

# Stefan's goose

Scholarly source:

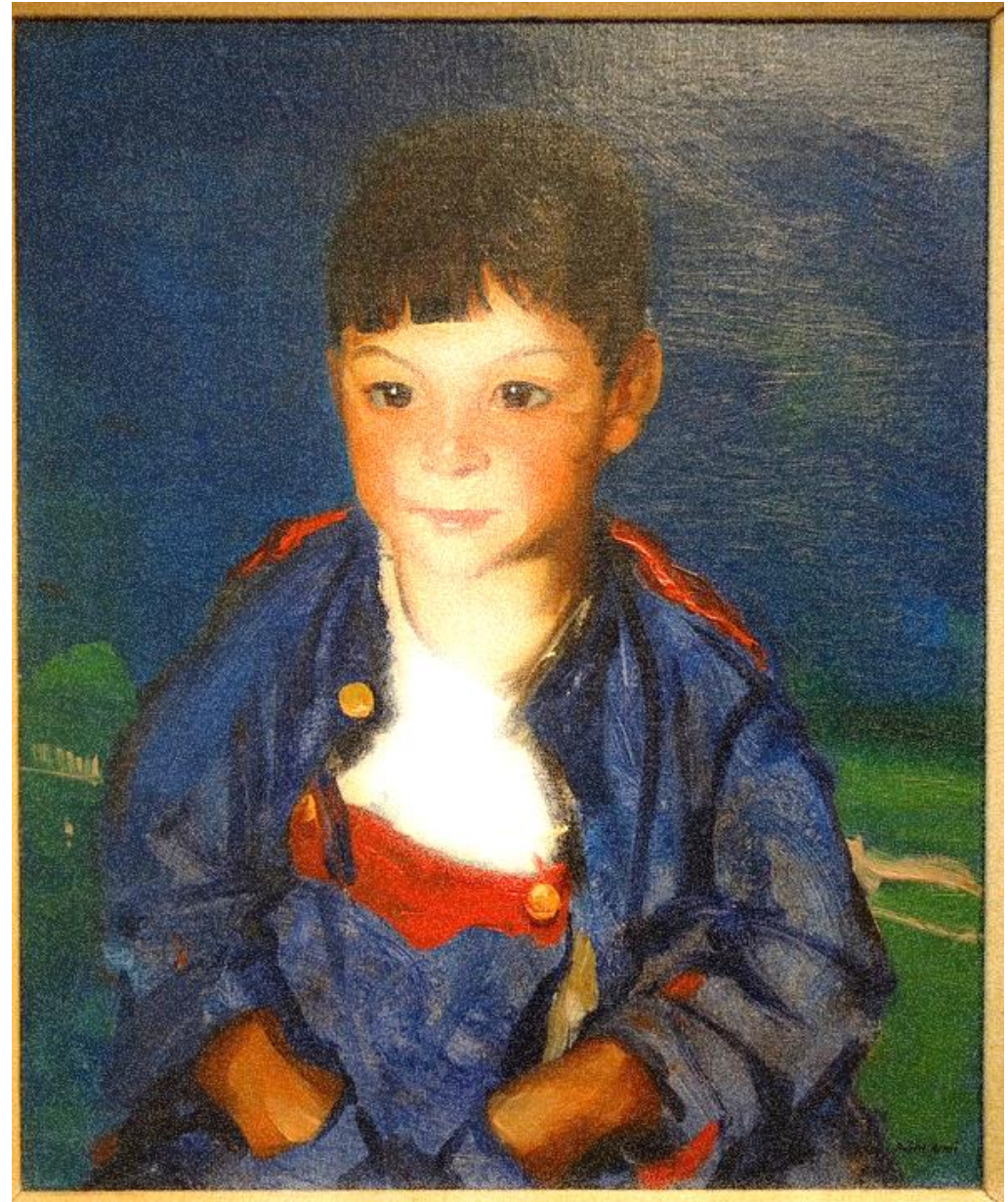
Urban Anthropology (2002). *Oral history project of Milwaukee's Old South Side*. Milwaukee:  
Urban Anthropology Inc.

## Meet Stefan

Stefan Sawicki was a six-year-old boy living on Milwaukee's South Side just before the start of World War Two. His parents had been born in Poland.

Stefan was generally a very happy little guy, but he was about to face something he wasn't quite ready for during March of 1941. Stefan would always remember that event as "the day of the goose."

But before we get into that, let's talk a little bit about his world.

