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About 2800 Words

THE FREE SPIRIT OF REINHARD AVENUE

by

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I first saw the name of Martin Tischler on an exquisite foot-high carving of a shepherd playing a flute. Now, ten years later, I sat across from its creator - a friendly little man with grey-streaked hair, impish goatee, and the arms of a gladiator. Watching him turn a rough piece of oak in his traplike hands, the keen, probing eyes seeing what was not yet there, I wondered how this gentle man had been able even to survive his 66 war-scarred years, let alone ride the edge of fame through three careers across two continents.

"It is simple," he replies. "God gave me something. I like to share it with others."

Tischler's "something" is a free spirit that works through his hands to reveal the very soul of wood. His subjects span the gamut from madonnas to devils, butterflies to bombs; and his bold figures, along with countless other art objects - crucifixes, toys, chalices, chessmen, fine inlaid furniture - bear his name in hundreds of homes from his native Transylvania to Austria, and throughout the United States. More than 700 of his framed works - inlays, reliefs, mosaics, paintings - have appeared in exhibits from the Columbus Institute for Contemporary Art in Columbus, Ohio, to the Wienermesse, famed exhibit center in Vienna. As a refugee in World War II, his craftsmanship was in such demand that Austria offered him citizenship as an inducement to stay. When he declined, a mysterious countess was among those who intervened to help him reach the United States.

Today a sprinkling of showmen, statesmen and fellow artists still drop by his tiny quarters on the edge of German Village in Columbus, along with a steady stream of friends, curious tourists, and neighborhood children. It is hard to know which is the greater attraction - his obvious love affair with wood or with people. It is the life in both that he reveres, and the quickening of beauty in both that inspires him. "Especially the kids," he will say. "To me they are always the future of everything."

Martin Tischler was born in the small city of Bistritz, Transylvania, in 1911. His father, whom he adored, was a policeman who instilled in him a deep sense of respect for every human being. An only child, Martin

spent much of his youth alone, roaming the valley of the lovely Bristritz river, climbing the foothills of the magnificent Karpathian Mountains to talk with shepherds. "They could not read or write," he recalls. "But their wisdom was deep."

He was charmed by the simplicity of their lives. "One robe for clothes, a bowl for food, water from the springs. Shadows told the time. At night they could guide you for miles by the stars. They could read the weather from nature's signs. And they were masters with the trishka, the flute, playing songs passed down from their forebears. Such sad, beautiful music. Like Beethoven."

His father died when he was eleven, ending his dreams of becoming an engineer or doctor. He would have to learn a trade. "My mother took me to a bakery. I didn't like that. We visited a machine shop. They didn't need apprentices. Then we walked into a woodworking plant. I took one look at the beautiful inlaid panels and said, 'This is what I want.'"

His mother signed a four-year contract and took in washing to pay for his apprenticeship. He speaks of his mother with reverence. "She would come home with bleeding knuckles," Martin recalls. "Do you wonder why I tried to be a good student?"

In those days, all students were required to keep a log book in which their teachers posted appraisals of each 16-hour day. Later, whenever he would apply for work, the log book would automatically be submitted as his application - and its contents would determine how he would fare in getting a job, what he would do, and how much he would make.

"You could not hide from your record," Martin said. "That log made your life an open book." Nor was there any holding back secrets or techniques by any of his twelve master professors. Their pride, Martin recalls, was tied to the performance of their apprentices. "And they taught me about life, things my mother would not have dared to discuss. You learned respect for your peers, your teachers; you learned to love the old ones for the wisdom they had to give."

In 1942, he was happily managing a woodworking factory. His wife had just borne the first of his two sons when the second World War, which had to this time been fairly remote, suddenly became a horrible reality. In the first war he had had to learn German, then Hungarian, then Romanian - in addition to his own Saxon tongue - as his little country was parceled and shuffled back and forth. Now he was drafted by the Hungarians as an interpreter. He continued to work as refugees flowed through the city. "The townspeople would run beside the wagons handing them milk and bread," he recalls. "It was so sad. They did not know where to go."

Then the Germans came. Hitler was ceding parts of Romania and Transylvania to the Kremlin. One day, there was a knock on the door. "Everybody out!" a voice shouted. "The Russians are coming. Take what you can carry and leave!"

"You cannot imagine what it's like to have to flee and choose what you are going to take with you," Martin said, "until you have gone through the experience." He chose an old sweater, left behind a new suit. "I remember saying, 'I am not going to put my good suit on in a dirty truck.' How impractical I was. My wife knew better. Everything she took was for the kids."

