



Debra Ensign's story of

# Julia



My mother, Julia Mary Lorenz Neher, was born on October 31, 1920, in Bukovina, Romania, the illegitimate daughter of a 21 year old peasant girl named Theresa Paul. Before mom's birth the Paul family were making plans to immigrate to Canada, specifically southern Saskatchewan, where mom's grandfather had established himself some ten years earlier on a homestead near Wood Mountain. Their immigration process took longer than normal, because Theresa's sister Rosa was disabled, and the Canadian government forbade invalids to enter Canada without proper documentation. The government also required that the family produce a signed petition guaranteeing that the Hungarian community would financially support Rosa.

After being detained for nearly a year, Julia, along with her mother, grandmother and Aunt Rosa, arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan in October of 1921. They were met by mom's grandfather as well as Theresa's future husband, Andrew Lorenz. From the outside, the match between Theresa and Andrew looked promising: Andrew was a hard worker, owned a modest home and a few building lots in Regina and had a good job at the Co-op dairy. Within a few weeks of their arrival in Canada, the pre-planned marriage of Andrew and Theresa took place, and a few years later Andrew, Theresa and toddler Julia moved onto their own homestead near Regina.

By 1931, the Lorenz family had grown by five children: John, Mike, Joe, Albert and Mary. During that same time my mom realized what it meant to be illegitimate. Her grandmother would call her a bastard and dismiss her with lines like, "I wish I'd drowned you when I had the chance." Her mother didn't stand up for her (telling her to keep her mouth shut), even against the physical and mental abuse of Julia's stepfather. One of mom's stories was how she would hide in the barn to escape his wrath. Her brothers and sister meanwhile could do no wrong. Despite this, Julia always got along with her siblings.

The 'dirty 30s' brought dust storms, drought and grasshoppers, which meant hardship and stress for farmers and their families. Years later mom reminisced about the homestead and the new house her family lost. Her stepdad had to find work, so they packed all of their belongings into two covered wagons and started their journey, camping along the way, taking handouts from kind hearted farmers. They tried to not look back. A few weeks later the family settled near Markinch, Saskatchewan, close to her grandparent's home, where her stepdad found work.

Not only did Andrew find work, but Julia's mother also found a vocation. Theresa quickly became known for making the best moonshine in the area and, despite my mom's embarrassment, welcomed the income to feed the hungry Lorenz' mouths.

Mom was eleven before she started school. I'm not exactly sure why she didn't start school at age six or even eight. Was it because they were poor, or because her parents didn't think education necessary for a girl? I do know that at age eleven, in grade one, mom was unable to speak English. Adding to this humiliation, her classmates called her "barefoot Julia", since her parents hadn't bought her shoes. The subject of being barefoot was a sensitive one for mom. During their move a family noticed mom was barefoot, and gave her a pair of shoes which she saved to wear to school. But somewhere along the way, her shoes fell off the wagon, leaving little Julia heartbroken.

Mom attended school for four years until, at age fifteen, her parent's felt she was old enough to leave both school and home. With her possessions in a cardboard box, mom moved to Regina to live with her Aunt Brigetta, who lovingly ordered mom new clothes from the Sears catalogue. Mom stayed for a few months, working alongside her aunt, cleaning the Parliament buildings. But mom missed her siblings and soon found work a little closer to home as a housemaid. She proudly earned \$5 a month. Her new

employers, the Henderson's, were very good to mom. Mrs. Henderson bought fabric for 25 cents a yard and sewed mom four new housedresses and five aprons. The Henderson boys were also kind to mom, treating her with respect, always asking if she wanted to go to town or offering to take her to the local barn dances.

Oh, those community barn dances . . . where else would she meet her future husband? On February 14, 1939, George Neher proposed to mom, and on October 29 of that same year George and Julia were married at the Lutheran Church in Markinch, Saskatchewan. They promised to love, honour and save half of all of the money they earned, so they could prosper as a couple. They started their new life together with \$16 cash and \$15 worth of wedding gifts in a shiny new trunk.

They moved in with dad's family, which was a common thing for newlyweds to do in those days. It wasn't a match made in heaven, and eight months later and six months pregnant, after a fight with her in-laws, mom and dad moved out of his parent's home and into a room offered by their neighbours. Mom worked for the family, cleaning house in return for her daily meals and a few eggs for the weekends. Three months later, on September 29, 1940, Ronald was born. After Ron's birth mom pushed dad to move to southern Alberta, where her brother John had travelled to find work. They both wanted to prosper, and she knew they had to move away from Markinch to do that.

In May 1941, my mother, at the age of not quite 21 and pregnant with her 2nd child, arrived with baby Ron in Taber, Alberta, with all their worldly possessions packed into that shiny trunk and two cardboard boxes. Mission accomplished: Dad and uncle John had a contract to hoe twenty acres of sugar beets and the farmer also provided accommodation.

