

# **My Journey through Life**

**by Paul J. Wigowsky**

I was born in Germany on September 25, 1945. My parents were refugees from Ukraine (Soviet Union) in the early days of World War II. They were advised to leave the Soviet Union because of the anti-German hatred. My mother was of German descent, and my Dad was of Ukrainian descent. We spoke Russian in the home.

When my parents had a chance to leave Germany, they found a sponsor in the United States and boarded a ship in Bremerhaven, Germany, and sailed for America. The General Muir ship took 10 days to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and we landed in New York on April 26, 1952. I was only six years old at the time.



We lived in Philadelphia for a year before moving to San Francisco, California, where my parents bought a house within a year on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. As a boy, I remember playing at Rossi Park on Arguello Blvd. Also, I remember spending many days roaming through the spectacular Golden Gate Park, which was just a block away from our house. It was a boyhood filled with many Tom Sawyer-like adventures, and playing a lot of baseball and football in the parks.



I went to elementary school at Frank McCoppin, which was located on 651 6th Avenue in the Richmond District. I remember learning to speak and write English fluently by the third grade. My most memorable time there was with a pretty teacher named Miss Lowe. I had a crush on her. I guess I was a “teacher’s pet” at the time, also. She was my fifth grade teacher, and our classroom had students from different ethnic backgrounds. I was learning to live in a multi-cultural, multi-racial world.



My sixth grade classroom featured a larger class size, and I was one among thirty-four students. I was getting ready for junior high school, where there would be more students from other elementary schools. By now I felt very comfortable in school, and I was being Americanized at a rapid pace, learning all about American culture and watching the shows on TV, like Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers, and Davy Crockett.

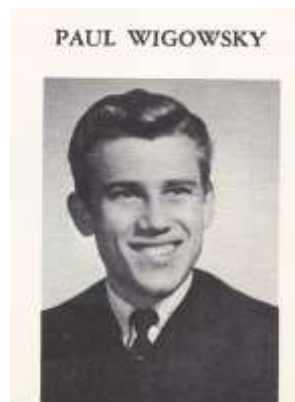


My years in Roosevelt Junior High on Arguello & Geary Blvd (from 1957 to 1959) were a continuation of my immersion into the American Way – the music of Rock-n-Roll, the TV shows of Bonanza, Howdy Doody, and the Three Stooges, and the post-war expansion of consumerism & capitalism. It was also the years when I was introduced to girls – i.e. my first kiss. My favorite teacher was my homeroom (Rm. 214) teacher, Mr. William Coolidge.



My years in George Washington High School on 32<sup>rd</sup> Avenue between Geary Blvd and Balboa (from 1960 to 1963) were a period of time when I began to understand American individualism and the role that America played on the world stage. The current events of the United States versus the Soviet Union were played out in my life because of my Russian heritage. It was a matter of Russians being identified with Communism, and I belonged to a church group that maintained its Russian language and culture. I seemed to belong to two different worlds, the world of my youth group and the church, and the world of school acquaintances and activities. I loved going to basketball games and football games. I was beginning to feel like an American, totally identifying with its life, people, and culture.

My favorite classes in high school were the shops: machine shop, auto shop, and electric shop. I took German for two years from Mr. Redlick. I enjoyed P.E. with coach McGrath, even though I was not very athletic. I was swamped with homework with the history teacher, Mr. Daskarolis. The civics class with Mr. Addlestone was quite a challenge. During my last year I went on the 4/4 program, part time school and part time work. I worked at the Petrini's meat department in Lick Market on 7th and Clement; it was a job that my older brother got me so I could earn money for college.



When I graduated from high school in 1963, I left home in order to pursue my dream of becoming a missionary in some remote corner of the world. Little did I know at the time that it was really not my cup of tea. I spent two years at Bethany Bible College near Santa Cruz finding out that religion was a mixed bag of different denominations (or belief-systems) contending with each other for church membership and money. It was a world of zealots and fanatics and Bible-thumping believers who wanted to convert the world to their own way of thinking. I was not good at that – the proselytizing business. However, I did have lots of fun singing and playing the piano with a traveling quartet. We went from church to church, performing and meeting people (and girls) who loved the gospel songs we sang.



The Parsons Quartet

I started to go to other colleges after that: Cabrillo College at Aptos, College of San Mateo, and San Francisco State College. I was beginning the pursuit of knowledge at a pace that turned me into a perennial student. I wanted to know as much as my brain could fathom, and I took courses in anatomy, astronomy, psychology, and, of course, English and history. I was so immersed in learning everything that it seemed like the world around me didn't exist. I was reading constantly, devouring books as a daily meal.

