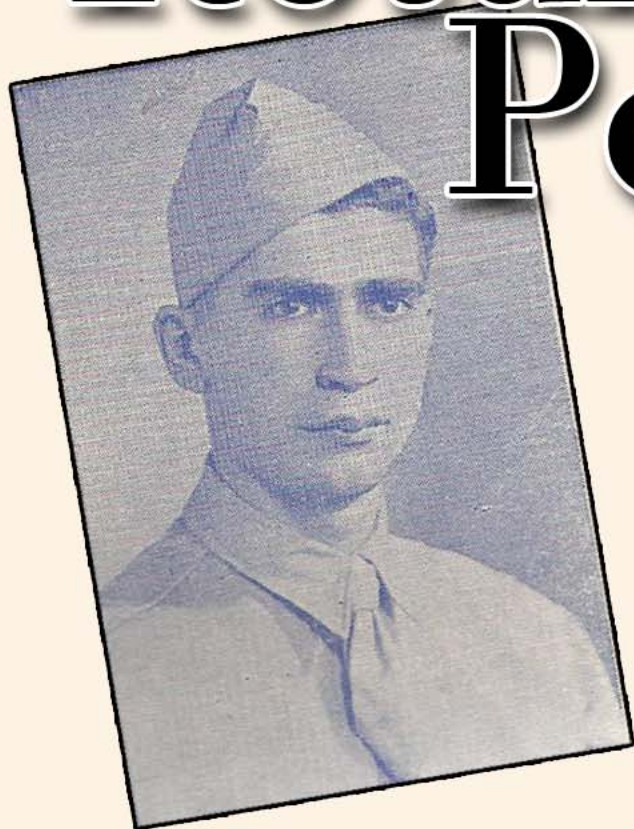




Newark's Rotunda Pool: *An Italian-American Legacy*



**"When WWII broke out,
the Italians fought for America."**

This was how John Rotunda, our father and grandfather, respectively, always began the story of our family's connection to the Rotunda Pool in Newark, New Jersey. All families have their tales of relatives, living and dead, that are passed through the generations as a way of creating a shared identity. In our family, the story of the Rotunda Pool in Newark served not only as our connection to history, but as an important reminder to take pride in both our Italian and American heritages.

Joseph Ralph Rotunda was the first soldier from Newark's Italian-American community to die in World War II. He subsequently had a city pool named for him

by Michele Rotunda & Scott Rotunda Delaney

www.GardenStateLegacy.com Issue 29 September 2015



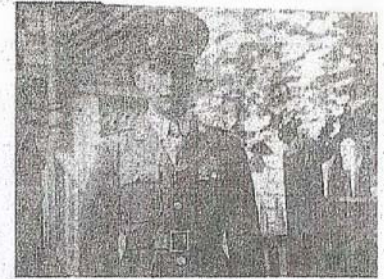
FOUR BROTHERS from Newark, New Jersey all were in the Armed Forces during World War II. Their niece, Rosalyn Zeid of Lakewood, N.J. remembered her uncles by submitting these precious pieces of the past. Above is Gayton Rotunda, the oldest son of Giuseppe and Maria Rotunda. He was in the Army and Marine Corps. He dedicated his civilian life in assisting veterans in the Disabled Veterans of America as National Deputy, as well as positions in the American Legion.



CONSTANTINE ROTUNDA, known as Gus, did his tour of duty stationed in Washington, D.C. during World War II.



ARMY AIR CORPS member John Rotunda was a First Sergeant in the Army. He saw action in the European Theater of Operation during World War II.



YOUNGEST SON Joseph Ralph Rotunda Jr. made the ultimate sacrifice during World War II. He was killed in action in Africa on May 8, 1943. He served with the 76th and 34th Infantry Division. The Rotunda Pool on the corner of Clifton and 7th Avenues in North Newark was named in his honor. He was the first American of Italian heritage from Newark to give his life for his country.

Italian-Americans were eager to prove their loyalty to the U.S. during the Second World War. Newark's *Italian Tribune* regularly printed pictures and stories about the young men serving in the armed forces from Newark's Italian community. This undated clipping features all four of the Rotunda brothers, including Joseph Ralph Rotunda, who was the first of that community to be killed in action.

as a testament to the Italians who proved their loyalty by fighting and dying in the war. The story of the Rotunda Pool, as it was told to us, spoke of a sense of a historical precariousness of American identity that did not resonate with the third and fourth generations that we embody. When we began our research, numerous relatives sent us clippings and shared what they knew about the pool and about Joseph Rotunda, and his three brothers, who also served in the Second World War. Clearly the story resonated strongly within the family, but what did it mean to the broader Italian-American community at the time?

