

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS Three countries, three families, three stories. All Americans.

By Vivian Yess Wadlin

Sidgwick Family: England

The bomb shelter was in the garden. The British government had supplied the Sidgwick family with heavy sheets of sturdy corrugated steel to be erected by sinking them into the soil to about half their eight- or nine-foot height. The earth between the standing sheets was excavated creating the more or less level floor. Excess soil was bagged and piled up outside the steel wall protruding above ground. The roof consisted of six rectangular sheets of the same heavy corrugated steel with each sheet half rounded at one of its short ends. Two sheets were then bolted to mate at the top, creating an arch. The three completed arched roofing panels overlapped each others' long sides and were then bolted to the upright earth-bound panels. The roof was then also covered with bagged soil.

When completed, the interior was approximately forty-two square feet, six feet by seven, and at its apex, about six feet high. The front and back panels of the structure each consisted of three corrugated panels, with the right and left panels somewhat shaped to conform to the arched roof. One end had an entry/exit square cut out above the natural earth line. The government-provided shelter kit was so complete, it included the "spanner" (wrench), the nuts, bolts, and washers needed to erect the building. Each shelter had four sleeping bunks as bombings usually began about 6:30 pm and continued until around 1:30 am.

After that, one long signal blast meant "all clear." Once it sounded, the family resumed their normal daytime activities including school—if it was still standing. George's school had its own 40'-long bomb shelter. He reported "One German Doodlebug V1 pilotless plane hit near the school shelter but no one was hurt."

George was six when the war began, and twelve when it ended. He and his family—mother (Jane), father (George), sister Elizabeth, and brothers Frank, and Alan, the latter born during the war—would adjourn to the shelter when the air-raid sirens sounded. George described the sound as "...similar to the wavering of warning sirens here in the US." During the winter," he added, "the shelter conditions were miserable."



Seated in 2022 at an enormous table in a dining room book-ended by two ornate (and also enormous) antique grandfather clocks, George and I were joined by his wife, Marie. With George's reserved English accent somewhat modulated by



his long residency in the US, he recounted his early years for me.

Asked why he and his siblings had not been sent to a less targeted area north of London as so many children of the Blitz had been, George said, "We did go up north for my brother's birth, as our



family was there. But my father's work brought us back." He said his mother did not want to be separated from her husband. She had to support him in that difficult time. "So British!," I thought.

George said the bomb shelter, known as an "Anderson Shelter," was transformed to a garage after the war. I wondered how many were still in use around London. That made me think about some of the structures built in Ulster and Dutchess during the Cold War. I could think of three without scouring the web. But they were fallout shelters, not bomb shelters. We'd been fortunate.

When I initially asked George if I could interview him, I asked what he would like to talk about. He said, "The saturated bombing of London, the first V-1 weapon (the Doodlebug) and a typical day in the life of a school boy during the war."

Regarding the V1 rockets, "You could hear the pulsating of its engine, then the silence, then the ground shook. Fortunately, our home was not hit." The V-1 was a pilotless flying bomb filled with high explosives and had enough fuel to take it from Nazi-occupied France to London. When it ran out of fuel it dropped, indiscriminately.

One nearby explosion blew out a window in their home near a couch occupied by a sleeping baby Alan. He was unscathed. In fact, no one in George's family was lost during the war. He noted that fact fused a part of his abiding Christian faith.

The Sidgwicks went on with life during the war. Older brother Frank became a Royal Air Force (RAF) flight mechanic and served throughout the war in the United Kingdom and in North Africa. He had been apprenticed to a tool maker. Later, Sister Elizabeth became a writer for the British Postal Service. Alan went on to become an electrical engineer.

As to his own foray into adulthood, George went to Technical College in Middlesex, England. He became a cabinet maker and joiner. His skills are apparent today throughout the Sidgwick home with its many exceptionally lovely wooden furnishings—some he built, some he restored.

