

VOLUME 106 - ISSUE #2 - 5780 - SPRING/SUMMER 2020

Chai Lites

FRESH PAINT

The
colorful
path
Renate
Dollinger
took to
The Summit
at First Hill



“I
like it
here,
it feels
like
HOME”



Renate (Ronnie) Dollinger's laugh is just as magical as her artistic talents are exceptional. A resident of The Summit's Memory Support Community, Ronnie's life story is one that movies are made of. A refugee from Hitler's Germany, she's been called the "Grandma Moses of the Shtetl," having exhibited widely in California and represented in private collections throughout the country. As Ronnie told us, "I feel free here. I am independent, I paint every day. It feels like home."



FAMILY TIES

RD: My gigantic German father, Otto Sandberger, earned an Iron Cross in the First World War and was head of the Cavalry stationed in Brieg. He was very rich; his father had many textile mills in Germany. The mill in Brieg, where I was born in 1924, was a great big one. Many of the town's people worked there.

My mother's family had a shop of fine linens and other materials. Otto made a delivery to the store one day. He saw Katie, took another look at this gorgeous young woman, and thought she could give him a son. She was engaged at the time but broke it off to marry Otto.

With Otto's blessing, my mother started a school for children of the millworkers. She was madly in love with being self-employed and very independent.

Katie stood five feet tall—that was it. Otto was huge like a tree. He was like a king. He wanted an heir to his throne. He could not forgive my mother, my sister Steffi, me or the world for the terrible thing that had happened to him— to have been given two girls.

On New Year's Eve 1935, Otto sent my mother to their favorite opera, "Die Fledermaus." When she returned she found Otto dead. He had committed suicide.

FROM RICHES TO RAGS

RD: After my father killed himself, his family disowned us as there was no male to become heir to the fortune. They cut us off entirely. The mill and all the property were sold at fire sale prices to the Germans.

My mother was one of the nicest people you'd ever meet. Through a friend, she heard that an old age lady's Jewish home in Breslau was looking for a manager. The friend spoke on my mother's behalf and she was hired as matron. It was a three-story building with 65 old ladies living there. Because of the Nazis, we couldn't get kosher food.

My sister had fallen in love with Max, a young rabbi-to-be. The Nazis were everywhere. Max was arrested and dumped across the Polish border in 1938, as were all Polish Jews living in Germany at the time. Most likely through a bribe, Max was allowed to come back. Steffi and Max were married the night of his return and were gone the very next day. They were off to America— there was a ship going and they were gone, gone, gone.

THE TRAIN OF LIFE

RD: In November, 1939, my mother said to me, "Renata, I'm going to take you to a place where they have trains. I am going to get you on the train because it will take you out of Germany. This is the only way you can live, so please don't get upset."

She smuggled me onto the next-to-the-last train leaving Germany that the Quakers ran underground. It was going to Holland and then England. At first I couldn't get onboard; there were so many children. She said, "Push, push." It was so terrible what was going on. Little tiny kids were being pulled by one arm to get on the train. If we were left behind the Nazis would have killed us. I never saw my mother again.



THE DOODLER

RD: The train stopped in many places, but I continued to England where I lived in an orphanage until it was bombed out. Then I lived in the subway tubes with many others. Everyone who lived in the orphanage had to learn to become a servant. Well, I was no good in the kitchen; I was not good at cleaning; I was not very usable. The matron asked me, "What can you do?" I said, "Paint!" The matron managed to get me an interview to one of the fanciest art schools in London. They asked me to paint a flower. I did, but I thought it was no good so I threw it in the trash. They pulled it out and gave me a scholarship. I learned a lot. I often say my doodles gave me a scholarship for life.

SERVICE TO COUNTRY

RD: In England many were called up for military service. Although I was not a British citizen, I liked the uniform of the women in the Land Army. I applied and applied for days. I think they finally let me in to get rid of me. I was a forester in Wales. I was five feet tall and was given an ax that weighed nine pounds. It didn't take them long to figure that I was not that good with the ax, but was terrific with the horses. They had Clydesdales that pulled the logs to the railroad station. I was responsible for two of the biggest horses you've ever seen. I cared for them. Lilly was sweet, Gussie was a little more temperamental (he was the male).