The Rotunda Pool stands in the same location at 75 Clifton Avenue, where the Essex County Brewery once stood. When the pool was first named in 1943, it was known only as the "Clifton Pool," and this title still stands on the building right below the slightly more diminutive "Rotunda Pool." Additional signs also note its designation as the "Rotunda Recreation Center." There have been calls in past years to rename the pool after someone more reflective of the current population, but objections from Newark's Italian-American community prevented a name change. Likely few who pass by or even frequent the pool know its history. A recent visit revealed that the 1966 plaque "in memory of Joseph Ralph Rotunda, Jr. who made the supreme sacrifice for his country, World War II, North Africa, May 8, 1943," still stands. Our revelation to the gentleman at the door, that the center was named after our relative, elicited little reaction (although he thoughtfully moved to the side so we could take a few pictures). Today the neighborhood is ethnically diverse with vibrant Latino and African-American communities. However, there are still signs of its past life as an Italian enclave. St. Lucy's Church, built in 1892 on Seventh Avenue, continues to offer a mass in Italian (as well as English, Spanish, and Latin) and to serve some segments of the diaspora of Newark's Italian-American families. Calandra's Bakery continues to operate just a few blocks away. And directly across from the pool is the imposing presence of Sacred Heart Cathedral built in part by Italian

immigrants in the early twentieth-century to serve a growing Catholic population.

Looking back on seventy years of Newark's history in October 1943, the *Italian Tribune* spoke of the accomplishments of the city's Italian population whose "stories are filled with drama pathos, and courage, for against great odds they have won not only

a hard battle for existence but have reared their children to become leaders in their new home, a credit to themselves and a valuable asset to their country."¹ Italians started migrating to the United States in large numbers at the tail end of the nineteenth-century with economic circumstances serving as their primary motivation. Italian unification had not brought economic improvement nor had it created a unified citizenry. Southern Italians, in particular, facing poor agricultural conditions and discrimination from their northern countrymen, arrived in large numbers on the shores of the United States. Yet this did not make them Americans. Many of the immigrants initially viewed the move as temporary, an opportunity to provide for their families, to save up some money to purchase land upon their eventual return to Italy. While over four-million Italians in the years 1880-1920 remained in the United States, estimates suggest that over a million Italians did return home.² However, by the early twentieth-century, Italian immigrants increasingly found themselves making the decision to remain in the United States, seeking opportunities not only for themselves but for their children. Despite largely agricultural backgrounds, most settled in



The bronze plaque commemorating the naming of the Clifton Pool for Rotunda.

urban environments where they could more easily find employment and a sense of familiarity as "Little Italys" formed in a number of American cities.

By the early twentieth-century, 21,000 Italian immigrants made Newark the country's fifth largest enclave with a vibrant Italian-American community spread throughout the city, and the First Ward best known as the Italian quarter. A wide variety of businesses, from grocery stores to barbershops to saloons, both owned by and catering to Italian-Americans, opened, and over eighty fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies were formed.³

At the time of his son's death in May 1943, Joseph Ralph Rotunda, Sr., a skilled cooper, resided at 34 Mt. Prospect Avenue in Newark's First Ward, just one block southeast of the pool that would bear the name of his youngest son. He and his wife Maria (nee Stefanelli), who had died the previous July, had four sons and six daughters. Their first child Gaetano (known as Gayton) was born in Italy and the rest in the United States. The family had fared well in America and was well known in the First Ward. One of

WESTERN
UNION

WUAH132 15

NK NEWARK NJ MAY 28 720P

PVT JOHN J ROTUNDA SQD C 25 TRNG GRP

US ARMY AIR FORCE JEFFERSONBARRACKS MO

GET PERMISSION TO COME HOME AT ONCE RECEIVED WORD THAT

RALPH KILLED IN ACTION NORTHAFRICA

GAYTON

655P

The telegram John Rotunda
received telling him of his
brother's death.

Maria's relatives, Louis Stefanelli, was a founder of Columbus Hospital which served the health needs of the Italian-American community. Gayton was a graduate of the Mercer-Beasley School of Law, now Rutgers University, and served as President of the Revenue and Finance Chapter for Newark City Employees Local 176 and as a tax assessor for the city of Newark. Constantine (known as Gus) was a well-known fencer who later served as the fencing coach at Central High School. John Rotunda, Sr. (our direct family line) had been elected Justice of the Peace in 1935 and, prior to the war, was attending the Casey Jones School of Aeronautics then located on Raymond Boulevard in Newark.

Joseph and Maria's youngest son was known by his middle name "Ralph" probably to distinguish between father and son. Margaret, Rose, and Diane, three of their six daughters, were married, and the youngest Josephine also fenced competitively in city and state tournaments. The family were active members of the congregation at St. Lucy's Church, and the names of the various siblings filled the rosters of numerous First Ward clubs and societies.

