



# The Search for Nicolasa

**OTHERWISE,  
THE MOTHER  
CHIN HOI MEEN  
NEVER KNEW**

**—An Historical Saga  
from Past to Present**

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## **Prologue: Origins Unrequited**

Stricken with a cerebral glioma, a type of malignant brain tumour, and at the relatively young age of sixty-five, famous photographer, decorated war hero and entrepreneur Chin Hoi Meen (CHM) of Rabaul, and latterly of Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, died without ever knowing his mother. The year was 1982 and in his last decades he had spared no expense, travelling and making fruitless enquiries in an endeavour to search for the mother whose name he knew but of whom he had no memory.

After Chin Hoi Meen died his youngest son and business successor, Raymond Chin, took up the mantle which was so dear to his father, and which was increasingly so to himself. Yet, tied down by a growing business empire, and with the passage of time dimming the truth and conflating legend and rumour, an impenetrable fog settled over the mystery that was Raymond's paternal grandmother. The ghosts of the past, it seemed, would not be so easily known.

## **A Fairy Tale Princess**

The Chin family legend has various incarnations, however certain basic facts are known. Chin Hoi Meen's father was the famous hotelier, Chin Yau Yee, better known to the world by the *nom de guerre* Ah Chee, and by 1915 he was well established in Rabaul as a successful entrepreneur and a man of legendary grace and geniality. By then, well into his forties, he desired a wife befitting his position, and to provide him with a son and heir.

Here, the mysterious figure of 'Kulasa' enters our story, not a native islander as might be initially supposed, but as family lore had it, an 'olive-skinned beauty' who passed her complexion and exotic looks onto her son Chin Hoi Meen. To the present day, her children and descendants continue to attribute their tall, distinct features from 'our grandmother, the Polynesian princess'.

In actuality though, knowledge about her precise origin was hopelessly confused. Some thought she was Guamese, some from Saipan, some Filipino or Malay and others thought she even hailed further afield, from parts unknown.

Whatever her origins, Ah Chee and Kulasa





A rare photo of Ah Chee (*centre*) outside his hotel with two Australian friends who no doubt benefited from his famed generosity

were married in 1916 and Chin Hoi Meen was born on the 28 January 1917. There followed a daughter, Dolly, who was born and died in 1920 at the age of six days. Thereafter, Kulasa seems to have vanished from the record entirely.

Family lore is again contradictory, but variously says that she was kidnapped by a German man, or, that she ran away with a German man, or, that she was forced out by Ah Chee and then married a German man. The story begs a thousand questions, such as why did she leave her only son behind? Did she leave New Guinea and return to her native place, wherever that might have been? Did she remarry and have more children?

Or is the whole story of a German lover completely fanciful and did she in fact die in obscure ignominy shortly after her ejection from the Chin household? Alternatively, a more mundane but rational explanation might be that she was simply another mother that died from complications of childbirth, as was common in those times.

## 'Almost impossible'

The name Kulasa is the singular appendage to the entry of 'name and maiden surname of mother' on Chin Hoi Meen's death certificate, and reveals no other information. This information had been evidently drawn from an older, now lost, piece of documentation, and of which the certificate's informant had no recollection. Until two years ago this death certificate was the only piece of evidence that gave a hint of her identity.

Then, in late 2019 my father's first cousin, Raymond Chin, approached me with a proposition, to see if new life could be breathed into the search for his grandmother, Kulasa. He had heard of my ongoing research into the histories and genealogies of the New Guinea Chinese and wondered if I could help. I was fascinated and intrigued and so I accepted, although I cautioned Raymond that the search may well prove fruitless. After all, the last anyone had ever heard of Kulasa was nearly 100 years before. The chances of solving this mystery, I thought, might be like trying to piece together bits of a broken needle in a massive 100-year-old genealogical haystack ... almost impossible.

