

Eulogy for Edith Renate Preiksaitis

On behalf of our family, we would like to thank you for coming today to celebrate the life of Edith Preiksaitis who we have called “oma” or grandmother over the past four decades.

Celebrating life events has always been important to our family- birthdays, christenings, confirmations, weddings, anniversaries and graduations. These events often lasted several days with the house full of people, extravagant meals for 20 or more, friends and extended family from afar, staying in our home as overnight guests. Oma was always the organizer and “project” manager of these events and has never hesitated to prolong a good party. Her 97th birthday celebration last October lasted almost a month with family visiting to introduce a new great-grandchild, a restaurant luncheon out, two more formal “family birthday” parties and celebration events at her assisted living facility. True to form, she also organized and directed this current remembrance event, leaving clothes to be worn, cleaned, ironed and covered in plastic and a folder of instructions for the event, including hymns to be sung, instructions for the memorial card and the colour of the flowers to choose along with the names and addresses of people to be contacted. She even drafted her own obituary with date of death left blank to be filled in. So typical that she made things easier for all of us until the very end. And we are grateful. Today we are sure that she would want us not to be sad but rather to celebrate her long and well-lived life.

My name is Rita, the youngest daughter and I have been asked by the family to share our memories about the mother and grandmother we loved dearly and do our best to pay tribute to an amazing lady, remember her life and the lessons she taught us.

Lesson 1: On Marriage

Family always comes first. Our mother was an unwavering example of honoring marriage vows. My mother met my father after the war in a refugee camp in Lubeck, Germany when he came to fix a light-fixture in the army barracks in which her family was living. She tells the story of

originally calling him the “dumb Russian” as he was quite boisterous and may have had a drink or two before the event but love prevailed and they were married in 1948. Our parents had been married for 64 years when he died 2012. They were partners in everything that they did and in terms of gender equity their relationship was very modern – out of keeping with the times. They shared housework-cooking, laundry ironing and cleaning and childrearing as they often worked shifts and were away from the house at different times. They often seemed like two parts of a whole, supporting each other and compensating for each other’s frailties as they got older. Our mother set a very high bar for devotion until death do us part my father’s health declined and he had to enter a nursing home after many years of our mother selflessly caring for him at home. For 14 months she made daily (sometimes twice a day) bus trips to see him in the nursing home. Rain, snow, bitter cold or extreme heat did not interfere with this daily ritual. She was a strong advocate ensuring he had exceptional care and would sit with him for hours sharing news with him about what was going on in the world and with our family.

Lesson 2: On Family

Although they anxiously waited for a long time, lagging far behind their peers, our parents were so excited to become grandparents. For Oma it ushered in a new era of knitting intricate sweaters for all the grandchildren and making beautiful personalized Christmas stockings. Oma never forgot a birthday. She loved spending time and spoiling her grandchildren, tolerating behaviour that her own children would never have gotten away with. When she was in her 70’s she went on a tobogganing excursion with them and remember her flying high off the toboggan as she hit a bump. We winced since she already had osteoporosis at this time but she simply got up and went up the hill again. In her later years, oma’s default Christmas gift was socks. She took great care in picking them out to match everyone’s personality. As Harold mentioned yesterday, we will now be in a new era where we have to buy our own socks. We are lucky in our family to have a new generation of great-grandchildren and oma was so excited to meet the newest members Alex and Maeve in person in the last year of her life.

Lesson 3: On Gender Equality

Our mother was a woman ahead of her time. Although we grew up in a working-class neighbourhood, most women in the 1950s and 1960s were stay at home traditional mothers. Our mother always worked full-time when we were growing up as two salaries were required to support the family particularly as our father was sometimes laid off or on strike. My parents worked hard and sacrificed much to give us a better life. She was very upset when a neighbour once told her that her children would never amount to anything because she worked outside the home instead of staying home with us. Many years later when we were in highschool and doing well academically and taking on leadership positions at school, the administration of the school invited my parents to come in and give a talk about their good parenting skills. They declined because of their English skills but my mother kept that letter, pasting it in the scrapbook where she stored every newspaper clipping about her children, no doubt feeling rather vindicated about her decision to work.

