Alex Foxwell ’16 went to Paris last summer on a Starr Center fellowship to help UNESCO, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, commemorate the humanity sacrificed to the holocaust called slavery. But while working to recognize those lost in one human tragedy, his personal research into another revealed the heartrending answer to a longtime family mystery.

Poring through deportation manifests and German/Vichy arrest records at the French Mémorial de la Shoah, France’s Holocaust museum, Foxwell finally learned the fate of his great-uncle, who had been a fighter in the French Resistance during World War II.

“The documents list his deportation from Lyon, where he was arrested, to Drancy [a concentration camp in a Paris suburb], and then on to Auschwitz,” Foxwell says. “The search for 70 years really came to a head in what was a very emotional day for me and my family.”

Foxwell, a double major in drama and history, believes deeply in the power and purpose of history, in part because of his close relationship to it. “The whole reason I think of history in terms of social justice is from my grandmother, who is a French Holocaust survivor.” Walking the streets of Paris, Foxwell retraced the paths of his forebears, Jews who came to Paris from Poland in 1924. They moved to Reims until 1940. “When the Germans invaded France, the French gendarmerie arrested my family and sent them by cattle car to Drancy, but luckily someone got them out.”

Until this summer, no one knew what had become of his grandmother’s brother, Isaac, the French Resistance fighter who “got false papers for everyone in the family so they could pass wherever they needed to go. In August of 1944, right before liberation, he and my great-grandfather were arrested.” Foxwell’s great-grandfather survived only long enough to die of kidney cancer six months after liberation; all but one of his 17 siblings were gassed or shot in Poland.

Foxwell’s work with UNESCO marks the first time Washington College’s C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, which administers the Comegys Bight Fellowships, has partnered with the organization. Foxwell earned the $4,000 fellowship, as well as an additional grant from The Hodson Trust, to work on UNESCO’s Slave Route Project.

Funded by several private donors at The 1782 Society level, the Comegys Bight Fellowships annually support as many as a dozen outstanding students in summer positions at leading cultural institutions.
After a great fall semester back at Washington College, I’m very excited to head off to my study abroad experience in Israel. Although I was supposed to spend my fall semester at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, my trip was postponed due to security concerns. The administration and staff at WC were very helpful in shaping a positive semester for me despite the change in plans. I was able to plan a great class schedule, spend another semester as the president of Hillel, work as the Resident Assistant of East Hall, and teach a weekly tap dance class for the dance club. I also traveled to Istanbul, Turkey, with the International Studies Department to present research at the Annual Conference on the Muslim World! Everything happens for a reason. Luckily, I was able to switch my semester enrollment at Ben Gurion very easily and secure my spot in the Oversea Student Program. I owe a huge thanks to Kate McCleary, Director of the Global Education Office, for helping with all the logistics! With much of the preparations already started, it was relatively easy to get ready for my semester abroad. I visited the Israeli Consulate in Philadelphia to secure my visa, started selecting classes, and filled out lots of paperwork!

In anticipation of my semester abroad, I’ve also connected with friends in Israel whom I’ve met on my past trips to the country. During my Taglit Birthright trip in January 2013, I befriended some Israeli soldiers who joined our group. This past March, I traveled with the Jewish National Fund Alternative Spring Break program to do volunteer work in the Negev, and I plan to volunteer with some of those organizations while I study there. There is so much to look forward to this coming semester abroad and I am very excited for my next adventure in Israel to begin!

Rebecca DeSantis '16
Hillel President 2013-2014
Roy Ans Makes Legacy Gift To Support Judaic Studies

As a young man at Washington College in the early 1960s, Roy Ans ’63 was a member of the Jewish Student Fellowship. Now retired from his medical practice specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, Ans followed through on that membership in a way not many people can duplicate. Advocating for the creation of a Hillel House, he volunteered to lead the campaign to raise funds to support Hillel programming. In 2012, the College dedicated the Roy P. and Nan Ans Hillel House, and fundraising efforts continue to build the endowment.

In 2014, Ans finalized his plans to endow an interdisciplinary professorship in Judaic Studies through a $1.75 million estate commitment. The Ans Professorship will permanently bolster Hillel’s position on campus and secure the strength and rigor of the College’s religion minor, something Ans anticipates will positively impact the College as a whole. “Liberal-arts colleges like Washington College thrive on diversity,” said Ans. “I hope my gift adds to that diversity and promotes awareness. Distinguishing ourselves from our peer schools increases our chances of attracting talented, well-rounded students.”

