

## TWO FRIENDS: SIMA AND POLA, 1939-1945

Sima Gleichgevicht-Wasser was born in the Henrykow district of Warsaw and grew up in a traditional Jewish home. Her father, Joshua Gleichgevicht, was a manager in a cork insulation factory, and was also the proprietor of a clothes pressing business. The family was not wealthy but they lived comfortably.

After the German invasion, Sima and her family were forced to leave their homes and go to the Legionowo ghetto, 16 miles northeast of Warsaw. Sima's grandparents, uncles and aunts went to the Warsaw ghetto, where they lived together in a crowded apartment. There was little or no food arriving in the Warsaw ghetto, or in the Legionowo ghetto, and they were all starving. Sima, being able to pass as Polish, became a professional smuggler to supply her family with food.

Many times she was stopped by the police, and the food she was carrying was confiscated. One time a German guard stopped her as she was carrying food to the ghetto. He said that she was a Jew, and tried to force her to admit that she was Jewish. The guard had a German shepherd. He ordered the dog to attack her. She was severely bitten, but cried out that she was not a Jew. She told the guard, "Go ahead, kill me, I will not say I'm Jewish." All her life she bore the scars where the dog took chunks of her body. Another German guard, whom Sima had never seen before, took pity on her and vouched that he knew this girl, and that she was Polish and not Jewish. The Germans eventually discovered all the secret passages and it became too dangerous to get in and out of the Warsaw ghetto.

The Legionowo ghetto was liquidated on the morning of Simchat Tora, October 4, 1942. Sima had been out smuggling, and as she was returning to the ghetto someone she knew stopped her and told her not to bother, that the ghetto had been liquidated. She never saw her family again. There was no time for tears or emotions. She was in survival mode. She was exhausted, starving, and infected with scabies. She had to find a place to stay. Nobody wanted to take her in. She went to some people she knew from her smuggling and they let her sleep there for the night. The walls were thin, and she overheard them talking about how they didn't want her there and would report her to the authorities in the morning. She slipped out of their apartment that night. She had nowhere to go. She slept in haystacks.

After Sima's flight from Legionowo, a Polish couple, Stanislaw and Maria Gorzkowski, took Sima into their home in the Dabrowka suburb of Warsaw. They were the parents of Apolonia ("Pola") Gorzkowska, later Nikodemaska. Sima would stay with the Gorzkowskis off and on for the next two years. She eventually went into hiding in Dabrowka with Pola's aunt and uncle, Franciszka and Jan Wojcicki. Before the war Jan Wojcicki, a well-to-do farmer, had been friends with an uncle of Sima's, Simcha Inwentarz, who owned a hardware store. Sima cooked, cleaned, milked the cows and did other farm work for the Wojcickis. She remembered the warm and friendly atmosphere with the Wojcicki family and was grateful to find work with them. Sometimes when she thought nobody saw her she would go into the fields. When she heard dogs barking she would hide so that people passing by would not see her. Pola often visited her aunt and uncle Wojcicki, and Sima and Pola became close friends. They had no secrets between them. They talked about life, and shared their plans and dreams. Their friendship was so strong that Pola spent every free moment with Sima. Pola invited Sima to her parents' home, where she was warmly welcomed.

Pola said: "There are different people, some are criminals and some are good. My family didn't hate any race or any human being. Our religion says 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' It was the most natural thing to help another person who needed help." But Pola admits that her family went far beyond the minimum requirements of helping those in need. "My parents risked not only their own lives but also their children's lives. Not only the parents would be killed, their children would be killed too." Sima commented: "There were very few people like Pola's family. They did everything they could to help me. They were good and honorable people. They not only risked my life, they risked their lives. They had a family. If the Germans found a Jew with a Polish family they would execute the whole family. Pola did a very great thing for me. I was like a child taking its first steps."

After Sima had worked for the Wojcicki family for some time, somebody informed the Germans that there was a Jewish woman working in the house. Pola remembered: "My uncle saw through the window that the Germans were coming. He shouted 'Kryska, run!' but it was too late. Sima grabbed a hoe as if she was going to dig potatoes in the field. She had quick reflexes, and acted composed. If she hadn't acted quickly, if she had blushed or grimaced ... She had self-confidence." The Germans and the Polish police asked Sima about the Jewish woman who was reported to be hiding in the neighborhood. "They didn't recognize me. They asked me if I knew the Jewish girl who was hiding. They asked me what my name was. I said 'Krystyna Budna.' I had adopted that name to be able to move about in public, and used the nickname Krysia or Kryska. They asked me if that was my real

name. I answered, 'How could it not be my real name?' The Germans asked the farmhand Drapieski if there was a Jewish woman working there. He answered, 'This Kryska is the only person who is working here. There is no Jewish woman here.' Mr. Wojcicki invited the Germans and the Polish police into the dining room and asked them to sit down. He told them that he was an established and wealthy farmer and would not risk hiding a Jewish woman. The Germans believed him. As they were leaving, the German officer said "*Ordnung muss sein.*" (There must be order.) As soon as they left, Sima started to shake violently. It was no longer safe for Sima to stay at the Wojcicki's house, and she left.

Sima didn't look Jewish. She had a light complexion and was blonde. She looked Polish, had adopted a Polish name, and could easily pass as Polish. But for Sima to be able to live as a Pole, she **needed a *Kennkarte*, and to get a *Kennkarte* she needed a Polish birth certificate.** Pola agreed to obtain a Polish birth certificate for Sima and went to a church to get it. It was a particularly dangerous endeavor because the woman whose birth certificate Pola obtained was still alive and lived nearby. Once she had a birth certificate, Sima registered at Ossolinski Street, near Saski Park. Then Pola went to her friend Michal Stonkiewicz, pseudonym Harski, the underground captain, for help in getting Sima a *Kennkarte*. Michal said that Sima should go to the Registry of Population at Krakowskie Przedmiescie to a designated window. It was arranged ahead of time. She wasn't asked any questions, got fingerprinted and obtained a *Kennkarte*.