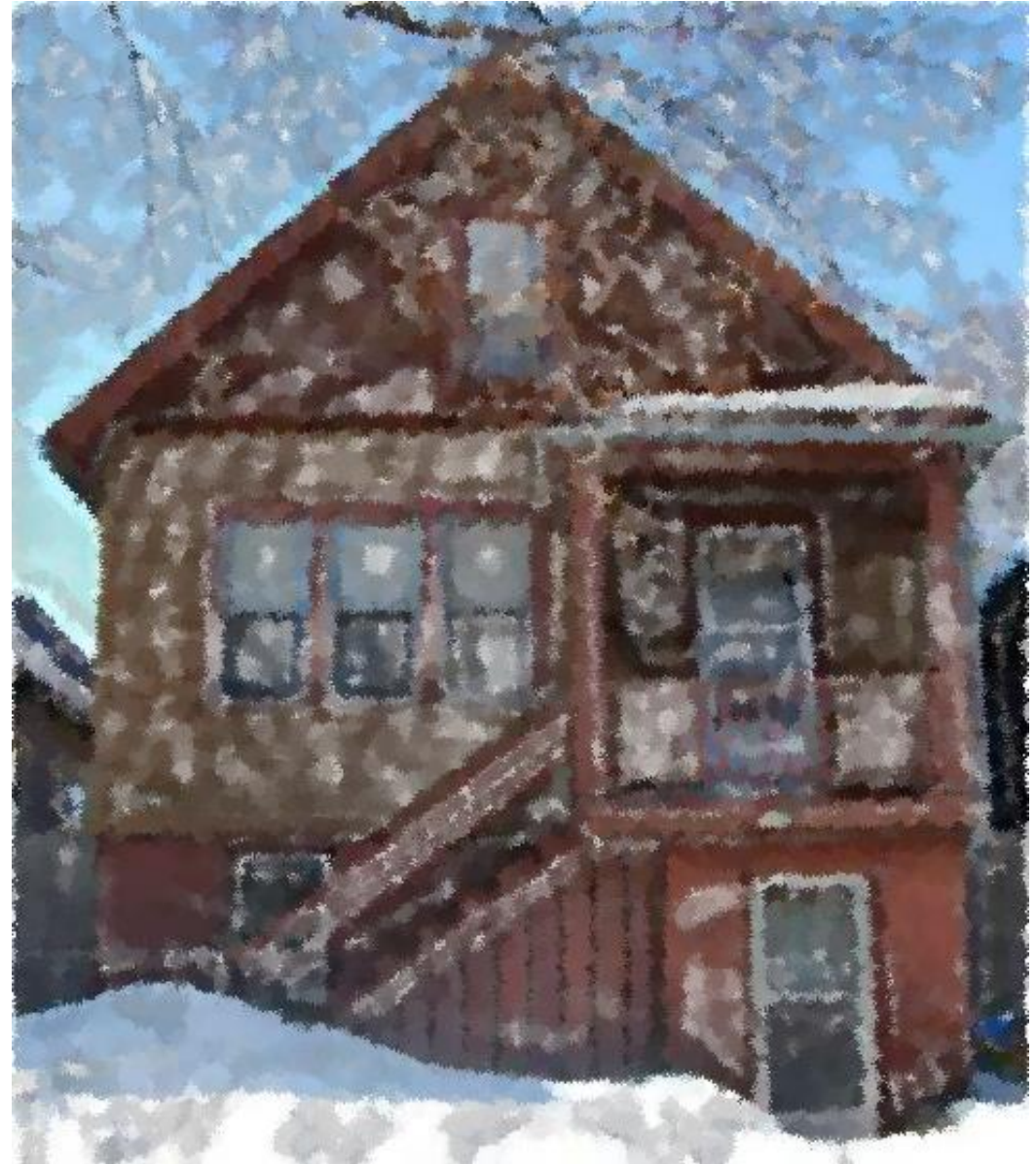




## Stefan's world

Stefan lived in a house that was just off Lincoln Avenue and just a block away from Kosciuszko Park.

The house was known as a Polish flat. A Polish flat is a small cottage that was lifted up to add a floor below that would have a very low ceiling. Stefan's family added the lower floor when relatives came from Poland who needed a place to stay.





The relatives living downstairs in the Polish flat included Uncle and Aunt Sawicki and their baby. Upstairs was Stefan, his parents, a seventeen-year-old brother Roman, and two older sisters named Helen and Anna.



