

## Pop the Poacher

by

Catherine Berry Stidsen

"My father was a stonemason in the old country. That was a very good job but better in summer than winter, of course, when there was very little building going on. My mother had been a servant. She was sent at the age of thirteen to work for a Jewish family in Budapest. She began by cleaning their shoes and when she left them she was their cook and they were very, very sorry to see her go.

"My parents came from the same village and by 1903 they had married and had one daughter, Aunt Elizabeth. But in the winter there was little food so my father decided to go out with his friend, Frank Rauscher, and get a deer to feed their families. Frank was your Grandmom's brother. Remember him? They got their deer but they got caught. They were poaching on the archbishop's estate. When Grandpop and Uncle Frank were taken to the archbishop he told them if they got out of the country he wouldn't send them to jail. I guess he thought he was being kind to them.

"Well, they went home and told their wives and they were really upset but they called in all the relatives and said that if everybody would put in their money, Joe and Frank would go, and then they would eventually bring anybody else who wanted to go, to America. So the family pitched in and sent Joe and Frank and they landed in Philadelphia in a place called West Manayunk where there were some other German-Hungarian people from Lokut.

"They did get work. Pop had Uncle Frank Rauscher to help him and they used to make cement sidewalks and they would point buildings and sometimes they would even get a whole house to build. Remember the time I walked you around Manayunk and showed you the things he did. They're still in perfect shape, not a crack in them, those sidewalks or anything else. But he never pointed St. Mary's Church. He said it shouldn't be done and you can see that place today where it always leaks. But Father Gantert wouldn't listen to him and got somebody else to do it and that's why it leaks today.

"Now, by about 1906 they had enough money to bring their wives here and so your Grandmom and Reseneni came and they lived in that house that my cousin Theresa lives in now and you know how long it takes us to walk there when we go to visit. But Mom was very unhappy there even though she soon got pregnant with your Uncle Frank. She liked talking Hungarian more than German and most of the others there liked to talk German and she couldn't understand English at all. Aunt Elizabeth started to talk English and your Grandpop had learned how from his work, but she couldn't understand a word and didn't want to and so she said she had to go back home for a visit. Actually, she had decided she was going to stay there and hoped Pop would come back and stay because the old archbishop had died and she hated it in America. Pop said she could go but he wasn't going with her, dead archbishop or not. America was his home now.

"Well, she wasn't back in Lokut more than a couple of weeks when she discovered she was pregnant with me. Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Frank wanted to go back to America but she didn't want to go so she wrote to Pop and told him to come back. When he heard she was pregnant he said he would come but he wouldn't stay and sure enough when he got there he told her he had only come to help her get all of us back to America and that was that. She'd either have to find somebody to take care of her, because he wasn't going to, or come with him. He could be really hard when he needed to.

"So, she packed up again and went. I was only nine months old. Lizzie and Frank said they were as sick as they could be on the boat. Everybody was vomiting everywhere. They had terrible food and I was sick a lot, too, but Pop was as happy as could be because he was going back to his real home, America.

"We all went back to live in the house in West Manayunk and Lizzie went back to school and remembered her English fast and Frank started getting good at it from the kids he played with and then your Grandpop said no more German at home. Your Grandmom had to learn English and that was the only way to have it happen if everybody spoke it at home so everybody was to speak English. I think she really hated him then. She used to sneak out once in a while and talk to Mrs. Janischeck in Hungarian but pretty soon Mom could speak English, too, and not too bad.

"By the beginning of the First World War there were three more of us, your Uncle Joe, Aunt Anna, and Aunt Theresa. It was pretty good up until then but during the war it was really rough. Pop didn't have much work. At Christmas we used to go to the police station and they would give us an orange. We thought that was something really special. And people didn't like Germans during that war or the next. Pop was so upset by the war that he took the flag he had brought with him from Austria-Hungary outside and he burned it one day and I remember he stood there crying and it was terrible. I guess it wasn't just that he didn't ever want to go home again but he didn't ever want to have anything to do with the old country at all any more, except drink beer and

play pinochle in the winters especially when there wasn't any construction work.

