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Book review:

Battling Editor: The Albany Years, Harry Rosenfeld

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Battling Editor: The Albany Years, Harry Rosenfeld (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-438-47377-2, pp. 274, \$24.95.

I know Harry Rosenfeld. I do not mean that literally – I have never met the man – but I know his type of editor. I had the good fortune to become a journalist at the end of the 1970s as the demand for in-depth, tough-minded reporting radiated from New York City and Washington, D.C., to smaller metropolises throughout the country. Smart, principled editors, such as the author of this engaging memoir, led the charge.

In 1978, the same year I began my professional career, Rosenfeld took the helm of the *Times Union* and the *Knickerbocker News*, a morning and an afternoon newspaper in Albany, N.Y., both owned by the Hearst Corporation. Rosenfeld had had long successful tenures at first the *New York Herald Tribune* and then the *Washington Post*, yet he wanted to run his own newspaper. Editorial leadership of the two papers in New York's capital city gave him that chance. His attempts to infuse these decent, if undistinguished, publications with the journalistic standards he learned at the *Tribune* and the *Post* are the focus of *Battling Editor*, Rosenfeld's second book on his life. *From Kristallnacht to Watergate* recounted Rosenfeld's childhood in Nazi Germany, immigration into the United States, and high-flying career, globetrotting for the *Tribune* and supervising Woodward and Bernstein at the *Post*. Although *Battling Editor* lacks the high drama of fleeing the Nazis and felling a president, it nonetheless chronicles a crucial period in journalism history. Local newspapers such as the *Times Union* improved dramatically in the 1980s, only to face inexorable decline in the following decades as subscribers and advertisers bolted to new media. Rosenfeld relates his two decades' fight to instil and then maintain high-minded journalism in the face of unrelenting demands for ethical compromises and budget cuts.

Rosenfeld moved to Albany at the best of times for journalism. The spirit of Watergate led even bottom-line oriented publishers such as Hearst to want to support investigative reporting. Albany, with about 100,000 people in the city and a million in the metropolitan region, proved to be a good place for that. As the seat of a sprawling state government, Albany afforded plenty of opportunities to ferret out corruption. Early on, Rosenfeld was given the resources to add staff and the authority to introduce an ethics code. When big, regional news happened – a major snowstorm, the death of the former New York governor and ex-Vice

President Nelson Rockefeller, the Winter Olympics in not-too-far away Lake Placid, N.Y. – his news staff flooded the zone. Editors and reporters identified corruption by the city’s mayor, the county’s executive, and a removals company that was a major player and employer. They produced series on abortion, the prisons, and the system of regulating physicians. An innovative 1982 issue, “Suppose the Bomb Hits Albany”, described hour by hour and neighbourhood by neighbourhood what might occur during a nuclear attack. “These enterprise projects . . . reflected our commitment to surpass reporting the breaking news, as important as that was”, Rosenfeld explains. “Only by probing deeper into complex and sometimes divisive issues was it possible to grasp the real problem and then perhaps discern paths to likely remedies” (p. 36).

The business staff was not always on board with these changes, particularly Rosenfeld’s insistence on killing puff pieces designed to flatter advertisers and on banning self-promotion that masqueraded as news. Still, Rosenfeld managed during his first decade to turn most business setbacks into opportunities. As the *Knickerbocker News* experienced the inevitable death throes of an afternoon newspaper, Rosenfeld merged it into the *Times Union*. After 145 years, the *Knick* expired on 15 April 1988. Adding much of the *Knick*’s staff to that of the *Times Union*, Rosenfeld was able to create a special projects unit for investigation and enterprise stories, expand the Capitol bureau covering state government, and increase the number of specialty reporters and editorial writers. The *Times Union* obtained its highest circulation ever. The combined papers “achieved the impact and influence that accompanied our extended reach”, Rosenfeld boasts (p. 148). In 1989, the Schenectady newspaper challenged the *Times Union* for dominance in the region, not least by launching a Sunday edition. Almost a third of the *Times Union*’s Sunday readership came from the Schenectady *Gazette*’s circulation area. Management wanted to cut staff and newsprint in anticipation of revenue losses. Rosenfeld wanted to increase staff and expand coverage on the theory that an improved version would hold its readers. Rosenfeld won the fight, adding space and staff and managing to hold its readership.

