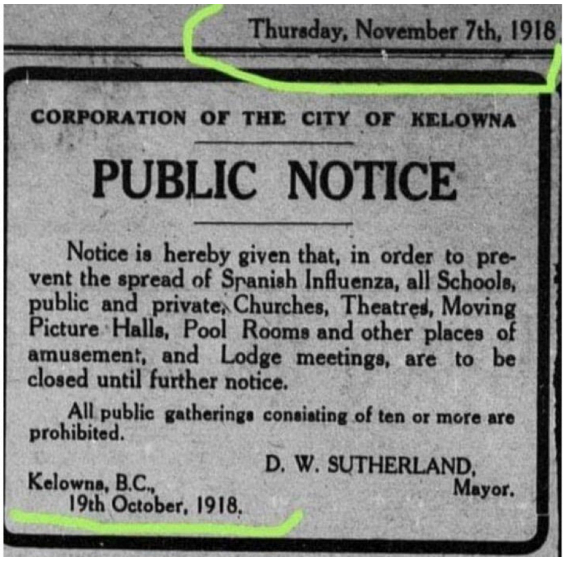
Chapter 2: Echoes of the Past: The Resilience of My Grandparents

It's interesting that the Spanish Flu of 1918-20 occurred a century before our family experienced the COVID pandemic in 2020-21. My maternal Grandparents, Joseph and Helen Lavy, were in the midst of the pandemic when my Mother, Eleanor Gail, was born on January 29, 1919. Their small row house in Wheeling, West Virginia, lacked electricity and other modern comforts. How did they manage to care for a newborn and three older children during such a hard and uncertain time? I can't help but reflect on the different challenges we faced during COVID-19, a hundred years later. With our modern conveniences, we continued grocery shopping, had carry-out meals, and engaged in limited outdoor activities.

Families like the Lavys had to face the crisis largely on their own. My Grandparents never spoke about those tough times, so I can only imagine what they went through and how strong they must have been.

From The Wheeling News Register



Thursday, November 7th, 1918

CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF KELOWNA

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that, in order to prevent the spread of Spanish Influenza, all Schools, public and private, Churches, Theatres, Moving Picture Halls, Pool Rooms and other places of amusement, and Lodge meetings, are to be closed until further notice.

All public gatherings consisting of ten or more are prohibited.

D. W. SUTHERLAND,
Mayor.

Kelowna, B.C.,
19th October, 1918.

The pandemic claimed lives of 675,000 Americans

The H1N1 virus affected 500 million people around the world, partly because numerous World War I soldiers lived in crowded conditions. The government made little attempt to keep sick troops apart.

Joseph and Helen Lavy's ancestors came from Ireland and England and, after settling in Wheeling, their families spent their entire lives there or in nearby towns. Their home at 3606 Wood Street was a simple house that was fully paid off and valued at $3,000 in 1940. The house's backyard bordered noisy, shaking train tracks. St. Mary's Church was a short walk from their home and my siblings and I often played in a playground across the street. Many family memories were made with my Lavy Grandparents, though not all of them were happy.

Grandma Lavy did not leave behind warm memories of being a loving grandmother. She was quiet and distant, likely because she was very deaf and probably illiterate — she never signed or tried to write messages. As a small child, I remember watching her sit quietly for long moments, staring at her hands; I did not understand her strange behavior.

The Lavy daughters, including my Mother and her sisters, became domestic workers in middle-class homes in their early teens. This was a family expectation. My Mother's position as a home helper in the Starosciak family's home led to my parents meeting.

Grandpa Lavy was a burly man with a gravelly voice, who worked nights as a watchman at the nearby Bloch Brothers' Mail Pouch Tobacco Company. Later in life, Grandpa lost his sight, but we never knew the cause.

Bloch Brothers' Factory

Grandpa once took my brothers, Tom and Ted, to the plant and showed them what he did at work.

I discovered something interesting about Mail Pouch Tobacco that may have linked the maternal and paternal sides of my family. Mail Pouch was one of the first factories to make chewing tobacco from leftover cigar pieces, by adding molasses and licorice for flavor. Coal miners couldn't smoke at work for safety reasons, so many chewed Mail Pouch tobacco instead. I don't remember my Father or Paternal Grandfather, who were both miners, chewing tobacco, but I bet some of their coworkers did.

As a young girl, I thought of Grandpa Lavy whenever I saw barns painted with Mail Pouch Tobacco ads along the back roads of West Virginia.

Harley Warrick was a famous artist who painted over 20,000 Mail Pouch signs, an amazing number of quaint landmarks alongAppalachian roads.

My Paternal Grandparents

My paternal Grandparents, Thomasz and Mary, left Poland in 1911 to begin a new life in Wheeling, a busy town known for coal and steel. Grandfather Thomas was able to keep working as a coal miner in Wheeling, just as he had in Poland. Their journey on the U.S.S. Finland, October11-17, 1911, marked the start of their life in America. Even though they were listed as

Russian citizens due to political circumstances in Poland, they retained their Polish heritage and passed down their language, customs, and traditions.

Formal Photo of Dad's Young Family

Dad's Mother, Mary, stands next to his Father Thomas, who is sitting. Children, left to right, are Walter, Sophie, Ted, with Ida (Chief) standing on the far right.

As a four-year-old in 1948, I recall little about my paternal Grandparents during the time our family lived in Wheeling. My grandmother, Babcia (Bah-shah), passed away in 1943, the year before I was born. I think my grandfather, Tomasz, who we called Dziadek (Juck-ah), lived with his daughter, Ida, and her husband, William Trybuski. He relocated with them to Detroit in 1947 or 1948, drawn by the promise of well-paying assembly-line jobs for people with little education. Their story, marked by ambition, perseverance, and hard work, is a testament to the enduring spirit of the Starosciak family. Though my memories of them are sparse, their legacy of resilience and determination continues to be an inspiration.