

From notes left us by our Mother,

(ELZBIETA) STEFANIA MEDER NOWOBILSKA

(1900-1974)

My Parents

I will devote the first portion of these recollections to my parents. My father was Jan (John) Meder, and my mother was Julia nee Bruhl. Their surnames suggest their German heritage. Germans settled freely in Poland for ages, particularly after the Tatar invasions, to populate the emptied towns. The families of Bruhl, Meder, and Hass settled in Poland much later. The name Bruhl indicates the times of August Sas. The then ruling minister, Bruhl, brought his poorer kinsmen from Thuringen and Saxony, purchased the village of Freifeld near Cieszanow, and settled them under Magdeburg law.

Under Austrian rule, near the end of the 19th century, Freifeld had a diverse population. In addition to decedents of the German colonists, there was a large group of Poles and a significant group of Russians,

and later Ukrainians. When the elementary school was established, the united voices of Poles and (German) colonists decided on Polish as the language for instruction. The Roman Catholic church, a commonality for Poles and Germans, was staffed by a Polish priest, and was the source of crystallization between the nationalities. At home, the question of our parents ancestry was never discussed. All of us were brought up in the Polish spirit, although our ancestry was remembered subconsciously. Our parents knew German, and used it rarely, only when they were arguing in our presence.



Jan Meder



Julia Bruhl Meder

The truth of our ancestry most affected my eldest brother Franek. Since he was the

most educationally advanced of us, he was able to explain these matters to his younger siblings. He was of the opinion, that our ancestors must have had Slavic blood in them, having been subjected to germanization in previous centuries. Historically, he had a point, as the terrain now occupied by eastern Germany was populated by Slavic tribes 1000 years ago. The German "Drag nach Osten" (push east) subjugated these people and germanized them. To this day, west of the present Polish-German border, in Saxony, can be found groupings of Lusatians, who have retained vestiges of the Slavic language. When Hitlers invasion flooded the Polish territory, German authorities sought and forced families of Germanic ancestry to accept Reichsdeutsch or Volksdeutsch papers. A very small percent of colonists in eastern Little Poland (Malopolska) agreed to this requirement. It was said, that such rejections were punished severely, by deportation to concentration camps, or immediate firing squad.

Before World War I, members of Mother's family and a few others, emigrated to Austrian territory near Vienna. My brothers visited them and spent several vacations there. I visited them much later, in 1960, when I was living in London. I was pleasantly surprised that not only did the family elders not forget the Polish language, but spoke it fluently. In the fields, while at work, I heard greetings like those in Polish villages: "Godspeed" and "Praise be to God." The explainantion was not odd, that the locals refer to the village of Pischelsdorf as inhabited by "Polnische Familien" (Polish families).

Under Polish rule, Freifeld changed its name to Wolne Pole (Free Field), as decreed by local referendum. Presently, after World War II, the village was re-named Kowalowka.

My father, as a young boy, departed to a relative in Lvov, where he was enrolled in a locksmiths school. After a couple of years, upon completing his apprenticeship, he had a profession, and a position at the rail repair depot in Styj. At this time, my father decided to marry and start a family. His choice fell on my mother.

The Bruhl family was very well regarded in the village. The union became a reality, despite the fact that the young pair barely knew each other, and despite the promise of Mother's hand in marriage to another young man. The mutual feelings of this young pair were well known in the village. Prenuptual arrangements (with this other boy) were severed as a result of a misunderstanding about a parcel of land, which

was to be Mother's dowry. After many years, when I visited the village with Mother, I found out about this incident from the wife of Mother's unfulfilled love. She told me of how the matter was common knowledge at the time, and that parents made decisions about their daughters marriage. My father obtained his future in-laws agreement, since he did not barter about my mother's dowry, which he obtained in cash.

