

Bernard M. Rosenthal

Photographed with his brother Felix

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

I was born in Munich, Germany, on May 5th, 1920, the youngest of five children. My father was Erwin Rosenthal (1889-1981), my mother was Margherita Olschki (1892- 1979). My maternal grandparents, Leo Olschki and Paola Rosen, had emigrated from eastern Europe to Italy in the early 1880s and in 1897 Leo Olschki (by then a widower) and his six children settled in Florence, where my mother grew up. Olschki became Italy's most famous antiquarian bookseller.

My father Erwin was the only son of one of Germany's foremost antiquarian booksellers (and a colleague of Olschki), Jacques Rosenthal. Both he and his wife Emma Guggenheimer were "assimilated" Jews who, I think, never visited a synagogue. After obtaining his Ph.D. in art history in 1912, my father, then twenty-three years old, joined his father's firm, the Antiquariat Jacques Rosenthal which was housed in a patrician building built by my grandfather in one of Munich's most elegant neighborhoods.

In 1926, my parents and we children moved from there to a beautiful villa set in the midst of a park adjoining the "Englische Garten". By the standards of today, it was a princely household, with a governess, servants, gardeners, a chauffeur for the large Buick, and even a seamstress who came every week to fix the children's clothes. These servants were an integral part of our childhood and very much part of the family -there were many tears when this world collapsed and they had to leave.

Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933. Thanks to my father's amazing foresight, in May of that year, a few days after my Bar Mitzvah, I moved to Florence with my brother Felix (Albi moved to London and the two sisters, Gabriella and Nicoletta, left a little later, for Jerusalem and London respectively). We all spoke Italian quite well because mother had always insisted that we speak Italian to her, and we had been to Italy many times during our childhood and had become close to our many Italian relatives - so for me, a thirteen-year-old, it was not what you could call a tragic emigration. I managed to transfer from the German Gymnasium to the Italian gymnasias, passing the exams by the skin of my teeth.

I was, of course, the object of some curiosity (and occasional derision) to my new Florentine classmates, not used to having a blond tedesco in their midst, and my accent and somewhat harsh-sounding guttural r amused them. But my Italian soon became quite fluent, and I adapted quickly to my new life. I joined the Fascist youth organization Avanguardisti and wore the uniform including the black shirt whenever there was a parade or some sort of official "do". I became part of the Avanguardisti sciatori, a group that emphasized skiing and winter sports and I was a member of the team that represented Florence in the national ski championships.

It may seem strange to readers of today that young Jews would join a Fascist organization. But it must be remembered that Mussolini was very antagonistic to Hitler in the early years of Nazism, and that anti-Semitism and racism in general were not part of the theory of fascism. German Jews who sought refuge in Italy in the early thirties were well received and were easily granted residence permits. Besides, joining the Avanguardisti was compulsory for all those attending public schools.

My brother Felix and I lived in Florence with our mother while our father was almost always in Switzerland, where he owned an antiquarian book business named l'Art Ancien S.A., a kind of Swiss branch of the Munich house which he had founded in 1920. In 1935, when ownership of the Munich firm had to be transferred to non-Jewish (so-called "Aryan") ownership, the existence of this Swiss firm turned out to be a godsend, because it allowed my father to continue his professional activity and thus to keep the family afloat.

My concerns were those of any other Italian teenager of the day until Mussolini began to fall under the sway of Hitler, and anti-Semitism started creeping into the official policy of the Fascist party in about 1936. When Hitler came on an official visit to Florence in 1938, for security reasons all the German refugees were given the alternative of going to jail or leaving Florence for the duration of Hitler's visit. Yet on the whole, life continued normally and I can't remember any incident of overt personal anti-Semitism during those years. I was even asked to officially join the Fascist party shortly before I turned eighteen.

In May 1938 but I was able to side-step this on the grounds that I was not yet an Italian citizen. I was in France during the summer of 1938 when a law was passed barring all foreign Jews from Italian schools. Not being able to complete my high school education seemed like a disaster of unimaginable proportions and caused me near panic. I didn't return to Italy and this was a far more cruel blow to me than having to leave Germany five years earlier. By now I was eighteen, and the injustice of it all was much more palpable and real. Through the kindness (and courage) of the principal of the official Italian high school in Paris, who admitted me even though it was against the law, I was able to obtain my high school degree, the license liceale in 1939.