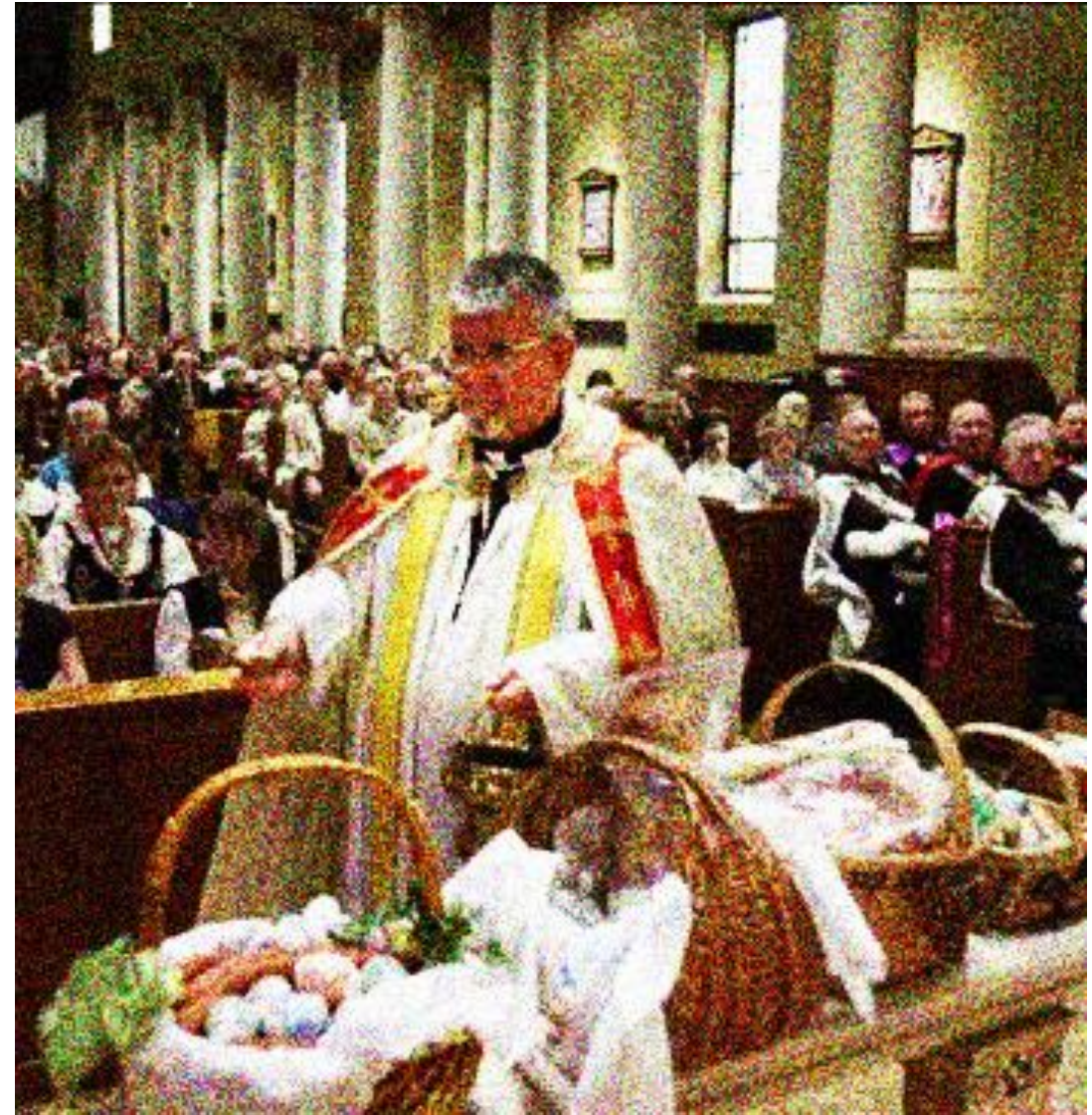
The two Sawicki families were Catholic and worshipped at the great Basilica of St. Josaphat that was two blocks away from Stefan's house. The Poles who had settled in this neighborhood had built the Basilica with their own hands.

Stefan was in first grade at the Basilica school.





Early spring was always a great time of year for Stefan's Polish neighborhood. It was close to Easter. On Easter their parents would fill Easter baskets with all kinds of decorated eggs and treats. The Saturday before Easter the parents would take the baskets to the Basilica to have them blessed by the priests.





All year around there was plenty to eat at Stefan's house. The Sawickis were not stingy with their meat, vegetables, and potatoes, and Stefan helped himself to seconds at every meal. In fact, Stefan's siblings teased him for being a little too chubby.





On Saturdays at this time of year the females in the family would go shopping for Sunday dinner. Usually Stefan went sledding with his older brother on the hills at Pulaski Park, about a mile away from their house.