During this visit, we went to the place where my grandparents home stood, where my mother was born and where she spent her childhood. The buildings had burned down, and in their place stood a home, built by its current Ukrainian owners, which was totally unfamiliar to my mother. Only in the large garden, did my mothers face light up while tears appeared in her eyes. She embraced the trunk of the old pear tree as if she were greeting a loved one, a witness to the joys and sorrows of her youth. She told me, that she climbed trees often, to pick a few fruit for herself and as gifts for the neighbors. Once, her father caught her in the pear tree as she caught her skirt on one of the trees branches while she was hurrying to get down. She was very ashamed, for which she suffered more than the unspared beating she received from her father once she reached the ground. Now, village girls wear pants to climb trees, but at this time, this was unheard of. Despite their difficult beginnings, the marriage would have been quite happy, had it not been for Fathers political interests during his free time.

At the end of the 19th century, Austria, on the basis of its constitution, gave its countries the ability to elect representatives to local and central congresses. National, Peoples, Socialist, and other parties were formed.

Father became a member of the PPS (Socialist) party and shortly became an important voice in the local organization. He traveled, agitated, and organized. The environment for this kind of work at this time were not easy. Meetings took place under the naked sky, various means of transportation was used, all under changing circumstances, without regard to the season. After a few years of this type of work, Fathers health suffered as he succumbed do various pulmonary ailments. Despite travelling Adriatic health spas in Abacja, he wasn't able to return to health. He died in 1908, leaving a young 40 year old widow with 6 children (from 17 year old Franek in his last year of liceum, to the youngest, myself, 8 years old) and a home with a mortgage. The funeral was attended by a crowd, two priests, two orchestras, and a few thousand railway employees, and the leadership of the PPS party: Daszy]ski, Moraczewski, and Diamand. The day was also unforgettable because of unusually large snowfalls which befell Stryj that year. It was only October, and a snow plow had to precede the funeral procession to clear the street for the crowd to pass. The last years of Fathers illness had their toll on Mothers physical well-being. She not only had to care for her ill husband, but also ensure that the dishes which were used to feed Father were disinfected. Contact with the children, particularly the young ones, had to be strictly limited in order to maintain sanitary conditions.

A few days after the burial, it looked as if the Fathers fate would meet Mother. By exerting sheer will, she overcame her weakness, packed a suitcase and left for a village in the mountains, saying to us: "Fend for yourselves as you can, I must salvage my health for you." After returning to her normal self, she did not have an easy life, needing to clothe, feed, and educate the six of us. She did all of this on the pension left after Father. Although we often lacked many fundamental things, we were taught to hold our heads high, not to ask anyone of anything, and to never talk about that which we did not have. Later, when Bronek obtained steady work, also with the railroad, life became much easier. When I began to work, our situation became tolerable. Fate, however, continued not to spare Mother further heartache. During WWI, she lost two sons, and within 20 years she lost her eldest daughter, Jozia and her youngest son Gienek. Her own hard-working life came to an end suddenly during the first year of WWII, dying in the presence of my brother Bronek, myself, and her grandchildren Leszek, Marek, Krysia, Zdzych, Danusia and Dziuska.

During her last months, she became childlike, as she no longer understood the worthlessness of our devalued money, and the lack of material goods that the war brought upon us. Perhaps it was fortunate that fate robbed her of her consciousness of the surrounding danger which was brought about by the occupying power, particularly for myself and my sons as wife and children of a Polish officer. She would have worried herself to death, and possibly exposed us unwittingly with her feelings, which she had not known how to hide.

My Brother Franek (Frank)

There were six of us. Four boys and two girls. It was Fathers desire for us to climb higher on the social ladder than he did. That is why he sent us to school, and even arranged for music lessons for his two eldest sons. The oldest, Franek, followed his fathers wishes. After completing high school in Stryj, he enrolled into law school at the University of Lvov. This was already after Fathers death, so Mothers

financial help as a widow was not great. She couldnt provide lodging for him in Lvov. So he wasted 4 hours daily (round trip) commuting to his lectures. He had to earn his own money to afford books and scripts. It was no surprise, that his studies didn't go smoothly. Other than these hardships, there were other circumstances which did not lend themselves to supporting his educational goals. Music took up much of his time. He practiced, learned other instruments, and organized a student orchestra. At first he assisted, and later he directed and conducted. My other brothers were interested in music, but to a much lesser degree. Each tried, in his own ability, to play an instrument. My own initiation into the sphere of music lovers did not end on a fortunate note, as Franek quite forcibly taught me violin, using the bow in more ways than one. I revolted and my violin lessons came to an end. However, I continued to help in score transcription, since Franek needed many copies for his orchestra. I would like to add, that Franek was the initiator of an ensemble of four instruments: flute, clarinet, trumpet, and trombone; playing hymns for church observances in the month of May.



