

Rufina Czerniewska Orechwa **(1899-1992)**

My Parents

I was born on 20th March 1899 in Korczyki near Grodno. My mother was Maria nee Tolloczko (1865-1938). She was the oldest in the family. She had sisters Stefania, Magdalena, Apolonia, Anna and one brother Boleslaw. They came from village Zapole. Her parents were mother Tekla nee Trzeciak and father Tomasz Tolloczko. My father was Konstanty Czerniewski (1865-1926), and he had one brother Kazimierz and two sisters Katarzyna, Antonina. He came from Ejsmont and his parents were father Wacław, mother Katarzyna nee Cydzik. They all came from Grodno area. Maria was 18 years old and Konstanty was 28 when they got married. My father inherited half of a small farm. This was too small to support his large family. My father was resourceful and hard working and he started to manage estates. These were estates of count Walicki, who was sent to Siberia for his taking part in January Uprising of 1863. His estates were given to Russian nobleman Levaszov and later it was inherited by knyaz (nobleman)



Maria and Konstanty Czerniewski

Waziemsky. My father managed these estates for Waziemski.. These properties were situated near White Lake few kilometers from small town Jeziory. These Russians owners lived in Moscow and Petersburg and their properties were managed by the local Poles. My father managed five estates: Wilanowo, Korczyki, Zadubie, Hubinka and Dunajowka.

My parent began management of these estates in 1908. All fields were sizable and managing them required hard work. In each estate my father had a lot of labor help who lived with their families in the houses provided for them. They were paid for the work and also received hay and straw. They were permitted to have one cow per family. The local peasants were mostly Belarus and were not friendly to their managers. In time peasants got used to my father and they liked him. My father made those estates more productive and profitable. Local merchants respected him. He used to get praises and appreciation from the owners for his work.

My younger years.

With great pleasure I recall Wilanow where our family lived. My mother was capable to manage Wilanowo. My parents were very demanding and my mother kept us children well under control. This is how the children were brought up those days. A great harmony, mutual respect and love existed at our home. I recall happy family events: reunions, holidays, parties, carnival drives, mushroom picking and lots of country amusements. Christmas and Easter holidays were always prepared according to Polish tradition. We used to invite not only family but also neighbors. Invited or uninvited young people were always welcomed.

Our father liked to play with us children. He would take us on his lap and treat us with a sweet or a chocolate. He also liked to listen to Apolonia's and Rufina's singing. My parents were ideal couple; they respected each other. My father often consulted my mother on important problems and respected her advice. He cared for her and was always her protector.

When children grew up the parents considered some education for them. For sometime they had a teacher at home who was giving instructions in languages Russian, Polish, German and also in mathematics and geography. Teaching Polish language under Russian rule was not allowed. Polish books were always ready to hide when a local official would come. The girls too learned these subjects. Two younger sons Mikolaj and Wladyslaw were placed in high school in Grodno. After some time there, they came back home. Their education away from home was ended.



Rufina Czerniewska

They both missed home and all its comforts.

In Wilanowo lived a Jewish family. Myself and my sister Apolonia often visited their home to see their daughters. It was interesting to watch the Jewish mother preparing foods for their holidays. My mother did not discourage those visit. We learned to respect other traditions and religions. In our parents home every human being was treated with dignity. Our family was very friendly with all people. My father was often asked to be godfather and as it was customary, he could never refuse it. When my brothers grew up they helped in estate. Their cooperation with workers was proper. Following the fathers example they valued farm workers for their honest and hard work.



Helena, Apolonia and Rufina

On Sundays the whole family rode to Jeziory, a small town 4 kilometers away. In front of the church, after the Holly Mass, the neighbors looked with admiration at our large family. My mother did not spare money on books, dresses and jewelry for the daughters. She loved to be well dressed and she was particular about good look of her children. The girls, Helena, Apolonia and Rufina, when grew up and were teenages helped with farming chores. In the winter growing young ladies did embroidering their outfit like table cloth, towels and bed clothes for the future. At our home we spoke Polish. Our family was well prospering and in beautiful surrounding of the nature one would happily live and enjoy everything.



Adam

My family

At the beginning my parent settled in Ejsmonty where my oldest brother Adam was born. Then my parents moved to Korczyki, an estate and village located 18 km. From Grodno. There all other children were born: Edward, Michal, Mikolaj, Helena, Apolonia and I Rufina.

