

PROJECT TO DISCOVER
SCHENECTADY **COUNTY'S** EASTERN EUROPEAN ROOTS
NEWSLETTER

April 2023 Vol. 10 No. 2
Our Tenth Year!

Dear Reader,

We are currently in *mostly* semi-yearly publication as we continue to discover, document and digitally preserve genealogy, stories and pictures of Schenectady County's Eastern European immigrants. However, if and when a family story comes that can command an entire issue, such as the one in this newsletter, we have the freedom to publish "whenever."

I met author Judie Jones Ambrosini at a Mont Pleasant High School reunion. After reading her family story and the memories it generated for me, I asked Judie to share it with everyone. Fellow editors agreed.

Please share your family history, help pass on the (electronic) word. Our deadlines are usually January 1st and July 1st. To submit your family story, pictures, etc., e-mail Phyllis Zych Budka: abudka@nycap.rr.com. Without your stories, there can be no newsletter. To be added to the newsletter e-mail list, contact Phyllis.

The Schenectady Digital History Archive To find our newsletters on-line:
<http://www.schenectadyhistory.org/resources/eer/>

Thanks to Bernice Izzo, Carole McCarthy and Martin Byster for help in editing this newsletter!

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The Szumilowski Sisters of Schenectady

Judith Jones-Ambrosini

Come along with me as I stroll through memories, rumors and the family lore from a time gone by, about the people I once knew.

Katarzyna (Kazia) Valentina Wysowska (1874-1914) was seventeen when she boarded the steamer from Kraków Poland to Schenectady New York. In Schenectady she met and married the former cavalry guard who had served in Kaiser Wilhelm's army, Wojciech Szumilowski (1869-1956). Together they had thirteen children, eight girls and five boys. The five sons and a daughter passed away before lifesaving treatments were developed. Their mother, Kazia, died four days before Christmas. She was only forty years old.

After Kazia passed, as in any tragic loss, some things changed while others went on as before. Although he spoke very little English, Wojciech remained at his job down at the Schenectady Locomotive Works and he continued to live in the house he had shared with my grandmother and aunts. Rumor had it that my Dziadek (Polish for grandfather) bought the house on Strong Street from the Mohawk Indians. Whether this was true or not, the story became family legend. He also farmed tomatoes, cabbages, grapes and most importantly, potatoes from which he made his vodka. His life was work and keeping strict tabs on each and every one of his daughters as best he could. Only on Christmas Eve did he allow himself to weep at midnight Mass in St. Mary's Polish church, as the choir sang Cicha Noc, Swieta Noc (Silent Night) just as they did the Christmas Eve he buried his beloved Kazia.

AUNT VIOLA (JABLONSKI)

Soon after her mother's passing, Viola, the eldest daughter, stepped in to assist her father in raising her sisters. Julia took a waitressing job at a hotel in Saratoga Springs to help the family. The others, Johanna, Cecelia, Elizabeth, Florence and Gertrude alternated between school and work. Viola was devoted to caring for her sisters and helping her father manage the household. Given all these responsibilities, she was forced to grow up quickly. She became a dedicated caregiver and never gave much thought to her own future.

Until one day at a St. Mary's Church picnic, Viola met Charlie Jablonski. Charlie was a rugged NYC cop visiting relatives in Schenectady. Soon he started coming up to Schenectady every chance he got, just to see Viola (whom he called Violet). Although smitten, Viola was concerned about leaving her father and sisters. Months flew by until one Sunday afternoon Charlie asked Wojciech to take a stroll in the garden. Charlie showed him a little blue box that contained an engagement ring. A smile broke across the old man's face as he put out his hand to Charlie and nodded his approval.

Charlie stood in the kitchen of the house on Strong Street clutching the blue velvet box. Nervously he presented the ring to Viola. He told her it had been his mother's engagement ring. Viola's sisters, who had been hiding in the living room, burst out with squeals of joy so great they reverberated all the way down Strong Street into Pleasant Valley! Viola said yes.

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That first Szumilowski wedding took place in the house at 21 Strong Street. Family lore has it that the revelry nearly brought the house down. There was food, beer, dancing and singing 'til the cows came home. Afterwards, Charlie and Viola moved downstate to New York City and began to raise a family of their own. They too had a large family, 2 boys and 5 girls, my Jablonski cousins.