In Paris we lived in an apartment which mother managed to make into a warm and elegant home. Yet despite the outward stability of our family life in Paris, we lived in a state of constant insecurity: our resident permits were subject to periodic renewal by the French police and being at the mercy of some bureaucrat was a humiliating experience. It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that I decided to emigrate to the United States, a decision reinforced by the constant urging of relatives in New York, who seemed to see the handwriting on the wall much more clearly than we did. It was, I thought, a rather hopeless dream, because the German quota was filled for literally decades; but to my enormous surprise and joy it turned out that, being a minor, I could immigrate on my mother's Italian quota.

On the advice of a friend, I decided to enroll at the University of California in Berkeley, and I registered there by mail from Paris. In late July 1939 my mother and I boarded the Volendam bound for New York. America (somehow, we didn't call it "the United States" then) was

sensational from the moment we landed: the customs officer at the pier asked me whether I really intended to live here. After hearing my eager "yes", he pulled me aside, out of my mother's earshot, and said: "Young man, then let me give you some advice: just remember that in this country, the woman is the boss".

Such informality and humorous friendliness on the part of a uniformed government official was unheard of to those of us who had been inured to show deference and respect, not to say humility, in our contacts with such officials in Europe. I arrived in Berkeley on August 13th after another sensational experience: a five-day train trip from coast to coast. I stayed at International House, a friendly community into which someone of my background fit easily. A part-time job as busboy in the I-House cafeteria supplemented the modest allowance I was receiving from my father.

A few weeks after I arrived in Berkeley, Hitler's armies marched into Poland and World War II began. I was completely absorbed by my studies. I had picked Chemistry as my major and I obtained my BA degree with a major in Chemistry in December 1941. I found most of my courses very demanding and hence my college years were not particularly carefree, except for the winter months, when I managed to ski in the Sierra. I was thrilled to be accepted as a member of the University of California Ski Team, an experience that contributed to my Americanization just as membership in the Avanguardisti sciatori a few years earlier had helped me become Italian.

My brother Felix, with whom I had shared life in Italy, had managed to make his way to Berkeley (via Chile) and in early 1941 we set up housekeeping together, sharing expenses with friends. Thanks to Felix, there occurred a further sensational event: the acquisition of a 1929 Ford Model A for forty-five dollars. My parents arrived in Berkeley from Switzerland later in 1941, and Felix and I moved in with them and gladly gave up our bohemian lifestyle.

Then came December 7th, 1941 - Pearl Harbor, and suddenly we all became "enemy aliens" because of our German passports. We lived under curfew, had our cameras confiscated and were placed under severe travel restrictions. Yet we were infinitely better off than the citizens of Japanese ancestry, who were deported to internment camps.

I was drafted into the US Army on Christmas Day, 1942; a few months later, in May 1943, Pfc Bernard Rosenthal of the 104th Infantry Division stationed in Camp Adair, Oregon, received his US citizenship papers. I was twenty-three when I underwent this last metamorphosis. In 1944 the unit to which I had been attached was shipped to England where we were first stationed in Manchester. I immediately contacted my brother Albi whom I had last seen in 1939. We met in the lobby of a Manchester hotel, he an English civilian, I an American GI. Suddenly, we were speaking English – or rather, he was speaking English and I was speaking American; ever since then, our accents have been a source of great amusement and mutual teasing; an equally memorable experience was being reunited with my sister Nicoletta who at the time lived in Cambridge. In July 1944 my unit was sent to Normandy. Landing on European soil in an American uniform as a liberator five years after having left as a barely tolerated refugee was a

somewhat strange experience, but the devastated landscape of Normandy had little in common with the France that I had left behind.

I first set foot again on German soil in 1945, shortly after the armistice when I was assigned to a Military Government unit in a village near Kassel. Naturally I harbored feelings of deep hatred and contempt towards the Germans, all Germans, but witnessing the endless destruction and the miserable condition of the population had a sort of numbing effect. My ability to communicate with people soon led me to realize that things were not as black and white as I had thought. Yet I found that although I was able to speak German without an accent (a source of great surprise to the Germans I encountered), in reality I was making the same sounds but no longer really speaking the same language. I had left Germany twelve years before and I was twenty-five when I returned, half a lifetime later almost. On the whole, I was relieved when my turn came to be discharged. I returned to Berkeley in January 1946, a little over three years after I had left.

