

Grandma Cook by Ginger Wolnik

Of my four grandparents, the only one I ever knew was my grandma Marie Cook. She was my mother's mother and she lived with us when I was very young, then again when I was a teenager. When I got my driver's license, I even drove her to doctor appointments and shopping. That allowed me to get firsthand stories from her about her family. Now that I'm retired, one of my hobbies is genealogy research, so those stories were a good start in filling in my ancestry records.

My grandmother was born Rosalia Marie Wardinsky in 1891. Her parents, Frank Wardinsky and Helena Staskiewicz, were immigrants from the part of Poland that was occupied by German speaking Prussia at that time. Frank was a shoemaker and was skilled in making ballet slippers. They were married in Chicago shortly after arriving in 1890. Her father wanted her named Rosalia but her mother didn't like the name so she called her by her middle name Marie. Grandma didn't know her first name was Rosalia until she was an adult, by then she was used to Marie and went by that name for the rest of her life. She was the oldest child and had two younger brothers, Walter and Frank Jr. At some point after Marie left home to get married, the family changed their last name to Ward to make it more American sounding.

Marie spoke Polish at home growing up, but her parents also spoke German, using that language when they didn't want their children to know what they were saying. They all learned English too; Marie never had an accent even though she was always fluent in Polish. When I was growing up, I used to tell people that I was part German because I incorrectly believed Marie's parents were part German. Now I realize they had to speak German because that was the prestige language in their occupied homeland. Also, as a shoemaker, Frank was a tradesman and had to be able to communicate with all customers and the people who ran things. When I took the ancestry.com DNA test, it showed I was 100% Polish and Eastern European, so that confirmed that I was mistaken about my grandmother's ancestry.

According to census records of 1900, the Wardinsky family lived on the west side of Chicago, on S. Western Ave. near Ogden Ave. Marie told me that when she was a child, there were woods nearby and the family would pick mushrooms in the fall, as her mother was good at knowing which ones were safe to eat. Today that neighborhood is very urban, Google street view shows it all pavement and buildings, but the houses from 1900 are gone.

Marie told me she only went to school through 3rd grade. Marie learned enough, as she was always an avid newspaper reader. She told me that her parents didn't think a girl needed an education and they favored her younger brothers. Marie got married at age 18 to Henry Kucharski and probably was glad to get away from her parents. She rarely talked about her brothers and was apparently estranged from them as an adult.

One story Marie told me about her mother was how her mother would comb Marie's hair by pulling the comb through the tangles starting at the root. Her mother was impatient and didn't care that it hurt her daughter. For that reason, Marie would always comb the hair of her own daughters and granddaughters by starting at the ends and slowly work out the tangles. However, my own mother would impatiently comb my hair by starting at the root. As a child, I came up with a theory that this behavior seems to cycle through every other generation because you had to be a victim of this hair pulling to care enough not to do it to others. If your hair was always carefully combed out, then you lacked the awareness of how important it was to take the time to pick out the tangles started from the ends. By age five, I started wearing my hair short.

Marie did not get along with my mother, but as I got older I realized that Marie did not get along well with anyone! She had had a hard life, losing everything during the Great Depression. The timing of my mother's birth was also unfortunate. After Marie had five children in eight years, there was an eight-year gap, then my mother was born after Marie thought her family was complete. I believe my mother was an unwanted, surprise child and Marie apparently resented having her.

When my mother was about six, her family lost their house. Her parents lived apart after that and it was only when I was an adult that other relatives filled me in on the details. It turned out that my grandfather was making bootleg wine in the bathtub during Prohibition, which was only legal for personal consumption. However, he started selling it to coworkers at work! He got caught, was fired, could not pay the mortgage, the bank repossessed the house and Marie left him. They never got divorced because they were strict Roman Catholics. They lived apart until shortly before Henry died in 1958, when she cared for him while he was dying from complications of diabetes.

At some point before my mother was born in 1926, Marie changed her last name from Kucharski to Cook. That was a logical choice of a new name because Kucharski means "cook" in Polish. She was always cooking and

baking and as a child, I wondered if it was because of her name, or if all grandmas were good at cooking! My mother's maiden name was always Cook and her brothers took that name, but my grandfather kept the name Kucharski, or maybe he reverted to using that after the separation.

