

# My Mother - Biography of Stefania Meder Nowobilski



Elzbieta Stefania (Elizabeth Stephanie) was only eight years old when her father died, leaving her mother a widow with six children. She, along with her elder siblings, learned the value of hard work at an early age. As a young girl, she received a scholarship to attend the Sisters of Nazareth High School. Upon completing her education, she became a telegraph operator at the Stryj railway station.

Stefania was married to Albin Nowobilski on November 22, 1924. At that time, Albin was a lieutenant in the 6th Highland Riflemen's Regiment, stationed in Stryj.

Her first son was born on November 12, 1925 in her mother's home in Stryj. His birth was attended by Maria Bojczuk, a local midwife. Reportedly, the midwife had to administer to him for quite some time before he "came to life" and uttered his first scream. Albin was so grateful that he rewarded her very generously. The boy was baptized Leszek Stefan.



1917 Stefania and her friend Adela



1919 Stefania at her telegraph office

a hospital on March 25, 1927. He was baptized Marian Stanislaw.

Shortly after Marek's birth, Albin was transferred again; this time to the 3rd Highlander Riflemen's Regiment and was sent to Poznan

A short time later, Albin was transferred to the Border Protection Corps (KOP) and stationed in Husiatyn near Kopeczynce on the Polish-Soviet border. To prevent possible complications, Stefania traveled to Lwow to give birth to their second son Marek in



1924 Stefania and Albin wedding

for training. The young family lived in Poznan for just under a year before moving to Bielsko in 1928, where they first lived in a hotel and then moved into a newly built three room apartment. It was quite luxurious for the time. There was a bathroom with a sink, tub, and toilet. Hot running water was available from a gas-burning heater in the bathroom. The kitchen had gas burners and a coal-burning oven. There was a large entrance room and the apartment was heated by coal-burning tile stoves.

Behind the apartment building was a large fenced yard, an ideal place for a playground. It was always full of children of all ages who engaged in all types of games, including dodge ball and baseball.



1925 Stefania and Albin on the border

The apartment building also housed a kindergarten for the children of military families and was staffed by a full-time teacher. Stefania was active in the council of military families which planned children's activities, including St. Nicolaus (Father Christmas) and the traditional Polish Christmas Pageant, Jaselka. Leszek and Marek



1932 with the family on the river Stryj



1933 Stefania with sons in Cracow hospital

enjoyed a happy and carefree childhood.

During summer vacations, the family often traveled to grandmother Julia's house in Stryj. These were happy family times, full of joy and warmth. The sons hiked to the river, gathered sour cherries and pears in their grandmother's garden and drank warm milk from the neighbor's farm. In the summer and winter, Albin often took his sons hiking and skiing. The boys learned to ski when they were quite young. When their father led military ski training in Zwardon, the brothers and their mother vacationed nearby. During one of the trips with Albin, Marek broke his leg skiing.

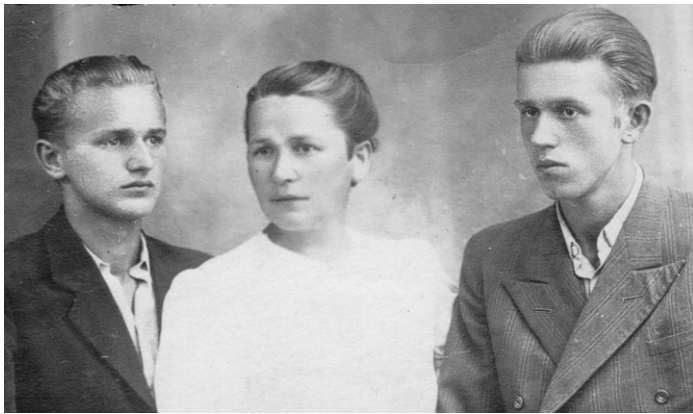
In 1933, when the boys and their mother vacationed in Rabka, all three contracted scarlet fever and were taken by ambulance to Krakow. When their fever finally broke, they were quarantined for another six weeks. One of the hospital paramedics made the boys swords and bows from tree branches. Although they were hospitalized, the boys enjoyed playing under the creative eye of this health care worker. From early childhood, the boys were taken to violin lessons at the local music school and were required to practice every day. They were not allowed to play in the yard until their homework was completed and until they practiced the violin for half an hour. Neither had any special musical talent, but their lessons contributed to their appreciation of classical music. One day, when the sons were playing in the yard, Marek climbed onto the gazebo and fell on his arm, breaking it at the shoulder joint. Multiple attempts to set his arm were made in the hospital in Biala, without success. The fifth attempt included orthopedic surgery and metal parts were inserted. This surgery was successful, and he had full use of his arm his entire life. During this pre-war time, Albin continued to take his boys on field trips and various outdoor activities. Leszek completed primary school (6 years) and the first two classes of lower secondary school (gimnazium). Marek was a good student and completed primary school in 1939.