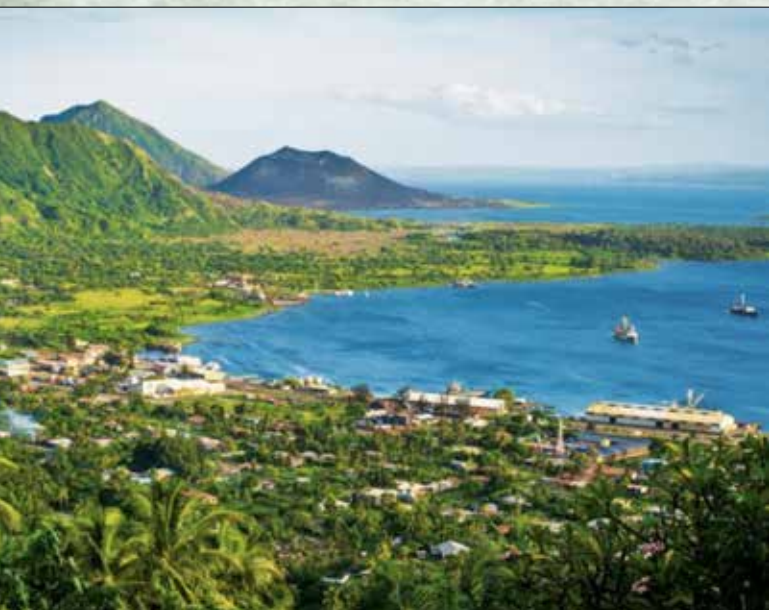
## The Evolution of Kulasa

Having the least information available can be a blessing in disguise; there is no surfeit of confusing information, and you take the most direct route available. In this case, the obvious place to look for Kulasa was at the registry of births, deaths and marriages in PNG, with the aim of obtaining the full birth registration information of Chin Hoi Meen.

Raymond and I made inquiries with the registry which is usually a difficult and unreliable facility to access. Yet, we were in luck, and after a few months of eager anticipation we managed to obtain an official transcript of the Chin Hoi Meen's birth certificate, which provided us our next vital clue. In it, Kulasa was recorded as being of the tender age of eighteen at CHM's birth. Crucially, her place of birth was also listed and revealed as Saipan, Caroline Islands—a small but significant breakthrough.

In the months whilst waiting for CHM's birth registration to arrive, I also consulted a little-known reference work, namely, the *Genealogical*





*Index to Australians and other expatriates in Papua New Guinea 1888–1975.* This resource is a *pot-pourri* of indexed cemetery records, probates records, newspaper birth death and marriage records and other miscellaneous records sets.

As well as documenting the colonial European presence in PNG, the *Genealogical Index* is a valuable source of information on the Asian and Asian-mixed raced populations in PNG during that time. Consulting it, I discovered the indexed entries of both the marriage of Ah Chee, and, the birth of CHM. In both entries, where Kulasa's name was expected, was instead written the name of 'Nicolasa (Nicolasa) Asan'. The birth of CHM's deceased infant sister, Dolly, was also indexed, but with her mother's name as simply put as, 'Colosa'. Joining the dots, it then became quite apparent that Kulasa was merely a spelling variant on 'Colosa', but both were clearly shortened forms of the fully realised and exotic-sounding name of Nicolasa. The mysterious Kulasa of unknown place now

became Nicolasa Asan of Saipan, Caroline Islands, and the identity of CHM's mother, and where to look for her, came into much clearer focus.

## No Strangers to These Shores

The sandy beaches, crystal lagoons and verdant coastlines of former German New Guinea, were certainly no stranger to itinerant folk from abroad. As well as the usual contingent of pith-helmeted, starched colonials, there came large numbers of industrious and stoic Chinese merchants, artisans and labourers, of which Ah Chee stood among them. Then, in much smaller numbers, came the indentured Malays, Javanese and Ambonese, who often worked as clerks and labourers. There was also a sprinkling of adventurous Japanese artisans and businessmen. Others yet, were the Micronesian Caroline islanders, principally from the miniscule island colonies of Guam, Yap, and Saipan, the last being Nicolasa's native land. Saipan Island was sold by Spain to the German Empire in 1899, who in turn constituted it as a part of German New Guinea.

