

Sabina Wolanski

Title: *Destined to Live: One Woman's War, Life, Loves Remembered*

Author: Sabina Wolanski with Diana Bagnall

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Location of Book: Monash University, Lamm Jewish Library, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Sydney Jewish Museum and most public libraries.

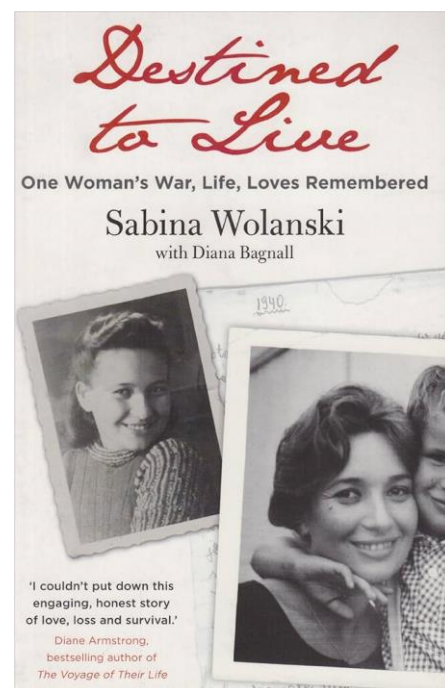
Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Borysław, Mraźnica labour camp; Wałbrzych; France: Paris

Australia: Sydney.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: adolescent survivor; pogrom; ghetto; labour camp; in-hiding.



Destined to Live is the 302-page memoir of Polish-born survivor Sabina Wolanski, who was twelve years old when the Nazis invaded her hometown of Borysław. She survived the war in hiding while her parents and brother were murdered. After emigrating to Australia in 1950, she was chosen to speak on behalf of the six million murdered Jews at the opening of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin in 2005. The memoir is based on the wartime diary she kept throughout the Holocaust years.

Pages 1–30 present a prologue and cover the author's childhood, family and history of Borysław. Pages 20–30 cover the outbreak of World War II and the Soviet occupation. Pages 31–75 describe the German occupation and escalating persecution of Borysław's Jews, from the 1941 pogrom to the Aktion in which the author's mother was murdered. Pages 76–146 recount the establishment and liquidation of the Borysław ghetto, the author's survival in hiding and in the Mraźnica labour camp, during the final months of the war, liberation, and the immediate post-war period. Pages 147–210 describe post-war life in Poland and Paris, her marriage, and emigration to Australia in 1950. Pages 211–282 cover family life, business, and the 1967 trial of Friedrich Hildebrand in Germany. Pages 283–302 include Sabina's speech at the 2005 opening of the Berlin Memorial and her reflections. The memoir also contains 21 historical photographs.

Sabina Wolanski (née Haberman) was born on 8 June 1927 in Borysław, south-eastern Poland (now Ukraine), to Sala and Fischl Haberman. She grew up in a comfortable, assimilated Jewish family with her older brother Josek. Her father was a bank director and successful wholesale merchant who traded in sugar, rice and flour. Although Jewish, the family was largely assimilated and Sabina identified primarily as Polish.

In September 1939, when Sabina was twelve, Germany invaded Poland and Borysław fell under Soviet control. The Habermans were persecuted by the Soviet authorities as so-called 'capitalists': they were evicted from their home, their property was confiscated, and Sabina's father, Rudolf, was arrested before eventually being released. The family narrowly avoided deportation to Siberia and resettled in modest accommodation. During this period, Sabina began attending a Soviet high school while her mother unsuccessfully sought permission to emigrate to the United States.

Following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Borysław was re-occupied by the Nazis. The following day, local Ukrainians launched the infamous Borysław pogrom in retaliation for the discovery of prisoners murdered by the NKVD. Around 350 Jews were killed, while many others were beaten, robbed and humiliated. The Habermans survived in hiding. Although the Germans soon restored order, persecution rapidly intensified through forced labour, starvation, and successive *Aktions*. Rudolf and Josek obtained work in the oil industry, temporarily protecting them from deportation, while Sabina and her mother survived in hiding.

In late 1941 and throughout 1942, a series of *Aktions* decimated the Jewish community of Borysław. During the major *Aktion* of 6 August 1942, Sabina and her mother were discovered after being denounced by a neighbour. They were taken to a holding centre, where Sabina witnessed extreme brutality. She was separated from her mother and forced into a clothing-sorting detail with a small group of women. The rest of the transport, including Sabina's mother, were deported to Bełżec and murdered. After a few days, Sabina was released.

In October 1942, the Germans established a ghetto in the poorest district of Borysław and the surviving Habermans were crammed into one room. Before long, her brother and father were taken to the Mraźnica labour camp.

As the Germans prepared to liquidate the ghetto in early 1943, Sabina again went into hiding. She first hid with her cousin's Christian nanny before joining eight others in an underground rabbit-hutch bunker at the home of Mr Machniki during the summer of 1943 – a Jew living under forged Polish identity papers obtained through his friendship with a German officer.

After Ukrainian militiamen discovered the bunker in autumn 1943 its occupants were imprisoned and scheduled for execution the following day. Sabina alone was spared through the intervention of Walek Eisenstein, head of the Jewish Police and father of Sabina's boyfriend Imek. Sabina subsequently joined her father, brother and Imek's family at the Mraźnica labour camp.

Soon afterwards, Sabina resumed hiding with several Christian families under the false identity of Sabina Kulawicz. Meanwhile, Josek repeatedly escaped from the labour camp to build a forest bunker, where Sabina later hid with nine other Jewish fugitives in primitive conditions, surviving on food supplied by Josek and his Polish contacts.

In the spring of 1944, Walek Eisenstein learned that the Germans were planning to search the forest and sent a messenger to bring Sabina out of the bunker. When she returned the following day, the bunker had been emptied by German officers and all of its occupants had disappeared. With nowhere else to go, she returned to the Mraźnica labour camp, only to learn that her father and brother had been executed by a German firing squad two days earlier.

Devastated and alone, Sabina wandered the streets of Borysław before seeking refuge once more with Mr Machniki, who hid her in his cellar for seventeen days until the Soviet liberation on 6 August 1944.

Orphaned at seventeen, Sabina struggled to rebuild her life amid the instability of post-war Poland. After periods of displacement and temporary employment, she married fellow survivor Zdenek (Dennis) Wolanski in 1948. The couple lived in Paris while awaiting emigration, before settling in Sydney in 1950, where they established a successful tie manufacturing business and raised two children. In 1967 Sabina returned to Germany to testify at the trial of former SS Mraźnica labour camp Commandant Friedrich Hildebrand, who ordered the execution of her father and brother. From the early 1990s she began sharing her testimony publicly, culminating in her address at the inauguration of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin in 2005.

Destined to Live is an eloquently written and detailed autobiography of the author's life and wartime experiences. Translated wartime diary entries appear alongside the author's retrospective reflections and recollections. Acknowledging the limitations of traumatic memory, the author also supplements her personal testimony with historical research to contextualise events. The memoir offers thoughtful reflections on the Jewish police of Borysław, survivor trauma, the complexity of memory and the enduring legacy of the Holocaust. Published by Fourth Estate (HarperCollins) in 2008, the memoir is an important account of both individual survival and the destruction of the Jewish community of Borysław.