

# letter from

## *Wellfleet, Massachusetts*

By *Richard Rosenthal* § “A Jewish Rambo!” That’s what this little Cape Cod town was getting for its new chief of police, or so I’d heard. It was 1990, and the Cape, particularly those towns situated on the lower part—Orleans, Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro, and Provincetown—was undergoing a demographic sea change. Changes can be quite painful. And I was going to be one of them.

Once solely inhabited by old New England families, the long-time residents of Wellfleet were making way for people from all parts of the country who had discovered its quiet, unspoiled charm. What had been a small fishing village was slowly turning into an upscale retirement haven. The old school vainly tried to hang on to power as the new arrivals came along and, with neither malice nor evil intent, basically outnumbered them. The struggle had been going on for some time when I arrived, and by then the balance had swung in favor of the “wash-ashores.”

In the meantime, my life was undergoing its own changes. My career with the New York City Police Department was approaching its twentieth year. That’s a long time to be working in one place. As a rookie in 1969, my first assignment was to infiltrate an organization, going deep undercover. Since then, I had been a police firearms instructor, a detective in assorted homicide, nar-



Police Chief Richard Rosenthal and Emergency Medical Technician Frauke Rosenthal arrived in Wellfleet after 20 years in New York City.



Most calls to the Wellfleet police revolve around traffic accidents, public drunkenness, and domestic disputes.

room. One could feel the tension. I realized that my first job was to establish a good relationship. I unlocked my door and it has never been locked since.

Initially, I had to play catch-up with the administrative things that had been neglected since the last chief of police had left the position. I'd sit in my office, working at my desk, and department members would slyly walk past, peeking in. I later learned that some thought it was a trick on my part to entrap them. Their paranoia ran deep. I can only speculate as to what a "fun" place this little department must have been.

Heading up a police department is not supposed to be political. Yet, in a small community, it is one of the most political jobs in town. I always remember being asked this rhetorical question by a friend, an experienced chief of police. "How often does a chief of police run for his job?" His answer: "Every day."

Moreover, objective law enforcement decisions, made fairly easily in an urban setting, become complex political considerations in a town of 3,300 people (20,000 in the summer). Police officers tend to encounter people when they are not on their best behavior; in a small

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otics, and robbery squads, and a helicopter pilot. I had even written a novel. When asked about my varied positions, I'd simply tell people that I just couldn't seem to hold a job!

Now my goal was to become chief of police in a small town and continue my professional writing. Applications went out to whichever police departments had an opening that year—not a large number of places. The application I sent to Wellfleet, a place I'd never even visited (indeed, I'd never been anywhere on Cape Cod), resulted in an interview and a job offer.

So I was both amused and bemused by this appellation put on me by the Wellfleet "street." In truth, the only souls in town who had even spoken more than a few words to me were the five members of the board of selectmen and the town administrator.

Now, one might wonder why the board of selectmen picked someone with my background. The answer is simple. Small towns often choose a police chief depending on the amount of trouble the department is causing

at that moment. If all is sweetness and light, then the chief will likely come from the ranks. Disharmony and rancor bring in the fresh blood.

In this case, as it turned out, there had been a breakdown in communication between the board and the police department, and between the department and the town citizens. There had also been long-standing animosity between members of the police and fire departments, which was particularly problematic as the departments operated out of the same station. By the time I was interviewed, the Board had already been through one aborted search for a new chief, and the position had been vacant for more than a year. In the end, what they felt was needed was a strong-willed, tough, no-nonsense, big-city cop to straighten out their little mess.

A Jewish Rambo, indeed.

My first day at work was telling. Every door in the place was locked tight. My office was sealed, the sergeant's door was closed and secured, as was the prosecutor's, and the squad

town that person might be your neighbor, a member of the board of selectmen, or just someone with lots of friends. Since voters decide on the town's budget and salaries, the same person who is subject to police action will vote on that officer's raise come time for the annual town meeting.

