

The Kowalski Story: An Oral History of a Polish Immigrant Family Who in the Latter Part of the 19th Century Settled in Pennsylvania

Our Forebears: John and Marya Kowalski

John Kowalski was born about 1860 in the province of Posen (Poznan), Poland. His wife, Marya (Chenkie) was born in the same province about 1867. At that time, and until 1918, there was no Poland. Poland was partitioned since the late 1700's by Russia, Austria and Prussia. Posen (Poznan) was in the Prussian area.

Both migrated (John in 1882 and Marya in 1884) to the United States and were married about 1889 in Nanticoke, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. According to the 1910 census, they lived at 24 Slope Street in Nanticoke.

From what my father told me, John had several brothers back in Poland. One was in the Kaiser's army, another was a classical musician, and another was a farmer, Ambrose, who migrated to Kansas. (I made a search of the 1910 census for Kowalski's in Kansas, and, I found about eight. Only one was a farmer and was born in German Poland. John Kowalski came from Poznan (Posen) in German Poland. This Kowalski's first name was Ambrose and he was born about 1866.) His wife, Agnes, was born in Texas about 1891, and, also was of German Polish parents. They had a son, John, who was 1 1/2 years old at the time of the 1910 census. John was the owner of a saloon in Nanticoke.

In 1910, John sold the saloon and took the family west by train probably to visit his brother Ambrose. They were gone at least three years.

Shortly after they returned to Nanticoke, John died leaving Marya a widow with three children.

An intriguing fact is that Rita's father, Theodore Rizzo, was in Oregon for about 5 years during the 1910's. He operated a movie theater in Oregon for the lumberjacks.

The best information that we have regarding Marya's Polish background is through her sister's Constance's birth certificate. A few years ago, I was

able to visit Constance's daughter, Connie MacKinnon of Truro, Nova Scotia who shared with me the information on her mother's birth certificate. From this document we know the following: Constance's father's name was Joseph Dywelski and her mother's, Antoinette Kolodziejczak. She was born January 1, 1889 in the city of Rogozno, the District of Obernicki, in the Province of Poznan, of the Republic of Poland.

Marya Kowalska's maiden name was Chenkie (possibly Henke). This suggests that Marya and Constance might be half-sisters.



Marriage photo: John Kowalski, seated on left and Marya Kowalska, seated on right.

Marya's second husband's name was Stawni. Pop related that his mother's sister, Constance, was secretary to Eugene Debs during World War I. Debs was an American Socialist leader, pacifist, labor organizer and Socialist candidate for US president five times. He was sentenced to ten years in jail for his pacifist beliefs.

There is a continuation of labor organizing and labor union involvement in the Kowalski family. Sy was followed by Vincent and Ronald.

Sy was an articulate story-teller. Very friendly, progressive, completely lacking in discriminatory views, except when it came to Republicans, and he was a humanitarian.

Sy was a coal miner, labor leader, labor organizer and a top-notch mechanic.

Probably, the high-point of his life was the 3-5 year period in the early 1930's when as the president of a United Mine Workers local, he defied John L. Lewis and took his local into the recently formed United Anthracite Miners of America.

The new union was formed because of the exploitation of miners by the coal operators all with the acquiescence of John L. Lewis.



Pop's sister, Elizabeth, standing on left
Grandma Kowalska, standing on right



Grandma Marya Kowalska



Pop's sister, Elizabeth, standing; Sylvester, Sr. on

This was a bloody period with many violent strikes and Sy was in the middle of all of it. The following was extracted from, "Steve Nelson: American Radical": "The story ends in tragedy. Just before the new union's regional conference in Wilkes-Barre, bombs were sent to some members of the coal operators' executive board, several public officials, the sheriff, leaders of the union, and some judges. Out of a dozen bombs mailed in cigar boxes, only the one sent to the president of the new union, Thomas Maloney, exploded, killing him instantly."

Pop told me that Federal authorities came to see him and told him that one of the bombs that was intercepted at the Post Office was addressed to him.

Sy was a unique person and I miss him.



Connie and Allan MacKinnon
Truro, Nova Scotia



My Father
Sylvester Konstanty Kowalski
usually called "Sy"

Our Sysko Forebears

My maternal grandfather's name was Joseph Sysko. I do not have access to any of his photographs or any specifics of his birth, emigration to the United States, or anything about his life here other than he was a coal miner and died at an early age as did the typical coal miner of that period.

