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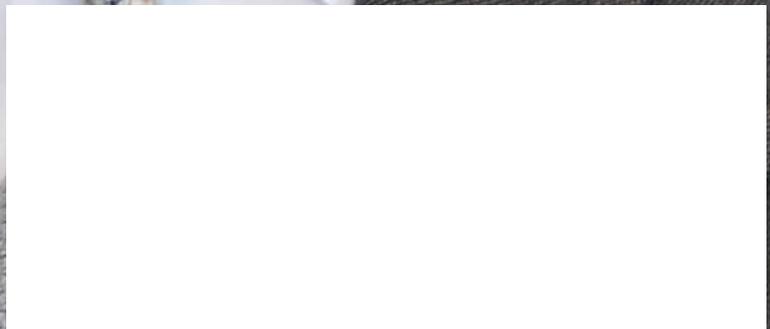
# Funeral Director

March 2014

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ICCFA  
Convention Preview

50  
Years of Service  
**Charles S. Salomon**



# Cover Story

By Alexandra Kathryn Mosca

## *making the* right choices

On an October evening in Manhattan, at the end of a day blessed with pleasant warmth, an intimate crowd of invited guests entered the New York Athletic Club on Central Park South. The group, which included established members of the city's funeral profession, as well as prominent Jewish clergy, had assembled for a special gathering to honor Charles S. Salomon, a man whose role as a funeral director at Riverside Funeral Chapel has become legendary. Many have called him New York City's pre-eminent Jewish funeral director.



Such a warm and collegial event drew plenty of accolades for a man who has earned the respect of those in his profession.

"To me, Charlie has always epitomized professionalism, dignity and caring," said Frank Rinaudo, managing director of Service Corporation International, who has worked with Salomon for 32 years.

Salomon has continued the long tradition established by the Rosenthal and Grossberg families, which were instrumental in cementing Riverside's place in history. "Charlie Salomon has picked up the mantle from those two distinguished families and has been the face of Riverside Memorial Chapel," Rinaudo said.

Stephen M. Mack, senior vice

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**Right:** Charles S. Salomon recently celebrated his 50th anniversary with Riverside Memorial Chapel. (Photo credit: Kevin Green) **Left:** Charles S. Salomon stands in a chapel at Riverside Funeral Chapel in Manhattan. (Photo credit: Alexandra Kathryn Mosca)





For half a century, Salomon has been burying the elite in New York City, including former N.Y.C. mayor Edward I. Koch, who died Feb. 1, 2013. (Photo © N.Y.C. Mayor's Office)

president of operations for SCI (Riverside's parent company), characterized Salomon as being a "beautiful blend" of art and science.

The Rev. Dr. Ronald B. Sobel, senior rabbi emeritus of Temple Emanu-El, who has officiated at a thousand of Salomon's funeral services, said "never once did I see Charles do anything other than what he does – what all of you do – with excellence, truly reflecting the divine that is within him."

When it was Salomon's turn to take the podium, his wife Joan looked on with pride. A man with an aristocratic bearing, Salomon looked out at the group and told them that they represented the most important people in his professional life.

"All of us who are here who share the commonality of purpose that I do, have heard so often that life is a journey," said Salomon in a soft voice. "Life certainly is a journey, and for me it has been a miraculous journey."

It was two months prior to this gathering, Aug. 10 to be precise, that "Charlie" as his friends affectionately call him, reached a career milestone in his professional journey as he completed his 50th year with Riverside Memorial Chapel. Adding

to the significance of the day was a call of congratulations from Robert L. Waltrip, founder and chairman of the board of SCI.

It has been a tenure that has kept pace with a multitude of changes in the world's greatest metropolis. At age 73, Salomon, Riverside's president since 1989, has arranged and directed many of the city's largest and most memorable funerals, giving him a unique vantage point into some rarified aspects of city life.

surrounding region. Among the famous he has conducted funerals for: conductor Leonard Bernstein, New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg, composer Marvin Hamlisch, actors Lee Strasberg and Jerry Orbach, impresario Sol Hurok, mayors Abraham Beame and Edward I. Koch, broadcast greats David Sarnoff and William Paley, New York Sen. Jacob Javits, and restaurateur H. Peter Kriendler, the owner of Manhattan's world-famous 21 restaurant.