Franciszek Meder

Like his father, Franek became a member of the P.P.S. (Socialist Party). I know that once, along with his friend Rudka, they were sent to the provincial Congress (Russian occupation), probably with petitions gathered in the region of Galicja. Earlier, he became a member of the Marksmans Association. After serving for one year in the Austrian army (1912-1913,) Franek obtained the rank of officer in the reserves. He served as an instructor in the Marksmans Association and was one of its leaders. As an officer of the reserve stationed in Stryj, he had access to borrow arms for practice and firing. He did this willingly for all divisions of Polish associations, regardless of their political affiliation: Marksmans Association, Marksmans Troops, Bartosz Troops, and Soko; Troops. Franek's dream, as of all Polish youth,

organized into Polish paramilitary organizations, was to serve in the military under Polish command. Everyone believed, that the upcoming war would right the historical wrong made by the partitions of Poland. Fate was not kind to Franek, as he found himself among the ranks of the Austrian army during the outbreak of the Austro-Russian war. We had received word that my brother's intention was to join the Polish Legion as soon as the opportunity arose, and to bring with him a detachment of Poles from his regiment. Unfortunately, he was not able to materialize these plans, as in the first bloody battle, he fell at Krasnik, along with thousands of youths mowed down by Russian machine guns. The battle field remained in Russian hands, who took large numbers of prisoners, and the dead were buried in one mass grave. For quite some time, we had no definitive news as to what became of Franek. We deluded ourselves that he had been taken prisoner by the Russians and would return to us some day. Such was the loss of the eldest of our foursome. With him was extinguished a great hope which he imparted in others, drawing on his talents and popularity among people.

Although he did not contribute to the betterment of our material good, I am much indebted to him. Second to Mother, he had the greatest influence on my upbringing and character. He awoke in me the independence of relying only on oneself and managing in all kinds of situations. He treated me on equal with boys, praising or scolding me, dependant on what I had earned with my actions. He remained in my memory, as tall, well built, and with a cloudy gaze from beneath his bushy brows. Many years later, when a new assistant regiment commander, Lt. Col. Sosabowski, came to Bielsko, I was struck by his resemblance to my brother Franek. I let him know of this resemblance. Thirty years later, I met him in London, then as a General and famous commander of the parachutist brigade. Immediately after our greeting, he surprised me with the question> "Do I still remind you of your brother!"

My Brother Bronek

My brother Bronek was a typically difficult boy. After elementary school, he had to choose a trade, as he didn't care for schoolwork. This began with skipping out during the last classes, and later he didn't want to go to school at all. He was always severely punished by Father and led back to school. Nothing helped. During one of these extracurricular adventures, Bronek was drenched in the rain and caught a chill which progressed to pneumonia. This resulted in a lung condition which plagued him his entire life. He was the most developed physically, of good stature, possibly the tallest of my brothers. He did not complete his schooling, but attended technical courses to become a mechanic. Even here he caused the instructors many problems. This all came to an abrupt end after the death of our Father. When Bronek saw Mother crying, he tried to cheer her up. Mother told him that she was crying for him, as she fears what will become of him. Now that he is without a father, she does not see the possibility of his upbringing.

From this moment, Bronek changed, and became the greatest help to Mother and the entire family.

In 1914, Bronek was drafted into the Austrian Army and survived the war unscathed. After his return from active duty, he was very attentive to Mother and his siblings. It wasn't until I married, that

Bronek married the much younger Helena Waszewka from the nearby town of Rozdol. Helena was a very good wife and was very good to Mother and the entire family. They had four children: Albin, Krystyna, Danuta, and Zdzich. All were wonderful. Unfortunately, little Albin died in childhood. Danuta died at the age of 8, during the war.