My grandmother's second husband, Joseph Kosciuk, was also a coal miner. He was alive when we were young children, but, he also died at a young age. Grandmother's maiden name is Bronislawa Lewandoska. Some records indicate that her last name was Lewkoska.

Grandmother was a kind, gentle woman who had a very strong Catholic faith. She was born on March 22, 1889 in Bialystok, Poland. Her entire life in Poland was under the extremely harsh Russian occupation rule.

Bialystok is in the extreme eastern end of the 1918-1939 Polish-Soviet Union border. It is just across the border from Minsk, Belarus.

As a young lady, she participated in the annual pilgrimage to Our Lady of Chestochowa. The pilgrimage was and still is a walking pilgrimage. The pilgrims walked together, prayed together, and sang as they walked. This pilgrimage is still traditional today and typically one would start in the capital Warsaw and walk to Chestochowa (which is slightly west of Krakow. In grandmother's case, she had to walk first from Bialystok to Warsaw and then to Chestochowa.

I can still remember that when the church bells tolled for the evening Angelus, Grandma, whatever she was doing, stopped what she was doing and knelt and prayed the Angelus.

Her grandchildren loved her. We were frequently at her house on Sundays. She always had a feast of fried chicken, her own fresh sausage and plenty of fixings. Dessert was her homemade pie, apple or strawberry-rhubarb, all from her own yard.



My maternal grandmother: Bridget Sysko

When Mom was young, Grandma raised, at times, a cow or a pig, as well as, chickens and ducks and also had an ample vegetable garden.

One interesting facet was that Grandma always insisted in listening each Sunday to Father Coughlin on the radio. Father Coughlin was an extreme reactionary who was rabidly against Roosevelt. So much so, that he joined forces with the two most powerful Protestant reactionary clerics and tried to prevent Roosevelt from being re-elected in 1936.

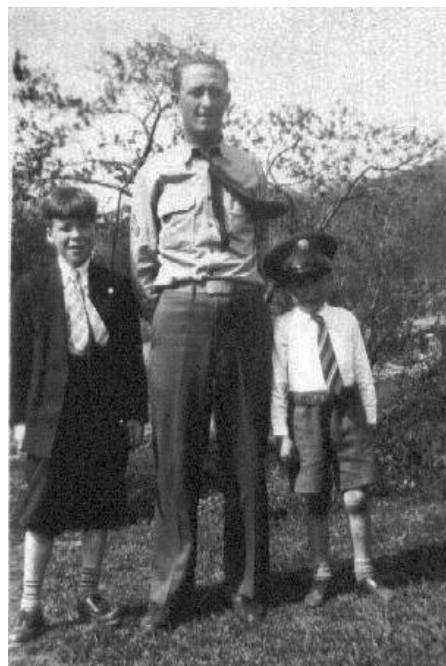
I also had the opportunity to help her with English so that she could take her citizenship test.

Recent collaboration with Theresa Bohenek, Brothers Ron and Joseph added additional information in regard to Grandma Kosciuk. As noted previously, she lived, while in Poland, in the Russian zone. The Russians required everyone to be educated using the Russian language and Grandma Kosciuk was fluent in this language. She couldn't read or write in Polish until she emigrated to the United States. She left Poland by herself at the age

of sixteen. Her father was insisting that she marry a certain Russian soldier. Likely, as was customary, soldiers were billeted in peasant's homes. Her father likely expected some reward from the soldier. Grandma wasn't going to marry a Russian soldier and secretly left Poland. Grandma Kosciuk had one much older sister. While in Poland because of her fluency in Russian, she was assigned to perform a recitation in Russian when the Russian Orthodox Patriarch came to their village.

At this meeting, Theresa related some aspects of her father's death. He was killed in the coal mines. Some coal miners brought her father's body to Theresa's home and left it on the living room floor. Now, we are not talking about the 19th century. He was killed in 1949. Barbaric.

Grandma Kosciuk was a very strong woman, a survivor, and a wonderful person.



In center, John (Kosciuk) Sysko on left, Brother John on right, Brother Ron



kneeling front right, Mom's brother Joseph; his wife Jean is standing on right; kneeling front left is Mom's cousin Zigmund Sysko; his wife is standing on the left; in center is Ziggie's sister, Sophie and then their mother.



