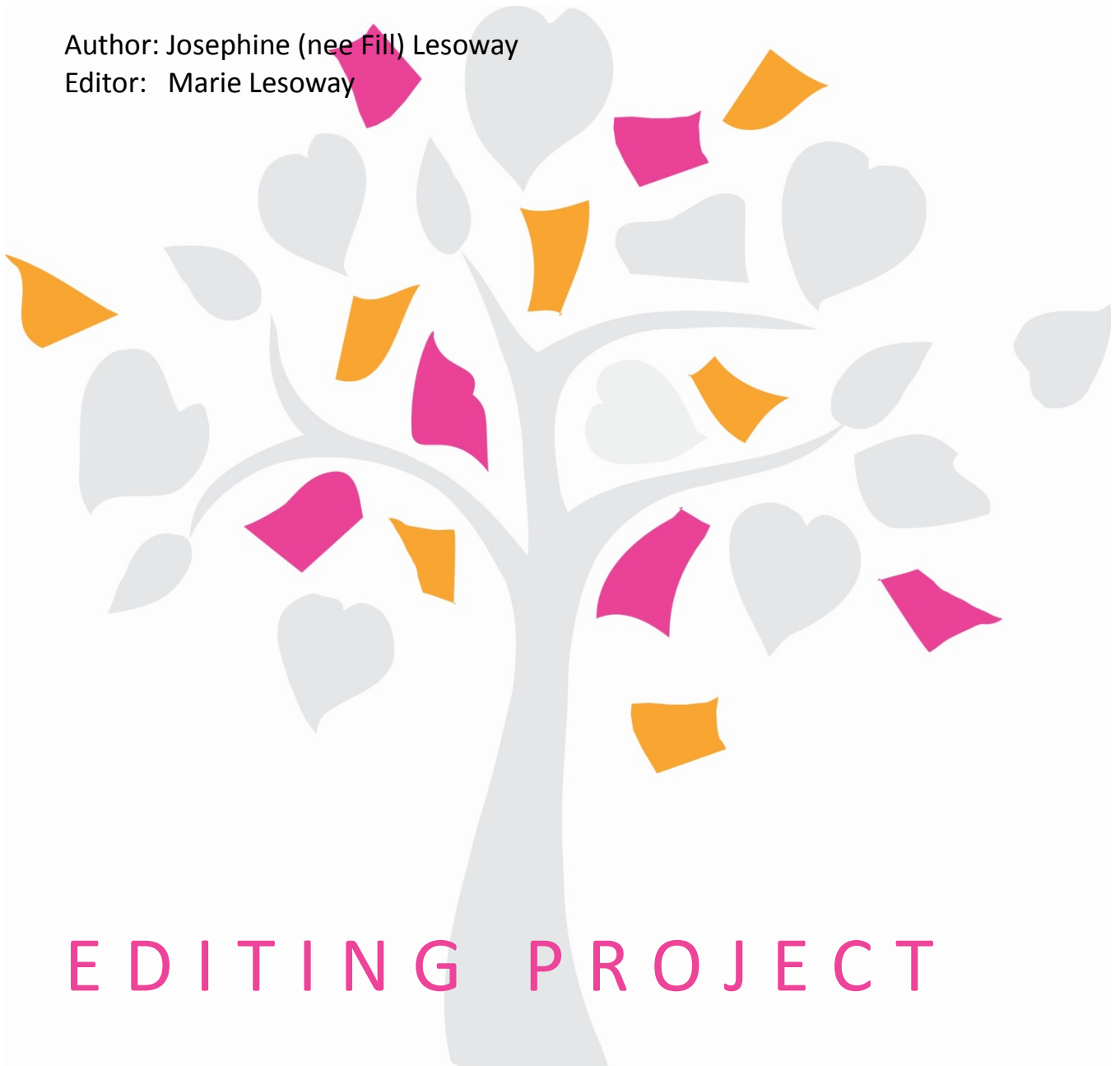


My School Days

Fond recollections

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The following story is a modified excerpt of the original prepared for the *Collectors' Extravaganza* exhibit at the Basilian Fathers Museum in Mundare, Alberta, in 1998.

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Josephine Lesoway (1920–2001) was a born teacher who spent 57 years in the classroom. She taught more than 1,000 pupils over the course of her career.



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Graduation

Hurrah! It was the fall of 1940 and I was now a full-fledged teacher qualified to teach every subject in every grade. I had completed a memorable year at Normal (the teachers' college in Edmonton), and graduated with an interim First Class Elementary and Intermediate Certificate that allowed me to teach Grades 1 to 10.

I completed my student internship under Miss Anne Nay at Vladimir School, and started my teaching career at Page School in September 1940.

