

EULOGY

We are here to celebrate the memory of Olga Vesey who died August 20, 1995 two days after her 88th birthday after a long battle with cancer.

To go back to the beginning, she was born to her parents Andrew and Annie Lesik in Winnipeg. The year was 1907. Her parents were born in a small city in Ukraine, Tarascha, which is south of the capital, Kiev. They were of peasant origin—and religious heretics from a small Protestant sect, Stundists. In coming to Canada they sought freedom from Tsarist oppression. Andrew Lesik with his wife's family, the Mowchans (Mowchenkos) had come to Canada after a year in the Caucasus. Annie was 18 and Andrew 25.

Olga was the third child in what became a family of six siblings: John, Eva, Olga, Vera, Nadia and Peter—although Nadia was killed in a tragic accident.

One of my mother's earliest memories was seeing Hailey's Comet at the age of two and a half. She hid under the bed with her older sister Eva. Her parents predicted "there's a war coming."

In the New World there were no Stundist churches at hand to minister to their religious needs. The children went to Baptist, Presbyterian and later on, United Church Sunday Schools. They were popular with the missionaries that served their neighbourhood, and soon learned English.

Their father, Andrew, earned his living as a labourer and devoted his efforts to providing for his family. Olga was a weak, sickly child who nevertheless helped her young mother with many of the household chores. She had a surrogate grandfather, an elderly newspaper seller, Moujow, who was a philosopher, truth seeker, and friend to their family. Olga lived through the great epidemic of 1918 that took friends, and acquaintances.

As poor children living in the North End of Winnipeg, their main delight in summer was attending the camp at Gimli (situated about 50 miles from Winnipeg) run by the Robson Memorial Institute of the United Church. Olga remembered the cream oatmeal porridge with lots of milk. It had cooked all night and was delicious to her thin body. Later on, she was a camp counselor and her sister Eva, a cook's helper at the summer camp.

Andrew and Annie, her parents, were ambitious for their children and decided that each child would receive training for a profession or vocation. After graduation from grade 12 she worked for one year as a student nurse; however, Olga loved teaching and attended Normal School for one year. The first year or two, she taught in a rural area of Manitoba with her sister where the largely Ukrainian population did not entirely appreciate the anglicizing influence of the provincial education system. She wondered why she had come to the district, but after helping a young boy with a cleft palate to receive corrective surgery she knew why.

Her third year of teaching was in an Icelandic district. She returned to the city of Winnipeg to undergo a thyroidectomy operation. She was later hired by the Winnipeg School Board, and noted with pride that she was one of the first Ukrainian-Canadian teachers to work in the Winnipeg school system. She received very high recommendations for her work and was proud of her students for their abilities in music, art and writing. She also found time to attend the University of Manitoba part-time and achieved third year standing. She was also the dutiful daughter who lived at home and helped her parents and siblings. In addition she attended a young adults' club through the United Church that encouraged interest in many activities and topics.

However in her early thirties her health had continued to deteriorate and she wanted to leave to a healthier climate either to get better or die. She traveled to Victoria, B.C and found a physician who diagnosed her health problems and was able to help her. She decided to reside in B.C. and found friends and work. Her teaching assignments took her to Kaslo in 1942 during the Japanese internment, later on to Sidney, Burquitlam, Sechelt and Bella Bella.

During that time she was introduced through an old friend, Katie Dixon, (nee Katerzyna Skibick) to her future husband. Katie Dixon's husband had worked with John Vesey in logging camps. John and Olga were married on June 28, 1944.

John's family was from England and he had lived in Victoria since the age of three. He was a slight man who was skilled in carpentry and electrical work. His antecedents went back to 10u66 and William the Conqueror. The first year they lived with John's mother in Victoria. Their first child, Nina Jennifer, was born in December of 1945. Employment opportunities in Victoria were not great, so the family moved to Vancouver in 1951.

Their second child, David Andrew, was born in 1951. He was a sick child with a hole in his heart, who died after an operation in 1958. Olga grieved the loss of their beautiful, intelligent son for many years. Times were difficult during the early years of their marriage but the strength and steadfastness of Olga Vesey was constant.

