

Fission: A Novel of Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 6, 2025)

Leslie Schover contacted me and asked that I review a book she was writing. I am often asked to do that for authors writing about Oak Ridge and I gladly agreed to her request. I later invited her to be a guest on *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City* video cast, to which she agreed. And, she agreed to write about her soon to be published new book, *Fission, A Novel of Oak Ridge*, in *Historically Speaking*. Enjoy her story of how the book came to be.

Although I grew up in the Chicago area, Oak Ridge, Tennessee was a part of my family's lore. My father, Donald Schover, was recruited at the age of twenty-three to work as an electronics technician with Dr. Charles Coryell's group at the University of Chicago. He then accompanied the Met Lab chemists to Oak Ridge in September 1943. The adventure began when he and my mother, age twenty, were invited to dinner by the Coryells and were informed that night about the need for my father's skills to create instruments to measure the plutonium needed to beat the Nazis in developing an atomic bomb.

Thus, they both knew at the outset about the purpose of the Manhattan Project. Although my older sister had already been born, my mother followed my father to Oak Ridge several months later, leaving the toddler with my maternal grandparents. Both Mom and Dad lived in the dorms for several months until their Cemesto B on West Malta Road was ready and they could bring their daughter to live with them.

When I was old enough to appreciate the story, they told me about the welcome party when my mother first arrived. My father was a popular guy because he was in charge of the pure alcohol needed for the Coryell chemistry lab—also used as the basis for creative punch recipes in “dry” Oak Ridge. While their friends shared punch in the lobby of the Guest House, the custom was for married couples to take turns using the private room upstairs, since even conjugal visits were forbidden in the single-sex dorms. This is an aspect of Guest House history that may not be familiar to present-day Oak Ridgers!

They had many humorous stories about their Oak Ridge years, including my mother's incomprehension when the man at the grocery asked if she wanted her purchases “in a poke” and refused to allow her to buy cokes unless she could present empty bottles (although she had just moved there). She was shocked when one of the wives who had grown up in the South asked why my blonde, hazel-eyed mother did not look Jewish, and was puzzled at her lack of horns.

After the culture shock, however, she said that she made some wonderful friends despite their different backgrounds. My father told me about the Glendenin Cocktail, an alternate name for the radioactive isotope that renowned chemist Lawrence Glendenin accidentally imbibed when he ignored safety precautions and pipetted it directly into his mouth.

He also told a tale that he thought may have been an “urban legend” about a guard patrolling the Clinch River who accidentally shot his horse in the head while attempting to bag a rabbit for dinner. Fearing the army's wrath, the guards decided to get rid of the evidence by burning the dead horse, but unfortunately started a brush fire instead. These stories are a reminder that the average age of people in Oak Ridge during the war was twenty-seven.

I was born in 1952. Growing up during the cold war gave me a healthy fear of nuclear weapons. I still vividly recall watching Kennedy's speech on television during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I had previously asked my father why we were not building a bomb shelter in our back yard. I was devastated when he told me, “Honey, it wouldn't help.”

Later, when I was seventeen, my father and I watched the newly declassified Japanese films of the horrendous health effects of the bombings on people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I asked my father how he felt in retrospect about working on the Manhattan Project. He told me that the fear of a Nazi atomic bomb had been a very powerful motivator.

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He still believed that at least the initial bombing of Hiroshima had saved the lives of many soldiers who would have died in an invasion of Japan, although he was more cynical about Nagasaki. He thought the government at the time wanted to see how a plutonium-based bomb would perform on a major target, despite the success of the Trinity Test.

He was one of the sixty-seven signers of the Oak Ridge version of the Szilard petition, asking Truman not to use the atomic bomb on Japan without first demonstrating its destructive potential. He also spent several months working in Japan in the 1970s

I had always wanted to do something with my parents' Oak Ridge stories, and over the past two years, I have incorporated them into a novel, *Fission: A Novel of Oak Ridge*. It will be published in early 2026 by SheWrites Press.