The growing status of Newark's Italian-American community was well-documented in the *Italian Tribune* with headlines focused on the achievements of New Jersey's Italian immigrant community. The paper, which began publication in 1931 in both English and Italian editions, regularly ran stories on local politicians, physicians, and other distinguished professionals in a concerted effort to counteract prevailing stereotypes. Like many of

the "new immigrants," Italian-Americans found themselves facing the dual challenge of inadequate economic opportunity and widespread prejudice. Italians had a reputation for lawlessness, and assertions that the Italian government had a policy of sending its criminals to the United States were widely believed.⁴ Italian immigrants were often poorer and darker than white native-born

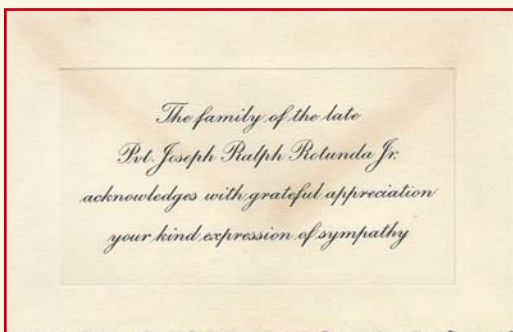
Americans at the time. Both qualities were closely tied to ideas of social and even biological inferiority in the United States and fed immigration policy such as the National Origins Act of 1924 which limited immigration by nationality. The editors of the *Tribune* decried prevailing "scientific" theories purporting to link intelligence to nationality or race noting "Italian-Americans were so rated for years, despite a wonderful heritage of educational refinements dating back thousands of years covering every field of endeavor. And they are still regarded as inferior in many minds in this country despite notable advances along every front."⁵ The connections between an Italian and American heritage were closely maintained with the vast history and culture of the former serving to buttress the achievements of the latter. For a short time in the 1930s, many Italian-Americans celebrated the initial successes of Benito Mussolini's Fascist government as Italy seemed to be assuming a place of prestige internationally that could, in theory, translate to greater respect for its sons and daughters across the Atlantic.⁶ Yet as the potential for military conflict with Italy loomed, Italian-American opinion tipped markedly in favor of the United States. Italian-American newspapers, which had been simultaneously promoting Americanization while praising Italian successes, abruptly switched gears by 1940. Just a few days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the *Italian Tribune* characterized Italy as "making war on us" and emphasized

the loyalty of Newark's Italian-Americans to their country "which they are ready to defend at the cost of every sacrifice."⁷

At the outset of World War II, Italian-Americans found themselves in a position in which their native land was at war with their adopted home. By and large, they sided with the United States with soldiers of Italian heritage making up a significant percentage of the armed forces. All four sons in the Rotunda family served in the military. Gayton served in the Army and Marine Corps and continued to work for veterans throughout his life; Constantine was stationed in Washington D.C., and John was a First Sergeant in the Army who fought in Europe. Joseph Jr., was a private in the early invasion forces in North Africa. His death would become notable as he was identified as the "first American soldier of Italian heritage, from the city of Newark, to be killed in action."⁸ This attribution is quite specific. By May 1943, not only had many Americans died in the



Memorial card (above) and acknowledgement card.



Very old death rpt 8293 file (8)