Lesson 4: On Education

Our mother had little formal education, having only completed the equivalent of grade 8. Getting a good education was very important in our family, seen as a key to upward social mobility. Our mother and father were so proud of the accomplishments of their children and grandchildren.

Self-education and self-improvement were also really important to my mother personally. My mother learned to read and write Lithuanian in school and although she could speak German, she couldn't read or write it until she went to night school while she was a teenage kindergarten assistant as a refugee in Germany. She learned to speak and read English only after coming to Canada. She did this by borrowing English fiction books from her work colleagues and looking up every word she didn't know in a German- English dictionary. Over time, she became an avid English reader, particularly in her retirement when she read many books in all three languages particularly fiction and autobiographies. My mother was also a beautiful letter writer and she kept up an extensive correspondence with relatives in Europe; we mailed her last letter written

in German just 2 weeks ago. She was a dedicated consumer of magazines in multiple languages, most recently, Hello Canada. She was particularly interested in the stories of the royal families of Europe on which my mother was a subject expert and she had a special fondness for Queen Elizabeth II who was born in the same year she was. She continued to watch the news and read newspapers until the very end and of course she had opinions – most recently that Joe Biden was too old to run for president and that she really liked Justin Trudeau’s most- recently seen socks.

Lesson 5: On Work Ethic

After coming to Canada, my mother initially worked as a farmworker and then as a housecleaner. A doctor who got to know my parents, got my mother a job as a housekeeper at the local hospital so she would have benefits that included health insurance when my father lost his. My mother is known for extraordinarily high standards for housecleaning and attention to detail. To the amusement of our friends, we always went on a cleaning frenzy when our mom came to visit – dusting baseboards, ledges above doorways and light fixtures but somehow, she always seemed to find the spots we missed. As my brother commented...”she may not be able to hear but she can spot lint on the carpet at 20 feet”. These skills, however, were incredibly useful at work where she rose in the ranks relatively quickly, initially promoted to cleaning only the operating rooms and eventually to becoming an OR technician responsible for cleaning and sterilizing operating instruments and preparing trays for specific types of surgeries. Two of us had our entire undergraduate university tuition covered by union scholarships that were the result of my mother’s work.

Although my mother had a full-time job, she also excelled at what were considered more traditional female activities. She continuously clipped recipes from newspapers and magazines and was an adventurous cook and baker. She knitted constantly using patterns that were often complex. She once went through a Princess Dinah phase and knitted many of the sweaters Dinah was seen wearing in magazines during her engagement to Prince Charles. We still have and cherish many of those pieces. She could mend almost anything meticulously, probably as a

result of growing up with so little and having to make things last. None of her children really acquired those skills because she was always available to do it (we saved it up for her visits) and she could do it so much better than we could ever hope to.

In her 80s and early 90s, about twice a week during gardening season oma would take a bus to Jutta's to deadhead and weed her very large garden. Her gardening outfit was sparkly hand-me-down jeans from her granddaughter and a old sweatshirt of her grandson's. She would often work for 3-4 hours without a break prompting concerned neighbours to bring her drinks and snacks. She was Jutta's secret weapon for garden maintenance. Her grandson once asked- "does oma ever sit down, or , you know just relax. The answer was no, or at least only rarely.

When our mother was in her 50s she decided that she had to learn to drive. We were a one-car family and our mother had been walking to and from work (about 2 miles in each direction) for years but when our father had a heart-attack and couldn't drive our mother stepped up to the plate and asked a friend to teach her. Just before she was to take her driver's test Jutta happened to be home and she wanted to demonstrate her new driving skills. She put the car in reverse and promptly drove into the neighbour's hedge. Although this was somewhat ominous, she persisted, got her license and drove around that small town for years.