But on this memorable Saturday in March his brother told him there was not enough snow cover for sledding.

"You should go shopping with Mom and the girls," his brother Roman suggested. "Besides, Mom thinks it's time for you to get your first barbershop hair cut."



So this would be a very special day for Stefan. He'd get his first barbershop hair cut. But it would also be the day he learned something about how the food he loved so much came to be.





# The day of the goose

The day started out pretty well. Stefan's family was going shopping for Sunday dinner at *babcia's* (grandma's) house. He always loved Sundays.

His thoughts about Sunday dinner were particularly strong this Saturday, as it was during Lent and he had to cut down on his eating. But he could eat anything he wanted at Sunday dinner.



Stefan, his mother, and his sisters took out their little red wagon and headed for Lincoln Avenue. Stefan loved the sound of the tinkling bells when the doors of Druminski's bakery opened and he could smell freshly baked *kuchen* or *paczki*.





Usually the bakers would give the kids free samples while Mrs. Sawicki looked over the breads and cakes. But this was Lent and the bakers knew the kids weren't supposed to do much snacking.



Mrs. Sawicki told the children that if Stefan didn't fuss during his haircut, the kids could get ice cream on the way home. This would be their first and only snack of the week.





As Anna and Helen took turns pulling the wagon, the family made their first stop at Wnentkoski's on 16<sup>th</sup> to drop off shoes for repair.





Mrs. Sawicki told Mr. Wnentkoski that Mr. Sawicki and Roman really needed new shoes, but the Depression was taking its toll on the family and they had to settle for repairs.

Mr. Wnentkoski said he understood. "Most of the families that come to the store are in the same situation," he said. "Some say that the Depression won't end unless we enter the war. That way lots of the men would have a way to earn an income."





The next stop was Joe Lemiesz' Barber Shop on 13<sup>th</sup> Street. "If I'm good, we will get ice cream next, right?" Stefan reminded his mother, as he struggled with all his might to sit still for the haircut.



"Not next, Stefan," his mother replied.  
"We have too much to do first. We'll  
get cones at Picadilly on the way home."  
Anna was sent over to Wiemann's Five  
& Dime Store to purchase a muffin tin.