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– Charles Salomon

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When the great and the famous die in New York, many of their families turn to Salomon as the man to make sure the funeral is done right, impeccably and with precision. For half a century, Salomon has been burying the elite from the city and the

If Salomon is nervous conducting such high profile funeral services, he doesn't show it. "The worst thing you can do is to transmit anxiety," Salomon said.

Salomon's sense of calm comportment has served him well.



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Stephen M. Mack related an anecdote at Salomon's anniversary fete, which illustrates the soothing effect Salomon has on people. In 1992, Mack and Salomon arrived to meet with the relatives of Steven J. Ross, the former president of Warner Communications, to plan his funeral. When the two men entered the room, Carol Rosenthal, Warner's ex-wife,

stood up and exclaimed, "Everything is going to be okay, Charlie Salomon is here," Mack remembered.

"So consider now for a moment the number of families that feel the same way, that feel the same comfort from the fact that Charlie Salomon is going to take care of the funeral. It's thousands," Mack said.

It is not just the high-profile

funerals that Salomon impacts with his caring and serene demeanor but also those of lesser-known New Yorkers.

James P. Torrellas, Riverside's general manager – who like many others considers Salomon a mentor and friend – said that, "every family who walks through Riverside's doors and is served by Salomon gets 100 percent of his passion."

Torrellas went on to say that Salomon, regardless of his position as president of Riverside, "pitches in on every aspect of the work that needs to be done." Those tasks include, he said, "working the floor, operating the elevator and asking people to sign the register book."

"He has joined the Riverside hall of fame, so to speak, along with the Rosenthal and Grossberg families," Torrellas said. "To honor him, Riverside has renamed the Colonial Chapel the Charles S. Salomon Chapel."

### Beginnings

For Salomon, it all began in 1963. It was after attending Brooklyn College with plans of going to law school, that Salomon found his life taking an unexpected turn. At a social gathering, Salomon had a serendipitous meeting with family friends Morton and Rosalind Rosenthal, owners of Riverside Memorial Chapel. The Rosentals asked Salomon's parents if their son would be interested in coming to work for them. Riverside, which began in 1897 on Manhattan's Lower East Side as a stable supplying horse drawn carriages and coaches for funerals, had become one of the city's busiest funeral establishments, handling approximately 3,000 funerals a year.

Salomon agreed to try it for six months. At Riverside he learned there was no shortage of work and quickly mastered any task that fell to him. After his shift ended, Salomon stayed late spending time in the preparation room watching and learning from Gus Kolb, Riverside's embalmer, who also taught embalming at American

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Academy. To further prepare for the practical and written exams he would need to take upon the conclusion of his two-year apprenticeship, Salomon pored over the *Champion Textbook on Embalming* written by A.O. Spriggs. He recalled acing both exams.

Committed to a career as a funeral director, Salomon was intent upon bringing comfort to families in much the same way as he remembered a funeral director had done for his own family when a beloved grandparent died.

Early on in his career, Salomon mastered the art of thinking on his feet, especially when the unexpected happened. There was the time, when as a young funeral director, Salomon suddenly realized that a burial vault would not fit into a particular grave. He quickly called to have another vault delivered and while he waited took the family to lunch – assuring them that the situation would be remedied in no time at all. Crisis averted. Such quick thinking would serve him well in years to come.

### Temple Emanu-El

In addition to his duties at Riverside, Salomon is also the official funeral director for Temple Emanu-El. Also known as Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York, it is considered the world's most prominent Reformed synagogue. A third-generation congregant, Salomon assumed that position in June 1970 after the death of his predecessor, Samuel Berliner. It is an elected – and pro bono – position that requires an annual re-election by the temple's board of trustees. Salomon explained that the temple has such a position to ensure that funerals conform to and follow a certain protocol. Salomon also serves as the chairman of the temple's ushers committee.

Mark Heutlinger, the temple's administrator, has known Salomon for 25 years and has worked with him on numerous funerals. "Mr. Salomon is the epitome of dignity, grace, style, elegance and decorum," Heutlinger said. "He simply knows what is right

and how to do it. I consider him my mentor and beloved friend – as he has been for many who have had the privilege of serving those involved in the most final of life circle events."

Together, Heutlinger and Salomon have coordinated some of the biggest funerals seen in New York City, all the while upholding the standards of a special house of worship. In such large

events, Salomon likens his role to that of a theatrical director who assigns roles to various participants. He credits others – like Heutlinger – with getting the job done right in a team effort.

