
Josif VESEL

AUSCHWITZ – BUCHENWALD – THERESIENSTADT



Dr Josif Vesel was born on December 21, 1927, in Novi Sad. His father, Daniel (born 1904), died while on forced labour in Ukraine in 1942. His mother, Katarina-Estera (born 1903) and two younger sisters, Ela (born 1931) and Irena (born 1932) were killed in Auschwitz in 1944. He and his eldest sister Blanka (born 1929) were the only members of the family to survive the Holocaust. Blanka emigrated to Israel in 1949 (Lea Lederer, Nathanya Kibbutz), where two of her children, five grandchildren and a great-grandchild still live. Dr Vesel spent his entire career working in the clinics of the Medical Faculty of Belgrade University. He retired in 1993 as a professor and director of the Psychiatric Clinic.

His wife, Cvetana Smid-Vesel, is a retired neuropsychiatrist.

I attended the Jewish primary school in Novi Sad from 1934 to 1938. I remember my wonderful teachers, Fan, Boroš and Rabbi Kiš. There were Serb, Hungarian and German students at the school and I don't remember any nationalist or religious excesses there. I was on friendly terms with everyone throughout the occupation and after the war. Between 1938 and 1941 I completed three years of secondary school and also enriched my life in the *ken* (Hashomer Hatzair). My

role models were the outstanding youth leaders, *menahels*, Šragaj Vajskopf, the *rosh* of the *ken* and, later, the *rosh* of the Shaar Haamakim Kibbutz, J. Levinger-Bimbać who, before the *aliyah* learned the cabinet-making trade in the same workshop where I was to learn it during the occupation; Šimon Miroslav Štajner and Jošua-Robert Najman. I would particularly emphasise the positive formative influence on me of by the *menahel* of my *kvuca* (year of 1927) – this was Aron-Teodor Kovač, now retired professor of internal medicine in Novi Sad.

Of the *haverim* and *haverot* from the *ken*, I would first mention two who were with me in the concentration camps the whole time. There we continued our companionship, and supported each other through distressing times, which certainly helped me to survive. One of them, Hugo Rot, who became a psychologist and publicist in Belgrade, is no longer living. The other is Aleksandar Rozenberger, now professor of neuroradiology in Haifa. Of the others I shall mention some who remain in my memory as young boys, between twelve and fifteen years of age, who had great ambitions to be kibbutzniks in what was then Palestine: Eli Ordentlih, now an expert in



*Prison photograph
of Josif Vesel*

fisheries in Israel; Jakov Felčer; sisters Judita and Marija Šenberger; Bruno Hofman and his sister Hermina; Hana Lihtner and her brother Mikica; Ivan Gros; Mira Šenberger-Pašić, a university professor in Belgrade, now deceased; Egon Štajner, a journalist and publicist in Belgrade, Ruben Lederer-Eldar, medical corps general and professor of neurology in Haifa; Jichak-Đura Remer, with whom I learned a trade during the occupation, now an FAO expert in milk production in Israel, and; Eugen-Moša Verber, Judaist, writer and actor from Belgrade, now deceased. I was at the last *moshava* at Selce (Slovenia, 1940). With us was *Haver* Hilel who had come from what was then Palestine to teach us about kibbutz life. In our *ken*, along with many interesting activities, we also played various sports. Our Community provided us with a large gymnasium.

I was not aware of the dangers for Jews although, in a way, I had been warned. In the autumn of 1940, because of the Korošec Law (*Numerus Clausus*), my sister was not accepted in the first year of secondary school. We were first seriously warned about the dangers by my *menahel*, Aron Kovač. Several days after the war began on April 6, 1941, but before the arrival of the Hungarian Army in Novi Sad, he summoned all the members of the *kvuca* to his apartment. He told us that we were going to part as *Shomrim*, and told us what had happened to the Jews in Poland from 1939 to 1941. He advised us on how to survive.

Between April 6, 1941, and April 26, 1944, I was unable to attend school because of the *Numerus Clausus*. Instead I learned my trade. Some days I worked as a porter, pushing a cart in the Temerin and Futog markets and so helped my mother to feed us. At the end of 1941, my father, Daniel (born 1904), was taken to forced labour. His surviving comrades told us that he died in Ukraine.