As a chemistry major undertaking independent study, Ans had the opportunity to use cutting-edge equipment. Knowing how to use that scientific equipment changed the course of his medical career, he says. “Having that skill-set opened a lot of doors for me, all the way to reproductive medicine.”

Washington College influenced every aspect of Ans’ maturation into adulthood, he says. Through the Sunday afternoon foreign film series, Washington College introduced him to a lifelong love of cinema. “The first movie was Battleship Potemkin. I was floored – I have been a movie buff ever since. I have even been a medical consultant on a few movies.”

And he attributes his keen business mind to his track and field coach, Don Chatellier. “Watching how he strategized, how he managed the team and kept us motivated, I developed a business sense from that.” Academic dean and history professor Robert Kirkwood also had an influence on Ans. “Dean Kirkwood’s door was always open to me. He was incredibly important in my decision-making during my time at Washington College and after, as well.”

Numerous areas of study will benefit from Ans’ gift. “A wonderful aspect of this professorship is that it will bridge multiple departments, giving students an opportunity to work with a faculty member who understands and teaches the impacts of religion in their particular field,” says Washington College Provost and Dean Emily Chamlee-Wright. “This kind of interdisciplinary teaching fits perfectly with the strategic plan of the College.”

As Washington College has provided a lifetime of influence and guidance for Dr. Ans, he hopes his gift will impact future students in the same way. “I imagine a political science or English major having more opportunities to learn about religion,” he says. “I want to pay it back – all that Washington College did for me, the doors it opened.” ✡

Dr. and Mrs. Roy Ans (center) are pictured at the 2012 dedication of the Hillel House.

Resources for Jewish Students

Washington College offers a welcoming community for students of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds. Close faculty mentoring helps students sort through an array of special classes, fellowships, internships, and study abroad opportunities.

- Roy Ans Fellowship in Jewish-American Studies
- Institute for Religion, Politics and Culture (washcoll.edu/departments/irpc/)
- Study Abroad In Israel
- Washington College Hillel (washcoll.edu/clubs/hillel/) and on Facebook
- Chestertown Havurah (chestertownhavurah.org)
- Temple B’nai Israel in Easton, MD (bnaiisraeleaston.org)

For more information, email wc_admissions@washcoll.edu

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The Roy Ans Fellowship is dedicated to creating an incentive for and recognizing excellence in the study of the American Jewish experience. The grant is awarded to a student and a faculty advisor who work closely on a topic exploring Jewish life and thought in the United States. Both the student and the faculty member receive grants to compensate them for their hard work and to create an incentive for students with an interest in this area to undertake a substantial research project in the field. Upon completion, the student presents his or her research in a public presentation to the academic community.

This year’s awardees are Melissa Deckman, professor of political science, and Kyle Sepe, a senior political science major. Sepe will investigate the relationship between young Jewish-Americans and the Republican Party, exploring the historic connection between American Jews and the Democratic Party and changes in voting trends among younger Jewish Americans who demonstrate a greater affinity with the Republican Party. According to Deckman, Sepe is proposing a fascinating hypothesis about the political views and behavior of younger Jews, and is rigorously testing his ideas with the use of advanced data sets and statistical analysis.

The Roy Ans Fellowship is awarded through a competitive process administered by the College’s Institute for Religion, Politics and Culture, a program dedicated to studying the historic and ongoing contributions of religion to political and cultural life and to the rigorous study of matters of pressing concern in our politics and culture today. Students and faculty are strongly encouraged to apply for the next round of grants, which will be announced in the early spring. More information is available by contacting Joseph Prud’homme, the Center director and associate professor of political science, at jprudhomme2@washcoll.edu.

Visiting The Esnoga in Amsterdam

by Dr. Gary S. Schiff

There are many extraordinary Jewish sites in Holland, which I hope to speak about in my lecture, “In Search of Dutch Jewry: Mokum and Medeinah,” at Washington College on April 15, 2015. But if I had to choose a favorite, it would probably be the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam (known as the Esnoga, Latin for Synagoga).

