

Name: **Frederick John (born Fritz John) Rosenthal**

Birth date: September 4, 1923

Place of Birth: Cologne, Germany

Parents: Philipp and Polly (Immergut) Rosenthal

Brother: Max Adolph Rosenthal (named for both grandfathers)

Children / Grandchildren: two / four

John Rosenthal grew up in a Conservative Jewish home (with a leaning to Reform), His family attended the Cologne Synagogue, celebrated the holidays and, while they didn't keep kosher, were familiar with the teachings and traditions of an observant Jewish home. He describes his childhood, before the election of Hitler, as wonderful.

His parents operated a small business that sold notions (ribbons, buttons, belts) needlework supplies, knitting wool, and "goebelin" chair patterns. His mother later designed patterns for hand knitted dresses that she would make (or piecework out) and custom fit in the store. John remembers an ever present undercurrent of anti-Semitism before Hitler was elected- mostly phrases that were commonly heard on the street.

In 1933, after Hitler came to power, John's parents wanted to make sure the children were safe. They decided to send the boys out of the country and so John and his brother (older by two years), Max, went to relatives in Venlo, Holland. This began three years of successive moves for a young boy of ten years old.

From Venlo, the brothers went to Amsterdam and then to Hilversum, and then John went to live with a Jewish teachers family in Laren. There John attended a Dutch school and learned to speak Dutch. He was invited to celebrate Jewish holidays at the home of a school friend and recalls "rolling home like a ball" following the rich festive meals there. His brother was meanwhile living with another family in a nearby village and John later went to live there as well. There was difficulty with that family so the boys wrote home and the parents decided to bring the sons back to Cologne. These moves took place over a year's time.

Once the children were back in Cologne, a highly placed churchman recommended to Philipp and Polly that John and Max would be safe at a Catholic School in Stavelot, Belgium and so that became their place of refuge for the next half year. Instruction in that school was in French - a language foreign to the boys, so that it was hard for them to learn anything. John also spoke of required attendance at Mass, and so that they would not lose touch with their Jewish heritage, Max wrote home for a Siddur so that they were able to daven during the Catholic services.

(About a decade later, Stavelot was one of the Belgian cities hard hit during the WW II “Battle of the Bulge,” and John was briefly stationed near there.).

The boys were in Stavelot for about six months when German laws prohibited the transfer of German funds abroad, and thus their parents were no longer able to pay their tuition abroad. Max and John returned to Cologne.

Philipp and Polly then located a Jewish boarding school in southern Germany, near Ulm. The school had an emphasis on music and crafts and John describes his stay there as the “loveliest time of my youth.” One day, while taking part in the daily running period in the woods, he fell behind the other students and began to limp. His leg muscles had weakened and he was subsequently diagnosed with polio. Again he returned home to Cologne, where he underwent a number of treatments, including hydrotherapy and electric shock, but what worked best was his father’s nightly massage of his affected leg with extract of bee poison. That would stimulate the circulation of blood and ease the pain. John credits his father’s devoted efforts for getting him “over the hump” by strengthening his thigh muscles which had begun to atrophy.

By this time (1935) the anti-Semitic Nuremberg laws had been passed. Among them was an edict that prohibited Christian women under a certain age from living in Jewish homes. With two full-time working parents, the Rosenthal family had always had someone to live with them to attend to the keeping of the home. The young woman who had been a member of their household for years had to leave and was replaced by her elderly aunt. John’s life was also affected in other ways: at 12 he recalls signs appearing on park benches, at movie theaters, restaurants and other places around town with the message: “Juden unerwünscht” (Jews not wanted here,) or “Keine Juden oder Hunde” (No Jews or Dogs). On the street, kids would chase him hollering, “Jud, Jud.” He also recalls hearing truckloads of Nazi Brownshirts riding through the streets, singing a Nazi song with a chorus of “When Jewish blood spurts from the knife things go twice as well.”

Public swimming pools were now “off limits” for the Jewish population and Jewish children were prohibited from attending German public schools. John’s parents now enrolled him in a Jewish high school in Cologne, where one of the teachers coached him in his portion for his Bar Mitzvah, which he celebrated in September, 1936. He recalls with great tenderness attending services with his father at the beautiful Synagogue on the Glockengasse where he loved sitting beside him and hearing the beautiful choral music. Throughout his life he has tried to recapture that feeling and has attended many congregations in search of that beauty, but as he now says to himself “What’s gone is gone.”

With conditions increasingly troublesome for German Jews, John’s parents made preparations for emigration. A friend in England was ready to help, as was an old school friend of his father’s in the U. S. who was willing to provide an affidavit for the family. Meanwhile there was the problem of selling what had been a successful business. A woman, who had earlier been a governess to Max and John later went to work in the Rosenthal business. (John still has a remarkable handmade book that contains a record of the boys’ childhood with events and sayings

that she recorded and for which her brother provided illustrations. It is the only object John preserved from his childhood.)