By the 1990s, however, the financial problems had worsened. The *Times Union*’s new publisher ordered cuts, a disproportionate amount coming from the editorial side. The new publisher also had a different philosophy. “He was strong on allying the paper with the local establishment whether political or more importantly business, advertisers especially”, Rosenfeld writes. “He was for championing the local repertory company

and symphony and public radio network, while I was for informing our readers accurately about how these community pillars were doing without abandoning standards.” The “horrendous cuts” marked “the beginning of a decline in which enterprise reporting that took on special interests faced increased opposition from the publisher”, Rosenfeld writes (p. 164).

The publisher proposed new ventures familiar to anyone who lived through those desperate times. How about starting a magazine to grab the all-important but always elusive younger reader? “Personal” for the under-50 set was started, and folded. So did “Preview”, a weekly entertainment tabloid. The business side wanted to insert a “version of the trashy supermarket gossip and sex magazines” into the *Times Union*, as Hearst’s San Antonio paper had done. When Rosenfeld objected, one manager accused him of “opposing any innovation ever proposed”. Rosenfeld reports that he responded with something like: “We could do that. But wouldn’t it be more profitable to sell drugs? Hell, we could open a whorehouse. There’s money in that” (p. 165).

Rosenfeld managed to hold the line on the trashy tabloid but not on further newsroom reductions. In a 1993 memorandum to the publisher, Rosenfeld warned: “These cutbacks are forcing us to take actions that begin dismantling the franchise this newspaper has built up piece by piece over the 15 years of my editorship. We are . . . surrendering bit by bit the distinguished attributes that have made us what we are” (p. 196). Nor was Rosenfeld able to fend off his own replacement. In spring 1994, Hearst announced that Rosenfeld was becoming editorial page editor. He resigned from fulltime work in 1997.

Rosenfeld’s experience in Nazi Germany and his Jewish identity are not central to this story as they were to his first book. They pop up now and again: when his newspaper confronts the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; when the paper’s death notice policy bars the mention of the “Nazis and their willing executioners” in a paid obituary as “accusatory” against “a race”; when he attends a Harvard seminar on “The Holocaust and the Media”. At his retirement dinner, he offered “a final reflection”, expressing his hope that “my life’s work will be accepted as partial payment on the great debt our families owe this country for having given us refuge and permitting us to flourish” (p. 223).

Rosenfeld writes serviceably, intermingling his life as an editor with his life as a son, husband and father. He tells his story in short chapters with snappy titles. The chapters often veer in several directions, however, and the titles do not necessarily convey their contents. “Innards of the Craft”,

for example, moves from forming an alliance with journalism schools, to allowing the public to attend the newspaper's afternoon meetings, to a seemingly unconnected Hearst corporate meeting. "Momentous Events" includes the birth of his first grandchild, the merger of his two newspapers, and the establishment of a no-smoking policy at work. "Changes and Challenges" recounts his three daughters' graduations from college, law school, and a masters' programme, as well as his attendance at a Harvard seminar, and his decision to add security to the Times Union building.

Even if it is in fits and starts, Rosenfeld's battle – and that of many editors like him – emerges as a moral contest. "The constant struggle was to maintain journalistic integrity in the face of management's frequent indifference, if not hostility", Rosenfeld writes (p. 202). It was an important if ultimately futile battle that he fought bravely. The biggest problem with *Battling Editor*, however, is that it feels as if you are reading about the First World War while you are in the middle of the Second World War. As much as can be learned from the experience of those who fought before you, it is hard to care as you face daily catastrophe.

Rosenfeld acknowledges as much in a short epilogue. Not only are local newspapers failing at an alarming rate, but also what constitutes news for too many people is not mere puffery but out-and-out fakery. "The press is under calculated political assault from an ascendant right wing for its very independence at the same time that its strength is sapped economically", Rosenfeld writes. Perhaps it is not what he went through as editor but what he experienced as a child that may offer the greatest lessons for the battle ahead. "The more I was reviled for my Jewishness, the more I valued it", he writes. "As a grown man, I better understood how Judaism embodied precepts of righteousness and justice. Those teachings were intrinsic to my work as a newspaperman. They mated well with the imperatives of the free press to foster a democracy whose calling card is equal justice under law" (p. 244).

Laurel Leff