



# The Persico Papers

**By Paul Grondahl M.A. '84**  
Photography: Mark Schmidt

Joseph Persico's papers — a treasure trove of handwritten drafts of his manuscripts and correspondence with literary agents, editors and fellow historians — are now part of the University's special collections.

There was Joseph E. Persico, B.A.'52, acclaimed historian and distinguished alumnus, grinning broadly while being showered with accolades by fellow authors and academics as he presented his papers and a lifetime of research material to the University at Albany Libraries at a ceremony last spring. What the assembled guests and speakers did not know was that Persico was thinking back to a less stellar moment...

...his freshman year in 1948, when he was evicted from his dorm room for being unable to pay a bill at what was then the New York State College for Teachers, UAlbany's predecessor institution.

His father, who worked in a leather factory in Gloversville, died shortly before Persico entered college. His widowed mother raised Persico's younger brother and sister alone on her modest leather factory salary. Persico vowed to put himself through college, the first in his family to do so, by hustling any odd job he could find: supermarket stock boy, beer truck driver, metal shelving installer and weekend tile-setting demonstrator at the old Montgomery Ward store in Menands. Persico scrimped and saved to stay in school.

"I took the cheapest room I could get, which was in a converted Army barracks set up on a field next to Brubacher Hall," Persico recalled. "It was so drafty and cold that the milk I kept in my room froze during the winter."

The barracks room there cost just \$14 a month, less than Brubacher. Even that sum was a stretch for the determined young man, who chose UAlbany because his mom considered it "the poor man's Harvard." Still, Persico came up short with his funds one month and briefly was evicted. He later moved into Potter House, a State Street brownstone across from Washington Park maintained by the Potter Club, a men's social organization. "The prime test for acceptance was that you had to be a 'regular guy,'" Persico recalled. "I must have passed that hurdle."

**AT THE AGE OF 75, PERSICO CAN NOW** laugh at the eviction story and other college adventures. He's a best-selling author with 10 books to his credit, including *Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918; Roosevelt's Secret War* and *Nuremberg:*

## In His Own Words

### Joseph Persico at the New York State College for Teachers

New York State College for Teachers had not been my first choice. In 1948 I had been accepted by the University of Illinois, a Big Ten university for a small town boy! However, that year my father died and I thought I would have to lower my sights. I learned of a small teachers college in Albany only 50 miles from home, applied and was accepted.

Lower my sights? I could not have been more wrong. I was to find in that small college, fewer than 2,000 students at the time, teachers of the first rank — Harry Price in history, Robert Rienow in political science, Varley Lang in English — professors who could have graced the faculty of any major American university. As I think back on the modest backgrounds of my fellow students, the teachers college I attended strikes me as something of a poor man's Harvard.

I had little idea of what I wanted college to lead to. A practice teaching stint in a Troy junior high school convinced me that the students, myself and education generally would suffer if I pursued that career. However, my major and minor, history and English respectively, could not have pre-

*Infamy on Trial* — which was adapted into a TNT television miniseries starring Alec Baldwin. Persico also collaborated with former Secretary of State Colin Powell in writing Powell's best-selling autobiography, *My American Journey*. Persico is frequently enlisted as an expert commentator for History Channel and A&E documentaries. He and his wife, Sylvia Lavista Persico, B.A.'69, divide their time between a home in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and an apartment in the Albany suburb of Guilderland. In addition to his wife, Persico's brother and sister are UAlbany alumni.



Joseph Persico and his wife, Sylvia Lavista Persico, B.A.'69

pared me better for my future, had I actually known what I was doing, since I ultimately

became a writer of history and biography. I was the first of my family to attend the college, followed by my brother, Richard, sister Annabelle and my wife Sylvia. I've often said that this public institution spared the Persicos from Ivy League destitution. I look upon what my old school has grown into — a campus with more faculty today than we had students in my day, theaters, art galleries, libraries, tennis courts, and parking lots covering acres — with mixed emotions. I feel at times that I was born too soon.