Aunt Viola raised her own children with love and discipline as she had with her sisters. I clearly remember climbing the steep steps to Aunt's Vi's house. My mother would hold my hand and remind me to behave. There was an unspoken sense of order in Aunt Vi's home. It could have been because Uncle Charlie was a cop or perhaps it was because Aunt Viola knew that to raise a large brood you needed a sense of order. Yet, there was always a sense of fun and excitement and lots of noise going on in that house. It was one of those places filled with activity and laughter. Cousins ran inside and out playing hide 'n seek and tag. The adults sat at the dining room table playing cards. Aunt Vi was in perpetual motion, moving in and out of the kitchen with coffee and platters of sandwiches, while at the same time keeping a careful watch over everything else that was going on. Meanwhile, Uncle Charlie sat in his big rocking chair smoking a pipe and reading his newspapers. Sitting at his feet was his German Shepherd, Blackie. All the kids knew it was better not to disturb them.

I have many memories of my visits there. One time when I was eleven, we had a family reunion there. That day I stole a cigarette from my father's silver Dunhill case. All the adults smoked, so I decided to try it. I nearly choked to death. I put it out and stuck it in my pocket, not knowing what else to do.

The day of that family reunion, my Schenectady cousin Johnny Rowny and I took a walk to the local luncheonette for a Cherry Coke. Johnny is about two years my junior. I told him about the cigarette and we decided to smoke the rest of it. Or maybe I talked him into it. We took a book of matches from the cashier stand and once outside, lit up. Within seconds, the two of us started coughing and choking. I remember we both swore we would never smoke again..... although down the road I did. Johnny and I still reminisce about that incident and still laugh about it.

Sometimes in life when we're lucky, we form singular connections, special attachments. My Aunt Viola and I, well, we never made that special connection. I wish we could have had more time together to get to know each other better, but at the time she was too busy and I was too young.

In my memory Aunt Viola was always the caregiver.

AUNT FLORENCE (ROWNY)

Aunt Florence had a pleasant face and a ready smile. She wore faded house dresses in summer and rubber boots called galoshes in winter. Although her appearance was plain, there was always a glow of optimism about her, a twinkle. Aunt Florence worked as a cook and housekeeper in fraternity houses at Union College. Her love of education, music and her spirituality trickled down in individual ways to all the children.

Aunt Florence lived in a small, modest house with my uncle Mike Rowny and their children, my cousins Bobby, Mickey, Jimmy, Johnny, Billy and the two girls, Marcelline

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and Rita. Although they were a close family, I never saw the entire family there at the same time. I remember people passing through, calling out greetings and moving on. Their home was purely functional, without much attention to decor, but there was something magical about that house. Perhaps it came from the well-tuned piano in the front room.

To this day I am very close with my Rowny cousins. The eldest, Bobby, set up an art studio in his garage where he could sketch, paint and practice tai chi. Marceline became a nun and a nurse. She eventually left the convent, moved to Florida and married twice. After college Mickey took a job with the army as a civilian personnel officer. He worked at West Point for a number of years, then in England and Germany. While he was working at West Point, I was in college in NYC. We sometimes took the Amtrak train towards New York together. He would get off at Highland Falls and I would continue on. Both English majors, we really bonded on those train rides. Jimmy was the mysterious one, very smart and very introverted. He had a long career as an admissions officer at Albany State College and was known to walk many miles to work from Schenectady. He never married, stayed in Schenectady where he eventually bought himself a little house and created a library filled with books and music. Johnny became a Jesuit Brother and taught English at Fordham University where he met and married one of his students, Sylvia Torre. Johnny gave up teaching and became an insurance executive for a "White Shoe" firm but he never lost his love for the written word. Billy was the kid brother, the prankster, but when he grew up became very shy. To overcome this, he took a course as a Toastmaster and it cleared up his shyness. He married a Chinese woman, Lulu, and learned Mandarin. They moved to California and settled into a happy life. The youngest of my cousins was Rita. She was very spoiled by her brothers, which made her confident and outgoing. She moved to New York City to attend FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) and lived the NY scene before heading back upstate. Rita was smart, musically and artistically talented and a bit of a sassy bohemian. I remember the beautiful portrait she painted of Aunt Gertie (who all the Rowny cousins called Giddy). Rita's art captured the very essence of our aunt. She also had a deep love and understanding of animals. In fact, she started a pet sitting business that thrived for many years.

