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Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

“How Can We Ever Forget Massachusetts?”¹ Abraham Ratshesky and the 1917 Halifax Relief Effort

Many people know the story of the devastating Halifax Explosion of 1917 and Boston's role in the relief efforts, but very few now know about the Massachusetts men and women who were instrumental to those endeavors. One of those individuals was Abraham Captain (A.C.) Ratshesky, commissioner-in-charge of the Halifax Relief Expedition, who, within two weeks, became a hero to the citizens of Halifax and Boston.

On the morning of December 6, 1917, the SS *Mont-Blanc*, a French cargo ship carrying wartime explosives, collided with a Norwegian relief ship, the SS *Imo*, in the Narrows of Halifax Harbor. The collision started a fire on the *Mont-Blanc*, and within twenty minutes the ship exploded. The pressure wave created by

the blast leveled over two square miles of the city's north end, then known as Richmond, and destroyed the Mi'kmaq settlement in Turtle Grove. This devastation, caused by the world's largest man-made explosion prior to the nuclear age, was followed by a twenty-foot tsunami that wreaked further havoc on the city and port. Glass shattered, buildings flattened to rubble, and countless lives were lost or forever changed. Almost 2,000 people were killed and 9,000 injured in the explosion.²

Massachusetts, and especially the city of Boston, quickly came to Halifax's aid. In February 1917, when the entry of the United States into World War I seemed certain, a group of government and private citizens formed the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety. The first organization of its kind in the country, the committee was to serve as a public emergency response unit.³ Hearing about the emergency in Halifax—without waiting to be asked—Governor Samuel McCall activated the Massachusetts' Public Safety Committee. Governor McCall and Henry B. Endicott, Chair of the Committee, appointed the one man they knew who could organize and supervise the relief workers on the ground: Abraham Ratshesky.

Ratshesky was well-suited for the job, having served as a director of the Metropolitan Chapter of the American Red Cross and as a relief worker after the fires in Chelsea (1908) and Salem (1914), Massachusetts. Born in Boston on November 6, 1864, to Asher and Bertha (Abrams) Ratshesky, Abraham—or “Cap” as he was sometimes called—was a politician, banker, and philanthropist. At age 14, Ratshesky left Boston

George Arthur, wounded in the explosion, sits with nurse Edith Choate, A.C. Ratshesky, and an unnamed man. This photograph, used in a number of papers, was taken by Richard W. Sears of Boston. (All article images are from the Ratshesky Papers.)





The photos above depict wreckage in Richmond, the area of Halifax obliterated by the explosion on December 6, 1917.

Latin School and went into the mercantile business with his father.⁴ He served in the Massachusetts State Senate from 1892 to 1895, establishing his reputation for honesty and fairness, but left political life at the request of his wife, Edith (Shuman), whom he had married in 1894. In 1895, Ratshesky and his brother Israel founded the U.S. Trust Company. Unlike other banks, the U.S. Trust Company provided otherwise unobtainable services to immigrants. He was one of the founding members of Beth Israel Hospital and in 1916, established the A. C. Ratshesky Charity Foundation, which still operates today. The Ratsheskys, who did not have children, lived on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, but also summered at “The Birches,” their home in Beverly, Massachusetts, where they entertained friends and family.

Ratshesky quickly responded to the urgent situation in Halifax. A relief train left Boston’s North Station at 10:17 p.m. on December 6—the day of the explosion—with eleven doctors, ten nurses, journalists, and several relief workers from the American Red Cross, as well as

much-needed supplies. All passengers had to present credentials to ensure they were not enemies of the United States.⁵ Winter storms worked against the train: it encountered heavy snow, a train wreck, engine breakdowns, and blocked tracks. At 7 a.m. on Saturday, December 8, the train finally arrived in Halifax, the first relief train to reach the city from the United States.⁶

