

Julia Roberts (Huyben) First World War Bride from Lille, France

“German’s Occupy Lille?” “France says ‘all is well’”. These were the headlines of the Toronto Star on August 27, 1914.

I am used to conflicting headlines like this today as I watch the Russian and Ukrainian conflicts unfold. Propaganda and misinformation were also rampant during WWI.

My Grandmother Julia knew all too well what was really happening with the military and on the streets of Lille, France. The industrial city in Northern France was her home.

“Since August 25th all the regular troops and officers, all the military staff, have gone. We have been abandoned. The Germans are coming. It’s the end. The end for us, because the French army is somewhere out there but we no longer know where”, Madame Delahaye-Thery wrote in her diary (McPhail, Helen, 2001. *The Long Silence: Civilian Life under the German Occupation of Northern France 1914-1918*, pg. 19).

Seventeen-year-old Julia Huybens worked as a seamstress in a factory and dreamed of being a dressmaker in Paris. Her mother, Octavie, owned and ran an Estamante (a tavern, and cafe with lodging) on Rue de' Australiz in Lille. After hearing the news that the Germans were invading, panic set in. Julia and her mother buried a chandelier in the backyard, along with other possessions that they did not want to be confiscated or destroyed. Julia, Octavie and her thirteen-year-old sister, Raymonde, evacuated their home as the soldiers entered the city. They did not want to be hostesses to the German soldiers who came to drink the wine and beer in the tavern and pillage food from the cafe. It is unknown where the family lived in Lille during the occupation; Julia’s grandparents had died several years ago.

The German soldiers demanded household items, even mattresses, by handing out the dreaded requisitions. There was a scarcity of lamp oil, candles, and electricity. The four long winters of the war were bitterly cold because there was no coal to heat the little flats most people lived in. The textile factories were shut down and destroyed, and Julia could no longer work because her work would benefit the German war effort. (McPhail, Helen, 2001. *The Long Silence: Civilian Life under the German Occupation of Northern France 1914-1918*)

Food was more expensive and eventually, there was little food in the shops. Julia and her mother lined up for hours to buy small amounts of what remained. The food from the supply CRB (Commission for Relief for Belgium, an organization led by Herbert Hoover

from the US) saved them from starving. Shipments were sporadic, because of supply lines and politics getting in the way. (McPhail, 2001)

Little Raymonde's school was closed because Typhoid was running rampant. Raymonde succumbed to the disease and died on Dec 13, 1915, at the age of fourteen, in a hospital on 196 Boulevard Montebello, Lille.

The Germans requested workers, but because Julia was loyal to France, she did not help them. Friends, neighbours and even family members distrusted each other as they fought for survival. Newspapers with information from tower signals, printed with equipment and paper, hidden from the Germans, surfaced. News from London differed from the propaganda of the German newspaper headlines. If Julia found one of these newspapers, she had to make sure she destroyed it or give it to someone she trusted. She learned about the war and the resistance movements that were going on in Lille. Members of the resistance hid any allied pilots who crashed their planes in German-occupied territory and escorted them back to safety so they could fly again. Julia and Octavie learned of the men who the Germans caught and had publicly executed by firing squad. They also heard rumours of women in the resistance being discovered and sent to prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. (McPhail, 2001)

Julia was working for the Red Cross during the occupation. She assisted the nurses and witnessed the horrendous injuries of the soldiers. The war was nearly over in November 1918, when Sydney Roberts, a Canadian soldier with the Lord Strathcona Horse visited a wounded soldier in the hospital. He was stationed south of Lille and was able to visit often. Julia became close friends with Sydney. His friend died of his wounds, but Sydney kept visiting and asked her to come back to Canada with him.

A letter from Sydney to his brother Clarence in Alix, Alberta read:

"Thank you so much for your welcome letter. Yes, I am going to bring home that French girl and will be in your part of the country about June. I am stopping in Winnipeg for a short time and expect to arrive there early in April. My wedding will be delayed on account of her residence in France. I am hoping to go to her place to get married. Your very affectionate brother Syd".



Julia in Red Cross uniform and Julia and Sydney's wedding picture.

These exact plans did not occur due to circumstances around the military and Sydney's hospitalization in England, Julia travelled to England and stayed with Sydney's Aunt Louisa Battle. They were married by the Justice of the Peace in Croydon, near London on May 28, 1919. Sydney had emigrated from England to Canada in 1905, so he still had family there.

After Sydney was released from the hospital, Julia and Sydney sailed on the same ship, "Canada" on September 13, 1919. Julia was in steerage and Sydney was with the military. The stench of vomit and being in close quarters with so many women and children was overwhelming. There were two women who were from France in steerage, so Julia had someone to talk to. They arrived in Montreal and from there took the train to Calgary, Alberta, then to Castor to meet Sydney's stepmother, Florence and his four half brothers.

Sydney's oldest half-brother, Bert, was particularly friendly to them. Bert wrote in his memoirs that "Julia was a very vivacious and such a happy girl, and good medicine for Sydney."