ORIGINAL

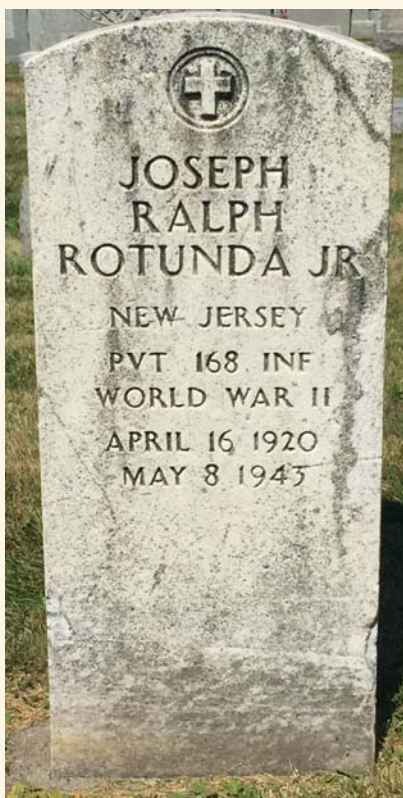
CHECK TYPE REQUIRED (See Instructions attached)		WW II APPLICATION FOR HEADSTONE OR MARKER (Please make out and return in duplicate)	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UPRIGHT MARBLE HEADSTONE	ENLISTMENT DATE <i>June 6, 1942</i>	SERIAL No. <i>32306797</i>	EMBLEM (Check one) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHRISTIAN <i>B</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> FLAT MARBLE MARKER	DISCHARGE DATE <i>Killed in Action</i>	PENSION No. —	<input type="checkbox"/> HEBREW
<input type="checkbox"/> FLAT GRANITE MARKER		STATE <i>N. J.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> NONE
<input type="checkbox"/> BRONZE MARKER (NOTE RESTRICTIONS)		RANK <i>Pvt</i>	COMPANY <i>Cannon</i>
NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial) <i>ROTUNDA, JOSEPH RALPH, JR.</i>		U. S. REGIMENT, STATE ORGANIZATION, AND DIVISION <i>168TH Infantry Regiment</i>	
DATE OF BIRTH (Month, Day, Year) <i>April 16, 1920</i>	DATE OF DEATH (Month, Day, Year) <i>May 8, 1943</i>	LOCATION (City and State) <i>East Orange, N. J.</i>	
NAME OF CEMETERY <i>Holy Sepulchre</i>		NEAREST FREIGHT STATION (City and State) <i>East Orange, N. J.</i>	
SHIP TO (I CERTIFY THE APPLICANT FOR THIS STONE HAS MADE ARRANGEMENTS WITH ME TO TRANSPORT THE STONE FROM THE FREIGHT STATION TO THE CEMETERY) <i>Gayton A. Rotunda</i> (SIGNATURE OF CONSIGNEE)		POST OFFICE ADDRESS OF CONSIGNEE <i>34 Mt. Prospect Ave., Newark, N.J.</i>	
DO NOT WRITE HERE		I certify this application is submitted for a stone for the unmarked grave of a veteran. I hereby agree to assume all responsibility for the removal of the stone promptly upon arrival at destination, and properly place it at the decedent's grave at my expense.	
FOR VERIFICATION <i>JUN 8 1948</i>	ORDERED <i>Lee, Mass. 20 JUL 1948</i>	APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE <i>Gayton A. Rotunda</i> <i>June 2, 1948</i> DATE OF APPLICATION	
B/L <i>3235923</i>	SHIPPED	ADDRESS (Street, City, State) <i>34 Mt. Prospect Ave., Newark 4, N. J.</i>	

OQMG FORM 623
REV 15 APR 47

IMPORTANT—Complete Reverse Side

16-11453-6 GPO

Headstone application and headstone.



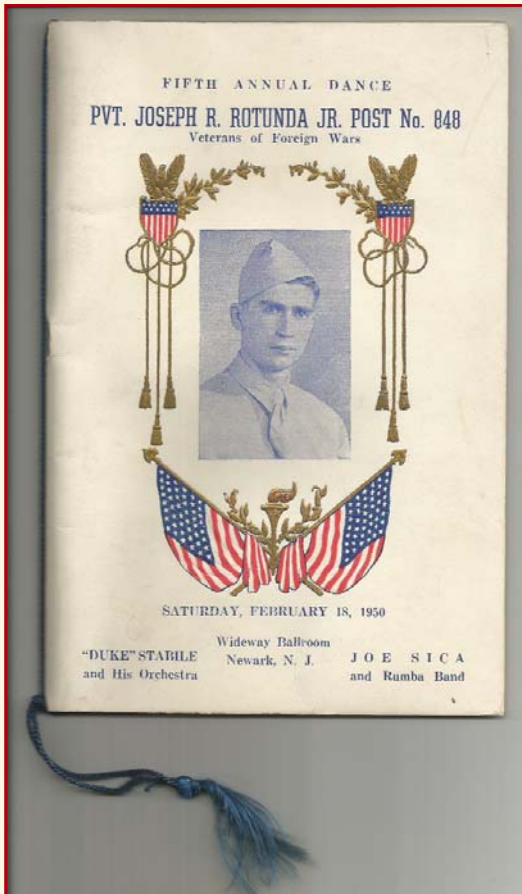
war, but Americans of Italian heritage and Americans from Newark were already among these. On June 16, 1943, the *Newark Evening News* reported on an announcement from the War Department which listed the death of Private Joseph R. Rotunda, Jr. as one of four soldiers from New Jersey to lose their lives in combat. In total 229 U.S. soldiers were reported killed in action in North Africa and 630 more wounded, 11 of whom were from New Jersey.⁹ But, for Newark's Italian-Americans, the sacrifice of a soldier who was truly of their community provided a kind of visceral evidence that they were unquestionably American.

Publicizing the participation of Newark's Italian-American community in the war effort served to belie lingering concerns about their loyalty. While Italian-Americans were not targeted to the same degree as Japanese-Americans during the war period, they were tracked by the government and some were interned. Groups most likely to be targeted were members of the Italian War Veterans who had been engaged in raising money for World War I widows and orphans in Italy, those associated with Italian language newspapers and radio broadcasts, and teachers of the Italian language. Initially, any U.S. resident born in Italy was labelled an "enemy alien." This designation was removed, appropriately enough on Columbus Day in 1942, in part because Italian-Americans comprised an influential voting bloc and were needed in the armed forces.¹⁰ Italian-American

young men were not unfamiliar with military service which had often been promoted by Italian-American cultural institutions as providing education, a good standard of living, and an opportunity to demonstrate one's patriotism.

