



Stefa Rapalavicius Czerwiec

March 11, 2018

Stefa Rapalavicius Czerwiec boarded the refugee ship USAT R.L. Howze in 1949, bound for Boston with three daughters in tow. Behind her lay almost four years in a World War II displaced persons camp. Ahead was a train to Chicago, years toiling in factories and taverns, and decades as matriarch of a family that spanned five generations upon her death March 11 at age 99.

That family — most of the grandchildren raised in Sarasota and spread now across the country — is forever bound together by the strength of one woman. From a Chicago rooming house to the former St. Armand Inn on Lido Key, she guided the family through tragedy and success, always remaining the central force in their lives.

Born in Lithuania in 1918, Stefa Rapalavicius married Jonas Ziulpa. The two fled the Russian invasion of their country, landing in a German refugee camp run by the United States military. For nearly four years she provided for her daughters — Veronica, Mary, and Irene — by buying and selling on the black market and doing odd jobs with her husband. Her aunt, Agnes Gecas, helped arrange passage to Chicago with thousands of other refugees leaving their homes in Europe.

In Chicago, she scraped together enough money to purchase a small apartment building, where she opened and operated a restaurant on the ground floor. During this time she also labored in factories, such as the Delco auto parts plant, and eventually purchased a tavern/rooming house that she ran with the help of her daughters. She divorced Jonas, later married Frank Czerwiec, and had a son, Frank.

The family left for St. Petersburg Beach, Florida, in 1965, where she continued her entrepreneurial ways by running a motel she purchased with her daughter Veronica and son-in-law Bill.

Her other daughters and their families soon followed, settling in Pinellas County, and followed their mother's example by investing in their own small businesses they operated with their husbands. Ultimately, the family pooled its resources to purchase the St. Armand Inn on Lido. Stefa's brother, Antonio Rapalavicius, joined after emigrating from Italy with his daughter, Rosanna, and the combined families operated the inn from 1977 until selling it in 1995. Stefa was a fixture at the motel, making sure the plants were watered, helping out behind the desk, checking on the maintenance staff, or just holding court in the coffee

shop.

Stefa was the central figure in the families' lives over more than five decades. Called "Bobbie" by her grandchildren, her house was alive with children, parties, holiday dinners, and the grandchildren's love of their grandmother. Speaking in a thick Lithuanian accent that she never abandoned, Stefa would claim "broke pockets" to her grandchildren, but they knew there was always enough money for fun. From a boat in Treasure Island, to a small property with horses in east Sarasota, Bobbie sacrificed her own pleasure for that of the kids.

Irascible, restless, and wise, her efforts in business were to benefit her family. Raised through the trials of a refugee, she liked to say that a business adversary was "dumb like a fox." In reality, that applied perfectly to this immigrant woman herself, who appeared to outsiders until her passing to be just off the boat. The family knew better. Her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren will forever remember the lives made possible and nurtured by this smart and courageous woman.

Stefa Czerwiec is survived by her daughters, Veronica Jakusovas (Bill) and Mary Kozlowski, and a son, Frank Czerwiec (Sheri), and predeceased by her daughter Irene Middleton. Her family came to see 11 grandchildren, 10 great grandchildren, and a great-great grandchild born just one day before her death.

She spent the final two-and-a-half years of her life in the company of the caring staff at Sunnyside Village in Sarasota, where her daughters and Rosanna took care to spend parts of every day with her up until her peaceful passing.

There will be a viewing and service Thursday, March 22, at Toale Brothers Funeral Home from 4-7 p.m. and a funeral mass at the Church of the Incarnation on Friday March 23 at 9:30 a.m. The family asks that donations be made to the Polycystic Kidney Disease Foundation, at www.pkdcure.org, in lieu of flowers.

Tribute Wall



“ *May God bless you and your family in this time of sorrow. RIP Stefa*

Carolyn Simmer

March 21, 2018 at 12:00 AM