Chemical Engineer Found Surprise Role in Manhattan Project; Meyer Steinberg, who has died at age 96, was among dwindling band of surviving scientists from a secret mission to build atomic bombs

Hagerty, James R . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]23 June 2021.

FULL TEXT

Meyer Steinberg was a 17-year-old chemical engineering student at New York's Cooper Union in December 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The draft board allowed him to stay in school.

After packing a four-year degree into three years, he was sent to New Jersey, where as a member of the Army reserves he inspected mysterious nickel-plated pipes destined for Oak Ridge, Tenn. He was transferred to an Allis-Chalmers plant near Milwaukee to inspect what he called blowers. A colleague recommended a book about uranium. Gradually, Mr. Steinberg worked it out: He was part of what became known as the Manhattan Project, the secret plan to build atomic bombs.

He later worked in Oak Ridge, in a plant so large that workers rode bicycles indoors from one station to another, and in Los Alamos, N.M., where he helped produce plutonium. After his Army service, he worked for a Guggenheim Brothers venture to make hydrazine rocket fuel in Mineola, N.Y. In 1957, he joined the Brookhaven National Laboratory and did research in areas including greenhouse gases, nuclear-waste management and conversion of municipal solid waste into fuel.

Mr. Steinberg was one of the dwindling number of survivors among more than 100,000 people who worked on the Manhattan Project. He died June 12 in Huntington, N.Y., a month before his 97th birthday.

In a 2015 interview with the Long Islander News, he spoke of the urgency that he and his colleagues felt during the project. "We knew that fission was actually discovered in Europe, so we were in a race with Nazi Germany," he said. "We were very much concerned that, if Hitler got it first, it would have been devastating."

At a plant in Belleville, N.J., he recalled inspecting 60 miles of nickel-plated pipe and rejecting a third of it "because I was able to tear away the nickel." The owners of the plant "hated my guts," he wrote later, "but I had a duty to perform." Later, he learned that the pipe was destined for a vast Oak Ridge plant to make enriched uranium for use in bombs.

Mr. Steinberg, the older of two sons, was born July 10, 1924, in Philadelphia and grew up in New York. His parents were immigrants from Poland. His mother owned a small clothing and textiles store in the Astoria section of Queens. His father made straw Easter hats and helped out in the store.

The family lived in a two-room apartment behind the store and spoke Yiddish at home. Young Meyer learned English at a public grade school. As a teenager, he swept the floors in a jewelry shop and once saw President Franklin Roosevelt ride through New York in a motorcade. A neighbor who was a chemical engineer inspired his interest in that field.

He passed a two-day exam that allowed him to study engineering tuition-free at Cooper Union. "To this day I do not know how I passed," he wrote.

After the war, he took night classes at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn and completed a master's degree in

chemical engineering in 1949.
He met Ruth Elias, a teacher, and they married in 1950.
Working for a venture backed by Harry F. Guggenheim in the 1950s, Mr. Steinberg experimented with hydrazine rocket-fuel production techniques. Mr. Guggenheim arrived occasionally in a limousine to inspect the laboratory, Mr. Steinberg recalled.
"I worked very hard, long hours and on weekends," he wrote in an unpublished memoir. His wife complained that he was neglecting the family. "I thought I was on the ground floor of a great expanding enterprise," Mr. Steinberg recalled. In the mid-1950s, the laboratory was closed down.
Mr. Steinberg moved on to a four-decade career at the Brookhaven laboratory on Long Island. While there, he helped develop concrete-polymer materials for highway construction. Among many other things, he did research on coal gasification. He co-wrote a book about the effects of greenhouse-gas emissions and how to mitigate them.
His first wife, Ruth, died in 2009. He married Phyllis Simon in 2012. She survives him, along with two sons from his first marriage, four grandchildren and two great-grandsons.
In the Long Islander News interview, when he was 91 years old, Mr. Steinberg spoke about his exposure to plutonium during the Manhattan Project. "It's like calcium in that it gets in the bones and stays in there," he said. "There are two theories of radiation," Mr. Steinberg added. "One states that any type of radiation is no good for you. Then there's another that states…a small amount could actually be beneficial to you. Well, I'm 91 now, and I'm a believer."
Write to James R. Hagerty at bob.hagerty@wsj.com
Chemical Engineer Found Surprise Role in Manhattan Project
Credit: By James R. Hagerty

DETAILS

Subject:	Laboratories; Families &family life; Highway construction; Nuclear weapons; Radiation; Chemical engineering
Location:	New York
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Jun 23, 2021
column:	Obituaries
Section:	World
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
e-ISSN:	25749579

Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2544191462
Document URL:	http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/chemical-engineer-found-surprise-role-manhattan/docview/2544191462/se-2?accountid=35635
Copyright:	Copyright 2021 Dow Jones &Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Last updated:	2021-06-26
Database:	U.S. Newsstream

LINKS

Linking Service