The Germans separated the men from their families - "They were saving us to fight the Russians," - and sent them on separate routes toward the west. Now it was their turn to pass through towns and reach out for milk and bread. Later, successive donors would in turn become refugees. "It became a chain reaction," he said.

Months later, Martin wound up in Austria. Largely by word of mouth, he found his family and his mother at last, and they were settled in a poor farm home in American-occupied upper Austria. It was 1945. They had lost everything. Their quarters were little more than a closet, their rations barely enough to keep alive. But they were together again.

The little family struggled to survive. "They would ask me my name. Tischler means woodworker - literally, tablemaker - in German. They would say, 'I did not ask your profession. I ask your name.' It was very bad."

Martin helped his mother clean stalls. He began to carve crucifixes and barter them for food. "You see what a profession can do for you," he says proudly. "I would make things the Austrians liked - toys, chessmen, jewel boxes. I would trade them for food." He sighed. "You don't know how much a potato means until you don't have anything to eat."

Military police were everywhere. "They would aim their machine pistols at you and say, 'Haben Sie pass?'" He grinned. "Over here you can get lost and nobody will ever find you. Over there, you were never lost. You were under such control. There was no way to get lost."

He got a job as a woodworker, walking for miles to work and back. Soon his art found attention. His firm won awards for excellence in Viennese art shows. He was commissioned to fashion an inlaid jewelry box for General M. Collin of the American occupying forces. In late 1945, he moved his family into a little villa in Traunkirchen, joined the Austrian Art Guild, and went in business for himself. When he made an exquisite inlaid "golden book" container for Bishop Gföllners of Linz, his name became known throughout Austria.

Yet, with money, fame, and more work than he could handle, he was still a man without a country. Transylvania was now occupied by Russians. He had heard what happened to his friends who were persuaded to return to their homeland. They were packed into cattle cars and transported to Siberia. He could not go back.

Austria offered Tischler citizenship if he would stay - "I know of no other refugee who was so honored," - but he had had enough of uprooting and turmoil. In school many years ago he had studied America, knew by heart every state, every capitol, their populations, their occupations. He had read where the trees were tall and the wood clear, the country free. His Saxon ancestors had trekked from the Rhine to Transylvania to escape oppression in 1145. Now, 800 years later, it was time to seek out freedom once again.

Fate smiled. He had entered some work in an art show in Vienna. An American army officer bought one of his inlays and sent a picture of its creator to his mother in Columbus, Ohio. She showed it to a friend.

"I can't believe it," her friend exclaimed. "That's my nephew!"

Martin and his aunt kept in touch. "But it is not easy for a family without a country to be received as immigrants, even in America," he notes. A mysterious countess ("We knew her only as Countess Pukki, of the International Refugee Organization,") and others tried to help. Finally in 1949, on the fifth try, he made it.

His total assets were \$1.10 in cash. "Those were lonely times," Martin recalls. "Not knowing the language was such a handicap. When people would wave and say, 'Hi,' I would die inside. I thought they were saying, 'Heil,' as if I were some kind of Nazi. When they would sweep a hand in greeting, I thought they were waving me off. Only later did I find that this motion means welcome in America." He has never faulted TV commercials. "They show and tell. That's how I learned English."

With his sponsor, Josephinum Church Furniture Company in Columbus, he carved fine-crafted altars, chalices, pulpits and lecterns for churches all over the country. Finding he could produce far faster than the other workers, he signed a land contract to buy an 80-year-old house at 492 Reinhard Avenue, paid for it in less than three years.

He has always been a prodigious worker. "All Saxon Transylvanians are workers," he says proudly. "We keep in touch. You will never find even one of us breaking the law or on relief." ~~Self-reliant, he even made the bricks for his garage. Later it became his workshop.~~

He studied American history, anxious for the day when he could become a naturalized citizen. He shed tears when he took the oath. "I had to lose everything to realize how much I really had," he explained.

"I have gained a thousand times more than I lost. I cry when I see the flag go by. How I love this country."

Martin launched into 100-hour work weeks to earn money. His two sons were in school. They had to have their chance. Today his older son, Reinhard, is an executive with a major manufacturing company; his younger, Ralph, an engineer with another.

