

## A Pocket Watch's Journey: Witness to History and Hope

Hello, I am a seven-jeweled pocket watch, manufactured in April 1897, at the American Waltham Watch Co., in Massachusetts. My watch style is an affordable option made popular during the U.S. civil war but not designed for use by the railroad industry. Over the next many years I worked faithfully for my hard working owner, but eventually I started having trouble keeping accurate time, my crystal was badly damaged, and my back cover wouldn't stay on. My owner decided to take the advice of his friends and trade me in for the new trench wrist watch style, made popular by the GIs during WWI. The watchmaker placed me in the box high on a shelf with the other outdated and broken watches.

As I slumbered in the dark box, the WWI conflict ended with the peace treaty finalized June 1919, allowing leaders to earnestly begin the process of rebuilding Europe. The U.S. Congress officially established the American Relief Administration (ARA), under the leadership of Herbert Hoover. The budget of 100 million dollars in February 1919 was the first financial appropriation for the mission of feeding the children of war-ravaged Europe.

Over the next two and a half years, children were fed throughout 21 countries of central, eastern, and southeastern Europe. However, starting in the late fall months of 1921, the first waves of starving refugees from Russia were arriving at the bordering countries of western Russia, describing savage conditions—especially in southern Ukraine and the Volga region. By April of 1921, the ARA expanded their massive food relief program to include 100 million starving Russian children.

Russia's collapsing infrastructure started during WWI, followed by ongoing internal civil wars and rebellions, and unrelenting grain requisitioning practices by Lenin even through the sustained droughts, that led to massive crop failures. As famine conditions deepened during the late fall of the 1921 and throughout the winter months of 1922, thousands of emaciated villagers continued to leave their homeland seeking help. The ARA relief workers sent back reports that there was widespread starvation that was decimating whole communities.

Eventually, recognizing the growing severity of the crisis, Lenin yielded to accept foreign aid and permitted a public open-letter appeal in newspapers worldwide in July 1921, to "all honest people" for help in feeding its citizens. Congress responded, passing the Russian Famine Relief Act with an additional \$20 million, December 1921, allowing ARA for the first time to expand its operations to include adults.

Support by American private citizens outnumbered the anti-Bolshevik opponents within the U.S., who rallied in the united humanitarian cause, donating millions of dollars. The two major grassroots organizations that emerged from this collective action were ethnic Germans from

Russia living in the United States. Their mobilization supported Hoover's ARA with an additional \$100 million towards the cause.

The watchmaker was equally moved by the crises and recognized how he could contribute to the cause. He carefully removed the box I was in from the high shelf, spreading all of us watches and parts across his worktable. In the warm sunlight filtering through the dust particles from the 15-foot-high transom windows of the old brick building, he inspected and balanced my movements, bringing me back to life. He replaced my damaged back cover with a nickel silver cover featuring a copper inset of boar heads, crafted by the Illinois Watchcase Co.



Finding a screw-on bezel to secure a new crystal proved to be a bit of a challenge. The best he could find didn't have a long enough thread to fully close the seam, leaving a gap between my front and middle covers. However, it held the crystal securely, and it did keep the dust out of my movements. He continued repairing watches until he didn't have enough parts to make whole ones. Delighted, the watchmaker carefully boxed us up to send across the Atlantic Ocean through the ARA organization. My journey took me to a storage building at Heimkehrlager (Homecoming) Camp in Frankfurt an der Oder, in Eastern Germany, a front-line transition camp for the fleeing refugees supported by the ARA in coordination with the Red Cross.

Thousands of refugees were arriving in Minsk, White Russia and Kiev, Ukraine whose locations were thought to be the largest evacuation points of displaced persons, by war, starvation, and epidemics. Typhoid was the most serious community disease which had been successfully reduced in Europe over the last two years. Alarmed by the returning threat to Western Europe, the ARA added these two new locations to their currently established districts of service, sixteen months after starting up the first soup kitchens in Moscow.

Minsk received shipments of food supplies January 1922, with medical support being established four months later in April. Bathing and disinfecting stations were established to combat the wide spread epidemics, but approximately 150 miles north of Minsk; 600 Volga Germans are struggling in far more desperate conditions without ARA support in Polotsk. Nine months behind Minsk, in September, bread is distributed to the ethnic Germans who had come forward to register themselves to work their way to Germany. It is the only sustenance the Polotsk group receives to supplement their watered-down potato soup.

As the ARA began identifying refugees with confirmed sponsors for immigration, preparations began for moving the largest group of people thus far, by train out of White Russia. The 222 men, 295 women, and 436 children under the age of 16 moved through Poland over two weeks, arriving at a bordering frontier station, where a German train was waiting for them Dec 9<sup>th</sup> 1922. Among them, is my future owner. During the very early morning hours, the German train stopped at a sanitation camp nearby Homecoming camp. Here, the refugees willingly isolated for three weeks to continue the typhoid eradication program before moving to Homecoming camp. As earlier refugees had left for their new homes abroad, the newly arriving refugees take their place, starting the process for a peaceful, hopeful future.

