

By Soren Dahl

12th Grade, Garfield High School, Seattle. Teacher: Heather Robison

Holocaust Writing, Art, and Film Contest 2019

Paula Stern: the Power of Faith

When I was first reading the survivor encyclopedias, I wanted to find people with a real connection to the Pacific Northwest. I came across Klaus and Paula Stern, who were the first Holocaust survivor couple to move to the region. I was interested in their story and started to research. As I read Paula's experience, however, I became inspired more by her actions and the relationship forged between her and her husband, which gave them both strength throughout and after the Holocaust. Her story is an amazing tale of survival and resistance, and a story about the power of hope through difficult times.

Paula was born Paula Schaul in Germany in 1922. Her dreams of becoming a nurse were dashed by increased anti-Jewish sentiment at the time, but she found work on Hachschara farms, which trained Jews in agriculture for a future life in Palestine. There she met and married Klaus Stern, but the two were separated when they were both deported to Auschwitz in 1943. Paula was assigned to a munitions factory, where she resisted the Nazi war machine by incorrectly throwing out good munitions. She survived the Nazi death marches and was liberated by Soviet troops. From there, Paula went back to her hometown, where she had agreed to meet Klaus after the war. Klaus wasn't there, but she received a note from him saying that he was alive as well and would meet her. After they reunited, they moved to Seattle and became the first survivor couple in the region.

What really struck me about this story was their separation, and lack of communication. In the age of smartphones and social media, communication is so casual and taken for granted

that we barely even think about it. Back then, it was hard to maintain communication over distances, even without the Nazi regime not allowing Jews to communicate at all. They were separated for over two years, and unable to even know if each other were alive during that time. With the staggering mortality rate of the Holocaust, it wouldn't be surprising if one or both of the couple had died, and without any records, there is no way to tell if either person had died or not. They eventually both found each other, but there were a number of ways that the miracle of reunification could have not happened.

Many of the genocide survivor stories I have heard of mention how surviving for the sake of others was an important part of the reason why they survived. When they were alone, people might have not found the strength to keep carrying on. I imagine this was at least partially the case for Paula. However, when other survivors have others still with them to carry on for, Paula only had the hope that her husband was alive. Her strength for survival, at least in part, came from something that was not tangible, something that came from within. That, I feel, is the most powerful part of Paula's story, and what inspires me the most. In the absence of evidence, faith is a powerful tool to draw strength from, and this strength can achieve great things.

Another thing I found powerful about the story of Paula Stern is how she was able to retain her humanity. This is evident to me through her sabotage of munitions, and expressing her humanity and resistance to the Nazi war machine. She was able to resist the oppression by not doing what she was told, and surviving when those in power wanted her to die. This is an important inspiring part of her story, because retaining humanity is the only way to resist a system that attempts to dehumanize. Later she helps start the Holocaust center in Seattle, encouraging people everywhere to retain their humanity, even in the face of overwhelming oppression.

What does Paula's story mean for me? I was certainly inspired, but to do what? Well, Paula's ability to have faith and hope reminds and strengthens me, and I will definitely remember how she was able to gather power from her faith. When I feel hopeless, I shouldn't give up, but find the strength to fulfill my goals, and hope that they are possible. Another element of her story that I can definitely connect to my current world is the message of humanity. While the new era of rapid information and instant communication can facilitate amazing relationships, it's sometimes easy to forget that there are real people behind those pixels. In a world where we can talk to anybody at any time, we need to remember that humanity is the key to any relationship. "Never again" starts with remembrance, and then introspection. We can look at the traits of genocide, and recognize empathy, righteousness, and humanity in the stories of survivors. We must relate to their stories, and recognize how we dehumanize and act in ways that lead to genocide. I hope that everybody can be inspired by these stories, and maybe the world can have a little more hope and humanity, moving away from death and towards "never again."