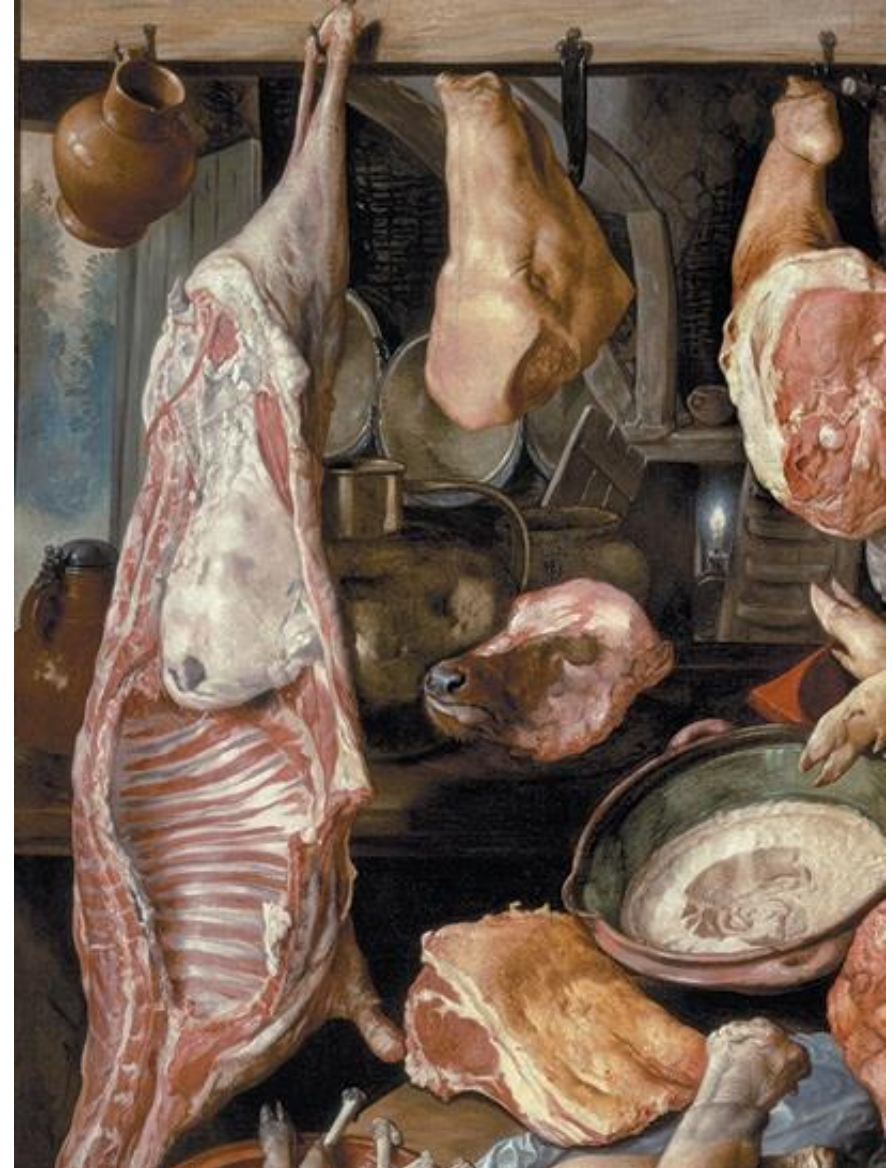




As soon as Stefan's hair was cut, the others headed east on Lincoln. But they were held up by a crowd gathering on 12<sup>th</sup> Street. The crowd was listening to a man preaching from atop a soapbox.



"Oh, it's just the Socialists," Mrs. Sawicki said. She pointed to the butcher shop down the block. "I'll run over and get a bird at Frank Bzdawka's (the butcher). You and Helen stay here and wait for Anna to come back."



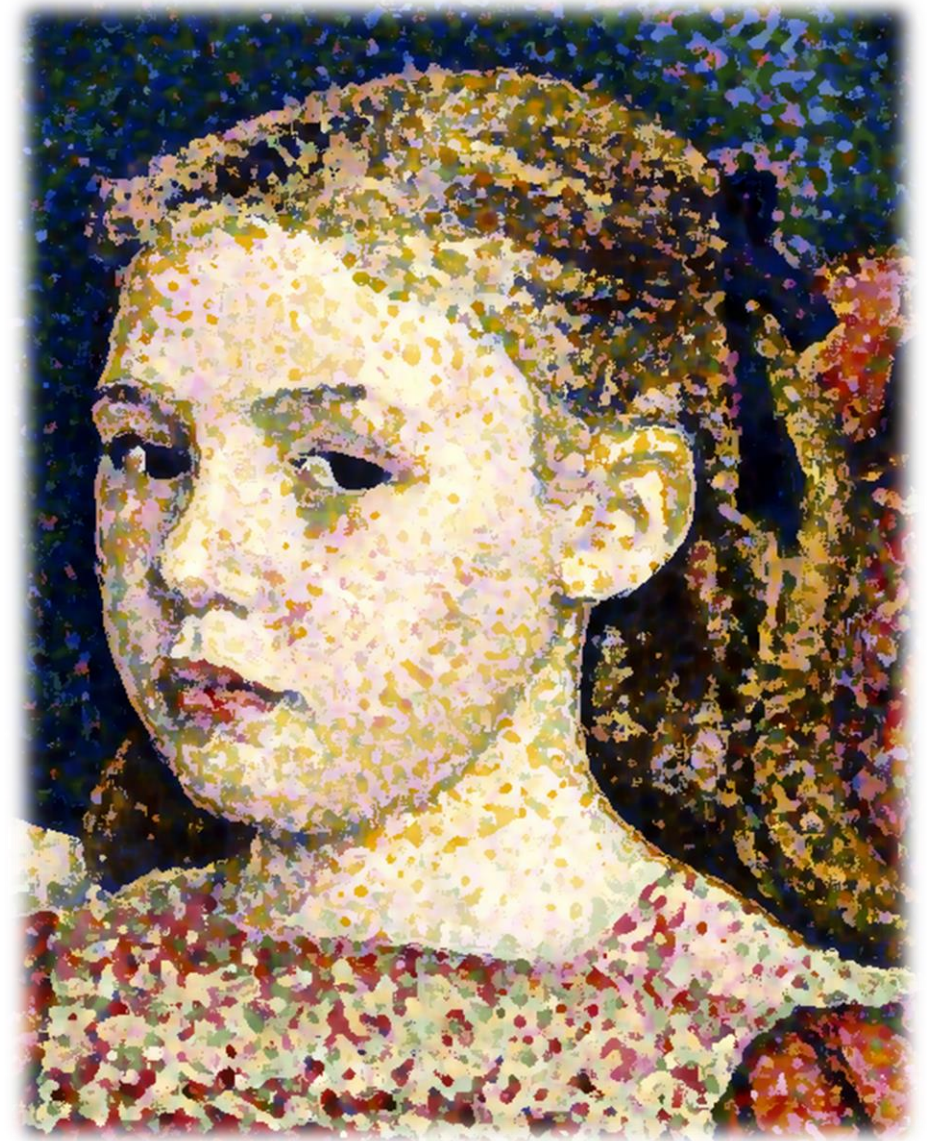


Stefan watched the speaker with great interest. The man was shouting that all kids should join the Young People's Socialist League to help the adults fight for jobs.