The pages of the *Italian Tribune* regularly emphasized both the ideological commitment and tangible contribution of Newark's Italian-American community to the war effort. Most poignantly, this was expressed in stories of its young men on the front lines. The actions of the Fascist government had created an uneasy relationship between one's Italian heritage and American identity; yet the *Tribune* was able to turn this around by highlighting the unique contribution of Italian-American soldiers. On May 28, 1943, a front page story on 23-year-old Newark native Anthony Nisivoccia stationed in England noted he had been named "Best Soldier of the Year" by a chapter of that country's Red Cross. In the article, his mother conveyed his motivation: "To be able to land in Italy where he could use his ability to speak Italian and to convince the Italians he might meet that the United States is Italy's best friend and that we are in this war to bring back liberty and freedom to the Italian people."¹¹

While Nisivoccia viewed his Italian heritage as a potential strength, this association was fraught with questions of loyalty. Italian immigrants and first generation Americans continued to have close family ties to Italy. In his history on Italian-American interment, Lawrence DiStasi notes the delicate nature of these ties in recounting the testimony of Louis Berizzi in 1943 who had been interned during the war. Despite Berizzi's assertion that he supported the U.S. war effort, his statement that he "did not like the idea of having my mother bombed" was interpreted as revealing an allegiance to his native land. Berizzi desperately tried to clarify that he was loyal to the United States and was merely expressing concern for his mother who still lived in Italy.¹² While even a hint of sympathy for the Italian cause could be viewed as treasonous, Newark's *Italian Tribune* sought to strike a careful balance that separated the deplorable actions of the Italian government from a more congenial view of the Italian people themselves. In a regular feature, "Our Boys in the Service," the newspaper often printed stories that spoke of the connection between Newark's Italian-American soldiers and the Italian people. Sometimes literal family connections were highlighted with pieces reporting on soldiers abroad able to meet their Italian relatives for the first time. Italian-American soldiers were deployed around the globe and were especially likely to encounter Italian soldiers in the first years of the war in the campaign in North Africa. A story on Corporal Anthony San Giacomo, stationed in Bizerte, opens with his experience with Italian prisoners captured in North Africa who assured him that they had not wanted to fight the Americans. Writing home to Nutley



Private Joseph R. Rotunda, Jr.
VFW Post 848 program.



Though known as the Rotunda Pool since 1943, the plaque honoring Joseph Ralph Rotunda, Jr. happened in 1966.

in 1943, the corporal easily conveys a sense of the value of his Italian-American heritage admitting that even though he "butchered the Italian language," he was able to obtain key information while out on patrol. He suggests an almost familial relationship with the "half Italian and half French" inhabitants epitomized, of course, in food, in his ability "to get a meal for all of us and a drink of good wine."¹³

It was in North Africa that Joseph Ralph Rotunda, Jr. was killed by a land mine while serving with the Cannon Company, 168th Infantry, in Tunisia as part of the first invasion forces. He had only been overseas for three months. One of the first announcements of his death noted that in his last letter home, he told his family that he was having "lots of fun."¹⁴ Looking at the picture accompanying the news of his death in 1943, it's hard not to think first of his youth. He was just 22 when he enlisted in June of 1942, only a month and a half after the birth of the nephew who would pass this story down to us. Army records indicate he was killed in action on May 8, 1943,

WAR DEPARTMENT

The Adjutant General's Office
Records Administration Center
4300 Goodfellow Boulevard
St. Louis 20, Missouri

1 November 1948

In Reply Refer to:

AGRS-DA 201 Rotunda, Joseph R.
(15 Oct. 48) 32 306 797

Mr. Joseph R. Rotunda, Sr.
34 Mt. Prospect Avenue
Newark 4, New Jersey

Dear Mr. Rotunda:

Reference is made to a letter received in this office in your behalf concerning the awards due your son.

The records in this office indicate that Private Joseph R. Rotunda, Jr. 32 306 797, was entitled to the following:

Combat Infantryman Badge
European-African-Middle Eastern
Campaign Medal with one (1) Bronze
Service Star for battle participation
in the Tunisia Campaign
World War II Victory Medal
Sharpshooter Badge with Mortar Bar

I have requested the Commanding Officer, Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot, to forward the above awards to you.

In order to provide an appropriate identification for widows, parents and certain next of kin of members of the armed forces of the United States who lost their lives in World War II during the period 7 December 1941 to 25 July 1947, a Gold Star Lapel Button has been established by Act of Congress. Believing that you might be interested, a blank giving information and instructions as to method of securing this device is inclosed for your use.

May I again extend my deepest sympathy to you in the loss of your son.

Sincerely yours,

Charles D. Carle
Colonel, AGD
Commanding

1 Inclosure
NME Form No. 3

Official Plaque Unveiling Ceremonies

IN MEMORY OF



PVT. JOSEPH R. ROTUNDA JR.