I earned my Permanent Teaching Certificate in 1942, after completing the compulsory requirements. These included two years of teaching experience, two satisfactory school inspectors' reports, and a six-week summer school session.

Normal School

There were about 320 students in my Normal School class. Our classes included physical training, math, science, English, art, music, social, psychology, school management, and a St. John's Ambulance course in first aid.

At the beginning of the year, there were nearly twice as many girls as boys in my class, but by Christmas of 1939, half our boys had enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force as Canada joined the Allied efforts in World War II.

In 1945, teacher education in Alberta became the responsibility of the University of Alberta. Before this, teacher training was offered at provincial Normal Schools, the first of which was established in Calgary in 1906. Edmonton's Normal School, which opened in 1920, was located in what is now Corbett Hall on the U of A campus.

A First Class Certificate indicated the completion of Grade 12 and one year of Normal School. A Second Class Certificate indicated Grade 11 and one year of Normal School. A Third Class Provisional Certificate indicated Grade 11 or qualification without Alberta certification.

With my First Class Certificate, I was on top of the world!

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My days at Normal marked the first time I was on my own away from home. It was lonely at first, although I soon made many lifetime friends. I lived in a rented room shared with my classmate, Julia Nay, and had to cook and do laundry for myself.

I also had to learn to get around the city on a colour-coded transit system. My friend Muriel Wakefield and I learned the hard way that, although our “white” bus stopped downtown, we needed to catch it on the opposite side of the street if we wanted to get back home!

City Slickers

Even Muriel and I soon became city slickers. A favourite pastime was walking across the High Level bridge to window shop downtown, and maybe take in a show if we had a nickel to spare.

On Sundays, I would walk to mass at St. Josaphat's Cathedral on 97 Street, and then spend the day with Semen and Anna Pospich's family. Mrs. Pospich and my dad had been schoolmates in Ukraine. She was a warm-hearted, generous soul who would feed

Page School District No. 1626 was established in 1907. The school was located on SE 9-54-18 W4—between Chipman and Hilliard—on land donated by the district's first treasurer, Otto Paege.

Podola School District No. 2065 was established south of Hilliard in 1909. The first school, situated on NW 20-53-17 W4, opened in 1910. I started school at Podola in Grade 1 and completed high school in Mundare.

Mundare School District No. 1603 was established in 1907. When I came to Mundare, I taught in the old, two-storey brick school that was built in 1916.

Ukraina School District No. 1672 was established in 1907. The school was located six miles southwest of Mundare on NE 34-52-17 W4.

me, pamper me, take me along to an afternoon concert, and send me home with fresh milk and eggs from the animals she raised right in her South Edmonton backyard. The city has changed a lot since then!

A Long Career

I taught grades one to nine at Page from 1940 to 1943 and at Ukraina in 1950. From 1943 to 1948, I taught grades six to nine at Podola, where I was the principal and senior-room teacher.

I moved to Mundare in 1950. In 1951 and for the next 34 years, I taught Grade 1, with several Grade 1-and-2

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split classes along the way. My class enrollments averaged 28 students, and my largest was a class of 42.

When I retired in June of 1985, I had been a teacher for 45 years. I taught religion as a volunteer throughout my time at Mundare School and for an additional 12 years after I retired. The full span of my teaching career was 57 years!

One of my duties as a principal and teacher was to ring a handbell for recess and lunch breaks and for the start and dismissal of classes. The bell my colleagues presented me with on my retirement reminds me very much of my days as principal at Podola. It has since become part of a larger bell collection.

A Dream Come True

I knew I wanted to be a teacher from the time I was a very little girl and my father was secretary-treasurer for the Podola and Ukraina school districts. His duties included hiring teachers and preparing their monthly pay. On the last Friday of each month, the four district teachers would walk to our house to pick up their paycheques. My mother always had the floors washed and a cake baked because the teachers were coming!

I knew in my bones that teachers were special people, and I wanted to be just like them. I often used to play teacher with an old Grade 1 reader my teenage aunt Mary gave me before I started school. It was one of my prized possessions.

My folks encouraged me to follow my dreams, even though sending me to school was a hardship for my family. I started high school in Mundare at the end of the Great Depression. Money was scarce, and high school tuition was \$65 per year. Normal School cost \$100 per year, plus room and board.

My parents paid my Normal fees in installments of \$20, selling a purebred cow to make each payment. They continued their support throughout my career.



I always knew I wanted to be a teacher.

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In the 1940s, since teachers were paid for only 10 months a year, my parents would take me back home for the summer. Throughout the winter, they kept my larder stocked with vegetables, meat, milk, and eggs from the farm. Later, they looked after my children so I could work at the job I loved—teaching—and continue my own education.

