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‘You have to enjoy life’: Jerry Lyktey reflects on 99 years

By Thomas Caputo | Staff Writer | TCaputo@NYmedia.com Nov 17, 2025 0

Jaroslaw “Jerry” Lyktey, who will turn 100 in December, reflects on his experiences as an immigrant, educator, and active member of the Ukrainian community.
Sentinel photo by John Clifford

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WHITESBORO — At nearly 100 years old, Jaroslaw “Jerry” Lyktey has lived a life most could only imagine. From a small village in Ukraine to the classrooms of Central New York, he has witnessed wars, displacement, and cultural upheaval — and emerged with a love of life, learning, and community.

“I have a secret. I discovered the fountain of youth. You have to enjoy life,” he said. “Life is very beautiful. You have to also take care of yourself. I always said I still believe in God. I always said that God gave me a nice body and said to take care of it, and I’m trying to.”

Born Dec. 29, 1925, in the Ukrainian village of Trostyanets, Lyktey grew up under shifting regimes, first Polish, then Soviet, and later German occupation during World War II — his youth, he said, was taken away from him, forced to witness war’s brutality.

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Languages and education became his compass. Fluent in Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, German, and English, Lyktey became a devoted educator. After World War II, he spent time in Germany at a displaced persons camp and worked with the U.S. Army. In 1949, he immigrated to America to join his uncle’s grocery store in Utica and soon pursued higher education.

Lyktey taught English for more than 30 years in local schools, including New York Mills, Utica University, and Herkimer College. For him, teaching was not just a profession but a mission.

“I like people. I was always interested in teaching them to be better, teaching them to understand themselves and to understand the surroundings in order to succeed,” he said.

Former students and colleagues say Lyktey’s character left as lasting an impression as his teaching.

Dave Dudajek, who was a student when Lyktey taught at New York Mills Jr.-Sr. High School, remembered him as “the consummate gentleman, always impeccably dressed, always willing to help kids. He’s just one of those special people.”

Dudajek added, “We talk about the need to protect and save Ukraine. Just look at Jerry and you can see why. He’s the kind of person that well represents his nationality and his people.” Dudajek’s wife, Jan, who later taught alongside Lyktey at New York Mills, echoed that praise, calling him “a very intelligent man, a gentleman and a scholar.”

Lyktey also dedicated himself to his Ukrainian heritage. In 1950, he helped establish a Ukrainian church in Utica, which became a hub for the community. He recognized that the church was central not only for celebrating religious and cultural traditions but also for fostering a sense of pride and togetherness among Ukrainians, many of whom had similar shared experiences.

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Zyn Jackiw, a trustee for St. Volodymyr the Great Ukrainian Catholic Church and organizer of Utica’s annual Ukrainian Festival, said Lyktey’s influence has shaped generations within the local community.

“As long as I can remember, Mr. Lyktey was a pillar of our Ukrainian community,” Jackiw said. “Very active in the parish serving as a church trustee for many years. Very proud of our Ukrainian culture and showcased it whenever he had the opportunity. A true gentleman in every aspect and someone I looked up to growing up.”

Nearly 100 and still going strong: Jaroslaw “Jerry” Lyktey (right) with his wife, Jean (center), and daughter, Kathy (left).
Sentinel photo by John Clifford

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Family remains at the center of Lyktey’s life. He and his wife, Jean, have four children and eight grandchildren, all educated and maintaining ties to Ukrainian culture.

“Education was very important, not just for my father, but also for us,” his daughter Kathy said. “If you don’t have an education, it’s just hard to succeed.”

Even at nearly 100 years old, Lyktey stays active by gardening, reading, following Ukrainian news, and sharing his wisdom with his family.

“I still love information. I still love to gather information and learn things,” he said. “Sometimes I’m very philosophical and still try to share my words of wisdom.”

He follows the ongoing conflict in Ukraine closely, and advocates for continued American support in the conflict with Russia. He explained that many Americans recognize the threat posed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and support Ukraine’s fight for freedom. He added that while the conflict causes great suffering, Ukrainians understand that they have no choice but to defend their country, and that without international assistance, their independence could be lost forever.

From war-torn Europe to the classrooms of Central New York, Lyktey’s family says that his life is a testament to resilience and the enduring power of family and community.

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