Sydney had endured much during the war, including witnessing his younger brother Stanley being shot by a German bomber plane while watering a horse. His older brother Percival also served in the war and arrived home safely.

That winter another brother, Clarence, helped Julia and Sydney find a farm with a small house, east of Alix. In the snow, they could not assess the property closely and it proved to have poor soil and little farmland because Tail Creek ran through the property. When Highway #12 was built in the 1950's, it went by this farm at the junction of Highways #12 and #21, near Content Bridge.

Julia didn't know English and did not integrate with their neighbours. She wrote her mother in France regularly revealing how lonesome she was and her desire to have her mother come to Canada. Julia and Sydney sent money to Octavie for her fare after their first child, Stanley was born in 1921.

Meanwhile, in France, Octavie married Francois Vandebroucke on May 9, 1923. Octavie mentioned him in her letters. The passenger list stated that Octavie's destination was Alix, Alberta to visit her daughter. When Octavie and Francois arrived in Montreal in 1924, Francois deceived her and took her to visit his relatives on Rhode Island. Octavie had to obtain work in the textile industry and stayed for two years.

Julia had another baby, Raymonde, in July 1925. Octavie took it upon herself to leave Rhode Island by train without Francois. He followed her and tried to get her to come back, but she refused. He burned all the contents of her trunk in revenge.



Sydney made renovations to the small house by adding a shed to one end and adding latticework to the outside. Octavie lived upstairs. Julia had another daughter, Gloria, in 1927.

The Catholic Priest, Reverend Harrison, objected strongly to the fact that Julia and Sydney were not married in the Catholic Church. He insisted they re-marry, and have their three children baptized in the Catholic Church. Octavie was in favour of this, but Sydney took some convincing. His father had been a Wesleyan minister, and he felt like he was abandoning his faith. The wedding was scheduled for July 31, 1931. Sam and Elisa Masi who were their friends from Alix were witnesses.

Throughout the years, Julia helped Sydney in the garden, work in the tannery, raise rabbits, sell meat and did other projects to keep them going during the depression. One day Sydney brought home a German man he found in the ditch and looked after him. Luckily for them, he had a pension and paid room and board.

After Sydney's Tannery business failed, he started working for the railway and was gone for weeks at a time. Sam Masi was Sydney's boss. Julia had two more girls, Madeleine b. 1933 and Rosina b. 1935.

The children rode their horse three miles to Carroll school in all kinds of weather and were paid a small amount to do chores before and after school. Every day when they came home from school, Julia asked them how school went and made sure they completed their homework. The children learned both English and French at home and English at school. Stanley, Raymonde and Gloria spoke English around Madeleine and Rose so they didn't keep their knowledge of the French language. As they grew older they rode horseback to Alix, six miles away, to attend High School.

Sydney suffered from severe PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). When WW2 started and he heard that his oldest son, Stanley, had enlisted he had a breakdown. His thoughts went back to the horrors of WW1. In his mind, Sydney was throwing grenades at the enemy, but people could only see him throwing rocks at cars on the highway. He was protecting his family.

Sydney decided to enlist in WW2. His PTSD symptoms worsened while he was in training at Suffield, Alberta. They transported him back to Calgary and then admitted him to Ponoka Psychiatric Hospital with a diagnosis of Paranoid Schizophrenia.



Stanley left for the war. Raymonde, Stanley, Gloria, Madeleine and Rosina.

The struggles for Julia continued as she raised her family throughout the war, with the help of Octavie, Sydney's brother Clarence, Raymonde and Gloria.

After WW2, Stanley married Mary Robinson in England and she soon became pregnant. Stanley arranged for her to immigrate to Canada. She too, like Julia, arrived in Alix, Alberta and lived on the farm while waiting for Stanley to return from England. Mary was not prepared to be so isolated, living with a French-speaking family and only one bus a week going by the farm.

Once back in Canada, Stanley attended the University of Alberta and took a degree in Education. He sent money home to Raymonde when he found a teaching position so she could attend Normal School in Edmonton. Gloria attended Normal School in Camrose and boarded with Stanley and Mary. Gloria later attended U of A. Stanley and Raymonde (my mother) made a career of teaching throughout their lives. Three girls, Gloria, Madeleine and Rose owned and managed motels and cafes, maybe taking after their Grandmother Octavie.

Octavie passed away in 1951. She had five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Julia remained on the farm with her two youngest children, Rose age 16 and Madeleine age 18. Sydney's brother, Clarence, remained to help on the farm. There were many visits from her older children and grandchildren.



I remember Mom and Grandma Julia talking in French when we visited almost every Sunday. We had many happy times with cousins playing in the barn and on the Tail Creek riverbank. Julia sewed dresses for all the granddaughters for Christmas in 1960. She passed away from colon cancer on June 26, 1961, when I was seven.

Reference

McPhail, Helen, 2001. *The Long Silence: Civilian Life under the German Occupation of Northern France 1914-1918*. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd: New York.