



Maria Aloisia Fiala

July 12, 1929 - August 1, 2015

Maria Aloisia Luxbacher Fiala died at her home in Ferndale in the early morning of Saturday, August 1. She was 86 years old. Maria was born on July 12, 1929 in a small village in the Austrian state of Carinthia (Kärnten), a beautiful region where wildflowered fields set with lakes roll and break at the feet of tall jagged mountains. Maria was only eight years old when Adolf Hitler first invaded and then annexed Austria as part of the German Reich. She lived her youth and adolescence under Nazi rule. Since her town was at a strategic crossroads of the rail lines running from Germany into Italy, she experienced regular heavy air bombardment from Allied forces during the war, leaving her with a lifelong fear of fire. After the war, Maria, still in her teens, followed her yearnings for travel and adventure and obtained a permit to travel to England and work in a factory. There she met a Czech refugee, Milan Fiala, who would become her husband. They would be married for 64 years.

In 1952, Maria and Milan moved to Paris where Milan was recruited by the OSS, the predecessor of the CIA, to run counterespionage missions behind the Iron Curtain into occupied Czechoslovakia. On at least one occasion, Maria also carried covert messages to Resistance contacts. She was often alone for long periods, not knowing where her husband was, or whether he would return to her safely, including when she gave birth to their first daughter, Marie, all alone in a small German village where she had been relocated for her safety. A second daughter, Jitka, was born in Paris. In 1954, a long-

awaited visa came through and the family immigrated to the United States, crossing the North Atlantic on a twin-engine propeller plane that stopped for refueling in Ireland and Newfoundland before finally bringing them to Idlewild Airport in New York, where they settled, renting an apartment in Harlem. While Milan worked three jobs, Maria worked as the building superintendent in exchange for a rent reduction. She washed three floors of stairs on hands and knees and stoked the basement furnace several times daily up until the time of delivery of their third daughter, Klara, the first natural-born American citizen in the family.

In 1955, the family bundled three young children and their few possessions into a used Packard and drove to fabled California, driving Route 66 across the Midwest and West, and living out of their car. Once settled in Los Angeles, Milan and Maria bought, improved, and sold a series of small homes, moving up in the world a little each time. Maria scrubbed, painted, and landscaped, as well as taking care of four children, as another daughter, Suzanne, had now joined the family.

In 1964 the family moved again, to the Idaho Panhandle. There Maria added driving a tractor, haying, shoveling snow, chopping firewood, planting and harvesting a yearly garden, and milking a goat to her repertoire of useful skills. Eventually Maria and Milan retired to Whatcom County, and lived in Ferndale since 1979. Here they lived out their retirement, actively enjoying all that the Pacific Northwest had to offer.

Throughout her lifetime, Maria's hands were never idle as she cared for her family. She was a wonderful cook, and the smells of home-baked bread, pastries, roasts and other European delicacies welcomed visitors to her home. She sewed her children's clothes, kept the house spotless, toiled under hot sun in gardens that yielded fresh baby lettuces for the table and blueberries for pies, canned pickles and preserved produce from the garden, and made

jams and jellies all summer, which brightened our winter months. These homemaking activities brought her much joy. In the evenings Maria either read, wrote, taught herself to play piano, or knitted or crocheted. Even a week before her death, her joints swollen with arthritis and hands weakened that she could hardly hold the needle, she was crocheting a baby blanket for a great-grandchild, with the yarn for another one waiting in her knitting basket.

Along with the domestic beauty Maria created, she was highly intelligent and had an active life of the mind. She studied and spoke several languages. She attended classes at North Idaho Junior College, read voraciously, and wrote lyrical poetry. Several of her poems were published. Toward the end of her life, when she could no longer read, she listened to history and travel audiobooks to keep her mind engaged.

While Maria had many interests and talents, she was quiet and unassuming. She loved nature above all, and was closely connected to the earth and the seasons. She was never happier than when digging in her garden. Maria was patient, gentle and loving, and all who were lucky enough to know her felt they were in the presence of someone special.

Maria was preceded in death by her husband Milan in 2013. She is survived by her daughters Marie Fiala Lawson, Jitka Fiala Terry, Klara Fiala Soper, and Suzanne Fiala; her sons-in-law — Kristor Lawson, Ray Terry, and Ken Soper — whom she welcomed into her family as warmly as if they had been hers by birth; her beloved 16 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren, with one more on the way; and two brothers, one sister, and other extended family in Europe and Canada. She leaves an unfillable void in all of our hearts.