FERNANDO CRUZ

Fernando Cruz graduated from Neuqua Valley High School, where he played on the men’s varsity soccer team. At NIU, Fernando is studying electrical engineering before he begins working for a successful company. “A Life during World War II” was important to Fernando because he examined a relative’s life and learned of her experiences with war.

Fernando wrote this essay in Nicole Kooistra’s English 103 course during the fall of 2010.
A LIFE DURING WORLD WAR II  
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You are held against your will due to your nationality or religion. They force you to live a life of constant terror and fear. You do not know if you will survive to see tomorrow. You are surrounded by death and the cries of the innocent. Your family becomes separated in the blink of an eye, and you are left wondering if someday you and your family will be reunited. The men in boots command you to work extremely long days. You are fed very little, and only the brave dare to close their eyes to sleep. You pray that this nightmare will come to an end, and peace will be restored. This surely cannot be real. But for Wanda Aksamit, this was the life she had to endure during World War II.

It was 1939, and the deadliest war in the world’s recent history had just begun. Wanda Aksamit was living with her mother, three sisters, and brother in Jaremcze in Eastern Poland: “At this time, in the land where I lived, no one spoke about the possibility of war. They all resumed their normal lives.” Although the war had already begun, everyone in the village continued with their daily jobs of building houses, working with cattle, and other hard labor. It was a very peaceful setting. The village was surrounded by dense, green woods. The snowy peaks of the mountains running from Russia to Poland stood in the distance. Wanda was sixteen at this time, and like most sixteen-year-old girls, she had no interest in politics. She and her village were not even aware that there was a war. Living far from the German/Polish border, they received little news. Many people during that time did not know what a television was, and only the extremely wealthy had a radio. Any important information was transmitted through two speakers in the center of the village. But for the first few years of the war, Wanda and her family continued living their calm, normal lives.

After three years, she married and had a baby boy. She and her new family continued to live in Jaremcze with her mother, brother, and sisters. It was not until one morning in 1943 that her life would be dramatically changed. Wanda awoke to a static voice coming from the speakers at the center of the village. The man was telling everyone that the German soldiers were making their way

through Poland, and they had twenty-four hours to evacuate the city. He announced that the Germans were taking the Polish to their work camps in Germany. When Wanda’s family heard the news, they thought the evacuation and working in the camps would only be temporary. Her family decided that running from the Germans would not be necessary. They hid all of their valuables and luxuries, thinking they would return back to them some day.

The following day, the Germans entered the city and posted a list with the names of those who would be going to the camps and what camp they were assigned to. Those who tried to flee or refused to go were immediately shot or beaten severely. It was during this time that Wanda’s family was separated. Her brother was taken to work in the fields and in the German estates. Her sister went to Hanover and laundered clothes for German soldiers. Wanda, her child, and her mother were taken to Eslinger to work in the factories to make German tanks and other weapons for the war. Her husband, however, was taken from his job, and to this day, she has no idea where he went, what happened to him, or if he is still alive.

Wanda was taken to the work camp in a train wagon that was crammed with many other people, their few possessions, and the cows that were allowed to come with them. Once they arrived at the camp, the men were taken to a separate building. Since Wanda’s child was still young, they allowed him to stay with her and Wanda’s mother. The building they stayed at was tall with many floors. Each room in the building had a few sets of bunk beds, three beds stacked on top of one another. Some of the rooms had small windows, while others had no windows at all. She described the room as very small and uncomfortable. There were twenty to thirty people crammed in each of these rooms. The walls were all brick, and the floors were made of decaying wood planks.