When World War II erupted in 1939, my sons and I were evacuated from Bielsko, to Brzezany, past Lviev. My brother Bronek, came for us, and using his railway connections, brought us to Stryj in a live-stock train. At this time, my husband Albin, was stationed in Hungary. Bronek and his wife Helena took us in to their small apartment, where they were already taking care of our aging Mother. This was a huge sacrifice for Bronek and Hela, to have their own three children, Mother, and now us in two rooms with a kitchen. Bronek was a very good father figure for my sons. He taught them how to be handy around the house. By example, he showed them how to get along with others. He was a remarkable person. We lived with Bronek for two years. When the

Germans arrived, we moved to my Mother's home. After the war, Bronek and his family were deported from Stryj, and settled in Gliwice where he worked on the railroad. He died in Gliwice and is buried there.



Bronislaw Meder

My Sister Jozia (Josephine)

Jozia, six years my senior, married quite young. Early on, she garnered a lot of attention. At dances, she never lacked for partners, and was able to choose from among the candidates. Fate was unkind, as she chose the most unworthy. Barriers prior to the wedding were not lacking. Even her future mother-in-law, sent her younger son to forewarn Mother prior to giving her daughters hand in marriage to one who is not worth much. Franek was away at this time, and after returning from his one year tour of duty, chastised Mother for agreeing to the marriage, as Jozia, not being of age, could not marry without her mother's consent. Mother was not able to forget her own premarital problems, and did not want to cause her daughter the same problems her parents had caused. Karol (Carl), externally, was very presentable, and could easily impress a romantic young woman. He was a very talented and regarded mechanic, specializing in petroleum and rail engines. He earned a decent living. As a person, he was not bad, but had a very weak will. He needed a strong-willed wife who could assure that he did not squander his salary. Unfortunately, Jozia was not this kind of a woman. As children, when a spat occurred among us all, Jozia always came up with the short end of the stick. When Mother punished me, I immediately pounced on Jozia to throw her a few punches. She did not defend herself, only cried quietly. She did not like to share her secrets, and when she became aware of Karol's faults, she never complained. Her unhappiness and his behavior was kept hidden from others.



Jozefa Meder Krolicka

They lived in Boryslaw. When the war broke out, Karol was called to the army, and Jozia moved to Mother, in Stryj. In the beginning of the campaign, Karol became a prisoner on the eastern front. He did not stay imprisoned long. With the help of doctored papers, he got a position at an oil field, and worked as an engineer until the Bolshevik Revolution. Of course, he spent what he earned, and returned home as he left, with nothing. They stayed at Mother's, where Bolek (Frank) and Jadzia came into the world. During this time, Jozia became well acquainted with Karol, and seeking that she was unable to change his actions, she withdrew into herself and silently tolerated the shortcomings which threatened her and her children.

After moving to Dubno, where Karol obtained work in a steam engine plant, Jozia became pregnant for the third time. Lack of needed care, generalized depression, and inadequate medical help caused her and her child's death in December of 1928. Bronek and (his wife) Hela attended the funeral. Mother went to Dubno in the spring to place a cross and stone, and to plant flowers from her garden on the grave. During a night, while still in Dubno, Mother dreamt of Jozia complaining "Mother, you promised me flowers, and did not bring them to me". This dream repeated itself upon Mother's return to Styj. During a

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conversation with Bronek, she discussed her dream and the location of the grave. It so happened, due to incorrect information from the cemetery help, Mother had placed the cross and flowers on an incorrect grave. A few days later, notice of the error was received from cemetery management.

I can not say, that we were close to each other, although we were sisters. Our age and character differences did not contribute to mutual trust and sharing. Her early marriage and rather unhappy marital life influenced me, as I did not rush into marriage, and made that decision at a much more mature age.

My Brother Kazik (Casimir)

The fourth of our brood, Kazik, was no less zealous. He completed high school and entered into a technical school in Boryslaw. After completing a two year curriculum with practicum, he quickly became a director at one of the area firms. While in this position, war broke out. His professional was well paid, and moreover one could count on dispensation from the army. Kazik declined the privilege of his position and quickly joined a detachment of the Rifle Association en route to roll call in Krak[w. Mother's pleads and curses were to no avail, that he keep his younger siblings in mind, as two older brothers were already in



