The Nuremberg Courtroom Exhibit in the Virginia Holocaust Museum at 2000 E. Cary St. in Richmond is an exact replica of the Palace of Justice where the Nuremberg Trials were held following World War II into the spring of 1949. The exhibit contains memorabilia, videos, and photos of the trials. The enormity of the crimes committed by the Nazis were put before the court and witnessed by the entire world as the first trials of a vanquished army and the greatest example of the rule of law in history.

In 2006, Jay Ipson, the founder of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, thought that a permanent exhibit depicting the Nuremberg Courtroom would be a unique addition to the museum and an impressive testament to justice and the rule of law. The original courtroom in Nuremberg, Germany, had been substantially changed, was only open to visitors on weekends, and was rumored to be scheduled for demolition by the city. Ipson secured the original plans for the courtroom and began fundraising to build a replica of the Nuremberg Palace of Justice. I volunteered to raise funds for the project.

The Virginia Law Foundation honored Murray J. Janus and Roderick B. Mathews for their life-long dedication to the ideals of the Rule of Law during a ceremony at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in May. Accepting the award from Anthony F. Troy on behalf of her late husband was Karia Mathews (left photo). Accepting the award from Irving M. Blank on behalf of her late father was Rabbi Beth Janus.

Museum Exhibit Represents the Greatest Example of Rule of Law in History

by Irving M. Blank
At the Virginia State Bar Council meeting in April 2007, I met Jon D. Huddleston, who was then on the board of the Virginia Law Foundation (VLF) and the Virginia State Bar Council. We happened to sit next to each other on the bus taking council members to dinner. During the ride, I told Huddleston about the Nuremberg Courtroom project and its need for funds. He told me that he was trying to get the VLF to change the grant-giving process so that fewer but larger grants would be made to get a greater impact from the grants. That chance meeting led to a great friendship between our families and a wonderful marriage between the Law Foundation and the Holocaust Museum. Huddleston was successful in his efforts to change the grant giving process at the VLF and the museum was approved for a $100,000 grant. A memorandum of agreement between the two entities was executed in August 2007. That marriage has endured and grown over the years. The Nuremberg Courtroom Exhibit is permanently displayed at the Virginia Holocaust Museum and is managed by the Nuremberg Courtroom Committee that is made up of eight members, four of whom are selected by the museum and four of whom are selected by the foundation. The committee also selects the annual recipient of the Rule of Law Award.

While the courtroom exhibit has only existed for a few years, it has been the scene of many memorable events and is an impressive tool to teach the rule of law. Past recipients of the Rule of Law Award have included Henry King, a prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials; Senator John W. Warner; Justice Gabriel Balch, who was the prosecutor of Adolph Eichman and later a member of the Israeli Supreme Court; and in 2013, Roderick B. Mathews and Murray J. Janus, who were great Virginia lawyers and the living essence of the rule of law, as well as devoted members of the Nuremberg Courtroom Committee.

The dedication of the exhibit on Law Day, May 1, 2008, was the culmination of an extraordinary day in the history of the museum, the VLF, the Richmond bar, and the State Bar. Through the efforts of Mathews, the museum was selected as one of the sites for the World Justice Project. On May 1, 2008, the day-long international program focused on the rule of law and culminated in the dedication of the courtroom exhibit. Madam Justice Rosalie Abella of the Supreme Court of Canada delivered the keynote address and there was not a dry eye in the audience. The courtroom exhibit has been used by the general and legal communities as a means to see that democratic values, rights, and institutions designed to ensure that justice is not only seen to be done, but is done. It has also allowed us to trumpet justice and promote tolerance by reminding people of the injustice and intolerance of the Holocaust.

Thousands of visitors, including many students and teachers, have visited the exhibit and taught the lessons of the Nuremberg Trials. The visual reminders of the world’s response to the Nazi atrocities are invaluable in the understanding, appreciation, and application of the rule of law.

The mission of the Virginia Law Foundation is to promote, through philanthropy, the rule of law, access to justice, and law-related education. The mission of the Virginia Holocaust Museum is to promote tolerance through education. Rarely have two institutions and their missions so perfectly coincided.

Irving M. Blank, a personal injury attorney with Paris Blank LLP in Richmond, is a former president of the Virginia State Bar. He is a fellow of the Virginia Law Foundation and the American College of Trial Lawyers. He is a member of the John Marshall Inn of Court, the Virginia Association of Defense Attorneys, and the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association. He was a member of the Virginia Bar Association commission that developed the Virginia Principles of Professionalism, an aspirational set of standards for attorney conduct.