Ratshesky was greeted with a scene of complete devastation, compounded by a blizzard on the night of the explosion that dumped over a foot of new snow. In his report to Governor McCall, Ratshesky wrote of the debris and chaos he saw everywhere, and of his local driver, who had lost his wife and four children.⁷ Under Ratshesky’s direction Canadian officials—as well as Major Harold Giddings of the Massachusetts State Guard; Lieutenant Colonel Frederick McKelvey Bell, assistant director of medical services for the Canadian armed forces; and fifty of the crew of the U.S. training ship *Old Colony*—managed to turn the old Bellevue Mansion into Bellevue Hospital. Windows were boarded up, floors and walls cleaned, and operating rooms and beds were ready by early evening on December 8. Ratshesky ordered glass to be shipped from Boston to Halifax immediately: without glass, buildings offered no protection from the snow and sleet. Tales of desperation were scattered throughout the newspapers. One paper reported that “half a hundred children, their heads bandaged and their little arms in slings . . . made up a small group of orphans who escaped when their place of abode in Halifax was wrecked. A shower of stone and glass had maimed some of them for life.”⁸ Ratshesky set about organizing relief efforts under a general committee to alleviate the confusion and duplicated efforts of relief workers already on the scene. Back in Boston, Endicott and the Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee raised one million dollars for supplies and relief efforts, an amount equal to \$20 million today.

Ratshesky was already well-known in Boston, but now he was considered a hero, a source of pride for the state and a much admired friend to Halifax.

A letter from Halifax

This letter from 17-year-old Walter Hoganson of Halifax to 16-year-old Harold Kennedy of Stoughton, Massachusetts, is preserved in Ratshesky's scrapbook (Ratschesky Papers, P-586, Box 4). After Kennedy received it, his older sister brought the letter into the law office where she worked with attorney Samuel Casson. Casson, a friend of Ratschesky, passed it on to him. Walter Hoganson's older sister, Catherine (Hoganson) Murphy, her husband Patrick, and their eleven-year-old son, Wilfred, perished in the disaster and are listed in the Halifax Explosion Remembrance Book.

Halifax, N.S.
Dec. 18/17

Dear Friend Harold.—

When I received your letter a few days after that "Horrible Catastrophe," believe me it cheered me up to know of friends, and I will surely keep up correspondence. The explosion was an awful thing. I lost a married sister, her husband was killed also. Out of the family of five, four of them are alive, the other boy perished in the explosion.

You asked me for my experiences in the explosion.

Well, I was at work at the time in the newspaper office of "The Daily Echo," a Halifax paper, and about 9.05 the lights went out very slowly. I was watching the lights going out when there was a short rumble and then a big "crash" (a terrific, terrifying roar).

I got as low as I could and the glass and wood flew everywhere, but I didn't get a scratch. Harold, our big steady building rocked like a little cradle. I got out of the building and when I got on the street everybody was running everywhere. People with scratches, cuts, and bruises were yelling, "The Dirty Huns," "There [sic] here at Last," and many other things, thinking it was an air raid. Well, getting clear of this my first thoughts were of home, getting home I found everybody alright. The house was all shattered, windows were out, plaster down, and our chimney split, as if a saw had it upped it down the sides. But nobody was cut. Then I made for my sister's house in Richmond, the northern part of the city where the explosion did the most damage. Well, I started off and the further north the worst it got, houses split in half, others down to the ground, others which had escaped the explosion were burning down with a fierce fire that was raging then. Getting to Duffus St. or what was left of it I found my sister's house burned to the ground and not a soul around. Leaving here in despair I went down to the waterfront which was swept as low as a field. My chum Victor James, was working here and he was instantly killed, his body was found

since. Making once more for home I left that field of horrors behind. That night a wild storm howled, snow, sleet and wind. I was expecting our chimney to fall any moment but it lasted out alright. The next day the work of relief started, and thank God the noble state of Massachusetts stood the same as ever ready to help us. I tell you I don't know what we would have done without the Americans, because we were left powerless by the explosion. Well, the work of relief started. Buildings were put into shape for the injured and homeless, and a man whose name will always stand sacred in every Canadian's mind took over the Relief Dressing Stations and Hospitals. This man is A.C. Ratschesky, the hero of dear old Halifax. Well, the food stations opened, and also clothing depots. At this time of writing, everything is slowly but surely getting back to normal conditions.

