

I interviewed four of my family members on the phone and asked them about my great great grandpa Vincent Palkeiwicz (1890-1957). Between my second cousin Mimi, my grandma Mary Jo, my great uncle Gene, and my great uncle John everyone had new stories to share. I wish I had met him but he died long before I was born. He is part of where I get my Polish roots. His youngest daughter Dorothy was my great grandmother.

All my family members said that Vincent loved his family and was very nice. John and Mimi told me the story about how his "Jaja" got here (Jaja is "Grandpa" in Polish). Vincent came to the USA with his brother Benjamin to avoid being conscripted by the Russians. The Russian military would seize Polish men and use them as cannon fodder. His brother had already moved to the USA and he came back for Vincent.

"He came to the USA from Danzig (which is now called Gdansk) in Poland on the SS *Pennsylvania*. He was on the journey with his brother Benjamin. Vincent came into the country through Ellis Island. After staying with his other brother Andrew (who already lived in the USA) in NY for a few years he arrived in Pennsylvania and was a laborer for fifteen years before becoming a coal miner. He married Cecilia Bolinsky (1891-1987)" said John. "Vincent's father was Polish, and his mother was from Estonia." Gdansk and Estonia are both on the Baltic sea in Northern Central Europe.

When Vincent came to the USA he was leaving all his family except his siblings. He immediately was registered at Ellis Island and became a legal American citizen. He joined an ethnic Polish mine called The Hudson Coal Company but he was not immediately a top tier miner. He started his career as a laborer and advanced to miner. A laborer is a miner who does work but gets paid per hour, and a miner gets paid per load of coal. He also took very good care of his tools and cared for his belongings and everything with pride.

"Vincent loved music and singing. He was delighted that one of his four daughters, Dorothy, played the piano. She was very good and Vincent gave her lessons. Education was very important to him. Vincent wanted Dorothy to go to college but she fell in love and married Bernard Shinal instead," Mimi said (Bernard was my great grandpa). Vincent played the piano himself and loved to sing and play music. "Vincent also loved to play checkers, and he loved gardening and especially loved his pear tree. He got a nice crop of pears each year." Gene told me.

"One of his greatest challenges was learning English from scratch, but he always had a positive attitude. He also missed his family but he never went back to Poland. The coal miners he was with were mostly Polish immigrants." Mimi and Gene said.

When Vincent arrived in Pennsylvania he knew no English. Luckily, his fellow miners were also Polish. He learned to speak English fluently, and within five years he became a teacher of English for the other Polish immigrants. He had a lot of pride in being an American. He was known in the mines for being nice, very strong, and being a hard worker. "He had big

strong arms,” remembered Gene, the only interviewee that ever spent time with him (He sadly died before his other grandkids met him).

He joined the miners union and became the leader. The miners' union is a union for miners' rights. If they wanted a higher pay they would agree to go on strike. One day some of the men decided to strike even though the Union voted not to have an official strike. Vincent went to work because it was not an official Union strike, so some of the striking miners used dynamite to blow up part of Vincent's house. Luckily, it only hit the porch and no one got injured, John told me.

However, Mary Jo said her Busia (Polish for grandma), Vincent's wife Celia, told her that the mafia blew up the porch because Vincent was the president of the Union. Gene said that he would bet that it was the mining company that blew it up. We do know that he was the Union president at one point. It is interesting to hear three versions of the story, but I think that Gene's story is true.

“The union also advocated for the children under 13 who work in the mine and are paid unfairly because there were no child labor laws.” Gene said. “He also got hit by a little rockslide, and got his thumb and index finger crushed. Infection and blood poisoning set in, and they had to take half of his thumb off. I remember as a boy seeing that,” said Gene. He was also very successful by mining coal for many years and he eventually got a car and loved taking good care of it.

I learned that he was active in his Polish Catholic church community. “When he was treasurer for the miner's union they collected enough money to erect their own pavilion for the church to have social gathering and picnics with their families. He would always be the pallbearer if someone in his church died, even if barely knew them. He liked to be of service,” said Mimi. He always was all for miners rights and he was a very caring person. Sadly when he was only 66 he died of black lung, a disease that miners get from having silica in their lungs from the rock dust in the mine. “He used to go out on his porch and cough and cough on his swing.” Gene said. “I feel really sad that my brothers and sisters never got to have the memories that I had, being the oldest.” Everyone agreed that he was a great man.

by Solomon Wood Leffel
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Vincent (far left) with his older brothers Andrew (Andrzej) and Benjamin