

Grandma Wolnik

by Ginger Wolnik

The names in this story are the Americanized versions they used because their Polish names are difficult to read and pronounce.

Bernice Wolnik was my "other grandmother," my father's mother who died when I was just four. Growing up, I thought I had some direct recollections of her, but now I think they were probably just memories of photos and home movies that my father took. As a child, I thought she was very old and that is how she looked in those photos. When I got older, it was a shock to discover that Bernice was just 61 years old when she died in 1959. Her husband, my grandfather Joseph Wolnik, died 10 days after her, at age 72. They both died from stroke, although my father said that his father died of a broken heart.

Until recently, all my information about my Grandma Wolnik was from stories my father told me. After my father died, I found some paperwork about his mother that confirmed those stories, such as her baptismal certificate and her immigration papers. Online genealogy research has produced additional information such as census records. Another source was her scrapbook, filled with cryptic Polish newspaper clippings, which were mostly her poems she published. From all this, I've been able to piece together her life story.

Bernice Rogosz was born in 1897 on a farm near the small village of Borzęcin in southern Poland, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire region of Galicia. She was the first child of Andrew Rogosz, who was 31 and Victoria Wojdak, who was 25 when Bernice was born. She had one younger sister and no other siblings. Without any brothers to help with the farm, they were very poor. Bernice learned to harness the horses and do some of the work that a boy would have normally done. The farmhouse had a dirt floor, but in spite of their poverty, Bernice went to school, presumably the Catholic grammar school in town. She was very religious her whole life, probably because of her schooling.

When Bernice was 24, she overheard her parents saying they would not allow her to get married because they needed her to care for them as they aged. At that point, her parents were 55 and 49 years old, which is middle-aged today, but would have been getting elderly in that time and place. Bernice's younger sister had already run off with a local boy and got married, I assume she got

pregnant so her parents had no choice but to let her leave. Since Bernice was the "good" daughter, she felt doomed to be a spinster. This was in 1921 and Poland was now a free country, thanks to the Treaty of Versailles after WWI. There was a major exodus of people fleeing impoverished Galicia for the United States, including at least one cousin of Bernice. That female cousin, whose name I'm still trying to discover, sent Bernice money to travel to Chicago. Bernice found her way to Denmark and left Copenhagen on Oct 29, 1921. She arrived in New York on Nov 8, 1921 on the vessel Frederik VIII. From there she travelled to Chicago where she got a job sewing in some sweatshop and eventually paid her cousin back the money. I don't know if Bernice lived with that cousin during that time, or if her cousin was married. I've discovered some 3rd cousins on my father's side in the Chicago area through DNA matches, so I might be able to figure that out someday!

It did not take long for Bernice to have the life she wanted. She met Joseph Wolnik, another Polish immigrant and they got married on May 12, 1923. They had their first child a year later. Unfortunately, that baby girl died the next day. My father was born the following year and she had no other children. According to my father, Bernice always missed and grieved for her daughter. I recently discovered where the baby was buried, so on my next trip to Chicago, I will try to find that grave.

During the Great Depression, my grandpa Joseph Wolnik always had a job, so with only one child, the family was relatively well off. My grandfather was just an unskilled laborer, working jobs like those in the Chicago stockyards. He probably did the grimy, dangerous jobs like those described in Upton Sinclair's novel "The Jungle," but compared to her life in Poland, they were "rich!" They owned a house with hard floors and indoor plumbing. They had a garden in the back yard with peach and plum trees. Bernice became a housewife, cooking and baking. My father's favorite was plum dumplings, which he learned to make from his mother.

During the 1930's, Bernice wrote a lot of poetry in Polish that was published in a Polish language newspaper in Chicago. I inherited her scrapbook of these poems and plan to get them translated into English so I can learn what she wrote about. They appear to be religious but until I get them all translated, I won't know what else they could describe, perhaps clues to her life? I would like to self-publish a book of her poetry someday and donate copies to the church in her birth village.

