

PEOPLE / ARTS

T·R·A·V·E·L

Florida's sun shines brightly,
welcoming winter visitors.
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Coming Home to die



Ida Scolnik knew she was ready to die, but her family would never be ready to watch a loved one being taken away forever.



Ida Scolnik of Muskegon, formerly of Pompano Beach, Fla., died at home the night of Dec. 24 after a short illness. She was 84.

Born in Chicago on June 18, 1910, she grew up in Albany, N.Y. The former Ida Heller, she and Herman Scolnik were married April 1, 1933.

She was a life member of Haddassah.

Her husband preceded her in death in 1990.

Scolnik is survived by two sons, William, of Oakland, N.J., and Robert of Muskegon; a daughter-in-law, Merle, and two grandchildren, Amy and Michael, all of Muskegon; and three sisters.

A funeral service was held Dec. 27 in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Friends and family met in a memorial service at 2 p.m. Jan. 8 at Temple B'nai Israel in Muskegon.

If this were a traditional newspaper obituary, written in words sparse and few, Ida Scolnik's life and death would now pass into public record, out of view.

It wouldn't tell readers that Herman Scolnik's pet name for his wife was "Snooks." Or that her sisters called her "I."

Or that she loved ice cream, every night, a bowl of it before bed.

It wouldn't tell what it was like growing up the oldest child of Jewish immigrants who fled Russia in 1908 and came to a new life in a

new land, choosing Chicago because a cousin lived there.

It wouldn't tell of a wife's pride that her husband was never out of work, not even during the Depression when other people went hungry.

Words in a death notice also don't tell of a grandmother ending one of her last telephone conversations with her only granddaughter with this blessing: "Have a long life, and healthy one, and a good marriage, like your grandfather's, and mine."

They don't begin to explain the impact of a doctor's news six months ago: inoperable colon cancer.

"There's nothing we can do," he told Ida. "Go home."

Determined "not to be a burden" to anyone, least of all her sons, Ida sold the condominium she and her husband shared in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for 20 years after retirement. She sold her car. Packed 22 cartons of belongings. And moved herself to a retirement home in Pompano Beach.

For three months, almost four, she told no one of the pain.

Finally, on Oct. 16, it was too much. She told her daughter-in-law, Merle, long-distance that she wasn't sleeping; she wasn't eating; she was dying.

Two days later, she was in Muskegon. With family.

Ida Scolnik had come home to die.

She arrived, knowing she had only weeks left to live.

Within the first few days, Ida's family turned to Hospice of Muskegon for advice and care. Nurses arranged for pain management and medication at home. A social worker came to talk to everyone, preparing them for Ida's final journey.

"One of the things we've learned

is we don't procrastinate with a patient's care," said Mary Anne Gorman, executive director of hospice.

"You never know if tomorrow will come."

Sometimes, something wondrous happens when a mother comes home to die.

In the urgency of the moment, mothers and sons talk.

"The thing is, my mother taught me how to live," Bob Scolnik said. "Now she's teaching me how to die."

The night Ida died, Bob and his family were at her side.

When he and Merle were planning the memorial service, talking with Rabbi Alan Alpert about passages from the Bible to read and the eulogies they would give, he felt the separation.

"I have no parents," he said.

At 50, Bob Scolnik is motherless. Fatherless.

He and Merle have received hundreds of sympathy cards, many from people who tell them about the deaths of their parents, and the shift in generations.

"I guess it happens to us all, doesn't it?" he asks, quietly, alone.

As the calendar changed from October to the first days of November, Ida Scolnik grew impatient.

"I'm waiting," she said.

Waiting for death to find her.

"I am at peace," she assures everyone. "I have no regrets. I never harmed anyone, never hurt anybody. I can go now. It's OK."

But before the end came, she told her story one more time.

She starts with a scrapbook saved since before "Billy," 57, and "Bobby," were born.

Photographs are important to Ida.

"We didn't have a wedding picture, but every five years after that, for our anniversary, we did," she said.

Herman was an auto mechanic in the early years, then service manager for an automobile dealership. Ida stayed home, brought up the boys, managed the money, prepared for their future.

"It was a wonderful, wonderful life. He was a good guy," she said.

Fearful she spread it on too thick, she hastened to say: "He wasn't perfect." But she loved him. And he loved her. Everyone in the family, everyone who met them, knew it was so.

They danced like two people who knew each other's every move, every next step. It is one of the things people remember most about them.