The ex-governess, now an employee in the business, had joined the Nazi party and used her party connections to force the Rosenthals to transfer the business to her at a third of its true value. Under duress they agreed to the transaction and considered themselves fortunate to have gotten anything. They also discovered the force of anti-Semitism from a former trusted family confidante.

On Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, Philipp was on his way to police headquarters to pick up passports for the move to the U. S., when he stopped at a lending library to return some books. He was asked, "What are you doing out, Herr Rosenthal? You had better go home!" And they told him what had happened and that Jews were being rounded up on the streets. He quickly returned to their apartment (4th floor) and moved the family to the top floor where the washing machines and dryers were. They brought up mattresses and food and hid out for three to four days.

All the while they could hear the commotion in the streets. The beautiful synagogue John had attended with his father was burned to the ground. The Jewish high school was closed down. (Many teachers and students later reestablished the school in England.) After a few days, things had calmed down sufficiently for Philipp to collect the passports and the family traveled to Stuttgart where they got the required immigration visas at the U. S. Consulate. Most of the family's belongings were loaded into a van (a modular unit) for transport to the U. S. Only a short while later, families could leave with only that they could carry in a suitcase.

Before the family was permitted to leave Germany, they had to pay their share of the tremendous fine (Judenbusse) levied by the Nazi regime on the collective Jewish community. That done they were allowed to take 50 Marks per person in cash! Fortunately Polly had managed to have a friend take her jewelry to Switzerland (at great danger to the willing friend) and had also sent what stock of hand knitted dresses she could to the friend in London. This would provide a stake for a new start in life. On December 1, 1938, they crossed over the Dutch border and stayed with Jewish families that sheltered refugees. The parents went to Switzerland to retrieve the jewelry and to have a respite from years of anxiety they hoped were now over. John recalls observing weariness on their faces.

The family arrived by ship in the U. S. in mid-February 1939. John was 15 (and had his first cigarette!) and Max was 17. Acclimatization to the U. S. was fairly easy. His new school mates having made fun of his "King's English" and his short pants, he soon leaned "American English" and switched to long pants. The family spent their first month at the Willard Hotel in New York and John attended the nearby High School of Commerce. He remembers being "at sea" with constant changes of schools, homes, languages... They next moved to Washington Heights at the 157th street and Riverside Drive, an area known among residents at the "4th Reich" or "little Germany" because of all the Jewish German refugees that had settled there. His new (closer)

school was George Washington High School. His parents now decided that an academic education was not enough: John needed to learn a trade, and so he was shifted again, this time to the Food Trades Vocational High School, which involved a 1/2 hour subway ride to Downtown Manhattan. He says he learned to “make a great tuna fish salad.”

Meanwhile his parents had begun to reestablish their business, taking it to a loft on 72nd street, a few blocks from their new home in midtown Manhattan. As the business grew, John’s help was required and his folks withdrew him from the culinary high school. Though John was by now 18 years old, he never questioned his parents’ right to decide what he should do with his education. He recalls that his parents would stay at work till after midnight. They had hired German refugees to knit the pieces of dresses designed by his mother in different patterns and styles. At the shop other workers (3-4) , would knit the backs, sleeves, skirt parts, etc. which the piece workers had brought in into completed hand fashioned dresses, two piece suits, bolero jackets and the like. Polly was a successful designer and soon sold her hand knitted fashions to department and specialty stores all across America, including such firms as Bullocks’s, Marshall Fields, Saks Fifth Av., Henry Bendel, etc. John although not a knitter remembers typing up instructions for home knitters row by row and stitch by stitch. At the same time he was doing all of the business correspondence.

Philipp and Polly decided John should learn more about secretarial functions and enrolled him in the New York Business School. On completing his courses there he received his first ever diploma. From the time he first attended elementary school, he had been shifted from school to school, both in Europe and the U.S.; from country to country from vocational to technical school and until then he had never been allowed to finish or graduate from any of them. John figures that over a period of only a few years, he had attended no fewer than 12 schools. From the age of 16, he had also been told to take many different jobs to help the family, from delivering groceries to selling diamond drill bits for dentists to making chocolate candy, and finally as secretary in the family business.

John often lunched at neighborhood restaurants, including the Eclair, a well-known patisserie frequented by many refugees on the West Side, and a Chinese restaurant, a few doors down, where he was when he heard the radio announcement of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Although the family had already applied for citizenship papers (which would take 5 years), they all had to register as aliens. Always trying to stay one step ahead, his parents next enrolled him in a Radio and Television Institute, figuring that, if drafted for military service, John would be better off in the Signal Corps. As John says, his mother was still “trying to run my life.” Worried that he might be drafted for the military when it was time for his physical exam by the draft board, she even made him promise to tell the draft board that he had polio. But John had other ideas and wanted to do his share in the fight against the Nazis, so when it came time for him to appear for the physical and the doctor asked, he said “When I was 12, I had polio. But now I am all over it.” John was accepted for military service. And while he kept his promise to his mother, he also followed his own sense of obligation and patriotism and did so with a clear conscience. His brother Max was not drafted because of eye problems.

