

Nowakowski Family

Leokadia (Lola) Nowakowski (nee Gnitecki)

- Leokadia (Lola) Gnitecki was born on December 28th, 1928 in Cecylowka, a village near Rowno, Poland.
- She grew up in a blended family.
- Her father, Izydor Gnitecki, was married twice. He had four children with his first wife, who died at a young age. Later, he married Lola's mother, Cornelia (nee Zygodlo), who was 16 years his junior. They had five children, Lola being among them.
- She remembers with fondness that the members of her family all got along and had genuine respect and affection for their parents.
- Izydor owned 1,200 hectares of farm land. What was not consumed by the family of 11 was sold (usually potatoes and wheat).
- Farming was not the first love of Lola's father – he was a professional surveyor, and had employees run the farm so that he could carry on his second business.
- One of Lola's earliest memories is accompanying her Dad on summer surveying expeditions.
- Lola felt proud that her mother was well-liked. "My mother was known throughout the village and district for her kindness. She would give advice and a helping hand if someone was ill, hurt, or just needed to talk. She also used to make linen on a loom," she said.
- Lola's idyllic childhood came to a sudden halt when the Second World War began in 1939. The German army occupied many parts of Poland, including 11-year-old Lola's home district.
- She and other children were not allowed to attend school. When the Russian army pushed the Germans out about two years later, Lola's school was re-opened. However, the teachers only spoke Russian, and Lola was taught in Russian for more than a year.
- "Then again the Germans took over Poland and caused the underground revolution. Many Polish and Jewish people were being slaughtered," Lola added.
- To her great sorrow and horror, Lola's father and 20-year-old brother were murdered in 1943 when they were caught in the crossfire between partisans and the local police. "We, as a village, were all supposed to die that night," said Lola.
- "We all had been sleeping for a whole year in an underground hide-out in a grove of trees close to the village. Each night we would sneak to our spot so the partisans would not find us. It was not safe after dark," Lola recalled.
- Eventually, Lola's remaining family and their friends fled across many fields to the city of Kostopol with only the clothing they were wearing.
- They soon were rounded up to be used as forced labourers.
- In the city of Rowno, Lola remembers being made to suffer further indignity: "We were all herded together, naked, to be disinfected from lice, and then go through doctors' examinations. We were then loaded onto cattle trains and sent to Germany. As we travelled through the country, our families were gradually split up."
- Lola was only 14 at the time, but was tall and strong and looked older. "At one stop I was taken away from my mother by the German authorities and sent off to work."
- Lola was forced to do heavy manual labour on a German farm – ploughing, threshing and seeding in the fields during the heat and the cold, as well as milking 13 cows twice daily, washing laundry and being an assistant in the kitchen.
- For one entire year, she worried constantly because she did not know what had become of her family. Lola was finally found by her mother.
- Lola learned that her mother, younger sister (age 8) and brother (age 15) were allowed to stay together. "They were kept in a camp for at least six weeks without adequate food before being taken to work for a kind German farmer who accepted my mother in spite of her having two children with her. One of my other brothers was taken to work in a factory," explained Lola.
- "When the Americans arrived, we, as the slaves of the Germans, ran to surrender and, once again, I found myself in a [displaced persons] camp. The difference was tremendous. We had an abundance of food to eat, lots of clothing, and we were respected as human beings."
- Encouraged by her mother, Lola returned to school for seven months and re-learned her mother tongue and also took an English course.

