

Michael Lawriwsky

19.9.1922 – 7.11.2005



Beloved husband of Lofia

*Loving father and father-in-law of Helen and Andrew, Michael and Maria
Devoted grandfather of Lubomyr, Tetiana, Nina, Sophie, Adrian and Michael
Family man, Ukrainian community leader, welfare worker and perfect gentleman, he gave
himself to all his causes*

He will be sadly missed

Vichnaia Pam'iat'

Michael Lawriwsky died peacefully in Canberra on the 7th of November, 2005, with his family at his side. He died with dignity, and with a sense of satisfaction that he had done his duty on earth. Now he could go to God with the same confidence he had always shown in everything he attempted.

While those around him were in tears, he spoke calmly about the passions in his life - Ukrainian independence, Australia and family values - and delegated responsibilities to his family members in relation to the funeral and completion of the projects that he was currently undertaking. In particular, he was concerned about the completion of the monument to his parents and other inhabitants of his home village of Dovzhytsia, where the cemetery, like the church where he had been christened, had been wiped out by the genocide of Lemkivshchyna perpetrated by Communist Poland in 1947.

He spoke of his love for Australia, which had taken him in as a refugee in 1948 and provided a democratic framework and opportunities in which hard work, and devotion to duty were rewarded with success. He praised the values and institutions that Australia had inherited from Britain, and the bipartisan, tolerant community discipline that holds our society together, and wished that these traditions of the English speaking world would take root in Eastern Europe and Ukraine. He thanked God that he had lived to see the independence of Ukraine, and the recent Orange Revolution. He recalled the words of the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko - what the Ukrainian people need is a George Washington.

Michael's early years

Michael Lawriwsky was born in the village of Dovzhystia in 1922 to Anna (nee Panyshak), who died of Tuberculosis when he was only 7 years old. When his father, Nicholas Lawriwsky, had marched off to the Great War in 1914, it had been in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian Army. He was taken prisoner by the Russians and was fortunate to survive six years as a POW near Omsk in Siberia. When he came back he found Lemkivshchyna, the most western of Ukrainian lands, was under Polish occupation. Michael was a good student, and was singled out as a particularly gifted reciter of poetry, mastering Shevchenko's 600-line 'Tarasova Nich', among others. He was also taught practical skills, as his father was a builder and blacksmith, and his older brother, Vasyl, was a furniture and wagon wheel maker.

Michael's father taught him to play the violin, and he belonged to a quartet, which played at dances and weddings. When the band needed a double bass,

Michael responded by making one in his father's workshop. When he needed a pair of skis in winter, it was the same solution – he simply made a pair in the workshop. These early experiences instilled in him an innate confidence in his abilities. He knew there was nothing he couldn't do if he put his mind to it.

Michael was also a member of a theatrical society, which staged plays with titles like 'Mazepa' and 'Pan Pysar' (Mr Secretary), in which he played the lead role. They performed 'Pan Pysar' in a nearby village called Lopinka. After the play, a dance was held, and it was here that Michael first met his future wife Zofia. He asked her what family she was from, and her answer was "The Malyniaks".

World War Two

Michael's father died not long after the launching of Operation Barbarossa in 1941. Michael was just 19 years old. Under the German administration, both Michael and Zofia attended an agricultural college run by an eastern Ukrainian refugee, Mr Yuri Bozhok, in the town of Tisna. They both enjoyed this time, and afterwards Zofia became the agronomist of Lopinka. As his brother Vasyl had inherited the farm, Michael found employment at the Tisna Council, which administered 16 villages in the region. He began as a mail-man, and it wasn't long after appointed as the Council's statistician, collecting and organising data on the population and agricultural production.

As the Germans retreated before the Soviet forces in 1943, the idea of a Ukrainian revolution for independence against the Germans and Soviets gathered force in Lemkivshchyna, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) became established there. As the front approached in 1944, Michael and his brother Vasyl dug a bunker for themselves in an exceedingly clever spot only a couple of kilometres from their home. Narrowly escaping conscription into the Red Army, Michael and his brother went underground, and Michael joined the UPA as a staffer. In a blacksmith's shop in Lopinka he built his own unique brand of sub-machine-gun. It could fit under his coat, fire singly or automatically and – importantly - use Soviet bullets.

