Mary Osborn Polak Oenslager 1897–1995

Founder of the
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Her formal name was Mary Osborn Polak Oenslager, but to her multitude of friends she was "Zorka," a pet name bestowed in her childhood, meaning "shining light." The name was an apt one, say those who knew her during her long and active life. "Zorka sparkled and seemed to attract people of all ages as she moved within the glamorous circle of the New York theater world of the 30s and 40s," said a longtime friend. Afflicted in her youth with gravely impaired vision, the young Zorka probably never dreamed of such an exciting future.

Mary Osborn Polak was born into a well-to-do family with an impressive heritage. On her maternal side, she was a descendant of a founding family of Brooklyn and was very proud of her Brooklyn roots. Her maternal great-grandfather was John R. Pitkin, a merchant who founded East New York—Pitkin Avenue is named for him. She was the fourth generation on her paternal side to have been born and brought up on Clinton Avenue in the fashionable Brooklyn Heights section. She was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and a Junior League president.

Zorka was an only child. A serious ophthalmic condition in childhood steadily worsened until, by her middle years, she was legally blind. But in her sixties, she would regain her sight after a corneal transplant—one of the first such operations performed.

Her father, Dr. John Osborn Polak, was one of the country's leading gynecologists and obstetricians and a pioneer in the medical use of radium and also in improving childbirth

procedures. Zorka was 26 when her mother died suddenly. Together with her widowed father, she settled into the Bossert, an elegant residential hotel in Brooklyn Heights, which remained their home for many years. Before her father's death in 1931, she occasionally accompanied him on his trips abroad.

Once, on a European cruise, she encountered a group of Yale undergraduates including a young sophomore named Louis Auchincloss who would become a famous novelist. All of them had been advised to steer clear of the lady passenger who was "probably desperate for company," recalled Auchincloss. But they ignored the warning. "She was wonderful and although she was at least 15 years older, we all adored her. It was a great lesson to me not to take for granted first impressions."

Otherwise, she seemed to spend time and energies in supporting charities; the archives of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, then a widely read daily, are filled with society page accounts of her serving on boards, and she was photographed frequently—an attractive woman with smooth wavy hair and a winning smile. By the time she reached her mid-thirties, she seemed slated for spinsterhood.

Then, in 1937, Zorka's life changed completely when she met and married Donald Oenslager. He was tall and good-looking. He also was a successful and accomplished stage designer, an author, and a popular associate professor in the Yale University drama department, where students admiringly called him "The big O."

"Their meeting was like a romantic novel," Mr. Auchincloss remembers. "He was Prince Charming, already famous, and here was this dear, kind old girl no one expected

to marry." But marry they did in a very private ceremony at the Hotel Bossert and went off to honeymoon in Jamaica. Returning, they made their home on Fifth Avenue and plunged into the busy and creative life of New York theater people. Zorka reveled in the excitement of Broadway productions and quickly found her niche. Her husband had devised innovative lighting techniques using an electrical keyboard to modulate the intensity of stage lights, and even with her failing vision, she was able to help gauge the effects he sought and so capture the mood.

Mary Osborn Polak in 1936.

They were true partners, sharing their theater experiences, traveling widely, and opening their home to friends of all ages—including Yale students. Although childless, they "adopted" dozens of their friends' offspring, and always remembered them affectionately with presents at birthdays. Among the crowd of young people were the sons of drama critic John Mason Brown, who had been best man at their wedding. Zorka, always generous with her inherited wealth, had a habit of sending the young men black silk dress socks, always with a surprise—such as a government bond—tucked into the toe.

From her youth, Zorka had pursued an interest in women's health. She endowed programs at a number of institutions, including the Maternity Center Association and the Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn, where her father had received his medical training and in later years served as president. The hospital's John Osborn Polak Memorial Building is named in his honor.

Leading the fundraising drive to expand the facility helped hone Zorka's talents in philanthropy. She gave generously from her own wealth but she also knew how to cajole others to contribute: "You have to come on strong sometimes," she said.