Once everyone was assigned a room, the soldiers assigned everyone certain shifts to work. The earliest shift started at 6:00 a.m., and everyone was awakened by an extremely loud siren-like alarm. The hours that Wanda was assigned were long and very difficult: “The workers received verbal and physical abuse. At the camp, it was all about discipline and work.” If anyone showed lack of effort, refused to work, or simply had no energy to continue, they were verbally abused, beaten, or in extreme circumstances, killed. Luckily for Wanda’s son, he did not have to witness any of
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these scenes. He was also fortunate enough to receive slightly more food than the other workers. All the workers were fed three times a day. They were served cold black coffee and bread. If there were any leftovers from the soup given to the soldiers, they were given to the workers. But it was usually only the broth without the meat and vegetables. Life in the camp was very difficult for Wanda, especially having to look over her son in addition to performing strenuous labor. She and her mom took turns watching him.

During the nights, it was hard to sleep. She was kept awake by the sound of gunfire and artillery shells screeching through the midnight sky. Because so many people lived in one room, sickness spread quickly, and many spent the night coughing and in pain. The first few nights were the hardest because she did not know if the soldiers would storm in and kill everyone or take her child away from her. She spent two years in this horrific nightmare, and she thought that she was going to die in the camp with her family.

It was not until one afternoon in 1945 that American, Polish, and British troops arrived at her camp and liberated everyone:

When the Polish, American, and British soldiers arrived to liberate the camp, everyone was very happy. I remember that the Americans brought us so much food and water. They gave us the same food they gave their soldiers. Of all the food they brought, the cans surprised me the most. It was canned meats with a tube in the center of the can with wax that was lit with a match. In five minutes it cooked the meat. The coffee now came with sugar in the form of cubes. Like the kind they gave to horses. I enjoyed it a lot. They also gave us chocolates packaged in small metal boxes covered with a special paper so moisture wouldn’t get in.

Wanda was happy and thankful that they had been freed, and it was the best food she had had in years. Although they were liberated, they had to stay at the camp until the train wagons arrived. The German soldiers were taken to a different camp, where they would be tried for what they had done. Once out of Germany and back in Poland, through different institutions that were created to reunite families, Wanda and her family were finally together again and in a healthy state. As for her husband, no one had seen or heard of him, and he was listed as MIA.
Many of the people were given the opportunity to immigrate to the United States and begin a new life, but Wanda’s mother wanted to return back to her homeland. However, this was no longer possible, because, after the war, eastern Poland was given to the Russians; her family lost everything they owned. They decided to go to Wroclaw, Poland. When they arrived, they were told that they could try to find an empty house and then register at the center of the city, where they gave the city all of their information. It was extremely difficult to find a house because so many had been damaged by the war or were already occupied. Eventually, her family was able to find a small house on the outskirts of the city that was located near a large park that looked like a dense forest. They spent many hours working on the house, because it had been damaged by the bombings. The house had no windows or doors, and some of the walls had been destroyed. Everyone was also assigned a job to help clean up the city: “Everyone was anxious to start their new life and family and begin to feel the peace and tranquility for the rest of their days in a life without bombings, shootings, death, murder, abuse, or constant suffering. Everyone wanted to feel the love and warmth of their loved ones and new friends.”

After a few months, Wanda found a job at an ammunition factory. It was not the best pay, and she began to look for another job while working at the factory. She started working early in the mornings in the wheat fields before heading to the factory. Soon, she got a job at a flower shop and would spend her days going from one job to the next. It was a hard few years, but it had to be done if she wanted her old life back. During this time, she returned to school and completed middle school and, consequently, was able to obtain a manager position at a flower shop. With this new position, she earned more money and left the factory and the wheat fields.

In January of 1955, Wanda married for the second time, in Wroclaw. That December, her daughter, Barbara Zboralska, was born, and three years later, her son, Czeslaw Zboralska, was born. After her ordeal, she raised her children to appreciate all the little things in life because people cannot know if everything will be stripped away from them someday. Wanda taught her children to treat others in a fair, loving way, no matter what nationality or religion they are. Although she lived through an horrific event, she
was reborn into a stronger woman with better morals and values and says that, in the end, we are all humans and should be helping each other instead of destroying other people’s lives.