Teaching in a One-Room School

Page School

My first teaching assignment was at Page School, for a grand salary of \$756 per year to teach grades one to nine. Page was a typical one-room schoolhouse with big windows, a potbelly stove, and a coatroom at the back. I lived in the adjoining teacherage—“the shack,” we called it—together with the young cousins in my charge: Florence Savitsky and Ronnie and Marcia Topilko.



In front of the Page teacher's shack in 1941.

My neighbours at Page were wonderful, even though the closest lived half a mile away. If they were going to town, they would drop by the teacherage to see if I needed anything. They included me in all the community's social events—dances, dinners, bingos, and bazaars. I was an honoured guest at all their family celebrations, and often spent the night at their homes.

Because it was in a prosperous district, Page School had painted grey floors instead of the bare, oiled floorboards more common in country schools. On winter mornings, I would start a fire in the potbelly stove and prepare footrests by warming green

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firewood on the stovetop. Each pair of students would get a heated log to keep their feet warm under their double desks.

After school, I had to hurry to get the next day's work written on the board while it was still daylight. The school had no electricity and no lamp, and midwinter days are very short.

Books and Lessons

In my early years of teaching, I had to invent my own lessons and worksheets. There were no workbooks, few textbooks, and of course, no Internet. Learning material of any kind was so scarce that I purchased my own set of encyclopedia in my first year of teaching. They cost \$100—more than a month's salary—which I had to pay off in installments. The children loved these books and used them in their spare moments throughout the day.

My set of encyclopedia was a welcome supplement to the grey wooden travelling library box that came from the county office every two weeks. The contents of the box dictated my lesson plans. If there were books on science, I taught science that week, because those books might not come our way again for a very long time.

In the days before textbooks and photocopy machines, the blackboard was an indispensable teaching tool. Used in combination with oral work, it was an effective way of accommodating a number of grades at once. If Grade 2s were doing rhyming words on the blackboard, the Grade 1s would learn by listening in and the Grade 3s would be getting a review.

Oral work helped me give students individual attention and identify any problems they might be having. Junior high pupils did oral reports often. The Grade 7s and 8s listened in on the Grade 9 reports presented orally in preparation for the departmental finals.

Activities and Clubs

In addition to the required subjects—reading, spelling, arithmetic, health, science, social studies (which included history and civics), physical training, music, art, and

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penmanship—school included a number of extra-curricular activities. At Podola, we planted and tended our own flower and vegetable gardens. In the fall, we had fresh carrots and turnips to munch on at recess time.

The annual county festival—held at Lamont or Mundare—was always a special occasion. My students presented songs and recitations. In 1953, my Grade 1 pupil Vicky Bartkiw took first prize for exceptional vocal dynamics in her recitation of the poem “This Little Bird.”

This little bird went hop, hop, hop.
I said, “Little bird, stop, STOP, stop!”

In each of the country schools where I taught, my students formed a club that took on the caretaker's contract. The club was responsible for bringing in the water and kindling, washing floors, and doing the yardwork. In the days before lawn mowers, we kept the grass under control by burning it—guarding against the spread of fire by placing wet gunny sacks around the perimeter of the designated burn area. We had a close call with disaster at Page School one time. The school was on a rise, and our fire spread downhill quickly and almost got away into Bob Paege's grain field.



With my student teacher Irene Eleniak (at right) in front of the new Podola School, spring 1944.

The school clubs I organized taught students about good citizenship, cooperation, and the democratic process. We lived like one healthy, happy family and even earned the means to see a bit of the world.

Some of the money the clubs earned as caretakers was used to buy sugar and cocoa. Families would take turns bringing milk, and I would make hot cocoa for our lunches. It was a nutritious and welcome treat for children who often lived several miles from school and had to walk or come on horseback or on a cutter in the bitter cold of winter.

The rest of the money we raised was used for picnics, softball tournaments, wiener roasts at Elk Island, and field trips.

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Every spring, the school club would hire local drivers or take the train to Edmonton, where we attended the session of parliament, toured the legislative buildings, visited the Journal building, the dairy, the meat packing plant, GWG, and other sites. Club members voted on a list of places they wanted to see, and the Grade 9s wrote letters requesting tours as part of their business writing curriculum.

As part of our trip, we rode the city streetcars and had our meals in restaurants. Everyone was allowed to order whatever they wanted from the menu—a real treat! We went to a show in the evening and returned home at midnight or later.

In the 1940s a trip to Edmonton was a brand-new experience for most of my pupils, and all expenses were paid by our club.

Health and Nutrition

A Public Health Unit doctor, nutritionist and nurses visited our school regularly, checking the students' general health, providing nutritional information, and giving inoculations against communicable diseases. Students received cod liver oil pills every day before lunch. To boost their vitamin C intake, they also got a spoonful of rosehip jelly. Everyone helped to gather the rosehips and make the jelly.