I was just about ready to be rewarded for my educational endeavor with a BA degree in English in the spring of 1969 when "all hell broke loose." The event was so bizarre that I include it as a separate story (Facebook conversation) that I had with Bob Davis, who was involved from the law enforcement side:



[Paul J. Wigowsky](#)

What I remember is that I had parked my car up on 19th and was walking down the street when I saw the cavalry gathered on the side street near the campus. I knew right there and then that something BIG was going to happen that day. When Hayakawa appeared at the entrance of the administration building during the morning demonstration and said, "There will no longer be any innocent bystanders" -- well, that told me I was in danger. And when the Cavalry with all those horses (must have been about 20 of them) arrived, I high-tailed it out of there. After that -- the campus closed down. That was in early May.

I am reminded of the famous line from a course in Shakespeare that I took at SFSU: "LIFE is a STAGE, and we are all actors (actresses) on it. We have our entrances and our exits."

And may I add, we choose the roles we play -- or is it that Life chooses the roles that we play!? And we have to follow and read the lines that we're given. In the heat of battle -- i.e. the "Sit-in demonstrations at SFSU in 1969" -- we participated in a drama that we didn't fully understand at the time. Later, I began to understand that Governor Reagan gave the order to Hayakawa to disperse the demonstrators by any means possible. And most likely, Reagan was given the green light by President Nixon. The chain of command was obvious later on to me when I served in Vietnam.



[Bob Davis](#)

Every day at least two or three times we would be called to attention by our superiors, and we would all run and get into formation assuming that we were going to be sent out onto the campus to use the training we have been given. After falling in and standing at attention for 10 or 15 minutes we would then be dismissed and told to go back to hanging out and/or drilling some more. It was probably the most boring duty I ever had done as a police officer.

On the day that S. I. Hayakawa read the dispersal order to the students, we were not aware of what was going on, on the campus. We were back in our secluded area just drilling and practicing. Once again we were called to attention and by now assumed that we were going to be standing there for 10 or 15 minutes before being dismissed. Only this time they actually marched us out to the North end of the commons. We could see hundreds of students yelling and screaming all around the campus and especially congregated out on the Commons. We were then given orders to spread out in a single file line from one side of the common to the other facing north to south. We were then given the order to go into an attack stance and further given the orders to start advancing towards the students at a half pace march. Obviously the students started backing away from us, staying 10 or 15 feet out of our reach. This was when I saw the horses coming onto the campus from the area of 19th and Holloway, dispersing students out of the area. Essentially, the students who were in the commons began running in all directions attempting to escape first from the horses, and eventually from those of us that were pushing them from the north. The so-called riot was over pretty fast, and for the most part the students broke up and left the campus without too many skirmishes.



Thanks, Bob, for giving us a "Play by Play" analysis from your point-of-view on the "battlefield" of SFSU. I hope no one was injured on that day. I personally was saddened by the whole state of affairs, especially the aftermath -- the closing of the school. That set a whole new chain of causal situations and events for me -- no BA in English, and Vietnam.

[Bob Davis](#) A few weeks later I transferred to the San Francisco Police Department. Shortly after joining the SFPD I was selected to be a member of the TAC squad. As most of you will remember, the Tac squad was responsible for breaking up riots and handling demonstrations in San Francisco. If you were part of any of the riots in San Francisco, like Mayday and many others, there's a good chance you and I met on the battlefield. If you happen to have met my baton also, oops....

As for rioting, San Francisco State was very mild compared to what I saw when we were deployed to Cal Berkeley. The protesters in Berkeley would generally be armed with weapons

which they used to assault us, including throwing 4 x 4 tiles down the street which would skip off the ground and bounce into our legs cutting us unmercifully. We were often hit by bricks, rocks, bottles and anything else that could be thrown.

We were hated and despised, but what most protesters never stopped to think about, was that we were generally kids the same ages as them. We just happen to have jobs where our bosses told us what to do. I had two small children at home and was very grateful to have a job where I could support my family. I was too busy working every day and trying to get home to be with my kids, that I had no idea what all the protesting was about. Nor do I suspect that many of the protesters actually knew why they were there. It was just a big party and something to be joining in. I had actually attended both Cal and San Francisco State, but was far too busy with my personal life to pay attention to what was going on at Sproul Plaza or on the Commons. I was a lot more concerned with my grades than I was with political ideology.