Sunday, December 11th, 1966

PROGRAM

ROTUNDA BATHS and POOL — 2:00 P. M.

1. National Anthem Jo Ann Lear, New Jersey Songbird
..... accompanied by Buddy Martin and his orchestra
2. Invocation Col. David L. Coddington
..... Pastor, Clinton Ave. Presbyterian Church
3. Introduction Samuel Sachs, General Chairman
4. Address of Welcome Police Director Dominick A. Spina
..... Master of Ceremonies
5. Principal Address Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio
..... Honorary Chairman
6. Address Hon. Ralph A. Villani
..... President, Newark Municipal Council
7. Address Hon. Joseph V. Melillo, Councilman, North Ward
8. Musical Interlude "America The Beautiful,"
..... Jo Ann Lear, New Jersey Songbird
..... accompanied by Buddy Martin and his orchestra
9. Introduction of Guests Police Director Dominick A. Spina
10. Prayer for Peace Rabbi Horace L. Zemel
..... Chaplain, Newark Police Department
11. Address Rev. Clarence Bleakney, Chaplain Newark Fire Dept.
12. Presentation of the Rotunda Family Dir. Dominick A. Spina
13. Benediction Rev. Vito Dell'Orto, Pastor, St. Lucy's Church
14. "God Bless America" Jo Ann Lear, New Jersey Songbird
..... accompanied by Buddy Martin and his orchestra

MAYOR
HUGH J. ADDONIZIO
Honorary Chairman

DEPUTY MAYOR
PAUL H. REILLY
Co-ordinator

SAMUEL SACHS
General Chairman

HONORARY VICE CHAIRMEN

Hon. Ralph A. Villani
Hon. James T. Callaghan
Hon. Joseph V. Melillo
Hon. Ferdinand J. Biunno
Hon. Samuel B. Finklestein
Hon. Norman N. Schiff
Hon. Harry G. McDowell
Hon. Dominick A. Spina
Hon. Ralph C. Caprio
Hon. Edgar J. LaCapra
Hon. Frank Addonizio
Hon. Anthony Giuliano
Hon. Dominick Miceli
Hon. Irvine I. Turner
Hon. Wilbur Parker
Hon. Joseph D'Alessio
Hon. John P. Caufield
Hon. James F. King
Hon. Lee Bernstein
Hon. Harry S. Reichenstein
Hon. Philip E. Gordon
Hon. Calvin D. West
Hon. Anthony M. Zinno
Hon. Aldo Giacchino
Hon. Anthony Iuliani
Hon. Anthony P. LaMorte
Hon. Armand E. Lembo
Hon. Franklyn Titus
Hon. James I. Threast

but the family wasn't notified until a few weeks later. A telegram from Gayton to his younger brother John, who was stationed at the Jefferson Barracks in Missouri, is dated May 28 and reads "Get permission to come home at once received word that Ralph killed in action North Africa." A letter to the family from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, dated June 9, 1943, informed the family that their son was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart for his sacrifice. Additional condolences arrived from U.S. Army Chief of Staff G.C. Marshall. Both government officials expressed their wishes that the noble cause of the war would provide some consolation to the family. The letters were reprinted in the *Italian Tribune* accompanied by a photograph of Pvt. Joseph Ralph Rotunda, Jr. and few lines of text which mentioned his family's address in the heart of the First Ward.¹⁵ Certainly this news continued the paper's tradition of reporting on noteworthy members of the community,

but this story also spoke of a specific type of sacrifice that was felt by the family, the community, and the nation.

In the ensuing months, Pvt. Joseph Ralph Rotunda became an even more visible symbol of that sacrifice. On October 17, 1943, he was honored at a memorial service in Newark's First Ward that included a parade in his honor that began at Barringer High School, his alma mater. The *Newark Evening News* headline, "Memorial Services for Newark Hero" focused on the individual sacrifice of Pvt. Rotunda noting that a flag honoring servicemen and servicewomen from the First Ward would be dedicated as part of the ceremony.¹⁶ The *Italian Tribune's* coverage highlighted the raising of a service flag as the main attraction and indicated that the day's events would include "a special tribute in memory of Pvt. Joseph R. Rotunda Jr., who sacrificed his life in defense of his country." Community involvement was evident as "hundreds of men and women active in social, civic and political circles will participate." A long list of organizations, entertainers, and political figures including New Jersey Governor Charles Edison, son of the famous inventor, were also noted.¹⁷ In February 1944, after seeking permission from Joseph Rotunda, Sr., officials from the Veterans of Foreign Wars (V.F.W.) designated the Pvt. Joseph R. Rotunda Jr. Post (No. 848) in honor of the "first soldier from the First ward to be killed in action in this war." This post became the ninth V.F.W. unit in Newark and enrolled soldiers who were in active service during the Second World War as well as veterans of World War I.¹⁸ The post's official publications, including programs from its annual dance, prominently featured a picture of Pvt. Rotunda.