An early photo of Mom with her Mother and Stepfather; standing on the left is her brother, Joseph; sitting is Bertha Kosciuk. Standing in the center is Mom and in front of her is her sister Jean; to the right of Grandma and standing is Mom's sister Anna; In front of Anna is John (Kosciuk) Sysko



Seated on left, Mom's half-brother, Henry Kosciuk.



From left, Bertha Kosciuk, Christine's friend, Lou and Christine (Kosciuk) Bolero, my cousin Theresa Bohenek and Theresa's mother Jean (Sysko) Bohenek.



From left, Eleanor (Kosciuk) Roman, Mom, Christine (Kosciuk) and her husband Lou Bolero.



Grandma Kosciuk and Ziggie and Sophie's mother.



From left, son Robert, Mary,
Grandma Kosciuk

Upper right, John (Kosciuk) Sysko

Middle right, John and Mary Sysko

Right, Robert Sysko



The Family of Sylvester and Sophie Kowalski and their Descendants



An early photo of Mom and Pop (on right)



Brother John First Communion



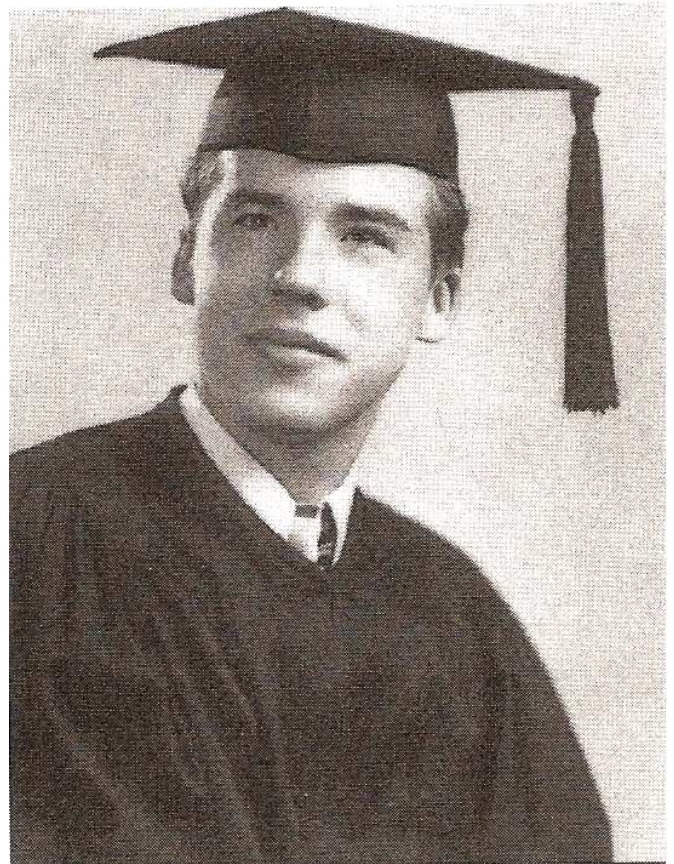
Mom and me shortly after I was born.



Sylvester, Jr. First Communion



First Communion Brother Vince



Brother John, Graduation



First Communion Brother Ronnie



Joseph, Pop, Vince and Mom

Brother Vince was a good soldier, a brave soldier, and a tough soldier.

Vince was regular army during the Korean War. He went to Korea with an anti-aircraft battalion.

The following is from “Good War Gone Bad”, by Richard Bernstein, New York Review of Books, October 25, 2007.

“Ridgeway had been appointed during one of the worst moments in American military history, after the Chinese army had, while MacArthur was in command, routed UN forces and pushed them from near the Chinese border to well below the 38th parallel between North and South Korea. In a matter of just a few weeks, Ridgeway had stopped the Chinese advance, and, using American firepower, was causing ten to fifteen times as many casualties among Chinese troops as the Chinese were inflicting on the UN’s forces.”

Vince’s anti-aircraft unit was in this retreat and were part of the group who were inflicting the previously noted casualties on the Chinese.

How did we get into this mess? Why did the Chinese attack MacArthur's UN force?

The “how” and “why” was MacArthur's arrogance and his will to be in charge of the US foreign policies rather than President Truman.

“But Ridgeway wasn’t really the issue (on March 7, 1951, MacArthur publicly spoke contemptuously of Ridgeway). MacArthur's desire for a full-scale war with what was called “Red China” was the real issue, and beyond that was his defiance of the president he served. In those early months of 1951, MacArthur, who thought he might be the Republican candidate for president in 1952, complained that the political leadership in Washington was tying his hands, preventing him from carrying out the grand mission to which he believed he had been called by destiny.”