It was the '50's. I was 9 years old and still living in New York when we went to visit Aunt Florence in Schenectady. I remember walking through her back door to the vegetable garden. For this city girl who had never given any thought as to where watermelons came from, it was such a surprise to see big green melons attached to long tangled vines growing right out the ground. Although there were other things ... squashes, cabbages and pumpkins, I distinctly remember those watermelons.

At the very end of the yard was a tall chain link fence. A part of it was bent back, creating a small makeshift gate. If you went through the gate, you'd wind up at Aunt Gertie's little rented house. Down the block on Craig Street was St. Columba's Catholic Church and school. Across the street was Lutz's German delicatessen and on the corner of Albany Street was Commanzo Brothers dry cleaners and shoe repair store.

But, if you turned back, passing the watermelon patch and vegetable garden and white sheets hanging in the breeze on long clothes lines, you'd walk through Aunt Florence's house. Out the front door and down several rickety steps onto the sidewalk, was Hulett Street. Hulett Street was a mix of nationalities, races and languages. Sometimes on Hulett

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Street you could hear gospel music streaming from the Baptist Church a few doors down. I can also remember hearing a faint Gregorian Chant coming from the Catholic Church over on Craig Street. But no music was more beautiful than when Aunt Florence sat at her piano and played hymns and sang. I thought it came from heaven itself. Although she never had material riches, whenever she sat at the piano ... there was always a feeling of joy ... and a touch of magic.

All the Szumilowski sisters had strong Catholic beliefs and practiced them in their daily lives but Aunt Florence had something else. She had a Buddha-like quality about her that was clear in the way material things didn't matter to her. She accepted life as it was. She didn't need the latest fashions, the biggest house or a front row seat. She understood things. As a teenager I always wished I could speak with her about how she could be so detached yet so involved with life.

In my memory Aunt Florence was a mystic.

AUNT JENNY (OSTROWSKI)

Aunt Jenny (Johanna) had one of those faces that never looked young even when she was young. It was a broad face with plain but pleasant features. She wore her brown hair pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Not a very flattering style but it made one wonder what would happen if she took out those hairpins that held it in place and just let her hair fall loose. But that never happened. Whatever dresses she wore were well hidden behind her spotless aprons.

Aunt Jenny and Uncle Eddie Ostrowski lived on the second floor of a two-family house they owned in Queens, New York. The two-bedroom home had a screened in porch and a music room. Then there was the kitchen. It was a functional room with an oval Formica table and four chairs set near the window that looked out to the backyard garden. Aunt Jenny moved seamlessly from stove to table carrying her homespun culinary delights of golambki, pierogi, cookies and rice pudding, to name a few. She was a terrific cook who loved to feed people. In fact, she and Uncle Eddie owned a little luncheonette in a nearby neighborhood.

I remember one time Aunt Jenny called my mother to ask if she would come work at the luncheonette. She said she would. But, after two days she quit, claiming Uncle Eddie stole from her tip cup while she waited on tables. Family gossip had it that he was both sneaky and cheap.

The couple had one son, Edward, who Aunt Jenny called Edju. We (the cousins) called him Nature Boy because he always played the song "Nature Boy" on his trumpet. It was a Nat King Cole tune. Edward was very smart and a talented musician. He broke his mother's heart when he married Susan, an auburn-haired beauty who was not Polish and more importantly, not Catholic. Susan was an Episcopalian!

Once a week, after school, I went to visit Aunt Jenny. It was the same thing every week. It started out with treats at the kitchen table a slice of her delicious Polish babka or the peanut butter cookies she knew I loved and a tall glass of cold milk. Then, and I remember this so well, we would go into the dining room. In the far corner was Aunt Jenny's mahogany bureau covered with a handmade white lace cloth upon which she set up her

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shrine. There a painting of Our Lady of Czestochowa, the Polish Black Madonna, and there were marble statues of saints and angels and fragrant votive candles. Unbeknownst to Aunt Jenny, I said a secret prayer. I prayed that she would give me one of her statues. She never did. Instead, she gave me holy cards and rosary beads from Poland.

Even as a child I realized that what I thought of as holy and religious was different from my Aunt's. I went to Catholic school. Throughout sixth and seventh grades I was mesmerized by the traditions of the Church; the beautiful flowers on the altar, the familiar scent of incense and the habits the nuns wore. I was convinced my destiny was to become a nun and wear those long flowing robes and veils. At home I'd sneak into the upstairs linen closet and take one of my mother's white sheets. I would cut it up into pieces and create a nun's outfit for myself. In the back of the church there was always a basket filled with lost and broken rosary beads. I'd help myself to these and drape long strands over my belt to add to my nun's outfit. Sometimes, I'd walk to Aunt Jenny's house wearing it. I remember picking roses from neighbors' gardens to bring to her hoping it would prompt her to give me one of the marble statues.

