
Darko FIŠER

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Osijek 1941–1943; Hungary 1943–1945



Darko Fišer was born on January 2, 1938, in Osijek, to Margita (née Szoke) and Alfred Fišer. He has a an older sister Lelja Jakić. Their father was killed by the Nyilas in Budapest at the very end of the war. On his return to Osijek he completed secondary school and later graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at Zagreb University. He worked at the same faculty and then at the Saponja chemical plant in Osijek. He is still working today as an Associate Professor in the Electrical

Engineering Faculty of Osijek University.

He was president of the Osijek Jewish Community for a number of years.

The first memories of every human being come from their early childhood and are usually associated with important or pleasant experiences. My earliest memories are of the gravest times in the spring and summer of 1941. Until that time, everyone in my family – my father, mother, sister and myself – had lived the peaceful life of a typical urban family. My father, Alfred Fišer, was a barrister and had been able to secure a fairly comfortable life for his family until the war began in 1941. We lived in our own house in a pleasant part of Osijek. My mother Margita, née Seke, was a secondary school teacher, but devoted herself to the household after the birth of my sister. My parents had never

nurtured any particular Jewish sentiment, but the events which were to come made them very conscious of their origins.

It was a capricious spring in 1941. It even snowed on my sister's seventh birthday, March 26. This trivial detail has been recounted over and over again in my family because this was also the day that dramatic events overtook our lives. My sister, Lelja, had been given a swing for her birthday but to her regret, and probably mine as well, our father was unable to hang it in the garden because of the snow. Instead, he promised to do so the following day. That following day was March 27, 1941. The demonstrations in Belgrade and Yugoslavia's breach of the Tripartite Pact were a signal for my parents that we would soon be engulfed in the war and that as Jews we were in great danger. Lelja's swing was never to hang in our garden.

The next event in my memory was in the summer of the same year. I remember that we had to move from our house to the outskirts of the city because Jews were no longer permitted to live in the better areas. However my parents managed to find quite decent accommodation with the help of acquaintances and relatives with whom we exchanged our house for an apartment. Both of my grandmothers took refuge with us on the edge of the town in order to have a safe haven, at least for a short time.

My father didn't stay long with us. The arrests of Jews and their detention in camps was not long beginning, but he found out in good time that he was on the list of those to be arrested first. He hastily arranged to hide by posing as a patient in the Osijek hospital where his brother, Oto Fišer, worked as a physician.

When Yugoslavia capitulated, Osijek became a border city. Baranja, across the Drava River became part of Hungary. Some Osijek residents had permits to cross the border because they had land or family on the Baranja bank of the Drava. It was also relatively easy to cross illegally, which my father took advantage of and so by 1941 was in Hungary, in a reasonably safe place.

We lived on the outskirts of the town for only a short time and my recollection of it is hazy. We certainly lived in poor conditions, one lingering memory is of us childishly wanting to have the lights turned on in the twilight while the adults, in an effort to save power, would allow this only once darkness had completely fallen. My uncle and aunt, both physicians, also had to leave Osijek in a hurry. In the beginning, the Ustasha authorities were very "generous" to Jewish doctors, not arresting

them immediately nor sending them to camps. Instead they interned them in Bosnia where they could be put to work in an attempt to control the syphilis which was endemic there. These doctors and their families enjoyed the protection of the Ustasha authorities, although at best this meant that their arrest and deportation was delayed for some time. Thus my Uncle Oto and Aunt Klara found themselves in northern Bosnia, in the village of Odžaci, near Šamac. In early 1942, when our future in Osijek became even less secure, my mother found a way for us to move to our relatives in Bosnia. All I remember of this is crossing the Sava by raft at Šamac into Bosnia. It has stayed in my memory because, although it was late March or early April, there was still ice floating on the surface of the river.

In this way we found ourselves in the comparative safety of Bosnia, among generally illiterate but well-meaning people who later helped us to escape with our lives. But conditions were also becoming more difficult there. As the Partisan units in the surrounding hills and woods became stronger, the Ustahas stepped up their terror and were less and less inclined to “protect” the Jewish doctors as they had promised. I remember the adults in the family discussing all the possible solutions. My uncle, whose opinion was respected by everyone, would say that we should join the Partisans and, indeed, in the middle of 1943, he and his wife did just that.

