

Siska

Siska, Jan & Tekla

Children: John, Steve

Hearst Relatives: Bies, Joanis, Poliquin

Depression, German Soldiers and an Ocean Come Between by Lori Siska

On a cold November morning in 1938, a six-year-old boy was bundled up and placed onto a horse-drawn sleigh beside his mother. He kissed his aunt and uncle, not realizing he might never see them again, as he was off to Canada to meet the father he had only known through photographs. It would be fifty-three years before he would meet his aunt again on his only trip back to his ancestral land.

John Siska was born in Bachledova Dolina, a little hamlet over the hill from his mother's village of Zdiar, Slovakia. He had grown up amongst relatives in a beautiful land, but he haunted his mother for details about the father he questioned he even had. What was only a handful of years of waiting, seemed decades to that little boy. Despite his relatives' attempt to make up for the absence, all he could think of was that his friends had fathers, but not he.

His father, Jan, had originally left for Canada in 1925 as a single man, for the endless potential of Canada. Living in the High Tatra Mountains at that time meant sharing land with siblings to forge new farms in what today is one of the

greatest skiing areas of the country. He could have stayed and farmed, but educational opportunities were limited for Slovaks, and he would never have risen above menial positions. Going to Canada meant a future for his children. (In visiting Zdiar in 2008, I could not comprehend how they could have left such a beautiful place). In 1931, he sent for a wife, and one was found by his brother. Tekla Ivancak had the good fortune of travelling the countryside as a dancer and singer with fellow villagers, but the lure of going to a new country was too great to refuse. She accepted the offer and the arrangement was made for Jan to return, marry her and take her back to Canada. (As a parent, I now can understand the tears her mother shed knowing she may never see her again).

John's parents were married in a double wedding with her sister Teresa, and they settled into the customary arrangements of living with his parents. Three months later, he returned without Tekla to his job cutting bush in Canada. With the Depression on, the Canadian government was limiting the number of new

immigrants and, although she was two months' pregnant, Tekla was denied entry. It would be seven years before my father and his mother would finally be allowed to immigrate. Even more difficult were the years that passed with neither hearing from the other, due to extenuating circumstances. At the age of two, my father contracted a serious illness, likely pneumonia. The doctor advised his mother to have a photo taken of him to send to his father, because he was not expected to live.



How brave she appears in the photo with a little boy with cheeks so flushed you could almost feel the heat rising from the skin.

On the November day of their departure for Canada, the sleigh took Tekla and John to Poprad, where they boarded a train for Prague, via Bratislava. Within days of their departure, the tiny village was bombed by the Germans, destroying the family home and animals. Her parents and relatives hid in the mountains, and when they returned to see the destruction, the shock caused her mother to have a heart attack and die. It would be four years after their arrival in Canada before my grandmother would learn of this tragedy. Continuing to France, Tekla and

John, along with other emigrants, encountered German soldiers who stopped their train and ordered everyone to return to their place of origin. Grandmother had a skill for languages and convinced the officer that these were not refugees, but women who had sold everything to join their husbands. The sobbing, frightened passengers were allowed to continue their trip.



Tekla and John Siska –Zdiar Slovakia 1936

The sea voyage was not pleasant—seven nights in rolling seas, seasickness, retrieving John from the floor after falling from his bunk due to the high waves. Tekla never wanted to go back on a ship again, opting instead for flying. Arriving in Halifax meant three weeks of quarantine before they were allowed to catch a train to Fryatt, near Mattice. Grandfather was there waiting inside

the tiny train station, but Grandmother, unable to convince the train conductor to stop, continued to Hearst. Here she waited, first in the station, then in a private home, until a Slovakian woman delivered her to Grandfather's farm.

When she finally arrived, Jan was away working. She couldn't believe the sparseness of his little house, feeling she was at the wrong home. She soon found a box of her letters and realized how little he had in all those years of waiting for her. John sat patiently at the window all afternoon and evening, waiting for his father to appear with his team of horses. When he showed up, John ran to him asking if he was his father. My grandfather said he thought so because he recognized him from pictures. At that point, John asked him if he could have one of the horses and he was lovingly told to choose. Grabbing my father into his arms, he cried uncontrollably, tears of joy.

As a Catholic, John was soon enrolled in Mattice's French elementary school, from which he graduated at the young age of thirteen; quite a feat for a boy who didn't start school or speak either French or English until he was seven. He went briefly to a Catholic high school in Sudbury and completed his high school education in North Bay, attending Scollard Hall.

The Siskas were aware of the Slovak village of Bradlo, eight kilometres south of Hearst, and through regular visits were able to forge a

connection to their ancestral home, as well as their new home. But the first two years were difficult, and Grandmother pleaded to go back. The flatness of the northern landscape, the incessant black flies (no window screens were needed in Zdiar), and the lack of social and cultural connection was stressful. Grandfather begged her to wait out two years, giving him enough time to save the money to return. They had been promised by the government that the land they were given was the key to opportunity. This may have been true of southern Ontario land, but not in the far north. They felt trapped. You could grow potatoes and winter crops, but cucumbers never outgrew their pickle stage, and tomatoes never ripened on the vine. Eventually, Grandmother extended the growing season by creating an ingenious outdoor mini hothouse.



John and Jan Siska in Fryatt -1949

Within a few years, they not only owned their first home, but eventually moved into Hearst, where they owned a parcel of land that today involves the area of between 7th and 8th Streets, from Alexandra to Edward. It was here they had one of the largest gardens. Residents would stop by to purchase fresh vegetables and herbs. She continued to garden that plot until her death in December 1983. Jan passed away in 1967.

My father eventually owned his own truck, doing odd jobs, primarily in paving and construction. He also worked for Woodland Forest Products, as well as for Oba River Timber, as a clerk. In the 1960s, he joined the town of Hearst as a clerk-treasurer, obtaining his ARTC degree from Queen's University. In 1988, he was approached to be the business administrator for the Hearst Board of Education.

John's brother Stefan (Steve), born ten years after John, began a career as a rail traffic controller for the CNR and eventually retired as General Superintendent of Transportation for Eastern Canada. In 2003, he used his experience in Senegal and Mali in Africa for three years, where he was instrumental in re-establishing new railway systems.



John and Steve Siska -1959

John continued to serve his community and church until his death from a massive stroke, in 2003. In recognition for his decades of service to the town, the local Community Living Association posthumously named one of two group homes after him. He also garnered provincial awards as a volunteer fireman, as well as for other volunteer efforts. His last few years involved bookkeeping for the church parish, the Legion Hall and Community Living. He also was personal taxi driver for his ten grandchildren. He was always there for his family, wife Anne Bies, daughters Lori Siska (London), Krista Siska Joanis (Hearst) and sons Russell (Winnipeg, deceased 1987) and Michael

Siska (Thunder Bay). He and Anne's children benefited from attending both the separate school, initially, and then the Hearst Public School, so they could be fluently bilingual.

The two immigrants, who left behind their entire world, were extremely proud of their children's accomplishments. This has not been lost on their children or grandchildren.



Olga Bies, Lori Siska, and Bill Bies -1959



Anne and John Siska's wedding -1955
Rolly Larose, Olga Bies, Anne (Bies) Siska, John Siska, Yolande Cloutier, Roger Cloutier