

## ***The Renon Family: A Historical Perspective***

This document chronicles the history of the Renon family in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Caroline Renon is the mother of Walter Fechner (“Artful Scholar”).

Nicholas Renon, the father of Caroline Fechner (Ulrich’s wife) was born in Europe in 1903, but in 1906 his parents emigrated to the United States and settled in St. Louis, Missouri. He grew up in St. Louis and apparently had a happy time, as he later spoke fondly of those days. Keep in mind, the World’s Fair was in 1904. However, by the end of World War I (1918), Nick’s parents wanted to return to Europe, as they were not able to assimilate themselves into American society, even though St. Louis was one of the most heavily German towns in America (with Milwaukee, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh). They were essentially peasant farmers and wanted to go back to the life they knew.

Unfortunately, Nick failed to apply for U.S. citizenship, so he not only had to leave his childhood home and all his friends, but he would be marooned in Romania, where the family settled. The Romanians considered him a naturalized citizen, so he was drafted into the military. He eventually married Elisabeth and settled down in a rural area of the Danube River Delta, where there was a small ex-patriot community of German farmers. The Renons bought a farm.

This is where Caroline Renon was born. It was by all accounts an idyllic pastoral setting to call home. The farm field extended radially from a small village, with white stucco walls and tile roofs. You might have confused it with Greece.

Eventually World War II started. The Renons were fairly isolated from any action until the last days of the war, when the Soviet Communists advanced inexorably westward, until they were finally stopped in Austria by the Americans. The rest of this document describes the Renons’ flight from Romania and their eventual emigration to America. During the journey Caroline would meet her eventual husband Ulrich Fechner.

In 1944 during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War the Russian troops kept advancing in Southern Europe. At this time Nick Renon was thinking long and hard what to do but finally made the decision that he and his family would not live under a Communist Government. Even though their area, which was called "Banat" and which was founded by German and French settlers was well to do, he thought it would be best to leave.

Therefore everybody, including Caroline's Grandparents loaded a covered wagon with all anticipated necessities they could think of, including straw to lay down on. Then in September 1944 they started the long trip without having a precise destination, just going in a northerly direction.

Life in a covered wagon was not easy. They always slept in their wagon while they were on the road. Every evening they stopped by a farmhouse and asked to stay with their wagon overnight. They also asked to keep their horses with the farmers' horses until morning. Sometimes the weather became quite chilly, but they were able to keep themselves reasonably warm.

In the morning most farmers invited the Renons for breakfast, however in the evening they were on their own most of the time. The Renons consequently ate a lot of sandwiches in the evening. They carried a big pan with them and filled it with water to somewhat wash themselves at times.

They started the trip by going over the nearby border of Yugoslavia into an area that also belonged to the Banat. Then they turned to a mostly northerly direction and had to go through Hungary (approx 150 miles) until they reached the Austrian border. They crossed it, by-passed Vienna and came to a town called Hollabrunn about 25 miles north of Vienna. It was the middle of October 1944.

After approx. 280 miles on the road, Nick Renon decided to stay there, at least temporarily. He took the horses and wagon to a farmer for safe-keeping, and Caroline became friendly with the daughter of a local school principal by the name of Lianne Oeller. That was helpful in getting a place to stay, which was provided for them in the school house. While Nick got a job in an office (he was a good bookkeeper!) Caroline signed up for school and already had a classmate in Lianne.

Everything seemed to work out smoothly except the news from the war was not good, since the Communist troops advanced

further and further. Caroline mentioned to her parents that she knew a girl from the Banat in Oberplan and since it is located close to the German border it appeared to be a good place for them to go.

In late February 1945 Nick Renon decided to get back on the road and they were on their way to Oberplan, approximately 130 miles away. Oberplan was actually situated in the country of Czechoslovakia before the war, but at that time it was occupied by the Germans. They arrived there at the end of February and the news came that American troops (part of General Patton's Third Army) were approaching rapidly, but nobody had any objection to that!