By 1961, John was firmly established working as an electrician at Burrard Dry Dock and they were able to purchase a house in North Vancouver in a pleasant, relatively undeveloped area near the Grand Boulevard. Olga and John both loved gardening, and Olga was especially motivated to growing a variety of beautiful flowers. This involved a lot of preparatory work as the ground was exceedingly stony.

Olga was very concerned about the cause of peace, and promoting détente between United States and the former Soviet Union. She joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and often hosted garden parties to raise money for the cause. Many prominent women were involved in WILPF and knew my mother: Mildren Fahrni, Ruth Bullock, Elaine Podivinsky, Dorothy Lynas, and Alice Coppard, to name a few.

A private, unassuming person, Olga read widely and was especially interested in her Slavic heritage. She studied Russian and Ukrainian for many years, and translated dozens

of folk stories into English. One collection of her stories, *The Flying Ship*, published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston of Canada, Limited in 1975 won a graphic arts award and was praised in library journals.

In 1975 when she was in her late sixties, Olga enrolled in Slavonic Studies at U.B.C. and obtained consistently high marks in Ukrainian, Russian, translation, Russian Art and Literature. She continued part-time until 1983, completing fourth year studies. She especially enjoyed her teachers Irina Reed, Irene Rebrin, and Svetlana Wilminck.

She was involved in the activities of seniors in North Vancouver: Silver Harbour Manor, North Vancouver Memorial Senior Citizens Club and the Lynn Valley Seniors. Her beloved older sister, Eva, lived in a suite at the Vesey home, where in later years, Olga and Eva enjoyed having their grandchildren visit. Eva passed away 12 years ago, having been lost to cancer.

Her eighties were far from serene. She was approached by a much younger woman, a scholar called Alexander Kruchka-Glynn, who wanted to republish the books of Olga's sister, the writer Vera Lysenko, who was noted for her pioneering books, *Men in Sheepskin Coats*, and *Yellow Boots*. As a result of this collaboration, *Yellow Boots* was republished in 1992 by NeWest Press. Their friendship was further strengthened by their experiences with breast cancer.

Olga's husband John was suffering from glaucoma and becoming increasingly blind by 1989. Her energy level was flagging, and two years ago she found she had a cancer on her cheek that was close to the nerve centres. In addition, she had a recurrence of breast cancer. She was determined to live to give support to John, and until a month and a half before her death, resisted offers of help with housework.

In her final days in the palliative care unit of Lions Gate Hospital, she talked about having her stories published for children and some staff helped to find an illustrator.

Olga Vesey was the family historian, and assisted members of her husband's family to find out about their heritage. Olga and John had visited England in 1970 and Olga had collected a great deal of information about the Vesey family while she was there. The last year of her life was brightened by her correspondence with Lori Heller, who knew little about her mother, Edith May Vesey who had died of T.B. three years after Lori was born.

In conclusion, mention must be made of her friends. She had many friends over the years: Beatrice Campbell (a childhood teacher), Dorothy Decator, Miss Lipsett, Jennie Vino, Helen Wellis, Mrs. W.H. Whitely, Janet and George Carmichael, Nora Davis, Hazel Owen, Clara Thagaard, Hilda Morgan, Jennie Station, Lil Fischer, Betty Evickson, Elsie Lorch, Betty Marshall, Sophie Moshier, mrs. Tanner, Victoria Symchych, Bill and Marjorie Havey, "Tommy", Irene Rebrin, Irina Reed, Mrs. Mihailov, Grave Vesey, and Margie Cassidy (her father's much younger brother's daughter). No offence is meant if not everyone is mentioned here.

She was old fashioned in being very private, but she was bred to live her life in the best way she knew how, and to treat people well. She was not formally religious in her later years, but was imbued with a sense of duty to do the right thing. She was a person of strong opinions who was against the folly of war, and for women's rights. She was gifted in writing. In the last year or so of her life Olga purchased many records of Ukrainian music that she loved to listen to.

She will be sadly missed by her husband John Henry Vesey, her daughter Nina Westaway, her granddaughter Margaret Olga Westaway, her nieces Josie and Patricia Babiuk, her nephew Tim Babiuk, and her brother Peter Lesik.