- After the war ended, authorities from the Polish government were sent to the displaced persons camps to encourage its citizens to return under the then Russian occupation. "We were leery of going back," said Lola.
- "Other countries were opening their doors to us, and I was determined to go to Canada, if possible. I was hoping to be able some day to make a place for my family."
- Her dream came true in January 1948 when Lola walked onto the United States Navy transport ship, the *U.S.S. General S.D. Sturgis*. She had just turned 19 when she arrived in Canada.
- Her heart was heavy at leaving her mother and family behind, but Lola convinced herself that she would get them to Canada in due course.
- Lola went by train to Winnipeg to work at the St. Boniface Sanatorium, which had guaranteed her a job. The sanatorium had paid for her passage to Canada and in return Lola and her friends agreed to work for one year.
- She earned \$35 per month less deductions for her ticket to Canada.
- By February 1949 she had completed the work in the time period she had promised. Her next job was at a nursing home for \$90 per month. She rented a small room at a monthly rate of \$8.
- "I was very happy to be in Canada, but I was so lonely not knowing the language and having no family here. I wished I had enough money to return home or else bring my family to me. Two of my brothers eventually did come to Canada on their own, while another brother and one sister settled in the United States," said Lola.
- Lola met her future husband Andrzej (Andy) Nowakowski when she and some friends attended a dance in Winnipeg. She married him in 1949.
- The year 1952 saw Lola's mother and sister arrive in Canada from Germany, but not before a scare: "My mother had a gall bladder attack on the train and they put her in the hospital for an operation to remove her gall stones. A month later she came to Canada. She was not well. She stayed with me in Winnipeg and then we brought her to Red Lake. We were finally reunited as a family. I promised myself that my mother would never want for anything but, although she lived eight years here, I feel it wasn't long enough to compensate for the suffering she had gone through."
- When the family moved to Red Lake in 1956, Lola and Andy purchased Hillside General Store. "I would sit in the store some times when it was quiet and think of all the times I was starving and now I was surrounded by anything I could possibly want to eat," Lola reminisced.
- Lola became a member of the Royal Canadian Legion Ladies Auxiliary.
- Lola has always valued education and herself is a veteran of many local adult English education classes. She mastered reading, writing, and speaking English.
- Lola counts one of the proudest days of her life as one in 1956 when she received her Canadian Citizenship. "Canada has enabled us to be affluent enough to have been able to help our less fortunate relatives in Poland. We sent them parcels and managed to bring 11 of them to see this beautiful, rich country which accepted us so readily. I show my appreciation by doing a little bit to help others," Lola remarked.
- Lola lost her life partner when Andy died in 1990.
- She feels blessed to have her children, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild in her life.

Andrzej (Andy) Nowakowski

- Andrzej (Andy) Nowakowski was born on August 18th, 1920 in the town of Zlotow, northern Wielkopolska, Poland.
- He was a veteran of the Polish army, 2nd Corps, and had fought under the English in Italy against the Germans.
- He was trained to drive military vehicles.
- In 1946, Andy was awarded "The War Medal 1939-1945" by the Polish government for his service during the Second World War.
- He immigrated to Canada in 1947.
- Andy found himself working at Weston Steel in Winnipeg, a company which manufactured large trucks and storage tanks.
- He married Lola in 1949.
- When they moved to Red Lake in 1956, he and Lola ran Hillside General Store for 15 years.

- After the store's closure, Andy found employment in the Red Lake branch of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. He worked there for many years and was well-known.
- Andy was also a long-time Legion member.
- He enjoyed fishing, hunting, and being outdoors.
- Andy died in hospital at age 69 on February 13th, 1990 in Winnipeg.
- He is buried in Red Lake Cemetery.

The Couple

- Lola and Andy met one evening at a dance in Winnipeg.
- Andy proposed and the couple was married in Winnipeg in 1949. Their wedding was small but a very happy occasion.
- Their daughter, Helen, was born in 1950, followed by Irene in 1951 – both were born in Winnipeg. Their only son, Theodore (Ted), was born in 1959 in Red Lake, Ontario.
- In 1956, the Nowakowskis moved to Red Lake, where one of Lola's brothers lived.
- Although she and Andy had neither a grasp of the language nor much business experience, they took a risk and purchased the Hillside General Store on Howey Street. "We delivered twice a week to Red Lake and once a week to Madsen, Cochenour, McKenzie Island, and Balmertown. We sold meats, vegetables, dairy, mining clothes, shoes, paint, nails, everything. That store was needed here at that time."
- They operated Hillside for 15 years.
- When they sold the store, Lola and Andy invested in a large retail building that had apartments upstairs which could be rented. For many years, the Red Lake Post Office occupied the entire main floor, and the Nowakowskis lived upstairs.
- Lola and Andy were early and long-time members of the Polish Alliance Friendly Society in Red Lake which built and operated the Polish Hall. They were also members of the Polish Alliance of Canada, and the local Multicultural Committee which used to sponsor a float in the Red Lake Festival Days parades, and also served Polish food at outdoor booths.