

THEY SURVIVED BECAUSE THEY WERE THANKFUL...

John J. Majka

(Monsignor André said these words during his sermon in the School Mass for Thanksgiving and I immediately thought of my parents.)

When things became difficult for my mother's family in the city of Salzburg, her mother sent her to live with two spinster aunts and a bachelor uncle on the family farm. She fit right in because she was a happy, hardworking young woman whose life was centered on her Catholic faith, grateful to God for what she had and was able to do for her family. The parish church was a short walk away and she was completely involved in the choir and prayer life. As the war continued and bombs began to fall in the fields near her home, she simply went on with her life, with her chores and her friends, most naturally trusting that God's presence would take care of them all.

As the Nazis rolled into Poland they grabbed my father as a prisoner worker. He knew how to bake bread so he was eventually sent to Austria to supply SS troops stationed there. His strong Polish identity and his Catholic faith gave him the strength to be thankful for being alive and being able to help others by secretly distributing bread to the local people, dangerously going against strict orders from the soldiers. Though he was threatened and even beaten, he never stopped getting food out to the people starving in the countryside.

Margaret snuck out in the middle of the night to pick up bread from the monastery bakery for her family and

neighbors. John helped the monks distribute the extra bread they baked on the side. That's how my parents met. As the war ended they fell in love and married and so began a journey of love and faith for more than 66 years together. They left Europe a few years later with their two boys (Stan and me) working on a huge farm in Louisiana. Thankful for their new life, they worked hard. They felt God had given them this opportunity and the freedom that the USA offered, but found they couldn't get ahead of their debts. With a third child, Mary, on the way, Dad wrote to his uncle in Detroit who lent the bus fare and shared his home as a start. By the time my sister was born we were renting part of the house next to Uncle's and my Dad started working at the Chrysler plant where he would stay for the next thirteen years. Within a year we moved into a home across the street, mortgaged long-term from true friends, who during occasional tough economic months were most generous in accepting mere interest payments.



....THEY WERE GRATEFUL FOR GOD IN THEIR LIVES

It was our first real Christmas as a family in America. In gratitude for the community acceptance and support, my mother began a Christmas tradition she brought over from Austria. She would have us distribute Christmas cookies and cakes that she and my father baked late into the night a couple days before Christmas every year. The neighbors were happy to see us coming and we obliged by accepting to share in the goodies with them, along with a cup of hot chocolate.

I remember my father as an Usher of St. Florian's Parish at Sunday Masses and an active member of the Holy Name Society. My mother stayed at home to raise us and help the neighbors as she could. For a year she also worked in the factory and then my brother Tony came along, on January 1, 1955. He was the joy of our lives at the time for the gifts and special attention we all received from the city: he was the first baby of Polish descent that year.

A few years later they wanted to try their hand in business and invested in a corner grocery store that they leased for three years. It was a learning experience but not all that profitable and a lot of work, especially because Dad continued working the afternoon shift at the factory, and Mom ran the store alone from 3 to 7 each weekday. Mom found out she was expecting again and they thanked God for being able to pass on the store to a new owner, at a time when it was quite challenging to sell any business in a changing neighborhood.

Soon after Chris was born, they looked into another business venture and we celebrated the first of 10

Dzisiaj Betlehem...Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht. Today in Bethlehem...a Silent Night, a Holy Night.

Christmases in a house and country store complex in Ruby, Michigan, outside of Port Huron. Ten more years passed and Mom was recovering from knee and hip surgery when they sold the country store and moved up north on the Lake Huron shore to buy a motel in the year-round recreational area: fishing, boating, snowmobiling and country skiing. It was less work and, more importantly, close to a Church with an active parish, something they had missed in the country.

Mom made a number of dear friends through the Ladies Auxiliary, who shared their beliefs and stories along with their sewing skills and recipes. Dad eventually became the Church sacristan, the parish maintenance man and cemetery caretaker and was even elected Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus. When he could no longer physically do those duties he and Mom became Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist and would regularly bring Communion to senior citizens in four nursing homes and pray with the housebound elderly. They never retired from living their faith.

At Mom's Funeral Mass the Pastor commented how Margaret's faith and gratitude for all God had done in her life, especially in the most difficult and confusing moments, shined through brightly in all she did. Two weeks later, at Dad's funeral, he remarked about how John knew the intimate power of bread, as a baker and as a minister, our daily bread and the Bread of Eternal Life.

It's our first Christmas without them, but not without their faith.

