

The Ottawa Branch of the Polish-Canadian Women's Federation Celebrates 50 years of Volunteer Work

It starts like a ghost story...

“Dear Madame President:

*I write to you with a request for help in finding the burial site of Dr Krystyna Maria Zurowska (1903-1978), a medical doctor who emigrated to Canada (Toronto?) escaping communist reprisals and who was a member of the Board of Governors of the University in Sudbury. She was an active member of your organization as well as engaged in the causes of First Nations. She did not have children and died in 1978 (1973?)'...”*¹. ---- The request came in March of this year and it seemed an eerie but timely

reminder of the history of our Branch Number 8, founded 50 years ago in Ottawa precisely as a result of the efforts of Dr. Zurowska who travelled across Canada in her spare time to promote the recently created Polish-Canadian Women's Federation, contributing to the formation of new local branches in several provinces. During a visit to Ottawa in 1964, Dr. Krystyna managed to engage four young Polish immigrant women to her cause: Ewa Konopacka, Weronika Ramik, Regina Forester, and Jozefa Czerwinska. The women agreed to meet and work together towards creating a local branch devoted to the promotion of Polish language, culture and traditions, and to making a positive contribution to Canadian society.

The beginnings

They met at private homes and just like the Famous Five, over tea and pastries they planned and executed their strategies. From the beginning these women engaged in creating linkages with Canadian society, especially other women's and immigrant organizations. The work with the Canadian Women's Council has continued until this day. The organization grew as more women were drawn in from all generations of Polish immigrants, including descendants of the oldest Polish-Canadians from the Ottawa Valley (the “Polish Kashub” region around Barry's Bay and Wilno), as well as the continuing waves of new immigrants escaping the ravages of war and an oppressive communist regime.

Core belief in “having roots in order to grow wings”

These were generations of women who had experienced loss, war, exile, hunger, illness. They saw in Canada a peaceful land, and an opportunity to finally set roots and build the future for their children and grandchildren. Just like Sir L.H. Lafontaine predicted in his speech : “ all populations... must come from diverse portions of the world to make their way into [Canada's] vast forests as the resting place of their future families and their homes. Like us their desire must be the happiness and prosperity of Canada which they should endeavour to transmit to their descendants in this young and hospitable country...”². While the personal biographies of the founding members read like novels and each one provides a rich material for an epic film, where the heroines conquer insurmountable obstacles and sufferings, their collective efforts were centered on this very objective: become engaged citizens of their new homeland and contribute to build a better Canadian society. Life in the new country wasn't easy, there were language barriers, economic challenges. They believed that every Polish person exiled

1 Free translation from original letter in Polish written by Dr Aleksandra Zurowska, distant relative of Dr Krystyna Zurowska.

2 As quoted by the Right Hon. Adrienne Clarkson in her Lecture 5 “Gross National Happiness”. Transcribed from CBC radio show. 2014 Massey lectures. “Belonging: The Paradox of Citizenship”.

from their homeland is like a tropical plant growing out of their original environment, and just like that plant which requires special care to survive in a pot by the window, thus the Polish immigrant requires a link to their Polish culture and language, a fertilizer of cultural elements to best nourish their roots and enable them to prosper in the new land.³

Core work of the organization

The volunteer work at the Ottawa Branch of the Polish Canadian Women's Federation was centered on the individual, on making each person's lives better, not on gaining recognition and awards. The women began Polish language training for children and youth, offered student scholarships through the Jadwiga Dobrucka Foundation; provided material support and advice to newcomers (who often came after years of languishing in refugee camps). Their work frequently focused on the food that feeds the soul through arts (organizing concerts, theatre productions, poetry recitals, recitation contests), learning (gaining recognition for credit Polish language courses; supporting the Polish Language Studies program at Ottawa University; organizing lectures series at local universities); and crafts (offering workshops on Polish traditional crafts, donating Polish artifacts to local museums, decorating the annual Christmas Tree at the Canadian Museum of Civilization). This legacy is continued to this day.

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Ottawa Branch

The current members of the Ottawa Branch of the Polish Canadian Women's Federation are celebrating fifty years of volunteer activity. They are twenty six, young and young-at heart, working professionals and retirees, who keep nourishing their Polish roots with the fertilizer of culture and language while engaging actively with the wider Canadian society in Ottawa. Recent accomplishments include the Exhibition "Polish Spirit" at the Bytown Museum (showcased Polish-Canadians who contributed in Ottawa and environs), the work of the Branch President Ewa Zadarnowski at the Ottawa Council of Women as Cultural Affairs Convenor; collaboration with the Ethnocultural Council in several initiatives including an annual International Brunch and Silent Auction that takes place in the Fall at the Polish Combatants Hall on Waverly Street. The Ottawa Branch organizes an annual Polish Poetry Recitation contest for children and youth, this year in its 33rd edition. The women also contribute to the funding of the Polish Language Studies at the University of Ottawa and other scholarly work related to the Polish culture, including a publication of a book on the Polish Kashub Heritage of the Ottawa Valley (author Joshua C. Blank, to be published by McGill Queens University Press).

3 From the Polish Canadian Women's Federation 50th anniversary book "Ogniwa Jednego Lancucha 1956-2006" ("*Links in One Chain 1956-2006*". Toronto, Canada. 2006.)



Photo above: Members of the Ottawa Branch of the Polish-Canadian Women's Federation celebrating their 50th Anniversary with a brunch at a restaurant in Chelsea, QC. November 2014. Holding flowers are the three surviving founding members and the current President Ewa Zadarnowski.

Challenges for the future

The fall of communism brought a new time of prosperity for Poland and a decrease in immigration from Poland to Canada. The challenge now is to take care of the senior members while engaging the young second and third-generation of Polish-Canadian women to continue the work. Professional and family demands leave little time for volunteer activities, which need to be adapted to the preferences of a younger generation who grew up in Canada and whose first language is English, not Polish. There are plans for an increased social media presence (the website has been active since 2005) and energetic younger members of the branch are continually bringing new ideas and projects. This year in June there will be five members receiving the Ontario Volunteer Award for years of service in the organization. Yet the most lasting legacy of the Federation's work continues to be the life-long friendships and positive support for each other in daily life as women in Canada.

And the ghost story?

The Polish Institute for National Memory is in the process of identifying through DNA the remains of Dr Krystyna Zurowska's younger sister, who had been executed in 1949 by the Communist regime and buried in a mass grave which was recently discovered. The Federation of Polish Canadian Women was able to help them locate the Toronto Cemetery where Dr Zurowska was buried and provide the contact information necessary to continue the process. It was an honour to the memory of one of our founding members and a distinguished woman whose life and achievements are an example for all. A proper start to the year-long celebration of the Ottawa Branch 50th anniversary.

In Summary:

1. The Ottawa Branch of the Polish Canadian Women's Federation celebrates 50 years, the life and achievements of the founding members are an example for all of us to follow.
2. There are currently 26 active members, membership profile of women includes many working professionals (lawyers, engineers, accountants) and different age groups.
3. The organization is committed to promoting Polish language and culture and creating a positive contribution to Canadian society, activities include museum exhibits like the recent "Polish Spirit" at the Bytown Museum; concerts, an annual Polish poetry recitation contest, support for projects like the Polish Language Studies program at University of Ottawa and books/films on Polish culture in Canada.
4. The Branch works with other Ottawa organizations like Council of Women and the Ethnocultural Coalition.
5. They have a web site in English and Polish: Ottawa Branch <http://www.kpk-ottawa.org/fpk/>; Polish Canadian Women's Federation (National) www.federacjapolek.ca .