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, many went east to the Ottoman Empire, others to nearby Portugal, which in 1497 also expelled them. As in Spain, many Jews left, some converted, while others practiced their Judaism in secret as conversos, despite the Inquisition. Small numbers emigrated over time to a few other venues, sometimes still hiding their Jewish identities. Among these adopted homelands were Bordeaux in France, and Brussels, then part of the Spanish-ruled Netherlands. In 1585 the now largely Protestant northern half of that country broke away and established an independent Holland with freedom of religion. So gradually more Portuguese Jews, largely merchants, moved to Amsterdam, the capital of the world’s greatest mercantile sea power.

So successful were they that in 1675 they dedicated what was then the largest synagogue in the world, holding 1,600 worshippers (1,200 men and 400 women). The huge brick edifice sits on a large, prominent square surrounded by a host of outbuildings used for every communal function: a mikveh (ritual bath), a world-renowned library, a treasure room of priceless ritual items, even a mortuary. Miraculously surviving the Nazis and magnificently restored, the main sanctuary is breathtaking, with glowing walls of stained glass, incredible silver ornaments and an elaborately carved Ark of dark precious woods. Maintaining their Sephardi tradition, the sanctuary is still candlelit by huge brass chandeliers and remains unheated (there’s a small winter synagogue). Likewise, the service is exactly the same as it was in the 1600s, with the rabbi and cantor wearing the same historically styled black robes.

This synagogue is also the “mother church” of all similar veteran Sephardi synagogues in the New World, from New York to Philadelphia to the Caribbean island of Curacao.

Dr. Gary S. Schiff is adjunct professor of history at Washington College.
For the eighth year in a row, Cantor Gary Schiff, leader of the Chestertown Havurah, sang with the Chester River Chorale in their presentation of *A Chester River Holiday*. Schiff first performed two solemn songs in Hebrew, and then, in a change of pace, offered a rollicking celebration of The Feast of Lights in a cha-cha version of “Ocho Candelikas” (“Eight Little Candles”). The lyrics were performed in Ladino, a mixture of Spanish and Hebrew coined as an everyday language by Jews in Spain in medieval times.

A brass ensemble including trumpets, trombones, a tuba, and a French horn joined in with piano, organ, and chimes to accompany Schiff’s songs. Sammy Marshall, the Chorale’s accompanist on piano, guest organist Stephen Harouff, and percussionists Ken Schweitzer and John Leupold, both faculty members at Washington College, rounded out the instrumentalists. The performances were held in the Presbyterian Church of Chestertown, and both of the shows were sold out.

Washington College is grateful for the ongoing support of friends and alumni whose gifts are helping to endow Hillel House programming. Thanks to the donors listed below, we have raised $96,000 toward our goal of $200,000. To make your gift to Hillel, please visit give.washcoll.edu or mail your check to the Office of Advancement, Washington College, 300 Washington Avenue, Chestertown, MD 21620.

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In July 2014, as part of its annual Summer Poetry Salon Series, the Rose O’Neill Literary House held its first two-day Jewish poetry seminar and reading, featuring established American Jewish poets Julie Enszer, Erika Meitner, Jason Schneiderman, Yerra Sugarman, and Literary House Director Jehanne Dubrow. Emerging poet Benjamin Lowenkron served as the first seminar fellow. During the seminar, each poet led a discussion in topics such as documentary poetics, poetry as a means toward the Jewish concept of tikkn olam (i.e. repairing the brokenness of the world), the use of Talmudic scholarship as a way of constructing poems, and the future of American Jewish poetry. Most of all, the seminar centered on strategies for mentoring and educating the next generation of American Jewish poets.

The seminar culminated with a very successful public reading, which was one of the best-attended events that the Literary House held during its 2013-14 programming. Fifty-five people attended, and the poets read selections from their most recent books.

The seminar is scheduled to meet again in summer 2016 under the name Shira: From Generation to Generation of American Jewish Poets—shira being the Hebrew word for poetry. In 2016, the seminar will be expanded to run for four days with at least two public readings, and will include participation by young American Jewish poets from across the country who are currently enrolled in MFA programs in creative writing.

The Literary House will be seeking funding to expand the scope of this seminar, which could allow the program to offer fellowships to more emerging poets and to include interested Washington College undergraduates.