

Preserving Memories

Author celebrates the life of her mother, who was one of 12 kids growing up in Depression-era Baltimore

By Amy Landsman

Betsy R. Rosenthal was only 2 when her family moved away from Baltimore, her hometown. But something always seems to keep calling her back.

It wasn't just the occasional trips to see family. It was more than the fact that her husband was also born here.

"Baltimore just kind of chases me through my life," she said chuckling during a phone interview from her home in California.

Rosenthal's parents, Edith and Leon, moved to Los Angeles when she was a toddler and her big brother was around 5.

Rosenthal recreates Charm City of days gone by in her new novel, "Looking For Me ... In This Great Big Family" (Houghton Mifflin Books for Children).

"Looking For Me" is based on her mother's life growing up in Depression-era Baltimore. Edith Paul Rosenthal was the fourth child in a family of 12 kids. "Lost in a sea of siblings," as Betsy Rosenthal puts it in the book.

"Her whole childhood and young adulthood was spent in Baltimore," Rosenthal said. "I've been working on this novel for years, and I spent a long time not only interviewing my mom and getting her stories, but also my aunts and uncles."

Edith Rosenthal currently lives in Northern California and Betsy is in Los Angeles, so along with the recorded memories she captured on her hand-held tape recorder, Betsy was often on the phone picking her

mom's brain.

"I was constantly calling her, 'Can you describe this for me? Exactly what did the rowhouse look like? What did the marble steps look like? What was in the different rooms?'" Betsy Rosenthal said. "There's a lot of Jewish content because she grew up in a big Jewish family. So there's mention of the holidays, they would go to *shul* for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, and there's discussion of the food that they eat, and they kept kosher. ... There's some incidents of anti-Semitism that she encountered growing up."

On one trip to Baltimore, Rosenthal and her mom visited the rowhouse where Edith lived. Her mother showed her where her father's diner, Paul's Luncheonette, had been located. "I got a good feeling about what life was like," Betsy Rosenthal said.

Having learned so much about her mom's early years, Rosenthal was struck by the contrast between her mother's life and her own.

"Because of the size of her family, her life was so different from my life, growing up with just one brother, the fact that everything was handed down and they had to do without," she said. "They had a lot of fun together as a big family. But they also were not well-off, and so they didn't have a whole lot. But they seemed to make do with what they had."

Rosenthal still has a lot of family in town. "The family name, at least on my mom's side, is Paul, and that's



Betsy R. Rosenthal (left) is shown here with her mom, Edith.

where there were a lot of siblings, so people might recognize the name," she said. "Then, my dad's brother who is a Rosenthal, still lives in Baltimore. ... This is also a coincidence — the man I married [David Michael Rosenthal], who I met in Los Angeles, his last name is also Rosenthal. So I

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was a Rosenthal, and I married a Rosenthal who happened to also be from Baltimore."

Betsy Rosenthal is the author of three previous works for children — "My House Is Singing," "It's Not Worth Making A *Tzimmes* Over!" and "Which Shoes Would You Choose?"

The events in "Looking For Me" really happened, though not all to Rosenthal's mother. Rosenthal combined some anecdotes to tell everything from her mom's point of view.

"It's a middle-grade novel in verse," she said. "My publisher slated it for

ages 9 to 12, but I'm finding that adults who are reading it are really enjoying it. I'm getting great feedback and reviews from adults. So I think the age range is really from 9 until 120."

A lawyer, Rosenthal was previously Western States counsel for the Anti-Defamation League. She stayed home when her second child was born, eventually having a third. Since she always wanted to write, she would work in those spare moments when the older ones were in preschool. Those little kids are now 16, 20 and 22.

Rosenthal is currently working on a novel for adults, and she has some other children's book manuscripts she hopes will be published.

Sadly, her mother is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. But her health was good enough before the book came out for her to understand that "Looking For Me" is about her life.

"When it was still in manuscript form, before it was published, I read the whole thing to her, and she loved it," Rosenthal said. "The way I see it is, she no longer has memories so these are her memories. I preserved them in a book."

For information about Betsy Rosenthal, visit betsyrosenthal.com. Jr

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