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By Thomas Morgan
Washington Post Staff Writer

John Rudder knew 30-odd years ago that he was being watched. The FBI men in three-piece suits and fedoras would go right up to his employers, right up to his neighbors — right up to John Rudder — and ask questions.

"What are you doing now, John?" the men would ask, as they climbed from Washington street corners into the cab he drove during a time when the headlines were of President Eisenhower, the Korean War and the Rosenberg spy trials. "Are you ready to talk?"

2 Generations of 'Subversives' Pay High Price

He never was — at least not to the neatly dressed FBI men.

Three decades later, Rudder, 56, finally learned the extent of the FBI investigation into his life during the 1950s and '60s: His daughter Miriam, 25, was denied a security clearance in 1977 as a research aide with a congressional committee investigating the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin

Luther King Jr. Miriam's record was not the problem. Her father's was.

The FBI had compiled eight volumes on John Rudder by 1967, when surveillance ended, and had labeled him a Communist years before. In its 1977 security report on Miriam, the FBI mentioned that she had attended a "subversive" secular Jewish school at age 10. The CIA, which also reviewed Miriam's security status for the committee,

recommended that she be denied clearance not because of anything she had done, but because of her parents' long history of protest activity. Miriam was bound to have close bonds of affection to them, the CIA reported.

Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), the committee chairman and himself a former street-marching civil rights activist, had the power to veto the CIA recommendation, but he did not.

"There was nothing else I could do," Stokes says. "It's not my job to get her clearance. I did about all I could do."

So, long after popular opinion has come to share John Rudder's disgust for racial discrimination, the Vietnam War and any number of other causes he has championed, the discredited FBI tactics used against him have kept his daughter from getting a job. [Since then, she has bounced from temporary job to temporary job, and been periodically unemployed, as she is today.]

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RUDDERS, From A1

"I am not a Communist," says John Rudder today. "I've never been a member of the Communist Party."

Nonetheless, those FBI files, Rudder believes, kept him — and now his daughter — from getting and keeping a good job and from becoming the civil rights lawyer he had once hoped to be.

Rudder and his wife, Doris, who marched with him on picket lines, were never leaders of any movement. They were not the Lillian Hellmans and Arthur Millers who eventually came to be respected for their principled stands. The Rudders were anonymous foot soldiers whom the FBI says today would not even be watched.

Following in the spirit of her parents, Miriam is now suing the FBI. And more than 40 million people recently watched CBS' 60 Minutes tell her story. That report — except for occasional newspaper photos of John or Doris toting protest signs on the street — was the first publicity the family has ever received.

The Rudders have been a fixture in the small world of Washington protest for three decades. Protest has organized their lives and taught values to their children. Protest also has given meaning to John Rudder's life — much of which has been spent working at odd jobs and living in public housing.

John and Doris Rudder inherited protest from their labor activist fathers and — much as doctors and lawyers routinely raise children who become doctors and lawyers — have raised children in their independent mold. But there has been a price.

John Rudder is a black Quaker. His wife, Doris, is white and Jewish. In the 1950s that in itself was protest.

The son of a Baptist deacon and railroad laborer from Paducah, Ky., Rudder started adulthood with great promise. He was graduated from Purdue University and in 1949 became one of the first black officers in the Marine Corps.

President Truman had integrated the armed forces the year before, but at his first assignment in Quantico, Va., Rudder was reminded that he was still black: A white enlisted Marine tried to stop him from sitting with white officers at the base theater; when he went to the base pool, white-sheeted Ku Klux Klansmen were

waiting for him, and a scuffle ensued.

"If you remember to stay in your place," his white commanding officer told him later, "you'll go far."

Rudder resigned, became a Quaker and took to the picket lines almost overnight.

A 1952 FBI memo about Rudder's participation in the short-lived American Veterans for Peace and its publication, "Vets Voice for Peace," reported his interest in these questionable activities: "It is noted that the articles in the above-mentioned publication advocate peace, worldwide disarmament and veterans benefits, and express opposition to the Smith Act, the McCarran Act, General Douglas MacArthur, racial discrimination and the American Legion."

Rudder and his wife became two of the angry people who regularly helped fill Washington churches and meeting halls to protest what they saw as racism. They met at Meridian Hill Baptist Church on 16th Street and the old Uline arena, then at 14th and W streets NW, to protest the execution of Willie McGee, a Laurel, Miss., man convicted by a jury of raping a white woman. They marched to mourn Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black from Chicago visiting southern relatives, who was murdered after whistling at a white woman.