I quickly realized that in order to survive I'd need the support of at least two of three groups in town: the board of selectmen, the citizens, and the members of my own department. My goal was to get all three. Yet, I was new in town, and the position and community felt very strange. I was supposed to be here, but I didn't really feel like I belonged.

I was fortunate, however, in having considerable experience in getting along with people of very different backgrounds. I met my wife, Frauke, in Berlin in 1967. She was an architectural engineering student; I was serving in the intelligence branch of the U.S. Air Force as a Russian language specialist. It was an interesting mix. Her father (a teacher) had served in the Luftwaffe (the German Air

Force) during World War II; my dad had been in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Her relatives had been members of the Nazi Party, while mine were a mix of Democrats and Republicans. Her family were Lutherans, mine were Jewish. A perfect match.

Frauke turned out to be my secret weapon and unofficial liaison to the town. She served on the council on aging and the town hall building committee. When nobody else would take the job, she even worked as the town's animal control officer. (Her pay was terrible, but we got one of our two cats, Louie D. Pussycat, out of the deal.) Perhaps, most important, after attending a CPR recertification session with me on a whim, she decided to join the fire department as an emergency medical technician. Because she is soft-spoken and hard-working, she has helped ease the long-standing tensions between the two departments.

This is especially helpful when the police department is faced, as it is every now and again, with an unusual situation. Last summer, for example, we had a series of car break-ins around town and a number of burglaries, at night, where the burglar would enter an unlocked door and take what he could. Most of the victims were asleep at the time, a potentially dangerous situation. Due to the scattered pattern of these events, we reasoned that several individuals were involved—a major crime wave for a town like Wellfleet.

Since the police department is small (with rarely more than three officers on patrol during a single shift), we had to come up with an imaginative way to deal with the situation. Borrowing a car, we put a VCR in the trunk and hid a miniature camera inside. This allowed us to videotape inside the vehicle. For bait, we filled a woman's pocketbook with what would appear to be desirable contents: a wallet filled with out-of-date credit cards and a broken but respectable looking cell phone peeking out the top. The plan was a long shot, but our options were limited.

On the fourth day, the thieves took the bait. They also took our videotape. We later learned that after breaking into the car and discarding the pocketbook, someone realized that the car was a hatchback and gained access to the trunk from inside. Initially uninterested in the funny looking VCR he found back there, he walked away. Thinking that something wasn't quite right, he went back into the car, examined the VCR, and found

the videotape! It wound up in the trash and was never recovered.

We did finally solve the crimes, although using somewhat more routine police methods. Going over field inquiries, we identified a suspect who had been found asleep in his car near where several of the break-ins had taken place. The national crime computer database showed that he had been convicted of burglary in New Jersey. We then discovered that his family owned a tiny mobile home in town, right near the burglarized houses. He was put under surveillance, and ultimately we matched his palm prints with one of the car break-ins. Our major crime wave turned out to be just one 20-year-old young man.

Most days, however, work is more routine—budgets, personnel, and issues of public safety. The most common calls to the police revolve around traffic accidents, public drunkenness, and domestic disputes. Very different from the NYPD, but perhaps just as important.

The lifestyle change has also proven to be a good one. Where I once commuted 45 to 77 miles one way to work, I now bicycle (in fair weather) the mile and a half to the office. Frauke and I frequently have lunch together at home. Her daily trip to the post office often means that she stops by the station to say hi to me and check in with her fellow firefighters. And at the scene of an accident, when I arrive to perform my duties, she shows up to do hers. We usually have time for a quick wave of the hand before she grabs gear from the ambulance and tends to the injured.

From time to time, friends with Type A personalities ask me why I haven't sought a position in a larger police department. The answer is quite simple; I doubt if I'd be able to duplicate the lifestyle. So this Jewish Rambo is no longer chasing murderers and bank robbers or hovering over the New York City skyline in a Bell JetRanger helicopter. He and his wife have settled down and are living a quiet life in Wellfleet—at least to the extent that small-town politics allows. \*

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