Longtime Friend John Saemann was born in Nuremberg, Germany, the son of a prosperous Jewish family. His uncle was a toy manufacturer who gave him a giant electric train set whose tracks filled a room. His life changed drastically, however, when Hitler came to power in 1933. Soon, because he was Jewish, he was not allowed to sit with his gentile schoolmates; he envied but could not join them as they participated in Hitler Youth activities.

His prescient parents realized immediately that he was in danger and, that year, sent him off to the States to live in Brooklyn with an aunt. In 1936, they themselves tried to leave with his younger sister, Erica. Unfortunately, his father died of a heart attack but his mother and sister successfully emigrated to Britain.

Meanwhile, John was enjoying his new life in New York. He graduated from a Brooklyn high school and went on to attend Cornell University. Then he was trained in optics, finishing prisms and lenses for binoculars for the war effort. Drafted in 1942, he served in a medical unit but was never sent overseas. Stationed first at the Presidio in San Francisco and then in Washington State near Mt. Rainier, he enjoyed driving up into the mountains to hike. He intended to marry an American girl. Instead he met Margot whom he’d known as a child in Nuremberg. Soon they were married and had a daughter, Andrea.

After the war, the young family moved to Danville, near Oakland, California. John found what he called “a sweet job” as a sales manager covering the whole state of California for a company that made syrups for ice cream and soft drinks. In his spare time, he became involved in grassroots activism, working especially with the Downtown Peace Coalition, based in San Francisco, which published pacifist literature and did community organizing in the late 1940s and into the 1950s. Then came a blow--in the early 1960s he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He had to quit working; he needed rest and relief from stress. His marriage of 26 years ended in divorce. But then a second cousin, Lillian, whom he would later marry, came to care for him. And gradually he learned to keep his MS stable with a regimen of daily exercise and a
careful diet. He took no drugs for multiple sclerosis or anything else—a pattern he would stick to for the rest of his life.

During the seventies, John was active in the Gray Panthers, a group that countered ageist stereotypes, opposed cuts to Medicare and Social Security, and advocated world peace, opposing the Vietnam War and war in general. By 1982, Lillian had become deeply involved in Transcendental Meditation so the two traveled to Europe where they studied it intensively for three months. That marriage eventually ended but they parted amicably.

John moved to Portland in the 1980s to be close to his daughter. Drawn to the Quakers through familiarity with AFSC, he joined Multnomah Meeting and was active on its Peace and Social Concerns committee. In the early 1990s he moved to Eugene and started attending Eugene Friends Meeting. People grew accustomed to seeing him riding around town on a large, three-wheeled bike—a grownup’s tricycle. He also started working with Ceasefire Oregon, a group which ran an annual gun turn-in event. He recruited local businesses to donate gift certificates which people received as a reward when they turned in guns. The police took possession of the guns and destroyed most of them.

Writing about him in 2011, Friend Helen Park reported that “remaining active physically, intellectually and emotionally has kept John amazingly spry.” As he moved into his nineties, he suffered significant hearing loss and had to use a cane or crutches to get around. He lived in a succession of nursing homes. Still he remained intellectually active and often his letters to the editor were printed in the Register-Guard.

At the end of a full and spirit-led life, Friend John Seamann made his transition on March 5, 2019 at the age of 99. Surviving him are his daughter Andrea, a granddaughter Stashia, and a great-grandson Tabor whose father, Nicholas, is deceased. John’s sister Erica, now in her nineties, lives in Australia.

-- Sylvia Hart