I tell you an American is just like our own, free, easy, cool, and ready. After this is over, and every thing fixed up again and our city gets to be a dear old Halifax again, we will realize what the brothers Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Maine Hospital Units did for us. Hoping you will write as soon as possible.

Yours truly,
Walter (over)

P.S.— I am mailing a book of views of the explosion to you as soon as possible.

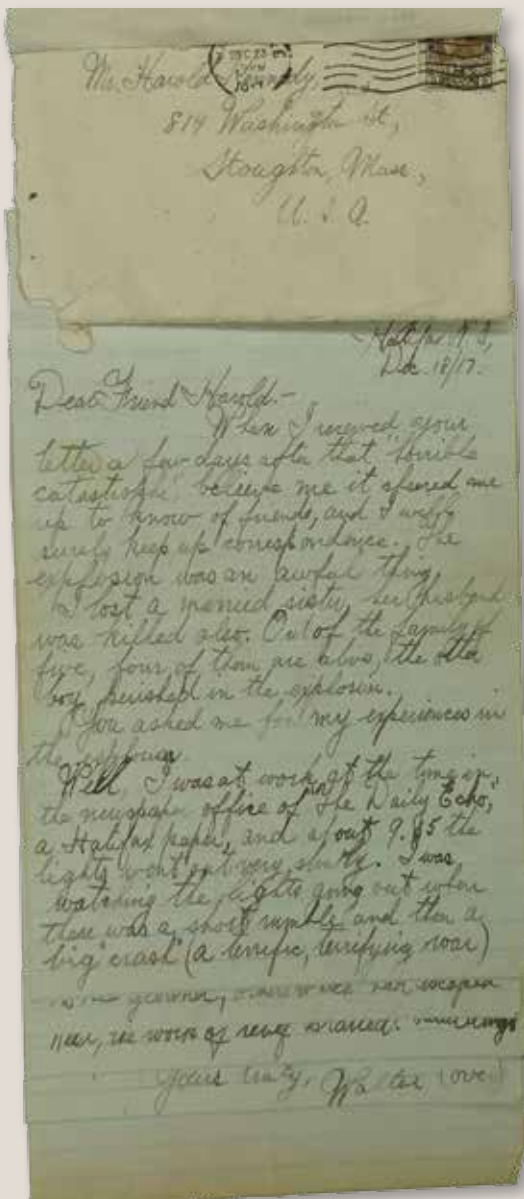
P.S.— I have a piece of a shell of the "S.S. Mont Blanc" one of the ships that collided. Would you want me to send it to you it is a great souvenir in its natural shape.