From that time on, surnames of Carolinian origin begin appearing in New Guinea, among them: Guerrero, De La Cruz, Conboy, Aquingo, Alden, Esteves, Marquess, Tadoi and Luhan. One of the witnesses to the marriage to Ah Chee and Nicolasa was one Titus Conboy, a fellow Carolinian, although he appears to be unrelated to her.

Nicolasa and her kinsfolk belonged to the Chamorro, originally, a dark-skinned, Austronesian peoples who originated in south-east Asia and migrated throughout the western Pacific islands. Gradually, starting with Spanish colonisation in 1668, the indigenous Chamorro became increasingly mixed with workers and migrants from Asia, most often from the Philippine Islands (also a Spanish colony), but also from China and Japan.

Their Spanish colonial masters themselves were not averse to intermarrying with the indigenous and immigrant locals, thus further colouring the mixing pot and in the process introducing their Spanish surnames. Centuries of genetic mixing characterise the modern Chamorro people today, whose complex features betray all of their islander, Asian and European roots.



## Following the Chamorro Grapevine

Armed with knowledge of Nicolasa's origins, and with the benefit of modern technology, I began a Google search for Chamorro historians and researchers. My first contact was with Jilette Leon-Guerrero, an anthropologist and historian, who runs the web-based site, *Guampedia*. She referred me on to an amateur historian and genealogist, Herman T Guerrero, who has compiled the genealogies of hundreds of Chamorro families. I briefed Herman on my project and he consulted his database of genealogies, looking generally for families surnamed Asan, but in particular seeing if there were any individuals that were an age and name-match for our Nicolasa.

Within a week Herman had located one tantalising individual, 'Nicolasa Lujan Asang, born 14 January 1903, in the town of Garapan on the island of Saipan; she being the daughter of Isidro Asang and Josepha Santos Lujan'. The match was not exact, not in the least because of the differently spelt surname (Asan vs Asang), but also because this Nicolasa was born in 1903, whereas Ah Chee's Nicolasa was recorded as being eighteen at the time of CHM's birth, placing her year of birth some four years earlier.

To be more certain, I asked Herman again to check his database, and to see whether they any other families surnamed Asan or anyone else with a similar name in Saipan was born in the period between 1895–1905? He returned a definite negative on both accounts. This was encouraging news, although the case for her being our Nicolasa was by no means clear.

Moving along the grapevine, Herman then referred me onto Bernard Punzalan, the founder of the Chamorro Roots Genealogy Project. Bernard in turn referred me onto a facebook site called *Chamorro History, Culture and Courtesies*, where I posted a query and description of my search for Nicolasa, including in my post the new information from Herman. Before long one of the members of the site, one Tommy Leon Guerrero-Benavente, pointed out some interesting facts from Herman's record of 'Nicolasa Lujan Asang'. In addition to this Nicolasa's birth details, a supplementary section also recorded her as having

married in 1973 in Palm Springs, California, to one Clarence Tysen. Tommy suggested working backwards from this fact about this Nicolasa to see if she could be joined with our Nicolasa. This raised an astonishing implication. If she were the same person, then not only did she remarry again at an advanced age, it meant that she was still alive and well, living in America, more than half a century after she vanished from memory of the Chin family!

## Widow of Hans

One further discovery would lead to the rapid dissolution of fog surrounding the enigma of Nicolasa. In the vast repository of records on offer from the well-known genealogical website *Ancestry.com*, Tommy Leon Guerrero-Benavente had identified the Nevada (USA) marriage index the record of Clarence N Tyson of California. Dated 19 November 1973, Tyson is recorded as having married in Las Vegas to one Nicolasa Schumann. Minor spelling errors aside, Herman's own record of Clarence Tysen marrying Nicolasa Asan in 1973 seems to be an obvious match. The discrepancy in marriage location (Palm Springs, California vs Las Vegas, Nevada) seems to be explained by the fact that both parties are recorded in the marriage index as being usual residents of California.

