

SECOND PLACE HIGH SCHOOL PROSE

A Sense of Belonging

Amanda Gomez, Grade 10

Riverside Virtual School, Riverside, CA

Teacher: Leesa Rankins Moore

Survivor Testimony: Paula Popowski

As a high school student learning about the atrocities that occurred during World War II and the Holocaust, I have tried putting myself in the shoes of the survivors. What if I were torn from my family, my home? What if everything I've sometimes taken for granted, were suddenly gone? My teacher asked, "What do you bring when you don't know where you're going?" As I searched through testimonies from survivors, I noticed a recurring answer: all survivors carried their memories with them.

When I first watched Paula Popowski's testimony, I was inspired by her hope, resilience, and resourcefulness throughout such horrific circumstances. In November of 1942, Paula and her sister made a step towards protecting themselves. At that time, Germans gave the order that every Pole had to have an identification card, which was in both German and Polish. Carrying false papers or false identification cards often meant the difference between life and death for many Jews during this time. Paula describes how she and her sister had the help of a kind stranger in seeking out the gold their parents had buried in their backyard so that they could purchase Polish identification cards. "That's when I had to have this identification card, which that picture's mine, the handwriting is mine, the fingerprints are mine, but the name is not mine, and it's not my religion." [37:25] The Polish name on Paula's identification card was Apolonia. The name Paula (Pola) was a shortened version of that name. With her false identification card, Paula was never captured nor taken to a concentration camp.

Paula's story makes me think of what I carry every day, though my circumstances do not include fleeing war or genocide. As a daughter of Mexican descent, I was born in the United States, yet I carry with me proof of my citizenship. It is a card that fits in my wallet, yet its weight is heavier than its size may suggest. The irony of my situation is that I need my Real ID to prove I was born in the U.S., whereas the Jews who were persecuted during the Holocaust survived by denying their identity. Paula was forced to carry her identity in secret and constantly feared being exploited, captured, sent to the concentration camps, and killed. I can imagine the horror of not carrying my identification card with me, being arrested, deported, and taken away from my home and family. I know it cannot compare to what Paula Popowski endured, however I understand Paula's fear of being questioned about the right to belong.

The stories of humanity's darkest moments must never be forgotten. I promise to carry Paula's story with me because I know what it means to feel uncertain about where you belong. When I think about the question, "What do you bring with you when you don't know where you're going?" my answer becomes clear: I bring history, memories, and hope that hatred and fear have no place in the future.