After Sima left the Wojcickis, Pola helped her to get a job as a housekeeper with Pola's friend Jadzia Rogozinska at Stanislawka Street 5 in the Grochow district of Warsaw, where she lived for a few months. Pola described how they went together to Sima's new home: "We took a train to the center of Warsaw. It was a huge event for us. We sat on opposite sides of the car facing each other. If someone saw us together and recognized us, I would be held responsible and she would lose her life. I escorted her to the home of my friend." Pola and Jadzia were attending the Midwifery School of the City of Warsaw (*Warszawka Miejska Szkoła Poloznych*) at Karowa Street 2. Sima lived with the couple, their son and the couple's brother and sister. Sima was their housekeeper and nanny. She was responsible for cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and taking care of the little boy. The family did not know that Sima was Jewish. Pola and her future husband, Pawel, came to visit Sima at the Rogozinski's home. They spent her days off together. Pola and Pawel became Sima's family.

Pola was married to Pawel Nikodemski in the cathedral in Warsaw's Old City in April 1944. As she

was greeting her guests, suddenly there was Sima in a hat and veil. Pola recalled, "I was astounded and delighted. She was putting herself in great danger, because some of the guests knew her. In spite of the danger she came to my wedding to congratulate me. I was so happy to see her, but I was scared for her, I wanted her to return safely, I didn't want anything to happen to her." Sima also remembered: "I remember when Pola got married I went to the church. She got married in the cathedral in Warsaw. I put on a hat with a veil and went. I wanted her to see that I was there. I cried because I was thinking I would never get married."

Sima stated: "It was a daily survival. Just to go out and mingle with people. Whenever I was walking in the street and somebody just looked at me my heart sank. When a German looked at me I thought he immediately knew I was Jewish. It is difficult to explain how hard it was. It was terrible. I didn't know **anybody** who was Jewish who **lived outside the ghetto. I was alone.**"

The Rogodzinski family left Warsaw and Sima got a job as a housekeeper with Maria and Jan Godlewski, a happily married couple with three children. Sima worked as a nanny to their children, including Marian who was an infant. Sima was very fond of the whole family and they were fond of her. She lived with the Godlewski family until the Warsaw Uprising on August 1, 1944.

During the Warsaw Uprising (August-October 1944) Sima suffered from hunger and lack of water. Once the uprising was suppressed after fierce street fighting, the German military expelled the remaining civilian population and systematically destroyed the entire city of Warsaw. Sima was sent with over half a million other Warsaw residents to a transit camp in Pruszkow, central Poland. Because Sima suffered from the bleeding associated with dysentery she wasn't sent to forced labor in Germany.

Sima joined Jan and Maria Godlewski who lived in Grudzkowola. They welcomed her warmly. One time in Grudzkowola Sima accidentally stepped on a nail and got a blood infection. Her whole body was swollen, she became unconscious and was taken to the hospital in Grojec. Medication was in short supply. Godlewski told the director of the hospital to save her life and he would pay whatever it cost. The doctor gave her prontosil, an antibacterial medication, from his private supply. Sima recalls, "It was Christmas Eve 1944. There were nuns there. They called a priest to perform the last rites and confession. I don't know how I confessed because I was delirious with a high temperature. During the night the crisis passed and I started to feel better. The next day a nun came

and told me that I would be receiving Communion. A priest came accompanied by an assistant. I took Communion. I felt guilty because during the confession I didn't say that I was Jewish. I didn't trust anybody. The priest was sworn to secrecy but I didn't say I was Jewish. I was afraid that I would die because I had lied. I asked God to forgive me." Sima stayed in the hospital in Grojec until liberation by the Russian army on January 15, 1945.

After the war Sima searched for Pola for two years before she finally found her. Pola was deeply touched that Sima went to the trouble to find her and thank her for saving Sima's life. Pola said: "There are very few people like Sima Wasser. We found each other. We are very similar. I'm a compassionate person and she is too." Pola told how Sima sent packages of oranges from Israel when they were unobtainable in socialist Poland in the 1950s. In 1987 in preparation for Pola's receiving the medal of the Righteous Among the Nations, Sima invited Pola to visit her in Queens, New York. Sima wanted her children and grandchildren to meet a woman who saved her life.

#### BRIEF BIOS

Sima Gleichgewicht- Wasser was born in Henrykow near Warsaw in 1923, and lived through World War II in Nazi-occupied Poland. She married Alexander Wasser in 1946. Sima and her husband left Poland in 1946 and lived in displaced persons camps (DPC) in Bad Reichenhall and in BergenBelsen, where Sima attended nursing school. Her first child, Jacob, was born in 1948 in a displaced persons camp in Germany. Then Sima and her family moved to Israel where they lived for 10 years. Her daughter Anne was born in 1952. The Wasser family moved to the United States in 1958. Sima worked as a registered nurse at Beth-El Hospital (now Brookdale University Hospital) in Brooklyn. She died in Florida in 1994.

Apolonia (Pola) Gorzkowska-Nikodemska was born in Dabrowka near Warsaw in 1922. During World War II she belonged to the underground. In 1944 she graduated from the Midwifery School of the City of Warsaw and married Pawel Nikodemski. After the war she moved to Lodz where she was a supervisor of midwives at the City Department of Health. She had two children, Teresa (1947- 2012) and Zbigniew Pawel (b. 1954). Pola received a medal of the Righteous Among the Nations in 1988. She died in Lodz in 1998.

Krystyna Sanderson

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