

My Catholic Family and the Holocaust

by Christine Lapidus

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My name is Christine Cimochoowski Lapidus. My family was Polish Catholic on both my mother's and father's side. This is a story about my grandfather Leon Cimochoowski and his four children. My father, Chester Cimochoowski, was the oldest. His three siblings Wanda, Joseph and Janina were all born between 1913-1921.

My grandfather Leon emigrated to New York from Suwalki, Poland on November 12, 1909. My grandmother Stephanie joined him in 1913. They settled in New Jersey where they purchased and ran a convenience store. All four of their children were born in the United States. In 1920, prohibition against alcoholic beverages became the law of the land and during the early 20's, my grandfather sold home-made liquor out of the back door of his convenience store. He became increasingly concerned that his business had been targeted by the Prohibition authorities, and in 1926, to avoid any trouble, took his family back to Poland. This decision had terrible consequences.

Fortunately, my father, Chester, came back to the U.S. in 1937 because a family friend, visiting them in Poland, told him he could have a better life in the U.S. The rest of his family stayed in Suwalki. After Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, my uncle Joseph joined the underground and became the leader in his area. The Germans, looking for guns, came to the family home in Suwalki. My uncle was not there at the time, so they questioned my grandfather Leon. They found an old, rusted pistol in the home which could clearly not be used as a weapon and arrested my grandfather anyway. He was beheaded by the Germans while in custody. My aunt Wanda was arrested at the same time as her

father because she was a family member. She spent a few years in the Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. Luckily, she was released because she had contracted tuberculosis while in the camp. My uncle Joseph was captured and imprisoned and for two years kept in a sitting position with his hands shackled behind his back. He never spoke about the details. The Germans wanted to use him as an exchange for captured German officers because he was an American citizen.

Joseph arrived in the United States aboard a ship, Ernie Pyle, in December of 1946 that left from Gdansk, Poland. He had walked from Koenigsberg Prison Camp in East Prussia to Gdansk. He was given papers by a local American consul.

Wanda arrived in the United States on February 21, 1945 aboard a ship, SS Gripsholm, from Marseilles, France.

Uncle Joseph worked hard as head chef at a restaurant on Long Island, but he never married. He became a gambler and had money problems throughout the rest of his life. He tragically hung himself in his apartment on Long Island at age 51.

My Aunt Wanda moved to Detroit, married, never had children, and lived to the age of 92. She suffered from migraines her whole life due to being in the camps. She rarely spoke about her experience.

My Aunt Janina became the caregiver of her mother. As she lived in Poland, I did not have the opportunity to discuss it with her. My father, Chester, was dedicated to his brother Joseph. He worked hard to get him papers after the war to come to the U.S. Whenever my uncle was in trouble financially, he was there to help. As a family we always sent money to Poland to help my grandmother.

Although my family in Poland had been Catholic, I converted to Judaism over 30 years ago because my husband-to-be wanted his children raised in the Jewish faith. I was no longer practicing

Catholicism and appreciated that women had a more pronounced role in Judaism. My family's experience during the Holocaust was another driving force in this decision; I felt – and still feel – a strong affinity for the sufferings of the Jews.



Chester at Warsaw Ghetto Memorial 1994



Joseph Wanda Stephanie Irene (Janina) Chester



Christine and David Lapidus 2023