BRONISLAWA KOPANIAK, RESISTANCE FIGHTER: 1919-2005

Polish beauty who fought the Nazis, helped former army officers out of the country and escorted Jews to safety later fled Communist rule to settle in Canada.

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On Sept. 3, 1939, in a small town in Poland, a blue-eyed, golden-haired, stylish and beautiful young woman turned 20. That day, too, Britain and France declared war against Germany for invading Poland two days earlier.

The fighting cut short her university studies in economics. Instead, Bronislawa Kopaniak helped many others affected by the war, using her intelligence, beauty and courage to work with the Polish resistance.

Through her efforts, many people escaped death. In turn, during the years when her own life was in danger, Mrs. Kopaniak frequently relied on the kindness and courage of strangers.

"There were different values. People had to help each other," Mrs. Kopaniak frequently told her daughter, Marguerite Kopaniak of Toronto. "And you had to take risks."

By October of 1939, Poland's western region had been annexed by Germany, the central area overseen by a German governor based in Krakow, and the eastern part under Soviet control. Poland had ceased to exist.

Born Bronislawa Krol to parents who had been involved in earlier efforts to liberate Poland when it had been divided among Russia, Austria and Germany, she was the youngest of four children. Her father, the owner of a copper mine who was considered a Polish patriot, died when she was 12, and she lived with her mother in their hometown of Czeladz in southwestern Poland.

There, in the months after the Nazi invasion, she and other young people gathered in cafés to discuss how to help their country. In January of 1940, she joined the resistance group Organizacja Bialego Orla, or White Eagle, and entered a world where people did not use their real names and came and went without revealing much about themselves. For her part, she adopted the code name Baska.

Mrs. Kopaniak's first assignment was to determine the allegiance of an official, Hieronim Palica, who had access to exit documents. White Eagle urgently needed to get out of the country those Polish army officers eager to carry on the fight from abroad.

Germany, as part of its plans for the Polish population, had ranked people along racial lines and classified Palica as Volksdeutsch, one of several Aryan subdivisions. But he had attended a Polish university, so his true beliefs were unclear. To find out, Mrs. Kopaniak took German lessons from him and made many pro-German remarks to assess his

reaction. Palica became upset and told her he'd like to strangle her for her sentiments. His allegiance lay with the Poles. With trust established, Palica passed documents to Mrs. Kopaniak. Through her, they reached the officers, many of whom escaped.

At the same time, she also learned that Palica had access to the list of people being rounded up, arrested and removed from their homes by the Nazi occupiers. Working with a friend, she was able to warn those on the list, supply them with food coupons and arrange false documents for their escape.

But the Germans grew suspicious of her activities. One night during the summer of 1941, she awoke to the sound of the Gestapo pounding on the door of her mother's first-floor apartment. Mrs. Kopaniak escaped through a window, hid in some bushes and melted into the countryside. She destroyed her papers and, for the next few months, travelled from town to town. Often hungry and tired, she was dependent on others for food, shelter and transportation. Smuggled across a checkpoint in the engine of a train, she ended up in Warsaw, where she was easily absorbed. Later, she learned that her mother had been arrested, held for a few months, then released.

To regain identity papers, Mrs. Kopaniak claimed to have come from a town she knew had been destroyed. She took as her surname that of a Polish hero, Lewandowicz, and, for a first name, Barbara. She would use it for the rest of her life.

In Warsaw, she continued her resistance work and helped Jews leave the Warsaw ghetto. Her trick, said her daughter, was to walk into the ghetto and then boldly escort people out to the safety of a distant forest, praying all the while they would not be challenged.

Once, Mrs. Kopaniak took in a Jewish woman. With both of them hungry, Mrs. Kopaniak took off her nylons, washed them and sold them so they could eat. Years later in a Warsaw café the woman recognized Mrs. Kopaniak, who remained remarkable for her beauty, and invited her and her family for dinner.

More than once, Mrs. Kopaniak counted on her beauty to help her pull off assignments. One involved mailing a certain package. Mrs. Kopaniak carried a basket of cherries to imply innocence and enlisted another attractive young woman as cover. When the package landed on the postal scale, it made a clunking sound, startling her friend. Mrs. Kopaniak denied there had been a noise when, in fact, there had been a clunk. The package contained a submachine gun.

By the time the war ended, Mrs. Kopaniak had become seriously ill with tuberculosis, and she spent a year in a sanatorium. Later, she tried to return home to Czeladz. But, by then, Poland was under Communist rule. Because of her wealthy background and her refusal to join the Communist Party, bureaucrats made her life difficult. All the same, ordinary people hailed her as a hero. A streetcar driver once stopped his vehicle, put his hand on his heart and saluted her.

A few years later, while working at an administrative job in industry, she met her boss, a mathematician and economist who had also been in the resistance. His name was Jozef Kopaniak, and they fell in love. They married in 1950, and Mrs. Kopaniak settled down to a peaceful life in the provinces. In the late 1950s, the couple moved to Warsaw, where Mr. Kopaniak headed Poland's first computer-research institute. In 1968, things took a turn for the worse after student riots erupted and the government found itself short of

soldiers. It tried to recruit the workers into a new militia. Mr. Kopaniak called a meeting of the 700 employees at his institute and appealed to them not to join up. To do so, he said, would mean fighting compatriots.

He resigned, only to be blacklisted. The family soon discovered that their mail was being opened and their telephone bugged. Around that time, Mr. Kopaniak was run down in the street by a car.

Poland was no longer safe for the Kopaniaks; it was time to leave. About 18 months later, Mrs. Kopaniak arrived in Canada with her young daughter and with a husband who was still recuperating.

Until the end of her life, Mrs. Kopaniak kept both her looks and sense of style. She looked back at the war with a sorrow for lives lost and with a feeling that her country had been abandoned by others, but without bitterness. "She was a beautiful woman both inside and out," her daughter said.

Bronislawa Kopaniak was born in Czeladz, Poland, on Sept. 3, 1919. She died in Toronto on Jan. 6, 2005. She was 85. Her husband predeceased her. She leaves her daughter, Marguerite, and grand-daughter Jacqueline.