

SAVED FROM THE TREBLINKA DEATH TRAIN



Jelena Kelner was born on October 21, 1914, in the village of Padina in the Kovačica district, the only child of Jozefina (née Kraus) and Teodor Kelner. Her father was taken from Topovske Šupe in Belgrade to an unknown destination on October 4, 1941. Her first husband, Leon Išah, a lawyer from Bitola, was also executed in the Holocaust, as were many of her relatives.

After the war she returned to Belgrade with her mother. She was employed at the Institute of Hygiene, where she specialised in bacteriology. She was assigned by the state in 1950 to work in Pirot, then in Niš, and returned in 1955 to Belgrade, where she worked at the Institute for Tuberculosis. She spent the last twenty years of her career as a bacteriologist at Železnička Hospital (later Dragiša Mišović Hospital). In 1961 she married engineer Franja Hidvegi.

The Jewish Medical Service administration was located in the premises of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Belgrade, where all the Jewish doctors, pharmacists, nurses and other health workers in the city had to report. The service was headed by Dr Isak Eškenazi and Dr Bukić Pijade was the hospital director.

My first post was at a clinic in the Oneg Šabat building in Dorćol. At the time I was supposed to be an intern and worked beside the older doctors. Dr Bukica Levi was also working there for some time. I was

afraid for my parents and stayed with them until August 15, 1941, the day when all the Jews were expelled from Banat. When I returned to Belgrade, I reported for work and was given my roster for a Jewish hospital which had been set up in the building of the Jewish Women's Society at 2 Visokog Stevana Street. The Jewish Medical Service was established by a Gestapo decree which banned Jews from treatment in other hospitals or clinics.

The hospital was well equipped, under the circumstances. The doctors brought their own medical instruments and the pharmacists their own medicines. There were about a hundred beds in the hospital. However the situation became more and more difficult every day. There were so many helpless Jews in Belgrade and many were forced to leave the state hospitals. There were a large number of sick, elderly and helpless Jews expelled from Banat.

As far as I remember, as well as the clinic in the Oneg Šabat in Jevrejska Street, we had others in the Federation building, in Zmaj Jovina Street, at 19 Kosmajaska Street (as part of the synagogue) and at Tašmajdan next to the German Police Headquarters for Jews.

Things became worse in Belgrade when the first camp was established in Topovske Šupe, near where the Mostar interchange and the Belgrade Fair stand today. The Jewish men expelled from Banat were taken there first and then, ten days later, in September 1941, all the others from Belgrade.

We doctors tried to house those most in danger in the hospital. All our efforts went into creating as much space as we could in order to admit as many patients as possible. Even under these circumstances, the patients had to be given medical attention, their histories had to be written up, precise records had to be kept of everyone who received treatment because the Germans would check these every day. There were not only inspections, but also a cruel procedure. The Germans didn't examine the patients, they would merely point at any patient they considered shouldn't be in the hospital and they would be returned to the camp immediately. So there was an ever-present climate of fear. The Gestapo would storm the hospital without warning and take away selected patients, and sometimes hospital staff as well.

Despite these conditions we took our work extremely seriously and conscientiously. I remember one girl who was in the neurological department. She was about twenty years old, a refugee from Austria who had been transferred from Šabac hospital because she was com-

pletely immobile. The department was run by two eminent Belgrade neurologists, Dr Alfandari and Dr Eškenazi. They treated this girl as though they were conducting their normal work at the clinic. They came to the conclusion that her paralysis was psychological in origin so they strove to do everything possible to get her back on her feet and make her life easier.

By this time, mid-October, 1941, the deportation of Jews from the Topovske Šupe camp had begun, while others continued to work in labour gangs, clearing rubble in and around Belgrade, one of the worst jobs. Sometimes we were able to admit people to hospital claiming they were ill. This respite enabled some Jews, not a significant number unfortunately, to organise their escape from Belgrade.

The systematic deportation of men from Topovske Šupe to the unknown destination from which they were never to return began on November 15, 1941. It was only later that we discovered they had been executed en masse. Female Jews were still "at liberty" and enjoyed limited freedom of movement until December 8, 1941, when they were all ordered to report and imprisoned in the Staro Sajmište camp. It was a harsh winter that year, there were large numbers of helpless and ill women and children and the assistance we were able to give was rather limited. Even when we obtained permission to take someone to hospital, many of them refused to be separated from their children and families. The hospital and its doctors tried to admit as many patients as possible, particularly children. These children were mostly frostbitten, often swollen, covered with skin infections and starving. Dr Klara First and Dr Eva Sabadoš worked day and night running the children's ward. Although both could have fled, they stayed out of humanity, feeling they couldn't leave their little patients.

As far as I remember, Dr Nada Kon worked in the medical ward, remaining at the hospital until the end, March 17, 1942, when all the patients and doctors were gassed in trucks.

Two days earlier, on March 15, my mother and I, as Bulgarian citizens, had received permission from the Germans to leave Belgrade.