But what of the distinctly German surname Schumann? Chin family folklore claims that Nicolasa left Ah Chee for a German lover in the 1920s. Could this be evidence of the truth of the family legend? Did Nicolasa really leave with a German lover named Schumann, and then much later in life end up in America where she married Clarence Tyson?

With all the recent progress, I was by this time gripped with feverish intensity to find out more and launched into an intense search in the records of *Ancestry.com*. Curiouser and curiouser the trail led. In the San Diego directory of 1971 (two years before her marriage with Tyson) I discovered Nicolasa Schumann living in San Diego, California, the entry describing her in abbreviated terms as 'Wid. Hans'—in other words, the widow of Hans Schumann. Our German lover, it seems, now had a name.

Then, in 1964, I discovered part of the



American naturalisation record of Nicolasa, where she is described by her full name of 'Nicolasa Asan Schumann'. Also named as a witness on her behalf is Nicolasa's daughter, one Victoria Johanna Marie Sherman (a married name).

If there was still some doubt as to whether Nicolasa Schumann who married Tyson in 1973 was really the same as Nicolasa Asan(g) of Herman Guerrero's record, then these naturalisation papers seemed to dispel that uncertainty.

## A Return to New Guinea

It is important to be very clear at this juncture. Nicolasa Asang of Saipan, born 1903, is the same as the Nicolasa who married Clarence Tyson in 1973, and we also have established that she was previously Nicholasa Asan Schumann, widow of Hans Schumann. The original spelling of 'Asang' in Hermann's records was likely in error. But the question still remained as to how to definitively prove her connection to our Nicolasa Asan who married in Ah Chee all those years ago in 1916.

To do this, I asked a simple question, 'could Hans Schumann be found in New Guinea at the same time?' I revisited the *Genealogical Index to Australians and other expatriates in Papua New Guinea 1888–1975*, which I had earlier used to identify the indexed marriage and birth entries of Ah Chee and CHM. I was delighted to find the indexed probate entry, dated 1919, of one Eugen Passarge, wherein the trustee to Passarge's Estate was named as none other than Hans Max Christlieb Schumann, a planter of Neinduk in the Bainings.

We can now begin to piece together some of the story. In 1919 Hans Schumann was a planter in East New Britain and a trustee to the Passarge Estate. In a little more than a year or two he had evidently become acquainted with the adolescent wife of Ah Chee and, in unclear circumstances, Nicolasa subsequently leaves Rabaul, presumably with Hans, and ends up years later as a widow in America. A seemingly incredible story.

## World Travellers

The sequence of events may already appear improbable for a simple islander girl, yet the story comes into sharper relief, and even more colourfully, with the discovery of Nicolasa Tyson's obituary in the archives of *Ancestry.com*. The

source, the *Nevada Appeal*, dated 20 December 2001 describes:

*'Nicolasa Tyson, 96, a Carson City resident, died 25 December 1999 ... she was born in Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands to Isidro Asan and Josepha Lujan. She was a Nevada resident ... she also lived in San Diego and overseas in Venezuela, Jamaica, West Africa, New Guinea and Germany. Among her survivors are two daughters, Anita Segovia of Venezuela and Victoria Morton-Gittens of Carson City.'*

In this simple obituary we find a brief summation, but gain our first glimpse, of the complexity of Nicolasa's life after Ah Chee. She had travelled the world. Much more surprisingly we realise, and not without a tinge of sadness, that she outlived her son, CHM, by seventeen years. She lived well into the adult lives of CHM's children, her New Guinea-born grandchildren, who always wondered about her but never knew she was living but half a world away.

The revelation of Nicolasa's obituary continued to open the door to discovery. Searching under her married name of Schumann, Nicolasa and her daughter Anita can be found departing on the steamship, *Carl Legien*, from the German port of Hamburg in 1925, on route to Rotterdam and Yokahama. Her year of birth is recorded as c.1903, and that of her daughter, c.1923.