At the end of sixth grade, I won a major role in a school play and dropped the idea of becoming a nun. I switched to becoming a movie star ... more glamorous and more interesting costumes and ... Makeup!

After graduation from eighth grade everything changed. Papa died in 1957 at age 50 of a major heart attack and Mama packed up my kid sister Janie and me and we left New York City to move back to Schenectady where some of her other sisters lived. My older sister Edith was newly married and stayed in the city. I didn't see much of Aunt Jenny after we moved upstate but received letters from her every so often. She had taken to collecting clothes and religious items to send to our relatives in Poland. She taught herself to read and write in Polish. When I close my eyes, I can still smell all the wonderful foods that came out of her kitchen waiting to feed whomever stopped by ... and I can see her shrine. The driving force in Aunt Jenny's life was her devotion to God.

In my memory Aunt Jenny was deeply devout.

AUNT CEIL (PIETROFESA)

My Aunt Ceil was my favorite. Aunt Ceil ran away from Schenectady when she was a teenager. She hated going to school. Nobody knows exactly how she got to NYC but she did and that's where she met Pete. They lived in a very tough neighborhood called Hell's Kitchen. I remember hearing stories about the time that a few of my aunts went downstate to NYC to convince Ceil to come home. But by then she and Pete were married and had their own life together. They really loved each other.

She and Uncle Petek ran a convalescent home for stray animals in a residential neighborhood in New York. Today it would be called an animal shelter. Cats and dogs, two giant land turtles and a goat inhabited the backyard. I was about seven when I got to spend a few days of summer vacation there. Aunt Ceil took me to Steinway, the fancy shopping street in Astoria, because my godfather, Uncle Petek, wanted me to have everything. I don't remember what I picked out but I do remember how special it was to walk along Steinway holding Aunt Ceil's hand.

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When it came time for my First Communion, I picked out a gorgeous white organdy dress with two flowing tiers and a white lace veil with seed pearls sewn into the lace. I really thought I was an angel. I was given beautiful bouquets of flowers. It was all so special ... not so much for the spirituality of the Holy Communion, but more for my beautiful dress and the flowers. I was only eight. That afternoon, Mama, Papa, my sisters and I went to visit Aunt Ceil and Uncle Pete. First, we stopped at Peggy's Diner for lunch. Peggy's Diner was a place Uncle Petek owned. He named it Peggy's after Aunt Ceil because, for unknown reasons, that's what he called her.

I had my first coffee ice cream soda that day. It was so grown up and so delicious! Later, when we arrived at their house, there was much excitement going on. One of the turtles got into the house and caused a raucous. Everybody was a little on edge searching for the snapping turtle. Snookie and Poochie, the two scraggly white mutts, were unusually high strung that afternoon. Papa picked me up and carried me into the kitchen when all hell broke loose. The dogs started running around and barking, thinking they found the turtle. Instead they found me. They jumped up and snapped at my white shoes, socks and dress. In a quick second the shoes, socks and dress turned from angel white to blood red. Blood flowed everywhere. I cried as the dogs continued to snap at my ankles and legs. Yikes! That did it for me and dogs for many years. It was quite an unexpected First Communion Day indeed, but Aunt Ceil rushed to get the dogs away and comforted me with a big hug and chocolate candy.

I have so many memories of Aunt Ceil and Uncle Petek. Uncle Petek once bought me a beautiful sapphire ring for my birthday. I didn't like the way it felt on my finger and so threw it down a sewer in downtown Brooklyn. Who's sorry now? He also bought me a pony. We had a pretty small backyard, certainly not big enough to house a pony. He always meant well but I don't think the Szumilowski sisters really understood him. After all he was not Polish. He was Italian. His name was Franklin Pietrofesa but everybody called him Pete or Petek. The family never understood how or why he was involved in so many odd businesses.

Eventually they bought a house a couple doors down from Aunt Viola. Often the entire family went to big Sunday dinners at Aunt V's. On those occasions I would always find an excuse to run down the street to see Aunt Ceil who never came to the diners. She didn't like to leave her dogs at home alone. Ceil's house was wonderfully cluttered with framed photos of all the nieces and nephews, beautiful porcelain dolls, several television sets and lots of unmatched furniture. She wore little Buddha earrings, a Jewish star and a gold crucifix on gold chains around her neck. She was a free spirit and I loved her.

