

The story behind the first ‘Matzo Ball’



CRAIG F. WALKER/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Jack and Audrey Orenstein pose for a portrait at their home in Somerville.

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 23, 2016

Andy Rudnick decided as a Boston University senior that he had suffered through enough silent nights on Christmas Eve. There he was, in a cookie-cutter ballroom in 1986, waiting in a long line for a drink with other Jewish singles, hoping for a spark of romance rather than settling for Chinese takeout.

“It really wasn’t conducive to having a good time,” Rudnick recalled with a chuckle.

So, he created the Matzo Ball, a Christmas Eve smash that began in Boston the following year and has spread to seven other cities from New York to Los Angeles. This year, 25,000 revelers are expected nationwide, with 1,500 of them at the Royale in Boston.

“There’s nothing else to do on Christmas Eve, and it’s the only night of the year that we can deliver the hottest nightclub in the market to the Jewish community,” said Rudnick, who now lives in Boca Raton, Fla. “Everyone going there goes for one reason: To meet a Jewish person to develop a relationship with — or not.”

Organizers estimated that 100 marriages have emerged from the Matzo Balls, including Rudnick’s, who met his wife on Christmas Eve in 1997 and was married about a year later.

“If you connect, things are going to move and progress very quickly, because that’s why you went there to begin with,” Rudnick said.

Just ask Jack and Audrey Orenstein, a Somerville couple who met at the first Matzo Ball, held at the former Metro nightclub on Lansdowne Street. Exactly a year later, they were engaged.

Audrey Hart was 23 years old when she scanned the sunken dance floor and spotted tall Jack Orenstein, who had been a computer science professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst when Audrey was a student there.

“I immediately got embarrassed, thinking I’m only 23 and he’s a professor and I’m out of his league,” Audrey said. “Then we started talking, and we hit it off. I was enthralled.”

Those were the days before the Internet and social media, and Rudnick had persuaded his bosses at the Metro, where he bartended, to turn over the club for an evening when young Jewish singles would be searching, sometimes pleading, for something fun to do.

The Lyons brothers, who owned Metro, thought that Rudnick’s name of “Matzo Ball” might be offensive.

“But I ran it by my mother, and she said it was cute,” recalled Rudnick, a native of Worcester.

His bosses expected 300 people to show up, Rudnick said. But 2,000 eventually came, and when the doors opened at 7:30 p.m. the line stretched all the way down Lansdowne Street to the Cask ‘n Flagon.

“It was out of control,” Rudnick said.

Before that first Matzo Ball, Jack Orenstein and Audrey Hart had seen each other in the hallways at UMass, but they had never spoken. Audrey was the gregarious one; Jack, the quiet computer scientist who was seven years older.

“He was different, new, and interesting. I wanted to learn more,” Audrey recalled.

Audrey had gone with friends and her sister, a reluctant sibling who had been “bribed” by her mother to attend so she could “meet a nice Jewish boy.”

Jack’s memory of the night is somewhat different: “I was glad that a person recognized me and talked to me.”

Now, their daughter Hannah, an assistant features editor at [Seventeen.com](#), is preparing for her second consecutive Matzo Ball in New York City.

“It’s just so exciting to me to have that family connection. I heard this story told year after year,” Hannah said. “And it’s always a funny story to my sister and me because my Dad does not like big, loud parties. It feels like this amazing act of fate.”

Hannah is 23, the same age her mother had been when she met Jack, who now is a retired software engineer. If Hannah finds the love of her life, so be it. But that’s not the objective for her.

“I’m going because it’ll be a fun party,” Hannah said.

Neither the Orensteins nor Rudnick said the Matzo Ball’s popularity is linked to any feelings of being marginalized on a night with overwhelming and visible Christian symbolism -- although Christmas Eve this year falls on the first night of Hanukkah.

Rather, they said, it’s simply an opportunity to have a good time and meet other Jewish people on an otherwise quiet night. Anyone, however, is welcome.

“I don’t think Jewish people feel that they’re missing out. We have other things. I just feel that there’s nothing to do,” said Audrey, who works in sales for Apple.

Hannah echoed the sense that Christmas Eve, for her, had never meant feeling left out. But last year’s dance had a special effect.

“I did feel this sense of community that everybody there is Jewish,” Hannah said. “I’m not particularly religious, but it was really fun to be in a big, exciting room of people where everything outside was quiet.

“It felt like the party was just for us that night.”



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Jack and Audrey Orenstein shared a laugh while talking about their life together at their home in Somerville.