

# Leopoldina Dobrzensky remembered as steward of land and local history

SUE TIFFIN

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

A decade or so ago, Leopoldina Dobrzensky told Julia Robertson that she had found a timber signed by Robertson's grandmother in her farmhouse. The farmhouse Dobrzensky lived in had belonged to the Ferguson family, and there, faintly on the timber was written, "Aggie Ferguson, Haliburton." Ferguson had died in 1975 in her 80s. When the house was remodelled more recently, Dobrzensky ensured the history in that timber was preserved.

"She knew that the farm belonged to my grandparents," said Robertson. "That piece of timber was coming out, and she gave it to me. She made sure that the people who were renovating the house, that that came back to us. It's even got the old nails in it. It's really something."

The story is one that those who have shared even a single conversation with Dobrzensky will immediately recognize as reflecting her passion for making connections, sharing knowledge and safeguarding treasured pieces of local heritage.

On March 18, Leopoldina Dobrzensky-Dobrzencicz, a steward of the land and of this community's history, died at the age of 94.

Born in 1926 to the Lobkowicz family, one of Europe's oldest, most illustrious families in what was then Czechoslovakia, Dobrzensky's family, raised alongside three sisters by her mother after her father's passing, survived the brutality of the German occupation of their country during the Second World War, only to then face the Soviet Union and a country under Communist rule. Dobrzensky, by that time married to her husband Jenda, with two kids, and five months pregnant, fled the country hidden with her family in a box that had been slashed with an ax in several places to create breathing holes and covered with gravel, as refugees with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

"Like sardines, Jenda, the two children and I crouched inside, my big tummy was directly on the floor," wrote Dobrzensky in her memoir. "We covered the sleeping children's mouths with our hands, hoping that they would not start to cry."

It was raining heavily when the truck started on its journey over the rough roads, Dobrzensky wrote.

"The border guards were likely reluctant to venture outside and stayed in the office, however, at one point we heard someone shouting, 'stop!'," read the memoirs. "To which our driver replied, 'C'mon, Tony, you know that all I carry is gravel, and this is my last trip.' Petrified, we held our breath. Luckily the children were still asleep and the truck drove on. I cannot remember ever having prayed so hard."

Eventually the family got to a point where they had to walk to the rest of the way to the Austrian border, with Dobrzensky saying she tried to remain calm as they moved, to help keep her unborn child safe.

"Suddenly the sky cleared and the sun came out," she said. "On a summer evening its last rays fell on a group of grazing deer. It was such a peaceful sight that my shallow breathing stopped, and I was no longer afraid."

The family lived in a refugee camp that summer, and



Leopoldina Dobrzensky pictured at the opening ceremony of the Barnum Creek Nature Reserve last October. /DARREN LUM Staff

then with family in Normandy before applying for refugee status in a few different places – the response from Canada came first, and so they immigrated here.

"For her to be so deeply rooted to Czechoslovakia's past, to her family life, to her home, to all of that," said Martha Perkins, former editor of the *Haliburton Echo* and friend of the Dobrzensky family. "To pack up everything, tied in a wagon, to escape the Soviets, come to Canada - with nothing. And what she was able to do, her way of dealing with it was to say, the past is past. I can't remove it from me, but I cannot live in the past. This is the life that I have today. My family is safe, my family is alive, that's what matters, and so we are going to make the best of Canada."

And so, Dobrzensky, Jenda and their three children – two more children would be born in Canada - settled into a new life in the Toronto area in 1951.

"One of the things that I deeply admired about her was the way she was able to make the transition," said Perkins, who said that Dobrzensky believed her family's background meant she always had a strong tie to her family's past, a sense of history and to be a steward of that from one generation to the next.

"So she was imbued by a sense of family and what it meant," said Perkins. "But not in an ostentatious way ... it was the sense of responsibility to the past."

Jenda and Leopoldina – or John and Leo as they were referred to locally - visited friends in Haliburton, and Jenda – who didn't like the city – suggested they stay.

"My husband liked it so much, he said, 'oh my God, it's just like at home,'" said Dobrzensky in a video made by Sticks and Stones Productions for the Haliburton Highlands Land Trust.

The pair, along with their youngest children, visited an available home – the farmhouse in which Robertson's grandmother signed the timber - that at that point required a lot of work.

