

# A Tribute to My Mama

Josephine (nee Fill) Lesoway

by Marie Lesoway



This eulogy was adapted from the original written by Marie Lesoway and delivered at Josephine's funeral on January 7, 2001.

Most Ukrainian content in the original version has been translated into English or supplemented with translated text. Untranslated words include the following:

- *baba* (grandmother)
- *dido* (grandfather)
- *borshch* (beet soup)
- *holubtsi* (cabbage rolls)

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# A Tribute to My Mama

*Josephine (nee Fill) Lesoway*

The sign of a good heart is a cheerful countenance.

—Sirach 13: 25

Our Mama was truly a woman of good heart. She had her own special blend of optimism, pragmatism, faith, humour, creativity, charm—and always, a smiling face.

Mama approached life with a flair all her own, and she was a trendsetter, of sorts. She was a bride who thought her bridesmaids would look fine in hats, which was a radical idea, in 1945. She was a woman of independent means. And she was one of Mundare's very first babas in running shoes.

Mama was born on August 26, 1920, but unlike most children of her day, she wasn't born at home: Mama arrived at the Lamont Hospital. And unlike most of her friends, who had only one Christian name, Mama was baptized with two names—Josephine Tillie—after both her grandmothers.

## Growing Up

Mama was the first child and only daughter of Andrew and Pauline (nee Hewko) Fill. She grew up on the family farm near Podola, together with her only brother, Donald. The Fill place was about seven miles west of Mundare. Mama's maternal grandparents, Mykhailo and Teklia Hewko, lived close by, as did her great-grandfather, Andrii Bandura. Mama was the oldest grandchild, and her baba's favourite, of course.

In spite of the privileges she had as the eldest grandchild, Mama didn't have things easy when she was a kid. Our Dido Fill was crippled with arthritis when Mama was little, which meant our Baba had to manage the garden and the farm—the crops, the cattle, the pigs, the chickens, the turkeys and everything else. Of course, all able hands were

expected to help, and Mama worked very hard. Although, in those days, she was a *pietsukh*\* who much preferred indoor pleasures to outdoor chores, she milked nine cows every day. Her family was poor as mice, Mama used to say, but she had a happy childhood nonetheless, and remembered growing up in a house full of love.

## School Days

When Mama was seven she started school at Podola, about two-and-a-half miles from the Fill farm. She and her brother walked to school, of course, and Mama remembered what a treat it was when their neighbour, Mrs. Bahry, would meet them at her gate with a warm, baked potato for the road. Mama also remembered long, cold winters—when the only time her feet were warm was when she sat them in the oven.

Mama completed high school at Mundare and went on to earn her teaching certificate at the Edmonton Normal School. Her days at Normal marked the first time she was on her own, away from home. She lived in a shared, rented room, and for the first time, she had to cook and do laundry for herself. She also had to learn to get around the city on a colour-coded transit system. Her friend Muriel Wakefield and she learned the hard way that, although their “white” bus stopped downtown, they needed to catch it on the opposite side of the street if they wanted to get back home!

But even Mama and Muriel soon became city slickers. Mama’s experiences at Normal were ones she treasured all her life. Her Normal School yearbook was one of her prized possessions, and she kept close track of all her classmates over the years.

## A Born Teacher

Mama was a born teacher who knew what she wanted to be when she grew up from the time she was very young. She was asked this very question on her first visit to the dentist—Dr. Schlein—when she was in Grade 2. What did she want to be? “A teacher!” of course. “Well,” asked the doctor, “can you spell cucumber? If you can, you can be a teacher.” Not surprisingly, Mama could.

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\* Someone who liked to stay warm atop a traditional clay oven, or *piets*

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Mama finished Normal School in 1940 and took on her first teaching assignment at Page—a one-room school located between Chipman and Hilliard. She taught 24 students in grades 1 to 9—for a grand salary of \$756 per year. She lived in the adjoining teacherage—“the shack,” they called it—together with the young cousins in her charge—Florence Hewko and Ronnie and Marcia Topilko.