"I think I would like to join this," Stefan said. "They don't seem to be against our church, Helen."

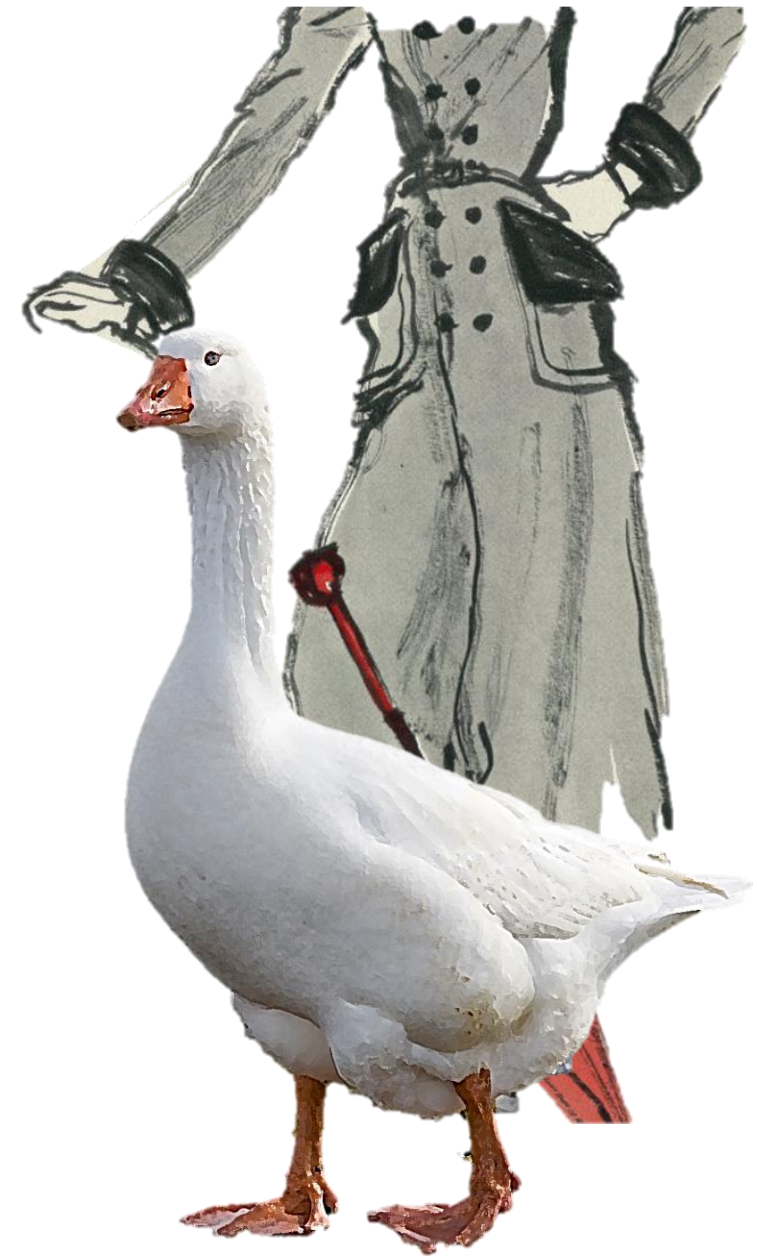
Little Helen scowled. "If our priests tell us to stay away from them, then this is what we will do."

Anna returned from the five and dime store, raving about the big deal she'd gotten on the muffin tin.



"There's mom, with the bird," yelled Helen.