George was born on February 4, 1933, in

Coxhoe County, Durham, England, north of London. He said that at first, England did not know what to do about the war, it was unprepared for the Nazi bombings. Soon, however, “the RAF became the savior” of the nation by fooling the Luftwaffe generals into believing the RAF was far larger than it was. The RAF would move planes from field to field causing German reconnaissance to double count planes. That information impacted Hitler’s decision not to invade from German-occupied France using land troops, though the distance across the English Channel was only 30 miles. (George thought England was so unprepared had Hitler invaded, his chance of successfully taking the country was very high).

At one point, George and his brother opened a Do-It-Yourself hardware store. After selling that store, George and his brother opened a shoe store. While that was being developed he moved to Freeport, Grand Bahama Island, which was under British rule. In the Bahamas in 1970, he met and married Marie Fraino who was born and raised in Highland, NY.

Asked his initial impression of the States, George replied,

“I found Americans to be very pleasant and out going. I did a 10,000-mile tour of the states in a camper in 1969 before meeting Marie. After we were married, we lived in Highland for four months, moving back to

England in 1970.”

The damp cold English winter weather and Marie’s homesickness convinced them to move back to NY permanently. George misses the English countryside and his family. He said the lack of gun control is the only thing that disappointed him about the States. The most delightful thing here are the people and their willingness to “make you feel at home.”

George had been an indentured cabinet maker (an apprenticeship) in England and made his American profession as a cabinet maker. He said he wanted to thank all the builders in Southern Ulster County who have used his skills.

George and Marie have two sons; George, a stock analyst in Dover MA, and Christopher who lives in Clintondale and works for the Wallkill Central School District. Both sons graduated from Highland High School.

I asked George to think back to his boyhood experiences, not just the war, but that, too. The war, however, drove George’s memories.

One outstanding thing that came to his mind was the “British Restaurants,” the name chosen by Winston Churchill. The restaurants were set up by the Ministry of Food in 1940. Their purpose was to supply very inexpensive meals. For nine pence, about 36 cents at the time, you could get a serving of meat—game, poultry, fish; eggs or

cheese, a vegetable, and dessert. It was to help those bombed out, had run out of ration coupons, or otherwise needed help. Schools and churches were often used. In London, mobile canteens delivered the meals to air raid shelters and on the street after air raids.

“On Fridays, my mother gave me nine pence to go to a British Restaurant. I would usually go with two friends. The restaurant was two miles from the school. Coming home from there one Friday, I recall hearing a screaming noise, the sound a Stuka Dive Bomber makes—that rat-tat-tat of machine guns and the bullets ricocheting off the road. However, I don’t think they were targeting us. We returned to school safely.”

As a seven year old, George said, he didn’t appreciate the dangers and hardships the war brought. “To us young boys, it was exciting playing army with our mock rifles made from pieces of wood.”

“Now,” George wonders aloud, “here in the 21st Century, it makes one think, does the world ever change?”

About Town

Our 40th year of publication

Winter Edition 2023-2024
Five pages
www.abouttown.us 845-691-2089

Tantillo Family: Italy

This story was first published in About Town in 2001 based on an interview with the late Sal Tantillo. It has been edited to account for the passing of 22 years.

1921: Seven months pregnant with her ninth child, Francesca Porcaro Tantillo was eagerly awaiting two wonderful events—the birth of that baby and the return from Italy of her second son, Peter, whom she had not seen in 13 years.

Francesca Porcaro was born on July 20, 1882, in Baucina, Sicily. Her husband-to-be, Leonardo Tantillo, was born in the same town in 1879. They married in 1900 and left for the 21-day boat trip to America, joining relatives living near a small town called New Paltz in New York State.

In America, Francesca worked handsewing ties and Leonardo worked as a carpenter. In 1913, the family bought a 79-acre farm on South Street in Highland, not far from Leonardo's sister who had encouraged the young couple to come to America.

In 1908, the Tantillo family traveled to Italy for a visit. Their three-year-old son, Peter was to spend some time with his grandparents while the rest of the family returned home to America. The plan was for Leonardo and Francesca to travel back to Italy and bring him home.