"Whatever I have done or do now is never done alone. It takes more than one person to do the work that we do," Salomon said emphatically.

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Given that Salomon equates his role with that of a theatrical director, it seems fitting that some of his major funerals have involved those prominent in the fields of entertainment and the arts.

One of those was the August 2012 funeral for composer Marvin Hamlisch at Temple Emanu-El, which drew a standing room only crowd.

Among the notables who packed the pews were entertainment icons Liza Minelli, Candice Bergen, Regis Philbin, Kathie Lee Gifford, Alan Alda, Bernadette Peters, Mike Nichols, Diane Sawyer, Lucie Arnaz and Susan Lucci. Former president Bill Clinton eulogized Hamlisch and a 600-person choir, seated in the temple's side sections, sang his popular tune "The

Way We Were." Throughout the service, the temple's organist played a selection of Hamlisch's greatest hits.

Six months later, on a frigid February morning, Salomon stood on Fifth Avenue, which had been closed to traffic, as the casket of former Mayor Edward I. Koch was carried into Temple Emanu-El. Koch's casket was borne on the shoulders of an honor guard comprised of New York City's Police Ceremonial Unit special detail as the crowd watched, for one of New York City's most important political funerals in years. In attendance was a who's who of New York politics and civic leaders, which included former governors Mario Cuomo, George Pataki and Eliot Spitzer, as well as former President Bill Clinton. A large crowd of New Yorkers lined Fifth Avenue to watch the scene, while a crush of media covered the event. Months later, Salomon inspected the gravesite at Trinity Cemetery to assure Koch's sister Pat that the grave was properly landscaped and manicured.

For a man who has rubbed elbows with the city's movers and shakers, Salomon has remained remarkably humble, almost self-effacing. But perhaps that may be the secret to his success. He has mastered what should be an essential skill for all successful funeral directors: He never overshadows the people he serves.

### **Life Lessons – A Professional Journey**

Reflecting on what he believes makes a good funeral director, Salomon said that the most important tool is being a good listener.

He also feels that it is important for funeral directors to reassess their role from time to time in order to gain perspective. That was something Salomon did upon the death of his parents.

"That's when you come to realize and appreciate what funeral service is all about. With both my parents, that loss each time rejuvenated me and gave me pause to look at what I do and how it appears to families; what



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impression I'm leaving them with after the funeral," Salomon said.

Honed from his years of experience, Salomon has advice for those starting a career in funeral service. He feels it is important to have a mentor or someone who can give proper guidance. "You start as a blank slate. We are the result of whatever influences that were present and that we were smart enough to emulate," he explained. It is important, said Salomon, to handle yourself properly during your residency for "What you do will follow you forever. You get a reputation if you exhibit apathy," he cautioned.

He stresses that this is not, "an entrepreneurial vocation" nor a profession one undertakes for the money.

Salomon's office is emblematic of his low-key style and manner. He keeps only a few mementoes from the funerals he has directed: framed photos from the services for Mayor Koch, Leonard Bernstein and Marvin Hamlisch. There is also a picture of Salomon with fellow congregant and former mayor Michael Bloomberg. In addition, several photographs of Joan, his wife of 40 years, are also displayed. Of his spouse, Salomon says, "She gets it," referring to the time commitment his job demands. Rounding out his photo gallery are pictures of the couple's pets.

At times, the work is all encompassing. In his spare time, Salomon likes to fix grandfather clocks. Such a hobby is a metaphor for the kind of attention to detail that he brings to his job.

For a man who has conducted funeral services at such historic venues as Carnegie Hall and the Shubert Theater, he also is ready to give of himself in a more personal way. When his longtime friend and colleague Joel Morris died in Massachusetts, Salomon made the trip to transfer Morris's body to Riverside's chapel in Mount Vernon, N.Y.

Although he has devoted five decades to his profession, Salomon has no plans to retire. "It has been a

wonderful 50 years," he said in a recent interview.

His magnanimous nature was evident when he acknowledged, at the anniversary celebration, the influence he has felt in his career from his various colleagues. "What you see here is the result of all those years of honing what I found to be great in others, and then I made it mine."

"Life is choices and one makes choices," Salomon told his colleagues. "I know I have made the right choices," he said of his lengthy career.

At the recent funeral of 1010 WINS reporter Stan Brooks, which Salomon directed, it was said of Brooks that he "couldn't imagine doing anything else with his life." The same could certainly be said of Charles S. Salomon. •

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