Obviously, MacArthur was an arrogant megalomaniac. He violated President Truman’s order to stay

south of the Yalu River and not go into China.
For this, President Truman sacked MacArthur.

Vince was a sergeant and was the senior non-com
for his anti-aircraft gun which was transported on a
large semi-trailer.

In spite of battle, cold, fording of icy streams,
Vince by the force of his strong personality, safely
brought the men and the equipment back. His was
one of the few who did.



Upper right: A 1952 photo of Mom and Pop.

Above: John and Sally at the beginning.

Center right: John and Sally.

Below: Sitting from left, Jim, John, Jr., Peggy, Shelley and Dan
Sitting from left, Dianne, John and Sally, Mary Beth and Rich.





Dolores and Vince with Danny and
John, Jr.
circa 1964



Tommy, Michael, Dolores and Robert



From left, Joyce, Debbie, Karen, Jeff, Joseph



Jeannette and Ronald



Lisa



Ronnie



The Kowalski Mafia
Ron, Joe, John, Vince and Sylvester



Grandfather Theodore Rizzo, Sylvester and Rita,
Mom and Pop



Rita and Grace Rysinger



Sylvester, Grandma Kosciuk and Rita



From left: Anita Lulli, Rita and Grace Rysinger



Vince, Steve, Sandy, Brian and Greg



Jane, their Pastor, and Steve



Who are they? Could they be Vince, Greg and Brian?



1 Robin Lake Drive, Cherry Hill NJ



Sylvester and Rita, June 1952



John and Sally; John and Peggy, Danny and Sherri, Jim and Dianne, Mary Beth, and all of their children (2004)



Front row, Mary Beth, Kristin, and Janet
Back row, Rob holding Aidan, Tommy, Dolores, Colin, and Mike (2004)



Lisa and Brother Ronald (2004)



Joseph and Joyce, Debbie, Jeff and Denise, Karen and Frank, and all of their children
(2004)



Azita, Donya, Daria and Greg (2004)



Caroline, Sandra and Christopher (2006)



Steve, Jane, Matthew and Anna (2004)



Brian, Zachary, Paulina and Nicholas (2004)



Sylvester and Dolores (2004)



Brian and Margo (2006)



From left to right, Caroline and Paulina, Maria and Matthew, Angela, Steve and Anna, Nicholas, Christopher, Donya and Daria, standing (2004)



Crystal and Vince (2006)



Grace Rysinger, Lisa and Tom (2006)



Debbie, Sandra, Mary Beth and Dianne (2004)

Anecdotes of the Peter Miraglia Family

Grace Rysinger, author

Pietro (Peter) Miraglia was a stone mason in the province of Basilicata in Southern Italy. After a serious infection of his thumb, he was forced to give up masonry. He emigrated to Philadelphia in 1882, leaving his wife, Gracia, and two small sons in Italy. He settled in South Philadelphia. There, he purchased land between the 200 and 600 blocks located between Carpenter and Montrose Streets. The 1910 census shows the family living at 268 Montrose Street.

He built a large house and stable and four or five brick rental properties in a courtyard. They were among the first families to have running water and indoor plumbing. He established a successful and prosperous business boarding horses and wagons. In that era, all businesses and trades utilized horses and wagons for transportation. In 1885, he brought from Italy to Philadelphia, his wife and his two small sons. In 1887, he became an American citizen.

He and Grazia had a total of six living children: Phillip; Vito; Anthony; Mary; Anna; and Felicia.

The three girls became seamstresses (about 1910 through 1925). Mary did the designing and cutting and Felicia and Anna did beautiful embroidering and beading. An artistic talent seems to have carried down to the fourth generation. Often the sisters' clients became close friends. In fact, I am still friends with Anita Vena Fiorello, the daughter of a client whose wedding gown the sisters created.. Anita told me that the sisters were known as the "Vera Wang's" of the neighborhood, and anyone who was "anyone" had her clothes tailored by the Miraglia sisters.

The entire family were very close-knit. Their descendants, likewise, are a very close-knit extended family.

Phillip worked for the Stetson Hat Company for 50 years and was presented with a gold watch upon retiring. As a young man, he was also a dance instructor.

After Pietro died in 1917, the stable was sold. The family then moved to 616 Montrose street. Grazia died in 1922 and the remaining properties were sold. A school, still in existence, was built on the original property.

