

At a time when the United States' role overseas is more open to debate than in years past,

BRYNHILD ROWBERG '39

recalls an era when America set the agenda for the world.

BY TOM SWIFT '95 · PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL KELLEY

AN ANGEL FIGURINE PURCHASED IN VIENNA hangs on her wall. Nearby stands a mirror from what is now the Czech Republic, and beside the sofa is a beautiful red chest from Taipei. The keepsakes that accent the Northfield home of Brynhild Rowberg '39 are attached to memories of a life spent in Athens, Vienna, Prague, Taipei, Bremen, Saigon and Washington, D.C.

In 2007, it will have been 40 years since Rowberg received a distinguished alumni award from St. Olaf. At the time of her nomination, she considered her most challenging positions to have been at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research in Washington, D.C. Her "unclassified" adventures included being attacked by a German U-boat while traveling overseas in a naval convoy in 1945 and, 10 years later, a terrorist bomb exploding beneath her apartment in Saigon. Rowberg, who was later stationed in Prague during the depths of the Cold War, would encounter danger more than a few times in her career.

World circumstances have placed Rowberg in a unique position of service. Having contributed to a rich chapter in American history, she nevertheless lives firmly in the present. Just as she spent her career building friendly diplomatic relationships around the world, she has never stopped being socially conscious, never stopped being devoted to her country.

Born in Northfield in 1917, Rowberg has family ties that stretch back to the earliest days of St. Olaf. Her parents, Andrew Rowberg '10 and Marie Rollag Rowberg, both attended the college. When Brynhild, the eldest of their two children, graduated from Northfield High School in 1935, St. Olaf was the only college she considered. "It never occurred to me to go anywhere else," she says. She remembers her childhood years in Northfield — founded by John North, an abolitionist and believer in women's suffrage, "all the good things," she notes — as a place of "plain living and high thinking." [CONTINUED ON PAGE 52]

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Brynhild Rowberg '39 was serving in the administrative section of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in 1957 when a number of American installations were damaged by bombs, including the apartment in which Rowberg was living. The bomb, which virtually destroyed the library on the ground floor, went off during the lunch hour for maximum effect.

She lived with her parents and younger brother, Leland, on Nevada Street near Carleton College and walked across town every day to The Hill where she not only majored in English and history but also worked in the dean's office and on the staff of the *Manitou Messenger*. In 1939 she graduated *magna cum laude* with department honors in English.

Times were tough and unemployment was high, as the Depression cast a shadow. "All we wanted was a decent, steady job," Rowberg says. "No one had far-flung ideas." That was especially true throughout World War II, when lives were put on hold. "During the war, people didn't think about making large sums of money," she says. "Naturally, we wanted to get ahead, but money wasn't the driving ambition you see now."

Leland, who was drafted into the Army when he was a St. Olaf junior, died in combat in France in 1944. Because so many families suffered similar incalculable losses, the sense of idealism at that time was palpable, Rowberg says. "So many of us, without even mentioning it to our closest friends, wanted to do something we felt was socially useful," she explains.

Rowberg moved to Washington, D.C., in 1941 and took a civil service job as a secretary in the U.S. Department of State. Four years later she was transferred to the Foreign Service, the personnel system used by the State Department to staff embassies and consulates throughout the world. Members of the Foreign Service are charged with carrying out U.S. foreign policy, negotiating treaties, and protecting American citizens and interests abroad, among other responsibilities. It is challenging and complex work.

At the time, the Foreign Service "was pretty much white males from the Ivy League," says Robert Flaten '56. Flaten, former U.S. ambassador to Rwanda, has known Rowberg for more than 45 years. "She's a remarkable woman," he says. "She joined a very elite group. She really was a pioneer."

The Foreign Service follows an up-or-out career path similar to the military; members not promoted are let go. Rowberg steadily rose in rank. In 1956 she was commissioned as a "Foreign Service officer of career, a consular officer and secretary in the Diplomatic Service," an uncommon

career path for a woman in the 1950s, but she had her own breed of independence.

After serving in England, Italy, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Greece and Indo-China, Rowberg was transferred in 1958 to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department, where she helped prepare a National Intelligence Estimate — intelligence documents that America develops on countries throughout the world — for Germany. She left that position in 1962 to become American consul in Bremen, Germany. But her most challenging and interesting work began in 1967 when she was appointed a political officer in the Office of Korean Affairs, Department of

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State. Among many responsibilities, political officers in the Foreign Service deal with governmental and social issues of countries with which the United States is engaged.

When the North Koreans captured the crew of the USS Pueblo in 1968 — a notable incident in U.S. history because it was the first surrender of a naval ship since the War of 1812 — Rowberg was involved almost exclusively in the negotiations that ultimately led to their being freed. Her duties included writing classified cables to more than 100 nations in an effort to find a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.

"The North Koreans are some of the most difficult people in the world to deal with," Rowberg says. "This was challenging for all of us on the Korean desk. It was high-stress work the entire time I was there and especially during the 11 months it took to set the crewmen free."

Transferred in 1971 to the American Embassy in Taipei as deputy chief of the economic section and military assistance officer, a rank equivalent to that of an Army colonel, Rowberg remained there until 1973 when a sudden hearing loss caused by a hereditary condition compelled her to retire.

COMING HOME

Friends describe Rowberg as sophisticated, generous, articulate, curious and an excellent problem-solver. She's also witty. When asked about the secret to a long, productive and varied life, Rowberg promptly answers:

"Genetics." She returned to Northfield in 1978 to care for her aging mother. "My mother lived to 98 and never lost her sense of humor," she says.

Rowberg, who never married and has no children, continues to live in Northfield and enjoys its cultural events and access to the Twin Cities. She still travels periodically to Washington, D.C., where, Flaten says, she "still has more friends than I do."

She remains an engaged, concerned citizen. Her career unfolded during perilous times, "and we are living through perilous times again," she says. She's "concerned with the near and distant future" of her country, in part because of the war in

Iraq, an action that she opposed. "A lot of people tend to pay no attention to it. It's just something that's going on a long ways away," says Rowberg. "People have no idea what the families are experiencing. Only the men in combat know what's going on."

Rowberg actively follows the news and understands the political undertones of current events. "America is neglecting things we should be doing at home," she says. She worries about what she perceives as a shift in the philosophy of U.S. foreign policy. "I don't like American unilateralism or American arrogance," Rowberg says. "We were not arrogant [in those years]. Sure, there were arrogant Americans but we were not an arrogant people."

Rowberg busies herself with Northfield's chapter of the League of Women Voters and in various capacities at St. John's Lutheran Church. She wrote an introduction to a book published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association as well as a number of pieces for the Minnesota Historical Society, and she recently lectured at St. Olaf about some of her career experiences.

"Social justice means a lot to Brynhild," says longtime friend Margaret Spear '45. "She's always been interested in making this a better world." 🍷

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