With two children to care for, my mother found another solution. The “Hungarian connection” had begun functioning again and there was a possibility of us reaching Hungary illegally and joining our father. But first we needed to get from Odžaci to Osijek. In those days, travelling for no particular reason would certainly have aroused suspicion, so my resourceful uncle came up with the idea that I should feign appendicitis and have to be taken to Osijek for urgent surgery. My mother had to take me to the hospital of course, and also brought my sister along because she couldn’t be left alone. My role involved a lot of weeping and wailing, particularly when there were people around whom we didn’t know, and I learned it well. I remember I was already giving a convincing performance before we left Odžaci while Hasan, our janitor, carried me from the building to a farmer’s cart to take us to Šamac. So seriously did I take my role that at one point, to my great surprise, my mother said to me “You don’t have to groan like that all the time.”

I don't remember how we reached Osijek, or when this role of a lifetime was over, but I do remember well how we crossed the border illegally. From later accounts of the event I learned that we had crossed the Drava, which marked the border, with the help of an Osijek lawyer, Dr Kamilo Firingir. He and his family had border passes so we went with him to the crossing as members of his family. My sister and I were told to keep our mouths shut and not to answer any questions. Our guide obviously knew how to bribe the guards. While we were walking past the sentry box on the bridge, Dr Firingir approached the guards and had a friendly chat with them. I remember that when we were about half way across the bridge my mother said softly to me: "Take a good look at the Drava, Darko, you may never see it again."

It was a journey into the unknown and the security it offered was only short-lived. Not until years later when I again saw the Drava did I realise how difficult those moments had been.

We spent our first day in Baranja, at that time part of Hungary, in a cottage on the bank of the Drava, in a settlement the people of Osijek called Kiš-Darda or Little Darda, after the nearby village of the same name. We waited in Dr Firingir's cottage for night to fall and then some people we didn't know took us under cover of darkness to the Darda railway station. There, some time before dawn, we boarded a train for Pecs.

I remember staying with my mother's relatives in Pecs and we played with their children who were the same age as us. I was five at the time and my sister was nine. Our little cousins spoke Hungarian and we had problems in communicating. I remember one boy being stubbornly angry with me because I couldn't grasp the rules of a ball game. There was an elderly woman, probably his grandmother, who was the only one in the house who spoke Croatian. She tried to interpret and explain the rules of the game to me but without success.

Taking further precautions and heeding our mother's warning not to speak in case we attracted attention with our foreign language, we journeyed on to Budapest. I don't remember our stay in the Hungarian capital, which was probably brief, nor do I remember our meeting with my father who had already been there for two years. I remember our next destination: it was a region near Szolnok with the rather exotic Hungarian name of Kodmonos. My father's friend Count Kohanovski had property there and we settled ourselves in a small but quite tidy cottage. Who Count Kohanovski was and how my father came to be

friends with him is a story in itself. Count Kohanovski's wife was born in Našice, the youngest daughter of the great Našice landed baron and one-time Croatian governor, Teodor Pejačević. Pejačević didn't have much luck with his daughters. The elder, Dora, who was later discovered as a talented composer and became very popular in Croatia after 1990, committed suicide over an unhappy love affair. The younger, Gabriela, besmirched her father's baronial honour by marrying the penniless Count Kohanovski in defiance of him. The angry father disinherited his wilful daughter who would have remained in penury had she not hired a talented young solicitor who contested the will and won, putting the family fortune into the hands of her and her husband. That talented young solicitor was my father.



*Darko, barely three years old,
January 1941.*

My sister and I both learned Hungarian quickly, but it was not easy at the beginning. I remember the first words I could use were *igen* (yes) and *nem* (no). I soon made contact with the local children who lived in poor peasant shacks with a single room and an earth floor. In our first days there I somehow found myself in the home of one new friend. His mother began speaking to me, in Hungarian of course, and I pretended to understand her questions by answering *igen* or *nem*. I remember I tried to do this without simply alternating the words, sometimes using one or other word of my rich Hungarian vocabulary two or three times in succession.

Nevertheless it was only a couple of months before my sister and I could speak Hungarian quite fluently and almost forgot our Croatian. Our mother warned us repeatedly to be careful what we say, drumming into us that we should not for any reason reveal that we were Jews or we would end up in a camp. If anyone asked who we were, we were to say only that we were from Croatia, and in any case we should speak as little as possible, both to people we knew and those we didn't, because

any of this could be dangerous. It took me half a century to understand how deeply I was traumatised by this. It was even worse for my sister who took what was happening to us much more seriously than I and felt it more deeply.

