

TALK GIVEN TO THE PROBUS CLUB OF KHANDALLAH ON
22 FEBRUARY 2013
BY KRZYSTYNA KOLODYNSKA-DOWNEY

Some of you have commented on the unusual spelling of my Christian name: Krystyna, spelt KRYSTYNA. This is how my name is spelt in Polish. I was born in Poland a long time ago. I had a very happy early childhood but then 1939 came and changed all that.

On 1 September 1939 the Germans attacked Poland from the west and two weeks later their friends the Soviets invaded from the east. My father had been called into the army and was taken prisoner of war by the Germans in December 1939. I did not see him again until 1947 when he was demobbed and was able to come to NZ.

The Soviets (and the Russians under the Tzars before them) were in the habit of punishing their own citizens as well as other "undesirables" by deporting them to Siberia. And so a mass deportation of Poles began in early 1940. Altogether over 1.6 million were deported including my mother and me (I was a political prisoner at the age of 8).

In 1941 Germany and the Soviet Union fell out, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union and the Soviets became an ally of the West. As a result the Poles were given amnesty, prisoners of war were freed and a Polish army was formed. Those civilians who could, left the Soviet Union and were given temporary asylum in Persia (now Iran). Subsequently the British Government offered the Polish refugees the possibility of settling in British colonies in Africa, in India, and then the NZ Government offered to accept 700 Polish orphans and 200 adults who would look after them. My mother volunteered to be one of those adults and so after 2 years in Siberia and 2 years in Persia we arrived in NZ on 1 November 1944 and the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua came into existence.

Although there was a Polish primary and secondary school at the camp, my mother very wisely decided that the sooner I started to learn English the better it would be for my future. (While we all spoke Polish and some Russian, none of us children spoke English when we arrived).

And so I became a boarder at the Convent of the Sacred Heart (Sacre Coeur) in Auckland, where I spent 4 years. I learnt English (and French), passed SC and UE and enrolled at the University, the first of the Polish children to do so. At the age of 20 I graduated, majoring in English and French and I joined the Public Service (Health Department).

I had always been interested in foreign affairs, foreign languages and foreign travel and I thought of a diplomatic career. However, at that time one had to be NZ born to join the Department of Foreign Affairs, so that avenue was closed to me.

In those days all the interesting jobs were in Wellington and when I was offered a position in the Public Service Commission in Wellington I accepted it. The job was very interesting and stood me in good stead in my later career.

I subsequently applied for and was appointed to the staff of the National Commission for Unesco. Unesco is the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. It is one of the Specialised Agencies of the United Nations but it differs from the others in that all of its Member States have bodies called National Commissions whose function it is to advise the Government on how best the country concerned can work co-operatively with other countries and contribute to programmes of common interest and benefit.

In 1961 I had my big OE: for 4 months I travelled throughout Europe visiting the places I had always wanted to visit and then for 6 months I worked at Unesco Headquarters in Paris.

1961 was a most interesting and significant year in that 17 former colonies in Africa (British, French, Belgium etc) became independent and in need of help and advice in areas of Unesco's expertise. I was appointed to head a small unit with a big name: Clearing House of Information on African Needs. The job was fascinating and living and working in Paris was a wonderful experience.

I then returned to NZ and resumed work on the staff of the National Commission. There were at that time some 65,000 public service jobs and there was just one that I wanted - it was the Secretary of the National Commission for Unesco. However, the job was held by a gentleman who seemed set to stay in it for a long time. So instead of waiting I applied for and was appointed to the position of Education Officer at the State Services Commission. In the event I held that job for just a few months as the Secretary of the National Commission did the gentlemanly thing - he was appointed Registrar at Victoria University and I was appointed to replace him.

During the following 12 years I reorganised the National Commission, re-wrote its constitution, wrote a handbook for its members, started a regular newsletter etc. My staff and I organised regular meetings of the National Commission, its specialist sub-commissions and committees. Membership of these bodies consisted of the Permanent Heads of appropriate Government Departments, chief executives of NGOs and university and other experts in fields relevant to the work of Unesco. We prepared briefing for biennial General Conferences of Unesco as well as other international conferences; we recruited experts for Unesco field posts, arranged programmes for Unesco fellows and engaged in a host of other activities in support of Unesco's international programmes. In all our activities we worked very closely with the Department of Foreign Affairs.

I was a member of NZ delegations to five biennial General Conferences of Unesco in Paris and represented NZ at numerous other international conferences in Europe, Asia and North America.

And so although I did not have a career in the NZ diplomatic service, I did the next best thing: I was involved in international work; I was able to put my knowledge of foreign languages to good use; and I travelled extensively.

After 12 years in this most interesting and challenging job I decided to stop working for a while. But this did not last very long. NZ was elected for a three year term to the Executive Board of Unesco and I was invited to serve on it as an alternate member, with Mr Fred Turnovsky as member. This involved my taking part in the Board's sessions in Paris twice a year, each session lasting around 2 months. I sat on the Programme Commission, the Human Rights Committee, as well as Plenary Sessions of the Board.

I should mention that the National Commission's Secretariat was physically located in the Department of Education. In addition to our Unesco responsibilities we also served as the Department's External Relations Section. We were concerned with departmental overseas travel, overseas aid ~~and~~ in the field of education, placement of students in NZ institutions, as well as recruitment of NZ experts for service in developing countries etc. In fact I felt that if it came to the Department with a foreign stamp or a foreign name, it ended up in the External Relations Section.

This is a very much abridged version of my life and my career in the NZ Public Service (which in those years, unlike now, was a good employer).

You may be interested to know that not only was I the first foreigner to hold the jobs I did, but I was also the first woman. I have never felt discriminated against on either ground. So thank you, New Zealand.