One summer while at college in NYC I took a biology course and stayed with Aunt Ceil and Uncle Petek at their home. I was very thin and always thirsty and drank copious amounts of water and loved ice cream. Uncle Petek brought an ice cream maker home one night so I could have all the ice cream I wanted. He also brought food home since Aunt Ceil wasn't much of a cook. After dinner we'd pig out on ice cream and giggle at silly things. It was a happy time with them. That was the summer before I was diagnosed with Juvenile Diabetes.

Years passed and life went on. I moved to Italy, then Canada before finally coming back to New York City. It was then that I got to visit Aunt Ceil again. By that time Uncle Petek had passed, Aunt Viola and Aunt Jenny too. Ceil now lived alone. She was in poor health

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but continued to smoke packs and packs of Camel cigarettes which made her voice deep and raspy. She had seven television sets, all of which were on the blink and 2 refrigerators jammed with food that nobody was there to eat. She still wore the Buddha earrings, Jewish star and gold crucifix. When my husband and son and I went to visit her, we'd try to straighten up the house, fix some of the television sets, but she would say... leave it alone and come eat something. We'd talk about old times and laugh out loud. Even though she was aging, she never lost her spunk and desire of taking care of others in her own special way. Aunt Ceil's free spirit was hers and hers alone, but I would like to think that maybe I have a little of it in me.

In my memory, Aunt Ceil was a blithe spirit.

AUNT GERTIE

I heard the whispers all the sisters got husbands and Gertie got a car. She never married. She was the one who stayed home to take care of Dziadek, my grandfather, in that little house on Strong Street. Whenever we visited Schenectady, we'd stay at that house. I would climb up a narrow wooden staircase to a big loft and sleep on a mattress on the floor cuddled up in a fluffy featherbed. For this city girl, it was thrilling. In the backyard, Dziadek, who called me Judka, had built a big table from an old barn door. Over it he constructed a rustic pergola and covered it with grape vines. After Sunday afternoon suppers, Aunt Gertie would bring out a platter of icy cold watermelon slices for the kids. While we'd run around the yard, Dziadek kept a watchful eye to make sure we were not near his fenced potato patch. When he thought we were too close, he'd come chasing after us with his cane yelling and cursing at us in Polish.

Gertrude Valentina Szumilowski walked into a room with attitude. Her perfect posture, deep voice from smoking unfiltered Lucky Strike cigarettes for too many years, and her gold hoop earrings, gave an impression of independence. She lived in a time when women had very few choices. Most women got married and stayed at home to raise a family and run the household. Instead, Gertie worked at GE Works, as did 80% of Schenectadians. She wore dark blue suits, braided her long hair in a twist and never took off those gold earrings from her pierced ears. Rumor had it that a beau had given her those earrings. Over the years, through sheer intellect and determination, Aunt Gertie climbed her way up the corporate ladder as far as a woman without a formal education could. She taught the young engineers scientific aspects of wiring and for that was recognized with many citations and awards.

In 1956 Dziadek passed on. A year later, in 1957, when we moved up to Schenectady, Aunt Gertie lived with us for a time. My school friends and I laughed and joked about her special shelf in the refrigerator. It had crazy things on it wheat germ, yogurt, bran, raw almonds, witch hazel. I now realize that what we found so wacky then was actually a window into a woman who was way ahead of her time. It didn't matter to her that she wasn't married. She had a car that gave her the freedom to go anywhere she wanted, anytime she wanted. I think Gertie was a feminist before it was stylish to be one.

She and my mother were born a year apart. My mother was born on Christmas night. Aunt Gertie was born on January 6, sometimes called Little Christmas. These two Capricorn women were real stubborn mountain goats bucking horns at every corner. I

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think much of it was my mother's fault. Aunt Gertie outlived them all. She was a dynamo. After celebrating her centennial birthday, she peacefully went on to meet her Maker in the place she always longed to be.

In my memory Aunt Gertie was a feminist.

