

Raise your Manhattan ...



... Marie Walsky is 100

By Susan Fornoff

It's really no wonder Marie Walsky celebrated her 100th birthday on Friday. She went to work in a mill at age 13, married at 17, had her first child at 18, struggled through a difficult marriage, and then, at 65, finally learned the meaning of the word vacation.

She's been catching up on life ever since.

"All I knew was about work," said Marie, a robust centenarian who still lives in the Plymouth, Pa., home she bought 25 years ago. "I was in the weaving mill until I retired at the age of 65. Now I'm going to be 100. I can't believe it – yet I think it's wonderful!"

Maria Agnes was born on Feb. 15, 1908, the third daughter of Agnes and Paul Kosinski, according to St. Mary's church records – or Kushinski, as Walsky spelled it, or perhaps Koszynska, as it was written on the marriage certificate of her oldest sister, Genvieve (Jenny). Jenny had been born in Poland in 1902 – the family is believed to have come from Krakow – and remained there with her mother after Paul left for Plymouth and the coalmines that year.

Life was a struggle for the turn of the century Polish immigrants, says Georgetta Potoski of the Plymouth Historical Society.

"The Irish coal miners had finally gotten to a point where they could strike for higher wages and better working conditions, and along come the Eastern Europeans, fleeing poverty and anarchy of their own in Europe, ready to work for practically nothing," she said. "Saying the two groups did not like each other is an understatement. Things were tense here."

Potoski did an oral history interview in the 1970s with a nun who remembered Eastern Europeans marching through the streets to the southern coalfields in about 1902. When they got to Nanticoke, she said, "No one would sell them food, or rent them a place to live or even cut their hair. They lived in barns and caves the first winter and only survived because the women went door-to-door begging. And when the men went to the mines to work, the workers would shoot at them."

No wonder, then, that Paul urged Agnes to remain in Poland. She, however, boarded a ship with her baby and joined him in Plymouth, where they would raise seven daughters and four sons (three others died as infants).

"She was determined to get here, and she did," Marie said. "We used to laugh that every payday there was a new baby in the house."

The first three daughters – Stephanie (Stell) was born in 1906, four years after Jenny but just 14 months before Marie -- grew up especially close, and shared roles as co-providers with their father, and co-homemakers with their mother. Only Valita Kvasnak, Marie's only surviving sibling at 87, finished 12 years of school.

Jenny left at a young age to do housework, and Stell and Marie went to work in nearby factories. "On wash day, I'd stay home and help mother do the wash," said Marie, who learned to pray in Polish from her mother. "There was no washer. These young ones don't remember that. We didn't have bathtubs either. There was a round wooden tub mother had to fill, then two would take a bath and then she'd empty the tub and fill it for the next two."

Grandson Barry Rosenberg of Punta Gorda, Fla., remembers his daughter Angela's shock when she interviewed Marie about the old days for a school project. Angela, now 20 and a junior at Penn State, was told that not only were there no TVs, VCRs, DVDs, computers or video games, but there were no indoor bathrooms or showers, "Nanny" had to quit fifth grade to go to work, "and," remembered Rosenberg, "only the men got to eat meat out of the pot of soup or stew on the stove, since they were the ones that 'worked.' No way! Yes way, said Nanny."

Marie remembers times were hard enough that boxes of food were brought to the house at one point. But she also had her share of fun in the bustling town, indulging her eye for fashion – the best thing about her house now, she says, is that it has six closets – and displaying a bit of a rebel spirit.

"I loved clothes," she said. "I'd get a dress once in a while, and Stell would be so mad because she'd have to give all the money to mother and I'd only give some. I'd let her borrow the dress, but I would have her do my hair or some other favor for me."

She didn't buy only dresses, it turns out.

"One of my favorite pictures of Nanny is her as a late teen," said granddaughter Beth Yehaskel, of Austin, Tex. "She's got a perm, is wearing pants, and is all spunk and attitude leaning on a car. Apparently she was the first girl in town to get a perm, first to wear pants, etc."

She also changed her name from Mary to Marie with not a second thought when she found herself working with two other Marys and a nun suggested Marie. "I always liked that name," Walsky said. "And then Stell, her name was Steffy but she decided she didn't like that name and wanted her name to be Stell. So I said, if you call me Marie, I'll call you Stell. You know how sisters are."