"Well, that house was where the porcupines lived, and where the snowmobilers would go through the doors, you know, the front and back doors because the doors were no longer there," said Dobrzensky in the video. "We could see it was a solid place. The children begged us to get it."

And so in January 1974, the Dobrzenskys became Haliburton County residents for what she said were the "10 happiest years of our married life," and fell in love with the land, which was so familiar to what they remembered of the Czechoslovakian Highlands.

"The Highlands are very similar, everywhere," Dobrzensky said. "It's usually land that is not very good, for farming anyway, a lot of rocks and so on. You have to earn a living, and it's hard earning a living so the people are very similar, I would say."

Though Dobrzensky embraced life here, appreciating the area through the seasons and the wildlife, it was the people who she quickly became most interested in, won-

dering about the history of farmlands and early settlers.

"Leo had much admiration and respect for the pioneer families of Haliburton and their ability to overcome hardships and survive in spite of the harsh environment they faced," said Steve Hill, curator at the Haliburton Highlands Museum. "She felt that their struggles and successes should be written down, praised, and never forgotten."

Neighbours told her there was no recorded history here, and that she'd have to do some research if she wanted to know more about it. When she called the museum and found at that time there was nothing on file for the Dugan family ["Mr. Dugan was on council for 23 years!" she responded], she turned her frustration to action.

"That got me so mad, that I said, 'OK, I'm going to do it,'" she said.

Dobrzensky began doing the work, becoming a regular at the registry office and then making connections between land, tax and death records in order to document history.

The result of those efforts was published in 1986, as the book *Fragments of a dream: Pioneering in Dysart Township and Haliburton Village*.

"She showed her connection with the past by being curious," said Perkins. "Well, what's the history here? What's the history of my property? And then going and writing *Fragments of a dream* because of just that curiosity and wanting to know about the past."

At the book signing, Dobrzensky said she was near tears when it appeared nobody had come, when suddenly the door opened and a group of about 30 people – descendants of the pioneering families - arrived to celebrate the book.

"And there was our neighbour, Mr. Roberts, who came up to me and said, 'thank you, you have given us back pride in our ancestry,'" said Dobrzensky. "And when he said that, that was wonderful."

"What she did in part is she gave legitimacy to Haliburton's history," said Perkins. "On one hand, you can say Haliburton's history is not illustrious, it was log cabins and trying to eke out a living. But she knew there was history in that. She knew that they were people, real people, who established Haliburton and made a life there. Her point was, we have to realize that life can be small and be big. Life can be this tiny village, but there's importance in its history, and let's not just say that because it's not as long, it's more recent, it is about people struggling to survive in very tough conditions ... she gave legitimacy to that."

Dobrzensky published a second book, *They worked and prayed together: Italians in Haliburton County*, in 1988, about the Italian immigrants who came to the area.

"They were like her," said Robertson. "They came from their countries, with nothing, to live here."

The books were well-received and are still used as reference materials today.

"It always flattered her that various local history authors would confer with her for advice and insight before embarking on their own works, and she was always happy to help encourage them," said Hill.

Though recording history was important to Dobrzensky, so too was advocacy to make the present and future better.

"She didn't just live in the past," said Robertson, who sits on the executive of the Haliburton County Historical Society. "She lived in the future. She looked and saw what we need to progress here. She didn't just live in the past - she saw things that needed to be done for the future."

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# Community mourns loss of a true 'life force' and 'fountain of information'

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Paul and Sharon Morissette were long-time friends of Leo through their shared interest in history and as part of the congregation of St. Anthony of Padua Mission Church. Like many others, they described her as being gracious, distinguished but humble, and caring.

"She was interested in everything," said Paul. "Virtually everything. There wasn't anything she wasn't interested in ... She would talk about anything. Local events, she loved local history and was deeply immersed in everything that happened in Haliburton County and the village of Dysart, because she'd done the history, but she knew all the players ... What she would do is take that to the provincial level, the federal level, and then the international level. She always saw the big picture. So she was highly, highly intelligent."

"She said her family always answered her questions because it was never the first answer that satisfied her," said Sharon. "She always came back, she said they were always patient. Obviously she had a very bright mind, and they always fed that mind."

Dobrzensky spoke at least six languages, well.

"She was really intelligent, but that really went with being inquisitive," said Paul. "She would challenge. She would challenge authority and ask why. Why is this, why is that, what can be done about it?"