Adam Czerniewski (1883-1951) (Adalek) was helping my father in managing the estates together with other sons. He served in the army and after WW I he returned to parents estate and stayed there with his brother Mikolaj. He was attached to his brother children. He never got married. His interests were fishing, hunting and pigeon breeding.

Edward Czerniewski (1885-1970) (Edwardek) married Franciszka Ejsymont (1896-1983) who was 13 years younger. They had two children Sophie and Anthony (Tosiek). He was a good son and brother; he cared well for his wife and children. Both lived to an old age and are buried in Kozlowicze near Grodno. Edward's family helped us by sending food packages when we were in Russia.

Michal Czerniewski (1889-1954) (Michas) loved nature, the forest, mushroom picking and flowers. He married Bronislawa Cydzik. They had three children: Zuzanna, Marian and Olimpia. Bronislawa died in 1952. Both are buried in Jezioro near Grodno.

Mikolaj Czerniewski (1891-1949) (Mikolcio) married Helena Cydzik. They had four children: Wanda, Konstancy, Ryszarda and Waclawa. With them lived the oldest brother Adam, who never got married. They all remained and lived in Ejsmonty family estate and their children live there and nearby today. Helena died in 1973.

Helena Czerniewska (1893-1950) (Helencia) liked to read books, embroider, draw patterns and she was a good cook. She married Wincenty Klawe (1893-1928) who was a widower and had two children Waclaw and Elwira. Helena had five children with Wincenty: Danuta, Ryszard, Tomasz, Kordian and Lineta. It was hard for the family when she became widow. Wincenty died on 25 November 1928. The estate was sizable and children were small. At the beginning she had to lease the farm but when the children grew up, Helena with the help of her brothers and neighbors managed to run her estate. Later her children helped. To primary school they went to Grodno. Danuta graduated from commercial high school. Ryszard finished primary school in 1939 and then he got occupied with family estate and younger family helped him. Helena took care of our mother.

Helena considered by Soviets as a reach landowner was arrested on Good Friday in April 1950. She was very sick and she could not walk. She was one month in the hospital and when she returned home she received an order on 31 of July to be imprisoned. God ordained differently. She died a day earlier on July 30. She and her husband are buried in Kulbaki near Grodno.

Wladyslaw Czerniecki (1895-1967) (Wladzio) was married with Aleksandra Ejsymont. They had two children: Irena and Kordian. After WWII they moved to Lisewo near Tczew. Wladyslaw died on 22 January 1967 and Aleksandra on 8 September 1961. They both are buried in Tczew cemetery.

Apolonia Czerniewska (1897-1984) (Apolonia) married Mateusz Ejsmont. They had five children: Teresa, Stanislaw, Elwira, Konstancy and Zbigniew. She was a good dancer, liked to sing and always happy. After WWII her family moved to Sztum, Elblag province. Mateusz died on January 7, 1974. Apolonia died on April 29 1984. Both were married for 52 years. They are buried in Sztum cemetery.



Edward



Michal



Mikolaj



Wladyslaw

World War I

When World War I broke out, all my brothers were called into the army. My father had to manage the estates himself. The war times were difficult. The front line past through and German units occupied Grodno and vicinity. State of Poland was recreated. Came the Bolshevik revolution. Bolshevik Red Army passed through our area. All estates were ruined and plundered by war. Our family had to find shelter with the family in the city Grodno.

My parents lost everything during the war. All estates of Russian owners were divided and given to the Polish settlers for their war merits. Our family returned to my grandfather estate in Ejsmonty.

Years between the wars

A frequent visitor to our home was my future husband Kazimierz Orechwa. That time he was a student of a military school in Wilno. He used to come on holidays and when he had been on the leave from the service. It looked like he liked me. He was always cheerful and his character appealed to me. It happened that after certain time he proposed the marriage to me and I accepted it. The wedding was in Jeziory church. After the wedding we went to Wilno and there we rented an apartment. Living in the city was depressing for me. I missed country fields and beautiful nature of my childhood. I frequently mentioned this to my husband. When he finished his military school and he did not get his commission for an officer we returned to the his father's estate in Orechwicze. There he started to farm his inherited part of the estate. In Orechwicze my first daughter Alicja was born, but she died as a baby. My second daughter Irena was born there. Meantime my husband as a war veteran received from the government a plot of land 17 hectares (42 acres) near Zydomla village. This land with the inherited one was sufficient to support our family. The land which Kazimierz received was not cultivated for some time and first crop was poor. The government loan of 3000 zloty helped us to manage this property. We both worked hard with the determination to endure the first years. With years we began to prosper. We started to built a new house on the land we acquired. The family moved to the neighboring village Obuchowicze. There our daughter Ala (second Ala) was born and also Anna was born but she died as a baby.



