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Barbara Kopaniak, 85: Beauty used brains to outwit Nazis

Regal woman lived a fearless life
Polish activist saved compatriots

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Like many eastern Europeans who came to Canada to rebuild lives shattered by World War II and its aftermath, Barbara Kopaniak lived a quiet life here, deliberately and gratefully.

She tended to the home for her husband Jozef, a brilliant Polish scientist who found lesser work at Ontario Hydro and teaching part-time at Ryerson, then a technical college, and she raised and encouraged her only child, Marguerite, now a medical doctor with a post-doctorate degree in immunology.

She died last month at 85.

Only her style — her regal carriage, the way she always stood for family snapshots at a slight three-quarter turn, one leg slightly bent, model-like, the clothes bought at department stores sales that seemed couturier on her, hinted that she was the granddaughter of wealthy nobility, the daughter of a successful and idealistic copper mine and property owner.

Her extraordinary eyes also gave her away — they flashed and spoke of adventure and courage. Last September her daughter threw a party. She realizes now it was because she wanted her then frail, failing mother — her best friend and soulmate — to be well again.

"My mother was so young at heart, so vital, so classy," said Dr. Marguerite Kopaniak. She used to have to drag her friends away if her mother was telling stories.

At the party, she looked across the room. Barbara Kopaniak was surrounded by five of the most handsome men there.

"They were fascinated. You could see they were really listening to her. They were leaning in to her. They weren't shifting their weight from one foot to the other, the way men do when they are bored at parties."

No wonder. The stories, like the woman, were extraordinary.

In January 1940, Bronislawa Krol was 20, a fair-haired beauty, the youngest of four children and the only one still living at home in the southern town of Czeladz, when she was approached by a former Polish officer who asked if she was willing to fight the German enemy.

Czeladz was in Silesia, an area adjacent to the Czech and German borders, and was part of an underground escape route for Poles to France via Hungary.

Krol's upper-class parents were Polish patriots who had funded and worked on an underground Polish newspaper advocating liberation from Russia. A wealthy property owner, her father, who died at a young age, was also a volunteer firefighter who refused to collect rent from tenants experiencing hard times. Steeped in altruism and idealism, Krol had been attending various clandestine youth meetings, as all around her Germans were arresting many of the town's leaders and taking them to Auschwitz.

False documents and passes were needed to whisk others out of the country to safety before they, too, were taken away to certain death. The man asked Krol to befriend Hieronim Palica, who worked for the German-run municipal authority and had access to the Germans' lists of people about to be arrested. Krol was supposed to recruit him — but first she had to ascertain where his sympathies lay.

She finagled German lessons with the man, during which she said disparaging things against Poles until one night, pale and shaking with rage, he stood up and said to her: "I would like to strangle snakes like you."

Thus began a relationship with Palica that resulted in hundreds of Poles being saved from Auschwitz, many of whom were sheltered in her parents' home until they could be spirited across the border. As well, Krol demanded from a school friend, the son of the local baker, free loaves of bread. She'd pack them in a suitcase and go to the prison. Young and beautiful, she would look at the guards with her mesmerizing eyes, tell them she was visiting her brother, or perhaps her fiancé, and when they let her in, as they invariably did, head straight to the sick bay where she passed out the bread.

It was 4:30 a.m. on Aug. 15, 1941, when the Gestapo banged down her family's front door with the butts of their machine guns. Asleep on the couch, Krol leapt out the window of the ground-floor apartment, catching her scarf on a lilac tree, and hid in some raspberry bushes.

She watched the German officer eye her scarf, then deliberately stand in front of the window to block the sight of it as he ordered his men to search the rest of the large apartment. (Her mother was arrested and released eight months later.) Krol became a

fugitive, following the Brynica River out of town, hiding in tunnels near the copper mines and in market-day crowds in neighbouring towns.

She was smart and savvy — having strangers buy her train tickets because she feared the authorities had posted her photo, finding an empty villa in a forest where she slept — but she also depended on the kindness and courage of strangers. An artist who housed her for two nights wept when she left before she could paint her portrait.

Without any documents, Krol used her wits, guile and beauty to stay alive and reach Warsaw, where she worked for the resistance. She got identity papers in a false name by pretending to be from a town the Germans had burned to the ground. "I have one witness, I need just one more person to sign," she said to strangers on the street.

When she was caught illegally crossing a border, she drew herself up — regally — to her full height of 5-foot-4 and said: " Gentlemen, look at me. I am a mess. Take me where I can wash up." They did; she escaped.

When she once unwittingly walked into a room where German officers were waiting to entrap resistance workers, she smiled brilliantly when asked for her identity papers, fumbling through her purse. "I must have changed purses," she said. The officer didn't buy it. She kept talking, flashing those eyes, offering him a cigarette as she lit one for herself. When he accepted, she knew she might be able to escape. "What am I supposed to do with you?" he asked her. "Let me go," she said. "Okay, but run fast," he answered.

She rode in German, not Polish, train cars because she reasoned there was less chance of being asked for her papers. But one time, sitting by the window, smoking her habitual cigarette even though she suffered from tuberculosis, she watched the reflection of a German officer approaching her. "Is this your luggage?" he asked. She was terrified but never lost her *sang-froid*. Exhaling slowly, smoke curling from the corner of her mouth, movie-star fashion, she didn't even deign to turn and look at him as she replied with a haughty "Yes." He walked on to the next compartment.

Told to post a machine gun to a partisan in another town, she asked a friend, another pretty young woman, to go to the post office with her. They wore their best dresses, Krol hired a horse-drawn carriage, bought cherries. They were the picture of carefree youth when they pulled up to the post office. When the bedazzled clerk threw the parcel on the weigh scales, there was a metallic clunk. "Oh, something went clunk," her friend said. "The scale went clunk," said the quick-thinking Krol.

Marguerite Kopaniak believes her mother saved hundreds of Jewish lives with her resistance work, which ended Aug. 1, 1944 with the 63-day Warsaw Uprising. After the war, her mother returned to Czeladz and ordinary life. But the people there hadn't forgotten what she did. If she was in a store, townspeople would beg to help carry her parcels. A tram driver once stopped, stood, placed one hand across his heart and saluted her with the other.

After the town was taken over by Communists, she organized a march to honour the old Poland — and was consequently forced into hiding. She was allowed to return only after the entire town signed a petition and threatened a general strike. She married Jozef Kopaniuk, a man as passionate and idealistic as she. In 1968, when students were protesting throughout Poland, he called a meeting of the 700 employees in his factory,

told them to support the students' cause, and resigned. It was 1970 before the Communists allowed them to leave the country, another year before they came to Canada.

People were always asking Barbara Kopaniak to write a book, to tell the world her stories. It's the stuff of movies, they'd tell her. More to the point, so was she, as beautiful and dashing as a Hayward or a Bacall. She refused them all, because, as she always said about her experiences: "It had to be done. How could you not?"