

Looking back

She's remembered as loving

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

Waleria Skuratowicz — winner of a White House commendation for her work as a foster grandmother — is remembered as a caring woman who would never refuse to lend a helping hand.

The Farmington Hills resident died Saturday at Providence Hospital, Southfield, of respiratory arrest. She was 82.

This was a most loving person who sacrificed herself to the end, remembered her daughter, Helena Bapaska of Farmington Hills.

"She never refused to do anything for anybody. Even when she was crippled with arthritis, if I refused to do something she asked, she'd say, 'Way, do you refuse? If I could, I would do it for you.'"

This is the beauty I would like brought out.

Mrs. Skuratowicz and her late husband, John, were born in Poland. Both became teachers — he a high school instructor, she a kindergarten teacher. They later married.

The Skuratowiczs moved to Muskegon in the Soviet Union about 1930. There, they continued their teaching careers.

DURING WORLD War II, they were taken by cattle wagon to Germany. My dad worked in a factory, my mother to work on a farm. Whole lots of people were sent to work in Germany back then, Helena said.

Following the war, family members were reunited in Wola Peckien, a refugee camp near Frankfurt, Germany, where Helena's father taught math.

In 1949, the Skuratowiczs, sponsored by a Polish organization, immigrated to Detroit. But even as Americans, Helena said, her parents never forgot their Polish heritage.

To make ends meet, Helena's father worked on the Hudson Motor Car Co. assembly line. Her mother waited tables in a restaurant.

Later, her father opened a watch repair shop. By this time, her mother had turned her attention to raising a family.

Helena takes delight in recounting how her mother unveiled a hidden

talent for Grandma Moses-style painting at age 70.

"This is a woman who never went to art school yet produced more than 100 oil paintings, pastels and sketches. She learned how to paint all by herself. Her paintings often were of European scenes as she remembered them. Her favorite scenes included flowers."

"She was very imaginative."

AN ENGLISH teacher at Dearborn High School for four years, and a 25-year veteran of the classroom, Helena only recently discovered where her gift for creative writing came from.

As she recounted, "At 81, my mother began to recite poetry from memory in Russian and Polish, poetry I never knew she knew. She never recited poetry when I was young."

A prolific creator of classical and folk poetry, Mrs. Skuratowicz could recite poems all day, for five days a week, without repeating herself.

"She was like a living bard, singing out poems. I have tapes and tapes of her impromptu recitations," her daughter said.

Poems were never penned. So some were forgotten almost as quickly as Mrs. Skuratowicz could create them. The last poem came the day before she died. It was about a couch she had.

"I asked her to repeat the poem so I could write it down, but she just couldn't," her daughter said.

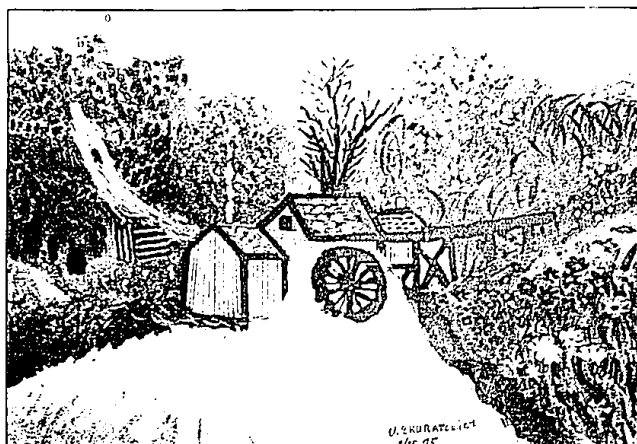
ALSO AT age 70, Mrs. Skuratowicz became involved in the federally sponsored foster grandparents program. Her foster grandchildren were mentally retarded children at the Plymouth State Home and Training School in Northville.

"She'd work there five hours a day, five days a week, playing games with the children, feeding them, talking to them, entertaining them. It also was the first time she really had a chance to learn English," Helena said.

In 1975, Mrs. Skuratowicz received a commendation from President Carter for 10 years of service in the foster grandparents program.

Her husband's death in 1979 was a tremendous blow. "She was completely broken up by my father's death," Helena said. "She stopped painting. About the only thing left at the end were her poems."

Other survivors include two sons, Eugene and Victor, both of San Francisco, seven grandchildren, and a great-grandchild. Services were held Tuesday at St. Clare of the Assisi Church, Farmington Hills. Burial was in Mount Olivet Cemetery, Detroit.



Waleria Skuratowicz of Farmington Hills fashioned this oil painting in 1975.

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