
Vera ROBIČEK-SIPOREN

SAVING MESSAGE:
DON'T COME BACK TO BELGRADE



*V*era Robiček-Siporen was born in Belgrade on October 20, 1927, to father Adolf, from Niš, and mother Marijana, from Vienna. Her paternal grandfather was born in Sarajevo. Together with her brother Aleksandar, Vera attended secondary school and Jewish religious school in the synagogue.

After the war and her immigration to the USA, she completed studies in human resources management at the Pepperdine University and, as a professor, worked in education in this field. She has three chil-

dren and five grandchildren. She now lives in San Jose in the United States of America.

Her mother died in 1989. A large part of her family from Yugoslavia and Austria disappeared in the Holocaust.

My father Adolf, my mother Marijana, my brother Aleksa and I left Belgrade in April, 1941, when German bombs demolished our home. Many of our neighbours were killed during the bombing, either by the bombs or by machine-gun fire from the German pilots.

Having seen some German aircraft coming closer, we tried to find a shelter, hiding in the entrance doors of houses. Finally we found a shelter, but it was full of people, so we continued on. Several minutes

later this shelter was hit and everyone in it was killed. Belgrade was unprotected. The German pilots took advantage of this and massacred the civilian population.

My father managed to secure transport out of the city for us, which was a real miracle. Along the way, whenever we heard German planes coming, we would have to jump out into ditches. We saw many dead people along the way. We arrived in a village where there was looting on a massive scale. Our driver refused to stop in this village, so we went on to a nearby town. The Germans seized the village we had left and the town to which we went was occupied by the Italians.

We finally reached Split. After we had spent some time there, Father decided we should return to Belgrade. He ran into an acquaintance (a minister from the parliament?) and told him of our plans. This acquaintance advised him to postpone the trip. He was just about to leave for Belgrade and promised to inform us about the situation there under German occupation.

We waited for a few weeks. Father bought tickets for the trip. On the morning we were to board the bus, a message arrived: "Don't come back to Belgrade!"

Montenegrin insurgents were attacking and killing German and Italian soldiers. The Italians took us as hostages. First we were in an Italian prison in Split, and then we were taken by ship to the concentration camp in Kavajë, in Albania.

About two hundred of us were put into a big barracks. There were wooden triple bunk beds. We were each given two sheets which were dirty from fleas. The food was disgusting and we also battled with mice.

About three months later they put us on a ship bound for the Ferramonti concentration camp in Calabria. Again we were surrounded by barbed wire. Our family was given one small room.



*Vera Robiček from her time
in Ferramonti, portrait
by Mihael Fingenštajn*

On August 1, 1942, Father was vaccinated in the chest against typhoid. He died of a severe heart attack. He was 48. He was buried in the village of Tarsia. Many inmates and the camp commandant attended the funeral.

On March 5, 1943, Mother, Aleks and I left Ferramonti and went into free confinement (*libero confino*). We were escorted by a guard – a Black Shirt. He carried our luggage and was very kind to us. He told the other passengers that we were dangerous prisoners and they mustn't come into our compartment. This enabled us to have a comfortable journey.

We arrived in Brienza, in the province of Potenze in southern Italy. The people of the village were very welcoming to us. They didn't report us to the Germans when their soldiers were withdrawing north through the village.



Postcard sent by Vera Robiček from the Ferramonti camp to Germany, showing censorship stamps

We stayed in Brienza, where we were liberated by the British troops. The officer who commanded the unit mobilised us as interpreters. At first Aleks and I worked as translators with the British Army and later we were given assignments in the administration. We wore British uniforms and were given personal documents and food rations. This is how we reached Bari.

Following the departure of the British troops, we worked for the UNRA. I decided to work for the ORT. In ORT, refugees were trained in various crafts which would help them in immigration. In 1949 we emigrated to the United States of America, from where our uncle and a cousin had sent us guarantees. Because we had good command of the English language, Aleks and I found jobs in Oakland (California) within a few days.

Aleks was drafted into the army and spent two years in Germany. After demobilisation he enrolled at California University. He completed his studies with extraordinary success. He became a highly respected expert and gained an international reputation. He died early at the age of fifty-two. His three children all graduated from Stanford University.