

Obituaries

OBITUARIES DESK: 416-585-5066

FAX: 416-585-5699

OBIT@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM

DEATH NOTICES: 416-585-5111

JOHN YAREMKO, 91 » CABINET MINISTER, COMMUNITY ADVOCATE



As a minister in the John Robarts government, John Yaremko (pictured circa 1963) drew on his experience of poverty, advocating scholarships, health care, and independent living for the disabled. THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ontario politician believed society had an obligation to help those in need

The first Ukrainian to win election in Ontario, Yaremko championed ethnic communities and presided over social services expansion

BY FRANK B. EDWARDS

As successful as he was, John Yaremko never forgot the stigma of being a poor immigrant kid. Shortly after he became Ontario's Minister of Public Welfare in 1967, he dropped the word "welfare" from the ministry's lexicon.

A few years later, when invited to address an Empire Club luncheon at the Royal York Hotel as a last-minute substitute for a tardy guest speaker, he challenged the roomful of privileged diners to reconsider their notion of welfare recipients.

"Our experience does not support the view that anyone outside the labour force who receives social assistance is either lazy, a failure or in some sense inferior," he told his captive audience. Yaremko then explained that he was about to launch a program that would inform citizens of their "right" to social assistance.

Former Ontario premier William Davis, recalling his cabinet colleague, says, "He recognized that in any civilized society, those who are more fortunate have some obligation to help those who have less."

John Yaremko died in his sleep of heart failure on Aug. 12 at Toronto's Ukrainian Canadian Care Centre, which he helped establish in 2008.

Born in Welland, Ont., in the summer of 1918, Yaremko was the oldest son of Ukrainian immigrants who arrived in the Niagara region shortly before the First World War. His parents, Mary Boyetzko and George Yaremko, had both grown up near the village of Rakovetz, but met in Canada. They had 11 children spread over 19 years. The family moved to Hamilton when the senior Yaremko took a job with the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco) in 1927.

At age 14, John Yaremko and his high-school friend Charles Ziminski won seats on the Junior Board of Trade's "city council" and experienced civic politics up close. Given the choice of three city institutions to visit on Citizens Day, Yaremko chose the hospital, the jail and the waterworks.

In a 2005 interview with social services consultant John Stapleton, he marvelled, "There must have been some

sort of a seed that even at the age of 14, the boy was conscious of important institutions."

A quiet, serious student with a ready smile, Yaremko graduated from high school with more scholarships than he was able to use in eight years at the University of Toronto and Osgoode Hall. He spent his summers working on local farms and at Stelco.

He was called to the bar in 1946, a year after he married Mary Matern, a registered nurse from Montreal whom he met at church. He was offered a position at a prestigious Bay Street law firm if he would anglicize his name, but he refused.

"He told me that story," says his niece Hélène Jarvis-Yaremko, also a lawyer, "but he would never tell me which firm turned him down. He would never say anything bad about anyone."

The newlyweds lived frugally and eventually bought a simple brick house near Spadina Road and St. Clair Avenue in Toronto, across the street from a mansion that had been converted into a rehabilitation hospital. Talking to the patients, Yaremko learned that injured veterans received pensions but civilian accident victims did not. It was an inequity that he later helped change.

In 1951, he turned his Ukrainian heritage into an asset when he ran for Ontario's Progressive Conservatives in Bellwoods, a working-class riding with a large immigrant population that was several blocks from his own residence.

Four years later, when city alderman Allan Grossman, the son of Russian immigrants, ran for the Tories in the neighbouring ward of St. Andrew, the two men refined their political machines to turn the ethnic vote into a new political force. They carefully kept track of the immigrant communities in their ridings and went out of their way to establish contact with new Canadians of all kinds.

In his first campaign, Yaremko unseated incumbent Albert Alexander MacLeod of the Ontario Progressive Party, who had held the seat for eight years. It was a tough campaign, won by a narrow margin, and he never forgot the people who helped him.

In a note of condolence, cur-

rent federal MP Borys Wrzesnewskyj noted that his Ukrainian grandmother had flowers personally delivered every Easter for the rest of her life after she allowed Yaremko to hang campaign signs on her fence.

"... A group of hooligans knocked down the fence along with the Yaremko signs," he recalled. "John came to my grandmother to apologize, offering to fix the fence. She refused and told him to leave the fence lying on the ground for the duration of the campaign."

Yaremko was the first Ukrainian to win an election in Ontario, and he held the seat until he retired in 1975.

He had a reputation for following his conscience, even if it meant wandering into other political jurisdictions. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 displaced 200,000 people, he flew to Budapest and then to Ottawa to argue the case for action. Eventually, Canada accepted 38,000 refugees and Yaremko won the hearts of Hungarian Canadians for life. In 2007, the Hungarian government awarded him its Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit.

By 1958, Yaremko was promoted to minister without portfolio. He then moved on to transport from 1958 to 1960. In 1960, Premier John Robarts made him senior member of cabinet with a promotion to provincial secretary and registrar.