My father visited only occasionally. He was living in Budapest and had some kind of agreement with his influential friend, who also gave him money. I found out later that this agreement was to do with the sale of land. My father hoped to inherit land from his aunt in Vojvodina and had agreed to sell it to the count at a good price after the war. The money on which we survived the difficult years of the war was the count's advance payments on this. In the end the agreement came to nothing. The count survived the war but my father, unhappily, did not. There was nothing left of his inheritance because the Communist authorities in Yugoslavia confiscated the land, while the count was left in dire poverty in Communist Hungary and died in one of the shabby huts in which his landless peasants had lived in Kodmonos. I remember that my father's Hungarian was poor and that he spoke to us in Croatian, which was by then difficult for me. It amazed me that he had not been able to learn Hungarian more quickly and better than us children.

We were also visited from time to time by Countess Kohanovski, whom we knew as Aunt Gabika. This was always a special event for me because she travelled the considerable distance from the railway station in a grand carriage. I had the privilege of being allowed to climb up onto the vehicle and to pat the horses. Once during this undertaking I fell and broke my arm which caused my mother great anxiety as she tried to conceal our origins during my visit to a doctor in the nearest town.

In the autumn of 1943, six months after we arrived in Hungary, we moved to a somewhat larger estate nearby, which also had an odd name: Cserepes. The reason for this move was probably not only to improve our security but also to provide us with rather better accommodation. There were another two families living on the estate and we became friends with them. I remember one of these had the family name Rot and that they were also Jews who were in hiding. Many years later I learned of the strange coincidence that Mr Rot's half-sister lived in Osijek and his half-brother, Professor Nikola Rot, still lives in Belgrade. In Cserepes we lived in several rooms of a former palace, a neglected mansion now used as a storehouse for farm produce. The

rooms were filled with piles of dried peas and beans. These were cleared from some of them in order for us to make a kitchen and two rooms. I could not understand how it was that we outcasts, living in the constant danger of being taken to a camp, were suddenly living in a palace! There was an abundance of food, beans and peas, most of which was eaten by the mice which kept the adults awake at night. We children, unconcerned by this, slept the sleep of the just, despite the mice gnawing all around us.

Our romantic sojourn in the palace came to an abrupt end in the spring of 1944, when our mother told us we had been discovered, denounced by an evil man. We stuffed our few things into our trunks and headed for Budapest. How my parents managed to find an apartment right in the city centre, near Vaci Street in Feher Hajo Street, or where the money for the rent came from remains a mystery to me. I do remember, however, that it was during our first days there that we heard our first air-raid siren. We were in a park near the apartment with our grandmother when the siren sounded the alarm. We tried to rush home, but some men in uniform made us go to the nearest bomb shelter. I couldn't make sense for myself of why we had to be frightened and take shelter from bombs being dropped by our allies on our enemies, nor why these men in uniform, who were our enemies, were taking care to protect our lives and herding us into the shelter.

We children were frequently moved out of our home for a day or two. Our father would come furtively, whisper something and take us to some strange place. We later learned that he would receive information from reliable sources that a raid was planned and that we should all hide in different places. On a number of occasions my sister and I stayed in rooms where there were a lot of children who had been brought there in the same way. There was a Red Cross sign drawn on the entrance doors of the premises, together with some strange writing. The talk among the children was that we were there under Swiss protection. At the time the name Raoul Wallenberg meant nothing to us but it is probably he whom we have to thank for our survival.

The winter dragged on and our parents were becoming increasingly concerned. They spoke of a *putsch*, of a *coup d'etat*, of Horthy being overthrown. We heard that the Nyilas, who were like the Ustasas in Croatia, had seized power and that our situation was now even worse. The Soviet Army was already in the eastern outskirts of the Hungarian capital and had begun its attack. The Russians sent their Christmas

greetings in the form of a powerful and unceasing artillery and air offensive. There was no longer room for us in the cellar so, together with another ten or so tenants, we set ourselves up in a carpenter's workshop facing the central courtyard of the ground floor of our building. There were days when a number of bombs fell right on our building, but we all escaped injury. January 8, 1945, turned out to be the most tragic day for us when my father was killed, not by Russian grenades or bombs, but by a Nazi bullet. In the eastern part of the city, close by Pest, the avenging Nazi gangs were roaming through the chaos, killing anyone suspicious. My father, with his typical "non-Aryan" looks was unlucky enough to catch their eye. He was shot dead together with a group of other victims. According to the account of an eyewitness who survived by chance, their bodies were thrown into the Danube.

Ten days later, on January 18, 1945, Soviet troops entered Pest, the eastern part of the city on the Danube. For us, this was the end of the Holocaust, our liberation had arrived.