Four years later, both Hans and Nicolasa are recorded departing aboard the steamship, *Wadai*, on route to Tiko in the German Cameroons, West Africa. In this later entry both her date and place of birth are listed as 15 January 1903, Saipan, matching precisely with what we already know. Much later on, in 1939, sisters Anita and Victoria Schumann are to be found departing on the steamship, *Kamerun*, from the port of Bremen, on route to Lagos, Nigeria.

Of particular interest here is Anita's entry which records her date of birth, 17 June 1922, and in the remarks column 'geb. (geboren) in Rabaul'—born in Rabaul. And so, another piece of the puzzle is revealed. Not only was Nicolasa still in Rabaul in 1922, but her daughter to Hans, Anita, was also born in Rabaul a mere five years after her elder half-brother, CHM. In their whole lifetimes, through time and space, this was the closest and only time the two siblings would ever be near to each other.





### Introducing René ... and the Rest of the Family

If the life and times of Nicolasa were to be defined solely by the wealth of amazing archival records now in our possession, then we might be satisfied that our journey was complete. As it turns out, that is not quite the end. Nicolasa's husband, Hans Schumann had a brother, one Paul Georg Schumann. Unlike our Hans, Paul Georg did not lead an itinerant, adventurous life. He remained in Germany had a daughter, Hannelore Schumann, Anita and Victoria's first cousin. Hannelore married Gunther Huhn, and they in turn had a son, René Huhn.

In the present day, René Huhn of Rheinbach in Germany is a second cousin to Anita Schumann's children. He is also an avid family historian who has posted the Schumann family tree on *Ancestry.com*. I soon discovered amongst the online Schumann genealogy an extraordinary black and white photo of young lady of mixed-Asian appearance, with stylishly coiffured hair and elegantly attired in the fashion of the mid-1920s (*above*). The photo was labelled 'Nicolasa Asan'.

I wasted no time in contacting René and he proved to be a most enthusiastic friend and collaborator. Henceforth, tumbling forth from the archives of Schumann family came

an amazing wealth of stories about the lives of Nicolasa and her children, beautiful and evocative photographs of her life and times, and most incredibly, a warm and tangible connection to the descendants of Nicolasa, today living in Venezuela and Germany.

### The Extraordinary Life of Nicolasa Lujan Asan: a biographical sketch

Nicolasa Lujan Asan was born on the 3 January 1903 in the little town of Garapan on the Island of Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands. She was first, and as far as we know, the only child of Isidro Asan and Josepha Santos Lujan. Isidro was a first generation migrant from the Celebes in the Dutch East Indies, present day Indonesia, and so we can reasonably suppose that he was of Malayan origins. On the other hand, his wife Josepha, was purely local and had roots in Guam and Saipan traceable to the late 1700s. Surnames in her family included Camacho, Espinosa, Santos and Castro.

Nothing is known of her childhood and how she originally came to New Guinea is still completely mired in mystery. What is certain however is that on the 23 December 1915 she came to be married to the thirty-four-year old Chinese entrepreneur Chin Yau Yee, 'Ah Chee' in the local registry office of Rabaul in German New Guinea.

She was still a child, barely thirteen, and not the adolescent eighteen as was implied on CHM's birth certificate. One can reasonably suppose that her age must have been overstated at the time to give some semblance of legitimacy to the proceedings, for even back in those times, marriage at the age of thirteen was rather less common.

Nicolasa was fourteen when Chin Hoi Meen was born. Then, at age seventeen her daughter Dolly was born, and then tragically died after six days. Around this time one photograph was taken, the only one in existence, showing Nicolasa with her son CHM. In it, CHM is a child of three or four, even then instantly recognisable as himself and with a bowl haircut ubiquitous to Chinese children of all eras. Next to CHM is Nicolasa, slight and simply dressed in a stripped 1920's blouse, ankle length skirt, and with the same coiffured hairstyle. She seems





TOP: Chin Hoi Meen (*standing*) and his mother (*right*)  
 BELOW: Hans Schumann, Nicolasa and their daughter, Anita

relaxed in her poise, sitting with her son on a hillside, somewhere in Rabaul, but her eyes are an impenetrable mystery.

