



“Stefan” (Photo: Roger Rössing; Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

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Stefan

Theodore Jerome Cohen

“I remember well the alleys and garages around our home on North Seventeenth Street in Milwaukee in the years immediately following WWII; they never ceased to pique my interest.

Up the alley behind our duplex near the garage where Dad parked the family’s maroon Custom Clipper Packard sedan—Dad always drove Packards—was the garage where the local ragman stabled his horse and stored his wagon. Beyond that, another neighbor garaged the bright red midget race car that he took to weekend track events in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois. Mother said the men were “unsavory,” whatever that meant, but it never kept me from talking to them. Besides, I loved feeding apples to the ragman’s horse late in the afternoon, after practicing the piano, while the old man unloaded his cart after returning from a day loading up whatever rags, old clothes, and other items of value he had acquired on the city’s west side.

Another garage, in an alley several blocks away, was home to four ponies. Shetland mares all, they were owned by the father of my friend, Stefan. The ponies were his father's; he—with Stefan's help—gave children rides on Sundays at local parks on the north and west sides of the city. I was fascinated! I mean, can you imagine walking into a car garage in the middle of a city and finding four ponies? For a boy of 8, it was a dream come true!

So, I sometimes sneaked over to visit Stefan and the ponies on my way home from school before running home to practice the piano. Occasionally, when no one else was around, Stefan would let him sit on one of the gentler ones, easily distinguished from the others by her shiny black coat and a white star under her forelock. I named him Star. On hindsight, that wasn't the most imaginable of names, but hey, give me credit for my adventuresome spirit and ability to make the most of my free-range childhood.

"Come on, Stefan, let's play some stickball¹ in the alley before I have to go home," I'd often would call when I got within earshot of the little stable.

"Can't, Teddy," was Stefan's forlorn reply more often than not. "Must muck stable."

Stefan did not speak English well. His family, like several others in his neighborhood, immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe with the help of the Roman Catholic Church following World War II. The fact is, he and his little sister, Kasienska, were the only two in their family who spoke much English, and only then because of having attended public school.

Stefan's father, a janitor, worked two jobs during the week while his mother cleaned houses for women on Milwaukee's East Side. Stefan and Kasienska attended Brown Street Grade School, so, at least during the day, their parents did not have to worry about them. But after school, it was Stefan's job to muck out the stable as soon as he got home. This left precious little time for him to do anything else before he, his sister, and their mother sat down to dinner, which almost always consisted of bigos² and home-baked bread with szmalec.³ (I tried the bread once and found it heavy, with a strange acid taste.)

At least once monthly and always on a Friday evening, the ladies from St. Michael's Catholic Church dropped by with a chicken and pork dish that Stefan's mother saved for Sunday's dinner, the only time the family ate together. Neighbors knew when the church delegation had dropped by with dinner because on those occasions, Stefan's mother changed the orientation of the large preprinted ice card⁴ posted in the family's front-room window as a sign to the ice deliveryman that she needed an extra twenty-five pounds when he brought his horse-drawn wagon up their street the following morning.

Though Stefan and I were about the same age, he was slightly shorter and lighter in weight than I. His dirty blond hair and blue eyes stood in sharp contrast to my reddish-brown hair and hazel eyes. Stefan's clothes were ill-fitting hand-me-downs—everything he wore, in fact, had been given to his family by Catholic Social Services of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. His mother repaired his socks with a darning needle and yarn, and she did the wash several times each week before retiring in the evening so that her children were never without clean clothes for school. Stefan's brown shoes, always untied, had not seen polish since the day they were given to him by the Church.

I, on the other hand, never lacked for new clothes or shoes, when these were required.

¹ A pick-up game played in a street or alley; it was similar to baseball but played with a broom handle and rubber ball.

² Polish stew made of meat and cabbage

³ Polish lard; also called the "poor man's butter"

⁴ The ice card was employed by people who literally used ice boxes to keep meats and other perishables cold; the card's purpose was to tell the ice delivery man how many pounds of ice they needed on any given day.

(<http://wcgs.ala.nu/icecard.htm>)

From the outside, then, it would be difficult to find two more unlikely friends. Our differences, however significant they might appear to some, were of no import. For us, the only thing that mattered was our friendship.

I felt sorry for Stefan. Sometimes, I would bring Stefan the Babe Ruth candy bar or Superman comic my grandfather, Grandpa Joe, had purchased for me after my Monday night piano lesson. Stefan always was appreciative. But I knew there was little I could do to help him. Though young, he already had sensed life was not fair, that no matter how hard a person might try, it was possible to control everything—or even to have a significant impact on the lives of others.

To this day, the mere scent of a pony or a horse evokes memories of that stable and time in my life. And it leaves me wondering: what became of Stefan and Kasienka.