We travelled to Bitolj which was under Bulgarian occupation. There we lived for a year in constant fear, forced to wear yellow armbands with the Star of David. A curfew was imposed, children were barred from attending school and Jewish merchants, tradesmen, doctors and lawyers were deprived of their right to work. Property, shops and stores first had high taxes imposed and then, finally, were seized. In the

second half of 1942, special residential areas were designated for all Jews. In this way they established ghettos and we in Bitolj were also in a ghetto. At that time rumours began to spread about the deportation of Jews and some fled to neighbouring Albania while others joined the Partisans. Unfortunately there were a much greater number of those who were unable either to find a contact to join the Partisans or to flee across the border, so the majority of us decided to share the fate of our families.

On the night of March 10, 1943, we were all on our feet, having packed our most essential belongings, as much as we could carry. At about five o'clock in the morning there was a banging on the door. Outside stood Bulgarian police and soldiers with a list of households. They called each of us by name and threw us out into the street. The young, the old, the frightened, all were crowded together, some wailing loudly, most of them controlling themselves so as not to increase the panic. When everyone was outside, we were lined up by fours and escorted under armed guard to the railway station. Before entering the cattle wagons we were subjected to our first search and everyone had their money and valuables confiscated. Despite the thoroughness of the searches, they were frequently repeated. Then they loaded us, fifty or sixty people to each wagon, and the train set off towards Skopje, where we arrived at about midnight. They opened the wagons and forced us to quickly climb out in the dark and go into two buildings. There were more than four thousand Jews from Bitolj and Štip. We climbed over one another dragging our belongings, the children, the old and the sick with the Bulgarian soldiers beating us the whole time.

When the dawn came we saw that we were in one of the buildings of the Skopje tobacco factory near the railway station. In the other buildings we could see large numbers of Jews from Skopje. We were packed in with more than five hundred people to a room. The buildings where we and the Jews from Štip were housed were sealed that first day because the Bulgarians were searching the Skopje Jews and they wanted to make sure that none of us were in contact with them, as they didn't want anything to be out of their control.

After having been locked in the wagons all the previous day and now being locked into a building without toilets, people were forced to relieve themselves in the corridors and staircases. The stench soon became intolerable and we could hardly breathe. It was not until March 13 that they opened the gate of our building for the first time and let us

go to the toilet and wash our faces. More than two thousand people were let out to do all of this in only half an hour before being locked up again. Less than half of us had managed to wash.

They let us out only once a day, building by building. The ill and the weak couldn't get out at all. We weren't given any kind of food for the first four days but on the fifth day the camp authorities organised a kitchen. However almost nobody had plates or dishes, as these were not the kind of things anyone had thought about when we set off. In any case, everything we were carrying had been confiscated by the organised gangs of looters. On the pretext of searching for hidden money or gold they forced us to remove our clothes and shoes. One would search us while the other six or seven would take whatever they liked. They would take medicines from the sick, even from people with weak hearts or diabetes, they even took our spectacles. If they found anything that someone had managed to conceal, not only would the item be confiscated, but the victim would be severely beaten. After searches like these we had only what we stood up in.

The local services were controlled by the Bulgarian occupation police in the most drastic manner, carrying out their orders by constantly threatening to report us to the Germans if we disobeyed. The Germans were in the camp every day. It was enough for a prisoner to appear at a window of the building for the guards surrounding the camp to open fire with their machine guns. They watched every move we made.

The first convoy of Skopje Jews left on March 22, 1943. The previous day, 1,600 people had been selected for this and given food for their journey: dried mutton, old cheese and a piece of dry bread, but no water. Just before we set off we were told that another eight hundred people were to leave as well. Because they had been selected in a hurry, most of these newcomers weren't given any food. The second convoy left on March 25, with more Skopje Jews, all the Jews from Štip and a group from Bitolj. In the third convoy, about two thousand people were deported, all the remaining Bitolj Jews.

Before the departure of each convoy, there was a blockade in the camp during which inmates were not permitted to leave their buildings. The trains were under German guard. There were Bulgarian police standing in front of the wagons and, from that moment, the Germans took charge of the inmates. Fleeing the camp would have been impossible.

Those selected for the convoys were loaded into the wagons without mercy. There were old and sick people, women in labour and children. There were wagons in the train which had not even the smallest openings for air or light.

Only doctors and pharmacists were spared deportation, instead they were released from the camp and immediately sent by the Bulgarians to forced labour. This was how I came to be released. There were also some families with Spanish citizenship released because Spain was an ally of Germany. Nobody, not a single soul, from those three convoys of Macedonian Jews sent to Treblinka ever came back. Only lists returned, having been neatly recorded by the meticulous Germans who had registered each camp inmate and precisely recorded their personal and family data. The lists were intended to give the impression that those who had been deported had been sent to work somewhere.

But their real destination had been the Treblinka death camp.