They were always among the few hundred people picketing Hecht's, Lansburgh's and other downtown Washington department stores and restaurants where blacks could clean the restrooms but not use them, work in the kitchens but not eat at the counters, buy clothes but not try them on or return them if they did not fit.

"I remember going to a restaurant at 7th and E streets NW. It was a dime store, like Woolworth's, and we walked up to the counter and sat down," Rudder remembers. "Blacks had just won a court case that struck down discrimination in places that served the public, and we were going to test the decision. A red-haired waitress, obviously a working-class woman, tried to ignore us and looked like it pained her to serve us. She kind of threw the menus at us. But we had won and she had to serve us."

They also made picket signs against the Korean War and attended the sad, slow-paced White House vigils to

plead for mercy for convicted spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg — two parents, like themselves, with children to raise.

Tenants of the far northeast Washington Lincoln Heights project for 20 years, the Rudders won a 1955 landmark court battle against American loyalty oaths, which were then required of all public housing tenants. "We were two little insignificant

people living in the projects," Doris Rudder recalls. "I can see signing such an oath for a sensitive government job," but not for poor people living in public housing.

These and other causes — opposition to nuclear bomb proliferation and the Vietnam War, for instance — seem hardly subversive today. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the Rudders' file grew thick quickly.

"I kept going, protesting and picketing, because we were winning victories," John Rudder said. "We won the loyalty oath case, the lynchings had begun to lessen and new opportunities for blacks began to open up." But real or imagined, Rudder believes there were consequences of that success.

"No sooner did I get hired," Rudder recalls, "[than] I would be fired, and it was either racism or those damned FBI files."

John Rudder was eventually expelled from Howard Law School for mediocre grades and, he says, his protest activities. His FBI file shows that his shadowy agents knew Rudder was close to quitting school and were even aware he had complained that he was having trouble sleeping because of mounting pressures from school and family life. After leaving Howard, he bounced from job to job, depending on part-time work as a cabbie.

Yet he never doubted that speaking his mind was worth it all, says Doris. "If anything, I was the one," she says. "I said, what the hell are we doing this for? I'm selfish; I want some of the good life now. He helped me understand why it was taking so long, and always, always, he was optimistic, believing in the goodness of Americans and that they would come around to change things."

His daughter Miriam remembers the many times her father — a man who had graduated from Purdue and become a Marine officer — took jobs as a radio repairman, a Fuller Brush

salesman, a storm window salesman only to be fired two weeks or a month later, the time she now believes it took the FBI to contact his bosses. Indeed, Rudder's FBI file confirms his belief that agents were regularly dropping in on his employers.

Rudder believes that is why the FBI men asked him that same question again and again: "How are you doing, John?"

"He would come home, after getting a job, and Mom and Dad would literally hold their breaths waiting to see what would happen. . . . Losing those jobs did get to him. I hold my breath now, not just for my father, but for myself too," says Miriam.

The children joined their parents on the picket lines as naturally as if it had been the country club green. They handed out literature or carried signs.

At home, they listened to the blacklisted and brilliant Shakespearean actor and political activist Paul Robeson on the record player. And between scouting classes and music lessons for all five children — Eugene, Karl, Beatrice, Miriam, and Lisa — the Rudder children learned that change can come through action, often unpopular action.

"I remember one afternoon when we were living in Lincoln Heights, Mom wouldn't let us play showers with the garden hose," Miriam says. "We went upstairs and made picket signs to protest, and we came down and picketed our mother. She laughed and let us use the garden hose."

Of the five, only Eugene, 32, and Karl, 29, became activists: Eugene, in the Free D.C. Home Rule movement

led by now-Washington Mayor Marion Barry, and Karl, in his unsuccessful fight to end the zone-map system of cab fares that some drivers say is unfair. Another daughter is the first woman to be a D.C. firefighter, and another wishes only to be left alone by the media.

John and Doris Rudder never worried much about themselves. But that Miriam could be persecuted in 1981 — a time when nearly everyone recalls the witch-hunting days through which they lived as a dark period for American freedoms — because her parents opposed racism, war, nuclear bombs and the death penalty even for alleged spies, angered John in a way that he could not become angry for himself.

That is when he sat down and wrote a letter to 60 Minutes.

Today, John and Doris live alone in the shell of a house in far Northeast. John is a substitute teacher, looking for a secure job at an age when others are preparing for retirement. Doris is a grade-school teacher.

If he had the money, Rudder says, he'd go back to law school and become a civil rights lawyer still.

"Frederick Douglass said without struggle there is no progress," John Rudder says. "Those who hope for crops without plowing are fooling themselves. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has; it never will. Until American people take things in their hands, things will not change."

"We have that right," adds Doris. "The Constitution says so."