

## JOHN, ELIZABETH AND RENATA POLT

The family fled their native Czechoslovakia in 1938, going to Switzerland, Cuba, and then the United States.

*“For our mother, the wall hanging in our portrait, represents the two halves of the family’s experience: first in Europe, and then in America.”*

The Polt (formerly Pollatschek) family was from Aussig, a small industrial city in northern Bohemia, where they had lived for generations. John was born in 1929 and Renata in 1932. Their father Frederick was a lawyer. 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 the family, spoke German rather than Czech. But the Nazis coveted the area, which they termed the Sudetenland and by the 30s, the Nazi-leaning Sudeten German Party boycotted Jewish stores, persuaded Gentiles to stop patronizing Jewish professionals, and agitated for a return of the area to the Reich.

Frederick was raised Jewish but had essentially left the faith in his late teens. Elizabeth’s father had been Jewish but had converted to Christianity on marrying her mother. Elizabeth, John and Renata were baptized, but nevertheless, the family was considered Jewish only in the eyes of the Nazis. Concerned about the rise of Nazism and alarmed by news of an arms buildup on the Czech border, Frederick and Elizabeth decided to temporarily move the family to Switzerland.

On September 11, 1938, they left Aussig and eighteen days later, the Munich Agreement ceded the area to Hitler. But 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, and, about a year later, they immigrated to America. They lived in New York, Florida and eventually settled in California. Both John and Renata continued their education in the United States. John became a professor of Spanish at the University of California, Berkeley. Renata earned a master’s degree and taught English, film history, German, and Jewish Studies. She wrote travel articles, as well as film and theater reviews.

Frederick’s mother had remained in Europe and was sent to Theresienstadt, and then to Treblinka, where she was killed. Many other family members, as well as Jewish members of Elizabeth’s family, were also murdered by the Nazis.