

Kesk Florida Eesti Selts/Estonian Society of Central Florida

In Memoriam to Rein Raja

Born October 1, 1931, Eidapere, Estonia
Died January 16, 2022, St. Petersburg, Florida

Rein Raja shares a history and story that is familiar to many Estonians who were World War II refugees. Rein was born on October 1, 1931, in Eidapere, Estonia, to Linda-Marie (Sitska) and Juhan Raja (the railway station master in Tootsi, Pärnumaa). As the end of World War II approached and territorial borders were being redrawn in 1944, Rein, his parents and their good friends Karl and Leida Pärt, sailed by ship to Germany's shores. Rein's family sought refuge in the US Zone in Augsburg, Germany, where Rein attended the Estonian Altkool VI Klass in 1947 and the gümnaasium with Estonian classmates from 1947-50. The family found themselves in a community with an active Estonian congregation and, so, Rein, represented by godparents Salme Mankin and Karl Pärt, was baptized in St. Ulrich's Evangelical Lutheran Church by Pastor Uno Plank. From Augsburg, the Raja family successfully migrated to the United States and the Chicago area in 1950.

After one year of schooling in an American high school, Rein graduated from Lyons Township High School in La Grange, Illinois, in 1951. Military service followed during the Korean Conflict. From 1954-56, Rein was assigned to the Japan Signal Battalion, 8047th Army Unit and he held the rank SP3.

Like young men in many Estonian refugee families in the 1950s, Rein was encouraged to pursue a college degree in engineering. In 1961, Rein graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Illinois/Champaign and became an active member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) professional association.

Following college graduation, Rein was elected into Fraternitas Estica, one of the oldest Estonian academic societies founded at the University of Tartu. He served as the fraternity's secretary in 1973 and 1974 and again starting in 1978 until his move to Florida. His fraternity hat, sash and lapel pin with blue, green and white stripes were kept secure in his safe.

Rein built his professional career immediately on graduation at GTE Automatic Electric Laboratories. He served as a Staff Engineer/Senior Engineer from 1961-1980; product manager at GTE Communications Marketing/Transmission from 1980-1986; and as a Senior Engineer/Engineering Specialist at GTE/Siemens Transmission Systems in late 1986. In 1987, Rein became a telecommunications consultant with CP Consulting, working on projects from New Jersey to California. Over 31 years in his professional career, Rein was involved in the planning and design of analog and digital transmission systems for voice, data and CCTV, including large scale centralized alarm and maintenance systems.

Rein met the love of his life, Geraldine (Geri) Markese at GTE Automatic Electric Laboratories, where their friendship as co-workers evolved into their lifelong partnership as an inseparable happily married couple. In 1988, Rein and Geri waved good-bye to their friends and members of the Chicago Estonian community and frigid Chicago winters, and they established residency in the new home they had constructed on Tierra Verde Island, Florida.

With their arrival on Florida's west coast, Rein and Geri joined the congregation of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Central Florida and the Estonian community's Kesk Florida Eesti Selts (KFES)/Estonian Society of Central Florida. Rein soon assumed leadership on the KFES Board, and he served as treasurer until 2016. For decades, Rein's wife Geri graced the association's celebrations with beautiful table centerpieces and settings with placecards meticulously enscribed. At many celebrations of Estonia's independence Geri looked stunning in an Estonian dress representing Rein's native homeland.



KFES expresses gratitude to Geri and Rein Raja for many years of service.
EVA 92, February 2010



Rein Raja delivers his annual Treasurer's report.
Kesk Florida Eesti Selts (KFES)/Estonian Society of Central Florida, November 2013

It will not surprise anyone who knows Estonians of Rein's generation and history that Rein was a perfectionist in all he undertook, an avid record keeper writing his reports with elegant penmanship, an environmentalist ahead of the times who printed on the back sides of paper from discarded manuals and reports, and souvenir aficionado. Among Rein's prized possessions were many of his schoolbooks from Augsburg, Germany; his military dog tags; his first employee evaluations and the diamond-studded watchband he received on his 25th anniversary and retirement from GTE in 1986; ski bibs from Rein's competitive races in Colorado and lift tickets, matchbooks and travel brochures from international ski resorts and countries visited by Rein and Geri; legions of photos; and his meticulous records of his household and Kesk Florida Eesti Selts/Estonian Society of Central Florida budgets, all always balanced to the penny.

At first glance, some have thought Rein to be a private person. He was an adventurer. Those who know Rein well know him as someone who was either on the air, in the air or on the water. Little did others know that Rein was a man connected to the world through his lifetime hobby starting in 1956 as a HAM radio operator with station call sign K9EFR. Starting in 1961, when he earned his private pilot license at the University of Illinois, flight logs, maps, and airport memorabilia reflect Rein's 51 years logging over 2000 hours as an owner and pilot of three private airplanes. The last he sold in 2012. Living near Lake Michigan's shore and the Wisconsin River from the 1960s to 1980s, Rein shared with his friends his motor boat outings on Lake Michigan and in the Wisconsin Dells. Starting in 1988, the dock at Rein and Geri's waterfront house was

home first to a sailboat and then to a powerboat named *Tere Tere* (Hello Hello), sold in 2021.

Rein defined the meaning of *seltsimees* (good and loyal friend and community stalwart). All who knew Rein will fondly remember that special twinkle in his eye, his wry sense of humor and the warmth he brought to the parties in his home, plane and boat rides and association gatherings. Many Kesk Florida Eesti Selts/Estonian Society of Central Florida members hold Rein and Geri in the highest regard as the elujõud (lifeblood) of our Estonian community. Rein's private nursing staff, in their short time together, let us know they will remember Rein for the profound impact he made on their lives and they will miss him dearly; Rein's charm, respect for their work, and expressions of gratitude brought joy and reward in each of the nurses' daily encounters.

Rein let us know in his latter years that Parkinson's disease was taking over his body. We are witness to the fact that it never took hold of his spirit. Favorite recent memories of ours include Rein and Geri at the KFES celebration of the 101st anniversary of Estonian independence in February 2019, and the modest party celebrating Rein's 90th birthday in October 2021 in the assisted living facility that became Rein's final Florida home. We will profoundly miss Rein, the strength behind the fabric of our local Estonian family.

The members of Kesk Florida Eesti Selts (KFES)/Estonian Society of Central Florida extend our deepest condolences to Geri and to Geri and Rein's families, here and in Estonia.



Geru and Rein Raja at the 101st Anniversary of Estonian Independence, Keskk Florida Eesti Selts.
February 2019



Rein blows out his 90th birthday „candle“ with Geri and Private Nurse Jennifer.
Grand Villa Assisted Living Facility, October 2021.

On Tuesday, March 22, 2022, in a small private ceremony, Rein’s ashes were interred in Section 1B 9C, Grave No. 24, at Bay Pines National Cemetery, 10000 Bay Pines Blvd, Bay Pines, Florida. (This Federal property is tucked into the municipality of St. Petersburg, FL.)

--Written by KFES Members Lisa A. Mets and Erkki Taada
With assistance by KFES members Triin Karr and Tõnu Toomepuu
and Rein’s lifetime friend and
Rein’s mother’s goddaughter Helle Pärt Gawrylewski