Bernice became a U.S. citizen in 1933, but remained active in the Polish-American community in Chicago. An article from 1935 in her scrapbook lists her as the president of a society that had just donated \$5 (a lot of money then) toward a monument to Józef Piłsudski. He was a Polish statesman who is considered the father of the Republic of Poland that was founded in 1918. Piłsudski died in 1935, which is when her society donated the money in his memory.

Back in Poland, Bernice's sister had many children. I have one photo of her family from the 1930's that shows five children; there may have been more. I don't know whatever happened to Bernice's parents, but I would not be surprised if they died during WWII. The war was very hard on all of Poland. Bernice kept getting letters from her sister begging for food and clothing. Bernice shipped many packages to her during the war, carefully sewing the presents into pillow cases. She never got any acknowledgements that the items arrived, just more letters saying they were starving and had nothing to wear but rags. After the war, uncensored letters finally arrived, not a single package had ever been received. Also, at least one teen daughter had been raped by the occupying Germans during the war. I don't have any of these letters and I don't know any of their names. As my genealogy research progresses, I hope to find their descendants and perhaps visit them in Poland someday.

My father was drafted into the U.S. Army as a private in 1944, which must have given Bernice mixed feelings. On the one hand, her homeland and birth family were under siege, so she must have wanted the United States to fight the Nazis. However, there was the risk of losing her only child. He was in the Army Air Corps and had trained to be a radar operator on bombers, so she must have been proud that he was on the cutting edge of new technology. Fortunately, the war in Europe ended while my father was crossing the Atlantic on the way to England, so he never saw combat. After about a month, his unit returned to the U.S. and he began training on a newer bomber to prepare for the invasion of Japan. Fortunately for him again, the atomic bombs ended the war before he was deployed to the Pacific. I can only imagine Bernice's joy and relief when he returned home unscathed and with an honorable discharge, good conduct medal, and a promotion to corporal!

I have the impression that Bernice spoiled my father. After the war, he went away to college on the GI bill. He would ship his laundry home for Bernice to wash and she would mail it back clean. He visited home often and came back to live with his parents after graduating even though he got a professional job. He was able to save a lot of money that way, but he never learned to live independently. My father never drank alcohol, smoked, played cards, or swore, I'm sure that was to please his mother. He didn't even drink, smoke or gamble while in the army because Bernice asked him to promise her that!

To please his mother, my father only dated "nice Polish girls" who were devout Catholic. My mother was Polish and Catholic, but Bernice did not like her, probably because she sensed my mother to be similarly domineering and controlling. Bernice tried to talk my dad out of marrying my mother, but he did anyway, maybe the only time he defied his mother. After the honeymoon, the newlyweds moved in with Bernice and Joseph. This caused a lot of strife. Years later, my mother told me that Bernice would pretend not to speak English; she would only talk to my father in Polish, leaving my mother in the dark. But Bernice understood English, so my mother could not have a private conversation with my father. Both my parents admitted to me that there was a lot of yelling and screaming during this time. My mother was pregnant with me and I wonder now if my anxiety and nervousness started *in utero* during this period. Eventually, my mother could not stand living with her in-laws, so they got their own apartment.

After my parents moved out, my mother insisted that my father cut off all contact with his cousins in Poland. He was an electrical engineer and was working on government contracts and needed a security clearance. Because Poland was now under Communist rule, she was concerned that being close to relatives behind the Iron Curtain would hurt his career. So, when Bernice and Joseph died in 1959, my mother destroyed all of their correspondence and contact information with Poland. That is why I don't know the first or married last name of Bernice's sister or any of her sister's children. My father probably knew the names, but unfortunately I never thought to ask for that information before he died. I did get the details about his mother that I've shared here. Perhaps some of Bernice's poems will contain new information about her life. My hope is that genealogy and DNA research will eventually fill in the rest!