

Felix Rosenthal

Photographed with his brother Bernard

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

I was born in Munich, Germany, on January 12, 1917, the fourth of five children, into a family of substance. My German father was from Munich, my mother from Florence. Both grandfathers, as well as my father, were dealers in rare books as well as scholars assiduously dedicated to the Humanities. In 1919 we moved to Lugano, Switzerland, to escape the grim postwar (WW1) situation, and because both father and grandfather Rosenthal, now wary of an exclusively German future, had decided to open a branch of the Munich rare book business there. I had my first elementary school year there, in an Italian/Swiss school, as a result of which I became practically bilingual at an early age.

Back in school in Munich in 1924, I soon had to learn how to contend with antisemitism: I was 7 when first called a "Saujud" (dirty Jew) by some rough kids and acquired a loathing for math that lasted over 20 years because of a sadistic and overtly antisemitic teacher who gave me failing grades no matter how well I performed.

With mother's side of the family in Florence, we would be sent to Italy for most vacations in the Twenties. This proved to be most useful for the language, and also strengthened the family ties, a vital blessing for the time a few years later, when we moved to live there.

Nazism started intruding in my life in high school, in Munich. There were 5 Jews in my class, a number of Protestants, and, of course, in Bavaria, a majority of Catholics. We students, in response to constant political and religious frictions, established a Council, with delegates from each subgroup. The system fell apart in the fall 1932, when I waylaid and beat up the big Nazi who was himself about to waylay and beat up the weakest Jew on his way home. From then on till Jan. 30, 1933, we were most uneasy.

Shortly afterwards we Rosenthal kids were removed from the Gymnasium. Albi, my older brother, was sent off to apprentice at the Warburg Institute in England, where he still resides as a dealer in rare books; Bernard and I were sent to Florence where in September we entered high school. Our Italian by then was adequate for the switch, losing only a few months' time.

Mother took a flat in Florence for Bernard and me. Our father, the only one in the family with a permit to reside in Switzerland, stayed in Zurich to where the business had meanwhile been relocated from Lugano. He had, with astounding foresight, sent all the most precious books and miniatures to colleagues all over the world "on approval", with instructions to return them, not to Munich, but to our firm in Switzerland.

This, and the activities of the Swiss firm, eventually saw us safely through all the worst of times. Needless to say, in 1935 we were declared, like all Jewish booksellers, incapable of representing

"Aryan Kultur" and were forced to divest ourselves of our Munich business. We made a straw contract with our trusted senior employee Mr. Koch and eventually settled most amicably after he returned from Russian captivity. This first diaspora was not to last: In early 1938 official antisemitism came to Italy via the Hitler-Mussolini alliance.

After my high school degree in 1935 I had gone to Milan to study mechanical engineering, and now foreign Jewish students were no longer allowed in secondary schools or universities. At about the same time my father had decided to assemble the family in Paris, first in furnished apartments, and then, in January 1939, in a nice apartment in the first arrondissement, into which the former household goods from Munich were moved from their 6-year storage in Basel.

It was still possible for us to travel, since the German Consulates kept renewing our passports, the kind that had a large "J" (for "Jude") stamped on page one and was valid only outside the country. At one time, visiting friends and relatives in Italy, I was warned to be out of the country before midnight that day.

The French authorities, already shot through with Nazi agents, were becoming totally inconsistent with residential permits. One time, after the usual standing in line for five hours at the notorious "Prefecture de Police", I was arbitrarily refused an extension of my student visa. I had no choice other than to risk to stay illegally for 3 weeks before this could be fixed, I believed, with a 1,000 franc bribe my father had to give via a lawyer. I had enrolled in a technical school, not believing that I would have the time or the financial support for an academic title. I was going to take some exams in the middle of August 1939.

In July my mother took my brother Bernard to the United States by availing herself of her Italian birth there was no waiting for Italians, and Bernard, a minor, could immigrate on her visa. My father asked me to drive him back to Zurich in the business car, where it belonged. The Swiss asked that I be accompanied to the consulate by my father to verify this, after denying me a one-month visa I had requested on my own. We were received by a consul whom my father knew slightly. The consul never asked me how long I wanted to stay and stamped a 2-month visa into my passport. I wish I could find him and thank him. He unwittingly saved my life! We arrived in Zurich in the middle of July. Thanks to the consul's inadvertence I was able to postpone the exams and to wait out in Switzerland whether there would be war over Poland. On September 1st the Germans marched into Poland.

France declared war 2 days later. All borders were slammed shut instantly, and I was happily "trapped" in Switzerland. Had I gone back to Paris as planned, I would have ended up in Auschwitz, because after the fall of France the Germans rounded up all Jews in the North, including Paris. Incidentally, the Germans, after the fall of Paris, stole everything out of our apartment in Paris and labelled the loot so carefully that we were actually able to get back all the carpets and other items! Also, the concierge, having gotten wind of the impending arrival of the Germans, managed to take all the silver and hide it, and gave it back to us once postwar contact was established.