A country school teacher was a teacher, artist, interior decorator, curriculum designer, furnace-stoker, janitor, counsellor, model citizen, mentor, fundraiser and impresario all rolled into one. Mama’s school concerts were gala events featuring songs, recitations and dramatic skits—in English and Ukrainian. They were the highlight of the district’s social calendar.

Mama’s country school students took many prizes at the annual county festivals. They had a school garden, and under Mama’s guidance, they formed a club that took on the caretaking duties for the school. In the process, they learned valuable lessons about good citizenship and cooperation, and with the money they earned, they were able to go on picnics and field trips—including an annual excursion to Edmonton.

For most of Mama’s students, a trip to the big city was a brand new experience. They toured the legislative buildings, took in the sites, rode the streetcars, went to a show and even ate in a restaurant!

Mama stayed on at Page School until 1943. She taught grades six to nine—the senior room—at Podola from 1943 to 1948. She taught grades one to nine at Ukraina School in 1950 and moved to Mundare later that year. In 1951 and for the next 34 years, she taught Grade 1, with several Grade 1-and-2 split classes along the way. She taught religion as a volunteer throughout her time at Mundare School and for an additional twelve years after she retired in 1985. The full span of her teaching career was 57 years—from 1940 to 1997.

## A Collector

When Mama taught at Podola, she was also the school principal. That meant she got to ring the bell for recess and lunch breaks, and for the start and dismissal of classes. The bell her colleagues gave her when she retired was a perfect gift because it reminded

Mama of her days at Podola. Of course, it didn't take long for that bell to form part of a larger bell collection.

Mama was a born collector—a packrat, some would say. She was also a great notetaker and archivist. She kept a daily logbook and scrapbooks and scribblers of quotations, jokes and wise sayings that struck her fancy.

## A Mentor

I found this line by Thomas Fuller in one of Mama's little books: "If you have knowledge, let others light their candles at it."

Mama certainly lived this creed. For her, teaching was the most important job a person could do. She loved her work. She was delighted to know that so many of her students grew up to be good citizens and good people, and that she had had a hand in shaping their lives. She was very proud of the fact that, throughout her career, well over half of her students passed their departmentals with an "A" standing, and none ever failed.

There is no doubt that Mama's teaching made an impression. When she fell sick with cancer, many of her former students took the time to write and let her know what a positive influence she had been. They shared warm memories of their first years at school—of the birthday cakes Mama drew for them with coloured chalk; of their "sunshiny faces" singing "Good Morning to You"; and of first learning the words to "Away in a Manger," which was Mama's Grade 1's signature song at Christmas concerts over the years.

## A Believer in Education

Mama loved being a teacher and she never forgot the great sacrifices her parents had made to give her an education. Country folks had to pay for high school in those days—\$65 per year. And tuition for Normal School was \$100, paid in installments by selling five purebred cows, for \$20 each, over the course of the term.

As graduation time approached, there was still \$20 owing—and Mama knew what getting that money meant for her parents. She didn't dare ring up any debt at the local

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store for fear that there would be no money to pay it, and she wouldn't be allowed to graduate. In her final week at Normal, she lived on coffee—and that's when she learned to drink it black.

When Mama graduated in 1940, her one year of training made her a full-fledged teacher. Later, when the requirements changed, Mama went back to school. She earned her four-year Bachelor of Education degree by taking summer school and night classes over a number of years. She got her BEd in 1965, the same year her oldest daughter, Elizabeth, finished high school.

How did Mama do it? Through sheer grit and determination. She had four kids by then—Elizabeth, Robert, Marie and Bill. She was teaching full-time, and dealing with huge classes and split grades. She and Daddy were building a house. There were three babas to look after. And then there was community work—the UCWL\* had a function each weekend, and it was de rigueur to send a home-baked cake and help with the serving. I guess it's not surprising that, in pictures from that time, Mama always looks tired.

But education, for Mama, was worth any price. That's why she and Daddy worked so hard—so that they could send all their kids to university and provide them with books and music lessons and vacations and learning experiences that would make their lives richer.

