

Interview with Stephen Martin – November 2008

Stephen Martin is a longtime resident of Springfield, MA. He came to Springfield after growing up in Detroit and Chicago. Stephen worked in Detroit at the famous Ford River Rouge plant, later joined the Marine Corp and served in the Korean War. Later he worked for an oil company (today known as Exxon-Mobile), and eventually opened up a business in the area.

STCC student and Springfield resident Stephen Martin discusses his parents immigration to the United States in the 1920s, their lives in Europe and their motivations for coming to the US as well as growing up in Depression Era Detroit.

I am very happy to talk about the background of both my parents who immigrated from Czecho-Slavensko which was formed by the League of Nations after WWI and today is known as Slovakia which was formed because of the Velvet Revolution recently.

My father lived in a town called Sobranse and it was six kilometers from Ukrainian border. The area was rich with good soil and farm land abounded. He lived in a home which was called a *hallupa* and they had dirt floors and the large animals normally an ox used for tilling and a milking cow would be in the room next to the large room where you slept and there would be a loft – you would sleep above the ground floor. And whenever a girl would come into the family and would become marriageable – and she would marry out of the family – the husband would take her to his house and she would remain there doing chores around the house. However, if you were a male and married you were expected to bring your bride into the household and the large animal room was reconstructed and made into a living quarter for the new bride and an addition was added to the house and the large animals were moved into that new addition. That was the custom.

My mother who did not know my father until she came to the US lived in a town call Modra and it is 45 minutes from Batislavia which is now the capital of Slovakia and as some of you historian buffs know it Batislavia is very close to Vienna and the Danube River flows in that area. The area is well known for their grape growing and produce some excellent wines and brandies and I happen to know because I have tasted quite a few of them on a couple of visits there and the town is a Medieval Town that still has a high wall and passage gates where you would have to get passage by the sentries and atop the walls are broken glass embedded into the mortar so if invaders tried to clime the wall they would manage to cut off a couple of fingers hopefully and that would slow them up from taking over the town.

Getting back to my father – unfortunately he lost his father due to an accident. I mentioned they were farmers and as an adjunct to farming they raised horses. The horses they would raise normally horses that would pull a wagon or carriage. And being so close to then Russia – they would raise them in pairs or threes and sometimes sixes to pull a heavy wagon. So my grandfather would deliver the mail in these heavy wagons and unfortunately there had been a bad storm before and the roads were icy and the horses lost their footing and went off the road and into a brook and my grandfather became quite ill. He eventually died of pneumonia. My father was at the time 17 and he was requested to make his father a casket which he did. He was the only male left on the farm at that time.

After burying his father, my father had to go into the Austrian-Hungarian Army. When you were 18 and healthy you had to serve four years. So when he had finished his third year unfortunately, the Duke was assassinated, and my dad survived four

horrendous years of WWI in trench warfare, battlefields, the killing fields – just terrible things.

Quite an interesting thing – he would speak very hesitantly about WWI and about how men would beg him to shoot them so that they would no longer suffer. They were starving and suffering from various diseases and lack of food and so forth and having been wounded. It was quite common he told me for an officer to shoot someone below his status if he was cowardly or not going to take orders.

However, my dad's expertise in horsemanship raised him to a status to where, with the war coming to an end, he became a horse thief on behalf of the officers who were returning to their large estates but there were no horses available. My dad would steal horses from the clergy who still had stables. So we were always proud that grandpa Martin was a horse thief.

Now, he married after the war. That marriage produced three children – a son and two daughters. The son died quite early and my father learned there was no future at that time because of all the devastating that had occurred. The area he lived in saw centuries ago the Romans going from one side to the other and the Huns going from one side to the other. They always seemed to cross that part of Europe and devastated it. World War I was no different. So he told his wife he was going to come to America because the streets were paved with gold – which he knew was a myth - but he thought, like so many immigrants in those days, that he could come here, save money and go back and maybe buy a little business or maybe extend the size of the farm and finish his lifestyle there.

Well he signed on for one year to work in the Hoboken ship yards in New Jersey and that secured his passage. So, however, prior to that he had a brother who escaped

from that area – he did so to get away from getting into the military and he immigrated and found his way to Detroit, Michigan where he became a tool and die maker - a very fine trade. It was he who encouraged my father to come to America and I do believe he sponsored him.

So, my father, after working out his one year contract for passage - By the way, he did retain a bit of a Jersey accent – he would occasionally ask my mother – “Hey dear where’s my shoit? (shirt)” We would always tease him about “Toity – Toid (thirty-third) Street and shoits.” But just a few words with a Jersey accent.