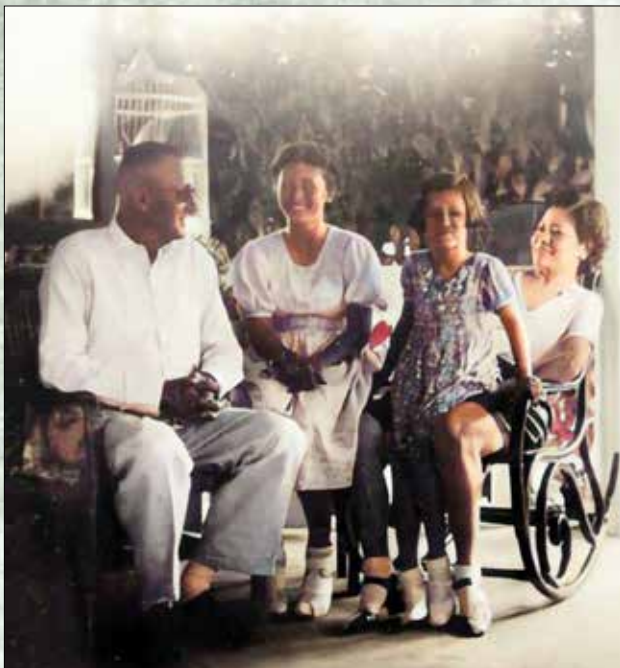
On 17 June 1922 Nicolasa gave birth out of wedlock to a daughter, Anita Cecile Nicolasa Schumann, in Rabaul. Five days later, on 22 June she married her new daughter's father, Han Max Christlieb Schumann, in Rabaul. In 1923, Hans, Nicolasa and Anita departed Rabaul, never to return. The only clue that we have as to what might have caused such a seismic shift in her life comes from the remarks of Anita Schumann many years later. In her own words, '[Nicolasa] left him behind when she decided to leave her Chinese husband and live with my father whom she had met earlier.'

Together the Schumann family travelled to and settled temporarily in Hamburg, Germany. In 1925 Hans sent Nicolasa and Anita on a vacation to the Far East. Amazingly, we learn that Nicolasa and Anita returned to her birthplace in Saipan to visit her family, her mother and her maternal grandmother both very much alive. The happy event is captured in a remarkable photograph showing four generations of maternal descent from Nicolasa Santos (Nicolasa's grandmother and namesake) to her mother, Josepha Lujan, then to Nicolasa Asan, and finally Anita Schumann, aged three. After leaving Saipan Nicolasa and Anita made a quick stopover in Shanghai, to visit an uncle of Hans, before returning to Germany.

Years of itinerant travel follow for the Schumann family, following the changing fortunes of Hans, and economic ebbs and flows of the roaring twenties and the slump of the thirties. From 1928–30 Hans and Nicolasa lived in Yaounde in the Cameroons, West Africa, whilst their daughter Anita attended a convent school in Germany. From 1928–35 they relocated to the British Gold Coast, now present-day Ghana, where Hans bought and operated a coconut plantation. It is here, in Kumasi, Ghana, that their second daughter, Victoria Maria Johanna Schumann, was born on 19 April 1933. From 1935–40 the family lived in Lagos, Nigeria, where Hans worked as a representative for a German brewery.

During these years there Anita schooled in Germany but spent holidays where possible with her family in West Africa. Her memories of these





TOP: Nicolasa and her two daughters, Anita and Victoria

CENTRE: The Schumann family

BOTTOM: Nicolasa's gravestone at the Holy Cross Cemetery

times are vivid and colourful and she describes in her self-written memoirs in great detail the colonial lifestyle, local servants, passage by steamship, quinine administered with cacao, and a host of other rare and precious experiences. Despite some hard economic times, several photos emerge from this period that demonstrate a close-knit family life. Hans and Nicolasa appear to have been a happy couple.