PATTON'S THIRD ARMY

RD: After the War, I had to do something to pay my rent. I remember it was VE Day. I went all the way to London to a little Swiss café. A beautiful English officer sat opposite me. He seemed to know much about me. He told me to go to Oxford Street at exactly 10 o'clock the next morning as the Americans would be hiring civilian interpreters. So, I went and the officer in charge asked, "Who are you?" I answered, "I'm your first interpreter." He said, "What? Can you speak German? Can you understand the dialect?" I said, "Yes!" "Can you speak English?" I said, "You're hearing me." "You're hired," he said. I worked as an interpreter in Patton's Third Army for two years. We had eight interpreters in all, all Jewish, who went to different spots. I was stationed in Dachau for a time doing secret phone and spy work and going out on special trips. General Patton was a really tough guy, but it was a really great job.

STOWAWAY FROM FAR AWAY

RD: In 1948, out of the blue, I got a phone call to sail to the United States. To make a long story short, I had left my papers behind, ending up going literally as a stowaway companion for an elderly lady. I didn't mind as my mother had trained me to be nice to older ladies. It turned out to be a Russian cruise ship. I came as an illegal entry. I stayed in New York with an aunt for a bit; then boarded a train for California to be with my sister and her husband Max. I arrived in California totally OK thanks to the blessing of the Lord.



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

RD: I met Gerry at a dance at the Jewish Community Center in Oakland. I thought it was going to be awful and it was. But then, to my surprise, in came this very darling man with thick curly hair. He was still in uniform having just been released from the Air Force. He walked right up to me and said, "May I have this dance?" About three months later we were married on leap-year day.

We settled in Daly City and gradually moved down the peninsula to our first house in Palo Alto in 1954. We had a lovely garden with lots of trees, parties and animals. I continued to paint and opened a small gallery. I was so happy with my life I decided to do Jewish paintings of the shtetl. I was also doing landscape paintings, one of which caught Ronald Reagan's eye and hung in his office in the White House. Four children later, we moved to Salem, Oregon and opened a big gallery. All of a sudden, we were doing well.

Over time, Gerry became sick, on and off, for quite a while. He was eventually diagnosed with lung cancer that had already spread to the spine. That was 2004. About a month or two later, he died. It was terrible.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

RD: Following Gerry's death, I came to Washington to be closer to my daughter. I was in an assisted living facility in Bothell for 14 years. I was doing a lot of shtetl paintings but was feeling a little sad. I wanted to be in an environment that was more Jewish, more understanding, more like the home my mother kept.

So here I am. I like The Summit, I really do. I feel free here. I am independent, they let me be myself. I paint every day, pretty much non-stop. It feels to me like home.

Being in a Jewish environment is very comforting. I am going to live here at The Summit until I'm 114.



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Nate Nusbaum, Chief Development Officer

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**MAY EXHIBIT:
THE ART of RENATE DOLLINGER**

**MAY 1 – 31, 2020
THE SUMMIT at FIRST HILL**

This is Ronnie's second show at The Summit; the first was nearly sold out. Her new work focuses on landscapes and seascapes. Pricing is very affordable so that anyone and everyone can own a Ronnie original. She donates all proceeds to the Art Program here at The Summit at First Hill.



The Summit's Memory Support Community, part of our acclaimed Assisted Living program, is located on the entire second floor. It consists of 24 studio and one-bedroom apartments – all with private bathrooms, walk-in showers and kitchenettes. Residents can spend time in their private apartments when they desire but are encouraged to engage in purposeful activities with community members and staff. The Summit's approach to Memory Support focuses on **what residents can do** (their choices and quality of life) – not on what they can no longer do. For more information, please visit www.KlineGalland.org/care-options/The-Summit-at-First-Hill