

Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka



Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka was selected for the 2011 Women Inspiring Europe Calendar.

One of the few that cannot be replaced

A tall, blond woman sits in the corner one of Warsaw's many coffeshops. She sips a coffee late even though it is already past 8 pm. It has been a cold December day with masses of snow falling unmercifully and turning the Polish capital's usual greyness into pure white. *"Warsaw actually looks nice these days"* Barbara Nowacka says and smiles. It will be one of only a few smiles this evening. Barbara came to talk about her mother.

This month, in April 2011, will mark the first anniversary of her mother's death. It will also be the anniversary of a national tragedy. On April, Poland suffered one of its worst political disasters after President Lech Kaczyński and an exclusive government delegation were killed in a plane crash over the Russian city of Smolensk. Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka was one of only a couple of companions to the president's delegation, hand-selected by Lech Kaczyński and his staff. One of the most important and out-spoken politician of the opposition, she had gained the respect of politicians of all colours for her sharp ability to transform her views and beliefs into political actions. At the time of the accident, daughter Barbara was heavily pregnant, due any minute. *"She wanted to spend the weekend after the trip with us. She loved our son and he adored her. But she never returned home. It's still impossible for him to understand."*

Izabela-Nowacka never ceased to fight, not for herself when she was suspended from university after she had refused to falter to the rule of the Communist regime, not for others when heavily armed police violently stormed a gay rights demonstration in the middle of the capital. The mayor back then who ordered the rough move of the police force on the protesters, was Kaczyński. Jaruga-Nowacka was a national parliamentarian and one of the organisers of the event. It's remarkable for her whole career that she managed to get even her opponents to collaborate years later. *"My mother never believed in revenge or the like. She tried to be constructive, in private as well as in public life."*, Barbara says. Her new-born daughter is fast asleep at home. Like a miracle, baby and mother remained unharmed from the shock and stress.

"Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka was one of the most impressive and outspoken feminist activists in Poland of last 20 years. She was the only one who successfully managed to work within women's movement and in politics." Wanda Nowicka today is the Executive Director of the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning, an organisation that Izabela-Jaruga had founded to advocate for reproductive rights and for legalising abortion in Poland. Nowicka and Jaruga-Nowacka have shared parts of the way, especially in overturning the country's 1993 anti-abortion law.

Taking her issues to the streets of Warsaw was something Jaruga-Nowacka never shyed away from, not even when she served as Deputy Prime Minister in the national government. Under her term in office, many things changed for the better for women and minorities in Poland *"She always spoke on behalf of the most vulnerable and socially excluded. She was not only engaged in political struggles, she personally engaged in defence of discriminated individuals."*, Nowicka remembers.

Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka became an active politician only in 1991 when her country took its first steps as a democracy. During the communist rule Nowacka, a trained ethnologist specialised in Mongolian had abstained from being politically active but never stopped debating the future of Poland and the possibilities for democratizing her homeland with friends and family. In 1992, she was one of the founding members of the Union of labour and 9 years later, she became the country's first Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Men and Women and another 3 years later, she was Deputy Prime Minister.

Her uncompromised fight for human rights, especially those of women and sexual minorities, made her a an icon also among civil society. As Wanda Nowicka puts it: *"She will always remain with women's movement in Poland as one of our heroines. She was the one of those few who cannot be easily replaced."*

Written by:

Shila MEYER-BEHJAT

International Editor – auFeminin Group

www.aufeminin.com

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