Josif Vesel from his days as director of the University Psychiatric Clinic, beneath the portrait of his mentor, Vladimir Vujić, after whom the clinic was named

In January 1942, during the Great Raid, my mother and we four children were taken to the SOKOL building where we sat all day in a hall. From time to time they took groups away from the back of the hall. We were sitting in the front part and missed out on “our turn”. In the evening we were released to go home. It wasn’t until a few days later that we discovered the fate of those who had been led away in groups and killed on the frozen Danube.

Germany occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, and set up a puppet government. Through the extreme right-wingers, those obedient to the Germans had become the masters of life and death for about half a million Hungarian Jews.

My mother and we four children were interned in a collection camp in Subotica on April 26, 1944. A few days later we were moved to another camp at Baia. A little later again we were handed over to the SS men and thrown into closed cargo wagons. We were transported north in inhuman conditions. I shall never forget the words of one of the oldest men in the transport, Mr Rotbart: "Only those who manage to endure slave labour will survive."

We arrived in Auschwitz on May 30, 1944. First they took the corpses of those who had died on the way out of the wagons. The first victim in our wagon was an elderly gentleman who suffered from diabetes and treated himself with insulin. Then followed about sixty of the blackest minutes of my life. As we came out of the wagons we were formed into a long column. All along the column the SS men were shouting, the dogs were barking, men in striped prison clothes were watching us with dull eyes, not answering our questions. We came to a podium on which an SS officer was standing. People said later that this was Mengele, I didn't know. From there the column separated into three new columns. The officer on the podium, the master of life and death pointed with his finger that my eldest sister, Blanka-Lea (born 1929) should cross to the left column for women able to work. Then he sends me with his finger to the right column for men able to work. My mother, Katarina-Estera (1903), and my two little sisters, Ela (1931) and Irena (1932), were clinging to one another. The three of them were sent by the master of death to the third column, the road to the gas chamber and crematorium. After that day, of the six members of my immediate family, only my sister Lea and I remained to fight for our lives.

I spent only a week in Auschwitz, in quarantine, from May 30 to June 6, 1944. While there we learnt from the camp inmates how the concentration camps functioned, about the gas chambers and the crematoriums and other facts of camp life.

We were taken on June 7, 1944, to the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar. I spent another few days in quarantine and was given my prisoner number, 58977. On June 15 I was moved to one of the Buchenwald divisions, the *Kommando Troeglitz Rehmsdorf*. Unlike Auschwitz, which served mostly to implement the "final solution", killing in gas chambers, the principal aim of Buchenwald was slave labour (because of the lack of German labour force). Death here was a consequence of poor food and exhaustion. What was needed for survival was a combination of factors, the right genes, a meaning for

life, physical condition, immunity and the support of friends. I've already mentioned that my two childhood friends, Hugo Rot and Aca Rozenberger, and I always helped one another. Survival often depends on an accident or an immediate choice between two options. For instance, I exchanged my boots for ordinary shoes and along with that got an easier job. After a few days we all received wooden-soled shoes. On another time I fell ill with vitamin C deficiency; my gums bled and my teeth were loose. We were all afraid of going to the hospital, remembering Auschwitz and the fate of men incapable of working. I was saved by the fact that I spoke fairly good French. I applied to the head of the hospital, Jean Dulac, a French professor of medicine, who accepted me in the hospital for a few days to replace a male nurse. This was enough time for me to cure my scurvy. Everything I did was with the knowledge and support of the head of the room, Walter Himmelschein a German social democrat and ambassador from the period of the Weimar Republic who had spent many years in prison.



Photograph from 1948. Back, left to right: Hugo Rot, psychologist and publicist; Dr Josef Vesel, neuroradiologist; Aleksandar Rozenberger, university professor in Haifa. Front, left to right: Pavle Bek, pharmacist (in Israel); Neurologist Ruben Lederer, head of the Israeli Army Medical Service (general and university professor) and Yitzhak (Dura) Remer, FAO expert in milk production in Israel

On another occasion, in a similar situation, I was helped by the medical assistant, Josef Fleck from Brno. In 1966, when I was at the Congress of Psychiatrists in Brno, I tried to find Josef Fleck and learned that he had died but that until his death he had been Brno's leading politician.