In February 1947, somewhat to my own surprise, I was on my way to Germany again, this time as an employee of the US Department of Commerce: because of my knowledge of Chemistry and of German, I was hired to join a team which was studying Germany's wartime production of synthetic fuels. After our work was completed, thanks to my (then) fluent French, I was hired by the War Department as a French interpreter for the American delegation to the Allied Control Council in Berlin, the four-power body ruling Germany; the job ended, rather abruptly, in March 1948, when the Soviet Union imposed a blockade on Berlin. I was re-assigned to an office of military government in Stuttgart until my contract would expire.

During these two years in Germany, I returned to my native Munich (a Munich in utter ruin) for the first time since our emigration and re-established contact with old friends. I also was able to visit with my Italian family - they had survived despite many close calls and great hardships. It was during my stay in Stuttgart that I met my future wife, the pianist Lilli Bohnke of Berlin, the daughter of the German composer and conductor Emil Bohnke and of Lilli von Mendelssohn.

I returned home to Berkeley in April 1949. Again, my stay was to be rather brief: having decided to become an antiquarian bookseller like so many other members of my family (at that time, relatives of mine were booksellers in England, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Argentina, the United States and Italy) I travelled to Zurich to begin my apprenticeship in our firm l'Art Ancien. After my fiancée returned from a year's study with Rudolf Serkin at the Curtis Institute of Philadelphia we were married in Zurich in October 1950. A year later we settled in New York, where I had obtained a job with the Parke-Bernet Galleries (later Sotheby's). Our son, David, was born in September 1952, in Berkeley, where we were spending the summer in my parents' house.

In 1946, shortly after I returned to Berkeley from the war, my parents bought a house which became the new family center for years to come. Not surprisingly, the milieu was again rather academic and many of our friends tended to be former Europeans now teaching at the

University of California. It was, as it had always been from the earliest days in Munich, an international and multilingual crowd.

In mid-March 1953 I started my own firm: Bernard M. Rosenthal, Inc., Booksellers, was born on the parlor floor of an old brownstone on New York's East 7 1st Street. Thanks to my having a name well-known in the book world, and thanks to my international connections as well as a steadily increasing market for rare books, my business grew rather quickly. I also became very active in our trade organization, the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America. I was its president from 1968 to 1970, and thus had a large network of colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1964 Lilli and I were divorced. For the past twenty-six years I have been married to Ruth Schwab, a native of Luzern, Switzerland, who had joined the firm in New York in 1966. We moved from New York City to San Francisco in the summer of 1970. A few years later, in 1974, we found a house in Berkeley in which we live at present. Thirty-five years after stepping off the train in Berkeley in 1939, I was home.

I do not feel that I qualify as a "survivor". It should not be forgotten that some German and Italian Jews, particularly those who could see the handwriting on the wall, who had the means and the good fortune to emigrate early, who were young and flexible enough to adapt to new situations, were able to escape the horrors of the extermination camps, and to flourish in the countries of their adoption . They were the lucky ones - I am one of them.

Compared to what others went through in the thirties and forties I lived a charmed and relatively carefree life even if it didn't seem so at the time. To be sure, leaving my native Germany in 1933 for a reason which at the time wasn't really clear to me seemed strange. Being suddenly excluded from my high school in Florence seemed disastrous and completing my high school degree in Paris in 1939 under enormous pressure was an experience I wouldn't like to repeat.

Support was provided by my large and international family, and the financial means for travel and study were available. We were a multilingual and international family, and we took it for granted that when you lived in a country you learned its language and accepted its customs. Thus, by the time I arrived in Berkeley in 1939 at age nineteen, I spoke four languages, had travelled widely. I was even happy to be drafted into the US Army in 1942, grateful to have a chance to fight the Nazis.

I have become an American with strong and lasting ties to Europe. Even though I feel frustration and anger about many of the social and political injustices that have become part of our daily lives here in the US, I will never lose the sense of gratitude for having been able to come to this country at a time when truly it seemed like a dream. Nor have I ever lost my sense of wonder whenever I step into a voting booth. I know that all the rights I have as a citizen are also enjoyed by people in many other nations, but I was given these rights here, at a time when others deprived me of them.