

Celebrating the Life of
Renée Eva Watkins

February 7th, 1932
September 15th, 2025



Friends Memorial Meeting
Strawberry Creek Friends Meeting
February 7th, 2026

Renée Eva Watkins was born Feb 7, 1932, in Berlin, Germany, to Ruth Anna Neu (née Warburg), a psychotherapist, and Kurt Max Neu, a banker and economist. She died on Sept 15, 2025, at Alta Bates Hospital in Berkeley from complications following a fall. She was 93. Her ashes will be scattered at sea on the Marin side of the Golden Gate bridge – one of her favorite views.

When Renée was four her family fled Nazi Germany, going first to the Netherlands where they lived for four years, and Renee attended school. (She began in kindergarten and moved to first grade at her own request a short time later.) By 1940, the family knew they had to leave Holland, but they were still waiting for visas to enter the U.S. They flew to Portugal, using temporary visas they had obtained in case. Only two weeks later,



the Germans marched into the Netherlands. Many Jews perished, including her father's parents, for whom he had not been able to get visas for anywhere safe. Renee and her parents stayed one year in Portugal, where they lived in a resort hotel in Estoril that was packed with refugees from all over Europe, all waiting for visas.

The family immigrated to the U.S. in 1941, when Renee was nine. A few weeks after their arrival, Renée was sent to a series of boarding schools and summer camps for the next three years. Her parents wanted her to be immersed in English (which she did not know at first) and become assimilated completely, so she would not be seen as a refugee. These years were hard for Renée, who was isolated and alienated most of that time. In the fourth year, she rejoined her parents in New York City and attended Hunter College High School, where she excelled and made several life-long friends.

After high school, Renée attended Radcliffe College, graduating in 1953, and she earned her Ph.D. in History from Harvard University in 1959. While a graduate student, she was married briefly to Calvert Watkins with whom she had a daughter, Cynthia Watkins.



Renée read in six languages and spoke four fluently. She had a prodigious memory, and she pursued a successful career in academia. She taught and studied Russian history, Renaissance history and the Reformation at Simmons, Ithaca, and Smith colleges, under short-term contracts, before accepting a tenured position as professor of history at UMass/Boston in 1967, where she continued working for 23 years. She became a recognized authority on the early Renaissance humanist, Leon Battista Alberti. Her appreciation of the Renaissance period, art and literature continued all her life.

In 1990, she retired from UMass/Boston and moved to Berkeley, California. She was a long-time attendee at Berkeley Friends Meeting and, beginning in 2001, she attended Strawberry Creek Friends Meeting where she served on the Finance and Mutual Support committees for several years. She also attended the Berkeley Buddhist Temple and went on many retreats.

She wrote continuously all her life and published locally some poetry, fiction and memoir pieces. She also travelled extensively well into her 80s all over the U.S., Europe, and South America. She was also a constant reader (she had library cards from at least four libraries in the area). Over the years, she did volunteer work doing landscaping and gardening for a senior residential complex; preparing soups at another retirement home; and with the Writer Coach Connection, assisting middle and high school students with their critical thinking and writing skills.



A dedicated scholar, teacher, writer, reader, gardener, birdwatcher, and naturalist, Renée wove wry stories for whoever was lucky enough to be her companion on a neighborhood walk or a visit to a museum anywhere in the world.



A diminutive five feet tall, she approached every day with a sometimes confounding mix of fierce intelligence and childlike wonder. She was highly independent, prone to a healthy skepticism of authorities, and was a Bohemian from the start.

These traits, together with her imagination, humor and kindness, made her hard to resist. People enjoyed her company.

In addition to her many friends, who sorely miss her, Renee is survived by her daughter Cynthia and her grandson, Omar Kabbaj, both of New York City.