When my mother was in her early 90's she often spent a ladies week in Canmore with Jutta. She loved being there, and hiked Grassi Lake and Johnson's Canyon without even a hiking stick. One year, when we were nearing the steeper part of the Grassi Lake hike, a middle-aged hiker on the trail whose wife was lagging far behind, asked how old oma was – she said 91. He turned around to his wife and said – you see how it's done!

Lesson 6: On fashion and birds

Anyone who has seen my mother's closet knows that she loves clothes and fashion. She believed in buying quality; we are sure there were some price tags removed before showing them to our father. She kept clothes for decades and she maintained them meticulously-

washes, pressed, covered in plastic as needed; shoes always cleaned and polished. She had a classic style always coordinated with matching earrings and necklace.

My mother also loved birds. She loved watching them in the wild and her house had many bird pictures, ornaments and figurines. Getting oma a “bird” was the default gift to her. Many years ago a close friend gave oma a bird clock which chimed with a different bird sound every hour. She loved it but probably didn’t hear it or could just ignore it. It drove everyone else crazy. It hung in a guest room in the Welland house and guests were known to remove it because of it’s round the clock chiming and leave it in the basement until they left.

Lesson7: On Facing Life’s Challenges

Our mother was firm believer that when obstacles arise in life, face them with courage and move on.

Our mother was just a teenager when the second world war irrevocably changed her life. She was born and grew up in a rural community in a German-speaking area of Lithuania that faced invasion by Russian forces during the war. She told stories about hiding in the woods from Russian soldiers and being so extensively bitten by mosquitos she needed medical attention. She recounted leaving almost everything behind and grabbing a bucket of cherries by the door for food as they went to catch a train as refugees. When my mother saw images of the refugees in train stations when the recent war in Ukraine began it evoked powerful memories for her.

Resources were often limited in those early years in Canada and our mother who our father called his finance minister knew how to make a dollar stretch. Somehow, however she managed to find a way to pay for new clothes and presents for us at Christmas and Easter, piano and ballet lessons, braces for our teeth, school trips and university expenses. Our mother took our brothers Armin and Harold to Blake’s Men’s wear in Welland for new suits when they needed them and they can always remember her asking – you are going to throw in a free shirt and tie aren’t you?

Our mother was almost 80 she phoned us one day to tell us they were selling their house in Ontario and moving to Edmonton to be closer to family. We were surprised that they would leave Ontario where they had lived for over 50 years and where they had a wide circle of friends and we thought the transition would be difficult but then we were reminded that they had come to Canada, a country they knew little about leaving everything behind with all their worldly possessions in a few suitcases. It was of course our mother who organized the sale of house, the yard sales and the move to Edmonton. I think our mother saw it as a grand opportunity to upgrade her furnishings, decorate a new space and be closer to grandchildren.

When my mother developed back problems in her mid 90's, had to have surgery resulting in a slow recovery she moved into an assisted living facility at Canterbury and adapted yet again -she became an exercise class enthusiast and her latent love of gambling came to the fore as she enjoyed betting on the horse and duck races.

Lesson 8: Friends last a lifetime

Our parent's lives were enriched by the support of a wide circle of friends. Our mother was the social outreach worker of our family. Shortly after arriving in Quebec my parents got to know four immigrant families of German extraction. We grew up calling these family friends our aunts and uncles. These families supported each other through a difficult transition and remained friends over 70 years with frequent phone calls, visits and letters. My mother sent a note to the only other surviving member of this group only a few months ago. My parents developed new networks with every move, within the German and Lithuanian communities and the local Lutheran church. More recently they made new friends at the Renaissance condominiums and Hosanna Lutheran Church. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the friends here today who have supported my parents and more recently my mother over all these years.

Our mother believed strongly in quality rather than quantity of life. We were blessed to have her with us so long and have so many happy memories to cherish. We hope that she is resting in peace surrounded by the love of family and friends.