

Two Samaritans In Lvov

Authors Note: I cannot truly guarantee that every fact and detail of this story comes with complete historical accuracy. As to the details surrounding the lives these incredibly courageous people there seems to be some dispute and conflicting claims.

Certain things do rise above the confusion though- For more than 13 months two tenacious men (municipal sewer workers or petty thieves who used the subterranean passages to store their ill gotten gains?) stood apart from the evil that surrounded them and protected a legacy of generations that remains to this day through the heritage of children, grandchildren, and the gratitude of the nation of Israel.

We may not be able to know every facet of detail with regard to the lives of these two men and their families, but we do know that there are carob trees planted on the avenue of the righteous of the nations at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and medals have been struck in their honor bearing the Talmudic inscription,

*"Whoever saves a single soul,
is as if he had saved the whole world".*

Leopold Socha...

Stefan Wroblweski...

21 protected Jews...

after 13 months 10 of 21 survived in the Lvov ghetto sewers...

That is enough for this to be a story that should never be forgotten...

Let us remember-

In the scope of Russian/Ukrainian history Lvov is not much. Throughout the interplay of nations this Ukrainian-region town has been bumped from one dominant power to another.

Lvov had everything you'd imagine from an old, 2nd class regional center- Surrounding farmlands that aren't as productive as they might be... poor working-class citizens who cherish their vodka and continue their existence under the smokestacks of inefficient factories... spring flowers that don't last long enough and only momentarily brighten the scenery of the sooty brickwork... dreary autumn colors that warn of the assault of a bitterly cold winter to come... such is, and was, the life of Lvov.

But even in a place that many would consider dreary we know that God somehow has a way of finding a few who are receptive to goodness and decency and nobility- Stefania Podgo'rski never knew that first day when she snuck food into the Lvov Ghetto that in the end she would be responsible for having saved 13 people from the atrocity of the Nazi death camps. "They can only kill me once," the brave young woman proclaimed.

Also, at the risk of his own life Walentyna Zak saved every member of the Morgenstern family and many of their friends...

And there were many others who chose rather to suffer affliction with the wounded children of God than to enjoy the pleasures of security for a season.

But I invite you to visit Delaware, to the adopted home of Halina Wind Preston. It is there you find "The Rescuers Garden", a quiet spot of reflection that comes from the inspiration of a woman who dedicated the balance of her life to educating children regarding the time when the ultimate evil went without challenge. She reminded many of an honorable legacy of decency that affronted the darkness. Ms. Preston knew of these things for as a young girl she spent 13 dank months in the sewers of Lvov, protected (along with 20 others) by two bottom of the run working-class men, Leopold Socha and Stefan Wroblewski.

This is the story of these two men and their 21 charges.

Due to the horrendously inequitable settlement of the treaties that ended "the great war" Germany was destined for a long, long road to stability and restoration even without the disaster of a worldwide economic depression in 1929. The fractured, aging, inept leadership of the old Germany stumbled in

stupidity through the era of the Weimar Republic. The world was ripe for conflict and Germany was primed for a savior.

We now stand amazed at how the pale, egomaniacal, unbalanced son of a 3rd level Austrian bureaucrat named Schickelgruber could somehow capture the essence of a people with such a long legacy of art, architecture, and culture. How the currents of historic development could bring such a man to the forefront in a land of such majestic beauty and possibility is frightening. Surely evil was at work.

And what of Lvov? The great Depression by itself did not going to dramatically change life in that town. Having never tasted great prosperity Lvov seemed somewhat insulated from the ups and downs of developments throughout the world beyond. Throughout the troubled post war era Lvov's people eked out their existence as they had for generations. For this reason neither Stefan Wroblewski nor Leopold Socha lost a lot of sleep over the fact that their lot in life was to work in the dank and dismal sewers of Lvov. They'd not been born to nobility and had no thought of escape from the hand that fate had dealt them.