Marriage of Rufina and Kazimierz

As soon as the house was completed our family moved there. We managed well and soon our estate yielded good crops. In Zydomla our two daughters Stenia and Krystyna were born. My husband Kazimierz was the reserve officer and often had to go for two week military maneuvers. At that time I had to do all the work but somehow I managed. My brothers and cousins who lived nearby helped us. Our daughters attended local school which was well equipped and had well qualified teachers. One year we bought a harvester which very few farmers had. During harvest we hired peasants help. We seeded fruit trees around the house and soon small trees started to bear fruits. It seemed like everything was going well. The loan for building the house and farm equipment were finally paid off. We had future plans for the family but unfortunately World War II September 1939 came.

World War II

My husband Kazimierz was the officer of the reserve and when the war started he was called to the army. As a cavalry man he left riding on his gray horse. I was left home with four daughter, the oldest Irena was 12 and the youngest Krystyna was 6. Farms were distant from each other and few were owned by Polish farmers. In the absence of my husband, Belarus farmers would come and search the house, looking for him. This was a very nervous experience for me. I did not know where my husband was. One night somebody knocked at the window and it was my husband. I was scared and I urged him to leave because of the peasants who may kill him. Kazimierz with hard feeling had to leave his family. He went North and crossed the border to Lithuania where he was interned . When Soviet army arrived the peasants stopped bothering us.

Deportation to Russia.

On 10 February 1940, very early in the morning, came Belarus militia with Russian soldiers and ordered to pack our belongings. We were told to leave our house. I was under impression that they would take us to the field and would kill us. I did not wanted to pack our cloth. My daughter Alice did not loose her head in such a tragic situation and she would pack whatever she could. One of militia man was more kind to us and suggested to pack the best cloth. On that morning before leaving our house we kneeled in front of Our Lady of Perpetual Help image and we prayed. It was very cold day with extremely low temperature. Using horse drawn sleigh they transported us to a railroad station where we were loaded to a freight car which had sort of large shelves build. On one of these shelves we made our sleeping area. We stayed at the station for a long time. Our relatives and neighbors would come to bring us food. After some time the train started to move to an unknown region. On one of the stations we were served some grits in a pale which was not warm. We were hungry but could not eat this meal. We decided to use that grit to fill the open spaces between boards in our freight car. The car was not heated and that winter was exceptionally frosty. That freight car was filled with people and that why we felt relatively warm there. We slept fully dressed and we cover ourselves with whatever we had. In the corner was a pale for personal needs. This was very embarrassing. When the train would stop we would usually jump out to do our needs nearby. There was always a fear that the train would leave. We traveled long time. Sometimes we would wait at a station a day or a night to pass by another train. Traveling east we reached our destination where Russians decided to settle us. This was Mikulskaya Base, Dobranski district near Sverdlovsk. (Ural Mountains)

Ural Mountains

We lived in the forest. Our family was accommodated in a barrack built from wooden logs where spaces between them were sealed with moss. Inside we were provided with primitive wooden beds where we could sleep. Our barrack was a one large room which accommodated many families. Later it was divided into several small parts. In such one part we resided, myself with my four daughters and my cousin Tecia with her daughter Henryka and her son Wieslaw. In this room was a stove to burn wood. Myself and all the other women had to work in the forest. Using sharp spades to cut off branches from a fallen tree to make them ready for transportation. This work was not well paid but we had to work in order to buy bread, which was assigned for each person in the family. We had to sell some of our dresses or sheets for which we could buy food.

Later I made mail contact with my family in Poland and soon we received packages. They would contain grits, flower and also in cans some roasted pork covered with lard. I used that pork little to our soups tastier. Thanks to these packages from my family in Grodno we survived that difficult year in that Ural camp. I bought a goat which we named Manka. Goat's milk was very nourishing and contained fat which we needed in the Winter.

Ala, Stenia and Henia had to go to a grade school, which was in this area. My oldest daughter could not work because she was too young and there was no high school. She was a guardian to Krystyna and she could teach her Polish and keep an eye on young Wieslaw. This is how our group of deportees grew accustomed to this kind of life which we tried to make the best out of it.