Your Friend,
Walter

My address.—

Walter Hoganson
11 Creighton Street
Halifax, N.S.,
Canada

Excuse scribbling

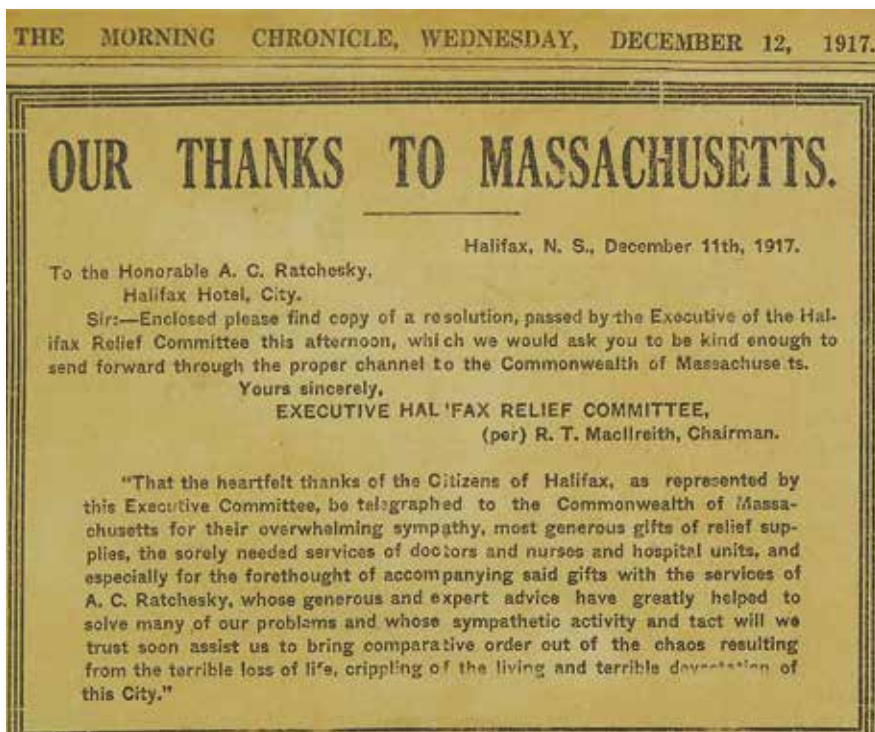


The letter sent by Walter Hoganson to Harold Kennedy, December 18, 1917.

Top: Thanks from the Executive Halifax Committee to A.C. Ratskesky. Bottom: Photo of the Massachusetts Relief Party in the *Boston Sunday Advertiser and American*.

"Dear 'Cap,'" wrote one of his brothers, "the wonderful work you are doing in Halifax is simply thrilling the Boston people. Your name is on everybody's lips; most of the newspapers are giving you great headlines, and today's *American* had a picture of you and Premier [Sir Robert] Borden, in conversation."⁹ Endicott wrote, "Massachusetts will never know how much she owes you but we will try to have them understand a little."¹⁰ Walter Hoganson of Halifax, in a letter to Harold Kennedy of Stoughton, Massachusetts, wrote, "Buildings were put into shape for the injured and homeless, and a man whose name will always stand sacred in any every Canadian's mind took over the Relief Dressing Stations and Hospitals. This man is A.C. Ratskesky, the hero of dear old Halifax."¹¹ These accolades were well-deserved, and not until much later did reports surface of Ratskesky's own injury, caused by a slip in the snow upon his arrival. Working while hurt and without consideration of his wellbeing inspired the community back home, and further cemented his colleagues' admiration.

On December 14, as Ratskesky began preparing for his journey back to Boston, Halifax's *Morning Chronicle* extolled,



For more information

- *Halifax Explosion 1917 Online Resources, from the Nova Scotia Archives*
novascotia.ca/archives/virtual/explosion/explosion.asp
- *Halifax Explosion Remembrance Book, from the Nova Scotia Archives. The database currently contains 1,946 names of people known to have died as a direct result of the events of December 6, 1917, with supporting information.*
novascotia.ca/archives/virtual/remembrance
- *From One Moment to the Next: The Halifax Explosion, from the Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library at the University of Virginia*
exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/halifax
- *The Halifax Explosion, from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*
cbc.ca/halifaxexplosion
- *Report of the Halifax Relief Expedition December 6 to 15, 1917 by Abraham C. Ratskesky*
archive.org/details/reportofhalifaxr00mass
- *The Papers of Abraham Ratskesky*
Finding aid: findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=338010#a19
To view the collection online, email reference@ajhsboston.org for access.
- The A.C. Ratskesky Foundation
Ratskeskyfoundation.org

“Boston and Massachusetts will be forever honored names among Nova Scotians, and we beg to say to Mr. Ratshesky, Mr. Moors and their colleagues [that] when they leave for their homes that we shall cherish as one of our dearest memories their manifestations of sympathy for us in our distress. May we venture to ask that they will convey to the people of Boston and Massachusetts an expression of our abiding gratitude for all that they have done for us.”¹² Proclamations and statements were made by both Canadian and Massachusetts officials, attesting to the strength of the bond between Halifax and Boston.