In early November 1943, the City Commission passed a resolution to rename the "Clifton Avenue Pool" the "Rotunda Pool" in honor of Pvt. Joseph R. Rotunda, Jr., who was identified as "the first Newark resident of Italian extraction killed in this war."¹⁹ A public and permanent memorial of this type would serve to not only honor the patriotism of Italian-Americans in the war, but it would also acknowledge the status and impact of the Italian-American community in Newark. This pool was not only centrally located within the First Ward, but it was part of Newark's larger recreational system as one of five Newark pools which participated in the Newark Water Safety campaign that provided swimming lessons to the city's children.²⁰ The resolution was put forth by Ralph A. Villani, Parks and Public Property Director for Newark, who had a storied career as a controversial police judge in the 1930s and later became the first Italian-American mayor of Newark in 1949. His stature in the community was displayed in the *Italian Tribune's* headline declaring "Villani renames pool in honor of Pvt. J.R. Rotunda." Villani's political career was built on the support of Italian-Americans, and he assiduously promoted their heritage and status in the community. For example, once the war ended, he made sure that the Italian flag was reinstated among the flags of the United Nations flying in the City Commission Chamber.²¹ Villani



A public and permanent memorial of this type would serve to not only honor the patriotism of Italian-Americans in the war, but it would also acknowledge the status and impact of the Italian-American community in Newark.

himself was viewed as an Italian-American success story with the *Italian Tribune* going so far to characterize a dinner honoring the Director and attended by various Essex County dignitaries as "a utopia realized."²²

The official dedication ceremony for the Rotunda Pool took place on Sunday, May 28, 1944, and was attended by Pvt. Rotunda's father, his brothers Gayton and Constantine, four of his sisters and numerous other relatives. At the time, Gayton was serving in the Marine Corps, Constantine was a private in the U.S. Army, and John, now the youngest of the surviving brothers, was a corporal, stationed in England. A great deal of "pomp and circumstance" accompanied the ceremony, most notably a march through the First Ward that included "troops from the Air Corps, Wacs, Marco, the six-year-old shepherd dog wounded in North Africa, two ambulance units from Newark Chapter, Red Cross, Goldingay Guard of Newark Post 10, American Legion and Rotunda Post, V.F.W., St. Lucy's Fife, Drum and Bugle Corps and St. Ann's Drum and Bugle Corps." Johnny Adams and his orchestra played at the dedication, and the ceremony began with a volley fired by a squad from the Air Corps. Director Villani was the main speaker, among several notables from New Jersey and Newark government including Congressman Fred A. Hartley, Jr. Villani characterized Pvt. Rotunda "as a symbol of American manhood who had given his life for God and country," emphasizing that he represented "all boys of Italian extraction, not only from the first ward, but from all over the city." He also noted the military service of all four of the Rotunda brothers, reminding the audience that they were the sons of Italian immigrant parents. Gayton also spoke on behalf of the family offering thanks for the tribute that honored the memory of his brother.²³

One can't help but wonder if the political and social prominence of the Rotunda family was relevant in the decision to rename the pool. Passed down to us along with the story of the pool's renaming was a box full of newspaper clippings, letters, ballots, athletic accomplishments, membership lists, dinner programs and newsletters attesting to the civic involvement of various Rotunda siblings and their association with prominent members of the Italian-American community. (And to our great surprise, we also found a newspaper clipping of Babe Ruth's 1932 visit to the Newark School Stadium and an original autograph stuck between the pages of a scrapbook.) John Rotunda had previously served as the justice of peace to the First Ward whose 30,000 Italian residents were reported to be able to "turn the tables in any election."²⁴ He ran for Essex County coroner in 1938 achieving a decided majority in his district but losing overall. Several news items on the pool's dedication noted that Pvt. Rotunda was the "brother of Gayton A. Rotunda, Newark tax assessor" who ended up working closely with Villani. Both men were equally concerned with promoting the reputation of Newark's Italian-American community, and it is possible that Gayton initially proposed creating an