Dobrzensky learned how to use technology to keep herself connected even into her 90s, and used it to e-mail politicians and leaders at every level.

"Her approach was so far ahead of its time in terms of voicing her strong opinion and viewpoints," said Paul. "Her letters would be 1,000, 2,000 words in length.

She was just that kind of person."

Sharon said Dobrzensky was a devout Catholic, a member of the Catholic Women's League of Canada since 1952, and cared immensely for those in challenging situations, as well as those who would cross her path.

"She said prayers for many, many people every night," said Sharon. "And her conversations were always about you, not about her ... She was always, always giving back."

But Dobrzensky's life itself was filled with, as noted in her obituary, "tremendous upheaval." Besides the struggle of her early days, the loss of her beloved father at a young age, and life during wartime, she experienced the loss of her husband as well as two children.

"So a big part of her life story is a lot of tragedy," said Paul.

"But every adversity she had made her stronger," added Sharon.

"Leo's life wasn't always easy and she suffered many hardships, from the death of a son and daughter to the upheaval of fleeing Czechoslovakia after the war when she and her young family came to Canada as refugees," said Sheila Ziman, a friend who described Dobrzensky as a role model. "But Leo was resilient and had a dignity and grace that I will always remember. At 94, she still lived in her own home and never left it without being impeccably dressed, greeting the world with curiosity, compassion and a keen intelligence."

Outgoing, likeable, and someone who saw the good in everyone around her made Dobrzensky a beloved part of the community, known for that impeccable and iconic sense of style – even in her own living room – and also her love of the sweets table at community functions.

"It is a great loss for the community that

she adopted, and the community adopted her as well," said Paul. "Everybody knows Leo in some way. She went to the functions. She was involved."

Dobrzensky was a founding member of Haliburton County Historical Society, a friendly visitor at Extencicare – she visited with Ethel Curry for many years – a palliative care helper, and spoke at high school classes and for local groups.

She appreciated art, loved to draw, and once joked she was a "mediocre student" in a painting and picture framing course at the then-Haliburton School of the Arts summer school.

"She was like a renaissance woman in the sense of her love of nature and art and music and history and politics," said Paul. "A life force. And the world's better off with her in it and the impact she had."

"Every day was not wasted with her," said Sharon. "And that was her message. Don't waste your life. Make it count for some reason, every day."

In 2018, Dobrzensky and her daughter Margaret donated a 500-acre property and 100-acre conservation easement to the Haliburton Highlands Land Trust, naming it Barnum Creek Nature Reserve for a key feature of the land.

"We came to Canada as refugees in 1951 and this country has given us so much," said Dobrzensky in the land trust video. "We were able to raise five children here, so I think it's only natural that you would want to give something back to the community."

"During the opening ceremonies on October 15, 2020, Leo extolled people to come out and walk the property to get a dose of Vitamin N as scientists had recently discovered this important new vitamin and there was no better place to get a dose of Vitamin Nature than Barnum Creek Nature Reserve," said Ziman,

who is a HHLT board member. The property has proven to be instantly popular, embraced and appreciated greatly by the community.

Dobrzensky said it was her great hope that the people in Haliburton in the future will be able to enjoy the space, finding peace in nature when they need it and can't find it elsewhere.

"The last line in my book is, people come and go but the land is forever," she said in the land trust video.

As the end of her life drew near, Dobrzensky said she expected she wouldn't live to see the end of the year.

"Her whole sense of being was, this is just part of life," said Paul. "Not sad, it was just part of life. We all did expect her to live forever, because she was so involved in everything right up until the end, which is fantastic."

Her loss has been felt by individuals and groups within the community, and also by friends and family throughout the world, all who have learned much from Dobrzensky and her gentle, inquisitive conversations in which she often characteristically asked the engaged partner, "Did you know...?" before sharing an insightful piece of wisdom or historical lore that she had come across in her passion for knowledge and understanding.

"We have nobody now to call," said Robertson, of the loss to the local Historical Society and the community as a whole. "She was a fountain of information. If you needed to know something, you could call Leo, and if she didn't know it, she'd find out and tell you how to get it. We've just lost a source of information."

The Haliburton Highlands Land Trust has suggested that those wishing to honour Leopoldina Dobrzensky's memory can do so "by getting outside and soaking in the beauty of nature."

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