As young men they'd married and their wives accepted their men for what they were- small cogs in an isolated Ukranian city. Such was life, at least until the tide of evil brought all the citizens of the region to the point of decision.

As stated, at first the Ukraine seemed insulated from the events to the west in "the New Germany." Granted, Germany was flexing its muscles as an affront to the rest of the world and it was true that her national voice, Herr Hitler, was bombasting from one border to another with a message of destiny and pan-Germanism. Initially the Ribbentrop-Molotov accord of August 23, 1939 seemed to provide a buffer and a protection for the Russian people. Both sides agreed to complete non-aggression for ten years and there was some rumor that Russia might even inherit the crumbs of eastern Poland by secret protocol on the side of the agreement.

Thus it was that Lvov, all of Russia, and much of the world looked aside when the Blitzkrieg overran Poland one week later. If anything, the people of Lvov

rejoiced for they were immediately thrown into the role of regional capital for a territory within "The General Gouvernement". Nazi lawyer, Hans Frank came from Munich to oversee the area, to bring stability to the district, and to deal with those that he called "vermin" and "lice" and "the bubonic citizens".

The first to be detained were the teachers, priests, cultural leaders, and other members of the *intelligensia*. That, of course, left Stefan and Leopold free to continue their work maintaining the sewers.

This roundup of the traditional leaders of society caused some concern among the average citizens of Lvov but the reality was that generations of jealousy quickly tempered any sense of outrage among the general citizenry of the region. Many of the average people almost felt that justice had finally been meted out upon the privileged for life, too long, had been inequitable. A typical sewer worker doesn't shed a lot of tears when the town banker gets in trouble.

But that was only the first wave. Soon the populace of the region learned the tide of evil was going to affect every one of them for those municipal leaders were soon forced into labor gangs where they competed with the average man on the street for the production of simple food. Many commoners soon found that even their own meager gardens and storage bins were being raided by the Nazi authorities and collaborators. When "conscripted" (stolen!) the supplies were sent to "the fatherland" so that Germany might have adequate resources for "the home front" while the Ukrainian people were moved to near starvation rations.

On June 22, 1941, with no warning (and very little logic!) Germany unilaterally suspended the non-aggression accord and moved east on Russia. Three million German troops were accompanied by 500,000 axis allies as Grodno fell on June 23, and then Kaunas, Vilnius, Slonim... It took all of one week for the Nazi troops to pour through Lvov and beyond. Resistance seemed totally futile against the advance of the invaders of "Operation Barbarosa".

Town authority, Herr Frank, found that his five hundred "Order Service" police were soon replaced with the remnant of the military and a second wave of SS who came with once sick and treacherous goal in mind for those murderers

represented "Einsatzgruppen C". *Einsatzgruppen C* was the massive killing unit chartered for one purpose- "to purge the region of all undesirables". (Truthfully, some, Ukranian Metropolitan leader Andrej Septyckyj among them, at first welcomed the new stability that this "aktion" might bring. The enthusiasm soon waned as *Einsatzgruppen C* killed 200,000 within weeks of their arrival.

It was quickly determined that killing individuals and clusters of people by means of firearm execution was neither cost effective nor rapid enough to serve the purpose. Nazi ingenuity then created semi-truck trailer execution sites where scores of victims were slammed shut into the trailer while a hose brought carbon monoxide into the space from the truck's exhaust. But even that was not satisfactory for the hierarchy at Berlin determined that at that rate it would take 5-8 years to complete their ghoulish task.

On January 20, 1942, fifteen leaders met at a suburb of Berlin called Wannsee to consider the success of the mass-gassing experiments at the town of Chelmno in Poland and how it might accomplish "the final solution to the Jewish problem." The infatuation with known as "Nazi efficiency" quickly determined that considering all factors of construction, housing, staffing, and price of Zyklon B (which could be readily purchased in mass volumes from the "German Vermin Exterminating Company") the inevitable cost of death could be knocked down to less than two and one half pfennig per victim. That would get rid of 40 undesirables for only one mark!