1935 Stefania, boys and cousin Janka build mound

On September 1, 1939, everything changed. That morning, Stefania's family woke to the sound of German planes and within a few hours they were packed. That afternoon, along with other military families, Stefania and the boys boarded trains for the long two-week journey east. The train was often pulled over to the side as military transports were given priority. Passengers often had to get off the train and lay flat in the trenches along the tracks when squadrons of German bombers flew overhead. Thankfully, the train was not attacked during this journey. It passed Lwow and unloaded its passengers in Brzezany, not far from the Soviet border. A few days before the entry of the Bolsheviks into Brzezany, Stefania and the boys saw Albin briefly before he retreated with the military to the Hungarian border. The sight of Soviet tanks and poorly dressed infantry in military vehicles was very depressing. The family immediately began to dress much more poorly, and Stefania particularly changed the way that she looked. In a short time, Stefania's brother Bronek (Bronislaw) came to bring them to his home in Styj. He worked on the railroad, and to get his sister and nephews home as soon as possible, he boarded them onto a car that transported pigs. Dressed as a railroad worker, he explained to the Russians that he was taking his family home.

Stefania and her sons were welcomed into the home of Hela (Helena), Bronek and their three children, Krystyna (12), Danusia (Danuta, 8), and one-year old Zdzich. The apartment was rather small; two big rooms, a big kitchen, and a hallway. Danusia had a leg injury and was an exceptionally good child. At that time, Bronek and Stefania's frail mother Julia Bruhl Meder also lived with



1943. Mother with sons

languages and literature. At this time, the boys resumed their violin lessons. Stefania, Hela, and Bronek did all they could to make a good life for their family of four adults and five children. Their only fear was the constant possibility of being deported to the depths of Russia. Near the beginning of their stay in Stryj, Stefania's mother Julia died on February 12, 1940 – and about a year later, her niece Danusia also passed away. Both were buried in the Stryj cemetery.

Under the German occupation, Stefania and her sons moved to Julia's house on Unia Lubelska Street where the family could be on their own and closer to work. At this time, Stefania did what she could to keep her two growing sons fed. They raised rabbits in their yard and grew vegetables in their garden. Stefania traveled to nearby villages to trade. It was dangerous to do so, as the Germans often staged kidnappings of civilians to be sent to labor camps in Germany. Middle and high schools were immediately closed. Stefania arranged with her acquaintances to hire the boys to work in the lumber mill. In some ways, this protected them from deportation to Germany, as the mill was under German control and produced prefabricated barracks for use in Germany.



1945 Together after 5 years

1944, high schools reopened, and the boys returned to their studies and volunteered for the Stryj fire department. One day, posters showed up with the slogan "Poland for Poles, Ukraine for Ukrainians, Poles and Jews register yourselves to Poland". A Polish committee was established near the train station. In the beginning, no one registered, as they thought that they were in Poland, and no one thought of moving west. One day, the deportation of young Poles caused a local panic and long lines of Poles appeared at the Committee to register for departure to Poland. Now, Stefania didn't delay. She stood in line all day to register her family to leave for Poland.

Stefania and her sons were loaded onto a cargo train. Along with their chests and suitcases, they crossed the river San into Przemyśl on February 2, 1945. They stopped for a few months in Mielec, because the front was still around Krakow. In April, the war was coming to a close, and the family

them. Despite everything, the boys' aunt and uncle brought in their sister's family and shared all that they had. The boys and their mother stayed with her brother's family for two years, and never felt that they were a burden during this time of great shortages. Both were very good to the boys, and Bronek was like a father to them. He taught them locksmithing and repairs. Under the Bolshevik occupation, the boys attended Soviet middle school where the language of instruction was Polish and Polish textbooks were printed in Kiev. Additional subjects included the Russian and Ukrainian languages and literature.