After that year he went to Detroit and my father was a quick learner. Jobs were very plentiful. This was 1923 – he came in 1922. In 1923 jobs were very plentiful in the factories and he went to work for Hutt Mobile – one of the car names that are no longer around like Moon and Essex, the Auburn, and many, many cars that were built in those days. And then he had an opportunity to go to work for the Packard Motor Company. Packard was considered a very fine car – in the category of a Cadillac or Lincoln Zephyr who was made by the Ford Motor Company. The three cars – the Cadillac from General Motors, the Packard which made only that car at the time, and the Lincoln from Ford were the three premium cars made at the time.

So when was working and saving his money his wife died in Europe quite unexpectedly. So he then encouraged his daughters to come here because his son had died prior to that time. He still had sisters and a brother who said they would look after the children until such a time as they would come over. However, it took several years – quite a few years - and at the time he put the money in place for his daughters to come here, only his eldest daughter came. The younger one felt that she wanted to stay with her

aunts. So his daughter Marcia came here and I still remember meeting her in Detroit as she got off the train, the Twentieth Century Limited from New York. She had the old European dress with many skirts underneath and she had her feather quilt with her, which every girl would make for her endowment, would take goose feathers and make a huge quilt called a *parina* (Polish people say *prajina*) – it is to keep them warm and you can make many comforters out of one of these.

So know I will digress and explain how my mother and father met. My mother in the mean time was abandoned by her father. He was quite a Charlatan and so he left his wife – my grandmother – and five children and he came to America promising he would come back and help them. However, he couldn't keep his zipper up and so he kept getting in trouble and he was, as I said, somewhat of a Charlatan.

So my grandmother, an enterprising lady, took in laundry and she would also raise geese. She would force feed them because their livers were in demand by the wealthy people in the town. She was well known for her goose livers from which they would make pâté.

Well my mother was the youngest in the family and so my grandmother could not continue to feed her and raise her so she took her to a convent. My mom at the time was about 11 years old and with a very tearful way she said that she was dedicating her into the order. My mother was a quick learner and quite inquisitive. Now this was a cloistered convent so you weren't supposed to look out windows. So my mom was always caught peaking out windows seeing what was going on in the outside world. She soon became a messenger for the convent because of her skills - her speaking skills and her ability with simple math. She would run errands for the convent in the town. The Mother Superior

came to the conclusion that my mother would not make – that there wouldn't be a place for her in the order.

They placed her with a wealthy family as a playmate for a couple of the girls in the family. So she became not adopted but a playmate and ran errands and do household chores. At this time she was around 13 to 15.

Getting back to my grandfather - he was having a hell of a good time with the ladies and in the bars. He had a change of heart and sent some money to my grandmother and said he could only bring over one child. So they had a vote and they said my mother would be the ideal person to come since she was the youngest and had more of a future than they had and some of the others had already married and established themselves. My mom emigrated to the United States at about the same time as my dad but they had not known each other since they lived on opposite ends of Slovakia. They found their way about the same year. Where they met was in Detroit in a fraternal hall, and ethnic hall were people would gather on Sundays and put plays on in native costumes and native language and women would cook food and after the play was presented instruments would come out and there was always a band that was always made up of various members and there was a big dance and it was a nice way to entertain each other as immigrants in their native ways.

The name of the organization is the National Slovak Society. They met there – they had many things in common and fell in love and married.

They had at that point run into tough times because the Depression was coming on. And so my father was laid off and he didn't work for seven years. There was no welfare in

those days and he would take whatever odd jobs were available. He would shovel coal down shoots in the cellars. Coal in many ways was delivered either you paid so much a ton for someone to shovel it into your cellar or it was dumped on the street. These men who were jobless would walk around neighborhoods with a wheel barrow and their own shovel and would be paid twenty five cents or fifty cents a ton to shovel the coal into the cellar. He would do this off and on.

Luckily my mother was able to get a job in a lodging house on the midnight shift – the 11 to 7 shift. She ran a mangle – a steam press where you would press shirts and pants giving them a nice pleat and seem. So with that money and the occasional dollar or so my father would make we got by.

And I remember – I was supposed to be sleeping – my father was talking about moving to a new two flat that the rent was only six dollars a month. That was a very exciting time for us to move into the first floor of this two flat for only six dollars a month. It had a yard and a barn in the back. I remember we got chickens shortly after we got there – it was a food source. My mother and father managed to turn the ground over and put some vegetables and we got by very nicely.