For the next couple of years Michael traversed the hills of Lemkivshchyna with the sub-machine-gun under one arm, and his typewriter under the other. In March 1945, after the Soviet NKVD forces had destroyed the nearby village of Struboviska and had deported what was left of the population to Siberia, they launched a massive search-and-destroy operation in the region. For five days Michael and Vasyl sheltered six other UPA soldiers in their bunker, including the commanding officer of the UPA battalion in the

region, Major Ren, who featured in the recent film, 'Zalizna Sotnia' as the bearded senior officer dressed in black. The real Ren was greatly impressed by the bunker, but as Michael said after viewing the film, he was never dressed in black, and was always clean-shaven.

Escape to the West

In 1946 Michael, aged 23, and his 20-year-old girlfriend Zofia, escaped to Slovakia, which was only 14 kilometres away to the south. Zofia had been living in fear in the hills with her family, which had up to that time narrowly escaped the massive 'ethnic cleansing' operation that was underway. They were arrested by the Czechoslovakian Army and were later joined by Michael's sister, Anna. Eventually, the three of them escaped to Cheb, in the Sudeten Land of western Czechoslovakia, from which the Germans had been deported. They passed themselves off as Slovaks, and in January 1948, one month prior to the communist takeover, they escaped into Germany. Less than a year later, they were steaming through the Heads of Sydney Harbour.

Life in Berri and Adelaide

Michael and Zofia were married at the Bathurst Migrant Camp in New South Wales, and were from there assigned to fruit picking in the Berri area in South Australia. Michael's sister Anna had married Nicholas Pesor and had given birth to their first child, Myra, in Wagga Wagga. Together with Nicholas, Michael built his first house in Australia. Not being able to afford a modern car, Michael bought an old Austin 7 and built an entirely new body for it. He used to drive that to the Berri Distillery, where he worked as an electrician, and in 1952 he used it to bring home his wife and newly born son, Michael, from the Barmera District Hospital. It was chiefly with thoughts of their son's education, that Michael and Zofia moved to Adelaide in 1956.

In Adelaide, Michael found employment as an afternoon-shift electrician at Kelvinator, but he had ambitions to run his own business, and soon bought a delicatessen, which he demolished and re-built into a supermarket with separate delicatessen, grocery and green grocery departments. His daughter Helen was born around the time of the grand opening of the new store.

Michael began to help other members of his family come to Australia. The first was his mother-in-law, Maria Malyniak, who with the rest of the family had been deported to north-west Poland. She lived in the Lawriwsky household for 14 years until her death in 1975. In 1962 Michael assisted his sister-in-law, Anna Lipkiewicz, her husband Michael, and their son John to

migrate to Australia, and for over three years they all lived together in the Lawriwsky household.

Michael was keen that the children should know the Ukrainian language and for years delivered eight children to Ukrainian Saturday School in the VW Kombi van that he used for delivery of grocery orders to his customers. Anna Pesor had three more children in Australia: John, Irene and George, while Anna Lipkiewicz had a second son, Stefan.

In Adelaide Michael played an active part in the Ukrainian community. He was a foundation board member of the Ukrainian credit co-operative, 'Hoverlia', and in the late 1970's was Chairman of the first division soccer club, USC Lion. He enjoyed singing in the church choir on Sundays and in the Ukrainian community choir, 'Homin'. After selling the supermarket, Michael and Zofia moved to a 14-acre property at Uraidla in the Adelaide hills, and owned a boarding hostel in the city. At Uraidla he built another house almost single-handedly, and in 1987, assisted his nephew, Roman Malyniak to migrate to Australia from Germany, where he had defected to from Communist Poland. In 1988, Roman's wife Yadwiga, and children Olga and Michael, joined him at Uraidla, and Michael gave them the use of a four-roomed 1840s pioneer's cottage on the property for as long as they needed to build up the deposit for a house of their own.

Michael's son Michael married Maria Woly nec and moved to Melbourne, where he completed his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Adelaide and in 1988 he was appointed Professor of Commerce at La Trobe University. It was during this period that Michael junior's children, and Michael senior's first grandchildren, Lubomyr and Tetyana were born. Michael senior's daughter, Helen completed a Bachelor of Science at Adelaide University, married Andrew Liszczy nsky from Melbourne and moved to Canberra, where she worked in cancer research at the Australian National University. Thus, Michael's burning ambition upon arrival in Australia, that his children should achieve a university education, had been well and truly met, and it filled him with enormous pride.

