

THE LIFE AND TIMES
OF
GERALDINE MARGARET CEK

My life began of course, with my wonderful parents, Joseph Novak and Mary Suckanski. Both my parents were born in Trinova, Czechoslovakia. Joseph on July 4, 1886 and Mary on November 1, 1890. Although living in the same town they didn't know each other and immigrated to America on the same ship on the same day. Again fate located them in the same town, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and they finally met through a mutual friend. They remained in Bethlehem and started a family that ended up to be a very large one.

My father was a steelworker by trade and a brilliant, creative man. He spoke four languages Hungarian, Polish, Slovak and English. He was a man of many talents, among them resoling shoes, watchmaker, musician and gardener. He even grafted a pear tree that produced seven different varieties of pears. He played the harmonica and accordion.

My mother was a homemaker and spoke three languages, Polish, Slovak and English. She also had many talents. She was an excellent cook and baker, gardener. She could sew and quilt. Her talents were strong and

helped to sustain her ever growing family. After their 1st two children, they moved just a short distance from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to Lebanon, Pennsylvania. The neighboring county is where the Amish of Pennsylvania live.

In Lebanon, they raised a large family of 14 children, seven boys and seven girls. My parents remained in Lebanon till death. Following is a LONG list of my siblings along with the year they were born and where they lived.

1909	Mary Mentzer	Sayre, PA	Deceased
1910	Helen Sarek	Lebanon, PA	Deceased
1912	Joseph Novak	Lebanon, PA	Deceased
1915	Ann Wentzel	Lebanon, PA	
1917	Josephine Capillo	Lebanon, PA	
1919	John Novak	Lebanon, PA	Deceased
1921	Stephen Novak	Glouster, MA	Deceased
1923	Michael Novak	Lebanon, PA	Deceased
1925	William Novak	Lebanon, PA	Deceased
1929	Paul Novak	Lebanon, PA	
1930	Carl Novak	Lebanon, PA	Deceased
1932	Rose Wolfe	Tulsa, OK	
1938	Carol Shirk	Lebanon, PA	

Two of my brothers, John and William were killed in World War II. John was married and had a six year old daughter, Joyce, when his wife died of tuberculosis. After John's death my parents adopted Joyce, raising their number of children to 15. Joyce now resides in Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

I was born in Lebanon, Pennsylvania on July 6, 1928 and weighed a whopping 12 pounds. Lebanon was a growing town with a population of approximately 30,000 people. We lived in what was known as West Lebanon and the section of a "hunky" neighborhood. "Hunky" meaning descendants of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland.

Our house was at the corner of two streets with a running creek across the front and a concrete bridge connecting it. It was originally five rooms but with our growing family, the house also grew to 12 rooms and later on a third floor attic.

I enjoyed growing up with a large family and with loving, caring parents. I had great respect and admiration for my older siblings. In the early years we were the first family in the neighborhood to own a car. It's a good thing there were plenty pairs of hands because it was a "crank up" car.

My parents would gather several of us younger kids in the car, complete with homemade fried chicken and other homemade “goodies” and go to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for the weekend. My mother’s sister, Betty lived in the country on a large farm. We called her Teta, meaning Aunt in Slovak. I have many happy memories of the time I spent there with my Aunt and cousins.

My younger sister, Rose and I would spend most of each summer at the farm. Two of my cousins from New York also spent summers on the farm. Each day we would dam the stream that ran through the pasture and we had our own swimming hole. That was my favorite thing to do but I also enjoyed watching the cows being milked and after the milking, I helped churn butter.

Unlike current times where each family member “does their own thing” we did things together as a family and not just on holidays. It wasn’t unusual to have an evening of music and dancing. My Father played the accordion and harmonica and my brother, Johnny, played the guitar. Johnny was also in a band. Soon after learning to walk as a child, my Mother would teach each of us to Polka. The Polka is a lively, ethnic dance known over the world.