The Swiss police took a dim view of my presence after my visa had expired. I was ordered to report every ten days to show what efforts I was making to get a visa for elsewhere, or else I would run the chance of being interned in a labor camp. Thanks to a well-connected uncle in New York a visa for Chile was set aside for me. I went to Lausanne to the Chilean Consulate and received it in proper order. In early December I boarded the 33,000-ton Italian liner "Augustus" in Genoa and became one of about 600 refugees headed for South America.

Having arrived in Chile, we were then asked by loudspeaker to line up and present our pink landing card at a window to have the assigned final destination entered next to the name. At 6 PM one of the Italian ship's officers asked me to read a notice in German over the loudspeakers, explaining that the man who normally did this, had refused to do so after perusing the message. I bravely announced that the ship had to be vacated immediately and that we were to board the train standing ready next to it. The train would leave at 6:45 PM. No porters were allowed. Leaving behind property would mean risking its loss. The ensuing scene defies description. People whose average age was in the forties had brought along everything they owned. When we arrived at Temuco, approx. 400 miles South of Santiago, I gained my destination with several dozen others, at a quarter to midnight of Dec. 31.

I spent two months in this rather charming little town, a center of agriculture in the middle of Araucano Indian country (and, incidentally, Pablo Neruda's birthplace). Since my Spanish had become quite fluent, a hastily organized committee sent me to be surrounding towns where I was to look for jobs for the new arrivals. Our passports were still in the hands of the Police, so, when after two months a few others and I simply left and went to Santiago, I did the South American thing and crossed a police officer's palm (at 1 PM, in his home, when not a mouse was stirring outside). It was cheap! I was given an identity card and told how to be in touch if caught, and how to get the passport if needed.

My Spanish had by now had gotten so good that I had tried to continue my Engineering studies at the University in Santiago and had taken a first batch of exams to that effect. When I was notified, however, that my US visa would be coming up shortly, I decided that I would join my younger brother in Berkeley. I left Chile on Nov. 1940, the day Franklin D Roosevelt was reelected to a third term. Of course, I had had to pay another bribe to get my passport!

On November 24 I landed in New York. I had to register for the draft upon disembarking (the alternative would have been that IF the US were ever to go to war against Germany, I would be deported upon war's end to my place of birth). In Berkeley, at UC, I tried again to further my Engineering, sharing a nice large room with my brother Bernard, the conversation with whom was beginning to be trilingual.

In 1942, I moved in with my parents who had arrived in the US in summer 1941 thanks to an extra-quota visa from President Roosevelt who had approved a list compiled by Thomas Mann of "500 Endangered Intellectuals" whose presence in the US would be desirable. My parents had come to live in Berkeley and had rented a house with a fine view of the Golden Gate. As a result of Pearl Harbor, however, when all Germans including the Jewish refugees (!) were

declared Enemy Aliens and subjected to curfew and restrictions of areas where they could live, we were forced to find another place with a lesser view. We still fared better than the native Japanese who were deported to internment camps early 1942. My parents, however, were not willing to put up with the indignity of the curfew and moved back to New York. My brother was drafted, and now I moved back into the place that we had shared originally.

In early 1943 the draft caught up with me. The day before I was to enter the Army, I sold most of my everyday belongings in a successful garage sale. It was therefore a bit of a shock when at the Army physical in San Francisco I was told that because the signature was lacking on the Alien's Eligibility" certificate, I could not be drafted now, and that correction would take a while before I could be called again! With little more than the clothes I wore I went to New York the next day, to stay with my parents. By a happy coincidence a friend from Berkeley called within minutes of my arrival, on a Friday. As a result, I started work on Monday morning on the German American-German Dictionary of Military Terms that was being prepared by the War Department. Since by then I was able to take a car apart in German, Italian, French, Spanish and English I proved to be most welcome at the offices where the dictionary was being prepared in a total of twenty languages. My technical interests and knowledge became very useful.

During the almost 6 months there I was "discovered" by a team that was looking for multilingual intelligence personnel. I did not ask for another stay of induction as I could have, and became a Counterintelligence officer in October 1943, scoring very high in both the mechanical aptitude test (139/140, highest in 6 months at Fort Dix, NJ) and in the General Intelligence test (140) As a result I later spent much of my service time in a "high IQ outfit", where a minimum of 135 was required. After a very tough basic training of 17 weeks in Alabama I was sent to Camp Ritchie Maryland, where I, together with many other Jewish German refugees, was given excellent training in Intelligence activities, especially in Interrogation of Prisoners.

