

This is the story of my mother, Stella Wolak (Irla) and father, Sebastian Wolak as told by their daughter, Marcia Woytovicz, of Athabasca, Alberta. September 21, 2022

Stella (Irla) Wolak:

Stella (Stefanja) was born in the village of Radgoszcz in the district of Dabrowa, in the province of Tarnow, Poland on July 7, 1926. Southern Poland.

Her father, Michael (Michal) Irla left Liverpool, England on June 22, 1928, aboard the S.S. Andonia IICunard Line ship. On June 30, 1928, he arrived in Canada at the Port of Quebec. He arrived with hopes of building a new home and improving living conditions for his wife and three children that he had left in Poland. Michael worked for local farmers, saving money to buy a place of his own. On August 2, 1929, Michael applied for a homestead, and for \$10 bought SW 01-69-21-W4-in the Deep Creek area, later to become the Laura School District. It was about twenty-eight miles northeast of Athabasca and was a new area with just a few settlers. Michael built a small home and had five acres cleared and seeded to wheat on his homestead.

Stella arrived in Canada from Poland on June 03, 1932, at the age of 6. Along with her mother, Veronica (Weronika) nee Wawrzonek, (29) and 2 brothers, Michael (Michal) (4) & John (Jan) (9), they boarded the boat 'Duchess of Bedford' on May 27, 1932, in Liverpool, England not knowing what to expect of this new land called Canada.

Although some details of her trek across the Atlantic Ocean have been forgotten, she still remembered the day she left Europe, where everybody was saying goodbye to their family and friends.

Stella and her family along with hundreds of other immigrant families were more than willing to hop aboard the S.S. Duchess of Bedford and brave the Atlantic Sea in order to start a new life in Canada.

With nothing to see but water all around, she remembers watching the big waves coming over the port hole windows and the boat rocking back and forth. It was getting worse, and everyone was asked to put on life jackets. Stella was very scared. People were getting seasick, and her mom was very sick.

Then in the far distance, they could see a silhouette of land. Everyone started cheering, crying and were so grateful to see land. Stella ran up to her mom and told her she saw land. Stella was so excited.

After 7 days at sea, they arrived in a port in Quebec and then they took a train to Edmonton, then another train to Athabasca.

Their journey was almost complete, but possibly the toughest part of the trek was still to come, getting to their new homestead.

Walking 28 miles later Stella and her family reconnected with her father for the first time in five years and their new life and home.

They had nothing but a little cabin on the land to start with. But they were happier than ever before.

No one owned their own property in Poland so having something to call your own was a great feeling.

The hard work wasn't over for Stella and her family once they finally arrived at their new home.

It was just the beginning, they cleared more land and after a while they started to get chickens, cows and other animals. The decision to move to Canada paid off for Stella and her family.

It was a trip that she would never forget. Taking only minimal possessions, leaving your homeland in search of a better life for their family. She praises her mother for giving up everything in Poland and packing up 3 children and moving them to another country. Two things she told me that summed up why they left: They were happy to own land and freedom.

In 1935, Michael and Veronica had another daughter, Mary. Michael helped organize the Laura School District in 1937 and assisted in the construction of the school. It opened in 1938. Mr. Kryskow was the first teacher.

Stella's Dad donated one acre of land on the southwest corner of his farm for the Roman Catholic Church—St. Clements—to be built on it in 1950. In 1951, the Pleasant View post office was first opened on the Irla farm. Her brother John was the first postmaster. The whole family were active in the school, church, community, and the Polish culture of the area. Michael loved to play his violin at house parties held in the community and would also sing to add to the humor of the event.

In February of 1952, Michael went to Pennsylvania to visit his sister who he hadn't seen for thirty years. He retired from farming and moved to Athabasca and sold the farm to Steve Danylchuk. Michael passed away on March 18, 1970 at the age of 76 and is buried in the Athabasca Cemetery. Veronica passed away in June 22, 1975 at the age of 73 and is buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Edmonton, AB.

Sebastian Wolak:

Sebastian (Zbigniew) Wolak was born in the village of Oderne in the district of Uscie Gorlickie, within Gorlice County, Poland on July 11, 1927. Southern Poland.

His mother Annie (Anna) nee Niemasik, was born in Austria. She was just a young girl when the armies of the First World War marched through their village. Their home was destroyed by fire, and they lost all their belongings. After the war she lived in Poland where she met his dad, Marion (Marjan) Wolak. They were married.

Marion left his wife and son in Poland to come to Canada in 1928, looking for a new way of life to provide for his family. He boarded the ship, Estonia-Baltic American, from Danzig, Poland on April 16, 1928, and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on April 27, 1928. He first worked for the railway. On April 24, 1930, he filed for a homestead, NE 06-69-20-W4, costing him \$10. He was one of the first homesteaders in that "corner". Marion built a small log house and cleared a few acres. There was no road there yet, only a trail along the telegraph line (to Fort McMurray) that crossed his homestead. The area was still a virgin wilderness with heavy spruce forest, and Marion developed a trapline which was his main source of income.

It was Marion's intent to bring his family to Canada as soon as he was settled, but with the coming of the Depression, living conditions in Canada became tough and money became as scarce as it was in Poland.

Finally, 10 years later, in 1938, Marion was able to purchase tickets for his wife and son to come to Canada.

Sebastian (11), along with her mother Annie (31), left Gdansk, Poland on May 28, 1938, aboard the Gdynia-American Line. After 8 days at sea, they arrived at Halifax, Nova Scotia on June 5, 1938. When asked what he remembers of the trip, he recalls playing hide & go seek on the ship, and many people got seasick.