My brother, Carl was born two years after me but was very ill and only lived to be two years old. Mrs. Stellar a neighbor and friend of my mother's also lost one of her young sons. Out of their grief and sorrow my mother and Mrs. Stellar developed a coping therapy which would be considered strange in this day and time. Each Sunday afternoon in the summer we would the graves at the cemetery. My mother would gather my brothers, Billy, Shortey (Paul) and me and Mrs. Stellar would do the same. The reason for going was to place flowers on the graves and pray, but the "outing" had been created. The mothers would pack a picnic lunch and the children, all just toddlers would play on the grassy slopes. The cemetery was quite a distance from our home, but since we didn't have a car at the time we walked. Since both families had friends and relatives also buried at that cemetery we, of course, prayed at their graves.

Remembering my early years, we would think a family having children in close age range that there would be a sick child at all times. I had two illnesses that were common in that time, scarlet fever and whopping cough. The scarlet fever was very contagious so our house was quarantined and any house that was quarantined had a large sign on the door. Only three of my siblings were affected, Rosie, Shortey and myself. My brother, Billy didn't want to miss any school so he stayed at my older sister's house at that time.

One benefit of a large family is that there were several siblings close to my age so I was rarely without a playmate. Two games I played as a child were hide'n seek and my favorite, knipper. My Father made the pieces necessary to play knipper. He would first cut off the handle of a broom and cut it into two pieces. "The knipper" was approximately 4 to 5 inches long and "the stick" was the remainder of the broom handle. He then whittled (shaved) each end of the knipper to a point and one end of the stick. I don't remember the objective of the game or the process. The part I do recall is that a small hole was made in the ground and the knipper was placed over the hole. The pointed end of the stick was placed under the knipper and the knipper was flipped into the air and was hit by another player. Not a very safe game. Another favorite game was hopscotch. I would think that in some towns across America is still played today. My charm of choice was a soft edged piece of colored glass. My Father made the pieces necessary to play knipper.

Probably my most treasured and memorable time each year was Christmas time. Of course when I was young the amount of snow we got during the winter was a great deal more than current years, and that only added to the excitement of Christmas. In comparison to today's gift giving our s was definitely lean, although we didn't feel it at the time. My gifts

were small items like socks or small toys. I do recall one gift I received as a child, a little child's ringer washer. I can still picture it. We always went as a family to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve where we sang in Slovak. The best part of the holiday was all the goodies and traditional Czechoslovakia foods my mother prepared. There was a traditional roasted meat of the with the trimmings and homemade peirogies but the best was a Czechoslovakia soup that was only eaten at Christmas and a pastry called Kolachy, better known as a nut roll.

I went to a Parochial school for several of my early years then changed to public school. The Parochial school was a neighborhood school and distance away and all new kids. That was hard for me since I was a very shy girl but a teacher helped my transition easier. He was Mr. Nichols and he taught science. I don't remember how he found out that I was of Czechoslovakian heritage but he nicknamed me "Czech" and always addressed me as "Czech" He was my favorite teacher.

My Parents were very moral people and raised us with high values. The two things that made a great impression on me were lying and respect for others belongings. These things have stayed with me my entire life.

Now for the “me” part of the essay. I was born July 1928 and was christened Geraldine Margaret Novak. Unfortunately I gained the nickname, Girlie from my older sister Helen. All my family knows me as “Girlie, even to this day and all my friends, except for one, know me as Gerry,

I married a man, Matthew Zserai that lived about 20 miles or so from my hometown. He was born and raised on a farm in Jonestown, Pennsylvania and we raised two children. Linda was born October 11, 1947 and David was born June 20, 1952. They were both born in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Linda resides in Sun City, Arizona and David resides in Salt Lake City, Utah. I later divorced Matthew and he died in 1977.

I met my next husband on a blind date arranged by my brother Shortey and sister in law, Ann. He’s name is John Cek and he was born and raised in a nearby town of Cornwall, Pennsylvania. When we married in 1973, I then moved to Hyattsville, Maryland, where he was living at that time. In both my marriages I was a homemaker and always enjoyed working at home. We moved back to Lebanon, Pennsylvania and that is where my husband passed away in 1987. I now reside in Peoria, Arizona.

Historical events I remember are John F. Kennedy's election and his assassination. Probably the most memorable and devastating time was World War II, having lost two brothers in the War.