Philip married Josephine Cibos. He died in 1957. Their children are: Grace who married John Juliano; Rita who married Edward Wyllner; Peter who married Anita Lulli; Eleanor; and, Marie who married Vince Cocco.

Vito died a young man in Philadelphia.

Anthony married Mildred Spatola. He died in 1922.

Mary married Amadeo D'Adamo. She died in 1968. Their children are: Julie who married Lou Bott; Joseph who married Anna Mae; and, Peter.

Anna married Theodore Rizzo. She died in the early 1940's. Their daughter, Rita is the mother of Gregory, Sandra, Brian, Vincent and Stephen Kowalski.

Felicia married Anthony Pangia. She died in 1977. Their children are: Anthony who married Betty Pusloski; and Grace who married Frank Rysinger.



Pietro Miraglia

The Polish National Catholic Church

Until the Kowalski's left Scranton in 1942, the Polish National Catholic Church was the central part of our lives. We went to the parochial school, were altar boys, and were deeply involved with various church activities. We received the sacraments. Today, this would be characterized as "Fellowship". Since we were poor, the Polish National Union of America (Spójnia), a fraternal insurance organization associated with the church, paid for my tonsil removal operation and my first pair of glasses. In church circles, the Church was always referred to as "Kościół Narodowy" (National Church). In the Appendix is the Historical Timeline of the PNCC. On the internet, the following can be found:

- Apostolic Succession in the Polish National Catholic Church.
- Old Catholic Church (from Wikipedia).

The Old Catholic Church is the key to the Apostolic Succession in the PNCC. Its roots go back to 696 CE and was the See of Utrecht (Netherlands). The Church of Utrecht provided Pope Hadrian VI in 1552. It has a long and independent history. "After the First Vatican Council in 1870, considerable groups of Austrian, German and Swiss Catholics rejected the teaching on papal infallibility, and left to form their own churches outside union with Rome. These churches were supported by the 'Old Catholic' Archbishop of Utrecht, who ordained their priests and bishops..." (Wikipedia). The leader and Prime Bishop of the PNCC, Francis Hodur, was assigned as the first pastor of Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Parish in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania in 1894. And, who lived in Nanticoke in 1894? None other than John and Marya Kowalski and their daughter Elizabeth. Sylvester was born in 1902 and always stated that his mother was a charter member of the PNCC. Hans Kung (my favorite Christian thinker and probably the best since Martin Luther) in his book "The Catholic Church" says this about the 'Old Catholic Church' actions after the post-Vatican I: "With validly con-

secrated bishops, it seeks to hold to the faith of the church of the first millennium (the first seven councils), to implement a synodical-episcopal constitution with great autonomy for the local church, and accord the pope no more than a primacy of honor."

This is the third schism of the original Catholic Church. First, the eastern Byzantine church (today these are the Orthodox Churches: Russian, Greek, etc.) left. Then, we had the Reformation which spawned the Protestant churches (Luther and Zwingli) and the Anglican Church (the Episcopal Church-America). And, then finally as a result of Vatican I and the issue of papal infallibility, the formation of the Old Catholic Church which in turn spawned the Polish National Catholic Church.

The members of the PNCC are Catholic. The Roman Catholics are Catholics. All members of the Kowalski family are Catholic.

Life—1929 to 1942

The part of the Kowalski Story that is most indelibly “burned” into my psyche is growing-up in the poverty and turmoil of the Great Depression. The year that I was born, 1929, experienced “The Stock Market Crash”. Four years later, in 1933, the United States was in “The Great Depression”. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in March of 1933 (so did Adolph Hitler of Nazi Germany fame) and his first act was to close all banks in the country. Most were bankrupt.

The 1920’s was a period of false prosperity. In 1922, the national income was \$68.5 billion. By 1929, it rose to \$93.6 billion and dropped to \$40 billion in 1932. The number of employed workers decreased from 48 million in 1929 to close to 36 million in March of 1933. The unemployment rate in 1933 was about 25%.