Yaremko moved to the Public Welfare Ministry in 1966, transforming it into Social Family Services. In 1971, he became the province's last provincial secretary while also heading the newly minted Citizenship Ministry. He finished his career as Ontario's first solicitor-general from 1972 to 1974.

Aware of politicians' negative image, Yaremko explained that he was in "the elective public service" and told constituents that his goal was "to make life better in Ontario for everyone."

He told John Stapleton, "I had the opportunity to do things and have things done which would change the lives of many ... I was proud to be progressive. I was never on the right. I don't know what it means to be on the right. I've been hungry in my time. I know what it is to be hungry."

Former premier Davis says, "It was obvious that he was trying to help and not to try to make political points. He was just a really decent person."

As a cabinet minister, Yaremko brought his own experience of poverty to the policy table. He advocated for provincial scholarships, health care and a measure of independent living for the disabled through pensions and subsidized housing.

In 1965, he was instrumental in convincing the City of Toronto to donate land for the construction of Bellwoods Park House, a 61-room home for adults with cerebral palsy, and maintained a personal interest in its residents from the opening day in 1967. It was considered the first independent residence for adults with physical disabilities in North America, and Yaremko became its honorary chairman up to his death. In 1983, the centre was expanded into self-contained apartments and renamed the John Yaremko Centre for Community Living. Yaremko visited often, dispensing chocolates at Christmas and on Valentine's Day.

During Yaremko's time in cabinet, Ontario experienced tremendous population growth. Under Premier Robarts, hundreds of new schools were built, health care was introduced and social programs expanded. Social assistance recipients almost doubled from 80,000 to 150,000 through the 1960s. As Social Services Minister, Yaremko claimed the welfare system was "under the greatest strain since the Depression," but he never apologized for its ballooning budget. He fought for federal funding and got it in 1967 through the Canada Assistance Plan, which brought dollars and national standards to provincial welfare programs.

"When I was growing up in Hamilton, a steel town where people lived from paycheck to paycheck," he told Stapleton, "... if something happened to the breadwinner and he missed one cheque, then life became very different for many."

Yaremko was welcomed as an ally of every ethnic community he encountered, and Davis remembers how that turned into votes: "He was close to the Ukrainian community but also many others

“

I was proud to be progressive. I was never on the right. I don't know what it means to be on the right. I've been hungry in my time.

John Yaremko

“

He was close to the Ukrainian community but also many others in the city. ... He broadened the base of the party.

Former Ontario premier William Davis

in the city. His riding was one of the most diverse, I would think, in Toronto at that time ... He broadened the base of the party."

One of Yaremko's proudest accomplishments was helping to establish ethnocentric nursing homes across the province so that seniors could enjoy living with their own traditions and foods. An early project was a private rooming house aimed at Ukrainian residents.

"I felt very strongly there could be no discrimination," he recalled in 2005. "It had to be available [to everyone]. But anybody who was going there knew that they were going into a facility whose culture (and food) was going to be Ukrainian ..."

Chinese, Greek, Polish and Italian groups quickly followed with homes for their own seniors.

One unexpected benefit of Yaremko's popularity was the acceptance and recognition of his distinctly Ukrainian name. His niece Hélène Yaremko-Jarvis, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Ethics and Corporate Policy, moved to Toronto following law school in 1979, having grown up in Quebec, where her surname caused endless trouble for non-Ukrainians.

"I had spent my whole life in Quebec City spelling Yaremko ...," she says. "But in Toronto

everyone knew it ... Croatians and Italians ... It was unbelievable. He held great respect in the ethnic communities way beyond the Ukrainian. He spent his life cutting ribbons for all sorts of ethnic events."

Yaremko-Jarvis recalls her uncle fondly, describing his and his wife's thriftiness. Her aunt Mary shopped at Holt Renfrew but only on sale days, and downtown meals usually involved department-store lunch counters or fast-food burgers.

The couple often drove a rental car around the province in search of Upper Canadian antique furniture and glassware, insisting on paying market value to farm families who didn't realize the value of the old stuff they were selling. In 2007, the Royal Ontario Museum added part of the Yaremko collection of pressed and cut glass to its Canadiana gallery.

Following his 1975 retirement from politics, Yaremko served as chairman of Ontario's appeals tribunal for commercial liquor licences until 1985, after which he and his wife pursued philanthropic work for the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canadian Opera Company and the ROM, as well as special needs and multicultural communities. There were always awards to be received, scholarships to give, donations to be made and ribbons to cut.

Yaremko worked to introduce Ukrainian studies into universities, and brought Ukrainian students to Canada to study democratic institutions. This year, he had a chair in Ukrainian studies named in his honour at the University of Toronto.

After his wife died in 2005, he continued to live in the simple home they had shared since the 1940s, with its single bathroom and unfinished basement full of filing cabinets. When he finally moved to the Ukrainian Canadian Care Centre after a heart attack, he maintained his room as though it were an office, full of newspapers and correspondence, enlisting anyone near at hand to assist with the stream of greeting cards and letters he sent out regularly to the people who had helped him along the way.

John Yaremko leaves four sisters, two brothers and many nieces and nephews.

» Special to The Globe and Mail