Learning, for Mama, was a lifelong endeavour. She was an avid reader, particularly in her retirement, when she finally had time to indulge in such pleasures. For the past few summers, Mama took university-level classes in theology, and although she didn't need the credits, she still did all the readings and assignments. She took every opportunity to learn and very much enjoyed a parliamentary procedures workshop she attended for the UCWL a few months ago. On her trip to the Holy Land last spring, Mama fulfilled a lifelong dream—and of course, she took detailed notes about all she learned.

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\* Ukrainian Catholic Women's League

## An Optimist

One of Mama's journals includes this riddle. "What two days start with 'T'? Today and tomorrow." (It's a line from *Forrest Gump*, I think.) For Mama, tomorrow was always filled with promise. She was always an optimist—and she could find a silver lining in every cloud.

Sometimes she was cheerful to the point of being exasperating. We teased her about her Israel trip—only our Mama could vacation in the middle of a war zone, and not have noticed.

But that's how Mama was. She always made the best of things and saw the best in other people. She gave the best of herself in everything she did, and left the rest to God. That's why Mama could find her way around a strange city with no map. It's why she could always grow something in her garden—even if it didn't rain. And it's why she always won bingo often enough to stay in the game.

## A Nature Lover

This line by Vincent van Gogh is from a little book our cousin Rose sent Mama: "The best way to know God is to love many things."

There were many things my Mama loved, but her family headed the list.

Mama loved nature—especially the mountains—and she knew the names of all the wildflowers and trees and creatures of the province.

Mama loved her robins. The same ones came back, year after her, and they would let her know whenever a starling or a crow dared make a foray into her yard.

Mama loved her garden. She grew her own beets for *borshch*, cabbage for *holubtsi*, onions, garlic and vegetables for canning. And of course, there was the never-ending, ever-bearing raspberry patch—the bane of my childhood—although some of Mama's grandkids actually like picking raspberries. Mama made jams and garlic dills—Baba pickles, we called them. She canned fruit to last her family throughout the winter. And when she retired, she made her own bread.



## A People Person

Mama loved people and had many friends, both young and old. She made friends quickly because she was a good listener who was truly interested in other people's stories and lives.

We often joked that we could drop Mama in the middle of the Sahara or on the Great Wall of China—and even there, she would no doubt run into a friend.

## A Dancer

Our Mama loved to dance—from the time she was a kid until our dad died five years ago. She and our Uncle Donald went to all the dances for miles around—at Podola, of course, and Mundare, Borshchiw, Moscow and Hilliard. Mama remembered nine or ten friends piling into the car to go to a Saturday dance—hanging onto the running boards if they didn't quite fit. And they'd dance until the sun came up.

It was at a dance at Hilliard that Mama met Daddy—her tall, dark and handsome knight. Daddy wasn't much of a dancer then, but he caught on quickly. He had to, if he wanted to get *that* girl. He told me he knew she was the one for him the minute he set eyes on her.

## Marriage and Family

Mama and Daddy danced their way through 50 years of marriage. Their marriage was truly a match made in heaven, and Mama missed Daddy terribly when he died.

Mama married Daddy in the old Sts. Peter and Paul church in Mundare on August 26, 1945—on Mama's birthday. Daddy came from a family of twelve—and Mama finally got the sisters she had always yearned to have—our aunties Jessie, Vernie, Millie, Marie, Susan and Paula.

Mama and Daddy lived with the Lesoways for the first months after their marriage, and then set up house-keeping on their own farm—on the quarter-section adjoining Mama's home place. In 1950, they left the farm and moved in with Mama's parents in Mundare

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town. Life was cozy in a one-bedroom house—with four adults and two kids—but there was always room for friends and family to drop by.

When Mama and Daddy built their own house, that just meant they could entertain more people at once. When we were kids, it was nothing for Mama to throw a sit-down dinner for 30 or 60 or even 100 people. Why, it happened all the time—big birthday parties for one or another of our babas, memorial services for our didos, holidays, feast day celebrations, going away parties and more.