(So the family fluidity on names was entrenched. A few years later, Valita's husband, Leo, told his new bride he hated the name Valita, and she easily adopted her middle name instead, Rose.)

Marie caught the eye of Joseph Walsky, and in 1925 they married. Her first child, Dorothy (Dot) was born a year later and died of cancer on Jan. 5, 1990 (a day before heart failure took Marie's sister Jenny). A second baby, a boy, died in a home birth; she went to the hospital to give birth to her third child, Marietta Walsky Gorman (now of Gwynedd Valley, Pa.), in 1942.

Until his death in 1960, Joseph battled the alcoholic demons that were common among the immigrants who worked in the perilous mines.

"Living with my husband when he drank, that was the hardest time of my life," said Marie, whose father, Paul, is remembered as an alcoholic who died of lung ailments in 1942. "I tried to make a go of it but I couldn't. And when I stayed away from him, that's when I did the best."

Marie helped Dot raise her children, Barry Rosenberg and Marsha Strickler (now of Bonita Springs, Fla.), at the time Marietta was growing up. (Barry had three children, Tricia, Katie and Angela, and has two grandchildren by Tricia; Marcia and husband Lenny had Matthew and Brandon, and Brandon's wife is expecting Marie's third great-great grandchild to arrive in March.)

“Nanny has been my best friend my entire life,” Rosenberg said, listing life lessons including “pray every day, go to church every week, work everyday, don’t waste anything... and of course always wear clean underwear just in case you get into an accident and have to go to the hospital.”

Said Marietta, “One of the most important things I learned from my Mom was the value of education. She had very little formal schooling and was always intimidated because of this. She was determined that I would go to college and she really encouraged me in that direction. Half my tuition was paid by a scholarship that I won and half was paid with bonds that she had saved over the years. She was always very proud of her efforts.”

Said Marie, “I felt so rich because I had a beautiful home and a car, and I put my daughter through college.”

Marietta graduated from Holy Family University in 1964 with a chemistry degree, and married Tom Gorman, a longtime telecommunications executive who marveled at his mother-in-law’s resourcefulness over the years.

“She could take a dollar bill and stretch it six ways from Sunday,” he said. “Nothing went to waste in her house. She’d use the same paper towel four times before it’s disposed of. A chicken or piece of beef migrated from dinner to lunch to snacks to soup. Milk was frozen and used sparingly over time.”

Yet, he said, she’s been generous with grandkids and those in need. “This person with a fourth-grade education really knew how to manage money and not worry about where her next meal was coming from.”

The Gormans had three children, Christina, Michael and Beth, who reaped the benefits of Nanny’s retirement in 1973 after 26 years a weaver in the FMC mill in Chester. (Christy and Ricky have two children, Ava and Rylan, and live in Montclair, N.J.; Michael and Tori have Emma and Drew and live in Arlington, Va.; Beth and her husband live in Austin, Texas, with son Max.)

“We spent many, many hours together when I was small,” said Beth, who can’t hear the song “You Are My Sunshine” without thinking of her grandmother’s visits to the Gormans’ home outside of Washington, D.C. “I was psyched to get so much attention from Nanny, since I was the youngest of three.”

Marie thrived in retirement. In 1983, at the age of 75, she bought a house in Plymouth and returned to her roots, establishing a home base for jaunts to visit family from upstate New York down south to Baltimore, where sisters Jenny and Stell had moved to raise their families.

“The best vacation I remember was when Tom took us once for Thanksgiving to a place he rented in Ocean City, N.J., and Marietta had the nicest turkey dinner and then everybody took a dip in the real cold water and ran back into the house to get warm again,” she said. “It was fun.”

“Everybody” meant Christy, Michael and Beth and their significant others, much to the surprise of Tom and Marietta – not to mention, Marietta says, “everybody walking on the beach that day.” (Beth says the Polar Bear Club dip was Mike’s idea.)

Marie gave up driving in her late 80s because “grandson Barry needed a car, and grandma takes care of her grandchildren,” but continued to live in her home in Plymouth. She never even looked into living in a senior community, though Marietta suggested it might be more fun to have other people around.

