Alexandra Pianoff was born in London in 1954. Her father was Alexei Pianoff, a Russian/French engineer, and her mother was Enid Rogers, then a recent arts graduate of Sydney University. They had met on a train in the south of France and soon married. Alex grew up with her mother, younger sister and father, later stepfather. She lived in various continents – Buenos Aires at one time, rural New Zealand another – she specially liked two periods at Coombe Springs, a Gurdjieff community near London. It was an upbringing in many ways mind-expanding but the incessant changes of place were stressful. The family eventually settled in Sydney.

Her most successful period at school, in most ways her best time ever, were the last years when she attended North Sydney Girls High School. She proved to be very skilled in languages and literature. She always enjoyed a language-based joke, for example – a typical one she liked was the sign in the psychiatrist’s waiting room, “Denial is not a river in Egypt.” But she was also very talented in ballet, and spent many intensive hours training in Miss Tweedie’s studio. She often said when fighting difficult times later, “The ballet training got me through.” After the School Certificate she left to join the ballet, but soon decided that ballet people were not interesting enough and returned to school. She rejoined her old class, and considering that she had to catch up on some months’ work, it was remarkable that she achieved second place in the State in English in the HSC.

She then did an Arts degree at Sydney University, eventually gaining first class honours in French. It was mostly not a happy time, for reasons not then clear but probably due to the onset of the Hodgkins disease that was diagnosed later; there was also her
mother’s second divorce and serious illness. She did however enjoy a period in Women’s College and made some good friends there.

Following graduation she won a scholarship for a masters degree (maîtrise ès lettres) in literature at the Sorbonne. She lived for some of the time in Paris with her Ukrainian grandmother ('Baba') and learned a great deal from her. But it became clear she was very ill and eventually the Hodgkins disease was diagnosed. It had only recently become curable and the severe radiotherapy caused problems years later.

Back in Sydney she enjoyed quite good health for a few years. She completed the thesis, and was largely responsible for choosing a lovely house among trees in Lane Cove where she and her mother moved. She lived there almost all the rest of her life and its calm atmosphere with an interior arranged as she wished proved always helpful to her health.

By that time many disturbing things had happened over a long period; she undertook an intensive psychoanalysis through the 1980s, which was a major effort on top of her work as a teacher with the Adult Migrant Education Service. Her teaching style involved a lot of personal interaction, which made the teaching great but required high levels of energy. She produced a published report on ‘English for nurses’, ¹ which combined her language skills with her unwished-for experience of the medical world. Besides that she gained a part-time degree in psychology at Macquarie University. Among the courses she was particularly interested in cohort studies, which deals with the how the people born at the same time go through life stages in similar ways, but in a different way from those born at other times. She was impressed with the lecturer’s opening comment, “Have you noticed how people 10 years older than you seem to go through life in a fog?” One cohort

in which she took a great interest were the “Bicentennial babies”, as she called them – the children of her friends who were born around 1988.

She married James Franklin, then a tutor in mathematics at the University of New South Wales, in 1985.

From about 1991 her health worsened and she was no longer able to do paid work. In that year she had a visit from her father, which went well and was a major event. She decided to become a Catholic and joined the Lane Cove parish through the RCIA program (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults). Though she had little interest in ritual or doctrine, her faith remained a basic orientation. With time now spent at home, she also wrote a book about her time in Paris based on her diaries from that time, but did not make serious attempts to have it published.

Around 1993 she was diagnosed with scleroderma, a largely untreatable auto-immune condition that gradually weakened her. She worked very hard with exercise and diet and was able to lead a reasonably enjoyable and productive life. She also read – a particular favourite was Virginia Woolf’s diaries, which describe the restricted life someone intelligent and very interested in people who is forced to stay at home calmly to deal with health problems. Classical music around the house was important: mostly she had 2MBS-FM on. She found it hard to keep in contact with friends as she could be stressed by unannounced visits or phone calls, but much appreciated letters, cards and photos of friends’ children.

A tortoiseshell cat arrived in 1996. The two had a mutually adoring relationship. Alex carefully trained the cat to have high self-esteem.

At the beginning of 2008 she insisted on doing the work of choosing a nursing home for her mother and taking her there. Her breathing and swallowing especially were badly
affected by the disease but she single-mindedly kept to her routine of exercise, shopping, cooking and washing up to a week before her death. In October 2008, she died after a few days in Royal North Shore Hospital, where she stayed to the last moment optimistic and interested in the people around her.

*James Franklin*


Caption for photo:

Alex Pianoff at Fox St, Lane Cove, c. 1985