Unfortunately, Italy became embroiled in two wars (first in Africa and then WWI) while Peter was there. The situation prevented him from returning to his parents until 1921.

Now, though, he was coming home, just in time to welcome his newest sibling. Francesca, Leonardo, and daughter Florence (born in 1909) went to meet Peter's boat. In addition to Florence, Peter had an older brother Frank, born 1903; younger brothers Joseph, born 1913, and Leonard, born 1917; sisters Anna, born 1906; Virginia, born 1911; and Katherine, born 1915. Peter had seven siblings when he landed at Ellis Island.

Peter's ship was quarantined—no one could disembark. While waiting for the authorities to lift the quarantine, Leonardo, now 42, was hospitalized with pneumonia. He died before Peter stepped ashore, leaving a widow with eight chil-



Francesca and Leonardo Tantillo, photos circa 1910

dren and a ninth, soon to be born.

Bewildered because no one met him, Peter wandered a few days before someone took him to one of his uncle's home. There, he learned of the death of his father whom he had not seen since he was three. (Leonardo was buried in Calvary Cemetery in New York. Every year since his death, his family traveled down to visit his grave site).

Two months after Leonardo's death, the ninth Tantillo child, Salvatore, was born to the widow Francesca.

Unlike the old-country tradition of wearing black for the rest of a widow's life, Francesca wore widow's black for just one year. The fatherless family made ends meet by working at anything and everything. The farm was primarily a vineyard, and they sold grapes for juice. Francesca



Photo above. Tantillo family: Salvatore, Leonard, Katherine, Joseph, Florence, Frank, circa 1980. Fawn Tantillo collection.

continued to hand-sew ties. She would pick up a suitcase of the cut material, sew at home, and return the finished ties to the factory. Many women in the area did this, often traveling by foot, trolley, or wagon to pick up material or return the finished ties.

All the Tantillo children worked. They tended

chickens, cows, and gardens. As the youngest Tantillo, Salvatore related they had, "... not much time to play." He recalled two toys from their childhood years—an erector set and a live-steam toy.

According to Sal, his mother was always cheerful and never allowed the children to be sad. There was no such thing as welfare then, and if there had been, according to Sal, she would have been disgraced to have accepted it. She lived on the homestead farm for the rest of her life and died in 1965 at the age of 83.

Francesca's children did well. Leonard and Sal served in the military during WWII. Sal was delayed enroute to the invasion of Japan where it had been estimated 550,000 Americans would be lost. With the flight of the Enola Gay, Sal never left his outfit in Germany.

By the early 1930s, Peter and Frank Tantillo had become farmers. Tantillo's Farm Market on Route 208, south of Ireland Corners in Gardiner, is still run by Frank's family.

In 1937, Joseph Tantillo opened a grocery store on the corner of New Paltz and North Ohioville roads. During the war, the draft would only take two sons if others worked on the farms, so Joe gave up his store and worked on the family farm. His sister, Katherine ran the grocery while Joe was farming.

Leonard became a teacher and later a Poughkeepsie area school principal.

Katherine (Oliver) opened a novelty store in Highland. Sister Virginia married (Bravata) and raised a family, as did Florence (Triolo), and Anna (Cesarini).

In 1946 Salvatore opened a garage/gas station across the road (Route 299 now) from his brother's store. Tantillo Service Station celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1996. (When this story was originally published, Sal and daughter Gina (Swanson) worked in the business every day, keeping us on the move.

In addition to running a business and raising a family, Sal was a school board member and supporter of many area organizations. He was among the most beloved people in Ulster County. He passed away in 2008 and rests in the Loyd (yes, one "L") Cemetery, not far from his home, business, and other family members.

Polischuk Family: Russia

In 1998, Joyce Minard was the Director of the New Paltz Chamber of Commerce. An institution in her own right, Joyce was also a friend and fellow New Paltz High School Graduate. We shared a lot of history.

So, when Joyce called and asked if I was interested in marketing a couple's business, I said I appreciated the contact, but I was too busy to take on new clients. Then Joyce put on her "voice." This was a special job. This family recently transplanted to New Paltz from Russia and REALLY needed help. MY help.