At last, the box of watches I sat in was taken into the camp and set down beside an administrator helping the refugees get paying jobs to fund their immigration. My anticipation grew as watches all around me were plucked out of the box and handed to the men standing in line. When I was finally pulled out of the box and unwrapped, I was placed in the large square confident hand of Anton Klobertanz. He gave an approving smile as he recognized some of the English letters of the word American printed on my dial. Upon turning my crown, my second hand jumped into action without hesitation. Upon hearing he is to go to the train yards to keep the trains moving on time, I could hardly contain my excitement. This was a dream I could never imagine in the U.S., because I was not designed according to the rigorous standards for train watches, but I was more than ready to team up with Anton for this important job!

Anton Klobertanz born in the village of Schuck, a fifth-generation descendant of Michael Klobertanz, who immigrated from Germany to Rothammel village in the Volga region of Russia at age 8 with his siblings and parents in 1766. 155 years later, during the fall of 1921, Anton was one of a group of seven from Schuck plus one more from Pfeifer for a total of eight that fled their homeland in the middle of the night. The group of three men, four women, and a two-year-old journeyed northwest with what they could carry, through the bitter harsh conditions and winter weather to the White Russia region. Johannes Weigel from Pfeifer went to Minsk while the others traveled north to Polotsk. To avoid a risk of arrest while there, Anton and Rosalia adopted the alias surname of Preis.

Two of the eight did not make it to Germany. Anton's sister-in-law Cecilia Fesser couldn't cope with the unrelenting dire conditions anymore, and left Polotsk to return to Schuck. She did not make it back to her home village nor was she ever heard from again. Seraphina née Schachtel Fesser, mother of three-year-old John Clements and wife of John Lorenz Fesser, died in Poland after being confirmed for transfer to Homecoming Camp, November 9, 1922. Her son and husband, Anton Klobertanz, with his wife Rosalia née Fesser, sister-in-law Helena Fesser, and Johannes Jacob Weigel, all arrived together at Homecoming Camp on the same train.

Each day at the camp brought improving health and hope as contacts are made with family members in America. The first of many blessings, was Anton and Rosalia reclaimed their true surname. Johannes Jacob Weigel and Hellena Fesser married February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1923, in the camp. Anton's wife Rosalia gave birth to their fourth and first surviving child, Rose Marie, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1923. Rosalia shared with her daughter all her life that she survived because of being delivered and cared for in a hospital. Anton and Rosalia, had lost their first born at 3-4 months of age, and the next two infants, 2-3 days after birth, because Rosalia was unable to lactate due to the malnourishment caused by the famine.

Following his dream, John Lorenz Fesser learned that it was easier to acquire farmland in Canada than it was in the U.S. With the help of the Volga German Society located in Berlin, he and his son's sponsorship was changed from his Uncle in Portland, Oregon, to his uncle Alexander Rohwein in Saskatchewan. Eight years after arriving in Canada, Johannes Lorenz fulfilled his dream owning a farm in South Battleford, Saskatchewan, with his second wife and their additional seven children.

My train-yard-working days ended when infant Rose Marie had met the quarantine requirements to travel abroad. Her parents, Anton and Rosalia Klobertanz, and her aunt and uncle, Hellena and Johannes Jacob Weigle, boarded the SS Estonia in Danzig, Poland, Sept 27 1923. Thirteen days later, Oct 9<sup>th</sup>, 1923, they watched the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty on the horizon grow larger. From New York, they traveled by train across the U.S. to Portland, Oregon, where their waiting family lived.

I was kept safely in Anton's pocket over the next 33 years, starting with his first job at the East Side Mill & Lumber Co., in Sellwood, Oregon, sweeping floors for 25 cents a day. Then he hired on as a janitor at Lipman Wolfe & Co. department store in downtown Portland, eventually promoting to foreman of the maintenance department by 1940. In 1925 his son Tony was born as a U.S. citizen. Anton was naturalized in 1930 and in 1931 he was the owner of newly built family home. He took pride in watching his son and daughter grow up, get married, and have children of their own, which he embraced with tight hugs of love and joy. All his hopes and dreams were fulfilled by his hard work and his belief in the American dream.

April 1956, I was carefully nested between Rosalia's tatted handkerchiefs in her top dresser drawer when Anton died. There, I rested till Rosalia was buried with Anton in 1969. Daughter Rose Marie took me out of the drawer, while the stories of the journey from Russia to America flooded her thoughts. She held me tightly with warmth, pride, and melancholy, deciding I was not going back in the drawer. She wanted me on display in honor of her parent's faith, hope, and unrelenting determination of survival.

Today, 102 years after being placed in Anton's hand, I am still on display where his second great-grandchildren, help operate model trains with their grandfather, Papa Christopher. As the stories continue to be shared with the ninth generation of Michael Klobertanz, I am treasured with pride, as a symbol and witness to the Germans from Russia legacy.



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