Most of Marie's six children were already grown and out on their own when she lost her house, but my mother was still little and the next youngest was a teenager. They first stayed with family members, then Marie got a job and they moved into a small trailer, which was freezing in the Chicago winters. When my mother finished high school, she got a job as a secretary and moved in with one of her older sisters and Marie moved in with her oldest son and his family. I don't have the exact timeline, but Marie moved a lot among her children. She would have a fight with a daughter-in-law or son-in-law, and then move on to another home.

When I was about three, Marie moved in with us. She had her own little apartment in the new house that my parents built in Des Plaines, Illinois. We lived upstairs and I remember going down those stairs to visit her and asking "What'cha cookin', grandma?" She would spoil me with treats and I recall liking her more than my own mother! In 1959, we moved to Florida but Marie stayed in the Chicago area, moving into a flat in Cicero, Illinois. She visited us several times in Florida and we also visited her occasionally in the years that followed. Even though my mother was always arguing and fighting with Marie, I now recognize their relationship as codependent and enmeshed.

Marie had friends, but she kept outliving them, she even outlived one of her daughters, my Aunt Lilyan. After my family moved back to the Chicago area, Marie moved in with us for almost a year. She was getting old, but was still strong and strong willed. In her prime, she stood 5' 10" and was heavysset and powerful even as she aged. Once, I ran out of gas while driving her on an errand. The car was stuck in the road blocking the lane, so she got out and pushed the full sized sedan by herself while I sat in it and steered it over toward the curb! But the trauma of the Great Depression never left her. One time, she treated me to lunch after taking her to a doctor appointment. While I studied the menu, she suddenly announced that I had to order the least expensive item! That turned out to be the hamburger platter, which I was about to order anyway. I was still appalled because I knew she had plenty of savings and was collecting a pension from Western Electric as well as Social Security. I don't know if she was paying rent to my parents, but after a year she moved out in a huff, now I wonder if money had something to do with it.

As Marie got older, she became even more cantankerous. She was always complaining about her health even though there was nothing seriously wrong with her. She had arthritis and walked with a cane, but was still independent and lived in her own apartment. The last time I visited her, she greeted me by saying "I almost died last night! Then the Blessed Virgin came and talked to me!" She was always religious, but she became more so. She loved watching old movies on TV like "The Ten Commandments", "The Song of Bernadette" and "The Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima." Her dresser top was like a religious shrine with statues and rosaries and prayer cards and candles.

I thought Grandma Cook would live forever. Our family matriarch finally passed away in 1983 at age 91 of an apparent heart attack, that is, of "old age." I was living in California at the time and my youngest brother was visiting me for a vacation to Yosemite. My mother deliberately did not call me until after the funeral because she did not want to ruin my brother's vacation by having us fly to Chicago. My mother also said she didn't think I'd come and she didn't want me to have regrets, so she decided to take that choice away from me so I could blame her instead of myself someday. That is a very strange way of thinking and I was angry with her then, and I'm still sad about it now. I'm also disappointed that none of my other relatives contacted me; they told me later that they assumed my mother contacted me and when I didn't show up, they figured it was too inconvenient for me.

On one of my trips to Chicago, I visited Marie's grave and was surprised to see her buried right next to her estranged husband. I found out that she had arranged his funeral and bought the plots together when he died in 1958, so she must have forgiven him. Since she was so religious, she may have thought that was her way to get into heaven. However, his grave marker lists him as Henry Kucharski and her marker has her name as Marie Cook.

Even though Marie is now long gone, her DNA runs through me. I sometimes find myself doing and saying things like she did. What amazes me most is when I get together with my maternal cousins, I realize they also have similarities to her and to me. Well, we share her exact mitochondrial DNA and approximately one fourth of her nuclear DNA! I'm glad I never had kids because I may have perpetuated this line of domineering mothers. Marie felt that her mother was often mean to her. My mother has plenty of stories of how Maria was mean to her and I could write a whole book about what my mother did to me! However, I loved my Grandma Cook and I miss her. Since my other grandparents all died when I was only four, I feel very lucky that Marie lived long enough for me to really know her.