

Paul J. Stasiek  
Grade 12  
Ridgewood High School  
Norridge, Illinois  
Teacher: Mr. Matthew Bennett

### The Terrors of War and Genocide

My great grandfather, Pawel, was a farmer who traveled and sold his product throughout many southern Polish towns surrounding the city of Krakow. Throughout his many travels, he developed relationships with customers and local communities, one being the Polish-Jewish community in Krakow and another being the Jewish community of Niedzieliska- the town in which my great grandfather lived. Though differing in religious belief, Pawel developed relationships with these communities, and, even, some of his closest friendships. Pawel would work with the Jewish inhabitants of Niedzieliska and become close friends with many of them. He would develop not only relationships regarding his work but personal relationships as well. It was not until late 1940 that Pawel's relationships were being infringed upon by the disastrous force of Nazi Germany. With the Nazi invasion of Krakow, the establishment of the Krakow Ghetto in 1941, and the beginning of The Holocaust, my great grandfather began seeing right before his eyes the disappearance of some of his closest friends and colleagues.

Though Pawel was allowed to reside in Niedzieliska during the war, he continued to work and travel to Krakow regularly. A frequent stop of his: the Krakow Ghetto in Podgórze. As time elapsed, Pawel familiarized himself with the treacherous conditions that awaited the remaining Jewish inhabitants of Niedzieliska if they were forced to enter into the Ghetto. A close Jewish friend of Pawel's, Moniek, knew that it was probable that he too would be required to enter into the Ghetto. Pawel was familiar with what awaited Moniek and tried desperately to dissuade him from entering and to live out the war under a different identity. Pawel reasoned that Moniek looked more like the typical Polish man than a person of Jewish descent, but, nevertheless, Moniek had reported to the ghetto along with the rest of his family. Pawel,

knowing the conditions of the ghetto, had decided to make extra stops there and smuggle in food that he would otherwise take back with him to Niedzieliska. He continued to provide help to the inhabitants of the ghetto for as long as he could have under the violent war conditions of 1941 Krakow. Pawel managed to help out the struggling people of the ghetto and still make it home to Niedzieliska safely, but this all changed when he encountered the full force of a German officer who managed to see him waiting with food by the ghetto wall. Pawel, not capable of speaking German fluently, experienced fully what it meant to be hopeless. He was thrown underneath a bridge and expected nothing but immediate death. It was not unheard of to be killed by a Nazi officer simply for looking at them the wrong way, so Pawel automatically expected the worst. Until, a brave Jewish woman who knew the German language managed to have the officer set him free. Pawel did not understand what she was saying, but her pleading managed to save his life. Pawel did not know this woman's name, but he later found out that she was a higher ranking inhabitant of the ghetto who was often trusted by the Nazi officers. Petrified by this experience, he ended his efforts in aiding the inhabitants of the Krakow Ghetto. The war had gotten to him, and it turned him into someone who no longer focused on helping but, rather, on surviving. He continued living in Niedzieliska throughout the war, but the situation in Niedzieliska was also one where survival was most important. A Polish war criminal, Engelbert Guzdek, was stationed just outside Niedzieliska during the war (Szych , Zygmunt). Guzdek was a member of the German gendarmerie - a rural Nazi police force. Guzdek often terrorized many inhabitants of the neighboring towns, causing life to be under constant fear of death. Pawel experienced first hand the terror that Guzdek instilled on the people living in the towns when Guzdek murdered 93 Romanian inhabitants of a Szczurowa settlement (a town 2.3 miles from Niedzieliska). This

twisted crime was an achievement for Guzdek as he was rewarded by the Nazi Gestapo of Tarnow, and had many people providing him with great favors out of fear of death. Though Guzdek was later killed in Otfinow in 1943, his many crimes and terrors remained in the minds of the inhabitants of the towns near Szczurowa (Szych , Zygmunt). Pawel lived on to tell his story about the war before passing away in 1968. His story lives on in my family, and it reminds us of the many terrors that the war instilled upon the Jewish and Polish people. It reminds us of how a sick and twisted political force can split up friendships because of religion, how it can split up families, and how millions of innocent people can be murdered because of what God they believe in. But most importantly, it reminds us of the necessity to stand up when we see wrong being done. The heroic Jewish women who saved my great-grandfather's life is a prime example of that. Along with his story, this unknown Jewish women is forever remembered as someone who saved not only my great-grandfather, but every single person who descended from him.