On March 8, 1944, the American Troops took Oberplan with little or no German resistance. Everybody in town was in the basement for safety reasons and before long an American soldier came to the basement where the Renons were to check for German soldiers. His English was not very good, and he was totally surprised when Nick Renon talked to him fluently in perfect English.

He was not sure if this was real or maybe a German Spy!! So, he told him to come with him to his commanding officer, which turned out to be a Major Hardin. It did not take long, and Nick and Major Hardin quickly became friends. In fact, Major Hardin was looking for an interpreter anyway and Nick Renon spoke 4 languages.

The Renons also met a young couple, Erich and Melinda Zwertscheck with two small boys (1 and 2 years old). He was from Vienna and she from the Banat. Erich was an Architect and was temporarily relocated to Oberplan since Vienna suffered heavy bombing attacks

On May 8, 1945, the war in Europe ended and Major Hardin received a notice from his Commander that the US would withdraw their troops from Czechoslovakia, since it would be recognized as a sovereign country again. He told Nick Renon to get ready to move again and said he would notify him the exact date of the troop withdrawal so they could leave before that date.

The Renons and the Zwertschecks became real good friends and they set together one evening to select a nice place in Germany where they could meet again. They took a map and before long they pointed to the town of Freising in Bavaria (Germany), about 30 miles north of Munich. The Zwertschecks did not have any transportation of their own but made arrangements with a railroad dispatcher (a friend

of theirs), who would let them have half of a freight car and then see to it that it would go to Freising.

Somewhere in June the order came, and Major Hardin gave Nick Renon a Letter of Recommendation to ask any American official to help the Renons all they could. Major Hardin added that he would consider it a special favor to himself if they did so.

After getting on the road again the Renons came to the Austrian border (only a few miles from Oberplan). Alongside the American Soldiers there were Czech Guards present. It appeared that the Czechs were serving their own interests without any interference from the Americans. And sure, enough they wanted to search the Renon's wagon in order to appropriate things of value, including Caroline's accordion. They started emptying out the wagon. Nick Renon rushed to the American officer-in-charge and complained while at the same time showing him Major Hardin's letter. The officer was not sure what to do, so he called Major Hardin directly. When the Major heard this, he jumped into a jeep and arrived at the border shortly. Within a very short time all the belongings were put back into the wagon by the Czechs.

The Renon family went on and did not have any trouble at the Austrian-Germany border. Keep in mind that the Americans did deny entry into Germany for tens of thousands of Russian refugees from Stalin, who were murdered by Stalin after being sent back to Russia. After about 140 miles the Renons arrived in Freising about the early part of July 1945. They drove along Main Street and stopped at a butcher shop and asked if they had a room where they could temporarily stay. They were told they could stay in their loft. The Zwertschecks and Renons had agreed to meet at the Freising Railroad Station, but no time was mentioned. The Zwertschecks were not there at the same time the Renons arrived and also did not leave a note at a big message board provided at the Station.

Then Nick went to an American Military Office with his recommendation letter from Major Hardin and asked if someone would drop him off at the railroad station and pick him up later again until he could find his friends.

In the meantime, the Zwertschecks were there already and made it a point to be at the station sometime every day. One time Melinda Zwertscheck saw a military jeep approaching and thought that she

recognized Nick Renon in the front seat next to the driver! She screamed "That bushy hair, its Vetter Niklas, its Vetter Niklas..."

Shortly thereafter Nick got a job at the American Officer's Club at the premises of the Weihenstephaner Brewery. The Renons emigrated to the USA in 1948. A fellow named Ulrich Fechner, who had met Caroline after the war ended, followed later and married Caroline Renon in 1951. The Zwertschecks also immigrated to the US and they settled in Cincinnati where Erich worked as an architect. The friendship with the Fechners lasted a lifetime.

So, ironically, the life Nicholas Renon's wanted in America was taken away from him while he was a teenager, but then was returned to him under highly unusual circumstances 30 years later. All it took was a World War.