"They tell me I do not charge enough for my work," says Martin, who will remind you that he never had time to study art. "But I am not a businessman. I could have been a millionaire. But what is money? I visited a millionaire recently. He was terminal. 'Martin,' he said, 'what's going to do all the million for me now?'" He pauses. "I ask for only one thing from <sup>Soul</sup> money - give me health. I ask for nothing else."

He looks about the dim-lit room, nestled into his favorite sofa, surrounded by clusters of his handiwork. He smiles: "I have become a millionaire -" he taps a spot over his heart - "right here. I am wealthy with the joys of living and creating."

What inspires him? "I have observed much of nature. It is no accident. There is too much of a beautiful order in the world. But one has to look to see. I try to explain to people how to see things. Once you learn to see, it becomes so easy to create."

Tischler has had offers to exhibit in Germany and New York. However, he is content to remain in Columbus. He has had over 100 one-man shows in and around Ohio. His works have been exhibited extensively elsewhere, both here and in Europe; many have been acquired by collectors through



such display centers as Lakeside, Ohio, and the Schumacker Gallery of Ohio State University. There have been numerous awards. Seven TV films have recorded his life and works.

While Tischler accepts these honors gracefully, he'd rather join the neighborhood children in painting fantasies on the walls of his garage. "I raise more kids than their own parents. I tell them what's right and what's wrong; I talk to them about life. I explain things to them - scold them - I love them." He winks. "Involve the kids and you have made it," he said. "Otherwise they break your windows."

For years he taught woodcarving at the South Side Settlement House, a school for rehabilitating delinquents. Many of his students still drop by to see him; most have good jobs. "They tell me how I help them see they are real people who can do good things." He smiles. "I had a hippie once. How I would talk to him. I never knew if he was listening. Today he is a government executive in Washington, in an assignment he loves. Sometimes I see him on TV."

Two years ago Martin had a serious operation to restore circulation to his legs. Years of standing had taken their toll. Today he feels he will never carve again.

But he still puts many hours into other art forms. Trapped for three weeks inside his home last winter, he created a fantastic seascape of inlaid woods - briar, sycamore, walnut, ash, poplar, kingwood, zebra wood, fiddleback maple. He turned aside my compliments. "I'm still learning," he says. "I find I know much, yet so little. There's so much left to do - so much more beauty to be revealed."

Much of it he has already discovered. "See that mosaic with the long reflecting glass slivers?" he will say. "Most people try to make slivers by hitting a mirror with a hammer. Never works. You must break it over a straight edge." Again: "Much of the craft of the old masters has been lost, or 'improved' till it disappears in mediocrity. For example, who today knows how to make the glue for wood inlay stick to brass? I tell you how. Rub the brass with garlic."

A deeply religious man, Martin has expressed his feelings in an endless array of madonna figurines, mother and child figures, reliefs, and inlays with religious motifs. "All art is not beautiful," he reminds. "The crucifixion is not beautiful. But it is important."

To share his creations, Tischler marks his work at prices the average person can afford. Sometimes, impulsively, he will even give one away. For this reason, he has often had to boost his income by taking on other assignments, such as designing a line of cabinets or furniture. But it chafes him. "You must meet others' expectations rather than your own," he complains. "I am best when I am free and can laugh and be happy."

Indeed, his trademark is the freeform spirit of a nude dancer, released from a block of wood by his skilled hands. For humor, he may find just the right piece of driftwood to suggest a leering dracula - and mount a set of false teeth in its jaws to enhance the effect. In one prolific period, he made 21 violins from local seasoned woods, true in minutest detail to instructions recorded by the old master Stradivari.

He is also sentimental. He will not part with his violins despite their obvious value (one was recently appraised at \$3,000), feeling they should be kept in the family as part of the Tischler heritage. His eyes mist when he recalls how the gypsies in his old country would bring him their violins to fix. "Once I fixed a gypsy's clarinet," he recalls. "The band came back and played for me. That was a great reward."

A charcoal print of a woman's face shedding a tear draws my attention. It is his creation - a likeness of his friend and fellow artist, Charlotte And~~res~~. "Oh,-I had the urge to do it one day," he frowned. "I was in a - how you say it - pensive mood. I think I was saying I hope she will shed a tear for me sometime after I am gone."

Later, we had dinner with Charlotte. She hates the picture. "As if he would ever die," she declared, her eyes dancing. "Why, he's barely ready for college."

He reached for her hand, beaming. "If you go with open eyes," he said softly, "Is not life the greatest college?"

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