

When Baba Became a Catholic

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Baba Jula and Tata were my mother's parents, who came to this country from Romania and settled in the South Milwaukee area because that was where the Romanian immigrants put down roots.

In the old country, they had gone to the Greek Orthodox Church, but there was no Greek Orthodox church in the whole South Milwaukee area, so they didn't go to church.

There was a Greek Orthodox church somewhere in Milwaukee, but none of the old Romanians could drive a car. It was a long streetcar ride to Milwaukee, and you usually had to transfer from one line to another. So the old-country people didn't really get to Milwaukee much.

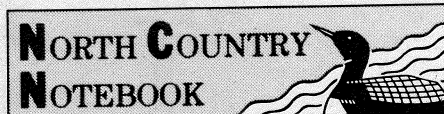
Mostly, the men worked at the

Bucyrus Company, which was right in town, or at Ladish Drop Forge in Cudahy just north of South Milwaukee, which was a very short streetcar ride.

When the old Romanians died, their families would bring in a Greek Orthodox priest from Chicago. He would conduct the services at the Molthen Funeral Home and stay and visit. The priest came to South Milwaukee a lot as the old ones died off and went to join their friends, where they had settled in a corner of the cemetery.

Baba and Tata's only daughter married my father, and that was good for them. My father was a Slav, a Croatian, and he learned Romanian and they liked that. Also, his parents were still in the old country, and he needed some parents here.

My father was a Catholic, and my mother converted to Catholicism when



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they married. From what I heard growing up, it was like Baba converted, too. She would go to Mass and do what my mother did, and Baba liked it all—the candles and the bells tinkling and the priest saying the Mass in Latin. A lot of which she could understand because, of course, Romanian is a Romance language, and the old Roman Empire had left its mark upon her country even as it left its mark on the

Roman Catholic Church.

My mother told Baba that Romanians had a head start on being good Catholics when they converted because most of the real Catholics who had been born into the church didn't have the faintest idea of what the Latin meant.

The women had to keep their heads covered in those days. Baba, in her babushka, fit right in. Kneeling there, she looked like any Polish grandma or Italian grandma or German grandma that filled the Catholic churches of Milwaukee County in those days.

I always thought that Baba did something funny when she made the Sign of the Cross. *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.* The Catholic way was to go from left to right across your body, but Baba went from right to left. It was a small point, to be sure, but I had been habituated to the rituals at Holy Assumption grade school by the Seven Foot Nun and the inspirational Father Kohler, who drove like a demon and confided that there were guardian angels sitting on his fenders.

When I became an altar boy, Baba was as proud as any natural-born Catholic grandma would be, listening to her "little priest" respond to the "big priest" in Latin. Of course, the altar boys had all learned the Latin responses by rote, and we couldn't have told you what we were saying if our very souls depended on it.

"Don't sweat it," Steady Eddy says now. "We got presidents who get in the same predicament."

It always sharpened my senses when I knelt at the altar to know that Baba was out behind me, staring at me with her black, burning eyes, seeing right through my surplice and high-buttoned cossack, seeing whether or not I had washed my neck and was fit to serve not only Father Kohler, but the Lord Jesus Christ as well.

Baba gave the other altar boys the same scrutiny. As a matter of fact, Charlie Kaiser often complained that he would get hot spots on his neck and shoulders when we served Mass together, like someone was "poking me with a hot stick."

Father Kohler never said anything, but you can bet that standing up there with his back to the assemblage just had to draw Baba's attention once she got past the lower echelons. In a way, Baba made a contribution that exceeded those of the natural-born Catholics in the Holy Assumption fold.

One Sunday, Charlie Kaiser was lighting the six candles for High Mass. The candles were tall and high up on the altar, and you could only reach them holding a long metal taper with a lighted wax wick. Charlie didn't see too well anyway, and he kept cranking the lighted wax wick to create a bigger flame to reach the top of the first candle. Lo and behold, the long flaming wick burned off from the taper and fell to the altar in a whooshing fireball.

There was a gasp from the congregation. Sister Matilde rushed out, genuflected, and tore up the altar steps to flail at the conflagration. For a moment, with her arms rising and falling it looked like she was saying Mass. Father Kohler came to the sanctuary door, kissing his vestments, dressing, watching. Sister Matilde got the fire out and then took the taper from Charlie and finished lighting the candles.

I don't think Charlie was humiliated. But I was. For both of us. After all, I was available and she never even asked me to put the fire out.

The altar cloth was burned, full of holes and scorched. Soon after, Baba sent Tata to get measurements from Sister Matilde. I don't know how much time Baba spent on the needlepoint and the embroidery. A year? She finished in time for Christmas, and they used it first at Midnight Mass. Who lit the candles for the High Mass? It wasn't Charlie Kaiser. And it wasn't me. It was Sister Matilde, who else? ■