Concerts

To raise extra funds for our excursions, the school club held Christmas concerts and fall festivals that included a concert program and dancing to a live orchestra. The children brought cakes and sandwiches from home, and we packed them in paper bags and sold them for a quarter apiece. We also sold raffle tickets at these events.

One of our Christmas concert raffles at Page School fell on December 19—the Feast of St. Nicholas, on the Julian calendar. All three prize winners that day were Nicholases—Nick Stefanyk, Nick Hrynyk, and Nick Tanasichuk. And in 1945, I married a Nicholas (Lesoway) whose birthday was on December 19.

Mother's Day at Podola was marked with a special concert at the school. Each year, the school club would buy materials and I would teach my senior-room students to crochet.

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(The boys too!) We learned using store string, and then used real crochet thread to make sugar-starched baskets filled with crepe paper flowers. At our Mother's Day concerts, the students recited special Ukrainian verses as they presented their flower baskets to their mothers. We also learned Ukrainian hymns and liturgy so we could answer mass, which was celebrated at school two or three times a year.

Accomplishments

Teaching in a one-room school was a real challenge. Although I never had more than seven grades at time, six classes still had to be kept occupied while I taught one. Grade 1 and Grade 9 took most of my time, but I had to make sure the others weren't neglected.

Grades 1 and 9 were my favourite because students' progress could be easily measured in these grades. There were no playschools or kindergartens in those days, so Grade 1s began the year knowing nothing about school: this meant their teacher could take credit for everything they knew by June, and especially, for teaching them to *read*. The Grade 9s wrote provincial finals scored by the Department of Education and averaged for the whole province: the teacher could see exactly where her students ranked.

In my first year of teaching, I had two students write Grade 9 departmentals. One got the first A the district had ever seen; the other, who wrote his exams while sick with the chicken pox, earned a B+. Throughout my teaching career, well over half of my students passed their provincial departmentals with an A standing. None ever failed.

In 1950, my cousin Venita Hewko, who was my Grade 9 student at Ukraina, received one of only five H placements in the entire county, which had about 100 teachers on staff at the time. The extra classes I held on Saturdays certainly helped.

Special Gifts

Over the years, I received many individual and group gifts from my students. The most special gifts were the ones from the heart—like the single, tissue-wrapped stick of gum one of my Mundare Grade 1s gave me in a matchbox.

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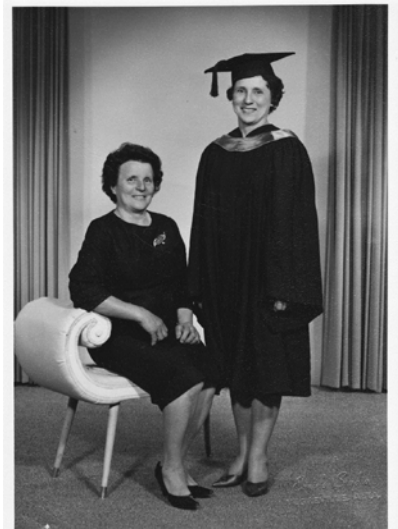
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On Mother's Day in 1950, Ukraina students Jim and Ed Engel brought me a handmade arrangement of variegated-paper flowers, saying, "We made this for you since your baby daughter is still too little to make you a gift."

A gift that I especially treasure is a birch Yule log Max Lucyk made for me when he was in junior high at Podola. Modelled on a sample from the Eaton's catalogue, the log was painstakingly shaped and smoothed, and holes were drilled to hold three red candles.

Another Graduation

In 1965 I received my Bachelor of Education degree. I earned my degree by attending night classes and summer school sessions over a period of six years. By the time I graduated, I had a husband, four children, a full-time job, and volunteer duties for my church and community. I could never have done it without the support of my mother, Pauline (nee Hewko) Fill, who looked after my house and my children so that I could study.



My mother was very proud of me when I earned my BEd.

A Job Well Done

I taught more than 1,110 students over my teaching career. It was truly an enjoyable and rewarding experience—particularly when my students appreciated my efforts and when they grew up to be good citizens and good people. It is deeply satisfying to see my pupils doing well in so many fields—medicine, nursing, law, engineering, agriculture, the priesthood, and of course, teaching. Several of my former students have told me they decided to become teachers when they were in my Grade 1 class, because "we wanted to be just like you, Mrs. Lesoway."

Wherever I go, I meet former students who acknowledge me as a real friend and helper. It's a great pleasure to know that I made a difference in their lives.

And if I had my own life to live over, I would once again choose to be a teacher.