Casimir Meder

the Austrian Army. She even employed the heaviest caliber of arguments, saying, that since his forefathers were of German decent, he had no obligation to join the Polish Legions. To this, Kazik answered with tears in his eyes: "Why did you, Mother, bring me up as a Pole". He went with eagerness, singing. From his time with the First Brigade, two post cards were preserved. The first, dated 8-8-1914, from Krzeszowice (a suburb of Krakow) with a likeness of a Rifleman, the second, a view of a castle on Pieskowa Skala, stamped Kielce, with a return field address of: First Batalion, Second Company, Second Platoon. Both of these cards were addressed to Mother and full of feeling. Correspondence ended with these postcards, as the Russians occupied Eastern Little Poland, and Kazik was injured (shot in the upper jaw) and was taken to the hospital, and later released from duty in the Polish Legions, as unable to serve. For nearly a year he was fed artificially, and finally, in an Austrian hospital, he received an artificial jaw section and teeth. After a time of rest, he was directed to

appear before the Austrian draft commission. His efforts to return to his old position in Boryslaw were fruitless, as many positions within the company were given to relatives of the owners and directors. The Legion command, to which he petitioned his return, advised him to enlist in the Austrian heavy artillery, as schooled in this weaponry, he could be of service to Poland in the future. He took this advice, and after a short training period, he was assigned to the Italian front. And there, luck did not accompany him. On the 16th of June, 1916, during a storm, he was hit by lightning along with two other soldiers. One was saved, while Kazik and the other soldier could not be saved. It was not possible, as their position was high in the mountains, precluding any rescue attempts. His Polish buddies arranged for a funeral and burial in a village at the foot of Monte Santos, on whose slope he perished. His rifle's eagle, from which he never parted, was placed on his tombstone. News of his death came by official notice a few weeks later, along with a note from his Polish buddies regarding the funeral and the location of his grave.

Soon it will be 60 years since I last saw him going to war. Yet, after all of these years, I see the silhouette of a short brunette with a well defined moustache and side burns. These were the source of envy from his two older brothers, whose beards appeared much later. Of course, Kazik took advantage of this, jeering them "that he should go for them to buy tobacco". He also felt that he was very popular among the ladies. Although he had many loves, he never shared his feelings, and often changed the objects of his adoration. He did not share his life's ambition, and did not make any plans. Once, he joked with Mother, proposing that she sell the family home, and give him his share so that he could, for once, party well. He must have felt that he did not have much time among the living. His last stay at home, prior to his departure to the Italian front, did not leave much in my memory. It must have, however, been full of emotion for his younger sister, as he appeared to me the night of his death in a dream. He turned to me and said: "I died, and yet I live." Could this have referred to his physical death due to lightning, or did it mean, that despite his death, his faith in regaining Poland's independence is alive, and he wishes to pass it on to me.

My Brother Gienek (Eugene)

My brother Gienek was not born under a lucky star. Conversely, the circumstances around his birth contributed to his slow development and lack of immunity to various illnesses. A month after his birth, a

typhoid epidemic broke out in Stryj and its environs. Hospitals were over capacity. Houses, one after one, were transformed into hospitals. Physicians were overworked, and medical supplies were lacking. When it came time for our home, Mother, along with the rest of us, succumbed to the epidemic. Doubt surrounded the survival of my newborn brother, and the physician advised that Mother continue to nurse the baby, hoping that this would at least save the mother. Breast-feeding did not last long, for as soon as Mother came to herself and realized the fate which the doctor issued the newborn, she halted the breast-feeding and cared for the child herself. Both survived whole, but the baby's development was slow, and his health delicate. Like a sponge, he succumbed to various illnesses. He finished school and prepared himself for work.



Eugene Meder

After the outbreak of war in 1914, he attempted several times to enlist into the army. Each time, he was rejected by the Austrian Commission, as totally unenlistable. In 1918, the occupying countries fell. Gienek participated in the freeing of Stryj from Ukrainian hands. Later, along with other Stryj youth, he enlisted in the Polish Army, conscious of the orders given him six years earlier by his elder brothers: "When we are not able, you must take our place, when the need arises." They were thinking, of course, of the future Polish nation, in whose rebirth they fervently believed.

