

Timelines

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Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam resigned, accusing US of betrayal

Crusader for Latvian art and culture in Australia

DAGNIJA ZARINS-GRESTE

1942-2009

THE family of Dagnija Zarins-Greste, forced to flee Latvia during World War II, spent five years in displaced persons camps in Germany before migrating to Australia in 1949, when Dagnija was seven.

The girl was fascinated by the colours of her adopted homeland and, while still at school, took painting lessons from "Prof" G.F. Bissietta, an art gallery owner. Family legend has it that she decided that the Heathcote High School uniform should reflect the Australian palette.

She designed a new one, fashionable and with the ochre colours of the Australian bush. Dagnija and her mother dyed material with natural pigments and sewed it. Gundega, her sister, proudly wore it to school, although it is not recorded how long the new costume was permitted.

Dagnija Zarins-Greste, who has died at 66, was born in Riga to Aleksandrs Zarins and his wife, Olita Lejietis. In Australia, the Zarins - with Dagnija's brother, Kristaps - settled in Engadine. Aleksandrs, an engineer, worked at the Lucas Heights reactor. The family went to Sydney Symphony concerts, plays, opera and the ballet, while staying part of the community of Latvian migrants.

After matriculating, Dagnija enrolled at Sydney University and East Sydney Technical College to study art. She was fascinated by the bohemian life and once helped to raid Hyde Park to present flowers to visiting Spanish musicians. Over time, however, she became disillusioned by the formality of her studies.

Zarins had met Rod (later Justice) Madgwick while taking the train to her classes. The couple moved to Melbourne, for his career and to give her a new focus. They married in the mid-1960s



Organisational skills ... Dagnija Zarins-Greste.

and she enrolled at the University of Melbourne.

In 1966, Madgwick became general secretary of the Public Service Association of Papua New Guinea, and they moved to Port Moresby. The marriage did not last and Zarins and their two daughters returned to Sydney. She bought a house in Birchgrove, completed a Diploma of Art Education and became an art teacher.

In 1980, she married Dr Ojars Greste, also of Latvian origin, who shared her deep appreciation of the arts. After their son was born in 1981, Zarins and Greste took a course in Latvian culture at Flinders University and she was elected to the Australian Latvian Artists Association.

After the re-founding of the Latvian Republic in 1991, her organisational skills came to the fore. In 1992 she was executive co-producer of a CD by the chamber choir Versija. In 1993, she was assistant curator of an Australian Latvian graphic art exhibition in Riga and producer of the Young Latvian Artists exhibition in Brisbane. She worked to have Latvian artists included in the 2006 Sydney Biennale.

Zarins was the editor-in-chief of the book *Australian Latvian Artists*. She had great drive and and sometimes she was a little exasperating, though her honesty usually ensured forgiveness.

Dagnija Zarins is survived by Ojars Greste; her children Inga, Sally and Edgars; four grandchildren; her brother and sister, and Rod Madgwick.

Peter Legzdins