Zorka's vision problems led to her interest in a new project. Recordings for the Blind grew out of the experience of World War II veterans with sight impairments, who discovered that they could not take advantage of the free education offered by the GI Bill of Rights because universities lacked facilities to assist them in reading textbooks. The organization's founder, Anne Macdonald, whose nursing experience alerted her to the need, called together a few people, including Zorka and her lifelong friend, Mary de Liagre, who pledged their help to serve as readers and also as fundraisers. Their first office was in borrowed quarters at a public library on 96th Street, a cramped, attic-like space on the third floor of a walkup building where they set up shop tucked away behind the book stacks. Their equipment was little more than a recording machine and a pile of 15-cent discs. There were no booths to screen out street noise. "You could sometimes hear a dog barking," remembered one volunteer reader.

The idea took off. Zorka, who seemed to know legions of potential contributors, was persuasive in getting gifted readers, among them Alistair Cooke and John Gunther. When the volunteers discovered a growing need for help outside New York, they responded with a national campaign.

Through Recordings for the Blind, Zorka endowed a program to provide Scholastic Achievement Awards for blind university degree recipients. She also proudly gave a celebrity-packed dinner in New York to honor the first blind student to receive a medical degree in the 20th century—an event that was attended by scores of the volunteers who had recorded every text and enabled the young doctor to complete his studies. The recipient, Dr. David Hartman, went on to become a psychiatrist.

Zorka became a gifted speaker who could mesmerize an audience. Her friends remember her standing with her head tilted upward, her voice lilting, and delivering an inspirational message that elicited gratifying pledges of help.

Dr. Peter Putnam, a longtime board member of Recordings for the Blind, insists Zorka's appeal was in her sincerity. "She was totally genuine, no pretense. And she was simply 'Zorka.'"

She was a generous supporter of cultural institutions, especially the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums of Art, which she visited frequently. And throughout her life she was a benefactor of the New York Philharmonic. She also was a faithful subscriber to the Friday afternoon concerts for 79 years, usually accompanied by one of her two nieces. During her years of being nearly blind, the opera and concerts were a solace.

When Zorka's husband died in 1975, she endowed a chair at the Yale School of Drama in his memory, and funded the Donald M. Oenslager Travel Fellowships for Yale design students. The Oenslagers' collection of drawings and prints of theater sets and costumes was donated to the Pierpont Morgan Library.

All the good works still left time for the parties she loved. Almost always arriving late, Zorka did not just slip in; she made an entrance, trilling "Helllooo" in a way that made everyone smile. She was famous for her malapropisms—she frequently used the expression "cock, stock, and barrel" and then would look bewildered at the hoots of laughter.

Mary Oenslager serving as chairman of a 1949 hospital building fund campaign.

Despite her poor eyesight, she loved to preside at the punchbowl, and on one occasion picked up and dipped her glove instead of the ladle, but joined in the hilarity when she discovered her mistake. On another, she bent to pick up an object and found herself holding the bare toes of a splendidly garbed African visitor.

A favorite incident concerned her lunching with friends and happily spotting a diner at another table wearing a replica of her own favorite straw boater. When she caught the wearer's eye, she smiled broadly and pointed to her own head, only to meet with a frozen look. When she repeated the gesture more insistently, the woman looked positively alarmed. Only after she left, did Zorka discover the favorite hat was at home and she had worn a totally different number. Her friends collected these "Zorkaisms."

Regaining her sight after the corneal transplant was a wonderful event in Zorka's life.

Blithely, she moved around the City, enjoying her new freedom. But as she aged, her friends advised her against traveling around by herself, especially making trips to her beloved Brooklyn. She assured them she was in no danger because she always wore sturdy, white nurses' shoes. "Nobody would attack a nurse, and besides, all the doormen know me."

When she died in 1995, her many friends crowded St. James Episcopal Church for the service. As is the custom, the church bells tolled once for each year of the departed's life—98 times. One loving friend remarked that if Zorka could have observed the mourners waiting in silence during the long, sonorous tribute of bells, she would have come up with a magnificent "Zorkaism" to fit the occasion.

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