Our way to Freedom.

At that time my husband was interned in Lithuania and 6 month later Russians moved him into Kozielsk prison of war camp. Group of officer before him ended in Katyn. When Germany invaded Russia the Polish officers got the amnesty and my husband joined general Anders army. At most convenient time my husband came to Ural area. He helped to transfer us South.

We traveled by steamer boat down Kama and Volga rivers. Later by train we went to Kazakhstan near Tashkent town and we stated there for several month. In Spring 1942 we went to Tockoye from where my husband managed to get us on a families transport train to leave Russia. In Krasnowodsk we boarded a ship which took us to Pahlevi port in Persia. From there we were loaded to open lorries an we were driven by Persian drivers through steep mountains full of serpentine roads to Teheran. It was a scary ride. In Teheran we were placed in special camps where our life slowly was returning to normal. My daughters were able to go to schools and Krystyna went to her First Communion.

In Teheran we met my husband again, before he had to leave with the Polish army to Palestine. Soon after we left Persia with other families and we were transported through Karachi in India and port Mombasa in Africa to Masindi camp in Uganda, located away from native towns and villages.



Rufina with daughters in Uganda 1943



Rufina and daughters in Africa 1948

In this settlement were about 500 Polish families, mostly children with mothers but there was also an orphanage. There was 21 Polish families camps in East Africa spread in former British Colonies. We spent over six years in Africa. Our health was affected considerably by such a long stay in tropical climate. We all had malaria, which would return with increased intensity with raining season. Our life in Africa was very primitive. Houses were built from twisted branches filled with gray clay forming walls. The roof was covered with elephant grass and the floor was a hardened clay. Around that house we had a deep groove digger out to prevent flooding during frequent rainy storms. Rainy season lasted half a year. Another half year was drought season when all the vegetation declined like ours in the winter. The heat was unbearable. To cool our room we had to splash our floor with water. After sometimes we got used to this climate and to the life in Africa. This was for us "Small Polish Oasis" inside "The Black Land". We had there Polish schools, a hospital with three Polish doctors and first we had our church w with a priest. Later we built a magnificent church and three Polish priests. This church is now attended by the natives. My daughters Irena and Alice graduated from high school and Stefania and Krystyna started high school there.

Our stay in England.

We left Africa in 1948. After 2 weeks journey from Mombasa through Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Suez Canal, Mediterranean Sea, Gibraltar and Atlantic Ocean we reached Southampton port in England. My husband was waiting for us there. We were together after over six years. Meantime my husband was in Palestine and later in Italy. He came to England in 1946 with the Polish 2nd Corp of general Anders. At this time many Polish families arrived in England. We all were under impression that we will eventually go back to Poland. We were accommodated in a camp in Wales close to a military unit where my husband was stationed. After few weeks my husband took our daughters Stefania and Krystyna to a Polish boarding high school Grendon Hall located north of London.

We moved to London soon after and my family was doing well. We all had some kind of a job and we were able to support ourselves well. During our 10 years stay in London all four our daughters got married to Polish young men.

Settled in Chicago.

Our first married daughter Ala emigrated to the States in 1951. Following their example we all gradually left for America. My husband and I with the last daughter family sailed to New York in 1958 and then by train to Chicago. Our whole family settled there. I was 59 years old then. My husband Kazimierz was employed in Drake Hotel in downtown Chicago, which was a good job for him. He worked there many years and retired when he was 82 years old with a good pension.

It was very hard for loss of our son in law who died suddenly in 1974 and then the death of his wife and ours oldest daughter Irena in 1978. They left four youngsters aged 13-21 years old. At that time we lived in their house in the lower apartment. Regardless of our age (I was 79 and my husband 80) and our great sorrow we felt an obligation to help them somehow. God let us help them with our advice and to be moral support to a time when all got married. When grand children sold their house our daughter Alice with her husband took care of us. We moved to upper apartment of their house.

Our family grew. We were happy to have 7 grand daughters and 7 grand sons. We were proud that all of them received college degrees. We lived yet to see our 17 great grand children. In spite of our war separation experiences God was generous to us.



Rufina with the family in Chicago 1958

The parents lived in daughter Alice apartment several years being in right mind and physically efficient. They both died in this apartment. Rufina Czerniewska Orechwa died on 16 of April 1992 at the age 93 and she was buried at Maryhill Cementary in Niles, IL.