1944 Stryj with sons and their friend Bronek



1945 Stefania and Albin in Nuremberg



left Mielec to settle in Bielsko. They occupied an apartment thinking that Albin would soon return to Poland. The boys attended accelerated high school classes to make up for their lack of education under the Nazis. The political situation slowly worsened, and it was understood that it would not be safe for Albin to return to Poland. Stefania received a pass to the Czech side of Cieszyn and traveled through Prague to Nuremburg to reunite with Albin who at this time was a liaison officer in the



1956 Stefania and Albin with granddaughter Ania

American zone. She wanted to become oriented whether her boys could also join their father. Shortly thereafter, the boys liquidated the apartment and took their valuables to Bronek who was now in Gliwice. The brothers started on their journey to Nuremburg by first visiting their cousin Wladek in Klodzko, a forest ranger in that area. With the help of a gamekeeper who worked for their cousin, they were guided across the Polish-Czech frontier.

They hiked through forests and mountains and arrived at the first train station on the Czech side. By train, they arrived in Prague and stayed the night with a family whose address was provided by their parents. The next morning, the sons departed by train through Pilsen to the German border. They had documents that were authorized by UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), that their father had sent them, but the border guards were unwilling to let the boys cross

into Germany. Thankfully, a friend of Albin's was at the border crossing and was able to persuade the guards to let Leszek and Marek enter. That same day, the boys arrived in Nuremburg and the family was reunited after 5 ½ years of separation. Albin couldn't believe how much his boys had grown and changed – 5 years is a long time in a boy's maturity to young adulthood. Stefania and Albin sent Marek immediately to Munich where he attended high school.

In September, Albin was recalled to London. His assignment as a liaison officer in Nuremburg had come to an end. Stefania and Marek left for Maczkow (now Haren) in northwest Germany, under the administration of the 1st Polish Armored Division, to await their transport to England. It wasn't until February 1947



1956 The family with uncle Ostrowicz

that Stefania and Marek were approved to leave for England. During the time Stefania and Marek were in Maczkow, Albin and Leszek drove by car to Brussels where a contact was to assist Leszek to be admitted to university in Spain. Unfortunately, the Belgians did not allow their entry and instead, Albin and Leszek drove to Paris. It was already October, so Albin sold his car and left Leszek in Paris while he went to London. In Paris, Leszek lived in a hotel and shortly, through the help of some of his father's friends, he received his documents and a visa to England.

As soon as Albin arrived in London, he began to search for a house to purchase by reading ads in the paper. He didn't have much time, as Stefania and Marek were arriving soon. He purchased a house on the northeast side of London at 27 Albion Square. It might have been better for him to have bought a house on the west side of the city where most Poles were settling. Unfortunately, Albin was not aware of



Parents with grandsons of son Marek

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1959 Chicago grandson Piotr birrth

installations of remote-controlled TV cameras at TV stations throughout Europe and was in North America several times on business.

At this time, he spent his free time in a Polish dance troupe at the YMCA where he met his wife Wieslawa Mar-



1967 Vacations with Leszek family in USA

In his free time, Leszek sang in the Polish Academic Choir where he met his wife, Krystyna Orchwa. They married in July 1955 and their daughter Anna (Ania) was born the following year. In November of 1957, they left England on the Queen Mary, sailing to New York. They stayed in New Jersey for two weeks with Albin's sister Aniela (Nellie), after which they traveled by train in December of 1957 to Chicago to join Krystyna's two older sisters, Alicja and Irena, who had already immigrated to the United States.

Stefania and Albin paid for their mortgage by renting their home's upper rooms. They worked hard to keep up the home. Albin tried to work out of the house. In the sizable shed in the back of the garden he started growing mushrooms as a business. But this business was messy and did not last long. With the help of Stefania's friends,

this and needed to buy a property quickly. In January, he secured a loan and in the beginning of February, Albin and Leszek moved in. By February 10th, Stefania and Marek arrived. The brothers began their studies to prepare for university in England. Soon, Marek traveled to Bodney to matriculate from senior high school. Leszek was sent to a camp where former Polish soldiers were receiving work training, and where he learned drafting. This provided the possibility of technical study, so both brothers worked and took English classes to prepare for university entrance exams. Marek passed the entrance exams to the Polish University College (PUC), but chose instead to begin work in electronics, and later obtained an engineering degree from a professional institute. He worked for Power Optics, which was a division of a larger organization. He supervised



As the daughter of an orchestra violinist, she had a keen sense for artistry and music. They were both such good dancers that they soon became the troupe's first pair. They were married in January of 1954.