- 1 "Newark's Italian Colony Started More Than Seventy Years Ago," *Italian Tribune*, October 8, 1943.
- 2 Frank J. Cavaoli, "Patterns of Italian Immigration to the United States," *The Catholic Social Science Review* 13 (2008): 220-1.
- 3 Michael Immerso, *Newark's Little Italy: The Vanished First Ward* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press and the Newark Public Library, 1997), 15-16.
- 4 Luciano J. Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello, *The Italian-Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 53.
- 5 Michael J. Eula, "Ethnicity and Newark's Italian Tribune, 1934-1980," *Italian-American* 19 (Winter 2001): 24-5.
- 6 Iorizzo and Mondello, 250-7.
- 7 Eula, 26.
- 8 "City Pool Dedicated to Pvt. Joseph R. Rotunda," *Italian Tribune*, June 2, 1944.
- 9 "Reported Killed in Africa Action," *Newark Evening News*, June 16, 1943.
- 10 Rose D. Scherini, "When Italian-Americans Were 'Enemy Aliens,'" in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian-American Evacuation and Internment during World War II*, ed. Lawrence DiStasi (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2001), 12-21.
- 11 "Anthony Nisivoccia of Newark Named 'Best Soldier of Year,'" *Italian Tribune*, May 28, 1943.
- 12 DiStasi, xv.
- 13 "Our Boys in the Service," *Italian Tribune*, June 25, 1943.
- 14 "Newark Soldier Reported Killed," *Newark Evening News*, June 2, 1943.
- 15 "Award Pvt. Rotunda Purple Heart Medal," *Italian Tribune*, June 25, 1943.
- 16 "Memorial Services for Newark Hero," *Newark Evening News*, October 12, 1943.
- 17 "Unfurl Service Flag in the First Ward Sunday Afternoon," *Italian Tribune*, October 15, 1943.
- 18 "V.F.W. to Name Post for Jos. R. Rotunda," *Italian Tribune*, February 25, 1944; "Rotunda Post 848 to Meet June 19th," *Italian Tribune*, June 9, 1944.
- 19 "City Pool Renamed for Dead Soldier," *Newark Evening News*, November 4, 1943.
- 20 "Villani Opens Swim Campaign July 3," *Italian Tribune*, June 16, 1944.
- 21 "Italian Flag Torn Down," *New York Times*, September 6, 1945.
- 22 John J. Sileo, "A Utopia Realized," *Italian Tribune*, May 26, 1944.
- 23 "City Pool Dedicated to Pvt. Joseph R. Rotunda"
- 24 "Newark Italian-American Youth Elected Justice of the Peace," *Eric Times-News*, November 23, 1935.
- 25 "Tender Rotunda Farewell Dinner," *Italian Tribune*, December 12, 1943.
- 26 "Honor Rotunda at Pool Dedication," *Italian Tribune*, December 2, 1966

enduring tribute to his brother. Gayton certainly took an active role in supporting and memorializing the Rotunda Pool, and it seems to have had a beneficial effect on his political career. In November 1943, just days after the resolution to rename the pool was announced, Gayton was honored at a farewell dinner prior to departing for service in the U.S. Marine Corps. The dinner at the Hotel Essex House included Commissioner Ralph A. Villani and other prominent members of Newark city government as speakers, and the toastmaster, Chief Magistrate Ernest F. Masini, presented Gayton with a departing gift.²⁵ When Villani was elected mayor in 1949, Gayton served as Chief City Clerk.

In December 1966, Newark's second and last Italian-American mayor to date, Hugh J. Addonizio, presided over the dedication of a plaque that is still affixed on the wall at the Rotunda Pool. The bronze plaque notes the "supreme sacrifice" of Joseph Rotunda but makes no reference to his heritage.²⁶ Ralph Villani, then President of the Newark Municipal Council was also present at the dedication and addressed the audience. The First Ward had already changed significantly. The success of the children and grandchildren of the original Italian immigrants meant better education and better jobs, but it also meant greater mobility – particularly with the benefits provided to soldiers after the war by the G.I. Bill. Many Italian-American families moved out of the First Ward to one of the many suburban communities that had developed around Newark. Urban renewal policies proposed under Villani's leadership and backed by Addonizio and Peter Rodino, both members of Congress at the time, contributed to cultural and geographical change in the community. The Columbus Homes, whose demolition in 1994 was celebrated by many Italian-Americans who grew up in Newark, created high-rise public housing by tearing down old neighborhoods. Mayor Villani lost his re-election bid in 1952 amid various scandals and charges of kickbacks from city employees, and the municipal government was subsequently reorganized consolidating the Italian-American First Ward into the North Ward. The construction of Route 280 in the 1960s further destroyed and divided traditional neighborhoods. And, of course, the Newark riots in the summer of 1967 altered the city's population and reputation in ways that continue to resonate today.

The dedication of the Rotunda Pool was a fitting memorial to the Italian-Americans of the First Ward and to the dedication and service to their country, the United States, which they demonstrated during the Second World War. Joseph Sr. lived well into his nineties in the same house on Mt. Prospect Avenue where he raised his ten children. The pool's location on Clifton Avenue allowed for the family and others to easily pass by, to remember their son, their brother, the uncle they never met, or the young kid from the First Ward that they simply knew as "Ralph." The family continues to take pride in knowing that the actions of Pvt. Joseph R. Rotunda, Jr. and the memorial accorded to him provides a legacy of bravery and honor for the family and their heritage.

