

Juliana Ossorguine Schmemmann, 1923–2017

Anya Schmemmann

My grandmother, Juliana Schmemmann, was both larger than life and full of life. It is hard to imagine her gone, since she was such a force of nature, a true matriarch of our large extended family, and a lifelong educator who touched so many with her wisdom and love.

Together with my grandfather, Father Alexander Schmemmann, who died in 1983, Juliana devoted her life to the formation of the Orthodox Church in America, an endeavor that embodied not only their faith but also their abiding love for America, the land to which they came as a young couple with three children. Juliana was a firm pillar of our faith community and a mentor and inspiration to many at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and beyond.

Juliana was born to a noble Russian family whose life, in Russia and in emigration, revolved around the Church. Her grandfather was the priest in their chapel in Clamart, France, her father the choir director, and her extended family the choir and parishioners.

Her deep faith was central to the way she lived her life, full of joy, gratitude, and verve. "Joy" was her mantra and a recurring theme in her two books and in the many talks she gave to church groups. As an accomplished career woman, she was intensely interested in the challenge of living as a devout Orthodox Christian in the modern

world, something she acknowledged was both a challenge and a blessing.

In an era when many women struggled to find balance between work and home, she truly "had it all," as a loving mother and grandmother, a devoted wife and member of the Church, and a successful educator and headmistress who inspired generations of students. It is remarkable to think how she arrived in America as a young woman with small children and hardly a word of English, proceeded to work at some of the most prestigious schools in New York, and earned accolades and awards as her career progressed.

I was fortunate to live with my grandmother for four years while attending high school in New York City. Our life was very cozy and full of little rituals. At home, after a long day at school, she would watch her favorite TV shows and catch up on correspondence. People were often surprised to learn that she loved to watch any and all sports, especially football, and also devoured romance and mystery novels. I believe that the combination of her European intellectualism and her embrace of American culture was part of what made her so approachable to so many.

Our daily commute from Westchester to Manhattan afforded us the chance to discuss literature, philosophy, and life. A lifelong teacher, she was fiercely intellectual and inquisitive, and loved

Note: Juliana Schmemmann was a Russian émigrée born and educated in France. After moving to the U.S., she had a long and influential career as an educator, speaker, writer, and spiritual guide.



nothing more than a good debate. She had strong opinions, but was neither rigid nor dogmatic. Rather, she was a keen listener, asking probing questions, offering her own insights, and challenging others to articulate and defend their views.

At the top private girls' schools in Manhattan, where she taught for over forty years, she was popular and beloved. Her students remember her as "the great Madame." "Strong and vibrant," one remembered; "kind, insightful, strong, and funny," said another; "a unique combination of rigorous and warm!" gushed yet another. To this day, I am often approached by elegant women at social functions who ask, shyly, could I possibly be related to Madame? There is always such pleasure when I respond that yes, I am.

While Juliana had degrees in classics and taught language and literature, she was in her heart a student of human nature. She was fascinated by the foibles of human beings, and her home was a virtual therapist's couch. Many sought her spiritual guidance and wise counsel. How often I remember her on the telephone with various callers, doling out warm but stern advice. She certainly did not abide complainers and

whiners! A serial optimist herself, she believed in disposing of life's lemons and making the best of any situation. "Find joy!" she would exclaim, and it was hard to disobey when she so clearly found joy all around her.

My grandmother often reflected on the example set forth by her namesake and ancestor, Saint Juliana of Lazerevo, who married at a young age and raised a large family, but found time to minister to the poor and sick as well as pray and fast. Saint Juliana was known for her piety, selflessness, and kindness—and for living a spiritual life while also tending to her everyday domestic concerns.

Like Saint Juliana, my grandmother was a real person living in the real world and doing her best to live the gospel on her own terms. Her flaws, such as they were, were part of her inimitable persona. She was a busybody, a drama queen, a bossy-pants! She filled every room she was in with her enormous and indomitable personality. We all slightly feared her even as we adored her.

At our cherished summer retreat in Labelle, Quebec, she would reign over her little living room as if it was a royal salon. Friends and relatives, for many of whom she was "Babu" or "Tyotya Liana," would file in to pay their respects, share the latest news, and seek her guidance. After one particularly busy day of visitors I remember asking if she was tired. "Not at all!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining, "I love it!"

And this is how we remember her – brimming with vitality, vim, and vigor, and with a great love of life. Up to the very end, even when her body was failing, her mind remained sharp and her joie de vivre intact. On our last visit with her, not long before she passed

away, she animatedly debated politics with us and grilled our teenage boys on their interests and ambitions. Her joy and pride in us was palpable and made us want to be our best selves.

May her memory be eternal!

"Joy is an effort, a daily exercise of seeing the beauty of one's life, through thick and thin; of singing 'Alleluia!' on a happy day as well as on one's dying day ... Joy then becomes a habit, an attitude, a state of being." —Juliana Schmemann¹ ❁

¹ Juliana Schmemann in Masha Tkachuk, "Joy, Gratitude, Freedom: An Interview with Juliana Schmemann," *St. Nina Quarterly* 2:4 (Fall 1998).

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Masha Tkachuk

My mother was blessed with a long, productive and fruitful life. However, her last years on earth were difficult because she had a serious illness which weakened her progressively. For an energetic, vibrant personality, this weakness was a challenge. Nevertheless, Juliana was not one to give in easily. She fought every step of the way and refused to curtail her activities. She wrote two books when already quite ill.¹ She continued to be interested in all aspects of life: politics, the Church, her large family, and her circle of friends, who sought her out and enjoyed many cups of tea in her cozy Montreal apartment.

I was blessed to spend ten years next door to my mother. She came to Montreal when it became clear that she should live close to someone in her family. And when I look back on those years, it was truly a blessing. When she first came, I was working full time as a teacher. I would come over for tea after school and tell her about my day. She was always interested and enjoyed listening to my stories.

She loved being part of our parish, The Sign of the Theotokos. She participated fully in parish life, attending most services, taking part in community events, and speaking at assemblies and conferences. She was a great support to my husband, Father John, encouraging him in his service, especially when faced with difficulties.

In time her illness weakened her, and she had to accept that she needed more help on a daily basis. So the time came for her to live in an assisted living home in New York, close to family, and finally in a nursing home where she ended her days cared for by a wonderful team of caregivers.

So far I have discussed my mother's twilight years. Now I would like to move back in time, when a young woman had the courage to follow her husband to North America, leaving most of her family behind. She had to learn a new language, find a job as quickly as possible, and place her three children in schools. She accomplished these tasks with remarkable

¹ Juliana Schmemann, *My Journey with Father Alexander* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2006); Juliana Schmemann, *The Joy to Serve* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2009).

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