

## Anna Baum

**Wife, mother, grandmother, teacher, author. Born February 5, 1921 in Ozorkow, Poland. Died February 8, 2006 in Montreal, of liver failure, aged 85.**

Anna Baum's father died when Anna was only four, and Anna was sent to live with relatives in a nearby town before returning to her own family when she was about eight years old. She always said that this early period gave root to her independence, self reliance, strong family ties and an instinct for survival. Partly as a result, throughout her school years Anna was involved in many activities: from poetry to music to politics, art and literary clubs.

This idyllic state was interrupted when Anna was only eighteen, as Europe plunged into war. Anna quickly realized the danger to her family. She wanted to leave Poland, but none of her family members wanted to leave. She left with some friends, got as far as Bialystok in eastern Poland – but then turned around and returned to her family. insisting that her mother, older brother and younger sister travel with her. This time they did, along with other family members and friends.



During their escape, Jacob, the man she would marry, joined the group. They eventually reached Nizhny Tagil in the Sverdlovsk region of the central Urals, at the very edge of Asia. There, Anna's wide range of activities attracted a substantial following. Out of this group of living souls, lifelong friendships were formed with people who would eventually scatter all over the globe. Because of Anna's mother's knowledge of edible wild vegetation, nearly all were able to survive the bitter cold and hunger.

While putting in long factory shifts during the day, Anna earned a Teacher's Diploma by attending school in the evenings. Even in these very trying circumstances, she always thirsted for knowledge, and peppered her teachers with ever more questions, always challenging answers and searching for deeper understanding.

Anna and Jacob married in December 1944, and moved to the city of Molotov (Perm) in the Urals. In 1946 they returned to Poland, and were assigned to the small town of Pieszyce in Lower Silesia. Here Anna first worked at an orphanage, where Jewish children, each of whom had emerged from their own individual war-caused hell, were brought back to a semblance of recovered life. She later worked as a teacher and eventually principal in the local school. Many years later, alumni from the orphanage and school, by then living throughout the world, would tell stories of what an influence Anna had had on their lives.

In 1952 Anna, Jacob and their son Jerry moved to Warsaw. In 1957 the family, now including daughter Lucy, immigrated to Montreal, where Jacob had two brothers.

Although slowed down by failing health, in the mid-1970's Anna obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (graduating Cum Laude) in Art History, a subject dear to her heart. To participate in a discussion with her on art, literature, or history was a privilege not to be missed; to visit a museum with her and hear her describe the art on view, its historical implications and relationship to the artist's prior or subsequent work was pure joy. Her in-depth knowledge, coupled with a voracious appetite for reading, attracted a wide group of friends. Anna and Jacob travelled extensively, and Anna always made sure that their itineraries revolved around local museums, libraries, and architecture.

Although accepted to a Master of Fine Arts program, Anna's health did not allow her to pursue that option: instead, she started writing books – in English, which was her fourth or fifth language. With the encouragement of her publisher, the late David Knight of Toronto's *Childe Thursday*, she authored three books of short stories about the Jewish experience in Poland before, during, and after the War. Each moving story was a fictionalised retelling of what she had seen with her own eyes. One of her proudest possessions was a letter she received from a Nobel Laureate in Literature, urging her to continue her writing, which she did, even long after obtaining a liver transplant at the Royal Victoria Hospital in 1995.

Anna Baum epitomized a lifelong search for knowledge, for independent thought, the will to survive: the legacy she left for her two children and five grandchildren.