Another individual who lived out The Holocaust in constant fear of death is a Polish-Jewish women by the name of Sima Wasser (Sima Gleichgewicht-Wasser). Sima lived a normal life in Warsaw prior to the war. She came from an upper-middle class family and lived comfortably; but this all changed with the Nazi-Germany invasion of Poland. When the Nazis built the Legionowo Ghetto, Sima and her family were forced to leave their current lives and move into a crowded room in the ghetto. Sima, having blonde hair and a light complexion, often passed as a non-Jewish Pole and managed to work as a smuggler to get food into the ghetto. One day, when Sima was on her way back to the ghetto, an acquaintance stopped her to notify her that the ghetto had been liquidated. That day, October 4, 1942, was the last day Sima saw her family. Hungry and infested with scabies, Sima went to the apartment of people she met during

her time smuggling. After staying with them for one night, Sima overheard them planning to report her to authorities. She escaped from their apartment and eventually ended up in the Gorzkowski household in a Warsaw suburb. Sima got to know the Gorzkowski's daughter, Pola, by living with her during her time at the Gorzkowski's. After Pola got married, she took Sima into her Uncle Jan Wojcicki's home. Jan had been a friend of Sima's uncle and allowed Sima to stay on his farm and do chores and work. Sima lived peacefully with the Wojcicki's until a neighbor had reported them for hiding a Jewish person. A German officer eventually came to the farm and questioned the family about the Jewish person that they were supposedly hiding. Sima, one wrong move away from death, had to pretend to be Krystyna Budna, and Jan Wojcicki had to give his all to convince the German officer that he would never hide a Jewish person. The officer believed him and left the farm, but the whole experience left Sima trembling of fear. Sima decided that it was now unsafe to continue living on the Wojcicki farm, so she tried desperately to obtain a Polish Identification Card in order to live as a regular Pole. These cards were very rarely faked, and it took a great effort to obtain one, but, through Pola's friend, Michal Stonkiewicz, Sima obtained a Polish ID and finally had the security of living as a Pole. With her new ID, Sima found a job with the Rogodzinski family as a nanny. During her time with the Rogodzinskis, Sima worked and lived normally, but she still lived under constant fear of being caught and murdered. Sima later ended up with the Godlewski family in Grudzkowola. Though the Godlewskis welcomed Sima in their home, she was still living under constant fear. Sima's fears were escalated during a near death experience in her journey for survival. Sima's whole body became swollen when she stepped on a nail and contracted a blood infection. This infection left Sima hospitalized on Christmas Eve, 1944 and nearly dying. The experience at the hospital is

when Sima's willingness to survive was tested, but, also, her identity was infringed upon by this will of survival. Sima was presented with nuns and priests due to her near death state. She was asked to confess to the priest and take communion right after. Sima, not knowing who to trust, did not tell the priest that she was Jewish. She took the communion with guilt and greatly feared that she would die as a result of lying to God. Sima lived out the next 20 days at the hospital until it was liberated by the Russian army on January 15th, 1945. After the war, Sima married Alexander Wasser in 1946. She attended nursing school and later had her first child, Jacob. Sima moved to Israel, lived there until 1958, and then immigrated to Brooklyn New York where she worked as a nurse at Beth-El Hospital. Sima passed away in 1994 while living in Florida, but her story lives on forever. Sima's story constantly reminds us of the terrors of a genocide and how families, friends, and even priests turn into people who can not be trusted. Genocides and war turn a nation hostile towards its own, they break up friendships and families, and they cause people of certain religious affiliations, ancestries, or other uncontrollable traits to fight for their life and live in constant fear of death (Sima Gleichgewicht-Wasser).

The stories of my great-grandfather, Pawel, and Sima Wasser exemplify the threats of war and genocide. These two stories show us the possibilities of a twisted political regime and how nations of people can be divided and turned against each other. Though these stories are similar with regard to political climate, setting, and the threats that loomed among the people described, they are also different. In my great-grandfather's wartime experience, he made an effort to help his Jewish friends and colleagues, but he was the one who ended being saved by a Jewish woman. After this near death experience, my great-grandfather ended his efforts of helping and eventually fell into constant thought of survival. On the other hand, Sima's story

reminds us of the many people who were not living in fear but still risked their family's lives and gave all their effort to helping their Jewish compatriots survive the genocidal environment of World War II. People like Pola Gorzkowska and the many families who helped Sima survive embody the traits necessary in a people to fight genocide and oppression. These stories are the embodiment of courage and bravery, and they show us the importance of standing up for our neighbors and doing good when we see bad being done. As these stories become older and World War II starts to feel like it occurred centuries ago, it is becoming increasingly important for people in the coming generations to discuss these stories and expose oppression, antisemitism, and hate in all forms. It will be the duty of my generation to preserve these narratives and shine light upon the tragedies of genocides to ensure that it never occurs again.

## Works Cited

“Sima Gleichgewicht-Wasser.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum,

[www.ushmm.org/remember/the-holocaust-survivors-and-victims-resource-center/benjamin-and-vladka-meed-registry-of-holocaust-survivors/behind-every-name-a-story/sima-gleichgewicht-wasser](http://www.ushmm.org/remember/the-holocaust-survivors-and-victims-resource-center/benjamin-and-vladka-meed-registry-of-holocaust-survivors/behind-every-name-a-story/sima-gleichgewicht-wasser).

“Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*,

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,

[www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person\\_advance\\_search.php](http://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_advance_search.php).

Szych , Zygmunt. *Guzdek: Kat Powiśla* . Dom Medialny , 2014.

Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team. “The Krakow Ghetto .” *Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team*, [www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/krakow/krakow.html](http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/krakow/krakow.html).