Following his service in Halifax, Ratshesky was an assistant to Henry B. Endicott, serving as both assistant Federal Food Administrator and vice-chairman and executive officer of the

Public Safety Committee for the remainder of World War I. In 1930, President Herbert Hoover appointed Ratshesky as ambassador to Czechoslovakia, which honored him in 1933 with the Order of the White Lion First Class—the country’s highest civil honor. He also served with the Federated Jewish Charities (now Combined Jewish Philanthropies), and the American Red Cross, donating a building on Gloucester Street in Boston to the latter organization. Abraham Ratshesky died in 1943. Although his contributions to the Halifax relief efforts have been forgotten over time, Ratshesky left a philanthropic legacy that continues every December,



when Halifax sends Boston the city’s official Christmas tree in a gesture of goodwill and remembrance.¹³ ♦

The Papers of Abraham Ratshesky (1864–1943) were donated to AJHS by the A.C. Ratshesky Foundation in 1987. The Papers include diaries; photographs; a scrapbook of photographs, letters, and newspaper clippings concerning the Halifax Explosion; the Order of the White Lion First Class medal and certificate; correspondence; estate ledgers; and films. In addition to the Ratshesky material, the collection contains photographs of the Shuman family and of Abraham’s sister, Rebecca Morse, and her family. Abraham and Edith (Shuman) Ratshesky were close to their extended family and the Foundation is still operated by descendants of Abraham Ratshesky’s siblings. The collection is available online; to request access, email reference@ajhsboston.org.

Notes

- ¹ This quote is taken from a telegram sent to Henry B. Endicott from Ratshesky: “The premier, Sir Robert Borden, after reading your telegram, was so profoundly grateful that he grasped me by both hands, and with tears running down his cheeks, said: “How can we ever forget Massachusetts?” The text of the telegram is published in a newspaper account in “Bay State Unit No. 2 in Halifax,” *The Boston Herald*, December 10, 1917. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Abraham C. Ratshesky (1864–1943), papers; P-586; Box 4; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, Mass.
- ² “The Halifax Explosion,” cbc.ca/halifaxexplosion/index.html.
- ³ Laura M. MacDonald, *Curse of the Narrows* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), p. 105.
- ⁴ “Ratshesky New Envoy to Prague,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 9, 1930, 1. News clipping; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 3, Folder 5.
- ⁵ Letters presenting the credentials of various reporters are included in Ratshesky’s scrapbook. Mention of the credentials also in

- Atkinson, Roy, “Boston Rushes Relief Special,” *The Boston Herald and Journal*, December 7, 1917. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 4.
- ⁶ MacDonald, *Curse of the Narrows* [note 3], pp. 177–79. Relief trains from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had begun arriving on Thursday, December 7.
- ⁷ “Ratshesky, Abraham C. *Report of the Halifax Relief Expedition December 6 to 15, 1917* (Boston: 1918), p. 11. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 4.
- ⁸ “To ‘Go the Limit’ in Helping Halifax,” *The Boston Herald and Journal*, December 8, 1917. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586.
- ⁹ Letter from an unnamed Ratshesky brother to Abraham Ratshesky, December 11, 1917. Since Israel is mentioned in the letter, it was written by either Max or Harry. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 4.

- ¹⁰ Letter from Henry B. Endicott to A.C. Ratshesky, December 11, 1917. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 4.
- ¹¹ Letter from Walter Hoganson to Harold Kennedy, December 18, 1917. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 4.
- ¹² *The Morning Chronicle*, December 14, 1917. From the scrapbook of Abraham Ratshesky; Ratshesky Papers; P-586; Box 4.
- ¹³ Halifax sent a Christmas tree to Boston in 1918. The tradition of annual tree-giving began in 1971 and still continues. In Nova Scotia, the gifting of the tree is a valued tradition, and includes guidelines for potential tree donors, a tree-cutting ceremony, and a parade as the tree begins its journey to Boston. The tree even has its own Twitter profile and Facebook page. See “Tree for Boston,” novascotia.ca/treeforboston/.