Just before the end of the war, in the land of "perfect organisation", strange events began which looked more like chaotic disorganisation. Because of the conditions on the fronts, every train, every wagon was precious for troop transports. However the "final solution" had priority. Concentration camp prisoners, *haftlinge*, in the west of Germany were being transported to the east and vice versa.

Between April 10 and 15, 1945, we could already hear the roaring of the guns on the Western Front. We thought that liberation was on the way but, on April 15, we were loaded into open cargo wagons. There were about fifty prisoners sitting in each wagon, with two guards in the middle. Along the way the train was bombed by the Americans so we continued on foot. We arrived in the Sudetan town of Leitmeritz. The whole town was decorated with flags for Hitler's birthday on April 20. The same day we reached Theresienstadt. This was the famous assembly camp, a reservoir for prisoners for Auschwitz and also a Potemkin village for journalists and the Red Cross of the neutral countries. Theresienstadt was faithfully described in Herman Wouk's novel *The Winds of War*.

The bombing of the train brings me to an extraordinary incident. At the beginning of 1945 we saw hundreds of American bombers every day. The British bombed at night. The aircraft flew over the camp and one of their targets was the nearby Brabag synthetic fuel factory. We saw these aircraft as "ours" and thought they heralded our freedom. We heard that in the carpet bombing they hit an English prison camp near the factory. In our camp we had no shelters, although the guards had a bunker watchtower. One day our camp was also hit in the carpet bombing. While we shivered in the barracks a thousand-pound bomb put a hole in the roof. Luckily it only grazed the main roof beam, slightly changed direction and didn't explode. We were extraordinarily afraid through all this. As I have already mentioned, our train was hit when we left Buchenwald. On that occasion we were bombed by the Mosquito dive bombers with their special bombs which burst horizontally and wounded many of the prisoners.

Many years later, in 1999, I found myself in the path of American bombers for the third time. I had severe psychosomatic problems during the bombing of the buildings in Nemanjina Street and especially when the Television buildings were bombed. Three times I was in danger and despair, each time as what the NATO glossary calls “collateral damage”.



Lea-Blanka, Josif's sister and the only other member of the family who survived the Holocaust. She later lived in Israel

On May 9, 1945, when we woke up we discovered there were no guards in the Theresienstadt camp. We heard the roar of the tanks and for hours watched the Soviet tanks and soldiers with rucksacks riding on them. They didn't stop in Theresienstadt. The war in Sudetenland didn't finish until May 15, 1945, the same date as in Yugoslavia. After the tanks passed the logistics units arrived. These organised food for us. Doctors from the medical unit found that there were men with typhoid fever. Theresienstadt was divided into two sections, separated by barbed wire. The women doctors assembled us in ranks and felt everyone's foreheads with the palms of their hands. Anyone with a temperature went into the hospital part of the camp and was treated. I wasn't ill so I remained in quarantine in the

other part of the camp. Hugo Rot fell sick, but recovered quickly and then we talked every day through the barbed wire fence. Aca Rozenberger wasn't with them because he had escaped with a group during the bombing of the train. We were in quarantine in Theresienstadt from April 20 to June 10, 1945 and on June 10 we left Theresienstadt for Novi Sad, where we arrived on June 18.

After the repatriation I passed the trade examination in carpentry. I didn't take a job because I had been given a government bursary to finish the fourth to eighth grades of high school. I graduated from the Medical Faculty of Belgrade University thanks to my stipend and even more thanks to the Jewish student residence in Kosmajaska Street in Belgrade. This was a unique student residence. Most of the students had survived the Holocaust and had no other home than the one in Kosmajaska Street. We lived like a large and happy family. My sister, Blanka-Lea Lederer, barely managed to survive the Holocaust in Bergen-Belsen. She and her two-year-old daughter Mira (Mira Havia, Tel Aviv, Nave Salom 60), emigrated to Israel. Blanka has since died. Her two children, five grandchildren and great grandchild live in Israel. Her son and two grandsons live in the United States.