

This Life

Edited by Suzy Baldwin

Civic spirit made her a Pole apart

Nina Skoroszewski
Social worker
1919-2005

After decades of devoted community work and activism, Nina Skoroszewski has died aged 85 at the Holy Family Polish Nursing Home in Marayong, which she had helped set up to meet the needs of the ageing Polish community.

Her very privileged Polish upbringing, with the values of noblesse oblige firmly instilled, resulted in an Australian career dedicated to helping the disadvantaged through her professional and voluntary work, as well as enthusiastic mentoring.

She arrived in Australia as a 30-year-old refugee, completed a university degree, and launched

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SEV OZDOWSKI
Human Rights Commissioner

into selfless work that continued into her 70s until a stroke prevented her dynamic spirit and mind from continuing what had become her life's mission.

The significance of her contribution to the Polish community and to Australia was recognized in 1983 when she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia. Later she was decorated by the Polish government led by President Lech Walesa. In 1994 Poland's ambassador to Australia, Agnieszka Morawinska, travelled to Marayong to present the Cavalier Cross of the Order of Restoration of Poland to a wheelchair-bound Skoroszewski.

Born Antonina Maria Izbiszewska in Izbica, Poland, into a family of landowning gentry she grew up on an estate in Sosnowica, raised with English and French nannies. She was educated at the Sacred Heart Convent and matriculated in 1936. Later she enrolled at the School of Social and Political Science in Warsaw to study soci-

ology. Her education was interrupted when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939 and World War II began.

During the war she was a member of the Polish underground and also did welfare work for Caritas. After the war, while her family's extensive estate was appropriated, she resumed her education and graduated in 1945.

Following her ideals and the demand for interpreters and translators in free Europe, she left communist-ruled Poland for Belgium and France, where she worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration as a translator. There were other jobs too, including one in a button factory in Germany.

She arrived in Australia as a refugee in October 1950 and was sent first to the Bonnegilla Migrant Camp. Shortly after she was transferred to the Scheville Camp where for five years she remained and worked as secretary for the camp's director.

Following her marriage in May 1955 to Stanislaw Skoroszewski, a former Polish army officer and prisoner of war, the couple settled in Sydney. They bought a knock in Her Majesty's Arcade, between Castlereagh and Pitt streets, and Nina enrolled at Sydney University in the social work department, squeezing studying between serving customers.

In 1956 she graduated with honours and was employed as a senior social worker by the Australian Red Cross Society, where she remained until 1973. She then joined the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs as a senior social worker and Grant-in-Aid co-ordinator, where she worked until 1981.

In 1978 the state government appointed her to the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission, a key body to promote access and equity for all Australians irrespective of their ethnic origin, race or religion. She was involved in the preparation of its report, *Participation*.

Since then she had been active in the establishment and work of the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW, a multi-



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partisan lobby group which at its peak had delegates from most of the hundreds of ethnic organisations in NSW.

Her contribution was acknowledged in 1997 on the 21st anniversary of the establishment of the council, when the MP James Spillies described her as being among the "pioneers" at a session of the NSW upper house. The council's foundation chairman, Vadim "Bill" Jeyorow, said this week: "She was a pioneer for the ethnic communities to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage for the benefit of all Australians, in particular as a foundation member and a vice-chairman of the council."

From 1974 and throughout the 1980s, she was "the guiding light and mentor" in a voluntary ca-

pacety of the Polish Welfare and Information Bureau in Ashfield. She was elected president for several years.

"She was definitely behind every major initiative and every funding submission," recalled Irena Wojak, a former bureau worker. "She came to every single committee meeting and she supervised, whether she was president or not."

From 1984 until 1988 she was a member of the board of management of Home Care Service of NSW. In 1986 she was appointed a member to the Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services, and was involved with the *Don't Settle for Less* report.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Dr Sev Ozdowski: "She was able to

have her voice heard in Canberra and at the same time she was a person of enormous social conscience always willing to help."

After suffering a stroke in 1992, she moved from her Czestochowa home, where she remained until her death this year.

During her 13 years of debilitating frailty, she received support and loving care from Janka Suchy, and Nathalie Kusikowski, as well from the nursing home staff and the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

Nina Skoroszewski is survived by her sisters, Kings, who lives in Warsaw, and Marium, in Lyon, France.

Isabel Lukaszewski is the Herald's first ethnic affairs reporter.