Every time Merle talks about

At first, Ida Scolnik pushed her family to go out, keep life "normal," even taking them out to eat several times, far right. But as she got weaker, she didn't even have the strength to walk alone, turning to daughter-in-law Merle Scolnik for help.

Chronicle/
KEN STEVENS



"Why is dying so horrible?
Why does it take so long?"

Ida Scolnik

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her in-laws on the dance floor, she cries.

For two years before Herman's death, Ida took care of her husband, felled by emphysema and lung cancer. It is that memory that worries her, that somehow her being in the house will be too much work for Merle and Bob.

They have busy lives: He is president of Muskegon Brake and Distributing, a Norton Shores council member. She is a special education teacher. Both are busy in Temple B'nai Israel.

When Ida moved in, their lives changed; so did their schedules.

"I don't want to be a burden," Ida said.

If she says it once, she says it a hundred times.

"I don't want to be any trouble," she insists.

She tires easily, and by the end of the visit, she looks even smaller sitting in her chair than when she started talking.

She hasn't eaten in weeks, and she keeps track of her weight steadily dropping below the 90-pound mark.

"It's no good," she said, sipping only on water. "This is no way to live. For three months (in Florida), I prayed to God to die."

"I've had such a wonderful life on earth," she said. "I'm ready. I'm ready to go. I'm not scared. I want to see everyone — my husband, my sister, my brother and his wife. I'm ready to die."

■ ■ ■

Ida stays upstairs in Amy's room, even though there is a full apartment downstairs — built for Herman and her to stay summers.

But Ida wants to be with family these last weeks, not off by herself.

Family is fine, but Ida doesn't want to see anyone else. She isn't up to it. Her fatigue, the waiting, the death watch put everyone in a mood of uncertainty.

Bob realizes there are "a million questions" he never asked his mother.

At the suggestion of a Hospice nurse, Ida tried talking into a tape recorder, getting memories down on tape, but it was too much.

She started to cry.

And she hates crying. So she stopped talking, turned off the tape.

Bob said this is "perfectly in character," that by denying her tears, his mother is keeping her dignity. He follows suit.

During the last two weeks of his mother's life, he could hardly bear the pain that came from seeing her gaunt face, the circles around her eyes, the hands that reached out in faint gesture when she could not speak, the desire for death.

One Sunday night, when she could not even get out of bed, she asked: "Why is dying so horrible? Why does it take so long?"

Her words sting.

Grandson Michael indulges his grandmother with a little cello music, a welcome respite in her days of waiting. She reads; he practices his music before switching to video games or riding bikes with his best buddies; and life continues. "My son tells me we know each other better than ever because I'm here," Ida says. "I'm so grateful to be here."



Michael, 12, is afraid
he'll walk into a room and
find his grandmother dead.

"I thought it would be easier than this," he confided.

If not wanting to be a burden is his mother's mantra, this is his.

"I didn't know it was going to be so hard," he said. "I don't know what I thought ... that one day she'd be fine, then she'd close her eyes and die, and it would be OK, I guess."

What makes him saddest of all is opportunities lost.

He wants to ask her if she remembers the end of World War I. If she worried about the United States losing World War II, and "that we'd all become Nazis."

For Jewish families, the possibility was crucial.

He wants to know if Heller is

really the family's name — or if it's the invention of some immigration officer at Ellis Island in 1908.

He wants to know his great-grandmother's middle name.

He wants his mother well again.

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On Nov. 14, Ida said no more pictures.

She sent the photographer away. She's tired. She doesn't want anyone to see her.

■ ■ ■

Michael is the child in a house where his grandmother prepares to die.

He is 12, plays video games,

rides bikes with his friends, gets his homework done on time (mostly), plays the Michigan fight song on the cello at his grandma's urging.

He is afraid he'll walk into a room and find Ida dead. Merle fears the same, that there won't be time for goodbyes. Bob isn't sure what he wants.

"To close her eyes and go," he said. "That's what."

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Before Ida died, there was time for laughter.

