

## Olga Baranovsky: Vivien Wilson

When I first arrived in Australia in 1971, I worked at Sydney University as a secretary in the Department of Town & Country Planning – not that they ever planned any countries, so far as I'm aware. The Secretary of the Department was a formidable Russian lady by the name of Olga Baranovsky. Everyone lived in fear of her, especially the students. At lunch time, the only time they had free, she would lock her door to eat lunch in her office. God forbid anyone should disturb her. 'Do you know how hard I work? I'm here at 8 am and between noon and 1pm is my lunch hour. I don't care that your assignment is due today! Go away and don't come back until after one!' she'd tell them. I never understood why she didn't simply place a box for their assignments outside her door.

Back in the early seventies, secretaries were expected to act as tea ladies, so Olga and I would take turns to make coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon for the whole Department. Everyone would gather in Olga's office except the Professor, who would take tea in his office with the door shut. Olga and I would then clear up and return to work. One morning, when I was particularly busy with a mountain of typing, I forgot to screw the lid back on the coffee.

The following morning Olga was preparing coffee. Suddenly a stream of invectives filled the Department. I hurried to see what all the fuss was about. Coffee powder covered every surface. Olga stood shaking with fury, her face a bright scarlet.

'Why didn't you check the lid was on before ...?' I stupidly ventured.

Her reply was unprintable.

'I'm resigning,' I told Rob, my young boss, as we sat eating lunch later that day. 'I can't take Olga and her temper for another day.'

'That would be like cutting off your nose to spite your face!' he replied.

I thought about it. I loved my work, the academics and the students, so I stayed on. Olga and I became fast friends. She came to my wedding, brought gifts when my daughters were born and has kept in touch ever since, until recently that is, when my Christmas card was returned, marked 'unknown at this address'. I suspect she has taken her temper to a higher authority.