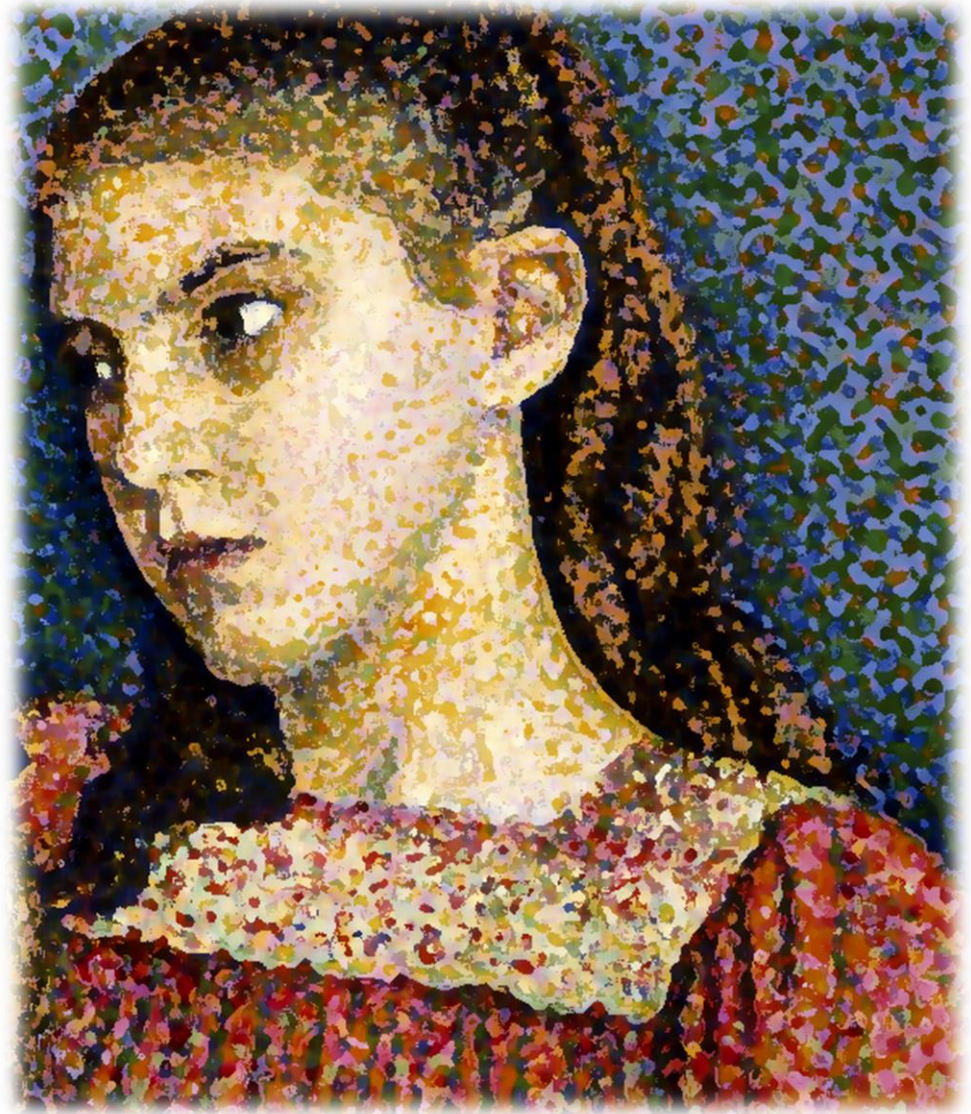
Stefan shrieked with joy as he saw his mother come out of Bzdawka's walking a goose on a string. He ran up to her and began fondling the goose's head. "Oh mom, thank you! Can I keep the little goosey in my room? Or does he have a cage?"



