cathedral. It is a gorgeous building following the Medieval Gothic cathedrals in England complete with pointed arches, ribbed vaulting, and stain-glassed windows. The Gothic is my favorite art form, and I thought I had been taken to heaven. I just had to play in the light coming through the stained-glass windows by waving my hand through it. When I discuss the Gothic in my classes, I tell about the time I lived in D.C. and visited the Cathedral. I was playing in the light of the windows when they told me to leave. But it did not work because I came back the next day. Actually, I was not thrown out. They just said they had to set up for a performance and they were closing the place for a while. But my fiction is better than the truth, because getting ejected is a better story.

I try to be a nice guy even though it is a stretch, because I am evil by nature. When we were crossing the streets in D.C., and the cars stopped for us rather than running us down, I waved a thanks to them. They called back, “Didn’t want to wash blood off my fender.” Some guys wear hats that say they are veterans, and I always thank them for their service. But I did not see pan-



*Light through a stained glass window at the Washington Cathedral.*

handlers for a while, and I finally yelled, “My money is as good as anyone else’s.” That did the trick, and I got approached a bunch of times. I always give them money, and they are always nice about it. They often say, “Thank You,” or “God bless you” which is very kind. When I used to hand out quarters, I called it “a coin for a compliment.” But inflation has hit, and I now hand out at least a dollar to everyone. I guess I should now call it, “A buck for a blessing.”

One panhandler was the most disheveled, bedraggled, and slovenly beggar I had ever seen. His clothes were dirty, rotten, filthy, and full of holes. Even the mosquitoes, ticks, and fleas refused to bite him. Yet when I offered him money, he looked at my clothes and said, “Keep it, buddy. You need it worse than I do.” Of course, there are muggers in the city, and one guy tried to rob me, but he looked at my clothes and refused, “Don’t you know bullets cost money? How could I turn a profit by mugging you?” It only got embarrassing when a robber held a gun on me and forced me to take money.

The last evening of the trip, we went to the International Spy Museum, and it was great, because I like the cloak-and-dagger part of international relations. They had displays about spying and intelligence which brought back many old memories of when I worked for the CIA, and I told Razil and Kurt a ton of old stories. Sometimes, people think you are a spy if you work for the CIA. Not so. I was an “intelligence analyst,” and I mostly chased pencils around a desk. I met some of the real Spooks, and they were tough dudes, the kind who would knife their own mother for a nickel.

On the last day, we got on the Metro to travel to the airport. I was very surprised because in our same car were six soldiers. I should not have been too surprised because one of the Metro stops was the Pentagon. At least, three of the soldiers were full-bird (Eagle) colonels. One of them was a lieutenant colonel, and there was more big brass on the Metro than the horn section of an orchestra. I was caught in a terrible dilemma. I have long thanked veterans for their service, but I wanted to take one step further and buy them a drink in gratitude. Since



I am a teetotaler, I do not even know what a drink costs, and I guessed five bucks ought to do it, but I only had four five-dollar bills on me. Luckily, two got off.

I knew if I tried to buy them a drink, I would make a horse's patootie out of myself, but if I didn't try, I would never forgive myself, so I gave it a shot. I offered to buy each of them a drink. I don't know if they wouldn't take money from the gutter, but each of them refused. They were very nice, thanked me, and shook my hand. One of them even patted me on the shoulder. I was terribly embarrassed, and I made a complete fool out of myself. Serves me right! That's what I get for trying to do something nice.

On the flight home from D.C., I watched the new (2021) version of the flick "West Side Story," except for the last part when Tony gets it. I still consider the 1961 version of the flick the best movie musical ever, but the new version had some good songs. I read they were looking for performers for the new flick. They found people who could sing but could not dance. They found people who could dance but could not sing. They then found people who could sing and dance, but could not act. It was pretty good anyway.

I had a great time attending the SAHS annual meeting in D.C., and I hope to see you all at future meetings of the Society.

*~ Albert Winkler, Orem, Utah*