

In Memoriam

## Walter Peter Turek

November 13, 1922 — April 14, 2008

Dad was born in 1922 in Bridgeport Connecticut. His parents were immigrants from Torysky, Slovakia, Peter Turek and Mary Tabak. They had two children, Walter, the oldest, and Joseph.

Dad attended Stratford High School, where he met his future wife, Helen Chuba, who was also the daughter of Slovak immigrants.

Shortly after graduating from high school, he enlisted in the U. S. Marines. Making good use of his youthful interests in radios and flying, he served as a radio/radar operator and gunner in dive bomber squadron VMSB 236. He served in air combat operations against the Japanese over the Solomon Islands from bases on Guadalcanal and other South Pacific Islands. He returned to the United States for training in the medium bomber, and was able to get leave over the holidays in 1944, when he and Helen were married on Dec. 31, 1944. (So they always got to celebrate their anniversary on New Year's Eve.)

Dad was honorably discharged after the end of the war in October 20, 1945, About nine months later, on August 3, 1946, Leslie was born, resulting in her position at the leading edge of the baby boomers. The family lived in apartments in the west side of Stratford, near the houses of both sets of grandparents, so as kids we always had our big family as part of our lives.

Dad was recalled to serve during the Korean War, as Battalion Communication Chief in the 2nd Tank Battalion, 2nd Marine Division at Camp Lejune, North Carolina and Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. During one landing exercise, when they were having trouble powering the radios, Dad came up with a strategy to run an antenna powered by the batteries of the jeeps in the cargo hold, and saved the day. His commander was so pleased with his performance that he was granted an exceptional leave, which allowed him to come home in time to greet his new son, Richard, born on November 11, 1951.

After the war, Dad worked as a skilled machinist at the Bullard Company and Singer Sewing Machines in Bridgeport. We moved into a modest house across the street from the Turek grandparents and Dad attended Bridgeport University at night, benefiting from the generous G.I. Bill for WWII veterans. He graduated Cum Laude in 1959 with a BS degree in sociology and political science, with both his children proudly attending his commencement ceremony.

Dad had an interest in many things. He was a life-long licensed amateur radio operator KB1BYZ. He maintained an electronics workshop in our basement, and often did side work helping people fix their televisions, etc. He was skilled in woodworking and made many items around the house. He had a stamp collection, specializing in WWII stamps of the South Pacific. He collected tapes of 40's jazz bands. He loved music, especially opera. He was a fan of Jean Shepard and listened to his radio show on WQXR.

Dad had a deep love of books and learning. He brought his children to the library and to museums and planetariums. He taught us that anything you want to do, you can figure out how to do by reading books and working at it.

After he gained his college degree, he looked about for a new career. He applied to IBM for work that would take advantage of his love of electronics, but they turned him down because he was “too old” for them to bother to train. He then took the government civil service exam and scored high enough to qualify for the U.S. Customs Service training program as a Merchandise Examiner. He spent 3 months living apart from the family in a grungy apartment on the backside of Beacon Hill while he attended the training course in the Boston Custom House (which was still a Custom House at that time). Trying to spend as little as possible, he ate at cheap cafeterias, and went to the free museums and open symphony rehearsals. Some people thought he was crazy to give up a great factory job, but he persevered.

He worked in the Customs Service from 1959 to 1980. At first he was assigned to New York City, so had to make the long railroad commute from our home in Stratford. Later he worked in the local Bridgeport office. But it soon became clear that to advance in position, he would have to be willing to move around the country. So he accepted assignments in Duluth Minnesota and Louisville Kentucky. In 1966, he was awarded a major promotion to District Director of Customs out of the Milwaukee office. In the office I’m sure he was all business, but at home he shared his wonderment. “Do you realize”, he told us, “that I now have the power to *seize a ship!*”

In the last stage of his career with Customs, he worked out of the Washington DC office as Director of the Regulatory Audit Division. In these early days of what is now known as the “global economy”, he set up an entirely new system of appraising and valuing items that were partially manufactured out of the country, and during this period he travelled to many exotic locations to help set up local offices there. He retired from the U.S. Customs Service in 1980. According to one of his colleagues there, he is still considered a “living legend” within the Customs Service.

After retiring, Dad and Mom moved back to Stratford to be near his aging parents. They purchased the house on Warner Hill Road, and Dad became a self-employed customs consultant for Timex Corporation for the next ten years.

Mom passed away in April, 1996. They had been married for more than 51 years. Dad took it hard—he always said that Mom was the one girl for him.

In his grief, he turned to activities to keep him busy. He had always been very interested in computers—not only did he use them well, but he wanted to understand how they worked. So he completed courses in computer science and mathematics at local community colleges. In spite of his age, he found friends there, and he helped to tutor some of the younger students with foreign backgrounds. In his seventies (!), he took flying lessons at the Bridgeport Airport, and talked of flying up to visit me in Boston. To his regret, health issues prevented him from being able to solo. This was something he always wanted to do, but felt that he couldn’t while Mom was alive because it would upset her too much.

In 1998 he discovered the interest that would be his passion for the rest of his life. He had always been interested in his father's stories about life in the "Old Country", and he decided to travel to Slovakia to try to find his roots. He went alone, not really knowing the language or exactly what he would find, and had amazing success tracking down relatives and locating a brother and sister of his father who were still living. He came back totally enthused about the country and his family there, and started diving into genealogy and tracing his roots.

By the time of his death, he had made six separate trips to Slovakia, and had met all fifteen of his first cousins living there, and many, many people in his family. He had young cousins from Slovakia stay with him for several summers while they worked in the U.S. He had made connections all over the world, due to his genealogical research. And he stayed in touch with Slovakia via email, magazines, newspapers, and watching Slovak television on his computer. He was studying to become more proficient in the Slovak language, and he donated funds to install the first heating system in the Torysky village church. Our dear friend and translator, Paula, said that half of his heart was in Slovakia.

His last trip to Slovakia was in the fall of 2006, to attend cousin Jana's wedding. He had a wonderful time meeting the family, which by now were no longer distant relatives, but close and loving friends. We know that many people in Slovakia will be grieving along with us today. A liturgy will be performed in his name on Monday at 5:30 p.m. Slovak time at the village church in Torysky, Slovakia. He would have liked that.



Dad with Cousin Marta in Košice, Slovakia - October 2006