“I said ‘I have company, I have my TV,’ ” said Marie, who is visited daily by one of two aides and plans to live at home for the rest of her life. She stays sharp by watching “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” and looks forward to the local Polish music program on Saturdays. When Stell’s daughter, Jeannette, is visiting, she says, the house turns into a dancehall.

“To look at Marie, you’d never believe she’s 100 years old,” said youngest sister Valita, with a touch of envy. “There’s not a wrinkle on her face. She’s a beautiful woman. She worked very hard, managed as a single mother – and she’s also a wonderful cook and baker. I don’t think anybody could bake a better pie. And she was always feeding anybody who came.”

Ah, well, food – Marie loves it and looks forward to breakfast every morning.

“My appetite is wonderful – the doctor says that’s what’s keeping me going,” she said. “There’s only one thing I’ve ever found that I didn’t like, and that’s limburger cheese. I tried it once, and, oh, did I have to head for the... Every other cheese I could eat. I like everything.

“And I don’t drink. But once in a while when I go to Tom’s, he’ll make me a Manhattan – a weak one.”

Marie might take a sip of one on Feb. 16, 2008, when five generations gather at the Blue Bell Country Club to toast her 100th birthday. She says her knees don’t let her get around so well anymore, and she takes a pill for this and a pill for that, but she still hopes to visit her recently renovated church, now All Saints, and (this is not a paid political advertisement), “I’d also like to see a woman president get in,” she said.

That would serve as just another reminder that Marie Walsky isn’t living in the early 1900s anymore. But when life starts at 65, that’s just fine.

The writer is a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, and granddaughter of Marie Walsky’s oldest sister, Jenny.

Genealogy notes

Jenny Kosinski Collins, the oldest of Agnes and Paul Kosinski's children, was born Feb. 18, 1902, in Poland. She married Clement Collins; they had three children (Jean Vaccaro, "Junior" and Romaine Fornoff) and moved to Baltimore. There are now eight grandchildren (Jean's Dave Loncao in Fla., Clem's Steven-Richard-Dennis in Md., Romaine's Susan (Calif.) Tom (Fla.), Carl (Md.) and Bob (Md.) and eight great-grandchildren.

St. Mary's Church of Plymouth, Pa., now "All Saints," had these records on 11 other children (Alexander is thought to have died in childhood because he is not remembered by Marie or Valita). Parenthetical notes are added from interviews with Marie, Valita and other family members:

Joseph...08/18/1904 (he lived with a woman but didn't marry, according to Valita; also, this birthdate does not seem correct)

Alexander... 10/02/05

Stephanie...12/24/06 (changed name to Stell, married Al Ambrozak, moved to Baltimore; children are Donald, Ray and Jeannette Spottek, too many grandchildren and great grandchildren to count)

Maria...02/15/08 (changed name to Marie, married Joseph; children were Dorothy and Marietta, five grandchildren, 10 great grandchildren, two great great grandchildren)

Apolinaris...10/09/10 ("Paul" never married, Valita said. Marie says that he worked in the mines, and when they closed he went to work for the borough and was killed in an accident on one of their trucks)

Sophia...01/11/12 ("Sophie Kosinski" never married, she was mildly retarded and enjoyed her later years in a group home, passed away in 1998; according to Social Security records, her birthdate was 02/11/12)

Petrus...11/22/1913 (Pete Kushinski had diabetes, which caused him to lose his eyesight and one of his legs, lived in Plymouth until he died in 1985, never married)

Caroline...06/18/15 (married Louis Janik, had two sons, John "Jack" and Louis, two grandchildren, died in 2000)

Floryanna...05/04/1919 ("Florence" married Kelly O'Brien, died in 2003)

Valeria...09/22/1920 ("Valita" or "Rose" was married to Leo Kvasnak for 65 years, until he passed away in 2002; they had four children – Leo, Bob, Linda, Susan – eight grandchildren and eight great grandchildren, at last count. She lives in senior housing in Hanover, Pa.)

Clemeno...04/05/1922 ("Clemmie" Kushinski, married Doris, had Clem Jr. who married Christine and had Carrie and Kevin; Clemmie died 1995)

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