I would go down to the railroad tracks and jump on a moving train and throw off coal, and wood and iron – anything I could sell. I would go down to the Packard [famous, though now defunct, automobile manufacturer] foundry and get iron castings that I would sell to the peddler coming down the ally with his horse drawn cart, blowing his horn and yelling out “Rags for sale, rags for sale.” But that was our lifestyle during those early, early days.

My father was active and remained active until his death in the National Slovak Society were he was elected to the board of directors. My mother took part in the women's society called the Jarvina (?). It was a women's organization only and it was tied into the Roman Catholic Church. I brought with me a couple of newspapers from the society and I also brought copies of my parent's immigration certificate that was issued by the Statue of Liberty Foundation which Lee Iacocca did a wonderful job raising funds for and some federal funds. They then renovated Ellis Island.

The second marriage of my father to my mother produced three children - the same gender mix as before a son and two daughters. Basically his two marriages produced six children. There are two of us left – my sister Helen – pronounced Helena or Ilka – Elona is another way of pronouncing it. She lives in Chicago and a widow. She is 18 months older than I am.

I buried my wife who was a second generation Polish girl. It was interesting telling my father after leaving the Marine Corp that I intended to marry this woman. He insisted and kept me up until 5 in the morning drinking Slevovitz - a Slovanik drink - and saying I should go back to Slovakia to find a bride or go back to Detroit and marry Eva Kohida who was a 100% Slovak – how dare I cross the blood lines to marry a Polish girl. But he grew to love her dearly and did tell her so before he died. We were very happy about that.

My fathers name was Uri (George) Stefan (Steven) Marcin. However, when he was coming through Ellis Island it was not uncommon in those days for the guards who worked there who could not understand the immigrant – they would take his name tag

and write across it a name similar to Marcin – and the name that came to their minds was Martin. So that's how I got the name Martin.

My mother when she came through her name was Magdalena Monica - so there was no problem there (Stephen laughed). She retained that name until her marriage. Our lifestyle early on – I mentioned the six dollar a month rental fee for the two flat. But we did a lot canning. My father would make wine, having the know-how and experience. So for us the end of the summer was a continual trips to the farmers market. We had no car so it was all by wagon and we transported bushels of cabbage, peaches, pears, and plums, and peppers, pickles, and tomatoes. Canning was a long time thing.

On occasion my father and his brother would purchase a pig and have it slaughtered. We would stuff the entrails and make our own sausage. If you could imagine a smoke house in the backyard of a house in a Detroit neighborhood smoking sausages! But it was a happy lifestyle and we entertained each other. On Sundays, we also had an aunt who immigrated to Detroit so there were three siblings from my father's family. My mother had none, as I mentioned, she was the only one who came here. On Sundays we would gather at one of the uncles and aunts house and cut hair, repair shoes – the women would talk about cooking recipes and they prepared food and the kids would end up playing in the yard. Someone would take out a fiddle or clarinet and we would end up singing songs. And then as the day was waning we would put everything away and walk back home until the next weekend.

That was the lifestyle we had and there was always a desire to learn a trade to further ourselves. There was a real desire to own your own home to save, that was a very important thing – always put aside money. Families would always help each other in that

regard. If one of the siblings on my fathers side was having some difficulty there was always the family to fall back upon to help get out of the mess. To this day I love my family and we are still very close in term of first cousins and my sister.

At this point Stephen is asked if the society – the National Slovak Society - offered any assistance.

Yes, they did, and if you notice in one of the publications – they actually have and had a savings plan, and insurance programs and premiums. So they did help as much as they could – acting like a bank and giving advice and so forth.

A fitting ending to this – my father passed away he would have been 83 – we feel he would have had a longer life – maybe ten years or so but he had injuries from WWI and he was kicked in the head by a horse which didn't help. My mother would have been 94 when she passed away. Both my sister, who I mentioned before Helen, and myself were by her bedside holding opposite hands when she passed away in her own bed.

After the main interview – Discussing getting by during the Depression.

Yeah it was tuff but the instinct to survive was so inherent in both of my parents because of their background they had nothing and could get by with nothing. My mother, we would often joke, could take the leather off an old shoe and make it palatable. I remember putting cardboard, not the heavy cardboard we know in cardboard cartons, I should say pressed board which was pliable into the soles of our shoes. I remember my

mother taking an old flannel sheet that was becoming thread bear and tearing it into strips and binding our feet and legs like leggings in the winter to keep us warm. Knitting was something you did. You knitted sweaters, and caps and gloves to keep warm. They knew how to stay warm and get by with little food and make it last.

