

Bob Pollack's Wild and Precious Life

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this service. I welcome the opportunity to reflect on my life and share some stories with you in the hope that it will help us get to know each other better. I've been coming to this church largely because of my daughter, Linda, and her family and I've enjoyed the stimulating services, the choir, conversations during Coffee Hour, the parties, and especially the opportunity to see Linda, Bruce and Jamie share their music.

I was born in 1926 here in South Philadelphia. My father was from Russia and my mother was from Lithuania. My mother told a story about me, at five years old, sitting on our front stoop, which adjoined our neighbor's front stoop. I was chatting away with the little girl who lived there. Finally, after I had finished, she said, "Bobby, I can't understand a word you are saying." I must have been speaking to her in Yiddish, the language we spoke at home. I learned English when I started kindergarten.

My mother worked in a clothing factory at Broad and Erie. My sister and I never went hungry, but there were times when I remember my mother saying, "YOU eat, I'm not hungry," so I know now that food was scarce. One time, when I was 8 or 9 years old, I was sent by trolley, alone, with my mother's wedding ring in my pocket, to visit the home of our cousins, the Perelmans. They were better off; they owned a factory that made cardboard boxes. I was to ask for a loan for grocery money and give the ring as collateral. They sent me home with the ring still in my pocket AND money for groceries. I don't think that was the first time the Perelman family helped us and it certainly was not their last act of charity, because their name is now featured prominently all over the city for their far-reaching philanthropic work.

WWII started when I was finishing high school. Through a lucky break in the recruitment process, I was drafted into the Hospital Navy Corps, and despite the challenges of some extreme anti-Semitism during my basic training, I served out the war years caring for wounded and sick soldiers here in the U.S. Folks thought that my time as a medic would lead me into a career as a doctor but I had other ideas. I felt very grateful for the GI Bill which helped pay for my education and I took full advantage of that, since my family could not afford to send me to college.

I applied to the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Sciences, where I could walk to my classes from our home on Pentridge Street. I LOVED it! I took every science class I could fit in my schedule. My Mom shared another story about a conversation with a neighbor from West Philly whose child must have attended high school with me and then gotten some kind of job. When the neighbor asked what I was doing after high school, my mother replied that I was still in school. The neighbor's response was a sympathetic remark saying, "Your Bobby, he doesn't quite get it, does he?" In my four years at PCP&S, I crammed in the appropriate courses to end up with three degrees: a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry, a Bachelor Science in Bacteriology and a Master of Science in Bacteriology.

Still passionate about continuing my education, I responded to an ad in a science magazine for a teaching fellowship at the University of Tennessee. After a brief meeting with the dean, who was in Atlantic City to attend a conference, I was hired! So for four years, I lived in Tennessee and earned my PhD in Biochemistry and Nutrition.

During my time at PCP&S, I had participated in the activities at International House. Every Friday night, the house would host gatherings for students from all over the world. Among the diverse crowd that gathered there was Lydia Aureli, whom I fell in love with

upon seeing her walk down the stairs. Halfway through my studies in Tennessee, Lydia and I were married and she joined me for those last two years in the South.

Upon returning to Philadelphia, my first job was at the Department of Agriculture, right up the road here in Wyndmoor. I worked there for 8 years. Through another lucky coincidence, aided by my wife Lydia's uncanny ability to invite the right people to dinner, I learned of an opening at Temple University. Without even a formal interview, just based on my CV, they made the decision to hire me. I think it was the NEXT DAY that I was ushered in to the Dean's office and introduced as the new Chair of the Department of Biochemistry at the Dental School.

That marked the start of a 25-year career in academia. I loved every day of it. It didn't feel like work to me. I loved the teaching, writing grant proposals, doing research in amino acids, and attending conferences. I wrote several books on nutrition and started a nutritional counseling center at the Temple Dental School.

It also allowed me and my family to do some really life-changing travel. Through another "chance" encounter orchestrated by my wife, I was invited to travel to Genova, Italy to help a colleague set up and run a lab where gel electrophoresis work was required, something I was fairly expert in. All four of us (me, my wife and two daughters) spent eight months in Genoa in 1975. I was invited to return to Italy many times during the 70's and 80's to give lectures. I treasure those memories.

I retired from Temple in 1988 but not from professional life. I explored various business opportunities, using my scientific background to help “start-up” companies produce lozenges for the treatment of colds, and tryptophan supplements which helped in the treatment of depression, appetite, sleep and pain management.

My wife died in 1997. In 2014, my daughters helped me move from our house in Andorra. Now I am enjoying my retirement at my new apartment in Cathedral Village. I’m making new friends. I enjoy the clay classes, an opera lover’s group, concerts, movies, the greenhouse and visiting lecturers. I keep in touch with my extended family, my two daughters and their families. I consider myself VERY LUCKY – an example of the American Dream, in a way, and for that I am truly grateful.