

# THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

## RIDING THE RAILS:

### RDC chairman celebrates his love of all things trains

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Henry Posner III holds his key to the city of Rock Island, Ill.  
(Photo by Adam Reinherz)

Henry Posner III has encountered the foreign and amassed a collection. Most prized are his trains. Posner, 60, is chairman of Railroad Development Corporation (RDC) and a third-generation member of Rodef Shalom Congregation.

Since founding RDC in 1987, Posner has utilized the Pittsburgh-based railway investment and management company to focus on domestic and foreign markets. By revitalizing downtrodden and defunct railroads, RDC has attempted to protect public interests and respect local cultures. RDC currently operates in the United States, Peru, Colombia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Belgium. The company formerly had a presence in Estonia, Mozambique and Guatemala.

Posner and RDC are the subject of a new book by historian H. Roger Grant, the Kathryn and Calhoun Lemon professor of history at Clemson University. The book, published by Indiana University Press, is titled *"Railroaders Without Borders: A History of the Railroad Development Corporation"* and describes the struggles and successes of RDC.

During an afternoon spent with Posner at his Greentree office, the tall, slender bow-tie-clad rail owner and enthusiast spoke to The Chronicle about history, decades of travel and acquisitions made along the way.

Posner's early involvements with trains began as a model railroader. After acquiring the April 1969 issue of Trains magazine from Bill & Walt's Hobby Shop on Smithfield Street, the then 13-year-old Posner became fascinated with prototype railroads. As Posner aged, interest became profession. Following his undergraduate studies at Princeton, Posner worked as a management trainee at Consolidated Railroad Corporation (Conrail), then assistant trainmaster in Trenton, Mich., and later trainmaster in New York City. Despite a leave of absence to earn his MBA from the Wharton School, Posner stayed at Conrail until returning to Pittsburgh to form RDC in 1987.

Posner said that RDC's philosophy of long-term investments reflects the realities of railroad economics. "It is a network business; it's subject to the lowest common denominator. You have to be very patient. You have to try three or four different approaches before you get it right."

The company's philosophy also recognizes family held beliefs.

"My father said it's better to be lucky than good," said Posner. "He was very lucky, and I'd like to think I inherited that from him."

Posner's Greentree office pays homage to his father (Henry Posner Jr.), grandfather (Henry Posner Sr.) and other ancestors.

Adjacent to photographs hanging in the hallway are portraits of Posner's great-grandfather (Roman Posner) and great-great-grandmother (Dorothea Felsenhardt).

Posner owes much to family, especially his love of trains.

In the summer of 1972, Posner traveled to Europe with Shady Side Academy. Although his class returned home after three weeks, Posner stayed. He met up with his grandmother, Bertha MacMurdo, and the pair traveled by rail for another two weeks.

"It was very liberating," said Posner. "We weren't relying upon a car. On a train you can learn all sorts of things about communities and people you meet along the way."

Since then, Posner has relied upon trains to learn much about communities and people.

"As a Jewish person you can walk into a synagogue; in my case, I can walk into a railway station and can relate to people without speaking the language."

Through this bond, Posner has acquired a collection of artifacts and tales.

Across from his desk is a Ukrainian mace and a Chinese railway car inspector's hammer — both symbols of authority, he said. Nearby is a ceremonial sword from Georgia (the country); a miniature steam locomotive from Uzbekistan; an award he received in Guatemala; and a key to the city of Rock Island, Ill.

Regarding the latter, Posner related, "The TSA was going to take it away until I convinced them that it wasn't a weapon."

Behind his couch is a portfolio of posters recovered from a bomb shelter. The illustrated images and Russian writing depict various survival tactics in the event of global war. One poster depicts how to identify a warhead, another how to dress, another how to build a bomb shelter, another what to do after hearing an alarm, another how to dig one's self out of the rubble and another, which Posner called his favorite, how to vomit after being exposed to radiation in the rubble of a shattered city.

"I'll make sure they end up in a museum or appropriate setting," he said.

