

WWII orphan and refugee who became Canadian naval captain dies of COVID-19

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Francis Anderson was a boy of nine when Russian forces overran his family's summer villa in eastern Poland during the early stages of the Second World War.

Months later, along with his father and two siblings, Francis was deported to a labour camp in Siberia. At the time, his mother was still in Warsaw, where she was visiting her sister. Warsaw came under German control in keeping with terms of the August 1939 pact between Soviet and Nazi leaders that divided Poland in two.

Francis would never see his mother again. He would later be told that she died during the valiant but doomed Warsaw Uprising in August 1944.

The war would leave Francis an orphaned refugee. He would eventually immigrate to Canada as a farm worker, sponsor his remaining family, earn an engineering degree, and join the Royal Canadian Navy. He ascended to the rank

of captain during a 30-year military career then took over responsibility for the country's airports at Transport Canada.

Anderson died in Ottawa last month from COVID-19. He was 90 years old.



Francis Anderson in late 2020.

“He was able to survive what he did as a child and to flourish because he had this optimistic stubbornness,” said Michael Anderson, one of his three children. “Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t have let go of it: It was with him to the end.”

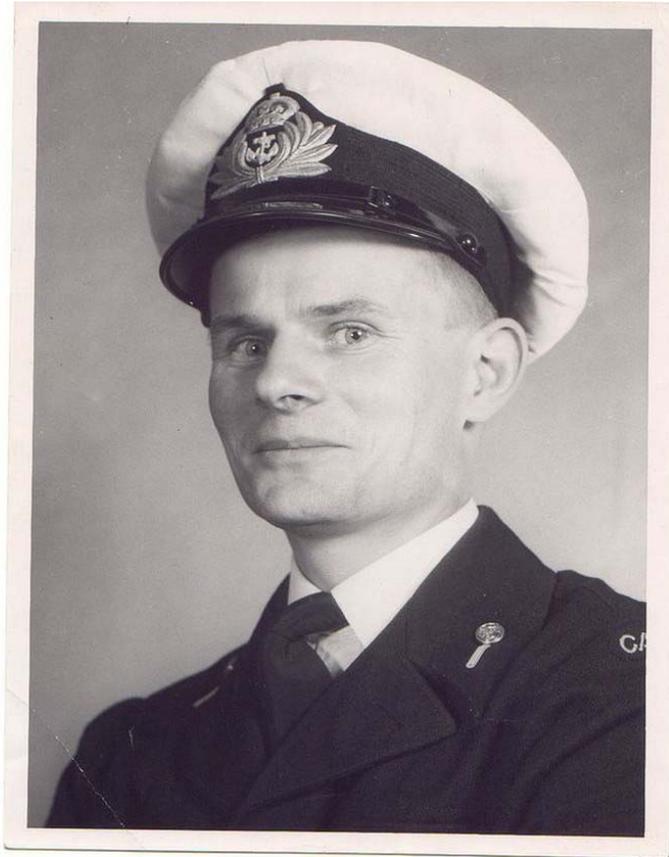
Anderson was born Franciszek Roman Tadeusz Stefczyk in August 1930 in the western Polish city of Poznan. (He would change his name to Francis Anderson after settling in Canada.) He was the son of an engineering professor at the University of Poznan, and the grandson of an economist who founded Poland’s system of rural co-operative credit unions.

His early childhood was idyllic. The family owned a roomy flat in the centre of Poznan, and a summer villa in Brzuchowice, near Lwow.

In late August 1939, as war loomed, Anderson’s father, Tadeusz, was mobilized by the Polish army. He left his children in the care of the family’s nanny, but returned to the villa one month later after the collapse of the Polish army. The area was by then occupied by the Russians.

In June 1940, the family and their nanny were deported to Siberia along with thousands of other Poles, many of them members of the intelligentsia. They were sent to a remote labour camp, where his father and older sister cut timber. Francis went to school with local Russian children. None of them were prepared for the Siberian winter, and all of them suffered.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the war's alliances suddenly shifted. With the Soviet Union now an Allied power, it agreed to free its Polish prisoners, including the Stefcyks, since Poland was an ostensible ally.



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The released Poles were sent south toward Iran. The Stefcyks went as far as Uzbekistan where they were told they would have to spend the winter working on a collective farm before moving on to Iran in the spring.

Conditions on the farm were even more primitive than those they had known in Siberia: They lived in a mud hut, used cow dung for cooking fuel, and drew water from a communal pond.

By December 1941, the entire family was sick with typhoid. Francis' father, desperately worried about his children, died two days before Christmas.

"The rest of the family was now in a similarly weakened condition," Anderson wrote of that moment in his unpublished memoir, "and we would have most likely perished from typhus as he did, should not providence step into the picture."

A touring Polish official discovered the orphaned family and took them to hospital, where the family's maid also succumbed to the disease. The children all recovered.

The three children travelled by boat in August 1942 to Iran, where they moved between refugee camps in Tehran, Ahwaz and Isfahan. At the end of the war, they were sent to Lebanon to await resettlement, an issue complicated by the fact that Poland was now behind the Iron Curtain.

In 1949, a Canadian official visited Lebanon in search of farm labourers, and Francis was confronted with a crucial decision: Should he launch a new life in another country or wait for things to change in Poland?

“It was a long, painful decision but to make a long story short, I decided to go for it,” Anderson wrote in his memoir. “I also reasoned that Canada looked like a country with a great future and I felt that somehow I should be part of it.”

In July 1949, he sailed with one suitcase. Anderson was 18 and alone when he landed at Pier 21 in Halifax.

He worked on a farm in Brampton, and took correspondence courses to improve his English and learn more about radio technology, a subject that had always intrigued him. After a year, the Brampton farm family, the MacLeans, helped him sponsor his brother, sister, her husband and their child as Canadian immigrants.

To help support them, Anderson went to work at a factory building radios, then moved to a better job assembling gasoline pumps in Toronto.



Anderson's built-in-the-backyard yacht being lifted over the house to be launched at Hartwell's locks in Ottawa (circa 1982).

In 1951, he enrolled in electrical engineering at the University of Toronto, where he met a recruitment officer for the Royal Canadian Navy. He joined the University Naval Training Division, which meant that the government paid for his schooling in return for his deferred military commitment.

After graduating in 1956, Anderson launched his career in the navy, where he specialized in avionics. He became the electrical officer of the navy's VF-870 Squadron in Shearwater, N.S. While stationed there, he met a female supply

officer, Lt. Andrée Savoie, at the officers' mess. The two quickly fell in love and were married in Quebec on July 1, 1958.

Anderson served at CFB Comox as base technical services officer, and held several senior positions with the Canadian military as director of avionics and armaments systems engineering, and director of individual training. He retired with the rank of colonel.

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He was still living independently with his wife when tragedy struck their family earlier this year: Their son, John, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Anderson went to Vancouver to care for his son, who died on May 5.

Two days after returning to Ottawa, Francis Anderson was diagnosed with COVID-19. At first, he was simply tired and weak. As was his custom, he told a visiting nurse that "everything's fine, everything's wonderful."

He was admitted to hospital with shortness of breath, and died on May 20 after six days in intensive care.

Published in the Ottawa Citizen, 25 June 2021

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