In the end, Leszek was able to pass his British matriculation exam and obtained a scholarship for four years of study, receiving a Bachelor of Science in Engineering, B.Sc.(Eng), from the University of London. Getting work was difficult. He had a few temporary drafting and construction jobs, but nothing permanent.



1970 Leszek family visits parents in London



1970 With Grandmother in terminal in London from London. She toured Rome, and visited the Vatican and Monte Cassino.

In the summer of 1965, Albin visited his son Leszek and his family. On the way, he visited his sister Aniela and his brother Wladyslaw in New Jersey. During his few months stay, Leszek's family took him on a car trip to Canada. On the way, they visited friends in Michigan and, in Canada, the family attended Ania's godfather's wedding and visited family and friends there.



1980 We visit Father with Irena in London exhibition. Stefania then returned to Chicago to be with her grandchildren during their summer vacation. The family took her on a car trip through six states. She liked Ozark Mountains. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, she flew to Detroit to stay few days with Ania's godfather's parents, the Kucharze. From there, she flew to Newark where Aniela's son Albin met her at the airport. Stefania visited some of her Meder relations in New York and, finally, her friends the Gelobters helped her board the liner "France" for her trip back across the Atlantic.

Their granddaughter Ania (12) visited her grandparents during her summer vacation and stayed with them few weeks while sightseeing London with them. In 1970, Leszek's family flew to London to be with Stefania and Albin. At that time, Stefania invited her brother Bronislaw's daughter and granddaughter from Poland to stay with them. It was very pleasant reunion and the young generation had pleasant time meeting each other.

Stefania was very active in the Polish Parish on Devonian Road during the last years of her life. She was a volunteer for a parish charity. In this volunteer service, she was entrusted to provide help to several bedridden parishioners. The first was a Polish paralyzed man married to an English woman, the other were an old couple with very poor health. Stefania had the most difficulty with a person from eastern Poland who was very sick, she had progressive gangrene. This person needed help after she was discharged from the hospital. Stefania shopped, prepared food and did some housekeeping for her. This person died in the hospital and Stefania arranged a funeral for he A month later, Stefania began to feel pains which lasted till her death on September 11, 1974.

Albin was hired as a porter at the Science Museum. He worked in this position until his retirement. Stefania was employed near their home. She sewed coats and ladies' handbags. Their son Marek often visited his parents and helped them with household maintenance problems.

In the summer of 1959, Stefania visited Leszek's family in Chicago. She stayed for several months and her grandson Peter was born during that time. The next year, Stefania visited the Meder family in Vienna, Austria. She was amazed when many of the older relatives spoke Polish. In 1961, Stefania visited Italy with a group

In April of 1967, Stefania sailed on the French liner "France" to New York. She stayed for a few days with her friends the Gelobters from Stryj, and she visited her friend Nela Grabowska, also from Stryj. She was driven by the Gelobters to stay for a short visit with Albin's sister Aniela's family in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. She then traveled by bus to Chicago where she arrived in time to be with her grandchildren at the May 3<sup>rd</sup> Polish Parade, and then enjoyed the rest of May with the family. At the beginning of June, she flew for the first time in her life to visit her nephew Boleslaw and his wife Elsa in Toronto, Canada. She had very pleasant stay with them, and visited many friends there. Elsa took Stefania to Montreal for the Expo67



She died in a local hospice in the presence of her husband, Albin, sons, Leszek and Marek, and Janina, Albin's niece. The funeral was held at the Polish church on Devonian Road, but her ashes were buried, according to her wishes, in Poland. In August of 1977, after a funeral mass in Bialka Tatrzańska's church, her ashes were buried in Albin's sister, Ludwika's, grave.

In the summer of 1979, Albin visited Leszek's family in Chicago. This time he traveled by plane and he stayed several months with his grown grandchildren Anna (23), Peter (20) and Irene (17). Leszek, Krystyna, and Irena later visited Albin in London before and after a European train tour. In September of 1984, Krystyna and Leszek traveled to London to spend three weeks with their father, Marek, and some friends from the "good old days in London".

Stefania's husband and our father and grandfather died on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1985. Leszek and Krystyna flew to London for their father's church funeral. A year later, Leszek, Krystyna and Ania, flew to Poland for Albin's funeral in Bialka Tatrzańska. This funeral was attended by family from all over Poland. After the funeral mass in the church, Albin's ashes, brought to Poland by Marek, were taken by traditional highlander procession to the cemetery and placed next to his wife Stefania ashes, in his sister Ludwika's grave.



By the grave of my parents in Bialka Tatr.