I remembered my mother taking goose lard on dark pumpernickel bread and salting it to put something in our stomachs. Potatoes, God, my father would go to the market with the wagon and the guy would want twenty five cents for a bag of potatoes and he would get him down to fifteen cents. He would buy the ones that had the sprouts coming out of the burlap because the man knew they were going soft. My father would break off the sprout parts and we would have potato soup, potato pancakes, baked potatoes, fried potatoes, mashed, gravy we would make gravy out of anything we could. Soups were a big thing. Butchering your own fowl.

I remember I was taught to take a chicken, bend its neck back take a kitchen knife and cut its throat into the toilet and flush the blood down - right in the middle of Detroit!

Speaking about Detroit in those days and the immigrant population:

We had our hood so to speak. The hood I belonged to we were kind of Eastern Europeans – some Romanians, Polish, and Slovak. That was the make up of Detroit in those days. You would go to another neighborhood and see Germans. We had our gangs and so forth we honored each other and sometimes you would make alliances with other gangs and meet in the school yard and beat the hell out of each other. But there were no shootings no knives and so forth. We never thought of doing such things.

Detroit was very ethnic because the factories offered instant employment. With that came security and food and shelter and clothing; the opportunity for schooling to buy a car. We never owned a car. My father could have bought one but at the time he was ready for a car he thought he would use the money for other things like education. I taught him how to drive – he was 74 years old – in a schoolyard in Danvers, MA. When I felt he was confident enough to know where all the gadgets were in the car I said “head for the street!” He gulped, and said “Really?” I said, “Yeah! Right now, get on that street!” So we came back and with great pride he said to my mother who was at my house with my wife, “Guess what Marta, Stefan taught me how to drive a car today!”

Discussing the Native born and older stock immigrants in Detroit and their views towards new immigrants

There was a lot of hatred. There was a lot of hatred because of atrocities that were performed centuries ago that were carried forward from family to family. Also religious beliefs: Roman Catholics for example. Slovakia today is primarily Roman Catholic. Czechoslovakia was formed by the Czechs and Bohemians, Moravians were in the center and set out from Rome centuries ago to Christianize Europe. So the Moravians and the Slovaks felt that the Czechs were not to be trusted because they were Lutherans. And being Lutheran they were tied into Germany. And there was such a hatred of Germany. The feeling was that the Polish although Catholic they were illiterate. They would look down their nose at them. And this all carried over to Detroit. The Romanians were Gypsies so you better lock your homes if they come around. And the Italians of course

felt that they never wanted to work only drink wine. They felt the French were a bunch of – how to explain this – because of the monarchy they looked down on everyone and they felt the English could not be trusted because all they kept doing was conquering lands and butchering people, taking over governments – the expansion thing.

Yeah, there was a lot of that, so as a child you stayed away from them and the blacks – you got in those days. But interestingly my father was very tolerant. Once he stopped working at Packard he came home one day, middle of the week, I forget which day either Wednesday or Thursday, we always had this big meal on Sunday – he told the girls clear the table I have a big announcement to make. So he told me to go into the basement and bring up a pitcher of wine. You were not allowed to talk at the table unless you were being talked to so we wondered what the big announcement would be. He looked at my mother and said, “Magdalena, your cooking has been good enough for the family all these years, it better be good for the public. I just bought a building in Chicago and we are going to open up a saloon!” We looked at each other – none of us wanted to leave Detroit – it was our home. I was a freshman at the University of Detroit. It was just devastating. But it turned out to be a good move for all of us.

He operated a saloon, my mother ran the kitchen. I was behind the bar at 17. That helped propel us into a level of earning that we could afford things we couldn’t afford before. He was 54 at the time. At age 79 he said to the family – he was great with announcements and keeping them secret from the family – he said, “I got tired of the public – they are beginning to annoy me so I am selling the saloon!” And he did. He bought a house, a brick house so it wouldn’t burn down and blew up the attic – you know he raised it up and made a lovely five bedroom apartment for him and my mother.

My sister lived downstairs with her husband who was a cop in Chicago. He had a great career and was very active in international amateur soccer. And he is in the Soccer Hall of Fame in Oneonta, NY. And so my father was the kind of a person who made decisions at certain points in his life that he thought would be good for the family.

The reason he selected a saloon – he always felt he learned during the Depression that people do two things during tough times - they drink and they find away of entertaining themselves. So he felt that the American automobile was entertainment because it took you to beaches, you were free, it took you to parks, to friends houses, to festivals , to concerts and you needed gasoline. So it was either it was a gas station or a saloon.

My kids kid me because I keep up some of the way my dad made announcements. At family get-togethers if I have something important to say I will excuse my children from their spouses and then lay it out for them just like he did.