With all that entertaining, Mama needed to have two freezers, and they were always full—right up to the time when she went into the hospital. Mama claimed to have cut back on canning when we kids left home, but she needed both freezers to hold all the baking she did—even though she gave it away almost as fast as it was baked. You see, Mama didn't just go on baking sprees. She held regular baking marathons—usually when there was a grandkid or two around to help, and of course, to take home a share of the spoils.

Here's what Mama wrote in her daybook on Thursday, August 24. "Damon and I baked 4 zucchini chocolate loaves, a batch of cornflake cookies, a batch of Dad's cookies, 2 batches of rice crispies, and 7 batches of ginger snaps."

Her entry for Tuesday, August 22 reads: "Picked raspberries. Dilled cucumbers, 4 jars. Made juice. (The number of jars wasn't specified, but you can bet it was at least a boilerful.) Weeded garden. Fed patients at hospital. Went to bingo at Mundare. Won last blackout. \$18."

All in a day's work, for Mama!

## Community Work

This line by an unknown author was underlined in one of Mama's quotation calendars: "Service is the rent we pay for our room on earth."

One of the ways Mama served was to volunteer at the Mundare Hospital. I had the privilege of going with her a few months ago, when she was already sick herself. It was wonderful to see the faces of all her friends light up when Mama walked into the room.

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She was their sweetheart, their angel, a bit of sunshine in their lives. I guess that's not surprising—because Mama really was a sunny person. Even in the last days, when she was very sick and in a great deal of pain, she was always nice. There was never a cranky word, and never a complaint.

Mama worked hard to make her community a better place. She was active in the Ukrainian Catholic Women's League, and served as secretary and treasurer for the Apostleship of Prayer. She was a founding member of the Mundare Library Committee and served for several terms.

Mama was fond of special projects, and the Mundare Museum had a special place in her heart. With her collector's nature, it was a natural fit. Mama thoroughly enjoyed recording her memoirs and collecting family histories for the museum's programs. She loved old photos and old stories and she was honoured to help Dagmar Rais, the museum curator, identify Mundare oldtimers in the museum's collections of historic photographs.

It was a blessing that Dagmar had this work for her to do. Mama was too sick for cookie marathons by then, but sitting around wasting time wasn't something she had ever mastered. It eased her pain to know that she could still accomplish something useful and be of help to someone who needed it.

## Quilting and Crafts

Mama was very good at all kinds of crafts—knitting, embroidery, tatting, smocking and crocheting. She took up quilting when she retired.

One of the projects Mama started just a month or so before she died was to make baby quilts for her oldest grandchildren. She knew she wouldn't live to meet the children her grands will have some day, but she was sure those children would grow better wrapped in the warmth of a pra-baba's love.

As Mama's cancer progressed, it got harder and harder for her to continue. All available hands were recruited to do the stitching—to Mama's specifications of course. We even

let Elizabeth have a needle. And we discovered that our Nicholas has inherited Mama's true eye for design.

By the time the final quilt was done, Mama was very ill. But she struggled out of bed to design the centre motif.

## Life Lessons

In closing, I leave you with some of Mama's own words of wisdom. Here's what she wrote in a book of recollections our cousins Bill and Betty-Lou gave her for her 80th birthday. It's from a page that says: "Recall some of the most important lessons you have learned in life."

Mama's Number 1 lesson is this: "To have a smiling face—it attracts people to you." It was a lesson Mama lived every day, and those of you who knew our Baba Fill will recognize the source of this good advice.

Mama was ever the teacher and ever a shining example of how to live the good life. She leaves us with many gifts and many lessons to remember.

Here is Mama's prescription for a happy life. She shared this with her guests at her 50th anniversary party:

Don't fret about yesterday. It's gone, never to return.  
Keep only pleasant memories.  
Don't worry about tomorrow. What it holds is God's secret.  
Be the best you can be.  
Live in peace and love, and try each day to do something for others.

Mama was very proud to share a birthday—August 26—with Mother Teresa, who once wrote: "The fruit of love is service. The fruit of service is peace. And peace begins with a smile."

We'll miss Mama's wise lessons. And we'll miss her warm smile. *Vichnaia pam'iat'*. May you be remembered forever.