JULIA

I never knew Aunt Julia but from the stories I heard from my aunts over the years, Julia was quite a beauty ... golden hair, her father's blue grey eyes, soft porcelain skin. She was almost sixteen when she first started boarding the 6am bus from Schenectady to Saratoga Springs. She worked the breakfast, lunch and dinner shifts at one of the elegant hotels that lined Broadway, Saratoga's main thoroughfare. Every night after work she took the last bus back home to cuddle with her sisters in their mother's featherbed. Saratoga was a new world to the young Polish teen from Schenectady. Before falling asleep she'd whisper stories about the plumed hats and diamond bracelets the fancy ladies wore in the dining room. She imitated their pretentious accents. She spoke about the handsome men she saw at the hotel. They all giggled over Julia's stories as one by one they fell asleep.

Months passed and one of the young gentlemen diners at the hotel invited Julia to have tea with him. His name was David. She felt flattered by this special attention, especially since she found him quite dashing. In time, tea became rides home in his roadster. They talked and laughed together. He gave her gifts of tortoise shell combs for her hair and chocolates from France. He called her Jewel. One ferociously stormy night the weather became so treacherous he was forced to pull off the road. Family lore is it was on that night that their passion took over.

Months flew by as love blossomed between the couple. Then Julia began feeling fatigued and queasy. Concerned and a little worried, Viola took her to the doctor. As Viola suspected, Julia was pregnant. Taking her older sister's advice, she told David, not knowing what his reaction would be. Viola counseled her not to worry, but Julia was still concerned. When she told him, David took Julia's hand, looked into her eyes and asked her to marry him. Tears of joy streamed down her sweet face. The following week was his parents annual Spring Fete. It would be then that the couple would announce their plans to marry. Then, fate stepped in.

As Julia walked into the hotel, she knew something terrible had happened. She couldn't imagine what. Her co-workers gathered around to tell her the shocking news. There had been an awful accident the previous night. How terrible she thought, hoping that none of her friends had been hurt in the accident. And then they told her that the 20-year-old son of one of Saratoga's prominent families had been killed when a trolley car sped around a turn head on into his roadster. He died instantly. His name was David.

Her grief was unfathomable. But as time heals even the worse wounds, Julia's baby was born, a healthy son she named David. David's family was kind and generous to Julia. They understood that she wanted to raise her son at home in Schenectady. They gave her financial support and bought her a sweet little house. Julia left her job in Saratoga and stayed home to raise her son. She loved being a mother and loved children. She began taking other children into her house. This turned out to be a good way for her to

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keep busy, for little David to have friends and a way to help others in need. In a sense, Julia started her very own daycare center. She never met another man to take the place of her beloved David. She went on to live her life with the love and support of family and friends.

Young David grew up to become a musician, a trumpet player. He moved to New York City where he wrote and played music in jazz clubs and later in life moved back to Schenectady and played trumpet with a jazz quartet in Saratoga Springs.

My memory of Aunt Julia is one of love and respect, even though we never met.

MAMA

What's in a name? Elzbieta Szumilowski grew up in a tightly knit Polish neighborhood in Schenectady. Elzbieta was the one who loved to fuss over her looks, her clothes and her social life. She often borrowed (without asking) a scarf or blouse from one of her sisters if it was a better match for an outfit she was wearing to a party or to church. She was what they called back then, "a looker". She was tall and slim with her mother's raven hair and captivating hazel green eyes. Like all the other sisters, she worked at GE. Because she never liked anything about her job, she saved up enough money to attend beauty school. And then, one weekend she and a couple of the sisters hopped in Aunt Gertie's car and drove to New York to visit their sister Viola. By then Vi was married and had started a family of her own. It was a time in the 1930's when dance halls were all the rage. Charlie took the girls to Coney Island to go on rides and to a dance hall. There Elzbieta met the handsome Welshman, Edward Harold Jones. Harold's mother and father had come from Wales. His father was an only child. He worked for the Brooklyn Eagle newspaper as a printer but died at a young age. Harold was also an only child and carried on in the family business of printing.

It was probably love at first sight. After their first meeting she went back to Schenectady and he went back to Brooklyn. They wrote letters to each other constantly. He drove up to Schenectady many times to visit her. The trip was a long 5-hour drive. It was before major highways or the NYS Thruway were built. But Harold didn't care. Then one weekend he brought his mother with him from their Prospect Park, Brooklyn brownstone. On this visit both Harold and his mother were overwhelmed by the size of the Szumilowski family. Seems it all worked out well because when Harold asked Wojciech for his daughter's hand in marriage, the family patriarch gave his approval. Another three-day Polish wedding took place at 21 Strong Street with family, friends, neighbors, St. Mary's choir, tables groaning with food and drink and of course, lots of dancing the polka.