In 1939, with the outbreak of war in Europe, the Schumann family were interned by the British in Ibadan, Nigeria. After six months, the Schumanns, along with the rest of the interned families were relocated to Kingston, Jamaica, where they spent the remainder of the war. It was here in Jamaica, after twenty-five years of marriage, that Hans Schumann died in 1947 at the age of fifty-five, ostensibly from liver cirrhosis, a long-term complication of quinine used as an antimalarial. Anita Schumann was a young lady of twenty-five when her father passed away. Keen to advance herself, she obtained a job as an English-speaking secretary for an American oil company in Caracas, Venezuela. Soon after, Nicolasa and Victoria joined her, and Nicolasa herself obtained a job with the American Embassy in Caracas. In 1949, Nicolasa's job led to her being transferred to a post in Washington DC, where Victoria finished her schooling.

From here on Nicolasa's story becomes tied to the lives of her daughters Anita and Victoria. Throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies Nicolasa lived in various locations in the Western United States—Palm Springs, San Diego, Carson City, mostly it seems following the fortunes of her youngest daughter, Victoria. Nicolasa returned occasionally to Venezuela to visit and live with her daughter, Anita. Then, at the advanced age of seventy, Nicolasa married for the third and last time to Clarence Tyson. Their marriage lasted ten years until his death in 1983. Nicolasa lived on for sixteen more years before passing away on 25 December 1999 in Carson City, Nevada. She was laid to rest at the Holy Cross Cemetery in San Diego, California. Nicolasa's youngest daughter, Victoria, died from complications of a stroke on 19 February 2015. Despite being married five times, Victoria never had biological children.





### The Last Link

Now, Nicolasa's story passes onto her eldest daughter, Anita Cecile Nicolasa Schumann (above). Not long after obtaining her job with the American Oil Company, she married a dashing young Venezuelan man named Santiago Segovia. They had four daughters, three of whom survive to adulthood and went on to have families of their own. Their families are now scattered across the Western hemisphere, principally in Venezuela, Spain and Germany. Today, their mother, and grandmother, Anita Schumann is ninety-nine years old, in good health and in possession of all of her mental faculties.

Anita Schumann is everything and all that remains now. She is the half-sister of Chin Hoi Meen, aunty, and great aunty to all the extended Chin family in Australian and PNG. She is the

last living link to her mother, Nicolasa Asan, the Chamorro girl from an insignificant Pacific Island who was married at thirteen, thrice widowed, went on to travel the world and lead an extraordinary life. One wonders at what she thought of it herself. She must have wondered with poignancy what happened all those years ago to the little boy, her first child, called 'Ah Meen', who she left behind in Rabaul. The boy who grew up to become a photographer, business entrepreneur and decorated war hero who, despite all his success, never found his mother again. At least now, perhaps, the ghosts of the past may finally be laid to rest.

### Epilogue

In June 2021 the extended Chin family gathered at Raymond Chin's residence in Brisbane for a momentous event. The occasion was the unveiling of a research journey that had taken almost two years to complete, and the unravelling of a century-old enigma which had finally laid bare its secrets. For the first time the two branches of the descendants of Nicolasa Asan, one side predominantly Chinese, and other side German-Latin-American, finally met. The ongoing COVID pandemic notwithstanding, the meeting was fully realised through the technological marvel of an international Zoom linkup.

The evening was an extraordinary success with connections made across three continents, from Brisbane (Australia) to Port Moresby (PNG), Caracas (Venezuela), Barcelona (Spain), Santiago (Chile), Erlangen, Hanover and Rheinbach (all in Germany). It was especially moving when the international Zoom gathering sang a rousing 'happy birthday' to the ninety-nine-year old Anita in Caracas, who had just celebrated that anniversary the day before.



*With tremendous thanks to Anita Schumann, her daughters Helena and Cecilia, the extended Schumann-Segovia family, Raymond Chin and the extended Chin family, for sharing their story.*

Chin Hoi Meen