

# A Valentine story that lasted 53 years

My parents were life partners who shared their Polish heritage, their religion and their family. Their core values transcended poverty, illness and personality clashes.

By Gloria Golec

"I could have married someone else," my mom muttered to me after an argument with my dad.

I was about 12 years old. Yeah, right, I thought, but said nothing.

My parents met at Kelly High School on Archer and California in Chicago. They got married when they were both 20 years old. How many other suitors could there have been in this short window, I wondered.

They got married on Sept. 4, 1937, the Saturday before Labor Day. They did not have a honeymoon and both of them went back to work at their factory jobs on Tuesday. My mother moved into the three-room basement apartment my father shared with his father at 47<sup>th</sup> and Komensky. To get their rent reduced, they shoveled coal into the furnace all day long. My mother said she hated the apartment so much she asked her mother if she and my dad could move back in with her. My mother was the first to get married in her family and my grandmother, who had my mother's four other siblings and my grandfather living at home, said no.

My parents had both quit high school after their junior year and worked at low-paying jobs, so there were always economic struggles, but major milestones in their marriage were always celebrated.

When my parents were married 25 years, they celebrated mass at St. Bruno and then had a lunch in a restaurant for everyone. I still remember making the centerpieces and wrapping tinfoil around cardboard circles and combining them with silver leaves and placing them on all the tables.

For their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, they renewed their vows at a mission church in California, where my Uncle Casey lived, and got new gold wedding bands.

My father became ill at age 62 and was in a wheelchair for 11 years. During that time my mother took care of him and refused all suggestions that he needed to be into a nursing home. When they celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary mass at St. Bruno, my father was in a wheelchair, and I still remember how she kissed him after the priest congratulated them. It was love even after all those years. My father died a few months before their 53rd wedding anniversary, in 1990.

After my dad died, my mother lived for 21 more years; she was healthy and robust for most of those years. Several times she mentioned, "I am not interested in another man." I always assumed this was some generic statement, like, "I don't want to travel anymore," and not some actual response to a real person.

When she finally passed on, I cleaned out her bungalow. It was a surprise to find that my mother had saved the many over-sized Valentine cards my father gave her, the kind that came in those flimsy boxes. He signed one of them "Guess who?" but all the rest were mushy love notes.

In her bungalow, I also found a large bubble wrap envelope addressed to my mother but with no postage. It was obviously hand delivered. Inside was a large binder. I flipped through it and could not figure out what it was and I almost threw it out, but I decided to put it in my ever burgeoning "take home" pile. It sat in my basement for several years and then one day I opened it again.

Somehow I missed the letter to my mom right at the beginning the first time I looked at it. It was dated 1997 and it was from "Bob" — not his real name, of course. He tells my mom how he heard she was a widow and he was now a widower and he wondered if they could get together. He ended with, "I have never forgotten you." I then carefully looked inside the binder page by page and it was filled with photos of my mom and Bob. One is of them sitting in a rowboat with his arm around my mother. In another they were standing on a cliff and again, he had his arm around her. Ticket stubs, play programs, cards my mother had given him, one dated 1935. What was going on? Who was this interloper?

Bob had included pictures of his life with his deceased wife and his children, and he lived not too far from my parents. Yet somehow, he saved all these mementos from my mom and was hoping to reconnect. I was shocked.

I called Aunt Gertie, my mother's only remaining sibling.

"I found this binder," I said. "It's from Bob."

"Your mother loved your father," my aunt shouted.

"What? You knew about this? She showed it to you?"

"Your mother loved your father," she screamed again. So my mother had showed the binder to my aunt but not to me.

So there it was. My mother could have married someone else after all, as she stated when I was 12.

My parents were by each other's side for 53 years. They were life partners who shared their Polish heritage, their religion and their family. Their core values transcended poverty, illness and personality clashes. I loved watching them dance; two separate people, one tall, one short, perfectly synchronous, gliding across the floor on billows of love.

Yes, my mother COULD have married someone else, but my father was her one true Valentine.

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