I was inspired long before the success of the movie *Oppenheimer*. I became fascinated when reports began appearing about two recently discovered Soviet spies in Oak Ridge, Oscar Seborer and George Koval (see Ann Hagedorn's excellent book, *Sleeper Agent*, Simon & Schuster, 2022). Both were in the Special Engineer Detachment (S. E. D.) and worked in X-10 during my father's time in the Coryell group.

Both were electronics engineers, like my father. Both were also Jews of Eastern European ancestry, just a few years older than he was. Koval, in particular, was a Radiation Health Officer.

My father had an accidental radiation exposure when his buddies carefully surrounded a very "hot" sample with lead bricks—but neglected to shield the side on the wall that adjoined my father's desk in the next office. I suspect this incident occurred before Koval arrived in Oak Ridge, but I wondered if Dad had known either spy. I imagined how indignant he would have been to find out about their betrayal.

Of course, by then, both my parents and their friends and colleagues were long deceased. Although the main characters in the novel are based on my parents, I created a totally fictional love triangle between the wife in the couple and the spy. Here is a summary of the plot:

"It is 1943 and Doris Friedman, a University of Chicago undergraduate with aspirations to be a concert pianist or lawyer, finds herself the 20-year-old mother of a sickly, premature baby. Her husband, Rob, an electronics prodigy, is recruited to work in Oak Ridge on the atomic bomb and Doris joins him. Both spouses are told about the bomb from the outset. While Rob works around the clock, Doris struggles with learning to nurture her cranky daughter and wonders if she will ever be more than a housewife. Fear is always present that the Nazis will get the bomb first and win the war. Doris makes friends with Betty, a Richmond debutante who initially believes that Jews have horns. Doris helps Betty through a miscarriage and copes with Rob's getting an overdose of radiation and trying to enlist to fight at the front. At times their marriage splits her heart in two, like fission splits an atom's nucleus. She falls into a flirtation with an army engineer, only to discover that he is probably a Soviet spy. She turns him in, at the cost of revealing her own infidelity. Rob and his fellow scientists sign a petition asking Truman not to use the bomb on Japan without first demonstrating its power. However, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are annihilated. Rob and Doris return to Chicago where they try to repair their marriage as the cold war begins."

In preparing to write the novel, I did a deep dive into Manhattan Project history, including major historical works and documentaries, oral interviews from the Atomic Heritage Foundation, books of Ed Westcott's photos, personal accounts about Oak Ridge during World War II, the Public Broadcast Series that D. Ray Smith hosted, online information, and other novels about the Manhattan Project. I was also surprised and delighted to find that Dr. Coryell's daughter Julie Coryell had edited and published hundreds of pages of interviews with him (by Joan Bainbridge Safford) in the book *A Chemist's Role in the Birth of Atomic Energy* (Prometheus Press, 2012).

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For the first time I really understood what my father's work had been during those years. Even better, I got to meet Julie over the internet, and we have become dear friends. I also corresponded with another Coryell group offspring, Ted Gest, a journalist and Washington bureau chief of TheCrimeReport.org. His father, the late Howard Gest, PhD, had contacted me when he saw my father's obituary in 2007 and wrote an essay about the Szilard petition (https://biology.indiana.edu/documents/historical-materials/gest_pdfs/hgSzilard.pdf).

Ray has been a terrific resource, reading at least two drafts of the book and commenting on historical accuracy. He sent me a link to a Clinton Lab phone book that had numbers and addresses for my parents and other people I recognized from their stories.

My mother had been commandeered by a Colonel in Oak Ridge to help him choose a piano for the officers' recreation hall. He insisted that his driver take an unfinished road, and they got stuck. In fleshing out her anecdote I also got information from the Knoxville historian, Jack Neely, on piano stores in Knoxville during that era and the availability of Steinways.

Ann Hagedorn was kind enough to have a call with me about the story of George Koval. The one thing I have not done yet is to visit Oak Ridge, but I hope to remedy that in the next few months and to treat Ray to a thank-you dinner!

I spent my own career as a clinical psychologist and had written three self-help books, a textbook, and numerous book chapters and journal articles, but had not produced any fiction (at least not knowingly) since college creative writing courses.