In October 1944, I was sent to Europe, in a group of 220 Intelligence Personnel, to a replacement center in Scotland. We were told of a special opportunity for 7 enlisted men (I was a staff sergeant) and 12 officers who were to be selected for a special assignment in England, picked personally by the new Chief of Intelligence, Col. Hochschild. Jumping back in time, I had initially met the Chilean Hochschild in late spring 1940, at a reception at his house in Santiago, and briefly talked to him. He had, in the old days, known my banker uncle in Berlin. He apologized for being in a great hurry to leave for one of his copper mines, so our encounter had been pleasant yet brief indeed. I had no idea whether Col. Hochschild was identical with the man I had met in Chile in typical intelligence fashion the colonel sat with his back to a window, and his helmet pulled down so far that his traits were all but obscured from the distance I had to respond. In less than one minute he ascertained my fluency in all languages, and on my way out I saw through the corner of my eye that he had nodded to his assistant who had started to write. I was one of the lucky seven to be picked.

We were sent to Beaconsfield on detached service with the British army, for special instruction in matters so secret that were available only to the top 200 leaders on the allied side. The

others who had not been chosen were sent right into the battle of the Bulge. My bunkmate from Camp Ritchie was killed when the tank he was in went out to gather possible information and was hit and burned. When I finally arrived in France late in February 1945, I met, by chance, the soldier who normally was Col. Hochschild's driver. I learned that the colonel was indeed the Chilean copper king. Having dual citizenship he had volunteered for the US Army and, because of his international background and his languages he had been given this job. His driver added that his very kind and bright boss had one quality that was almost unbelievable: "He never forgets a face!" Here again then, my life was most likely saved by one of those totally incredible coincidences!

Thanks to my special training in England, I was assigned to a small unit that often performed exceptionally high-level interrogations and was given very important intelligence tasks.

We moved from France through Luxembourg into Germany. At war's end I was stationed north of Munich. In the following are some, but not nearly all of my assignments: I was among the three selected to establish Hitler's death circumstantially, with the help of his valet/driver; Baldur von Schirach, Gauleiter of Vienna, founder and head the Hitler Youth, surrendered to us (he was executed after the Nuremberg trials); I was given the task to monitor the interrogation of Kaltenbrunner, chief of German Intelligence (a State secret about which I could not even talk to my commanding officer!); With one assistant I was asked to check 750 detained men and women on whether they still were threats to allied security; I was attached to a US team of supersonic flight experts as interpreter in their search for items that had been top secret in Germany, such as the supersonic fighter plane, and the ramjet engine; to interpret for another team the German secrets of traction on snow that could be learned to be used in the first postwar maneuvers in Canada; I discovered an expert rocket engineer among the prisoners and had him sent to Alabama to work with Werner von Braun; I was instrumental in guiding Lt. Walter Horn to recover the crown jewels of Charlemagne

I was dispatched to find out, mingling with German civilians, how much food they could gather beyond the rationed amounts that we were about to have to reduce for lack of shipping space; I interviewed Mrs. Goering, mainly on her relationship to Eva Braun; I tracked down a war criminal in the Bavarian hills who had eluded three attempts at capture by Counterintelligence.

After over one year's occupation duty I was discharged, with the rank of Master Sergeant, in May 1946. I returned to Berkeley where my parents had meanwhile set up a home. Wanting to put more of myself into future activities than I could have done in Engineering, I switched to Architecture. I received a master's degree in 1950, having taken my graduate year with Eric Mendelsohn, who also hired me a year later to work in his office. In 1954, and in 1955, I was retained by the San Francisco Art Commission to be the Director of the Annual San Francisco Art Festival.

I opened my own office in 1955, in San Francisco, after having obtained the California Architect's License. Like most small architects I had my ups and downs, and also a few notable successes, including a publication in Germany. In 1970 the director of L'Art Ancien the book

business in Zurich, died unexpectedly. My father who had meanwhile returned to Switzerland with my mother, insisted that I come to help, since by that time he was over 80 years old.

Thus, I became a dealer of rare books like my 2 brothers.

My stay in Switzerland meant a great deal to my parents. I decided not to leave them as long as they were alive. They died in Lugano, a place they had selected for their last years when on their wedding trip. In 1983, with full approval of my brothers who had an interest in the firm, I closed it. We had lost the lease after 20 years in the same fine place. To move within Zürich would have been almost unfeasible for a number of most valid reasons. In 1984 I returned to the West Coast, settling in San Rafael, just north of San Francisco, and opened an office in Sausalito. I live alone, never having succeeded, in several attempts, to get married. At 79, I am not overly concerned about what amounts to gradual retirement. I enjoy my friends here and try to travel to see my far-flung family and friends in England, Italy and Switzerland. Other than the usual aches and pains of advancing age I am in fine health ' fully capable of enjoying life as it should be.