[Paul J. Wigowsky](#) Those were trying times for all of us -- students, police officers, administrators, and others. Looking back at it all, it seems like our American Society was going through a "Domestic War" which was as psychologically traumatic as the Foreign War (Vietnam). However, those of us who survived both "Conflicts" learned from those experiences - and now we can tell our story as we reminisce about that "Cultural Revolution."

We did not realize what all the fighting was all about. You had your job, and I was just trying to finish school and get my BA. I was simply an "innocent spectator." I found out later that there were lots of "political agitators" that were revolutionaries (anti-war, anti-society, etc.) that were trying to change society to their own liking. They were the "speakers" who agitated the crowds and spurred the students to do "sit-ins" and disrupt the educational process to further their political purposes. And I'm sure those agitators were being used by "Higher Ups."



And so, after my education was temporarily suspended, I felt like I was spiraling downwards into a world of chaos, confusion, and constant conflict. The summer of 1969 was a time of great change for me: the hippie culture, the drug culture, and an encounter with a yoga guru and his commune. The psychedelic world wreaked havoc with my perception of reality, and I was swept into the maelstrom of a reality that was based on the mantra: "Turn on, Tune in, Drop out." The alternate reality of a counterculture influenced me, and I was seeing everything through a new prism, a new paradigm. The old world was obliterated, and a new consciousness began to appear, like the "dawning of a new day" (the dawning of the Age of Aquarius).

In order to escape the addicting trend toward self-destruction and nihilism, I entered the draft and went to Vietnam. I escaped the world of hallucinogenic drugs and entered the world of the military, where army life revealed to me the control of the mind by the armed forces. I was a puppet in the hands of the military-industrial complex, but

at least I was able to clear my mind and begin to think again. This time the mantra was: "Alert, Alive." I traveled a lot to different places during the Vietnam Campaign from 1970-71: Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. I began to see a different world, a different culture, and I began to appreciate eastern philosophy and religion.

I also gained experience in the medical field, for I was a conscientious objector and served in a M.A.S.H. (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) unit. I worked side by side with doctors and nurses in the emergency room. One of the highlights during my "tour of duty" was a visit to Da Nang, where Bob Hope entertained the troops by bringing dancing girls and a celebrity named Neal Armstrong.



After staying alive and coming back home to the States, I decided to return to SFSU to finish my education. I was able to afford tuition by using the GI Bill. Uncle Sam was good to the returning veterans, even if society was indifferent and more concerned with domestic issues. I reconnected with my family and lived at home while I pursued my BA degree, and then an MA in English and an MA in Russian. For my MA in English I had to write a thesis. It was on my favorite Russian-American author, Vladimir Nabokov. The thesis was titled: "Vladimir Nabokov: A Cynical Creator."



When I finally finished my education by getting my teacher's credentials in 1976 (after student teaching at Lincoln High), I was proud to have finally put my life back together. I had seen many veterans of foreign wars (VFW) suffering with handicaps, unable to cope with life in the US; I managed to overcome all difficulties and pulled myself up "by my bootstraps" and carried on with my pursuit of the American dream: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Even though I saw the horrors of war, I still felt that America was a beautiful country.

When my first teaching opportunity arrived, I grabbed "the bull by the horns" and moved to Oregon, where a friend opened the door for me to become a teacher at the

elementary school level. I was now happily married, and even had a son. Life was looking good!

I taught almost all the grades in the elementary school, starting from first grade and ending at the sixth grade level. During my twenty-seven years at Ninety-One School in the Canby School District I was blessed with the greatest students in the world – except for maybe one or two “trouble-makers.” Initially I worked with a group of Russian Old Believers, helping them learn English by using their native language. I learned English as a young schoolboy through the “Immersion Method” (without native language assistance); however, I found out that giving native language assistance facilitated the comprehension process. The students learned and comprehended the material much faster.



Working with Russian Old Believers helped me understand a culture that was preserved from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their story was so interesting to me and to the community where I worked that I eventually decided to gather the material the children shared with me and put it into book form. The end result was an educational historical fiction book that told the story of how the Russian Old Believers left Russia and lived in China for a while before emigrating to Brazil and later Oregon. Most of the incidents were drawn directly from the real-life experiences of the Oregon community. The book was called “Freedom For An Old Believer.”