Thus it was that soon every Jew, political *commisar*, partisan, and gypsy in the region was targeted for round-up, control, and deportation. Citizens of Lvov were first taken to Belzec, then Sobibor, and eventually to a railroad side yard called Auschwitz-Birkenau.

There were 7,000 Jews in Lvov when the Nazis marched in at the beginning of the summer of '41. By the end of that winter 90% of all Jews in occupied Russia were dead. But it was not so for 21 in Lvov- not so because of Leopold Sozhca and Stefan Wroblewski.

It is not completely clear as to how the scheme was first hatched and I wish I

could tell you that from the beginning these men were entirely altruistic and noble in their intentions, but that just is not reality. At first the two poor sewer workers saw an incredible opportunity develop before their eyes. Why not take advantage?

Some of the most prosperous members of their community were desperate for a place to hide. Can you blame two men (who had spent their whole professional lives in the sewers) for seizing the opportunity to extort 21 helpless and hopeless people who were desperate for refuge?

At first it truly was a "protection for a price" relationship. The refugees paid the two men a set amount per week and they knew that they would be provided for and protected. But as the weeks dragged into months some of the inhabitants of the sewers began to see their resources dwindle. Their chance at life was slipping away with the loss of their funds.

Finally, it was determined by the sewer dwellers that only those who could afford to continue to pay for their security should benefit from it.

One fateful morning as Leopold and Stefan came to the hiding zone they were told that a certain percentage of the 21 could no longer pay for their support and it was decided by the more financially stable refugees that the destitute would have to pay their way by finding food for the remainder. (The group dictate was that the ones who could not pay should come up from the sewer in the cover of darkness and hope to slip out of the ghetto into the countryside where they might forage and return or flee.)

Without a moment's hesitation Leopold Socha spoke fiercely, "No! As long as you are under our jurisdiction we are responsible for you. You are all equal! Either you all survive or nobody!"

That moment was a turning point for these two men and their families. Up to that point they had been mercenaries, performing a very dangerous task for greedy purposes. From that moment on they were courageous men who intended to do a righteous deed in the face of evil no matter what it might cost them personally.

We don't have adequate records to detail the totality of those remaining months of horror. We could make up little vignettes but your imagination would be just as accurate and it's truly not necessary.

Attrition, loss, escape... What we do know is that for 13 months two men, each a petty criminal in his own right, did something noble. Not only did they keep their charges alive with meager amounts of food and supplies but they would, once a week, trade out clothes that had been taken to their homes to be washed and returned. They found shoes and coats and whatever they could to make life endurable for those in the catacombs of filth.

We are told that as often as they could Stefan and Leopold would bring candles into the sewer tunnels on Friday so the faithful could light them to begin the Sabbath. At first the whole endeavor was about extortion but in the end it was about humanity.

As stated, when the horror ended 10 survivors, after more than a year cramped in the sewer canals, were finally able to see the light of day. It is reported the surviving remnant celebrated the surrender of Germany in the home of Leopold and Magdalena.

What of Socha? What of Wroblewsky? Were they rewarded for their noble efforts? Were they repaid? Were they held in esteem?

No. Truth be told, they were ostracized by the citizens of their region because of their deeds. Only months after the end of the war Socha was run down by a truck in a town in Poland. The "accident" was suspicious and many believed it was in response to his war-time activities. Some touted that he was "punished by God" for being a "Jew-lover."

Inevitably Leopold and Magdalena, Stefan and a wife (whose name I have never discovered) were honored as "Righteous among the nations" at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Today you can see their trees planted on "The Avenue of the Righteous" where these noble criminals remain memorialized.

“Lest we forget...” Such an important exercise in life.

*Greater love hath no man than this,
that he lay down his life...*

-John 15:13