

## **Elizabeth, John and Renata Polt**

Wartime Experience: Fled to Cuba

Our family members, the Pollatscheks, were all born in Aussig, a small city in northern Bohemia (Czechoslovakia). Friedrich Pollatschek (he later changed his name to Frederick Polt) born in 1896, was an attorney; he died in Oakland, California in 1967. His wife, Elisabeth (later Elizabeth,) born in 1902, was a housewife and the mother of Hans (later John), born in 1929 and Renate (later Renata), born in 1932.

Life in Aussig seemed stable and predictable. The family had lived in Bohemia for generations and seemed destined to remain there. Until 1918, the area had been part of the Austrian Empire, and many people, including our family, spoke German rather than Czech. That fact, however, contributed to the Nazis' coveting the area, which they termed the Sudetenland. By the 30s, the Nazi-leaning Sudeten German Party was boycotting Jewish stores, persuading Gentiles to stop patronizing Jewish professionals, and agitating for a "return of the area to the Reich."

Our family was Jewish only in the eyes of the Nazis. Elizabeth's father had been Jewish but had converted to Christianity on marrying her mother, a Gentile. Frederick was raised Jewish but had essentially left the faith in his late teens. John and Renata were baptized. Though the family was not observant, they considered themselves Protestants. The distinction was not a very important one at that time and place. Intermarriage was common, and until the advent of Nazism, Jews were fully integrated into political, social, and commercial life.

Concerned about the rise of Nazism and alarmed by news of an arms buildup on the Czech border, Frederick and Elizabeth decided to move the family to Switzerland, at least for the time being. On September 11, 1938, we left Aussig; eighteen days later, the Munich Agreement ceded the Sudetenland to Hitler.

Staying in Switzerland was not an option, since the Swiss did not permit foreigners to take jobs nor even to rent apartments. In 1939, the family sailed for Cuba, to await American visas. These came about a year later, and in 1940, we moved to Forest Hill, New York. During those years, Frederick worked as an advisor for other refugees, aiding them in procuring visas and in other immigration matters. More moves for the Pollatscheks were to follow: to Lake Placid, New York; to St. Petersburg, Florida; finally, in 1947, to Santa Barbara, California.

My father's mother, whom we called Mamina, was convinced that nothing would happen to her if she remained in her home. When she finally realized that she had to leave, it was too late. She was "transported" to Theresienstadt, where she stayed for some time, and then to Treblinka, where she was killed. My father's sister, Helene Fürth, was also taken to Theresienstadt and from there to somewhere in Poland, where she did forced labor on a river embankment. Many other family members, as well as Jewish members of Elizabeth's family, were also murdered by the Nazis. Frederick, his nerves and health shattered by the events in

Europe, never resumed his career in law, for which, in fact, he would have had to return to law school, English/American law being very different from European/German law.

John attended Princeton University and the University of California, Berkeley, where he received a Ph.D. and became a professor of Spanish – a language that he had begun to learn during the family's stay in Cuba – at Berkeley. He married Beverley Hastings, a financial planner, and they had three children, Richard, Isa, and Anne. John retired in 1992 and died in 2019. Their son, Richard Polt and his wife, Julie Gifford's son Alex, a student at the University of Southern California, has converted to Judaism.

On arriving in the United States, Renate, not wanting a "foreign" name—least of all, a German one--adopted her middle name, Harriet, but much later changed it again to Renata. She attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and Berkeley, where she received a Master's degree, and taught English—and occasionally film history, German, and Jewish Studies--at Merritt College in Oakland, retiring in 1991. After her retirement, Renata traveled widely and wrote travel articles, as well as film and theater reviews, the last two of which she continues to write occasionally. In 1970, she married Frederick G. Schmitt, a professor of mathematics at the College of Marin.

Frederick and Elizabeth Polt remained in Santa Barbara until 1966, but after Frederick suffered a severe stroke, it seemed best to give up their house and move to the San Francisco Bay Area, where both of their children lived. They moved to St. Paul's Towers, an Oakland retirement home; Frederick died in 1967 at 71. Elizabeth continued to live at St. Paul's Towers until her death in 2005 at 103. John and Beverley moved to St. Paul's Towers in 2015. John died in 2019 and Beverley continues to live there.

The photograph was taken in Elizabeth's apartment. For her, the wall hanging, which she bought on a visit to her remaining family in Europe after the war, represents the two halves of the family's experience, first in Europe and then in America.