

HOME-LESS

In his own words: An interview with



Michael Rainer

I was born Michael Nicolai Borokovnova on September 29, 1940, in Odessa. In the chaos of the Second World War, I came with my parents and the Cossack convoy to Friuli in April 1944. On the way west, we were traveling by train in Italy when an air-raid alarm forced us to stop. The train came to a halt in the open, and everyone rushed out. I slid down the railway embankment, and my mother threw herself on top of me to protect me. That is my earliest memory.

We stayed in Friuli for about nine months before the convoy moved toward Austria. Then I suffered the first great tragedy of my life: my pregnant mother died during childbirth, and the child died as well. She was buried according to Orthodox rites in Paluzzo. She was lowered into the grave in an open coffin, covered only with white cloths. As we left the cemetery, two women handed out sweet rice, a symbol of a sweet life in the hereafter.

Later, when I walked through the Tristach cemetery with master mason Müller (the brother of Meixner's mother) looking at the graves, I apparently said: "No mama, no mama."

My father, Nikolei Michailowitsch, was a doctor. I remember him slapping me once when I played with his dagger without permission. When the English carried out the deportation of the Cossacks in Peggetz, my father was shot. I was standing behind him when he slid past me. Then two hands grabbed me and pulled me out of the massacre—it may have been my mother's sister.

I don't remember exactly how I ended up on the Tristach side. The "Schussn mother" came to the field to check on a cow. A woman begged her to take the child with her. Even though she had already taken in a child, she took me out of pity. When she returned to the village, Meixner's father was sitting outside the house. She asked if he could take the child since she

already had a Cossack child. He reportedly said: “Just leave him here. We have bread and a bed.” That’s how I ended up with the Meixners, a large family. With me and a Polish forced labourer, there were nine of us in the household.

At first, I didn’t speak at all. A few weeks later, three people came—two Englishmen, a Soviet diplomat, and an interpreter. She asked me which language I spoke. I naturally said: “German” but speaking local dialect. They left. From then on, I spoke the Tristach dialect.

At the Brugger household, there was also a Cossack child, Zilla, who had been with us on the train in Italy. After this incident, when I went to Brugger, the Brugger mother said: “Zilla is not here anymore, Zilla is not here anymore.”

Once, a few children were playing at Tischler-Wegele speaking Russian. I watched from the fence. Then Meixner Moidl (mother) came and pulled me away. For a long time, I suffered from psychosomatic symptoms, like bed-wetting. The Meixner mother had endless patience with me.

Before I could start school, I needed valid documents. I had to see the official doctor, who examined me like I was a horse and decided I had been born in 1941. That made me younger, and I received a new birthday: June 2, the day I came to the Meixners. I also got a new name, the Meixner farm name: Rainer. I received as a kind of “dowry” my mother’s passport with my original birthday, two photos of my mother and her sister (both very beautiful), and a spoon.

Before Confirmation, I was baptized Catholic again. As a child, I wanted to be like the other children; I never liked being called “the Cossack” or “the Cossack boy,” which always sounded a bit derogatory. I got along well with the neighbours. The carpenter Franz Unterluggauer became my friend. He had bees and sparked my interest in them.

In school, I had to repeat several grades. Teacher Brunnhuber belittled me. When he handed me my final report, he said: “Michael, you are nothing, you can do nothing, you know nothing, you will always remain a servant.”

During the holidays, I bought an arithmetic book from the Geiger bookstore and started practicing. I quickly discovered that I understood things fast and had a talent for math. The following year, I attended a six-week agricultural course in Leisach and could prove that I had learned to calculate. The teacher, Tegischer, encouraged me and supported me.

The next year, I had to return to the continuation school. It felt satisfying to prove to teacher Brunnhuber that I could do more than nothing.

At 18, I went to Switzerland, to the canton of Solothurn. I worked at a large farm, one of four belonging to a consumer cooperative, as a horse-hand. The fields were steep, and I suffered terrible homesickness, crying my eyes out. The manager asked if it was not steep in East Tyrol too. I said: “Where I come from, it’s flat.” Only after I was allowed to call my sister,

Meixner Toni, who was working the season in Eglisau, did I recover. The manager then transferred me to a better-located farm.

This farm produced premium raw milk for a children's hospital. I was amazed when I first saw the technical facilities for cooling and milking. I became the second milker; only a Swiss citizen could be the first.

After I met my wife, who wanted nothing to do with farming, I looked for other work. I joined the chemical company Roche in Grenzach-Wyhlen, near Basel but over on the German side. Thanks to internal training opportunities, I advanced to shift supervisor. My math skills helped me greatly. I stayed at Roche until I retired, more than 38 years.

One thing I believe I inherited from my people—courage. I was never afraid, not even of my superiors. The company wanted to send me to Scotland. I refused, even at the risk of losing my job. I explained that I would never learn English because the English had killed my father. The company accepted this.

I married ..., have three children and three grandchildren. In 1999, I returned to East Tyrol and bought a house in Stribach.