War did not do well for my brother Gienek. As always, his health did not serve him. After a few months of battle, he succumbed to pneumonia with complications. Upon hearing of his illness, I traveled to the front. By this time, I was an experienced railroad worker, and my superiors agreed to my journey. I traveled by train, wagon, and under water to get to the small area past Czortkow, where the army field hospital was encamped. I spent a few days nursing my brother, and lifting his spirits. His stay in the hospital lasted a few months. After being released from the army as an invalid without pension, he undertook various types of work, for which he earned a reasonable living. He would have been promoted to higher positions, if not his continued poor health. He died in his prime, at 42 years of age, in 1939. He is the only one of us who is buried in the cemetery in Stryj, in the company of our parents, and his niece Danka. His death affected Mother greatly, causing a weakening of her being and will to survive. She followed in his steps a year later, at the beginning of the war, on the 12th of February, 1940.

I would also like to mention, that Gienek's buddies at arms, sought to have him buried in the section reserved for war heroes. However, since he had not received any war decorations (he did not seek them), and posthumous petition would have to be made to Warsaw. To bring an end to this dispute over formalities, Mother, Broniek, and I decided to bury him next to Father.

My Childhood

I was born in May of 1900, on the edge of the 20th century. I can't say that I had a joyous childhood. This should cause no surprise, considering my appearance shortly after birth. Imagine a sluggish asymmetrical infant with patches of red hair unevenly dispersed on the scalp, eyes whose lids opened with difficulty, and hands that were nearly helpless. It was good that my strong voice indicated that I was alive, otherwise chances of survival would have been slim. And so, the Ukrainian midwife declared at my birth that I must have been a changeling, altered by a witch, since I was quite unlike all the beautiful children whom she had previously delivered. She suggested to leave me at a fork in the road, and to wait until I was transformed back into an actual child. As you can see, my mother did not heed her midwife's counsel. I would have not survived this folk superstition. My godparents did not have much joy carrying me to my baptism. They called me the "little beast", and this name stuck for a few years. Mother, seeing my effort and suffering, prayed that the Good Lord would take me. She was afraid of the future that would await me. If people reacted to my looks, it was understandable. But the behavior of our dog, who was kept in the house by my father was puzzling. Usually, I laid in a small bed-cradle, as I couldn't walk until I was 3 years old. When no one was around, the dog would grab me by my diapers, put me on the floor, and laid himself comfortably in my little bed. He knew that he would be punished, and after a few of these in-



Stefania Meder Nowobilska

stances, Mother got rid of him. The episode ended sadly for him.

Thanks to my mother's unyielding care, in ten to twelve years the "little beast" turned into a normal girl. Every day she bathed and massaged me. She applied special rubs which resulted in instinctive muscle contractions, causing movement. In the summer, sand was brought to the garden, so that I could sunbathe on the warmed sand. Daily, I was given cod liver oil until I was 10 years old, even though I found it disgusting. Often, my father sweetened these difficult moments, by bringing me candy on his way home from work. Once, accidentally, he cut me. This wound took a long time to heal. Another time, at night, I had a stomach ache, and unconsciously soiled the clean bed linens and down comforter. When mother awoke, and turned on the lamp, she saw what I had done, grabbed me, and gave me a spanking. I yelled loudly (my voice never failed me), and awoke my Father, who yelled at Mother "What are you doing to the child, Stepmother?" The word "Stepmother" stuck in my mind. It was quite some time before I understood that this was merely a name that Father threw at Mother in the heat of the moment.

The greatest concern was the condition of my eyes. In addition to multiple medications, our physician decided on a risky and unproven operation. The operation was successful and my sight significantly improved. To this day, my right eye is much weaker and has a tendency of winking. When I was a young woman, this eye was the cause of many a misunderstanding. Some imagined, that I was flirting, and would not believe my explanation. Maybe they didn't want to believe my explanation. Others jealously claimed that my faulty eye was the cause of my popularity with young men. Since my vision was saved, the sight of blind people kindles particular feelings within me, ones of mercy and good will. When I run into a them tapping for the edge of the sidewalk, I do my best to help them cross the street, and sometimes I have even walked them to their home. Fundraisers for the blind always find me a contributor, as does the Institute for the Blind in Wronki, near Warsaw