In 1929, Pop was working at a Westinghouse lamp factory in Brooklyn, New York which is where I was born. We lived at 174 Lafayette Avenue. Pop’s mother died about 1932. Pop immediately went back to Scranton to where his mother lived (on Locust Street). Mom, Vince and I were living with Grandmother Stawna at the time. He asked a co-worker to advise his boss that he would return as soon as possible after his mother’s funeral. When Pop returned to Brooklyn, he was told that he no longer had a job. He returned to Scranton and again became an anthracite coal miner. When he and Mom married in 1928, his occupation was listed as “Miner”. As Pop relates, he became President of his United Mine Worker (UMW) local. In 1933, in reaction to serious inequities by coal mine owners and the indifference by John L. Lewis, the International President of the UMW, the United Anthracite Miners of Pennsylvania, (UAMP) union was formed and Pop, with the support of his local’s membership, took his local into the UAMP. Roughly two years later, 1935, the UAMP lost the battle and the union became defunct. Since Pop was an activist in the UAMP, he was “black-balled” from working in any coal mine.

What do you do to support your family when the only industry in Scranton is coal mining and you have been “black-balled”? Needless to say, we lived in poverty. For a period of time, Pop worked for the Works Projects Administration (the New Deal WPA) doing outdoor construction such as roads.

In 1937, Pop was able to work in a coal mine in Taylor, Pennsylvania on the condition that he would not participate in any way with the union.

The years of 1933 to 1937 were financially tough. Later, in either late 1938 or early in 1939, Pop was able to get a job as the mechanic for Manor Farms, a milk bottler and milk retailer. From this point, economically, the situation was stable and the Kowalski family went from poverty to just being poor, as were most people in the Scranton area. In October or November 1939, we moved back to Scranton and rented a house on Brook Street. When Pop was working in the Taylor coal mine, we rented a house on Loomis Avenue in Taylor roughly a block from where cousin Theresa Bohenek currently lives.

Life was, from an economic standpoint, stable. Since, Pop was on call, his company, provided us with a telephone—the first one for us. A little later, Pop received Blue Cross hospitalization. God, we were now living like millionaires.

As you can well understand, when one is unemployed or partially employed, day-to-day survival was necessary.

Later, in 1941, Pop went to Philadelphia to work for the Baldwin Locomotive Works. War for the United States was imminent (December 7, 1941–Pearl Harbor) and the defense industry was mobilizing. Pop was hired by Baldwin to work on their army tank contract.

The Kowalski family moved to Philadelphia in 1942.

The Kowalski timeline:

- 1929 I was born and lived in Brooklyn.
- 1930 Vince was born and we lived in Scranton with Grandmother Stawna.
- 1931 Lived on Locust Street.
- 1932 Grandmother Stawna died.
Pop resumed coal mining.
- 1933 The UAMP union formed.
- 1934 I started 1st grade at St. Stanislaus.
- 1935 Pop probably started working for the WPA over the winter of 1934-1935.
- 1936 Moved to Prospect Avenue still a short distance from St. Stanislaus.
- 1937 Pop started working as a miner in Taylor, PA and we moved to Loomis Avenue.
- 1938 Either late in 1938 or early 1939, Pop got the mechanics job with Manor Farms, an integrated dairy and retail company.
- 1939 September— Hitler invaded Poland; this was the beginning of World War II. A month or two later (or early in 1940), the Kowalski family moved to Brook Street in Scranton.
- 1940 A great year! We lived on Brook Street, a block away from St. Stanislaus Polish National Catholic church, the focal point of our lives while we lived in Scranton. Sylvester, Jr. was in 7th grade at Public School Number 8 on Cedar avenue in South Scranton.
- 1941 Pop went to Philadelphia to work for Baldwin Locomotive Works. Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. I was sitting in the living room when the Polish polka music was interrupted, about 1:30 pm on a Sunday, announcing that Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese. The US was in World War II.

Sylvester, Jr. was in the 8th grade in South Scranton Junior High School. It was either in 8th or 9th grade that Sylvester, Jr.'s long term professional objective developed. He wanted to become an aeronautical engineer and that he should attend Drexel Institute of Technology (DIT) in Philadelphia. Why DIT? DIT had cooperative-work program for engineering students. After the freshman year, students are placed in industry. A logical school choice for someone whose family didn't have "one-nickel-to-rub-against-another". Oh,

that it was so easy getting there.

1942 The Kowalski family moved to Philadelphia. One person, at least, Sylvester, Jr., was thrilled to leave the depressing economic and other conditions of an impoverished coal mining city. Philadelphia to Sylvester, Jr. was a refreshing rebirth. Not that everything was utopian but it was a magnitude better than living in Scranton. We had central heating for the first time in my lifetime.