Mom described Taber as the Garden of Eden and her new home as "about as pretty as the inside of a grain bin with a stove, a table, one bed and no windows." She wrote in her diary: "My husband nailed two apple boxes to the wall and unpacked the few dishes we brought into the apple box cupboard." Mom spent her days tending to Ron's needs, while my father, alongside my uncle, worked in the beet fields. Three times a week mom, pregnant and carrying Ron, would walk the three miles to town for food supplies, always grateful when the shopkeeper offered her a ride home.

In the fall of 1941, mom and dad moved to Picture Butte, where dad started work as a farmhand for WB King. The Kings were another kind-hearted family and very good to mom and dad, providing them with furniture and a four year old home in which to live. In mom's words: "We were living in the lap of luxury compared to Saskatchewan." On November 30, 1941, Mr. King drove mom and dad to the Galt Hospital in Lethbridge, where mom gave birth to Gary, one week before the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

Over the next few years, mom took care of the boys and the house, while Dad worked as a farmhand, taking care of over 2500 sheep and daily hauling truck loads of beet pulp somewhere, I'm not sure where. On June 8, 1944, my sister Marlene was born, and in 1945 the family moved a few miles to Shaughnessy, where dad laboured in the coal mine.

By 1949, mom and dad had saved enough money to purchase a farm near Diamond City, Alberta. Over the course of their farm life, both mom and dad toiled hard on their farm. Along with raising four children, they also raised chickens, geese, pigs and cattle, plus fields of sugar beets and wheat, and a garden large enough to can preserves for the winter months. They hired new Canadians to hoe the beet fields, helped the neighbours with the fall harvest, and I'm sure the only day they rested was on Sunday, when they took us to church.

On June 2, 1953, I was born, and by 1958, within ten years of buying their farm, mom and dad had prospered enough to hire mom's youngest brother Albert to build them a new home for their growing family.

I'm not certain when my mom started experiencing depression or mood changes, but in July 1963 she was admitted to the University Hospital in Edmonton – diagnosis: nervous breakdown. Did her tortured childhood memories haunt her? She wrote that she had always felt unloved. Was that part of it? What was the stress that caused this mental shift?

After her hospital discharge, mom worked hard at rehabilitating herself. For the first time in years, she went to work outside the home. Where previously her focus had been on caring for her children and helping her husband farm, now she put some focus on herself and her mental well-being. During this time we at home also felt the "Wrath of Julia", when she often became a force to be reckoned with.

Within a few years, mom started to realize some of her own dreams. She enrolled at the community college in Lethbridge and took one subject: English. Although she spoke English perfectly well, she felt insecure with the language and writing it, so she looked that insecurity in the eye and proceeded to overcome it.

In 1975, after 25 years of farming, mom and dad sold their farm and retired to Lethbridge. Sadly, two years later, in December 1977, mom lost her beloved George to cancer. After 38 years of marriage, this brought another major change in mom's life. Loneliness plagued her after dad's death, but she continued to attend college, soon adding Math as one of her subjects to conquer.

Mom also became very involved with the Canadian Mental Health Association, taking people into her home, young or old, who were suffering from depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia – anyone could land on her doorstep and she would take them in. Mom also volunteered wherever she could: the Salvation Army, the local Soup Kitchen. I believe she wanted to help those who were less fortunate, probably because she knew only too well the suffering that went along with being poor.

In 1988, mom and her cousin Mervin travelled back to Romania, her first and only trip back there. For mom, the trip was largely in search of her "roots". After looking through church registries and questioning relatives, the answer remained the same, "We have no record of who your father is." The number-one question that had haunted her for years was never to be answered.

In the meantime her stepfather, Andrew, had grown old and, as the saying goes, mellowed with age. He treated mom as if she were his biological daughter, visiting her frequently, always bearing gifts from one of his many trips to "the old country". One of mom's biggest surprises came upon his death, when she learned that he included her with an equal part of his meager estate. Indeed, there was love in his heart for her, or at least remorse for treating her poorly in her childhood.

In March 2002, at 82, we helped mom move into a seniors lodge in Lethbridge, Alberta. She had been neglecting herself and we were concerned. Reluctantly, she left behind her castle and most of the worldly possessions she had worked so hard for. Until 2005, mom could still be seen daily boarding the bus to meet friends for lunch or coffee at the Senior Centre or to attend Sunday church services at Christ Trinity Lutheran Church. But over the next few years, she slowly deteriorated mentally to where she is now ... in her own world.

I've had the privilege of reading some of mom's "Dear Diary" writings to help me write this story.

I Love you mom.