During my teaching career, I had many personal developments and adventures. In 1977, when Elvis died, I was personally touched and traumatized. I grew up on Elvis songs, and I had even seen him perform live in 1975 at Sahara Tahoe in Lake Tahoe. He was the “American Idol” of our generation. I heard the news while on vacation with my wife in Kauai, the island where Elvis starred in the movie “Blue Hawaii.” I felt like I had lost a soul-brother, and I cried. And then the recurring dreams started. It seemed like a multitude of people “saw Elvis,” who had “left the building,” and yet was seemingly roaming like a spirit upon the face of the earth. “Why was he visiting me in my dreams?” was the question I asked a medium, and the unsatisfactory reply was a common tabloid response, “because he wants to let you know he is still alive.” To make a long story short, I ended up making a “pilgrimage” to Graceland and Tupelo, Elvis’ birthplace. I even entered the Elvis sweepstakes to see if I could get an Elvis book published – all to no avail. There was too much Elvis memorabilia on the market. My



unpublished book - "In Search of Elvis" – is like "a memory pressed between the pages of my mind."



My next adventure was to join the "running craze" in the 1980's, when our generation seemed to cherish the natural way of "getting high." I felt the adrenaline rush every time I ran in a 10K or in a half-marathon. It all started when my brother-in-law invited me to watch a marathon he was running in San Francisco. I was totally awestruck by the stamina and perseverance of the runners, including an 84-year-old man who crossed the finish line in a time of under four hours. I was hooked. I trained to run next year's marathon (1985), and then I ran marathons in Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. I even ran the Moscow Marathon when I visited my relatives for the first time in 1989. The running craze ended for me when I tore my meniscus cartilage during a Hood-to-Coast relay race in Oregon. After the operation, my doctor told me that if I wanted to walk when I got older, I shouldn't run anymore. So I took up walking and hiking, instead.



I entered a new phase of my exploration of life and all that it had to offer when I started traveling to other countries. I had a taste of the "travel bug" when I was in Vietnam, and now I began to have a desire to visit our neighbors: Canada and the fantastic Banff & Jasper National Parks, and Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula. I had the opportunity to tour Mexico with a group of teachers. We were getting more and

more Spanish-speaking students in our school, and I was chosen to work with those students. The teachers' trip to Mexico was meant to acquaint us with the culture, history, and language of the people who came from there. I climbed the pyramids of the sun and moon at Teotihuacan near Mexico City, and I studied at the Universidad de Las Americas near Puebla. The next year, my wife wanted to see Mexico, also. So we went together to Cancun and drove around the coastal area of the Yucatan Peninsula. We climbed 91 steps up the astronomical and calendar-based Chichen Itza pyramid ("El Castillo"), and we toured Tulum and other Mayan sites. That's when I remember asking a tour guide where the Mayans came from, and he answered, "Why do they have to come from somewhere? They were always here."



My travels continued in the 1990's with a trip to the rain forests and cloud forests of Costa Rica, where I saw the elusive Quetzal bird. When I started teaching 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I expanded my horizons and the students' horizons by including America's national parks and historical sites in the multi-disciplinary curriculum that I created. So I traveled to Yosemite, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Crater Lake, Bryce Canyon, and other national parks, and gathered information during the summer so I could have a storehouse of information and pictures to show the students. Some of the travels were done with my entire family, which included a son and a daughter. There were a lot of beautiful places to explore in the United States, and the students were thrilled when their parents took them to those places during their summer vacations.



