

John Nickel - affectionately known as dad and Opa, was born in the Mennonite village of Grunfeld, Ukraine on October 18, 1935. He was the youngest of the three children - sisters Tina Kehler and Helen Janzen, born to Jakob Nickel and Elizabeth Nickel (nee Bergen).

Dad's childhood was marred by the policies of the Soviet government that exposed millions of its citizens to acts of extreme cruelty and violence.

Before Dad could celebrate his second birthday, his father Jakob, was arrested by the Soviet secret police, convicted as a so-called 'Enemy of the State' without a trial and executed a few days later. Some five decades later, a Ukrainian court issued a pardon to Jakob Nickel citing there was no evidence to support the charge. This pardon was deeply meaningful to dad and he made a point of keeping a copy of it in a file where he kept all of his important papers.

Dad's father being taken away, started many years of moving from place to place for reasons of safety for the family. Dad's mother, together with her young children, often traveled at night with their horse and cart, finding various friends and relatives with whom they could stay.

In 1948, when dad was 13, with the help of MCC, the family of four was allowed to immigrate to Canada. They left the port in Bremen on a ship called the 'Langfitt, 'landing in Halifax on October 22nd. After a long train trip, they settled in with relatives in Gnadenthal, Manitoba.

Through scrimping and saving the family was able to move into their first home in Altona the following year. Dad often spoke about how after the years of being homeless in the Soviet Union, living in a permanent place, was very meaningful.

In 1957 the family made yet another move – this time to the big city of Winnipeg. Dad had already moved to Winnipeg 2 years earlier to begin his Apprenticeship Agreement in Factory Woodworking.

Not long after, a young stenographer who worked for the Canadian National Railway, was sitting in the church choir and caught his eye. Her name was Nellie Sawatzky. Their romance blossomed and they got married in 1959.

Dad and mom's marriage was blessed with three girls, Bonnie, Lorraine and Caroline. Over the years three son-in-laws, 8 grandchildren, 2 more grandchildren have joined our family. When I told him he was to become a great- grandpa, he was over joyed and commented how good looking the child already is - great gene pool he said.

Dad had a life long love of water and boating, building his first boat when he was in his early 20's. Road trips and camping punctuated our early childhood, but when dad was introduced to Lake of the Woods, that was it, he was hooked. In 1976 he purchased an island lot to build a family cabin. Good thing there were no seatbelt laws, as we travelled many weekends in our station wagon with the back seat down, hauling plywood, doors, windows, cupboards, leaving just enough space for each of us girls and our beagle. Dad and mom enjoyed many years on the island, inviting friends and family to enjoy the summer sun with them.

Time at the lake was spent playing games under the hiss of propane lights, fishing, water skiing and tubing. He was very attached to his tin boat, banging out the rivets when it got leaky. Opa spent many sunny afternoons pulling the grandchildren in the purple tube around the lake with his tin boat. When they wanted to jump from higher up into the water, he built them a tall platform.

Dad caught his last fish in lake of the woods on September 20 of this year and winched his tin boat out of the lake for winter storage. He was able to do all of this without displaying any sign of illness or pain.

By nature Dad was a person who saw the glass as more than half full. His energy was boundless and his enthusiasm for getting things done knew no limits – whether it was helping out with whatever needed doing here at his church, fixing leaky faucets for the residents of Lindenwood estates, or building furniture for his family.

Dad's mastery of carpentry was something to behold. If you asked him to build a corner cabinet, for example, he would sketch out a design based on your requirements on the back of an envelope and then make quick measurements. Then in a matter of days he would return with the finished product that would fit exactly in its place. His furniture has stood the test of time and will become heirlooms for future generations. Or, if you needed help with a project, because we wanted to do some things as well, dad showed up with his tools, put on his carpenter's apron, attached the tape measure to his belt and took over.

After retirement, dad and mom committed annually to a 2 week volunteer stint with SOOP. They did this for 10 years. Some of those years, their assignment took them to California. Which was great because then they continued the drive for a short vacation in Palm Springs, and then to Modesto, to spend time with Caroline, Tony, Olivia and Liam.

Picking oranges, lemons and grapefruits was an inescapable fact of life on mom and dad's southern travels. Particularly because they grew everywhere and were so readily available. Dad would make a point of scouting out public boulevards in Palm Springs to find the best looking grapefruit trees and go about collecting their bounty. Last year he sent Lorraine to climb up a tree and toss grapefruits down for him to catch. That made him so happy.

Dad was also a man of devout faith, who made a point of living out that faith as best he could and living a life of thankfulness and gratitude to God. His prayers at mealtimes were about all of the things that make life better like the opportunity to work, enjoy time with family and the bounty of the table. Dad's faith was honest and sincere and we thank him for offering this legacy of faith to us.

Dad was so happy to welcome his son in laws Richard, Herb and Tony into the family. Dad and mom have been blessed with 8 grandchildren. Dad loved his time with each and every one of them, custom making bedroom sets, desks and coffee tables on request. We all have more than one custom piece of furniture made by him. And nothing made him happier than to have us all around the dinner table together.

Dad left this world on October 24th – a few days after his 88th birthday. He made his last fishing trip to Lake of the Woods on September 20th. A few days later it was apparent to him that something was not normal and he went to see his doctor. An MRI soon confirmed that he had pancreatic cancer and that no treatment was possible. Dad spent the final week of his life at the Riverview Health Centre where mom attended to him and his family could visit. Dad passed peacefully in the presence of loved ones as he would have wanted.

Dad leaves to mourn his wife of 64 years, Nellie, daughters Bonnie (Richard), Lorraine (Herb), Caroline (Tony), 8 grandchildren, Andrew, Michael (Rebecca), Heather, Stephanie (Alex), Zachary, Hillary, Olivia, Liam and sisters Helen Janzen and Tina Kehler.

We are grateful as a family that dad's time of suffering was short and mostly pain free, but that gratitude cannot erase our grief and the fact that we miss him dearly. Dad was a great husband, father and Opa, and although he had many years here on earth, it feels to us as if they were not enough. Dad's life was a blessing to us and many others and we take comfort in the assurance he has claimed his reward of life eternal with Jesus.