Today, my papers are housed at UAlbany, where only yesterday it seems that I was an unsure youth wandering through Draper, Husted and Page halls and Hawley Library. The school has changed and so have I. But I still retain a warm spot for that handful of brick buildings wedged between Western and Washington avenues that I attended over a half century ago.

THE EVICTION FOR FAILURE TO PAY HIS DORM ROOM BILL 58 years earlier was never mentioned at the ceremony, although Persico's generosity was praised. Library Director Frank D'Andraia noted that Persico could have sold his papers on the open market for a substantial sum or might have given them to the National Archives, where he researched many of his books, or to Columbia University, where he did graduate work. D'Andraia thanked Persico for donating his papers instead to his *alma mater*, and said the gift "enhances the reputation of the University at Albany Libraries," which is ranked among the top 100 libraries in North America.

"This is a great distinction for this university and a great resource for researchers," President Kermit L. Hall said. "Joe Persico has chronicled the peaks and valleys of the



Joe Persico as a junior at UAlbany, circa 1950

## Nelson Rockefeller's Speechwriter

In 1966, Joe Persico was toiling away writing speeches for Hollis Ingraham, commissioner of the New York State Department of Health, when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller proposed a sweeping Pure Waters Bond Act. Rockefeller's staff asked Persico for a few lines to insert into the governor's remarks. Instead, Persico submitted an entire speech.

"I heard opportunity knocking," Persico said. "I wrote one of the best speeches I'd ever written."

The unsolicited audition landed Persico a promotion to chief speechwriter for Rockefeller. By then, plans were already underway for the striking new Edward Durell Stone design that Rockefeller approved for the University at Albany, so Persico was not directly involved in the transformation of his *alma mater*. Persico had input on the governor's policies, though, as an Aug. 1, 1967 memo from Persico to Rockefeller (among his papers given to UAlbany) showed.

In the memo, Persico made suggestions to the governor for a full employment plan.

Rockefeller's handwritten reply: "Joe. Very interesting. Thanks.

Take up at staff meeting

Friday." That policy idea of Persico's didn't pan out, but for the next 11 years Persico composed the words that Rockefeller uttered in public, including those he spoke during the three years he spent in Washington, D.C. as vice president under President Gerald Ford.

"The writer's life is an emotional and economic roller coaster. It's not for the faint of heart, but it turned out beyond my wildest expectations," said Persico, who later incorporated his knowledge as Rockefeller's speechwriter into *The Imperial Rockefeller*, a biography of his former boss.

— Paul Grondahl

### Research Cards — Piecing Together a Book

RESEARCHERS will be drawn to the tens of thousands of 3x5-inch index cards that form the spine of his writing technique. Persico jots notes, thoughts, plot lines and character sketches on the cards while he's poring over material in research libraries and archives. He amasses 2,000 to 3,000 research cards for each book. "The hardest part is sitting with all those cards and trying to figure out what order they go in," Persico said. "I'll spend weeks and months of concentrated effort organizing them, stitching the cards into a story before I begin to write. And then it's a matter of re-writing. I've never gotten a book right in less than 10 drafts."

American experience." Hall also announced that an annual scholarship for undergraduate students and a fellowship fund for graduate students of American history will be established in Persico's name in recognition of his generosity.

Persico's papers are a treasure trove totaling 40 cubic feet of handwritten drafts of his manuscripts; correspondence with literary agents, editors and fellow historians; interviews with prosecutors, defense lawyers, victims and relatives for Nuremberg and with World War II American secret agents for *Piercing the Reich*; and notes and correspondence as a member of the American Battle Monuments Commission, for which Persico was asked to compose inscriptions for the World War II memorial in Washington, D.C.

Paul Grondahl, M.A.'84, is an award-winning author, journalist and teacher.

His latest book is *Now Is the Time: A History of Parsons Child and Family Center, 1829–2004*.