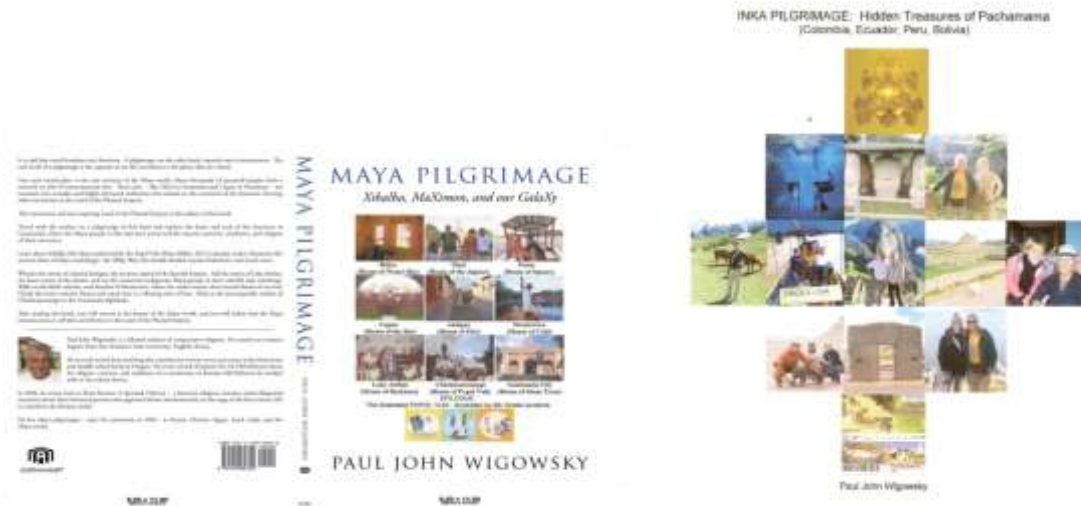
My trips abroad included a trip to Great Britain with my family in 1996. We all wanted to see all the major sites: London, the Windsor Castle, Stonehenge, Salisbury, York, Canterbury, and, of course, Stratford von Avon (Shakespeare's town). The other travels abroad were sometimes by myself, and sometimes with a family member. When the "Iron Curtain" finally fell down, and travel from the Soviet Union was allowed, my uncle came to visit us in Oregon. Then he invited me to visit him in his village in the Ukraine. I made my first visit in 1989, then in 1996 (after the Soviet Union was dissolved) I went with my brother and daughter. Susie was adored by all the relatives in the Ukraine. In one village, they even constructed a make-shift elevated outdoor warm water tank for her so that she could take a shower. My cousin Anatoly, who belonged to the Communist Party, was the only one who had a car, so he drove us around both times I was there. Of course, he made sure to take us to all the relatives' homes in all the villages and small towns. Kiev was the last place on the list.



When my German relatives – from my mother's side – were allowed to return from Kazakstan to Germany after "the Wall" between East and West Germany was removed, my mother's last (dying) wish was to visit them in Germany. I helped her fulfill her life-long dream to see her relatives again, and I traveled with her and my brother to Germany in 1992. I thought that my mother Olga (Korff was her maiden name) would "lay down her bones" in her homeland, but she continued to live for another 12 years after that and finally passed away at the age of 93. When she was in Germany, everybody treated her like the "Matriarch" of the family.



During my last three years teaching -- when I taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade -- I created a multi-disciplinary Ancient Civilizations curriculum that included literature, social studies, and creative writing. It was one of my most challenging curriculums, and my students loved the exposure to ancient civilizations and all the stories and history that came alive in my classroom. However, it was only after I retired in 2003 that I really began to appreciate ancient civilizations first-hand. I traveled to the Maya World of Honduras and Guatemala and saw the ancient ruins of Copan and Tikal. I began to see my travels as pilgrimages to places that were sacred to the ancient people, and I saw that the ancient people were still around, preserving their ancient customs, traditions and the religion of their ancestors. I made a second pilgrimage to South America, where my daughter Susie was my guide and companion. She was fluent in Spanish, and she was seeking a career in that part of the Americas. We traveled together through four countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The highlight of that trip, of course, was our four day excursion to Machu Picchu. I ended up writing books about both pilgrimages: Maya Pilgrimage: Xibalba, MaXimon, and our GalaXY, and Inka Pilgrimage: Hidden Treasures of Pachamama.



My pilgrimages are far from over during my retirement years. I made a pilgrimage to the sacred sites in India in 2009, and I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Israel) in 2011. I'm beginning to see the sunset years of my life as a pilgrim walking on the earth and admiring all the beautiful places that exist in every part of the globe. After all, a pilgrimage is all about experiencing the sacred world of the people and the places that one travels through. And I see the "sacred" in all things! In the words of a song from the 70's: "Everything is Beautiful in its own Way!"

Pilgrimages & Books: <http://wigowsky.com>

## EPILOGUE



As I finish my story, I am reminded that friends may come and go, but family stays throughout our life. Our children carry on where we left off, and generations of other children will follow them. Our circle of friends may change from time to time, as we move from place to place. However, our children stay in our hearts and minds no matter where they live.

I have now entered the Grandparent stage of my life. And what a stage of life it is! I have rediscovered the truly wonderful aspect of play. My grand-daughter loves to play with me whenever I take care of her, or whenever my wife and I take care of her together. She is presently “the Joy of our Life.” My son and daughter-in-law are wonderful parents.

What more can I ask for as I reflect upon the journey that I have been on throughout my life? I feel like I have experienced enough for a lifetime, and lived a life that was full of adventure and travel, love and romance, joy and sorrow, and good times and bad times. Now, I just want to sit back in my retirement chair and do a little more self-reflection and reading, and watch as my lovely grand-daughters run circles around me and perform their play-acting skits and games.



The Wigowsky Family, Christmas 2017 (Salem, Oregon)