I crumbled. "OK, Joyce..."

The Polischuk family came roaring into my life. There were eight of them—a set of grandparents, a set of parents (Leonid and Sofya), and four children, ages 6 to 16. Two girls, two boys. The grandparents, parents of Leonid, were Semen Broytman, born in Odessa, Ukraine (1928-2013), a civil engineer, and Faina Polishchuk, also born in Odessa, (1931-2012). She was a philologist and school teacher of Slavic languages.

The eight lived in a house not far from my advertising and marketing firm's office in New Paltz. Sofya and Leonid were both Moscow-trained musicians. She is a pianist; he is a violinist. They were already employed part-time by a college in New Jersey but wanted to develop their private client business nearer home and perhaps develop live performances for organizations and events.

The four Polischuk children already spoke very good English, but I found Leonid and Sofya hard to understand. Their six-year-old daughter, Mariya, was sometimes our translator. Our communication got better over the years.

The family told me they left Russia because they "feared Russia was becoming like the Weimar Republic" (Germany 1930s), and their oldest son, Daniel, born in 1980, was nearing the age for military service. They were warned that with his health he would be drafted as a paratrooper to participate in a civil war in Chechnya as cannon fodder. The Russian military of that era was engaged in a war in Chechnya, a mostly Muslim-inhabited nation. Chechnya had been involved in hostilities with all iterations of the Russian super-state from the old Russian empire to the Soviet Union, and finally, today's Russia. The war causing the Polischuks' concern had started anew in 1991 and didn't end officially until 2017.



Leonid and Sofya photo 2023 above and below, ad in About Town in 1999.



Both Polischuk parents were well educated, ambitious, and had much to offer their new country—as it turned out, the real wealth they brought to their new home. Their children also became significant contributors to their new country (more on that later).

Leonid was born in 1958 in Moscow. He earned a BA in Fine Arts, specializing in Violin, in 1973. From 1978 to 1983, he attended Moscow's P.I. Tchaikovsky Conservatory and received an MFA in Fine arts, again specializing in Violin and teaching the instrument.

Sofya Maryanova (Polischuk) was also born in 1958, graduating from a musical pedagogical college (Pedagogicheskiy Institute named after Ippolitov-Ivanov Imeni), where she received a BA in Fine Arts, specializing in piano. From 1977 to 1982, she was at the Saratov State Conservatory and received an MFA with a specialization in piano and accompaniment.

Sofya and Leonid explained that in "In Russia, you receive professional education for "free", but you have to work at an appointed place three years after graduation, which narrows your area of expertise. To get a second-level college degree in another major, you have to have permission from the state."

I asked if it was difficult to leave. If so, why? How long did it take you to get permission to emigrate?

"It was relatively difficult. Grandpa had a sister in the USA, and she was the guarantee for our refugee status. We had to pass an

interview in the American embassy, provide reports from the police, military compulsory service, our education certificates/ diplomas, and our employment history books. We were asked about our relationship with the communist party. After that we all had to have medical examinations from the American facilities."

Then were given permission and had one year to prepare.

In 1995 we got a charter flight (because of our parents' medical conditions). We were allowed to take 64 kilograms (141 pounds) of baggage and \$500 for each person."

So, the eight Russians arrived here with \$4,000 and found an unfurnished apartment in Brooklyn on the second floor for \$850 a month. Three days later, Faina was taken to the hospital with a heart attack. (The children had called 911). The grandparents then had to rent a stairless-studio apartment.

In Brooklyn, the Polischuk children were assigned to three different schools. It was not a good situation—the older daughter, Liza, was beaten up; and the older son, "...Daniil's school had metal detectors and a three-minute break between classes to prevent fighting." Students literally ran between classes. The youngest, Mariya, had to go to kindergarten at yet a fourth school.