John was 19 when he went in as a “Buck Private” and came out as a Sergeant T/4 after serving one year in U. S. (various training stints) and two years in Europe. He received infantry basic training near Spartanburg, S.C. , and, after three months in the Army was naturalized as a U.S. Citizen. (His parents had to wait out the full five years). Taking account of his language abilities, he was sent to the University of Minnesota’s German language area program as part of the Army’s Specialized Training Program. (He passed through Asheville on a train and it stuck forever in his mind as a place of beauty.) While at the University of Minnesota, John had the “time of his life,” with the usual college pleasures. After several months he felt that he needed to be doing more in fighting the Germans and soon he received orders to report at Camp Ritchie in Maryland. There he received Military Intelligence Training; and about one year after his induction into the Army he found himself on a troopship bound for Europe (which he had left as a refugee a little over four years before).

After one month in Northern Ireland and a few more in England, where he witnessed at first hand the terrible impact of German bombing on English citizens, John found himself in muddy Normandy not long after D-Day. From there he was sent to Antwerp in Belgium where he finally performed the activities for which he had been trained. He now belonged to a Military Intelligence Interpreter team and his various duties included interrogation of Belgian civilians who wanted to work for the U.S. military, checking barges and ships for contraband, interpreting Flemish and French newspapers into English to show what the Belgian people thought of the American Army, and so on. He also kept track on a map with pins of the places in Antwerp where German V1 and V2 rockets hit, so that the pattern of might be used to figure out where in Germany those rockets were launched from. John says that when he was in England, he turned down invitations to visit London because of German bombings. Now here he was in Antwerp where the Germans bombed with rockets almost every day. During the “Battle of the Bulge,” Germany’s last big offensive in the West, John was transferred to the Belgian city of Charleroi. There he saw civilian refugees as well as soldiers, streaming away from the front. After the Germans had been stopped and had retreated, he went to the closest the Germans had come to Charleroi and there saw many abandoned German tanks that had been shot up or had run out of gas and were left to rot and rust in the fields. John also recalls learning how to drive army trucks and jeeps in the middle of the winter on icy and snowy streets in Charleroi.

After he was transferred back to Antwerp, John got permission to take K rations to relatives in Rotterdam, Holland. His cousin who was Jewish and married to a Christian was fortunate in having made it through the war without being picked up and sent to a concentration camp. He also found two other relatives who had hidden out during the war. Like many Dutch people, they had also been starved by the Germans and had had to eat tulip bulb to stay alive. He also tried to find other relatives and the people who had been so helpful when he had been a young boy in Holland, but they were all gone. One family member, whose parents had been killed by the Nazis, later did manage to come to the U.S. and lived with the family until she married.

After the war, John returned to his family business. He met Carolyn Hanah in New York, where she happened to live only a few city blocks away. Together they explored New York's parks and museums, and also went on many hiking trips in Vermont and the Great Smokey Mountains. They were married in 1951. Early on, Carolyn suggested to John that he take advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights. Never having received a high school diploma he had to take an equivalency exam after which he was admitted to Columbia University. While taking night classes he found many veterans just like himself.

After four years of night school, he needed to take courses given only in the daytime, so he told his parents that he saw no future for himself in the business and he was leaving. For the first time in his life, John was striking out for himself. From now on it was he who would decide what to do with his life. He graduated from Columbia in 1953, summa cum laude and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He went on to receive two other degrees from Columbia, an MA in International Relations and an MS in Library Science.

Shortly before graduating from the School of Library Service, John received an invitation to a 6 month internship at the Library of Congress in Washington. He accepted and in 1956 he and Carolyn moved to the DC area to work and to raise a family. During his 27 years at the Library of Congress John rose from a lowly assistant bibliographer to assistant chief of the Library Services Division in the Congressional Research Service. He retired after 30 years of Federal service in 1983.

Back in the 1950's, John's mother had made applications for restitution from the German government for lost properties. The restitution was finally awarded to her two sons just a few months after Polly's death in 1974. (John's father died in 1952) John also applied for and achieved compensation for "interruption of education."

During his retirement, recalling the lovely train ride through Asheville as soldier in 1943, and the trips to the Smokey's in later years, John and Carolyn would often make trips along the Blue Ridge Parkway and eventually decided to move to Asheville, where they live within view of their favorite drive. Recently, John decided to write of his experiences during his youth in Europe and his life in America. He spent months on the manuscript. He now shares his story with students in classrooms who are studying the Holocaust. Every year on Veterans' Day he receives a call from his granddaughter thanking him for fighting the Nazis to save the U.S. The flag outside the front window says he was proud to serve.