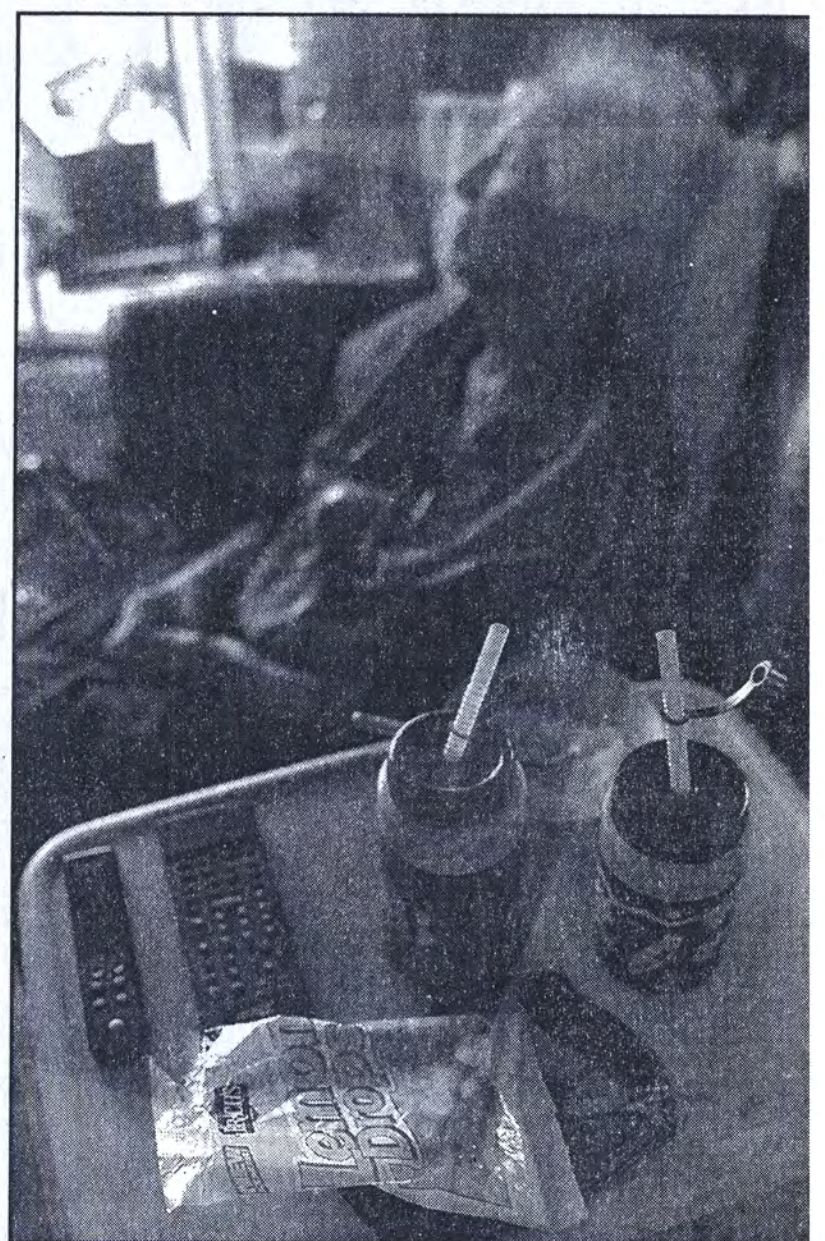
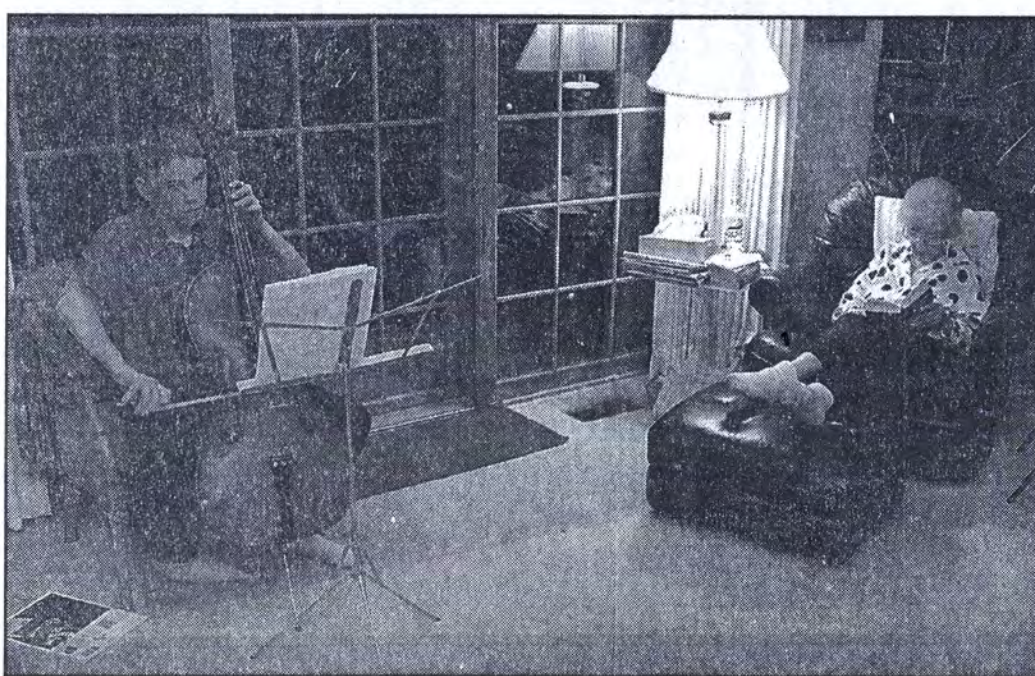
There were moments of such tenderness, it led her to blurt out in a rare display of emotion: "I'm so grateful for family. I'm so glad I'm here."