The Canberra years

In 1992 Michael and Zofia moved from Adelaide to Canberra. The hobby farm was proving too difficult to maintain, and they wanted to be close to their grandchildren, Nina and Sophie. Over the next decade two additional grand children, Adrian and Michael, were born.

In Canberra Michael threw himself into active community work. He became a committee member of the Ukrainian Association of the ACT, a member of the Choir at the St. Volodymyr Ukrainian Catholic Church, and began many years as researcher and announcer on the Ukrainian language radio program on Station 2XX.

Michael noted that there was no Ukrainian senior citizens' organisation in Canberra, so he formed one with a membership of around 45 people. Every two weeks for the last ten years they would meet at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Hall, and enjoy a program of songs, current affairs and information sessions on medical and pensioner affairs. About half of the original senior citizens' group have passed away in the last ten years, and as president, Michael was always called upon to speak at the funerals. Each of these speeches was specially tailored to the person, whom he knew so well from their gatherings.

Michael came to know a number of Federal and Territory politicians, and particularly those who had taken an interest in human rights abuses in communist countries. These politicians included the current Attorney General, the Hon. Phillip Ruddock. MP, the Hon. Senator Jim Short, the Hon. Senator Rod Kemp, Kate Carnell, MLA, Brendan Smyth, MLA and more recently, Senator Gary Humphries of the ACT. Not only did Michael never fail in putting forward, in the most diplomatic manner that was his way, the Ukrainian cause that he felt so dearly, but he also proffered sincere advice on the Australian issues that concerned him deeply.

With Ukraine's independence Michael was able to re-establish contact with former friends living in Ukraine. One friend who had been a mail-man in Michael's village of Dovzhytsia was Fedir Lazor. During the Ukrainian revolution he had been arrested by the NKVD and sentenced to hard labour in Arc Angel in Siberia for ten years. Miraculously he had survived, and was now living in the eastern Ukrainian town of Rubanivka, where Michael and Zofia visited him. After witnessing the critical shortage of equipment at the local school in Rubanivka, Michael galvanised the support of his local Kaleen Primary School, which was being attended by his own grand children, and organised a shipment of tracksuits and uniforms to the less fortunate school in Ukraine.

Other projects that Michael supported during the Canberra years were: raising thousands of dollars for the building of a Ukrainian Catholic church in the village of Mokre in the ethnically cleansed Lemko region of south-east Poland; financial support for the building of the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral in Kyiv; and, raising money for the publication of the book

‘Zlochyn’ (Crime), which documents the suffering of Ukraine under various foreign occupations during the last century.

For four years from 2000, Michael was the President of the Ukrainian Association of the ACT. It was probably the most pro-active committee that the ACT Association has seen, as Michael had gathered around him an energetic group of younger people, whose work he coordinated. During those years he developed a close working relationship with the first Ukrainian Ambassador to Australia, Dr Oleksandr Mishchenko. At the time of the Orange Revolution for democracy in Ukraine, Dr. Mishchenko spoke out bravely in support of the need for free democratic elections in his country.

Already ill, and at an advanced age, Michael left an impression of utter determination as he participated at the forefront of Canberra demonstrations in support of the Orange Revolution, and even contributed directly in that process, by becoming an invigilator of absentee votes cast by expatriate Ukrainians currently living in Australia.

Michael was a unique individual. Who else would remember that their first footstep on Australian soil in 1948 was with their left foot? He considered himself lucky to have lived beyond his early twenties, to be so fortunate as to have found his way to a country as great as Australia, and to have seen his family grow up here. He put his survival through some tough spots in 1945-48 down to his faith in God, and the protection of the Virgin Mary. During those times he had worn a medallion around his neck with an image of the Virgin Mary cradling the infant Jesus, and it had given him strength.

Lying in their bunker one night in 1945, Michael and his brother Vasyl had sworn that if they made it through the war alive, they would return to that spot and erect a monument to the Virgin Mary. Unfortunately, Vasyl died before communism had withered, but on the 4th of July 2000, Michael and Zofia did return on foot to the mountain above Dovzhytsia and found the site of the bunker. It had long since caved in, but Michael did erect his monument to the Virgin Mary. He prayed and gave thanks to Her for having helped him all those years ago, and for allowing him to live out his life in peace in a country on the other side of the world.

Now that he had fulfilled his promise, Michael felt that he had tied the last knot.

It was a beautiful life.