"He used to play pinochle, too, on Sundays, for a long time. We'd all go to mass with Mom but he and Uncle Frank Rauscher and most of the other men stayed at home and drank beer and played cards. Pop said there was no way he wanted anything to do with a church that was run by people as mean as the archbishop of Vespem. He wanted us in the Catholic school because it helped that the sisters who ran it and the priests there knew German but he wanted no part of anything to do with the church. .

"But one Sunday that all stopped. I couldn't believe it when Father Gantert said he was going to walk home with us after mass and talk to the men about a lot of things. He didn't even have breakfast. He just walked home with us up the hill to the old house. I remember skipping along beside him as we walked and Mom looking hard at me because I don't think she thought I ought to be skipping walking along with the priest. The weather wasn't too bad that day and when he got to the house he just walked right in and into the kitchen where the men were playing cards and drinking beer. I can see him yet.

"The men all stood up, surprised. He said, "Gelopt sie Jesus Christus". And the men all stood up and said, "In ewigkeit. Amen." He looked at Pop and the others and then he said, 'Mr. Hack, I am not the archbishop of Vespem.' I figured your grandmother must have been talking to him. 'I have problems enough with the archbishop of Philadelphia to know that they can sometimes be very difficult to deal with but I am a pastor and I take that very seriously. I want the best for all my people and that includes you and your friends. I want them to get the best they can for themselves and for their children. But I can't help to make that happen if you aren't there. Now, I'm not only talking about Sundays. I'm talking about the classes we have and the men's club and the way we work together to make good things happen for the families and especially for those for those who need some help now and then. We have a group called the St. Vincent de Paul Society and from what I hear from your wife, you'd probably make a good member of it. How about it, Mr. Hack, are you with me in this? You probably know people who need help who won't come to me directly for it. I know they trust you. I want you and need your help to help them, and I need all of all your friends here, too. And I need some masonry work done around the church buildings and I hear you're the best. Are you with me, or not?'

"Well, Pop looked like he had been hit by lightning. He looked around at the other men and they looked at him, and he put out his hand to Fr. Gantert, and he just shook his head yes without saying another word. And Fr. Gantert tipped his hat to Mom and the other women, and nodded and left to walk down the hill back to the church. He wouldn't even have any breakfast or even a cup of coffee.

"Well, after that Pop became what we call a pillar of the church. There wasn't anything that happened there that he wasn't part of, except pointing the church, of course. He did everything that Fr. Gantert wanted to have done and at a good price, but he wouldn't point the church. He said it would leak if they did that and it sure does leak. But Pop got lots of work after people at the church saw what he could do and how well he did it and how fair his prices were. Eventually we were able to move to Manayunk and to the house on Sheldon Street. Things weren't always easy there but it was our own place and Mom said things would be better eventually.

"Yes, they used to have some fights sometime, Pop and Fr. Gantert, but they never stopped being friends. Do you remember how he walked up the hill to Grandpop's wake and just stood there and cried? And do you remember four years later how he did the same for Grandmom when he almost couldn't make it up the hill anymore and Uncle Joe wanted to pick him up in his car but he said he would walk? I remember once when we asked him why he didn't have a car and he said he wasn't going to have a car until every person in his parish could have one.

"His sisters who used to keep house for him told us once that he never ever took a salary from the parish. He used to put his money back into the church funds. He said he had enough to live on from the money they inherited from their parents. He thought that room and board was plenty of pay for what he did for the people. Most of his people weren't guaranteed a place to live and food enough for every day. He was guaranteed that and he thought that was enough.

"So he buried both Pop and Mom and here we are today burying him. I'll bet Pop's already telling him in heaven what a mistake he made when he had the church pointed. We'd better get a move on and get over to church or we might not get a seat with the archbishop and all those other important people coming to the funeral. It's funny how people who have so little time for you when you're alive show up at your funeral. Pick up those cookies on the table. We'll take them to the hall for after mass. I guess it's a good thing Pop poached that deer after all, isn't it?"