Writing this novel has been an exploration for me of my parents' early lives. I was struck by my mother's limited choices, once she married and quickly got pregnant. I also thought much more deeply about my parents' experiences as first-generation Americans and their struggle to get educations, succeed in their jobs, and assimilate into the suburban world of privilege that they provided for me.

I thought I knew them both quite well—better than the average daughter—but so often I wanted to ask questions that had never occurred to me while they were alive. Of course it is a novel, and not a memoir, so I had the liberty of making up the answers.

In fact, the biggest challenge was to create a dramatic story that would hopefully keep the reader interested, since each of our lives is ultimately, rather ordinary. I hope I have caught some of the genuine spirit of Oak Ridge during its early years and that readers of this column will mark their calendars and look for *Fission* in 2026.

Thank you, Leslie, for the background you shared that brought you to the point of writing *Fission, A Novel of Oak Ridge*. I am glad to have helped a bit with your book. I found it enjoyable to read and very believable as it describes life in Oak Ridge well. I also look forward to yours and Julie's interview on *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City!*

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Leslie Schover, Phd and author of *Fission: A Novel of Oak Ridge* (Courtesy of Leslie Schover)



Engagement photo of and Donald Schover

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We, the undersigned scientific personnel of the Clinton Laboratories, believe that the world-wide social and political consequences of the power of the weapon being developed on this Project impose a special moral obligation on the government and people of the United States in introducing the weapon in warfare.

It is further believed that the power of this weapon should be made known by demonstration to the peoples of the world, irrespective of the course of the present conflict, for in this way the body of world opinion may be made the determining factor in the absolute preservation of peace.

Therefore we recommend that before this weapon be used without restriction in the present conflict, its powers should be adequately described and demonstrated, and the Japanese nation should be given the opportunity to consider the consequences of further refusal to surrender. We feel that this course of action will heighten the effectiveness of the weapon in this war and will be of tremendous effect in the prevention of future wars.

Charles D. Coryell	Paul C. Tompkins	Kurt A. Kears
Jack Siegel	R.W. Stoughton	John R. Lane
Norman Elliott		Louis B. Stenger
Walter E. Ballou	Lionel S. Galding	Elvin N. Covey
Walter C. Coker	Theodore P. Gray	Elton H. Turtle
S.D. Day	Earl R. Purchase	Russell R. Williams, Jr.
Harvey L. Brown	Edward L. Brady	Robert R. Edwards
Edward Shapiro	Howard Gest	Elmer H. Jenkins
L.C. Glendon	Arvid J. Miller	L.T. McClinton
William G. Brown	William J. Troy	A.W. Adams
Leslie M. Schover	J. Ralston	Walter B. Lewis
Ralph Livingston	Bernard J. Zimble	A.P. Brown
Joseph Klym	Walter A. Bridger	Pat Hettelle
Clinton R. Dammann	W.H. Bryan	Clayton W. Stanley
John P. Bude	R.X. Maney	John A. Gledhill
Donald D. Schover	D.E. Hookland Jr.	W. L. Smith
Dwight C. Lincoln	W. Black	P.H. Levantman
Edward H. Bohmman	James S. Morris	C.J. Borkowski
Jack K. East	Joseph Halperin	Robert L. Dutenhoff
John P. Hunt	Alan H. Janett	J.E. Satterly
	R.F. Leiminger	Robert S. Scott

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Don Schover's signature is in the first column, fifth from the bottom (Courtesy of Leslie Schover)

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October 1945: Coryell Group in Chemistry Building at X-10, Oak Ridge
At rear (left to right): Warren Burgus, Lionel Goldring, Charles Stanley, Jack Siegel, Russ Williams, Ed Shapiro (only top of head), Howard Gest, Ray Edwards, Don Schover. To the right of Siegel is Dick Money. At center, June Babbitt, the group secretary. Front row: Henry Levy, Ed Brady, Larry Glendenin, Jack Marinsky. Behind Levy, Gerald Strickland. Behind Marinsky, Richard K. Bersohn. 13 of the 16 scientists in this photo signed the Szilard Petition. (Courtesy of Leslie Schover)