

In Talking With... Zofia Mikos, Analytical Chemist, Novopharm

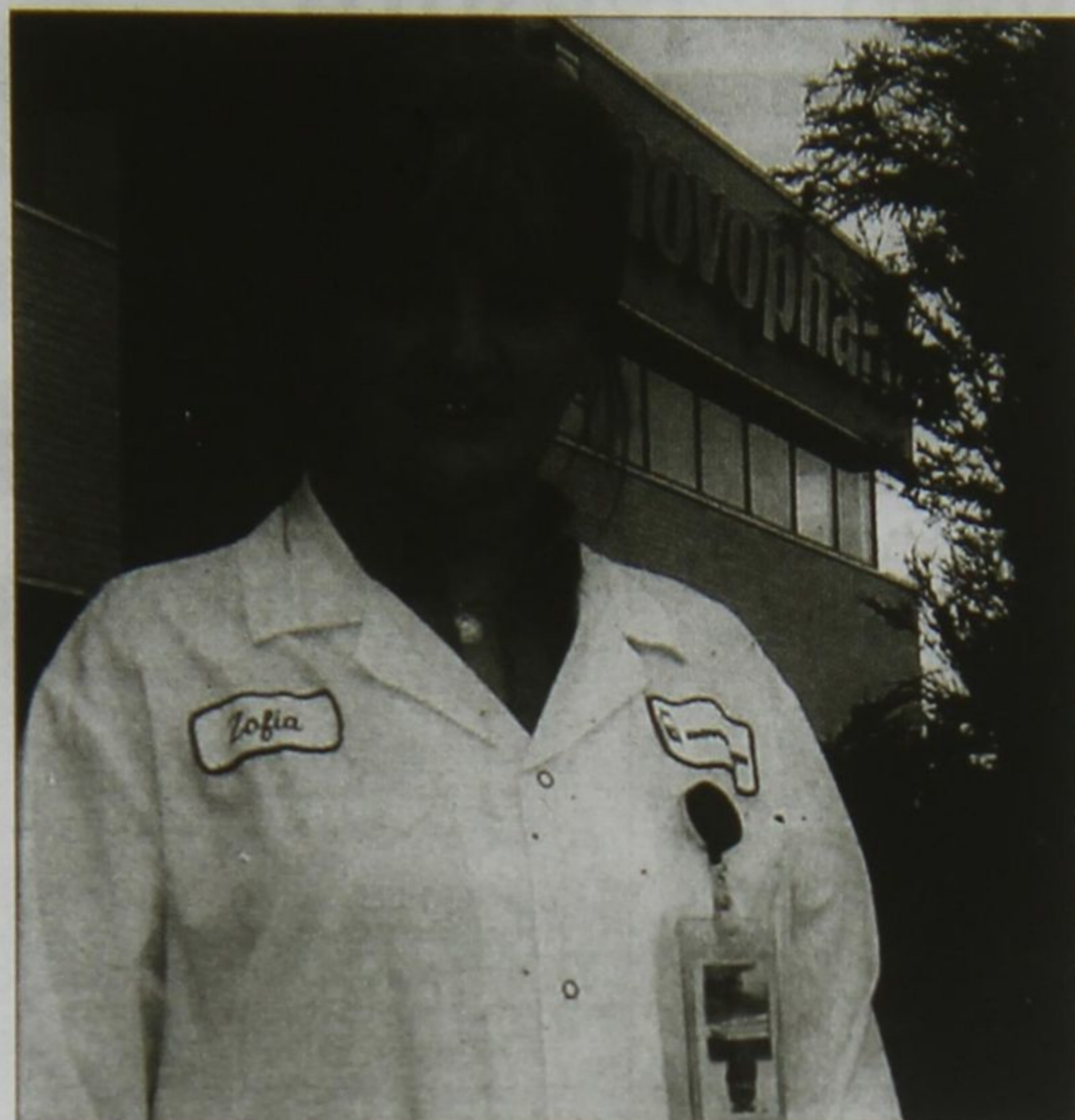
WSTM: Has chemistry always been your career?

ZM: No, but it has always been my dream, to work in a laboratory, ever since I was a girl growing up in Poland. We had very specialized high schools there, and I so wanted to go to one focussing on chemistry, but it was decided that was not a career suitable for a girl. So I went to a different school, and then to university where I took a degree in agriculture, in animal husbandry. For many years, I was a high school biology teacher.

WSTM: So you didn't become a chemist until you came to Canada?

ZM: That's right. I came in 1991, but my husband, who was a doctor, came over a year earlier, to see if life would be good here for our family. Although he wasn't able to find work as a doctor, he became a nurse, and he sponsored the rest of us to come to Canada.

We lived in Whitby, and I thought I would go back to school, but my English was very poor, so I took English lessons for eight months first, then I applied to the Food and Drug Technology program at Durham College. They wanted me to take some high school chemistry courses before they would even consider me, but I was stubborn and determined; I thought my education and experience were worth more than that. I went and



talked to the director of the program, and to my surprise he believed in me. He took me back down to the admissions people and told them to enroll me in the second year of the program.

WSTM: Was that a big challenge?

ZM: It was. I had to work very hard, especially since all the terminology was in a new language, and I had a job in a restaurant the whole time to help support the family. But I did

very well, and at my graduation, the director was the first to congratulate me. I was the first in my class to find work.

During the last term, that was early in 1994, I worked here on a coop placement for two weeks. The work was exactly what I was looking for, so I asked if I could apply to Novopharm, and they encouraged me. So by the time I graduated, I already had a job here, and I started as soon as classes were finished.

WSTM: So what exactly do chemists do here at Novopharm?

ZM: We are a generic pharmaceutical company; we produce a wide variety of products in a very closely regulated industry. So the chemists not only test and analyse the raw materials which go into the drugs, to make sure they're of high quality and are working together properly. We also perform tests on the finished product, to see that it does what it's supposed to do in different conditions, and is stable over a long time period.

We use very advanced instruments such as chromatographs and spectrometers, and the technology is upgrading rapidly, so that's very exciting.

WSTM: Have your responsibilities changed a lot over the last decade?

ZM: Yes, I'm now the leader of a team of six or seven chemists. That means I play a large role in determining the day-to-day priorities of the team, which projects require more time; some projects, of course, are "hotter" than others. I also help train the new chemists, so in a way I've gone back to teaching.

WSTM: When did you come to live in Stouffville?

ZM: About four years ago. My husband works at the psychiatric hospital in Whitby, so we lived very close to his work, and I did

all the commuting. But after the children were out of school, we decided to switch, so we came to Stouffville and now he commutes!

I grew up in a small town in Poland, so I love the friendliness and quietness of Stouffville. We live near the Lebovic Leisure Centre, and I spend a lot of time there, at the gym, the pool or the library. I also take dance lessons, I love to dance.

WSTM: What do you love most about your work?

ZM: There are different challenges every day; I love the problem-solving aspect of it, and knowing that I'm working in an industry that's dedicated to improving people's health.

Novopharm is also a wonderful place to work; there's a great cooperative spirit here. I knew I wanted to be here when I was a student, and I would be very happy to continue working here until I retire.

WSTM: Conditions in Poland have improved quite a bit since the fall of the Iron Curtain, haven't they? Do you ever wish you had stayed?

ZM: We return to visit every few years, we of course still have a lot of family in Poland. But when you decide to emigrate, it's a difficult decision, one that you have to commit your heart and soul to. So this is my country now, and it's a beautiful one. This is where I found my dream.

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