After her marriage Elzbieta Szumilowski was called Betty Jones. The young couple settled in Brooklyn and had 3 daughters. Edith was the first. Twelve years later I was born and then Janie, the baby. With Janie's arrival, life changed. Janie had Downs' Syndrome and required special care. Despite her condition Janie was a gift to our family ... a blessing. As Janie's needs grew as the years went on, I found myself becoming more and more self-reliant. I knew that Mama and Papa loved me, but needed to focus greater attention on Janie. I also found that I rather enjoyed the independence. Janie passed in 1970, yet every day I think of her as my guardian angel.

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Judith Jones-Ambrosini

Betty Jones was a force to be reckoned with. After Papa died in 1957, she sold all the properties they had accumulated, including two Brooklyn brownstones, a wonderful home in Elmhurst, a summer place in Breezy Point and ten acres of land on Long Island. All she wanted to do was move back home to Schenectady. And that's what she did. She bought a lovely t house in a nice neighborhood, reconnected with old friends and became very active with the Association for Retarded Children. It was about that time she decided she wanted to be called Elizabeth instead of Betty. Looking back ... Elzbieta, Betty, Elizabeth Szumilowski Jones ... was a great mother and a woman of substance.. Alone, she raised a Down's Syndrome daughter with love and care, and an artsy somewhat rebellious teenager, me. She did her best and that was good enough. People liked Elizabeth Jones. She had many good friends and wonderful neighbors. She stayed true to her Polish upbringing and faithful to St. Mary's Polish church. She was a terrific cook who made her own kielbasa and pierogis and chrusciki and well, words can't describe her Easter Babka! It seems like only yesterday that she was laying out a big plastic shower curtain on her bed and placing scoops of babka dough on it and covering them with blankets to rise overnight. Next day she'd form the clumps into loaves and bake them in the oven. Their fragrance wafted through the house for days. I only wish I had an interest in baking then but I didn't and never wrote down her recipe. Over the years I have tried to duplicate it. I am a very good baker having had an exclusive catering and baking business for years, but could never quite duplicate Mama's Easter Babka.

She's been gone for quite a long time now, since 1991, but a day doesn't pass when I don't think of her and smile memories of her love of going to the clubhouse at Saratoga racetrack with her best friend Rosie Kazyaka, her Cadillac Red nail polish, her penchant for playing canasta around the kitchen table with whoever was over to visit. When Mama and Aunt Gertie sat and played canasta for hours, they sang Polish songs. The more intense the game, the louder they sang. I remember the fierce competition she and the next-door neighbor had over their adjoining rose gardens. Mama sent away for the rarest and most fragrant roses just to win. She loved to sit in the glider on the front porch and hold court as neighbors stopped by to say hello. Our front porch on California Avenue was a happy place.

At times Mama showed her Polish temper. She used to get so mad at me for not doing whatever it was she expected me to. One time she was boiling water for tea and in frustration threw the kettle in the air. Accidentally it landed on my leg and burned my thigh. I couldn't go swimming for the entire summer. Patience was not one of Mama's virtues, however kindness and caring were.

Once a college friend was visiting and Mama gave us a time to be home as we headed out to the campus Rathskeller to meet Union College boys. Of course, we were late coming home. She was at the front door waiting for us and swatted both of us as we entered. We ran into my room. A few minutes later she shouted "Tell Ruth there's blueberry pie in the fridge".

So, so, many memories of Mama. How she loved to cook big breakfasts for my husband and son.... how she took care of my son when I was struggling and unsettled and how much she loved him. Only now do I understand that unconditional love between mother and child and grandchild. She was a good, kind, vibrant and strong woman who lived her life heralding those qualities. I feel she is still with me every day.

The Szumilowski Sisters of Schenectady

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In my memory, there will always be Mama.

I hope you enjoyed reminiscing with me. My wish is that perhaps you feel inspired to cherish your own memories.



Collage of old photos of family in Schenectady.

The Szumilowski Sisters of Schenectady
Judith Jones-Ambrosini



The sisters in 1911. Back row shows Aunts Jenny, Ceil and Mama. Front row is Gertie, Florence and Viola.

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Here's a picture from 1960 of my aunts. Back row is Florence, Jenny and Gertie. Seated are Viola, Ceil and Mama.