

Olga Denysenko, 1946–2017

Nicholas Denysenko

My mom, Olga, belonged to a generation of immigrants from Ukraine. In our time, we're learning a lot about immigrants. We express concern for the fundamental right to life and human dignity of immigrants. We also pay attention to the children of immigrants: how will they be fed and educated? Thinking about my mother as a person and trying to understand her makes me feel that we need much, much more reflection on children of immigrants. For me, this is the only way to come to know Olga truly, because my mom came to the U.S. as a child.

When the Metulynsky family arrived in the United States in 1953, they did not simply bring themselves here. Their customs, traditions, core values, and Orthodox faith migrated with them. The Metulynskys sustained those values and traditions in their new country. Like most immigrants, they celebrated a sense of American arrival. They became citizens, they tried to learn the language, they contributed to daily life, they educated their children. And there is something else I learned from my mom: they were incredibly poor. I was able to spend a lot of time with Olga this summer, and she told me the story of how they lived in a place where they shared a bath with several other families, and bathed in the same bath water after other children.

Mom loved to reminisce about her upbringing: she thought she had a wonderful childhood. By our standards, she had nothing; the Metulynskys were quite poor. By their standards, they had everything: housing, food, education. One of my favorite stories from her childhood was when, as a teenager, she asked her father, Fr. Mykola, for ten cents to have a cup of coffee with her friends. He responded, why pay ten cents for a cup of coffee when you can make coffee right here? To me, this represents how immigrants understood their new life in America. Living here was a privilege, and to stand the test of time, they would need to be able to save money, to show that their arrival was permanent. My mom was a part of this generation of children who learned these core values from her parents. These values shaped her philosophy of life.

As a child, Mom had to navigate the hybrid waters of dual identity. I imagine that this could be difficult for her, bearing the responsibility of remaining faithful to her core émigré community while also living as a "normal" American. I say "normal," because the mindset of immigrants is to show that they have arrived and are here to stay. Mom married our dad Gene in 1967, and they committed to continuing a way of life they had learned from their community. As they sustained this commitment, change was hap-

Note: Olga Denysenko was born in Germany in 1946, the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants. In 1953, the family settled in Chicago. Olga spent much of her adult life as a caregiver to aging parents. She was devoted to her family and her church, and loved cooking and music. She sang alto and soprano for many years at St. Katherine Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Olga is survived by sons Greg and Nicholas, daughters-in-law Heidi and Tresja, and grandchildren Margaret, Elena, and Sophia.



pening all around them, and I know that this change was often challenging for Olga.

Mom and Dad moved to Nebraska in 1970 and Minnesota in 1974. I want to emphasize that Mom was deeply, deeply committed to her parents, Fr. Mykola and Matushka Margarita. She adored them, so it was not surprising that Mom and Dad—and my brother Greg and, eventually, me—lived in the same city as our grandparents. One thing to know about Olga is that her love and adoration for her parents was based on everything they had given her. Everything they passed on was life-giving and good from Olga's perspective.

Mom raised Greg and me in this world of hybrid identity, firmly American and Midwestern while also retaining all of the core values, traditions, and Orthodox faith of the Ukrainians. We

lived this life under mom's guidance through the 1980s and into the 1990s, when she faced a new adversity, one that does not discriminate in any way: illness. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989 and endured a lumpectomy and chemotherapy. As she slowly recovered, she immersed herself in church life and devoted herself to another hard task: caregiving to her aging parents. To give you a sense of her values, let me share a thought about my experience of life in the 80s and 90s at Mom's house. It was truly festive. We loved holidays because of her. The food was amazing, there was always music. At times there could be heated debate and disagreement, but it was never boring! There was so much good food that we came to expect at least two kinds of meat for a solemn dinner. The tradition was so powerful that I find myself making sure there are at least two meats for all of our holidays.

Adversity came again in 2001: cervical cancer. Mom had a hysterectomy. The 2000s were unkind as well. After both sons were married (2001 and 2002), our family endured a series of deaths and illnesses: Gene died in 2005, Fr. Mykola in 2011, and Matushka Margarita in 2015. Mom never recovered from the sting of Dad's death. Then, even more adversity arrived. Mom had a stroke in 2014. After rehab, it looked for a while like she would have a full recovery. I think it is because she was energized by the great need to care for her mother. Alas, it was not to be. On March 18 of this year, she suffered her third stroke. Since 2001, over the last 16 years, it has been one episode of suffering after another for Mom.

Olga was a woman who appreciated the fundamental gift of life and op-

portunity. I have finally come to terms with the fact that we cannot easily understand her through the lens of contemporary culture. Her perspective was firmly shaped by her experience as an immigrant who arrived in America as a child. In this sense, she was unique: different from both her parents and her children. Maybe one reason Olga and Gene were so compatible is that they both enjoyed the simple things in life. Olga did not travel much at all. She was content to sip coffee on a cool summer day on her patio, enjoy a family barbecue, or sit with us to listen to a new recording of liturgical music and evaluate its quality.

I learned a great deal about simplicity from her. I remember complaining to her as a teenager that I was bored, and she said, "Well, get used to it. Most of life is boring." And in a sense, it was through her that I came to appreciate what it means to love family, to be a true steward of the garden of your family.

Every nation erects statues and memorials to honor its heroes. Books are written, documentaries are produced, and stories are told about political leaders, inventors, and other heroes. Where are the stories about the people who toiled over stoves to feed families, who care for aging parents, who sing competently and beautifully for

many years in church choirs? These stories are more powerful than any piece of stone inscribed with words honoring a hero. The memory kept of a faithful and beloved mother and wife is inscribed forever on the hearts of the people who love her.

The Orthodox Church uses a beautiful prayer for the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. We pray it during Lent and on other solemn holidays. The prayer ends with one of the most beautiful, poetic, and moving appeals to God to remember all people. We ask God to remember the old, the young, the sick, captives, widows, orphans, and "all those whom we have not remembered through ignorance, forgetfulness, or because of their multitude, since you know the name and age of each, even from his mother's womb." We commend to God's memory not just because we remember, but because we love. God's remembrance of Olga is a testimony to his love for Olga and for all of those who commend her to his eternal household. For Olga, death is not the end, but a beginning, because Christ has trampled down death through his death, and bestows life upon those in the tombs! As we sing her into God's kingdom, let us joyfully remember her life with that same spirit of thanksgiving for all of the lifegiving good she has imparted to us. ✱

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