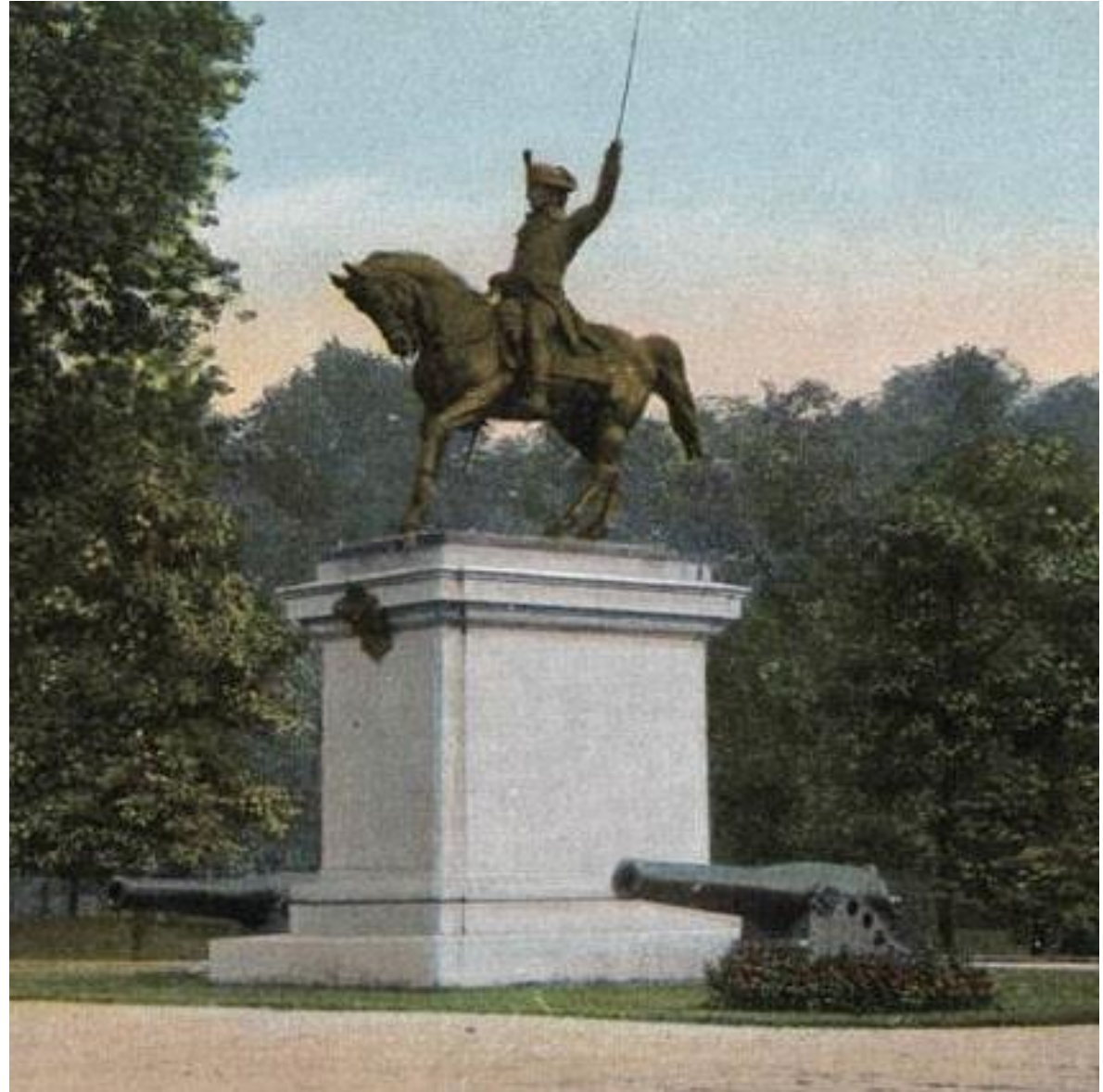


Anna gave Helen a knowing look. After all, she'd been grocery shopping with her mother for years.

Mrs. Sawicki didn't answer Stefan. She just told him to pull the wagon while she walked the goose.



In a few minutes the family was passing the Kosciuszko Monument on 9<sup>th</sup> Place. Mrs. Stawicki stopped. "I heard from Mr. Kapinski that if we go to war, they might have to melt down those canons for the metal."





"If we go to war," Stefan asked, "will Roman and dad have to be soldiers? They could get killed."

Mrs. Stawicki shrugged her shoulders. "Let's worry about that when we have to. Now, let's get our ice cream at Picadilly. We're almost there."



Anna and Stefan stayed outside with the goose and the wagon while their mother went inside for the cones. "I love goosey, Anna," Stefan said, petting the bird's head. "I hope I can keep him in my room."





Anna just kept rolling her eyes.

"Goosey can be part of our family like the Rozga's dog," Stefan exclaimed. "We can play with him in the yard."



When Mrs. Sawicki returned with the cones, she took the goose on the string back.

"Anna, don't you feel like going on the swings? Why don't you take Stefan over to the park playground," she suggested. "Helen and I can stop for vegetables."





"Can goosey come along?" pleaded Stefan. "He could swim in the pond!"

"I'll take goosey," Mrs. Sawicki said. "He's not our pet, Stefan."

"He is!" insisted Stefan.



"Anna," Mrs. Sawicki snapped, "when you get to the park, do tell Stefan what the goose is for. Please!"





And one minute later everyone walking through Kosciuszko Park that day heard a blood-curdling scream they would never forget.



The shriek was so loud that an old man near the monument swore Kosciuszko's horse nearly threw its rider.





And from that sad moment on, little Stefan swore he'd never eat a roasted bird on Sunday again.



And for years to come, picnickers at Kosciuszko Park would tell the story about the blood curdling screams of little Stefan that were heard for miles in all directions on that sunny March morning.





The end  
Let's talk!!!