Strewn about the floor, on shelves, on tables and tacked to the wall are other items. There are model trains, maps, trade publications (Posner subscribes to 30 rail-related magazines), a European rail timetable, framed photographs that a Jewish admiral in the Russian navy gave to Posner's father and a signal relay that Posner's grandfather overhauled.

Yet, for all the pictures, posters, magazines, books, gifts and souvenirs that Posner has acquired, hanging above them all is a single sign reading "Anne."

During an inspection trip in southeast Estonia, years ago, Posner passed a station marked "Anne." He turned to the chief engineer and said that if the sign ever came down that he would like it. As it turned out, the sign was being removed in the coming days. After Posner received the sign, he carried it back from Estonia by hand. Anne is the name of Posner's wife.

These days, Posner still travels regularly. Every six weeks he flies to Europe, and reflecting his tidy appearance, the initial itinerary is equally ordered. Posner takes daytime flights in coach class on the right side of the plane in a window seat. The seat selection is because "that's the side I sleep on," and the fare class, because "it's cheap," he said.

"I don't travel business class, and if I had to, I would give it to the person I was traveling with. Usually the other person appreciates it more than I do," he added.

Once Posner arrives, he is virtually willing to go anywhere.

"I tend to go where normal people don't go," Posner explained. "I don't have a lot of concern about safety or security, either as an American or Jewish person. I will err on the side of going despite the occasional security concern in order to decide for

myself what the real risk is. In most cases, it's either exaggerated or highly exaggerated."

When asked about anti-Semitism, Posner markedly replied, "In all the traveling I've done, I have never experienced any anti-Semitism in any form period, even in Pakistan."

Posner's work has taken him by train, trolley or bus to remote areas — a fact reflected by his weathered passport. Issued in 2010, the barely bound booklet already has two supplements. And like its bearer, the passport has its own stories.

Once, while riding a freight train from Paraguay to Argentina, Posner was stopped by border control. Unsure of what to make of a passenger traveling by freight, the inspectors asked for Posner's passport. After flipping through the heavily stamped book and discussing its contents, the clearly pleased gentlemen turned to Posner and said, "Muy bueno" (very good).

Because so much of RDC's work involves freight trains, Posner travels with appropriate gear. Apart from his passport, laptop, wallet, smartphone and camera, he always brings his own eye protection, work gloves and safety vest.

"Wearing somebody else's safety vest is like wearing somebody else's underwear."

Posner maintains that he can get by with these items and his navy blue blazer, green pants and bow tie for up to two weeks at a time.

"I wear different types of shirts just so people see that I did laundry," he said.

Apart from trains, Posner has few other interests. He is on the board of trustees of Winchester Thurston and a past president of the school. Posner and generations of his family have also been heavily involved in charitable works in the Jewish and the general communities, in Pittsburgh and abroad, but that's a story for another day.

However, Posner is also a photographer. Referencing images taken from his Sony Cybershot digital camera, Posner displayed photographs of trains, tracks and sunsets.

"The secret of good photography is to be standing there with a camera when something happens," he said.

It is a similar mindset to how he describes RDC's origins.

"How does a little company from Pittsburgh do things all over the world? We were culturally prepared when the opportunity fell into our laps. We spoke foreign languages and had passports."

In its 28 years, the company has remained steadfast in its beliefs.

Above the office's copy machine is a self-mocking motivational poster depicting an isolated car driving toward a tornado. Beneath the word "Perseverance," the caption reads, "The courage to ignore the obvious wisdom of turning back."

"We've got some of that, we're very persistent. We also try not to bite off more than we can chew," said Posner.

Perhaps prepared, perhaps perseverant, Posner is a testament to his trains, collection and heritage.

"My father said that the U.S. is a country founded by criminals and malcontents. You have to be cynical and dissatisfied to motivate yourself to go out and do things in a different way," he said. "You had to be cynical to leave Europe in the early part of the last century. I'm sure there's a lot of that in my DNA."

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