And for Bob to say: "I've gotten to know my mother better than I ever did."

Before Ida died, there were moments of fun.

The ancient game of mahjong, played with tiles similar to dominoes, was her passion. With Merle's help, and friends from

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During a visit with hospice social worker Marsha Barnosky, Ida confides she hasn't cried yet in front of family because she doesn't want them "to feel bad." Marsha reassures Ida it is "OK to cry," that "God gave us those tears to release our emotions." When she tells Ida that hospice "will be there for them, for Bob and Merle, and for the kids" after Ida's death, Ida reacts with a smile and a quick touch of the hand, above center. While she waits for the end, Ida spends many days in the family's TV room, sleeping and sitting in her son's favorite chair, above.

After getting a new Duragesic patch to offset the pain, Ida sleeps on the sofa in the TV room, while her family eats turkey dinner — a request of Amy's, who is home from college. Below, Bob takes a moment to compose himself after delivering his mother's eulogy at a memorial service in Muskegon during which he told her: "I'll see you when I see you."

Chronicle/KEN STEVENS



Although she could no longer eat, Ida Scolnik took her family out to restaurants. "What am I going to do?" she asked impishly. "Take my money with me?"

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Merle's mahjong club, she got in three more games.

Going out to eat and good food, these, too, were a passion.

Although she could no longer eat, during her first two weeks in Muskegon, she took her family out to restaurants: her treat.

"What am I going to do?" she asked, revealing an impish side. "Take my money with me?"

The night Ida died, friends came over to sit with Merle and Bob.

After the Hospice nurse and paramedics left, Bob announced — with some surprise — that he was starving. The friends went home, brought back fresh chopped liver and homemade challah bread, and the four of them ate. And ate.

"My mother would have liked that," he said. "Somehow, she would have gotten a kick out of that."

■ ■ ■

In his eulogy, Bob thanked his mother for teaching him so much.

Honesty and integrity. Perseverance and hard work. Personal discipline. Volunteerism. The importance of Judaism.

He promised her he'd keep track of the aunts, now that she's no longer there to be their "switchboard" and keep everyone informed about everyone else. He promised he'd keep family important.

"Remember that we all love you," he said, "and I'll see you when I see you."

■ ■

The rabbi was there for comfort, for inspiration.

"In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember her," he said at Ida's memorial service.

Hospice is there to help

Ida Scolnik was just one of the 295 people Hospice of Muskegon served in 1994.

Called in by families and physicians when a patient has weeks or months to live, Hospice answers with teams of nurses, aides, social workers and pastoral care.

If you or your family need Hospice, call:

■ Hospice of Muskegon, 728-3442.

■ Hospice of North Ottawa County, 846-2015.

■ Hospice of Oceana County, 861-4761.

"In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember her ...

"So long as we live, she too shall live, for she is now a part of us, as we remember her."

Surrounded by friends from the Jewish congregation and the community-at-large, Bob and Merle, Amy and Michael found solace. And love.

And as they wiped away their tears, the rabbi tried to give them peace.

He knew of the nights neither Bob nor Merle slept, watching over a woman lingering between the worlds of life and death. He knew Ida was weary, ready to be with her husband again, ready for the suffering to end.

But when she died, loneliness filled Ida's house.

And the hearts of the people who lived there.