Things changed in 1996 when they were invited by Leonid's childhood instructor, Mr. Malkin, to teach on Saturdays at the Academy of Music at Ramapo College. Mr. Malkin played a significant role in Leonid and Sofya's return to professional life. That year, Sofya took a job as a piano instructor in the Bronx. It was two hours one way by subway, three days a week to teach only eight and a half hours. She received \$10 per hour. Most of her students spoke Spanish.

"While we were teaching at the Academy of Music, we decided to explore the surrounding areas. At Tuxedo Park, we were told to go north to look at houses and to skip Newburgh. When we took exit 18 from the NYS Thruway, we turned left on Main Street. In two minutes, we passed the bridge and found ourselves in the fields. Minutes later, we saw a sign which looked Ukrainian (it was).

We turned back and stopped at the real estate office of Doris Colucci. She was amazing! The first house she showed us was the best we could afford

and we bought it.”

They continue to reside there, and during Covid, their younger daughter, Mariya came back from New York City and stayed there as well. She is now married and is a self-employed professional violinist.

Later, when I asked them what they liked best about America, they responded: “Doris Colucci was the best American person. She was brought to America from Italy and adopted. Because she didn’t have her birth certificate, she couldn’t have an American passport to travel abroad. She was extremely honest and patriotic.”

As to others helping settle the Polischuk’s in the states, they brought up (NAYANA) HIAS the world’s oldest refugee agency (established in 1881) providing humanitarian aid and assistance to Jewish refugees. Sofia explained,

“We had four months of English classes every day, and we were assigned a person to talk with on the phone. Leonid entertained her with anecdotes. We will never know if she was laughing at his pronunciation or the anecdote. We became very good friends—she also helped us with employment at JCC (Jewish community center) on Staten Island.”

The Polischuks had not previously visited North America, and their initial impression of America and Americans was that all our “cars were foreign made, imported.” The most difficult adjustment

for them was our smiles (they told me later that when we met and I smiled at them, they thought I looked like I might eat them!) Regarding language, “All words, terms in Russian meant something different here.” Sofya recalls translating their first bank statement, “the big and the small print.”

I asked if they saw similarities between American politics and those of the Soviet Union. They said yes, and now also with Germany in the 1930s. Recall that Russia suffered greatly from Germany’s attacks in WWII, so Russians are more sensitive to and knowledgeable about the events leading up to that war.

Asked what about America disappointed them, they replied, “We knew about America from Jack London—we brought 14 volumes of London’s stories from Russia, Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Fenimore Cooper. They all promoted the ideas that you rely on your ability to work, provide service that is needed, and earn accordingly—the way previous immigrants found their way in America.” Their way of saying, “not so,” today in America?

What most delighted you?

“Opportunity. We remember the first two years running everywhere nonstop. The Academy of Music gave us professional stability (in our minds). Later, Mariya was able to become a high-quality violinist—not an expected opportunity in Moscow. Daniil became an Orthopedist—a hip and

knee replacement surgeon. Yakov, always wanted to play with robots. When he got a job at GE, he called us and said he now has a lot of things to play with. Then added: “And they pay me for this!” Liza liked animals and pottery, she studied in NYC and had her exhibition there. Sofia added,

“Now we are teaching privately. We can follow students’ and parents’ wishes and work with each student’s abilities. We arrange for student recitals for the elderly and other groups. It doesn’t look like a music school for children in Russia—here there are no exams, no pressure, except what the parents and children themselves bring to bear.”

After the Polischuks’ careers were established, we remained very close friends. My husband and I attended Yakov’s wedding and other Polischuk celebrations. We’ve been with them through the loss of their parents, and the birth of their grandchildren, who now number eight. Leonid and Sofia continue to teach privately in New Paltz.

Leonid, Sofya, and I meet often for coffee. We chat about our shared macro-world and our individual micro-worlds. I still have trouble with Leonid’s strong Russian accent, but we manage to find much to say anyway, though we each probably understand about 80% of what is said. Sometimes three of their grandchildren join us, and I can think of no better way to spend a day.

Thank you, Joyce Minard.

About Town

Our 40th year of publication

Winter Edition 2023-2024

Five pages

www.abouttown.us 845-691-2089

All stories online at website.