Just 5 years after they were reunited, unfortunately, Sebastian's Dad died in November of 1943, in a hunting accident on his trap line. He was buried in the Richmond Park Cemetery.

Dad and his mom continued to farm. They cleared more land, raised alfalfa seed, and leased more land to the east. In 1946, his mom married Metro Meroniuk. They continued farming for the next five years. His Mom and Metro then moved to Smoky Lake and farmed there up until 1967, then moved to Athabasca and purchased a house on the west side of town. Metro passed away May 22, 1971. In 1976, Annie took a three-week trip to Poland to visit her sister and brother in the village where she had grown up and attended school. Her trip in 1976 took only nine hours by airplane, compared to 8 days by ship and 3 days more by train in 1938. Annie felt she was very fortunate to have come to Canada in 1938, as one year later, war had raged through the area where she had once lived.

Sebastian and Stella both attended the Laura School and were active in the young peoples' club in the community.

Stella married Sebastian on July 28, 1951. They were the first couple to be united in marriage in the new St. Clement's Roman Catholic Church in Pleasant View. They took over the operation of the Wolak farm. For the next twenty-five years they operated a mixed farm in the Pleasant View district. This included growing crops, raising hogs, chickens, milking cows and trapping. In the winter, Sebastian worked in many sawmills and operated a lumber planer mill with Adolf Gorski. He had to work off the farm a lot, which left Stella to hold down the fort.

They had six children: Marion (June 8, 1952), Philip (May 26, 1953), Richard (Sept. 8, 1954), Grace (July 16, 1956), Bertha (June 14, 1959) and Marcia (Nov. 22, 1965). Unfortunately, Richard died in a boating accident on the Athabasca River in August of 1973.

Marion married Linda Bulas and have 1 son, Vance (Hannah Moye) and have 2 children - Kayden and Zerrick. Marion & Linda reside in the town of Athabasca and Vance & Hannah reside in the county of Athabasca.

Philip married Barb Rojowski (now divorced) and have 2 sons and 2 daughters. Greg, Christopher, Melissa, and Jennifer (Landon Gott) and have 3 children - Zachary, Wyatt and Alexandra. Philip, Greg, Christopher and Melissa all reside in Edmonton, AB. Jennifer & Landon reside in Spruce Grove, AB.

Grace married Michael Gorski (now divorced) and have 2 sons. Marty (Cheryl Manns) who have 2 children – Brenden and Alana and Daryl who has 1 son – Donavon. Both reside in the county of Athabasca. Grace resides in Boyle, AB.

Bertha married Marcel Marcoux (now divorced) and have 3 sons and 1 daughter. Kevin, Jeffrey, Jason (Jennifer Pysyk) who have 2 children – Heidi & Cash and Robyn (Michael) Jackson, who have 2 children – Lenox and Novah. Bertha married Les Botten in 1996 and reside in the county of Boyle, along with Robyn & Michael, and Kevin. Jeffrey resides in Airdrie, AB and Jason & Jennifer resides in the county of Athabasca.

Marcia married Greg Woytovicz and have 2 sons. Derrick (Rebecca Lawson) and Tyler (Larissa Struski) Marcia & Greg along with Derrick & Becca reside in the county of Athabasca and Tyler & Larissa resides at Baptiste Lake, AB.

In 1976 Stella and Sebastian moved to the town of Athabasca. Sebastian continued to work in construction as a carpenter and was employed by Double R Sawmill at Calling Lake as shop maintenance man. After retirement, Sebastian enjoyed doing hobby carpentry, fishing, and hunting.

Stella worked part time at Blunts Nursing Home (now Extendicare). After her retirement, she spent a lot of time taking care of her garden and flower beds, which she loved so much. The gardens and flowers were her pride and joy, she was very proud of her yard.

They both enjoyed bingo, playing cards, and camping with family.

Stella passed away on February 18, 2011, at 84 years of age.

Sebastian passed away on April 2, 2013, at 85 years of age.

Both are buried at the Athabasca Cemetery

They have 13 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren as of 2022

Genealogy and family history:

Stella Wolak

Full name: Stella (Stefanja) Wolak, nee Irla
Father: Michael (Michal) Irla
Mother: Veronica (Weronika) Irla, nee Wawzonek
Spouse: Sebastian (Zbigniew) Wolak
Birthdate: July 07, 1926
Place of birth: Radgoszcz, Poland
Date of death: February 18, 2011. Athabasca, AB

Stella's father:

Full name: Michael (Michal) Irla
Birthdate: September 16, 1893
Place of birth: Radgoszcz, Poland
Date of death: March 18, 1970. Athabasca, AB

Stella's mother:

Full name: Veronica (Weronika) Irla, nee Wawzonek

Birthdate: May 07, 1903

Place of birth: Radgoszcz, Poland

Date of death: June 22, 1975. Edmonton, AB

Sebastian Wolak

Full name: Sebastian (Zbigniew) Wolak

Father: Marion (Marjan) Wolak

Mother: Annie (Anna) Wolak, Meroniuk, nee Niemasik

Spouse: Stella (Stefanja) Wolak, nee Irla

Birthdate: July 11, 1927

Place of birth: Oderne, Poland

Date of death: April 02, 2013. Athabasca, AB

Sebastian's father:

Full name: Marion (Marjan) Wolak

Birthdate: 1900

Place of birth: Nowosielce, Poland

Date of death: November 21, 1943. Athabasca, AB

Sebastian's mother:

Full name: Annie (Anna) Wolak, Meroniuk, nee Niemasik

Birthdate: March 13, 1908

Place of birth: Austria

Date of death: May 31, 1999. Athabasca, AB