
Pavle ŠOSBERGER

SENTENCED TO SLAVE LABOUR



P*avle Šosberger was born in Budapest on September 21, 1920. His family had been traders in groceries and timber in Novi Sad since the eighteenth century. His mother, Paula, was head of the Cultural Commission in the Jewish Volunteers Society and also founded the city's Jewish kindergarten. They lived in the family home in Novi Sad until the war began.*

From July, 1943, until October, 1944, Pavle was part of a forced labour gang in the Bor Mine camp. In October, 1944, he joined the Partisans and after the liberation spent ten years in active service in the Yugoslav Army. On his return to Novi Sad he became active in the Jewish Community. He has been president of the Community and a member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. He has written a number of books on the Jews of Vojvodina.

He is married to Agneza (née Neuberger) and has a son, Josip, and two grandchildren.

On the eve of the second world war we were still living in our family home in Novi Sad, at 63 Miletićeva Street. The family had sent me to central Serbia in 1940, to choose a town and rent an apartment and prepare it for us to move to in case war broke out. I chose Arandelovac and moved a large quantity of canned food there in case we needed it.

At home, everyone in the family had rucksacks into which they had packed the most essential items, clothes and so on. Everyone had their passport, personal documents and a few gold coins which we stitched into the hems of our canvas bags. Each male in the family also had a revolver. My father Josip, known as Joka, who was an experienced fighter from World War I, was the head of the family group. We planned to head off and join the Yugoslav Army as soon as we saw it retreating. However, that was not how things worked out. When the army began to retreat from Bačka, the bridges over the Danube were blown up and the Germans and Ustashes appeared in Petrovaradin. We remained in Novi Sad, in our apartments with the blinds down, aware that whatever lay in store for us would not be good.

The Hungarian army occupied Novi Sad on April 13, 1941, and the streets erupted in fighting with heavy casualties. This was a hunt for Serb volunteers and anyone who, according to the criteria of the occupiers, was not a desirable citizen. The casualties included many Jews.

On May 24, the occupiers summoned all Jewish men from 18 to 60 years of age to forced labour. We continued to sleep and eat in our own homes, but during the day we would work on the demolished river fleet base known as The Navy, at the airport and at the Danube docks. This went on until June 28, when we were released and replaced by another group who had not so far worked.

As they had begun to harass me in Novi Sad, I managed, using false documents, to move to my relatives in Budapest. There I worked on a building site with my uncle, who was an architect.

On October 13, the Hungarian authorities summoned everyone of my age to the Fifth Royal Hungarian Labour Battalion at Hodmezevasarhelyi. There we were divided into a number of labour gangs and sent to various places under Hungarian control, mainly cutting wood and building barracks and roads. We were later moved to a military exercise area as labourers. There we built bunkers, dug ditches and constructed other military facilities.

While we were working in Baja, there was a raid in Novi Sad. It was in the afternoon of Friday, January 23, 1942. We were washing in the bathroom when someone from Novi Sad told us that something terrible was happening in the city. We rushed to the post office to call our parents, but the telephone operator in the Novi Sad post office replied: "The number's not ringing and it won't ring again." No one knew what had happened but we suspected the worst and this was later confirmed.

A large number of Jews and Serbs were killed in the raid, among whom were 27 people from our building, including my father, my mother and my brother.

There were a lot of labour gangs based in Szeged, where they formed gangs for the Bor mine in 1943. From there we were taken to Prahovo by ship and barge and then on by train to Bor.

After the Hungarian and German authorities agreed to send ten thousand Jews from Hungary to work as labour gangs in the Bor mine, the German Ministry of Justice committed itself to delivering 100 tons of copper ore concentrate followed by six tons of chromium as payment for their slave labour.

By decree of the Royal Hungarian Ministry of Homeland Defence, the first Jewish labour gang was sent to Bor in July, 1943. They went in four convoys, some on board the *Kraljica Marija* and the *Karadorde*, some by barge through Szeged, Titel and Belgrade to Prahovo and from there by train to Zaječar and Metovnica to Bor, and some by train through Niš, Zaječar and Metovnica.

While people were being rounded up for the first convoy, an engineer and colonel in the German Todt organisation addressed the people lined up for forced labour in Hungarian. His name was Wilhelm Neier and he wore the medal of a German chivalric order around his neck. He told us that the labour gang would do useful work and that the Hungarian government would be paid in copper ore for it.

The first convoy, five Jewish labour gangs, set off from Szeged on July 11, 1943.

When the German army invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, a new forced labour group of about three thousand Jews was prepared. On May 26 they were sent by train through Niš and Zaječar to Bor. In May, 1944, there were between six and seven thousand Jews doing forced labour in the Bor mine. Most of them were from Hungary, but there were also people from occupied parts of Romania and Czechoslovakia as well as several hundred Jews from Bačka and Prekomurje.

When they arrived at the mine the workers were all taken to the Berlin camp above the Bor river, close to the Orthodox cemetery. This was the central camp in which all the Jews from the first two convoys were housed, along with a group of Hungarian Jehova's Witnesses. The others were accommodated in camps around Bor, all the way to Žagubica. These camps included Munich, Innsbruck, Bregenz, Heidenau, Vorarlberg, Laznica and Westphalia.

On our arrival in Bor we were all struck by the engulfing wave of sulphurous fumes which choked us. This was a frequent occurrence in Bor, especially in overcast weather. We were given numbers such as 13262. The "1" stood for the Berlin camp, the "3" for group number three and the "262" was the inmate's personal number.

The accommodation in the Berlin camp was standard wooden barracks, just as in the others. There were two labour gangs, a total of five hundred or more people, in each barracks. Only the Jehova's Witnesses, two hundred of them, were in a barracks by themselves. There was a total of seven barracks serving as accommodation for camp inmates. The soldiers and non-commissioned officers of the Hungarian guard had separate living and mess barracks, and there was a kitchen with a mess barracks, known as the "margarine bar" for inmates. There were separate barracks for washrooms, workshops and storage areas. The officers of the Hungarian command in the camp had their own barracks and mess hall in the centre of Bor where they enjoyed the same comforts as German officers. There were even rooms for officers' mistresses in the barracks. There was also a Hungarian Military Court in a private building near the Berlin camp, just above Sava Miraš's tavern.

Later an infirmary and a surgical post for the seriously ill were built. The head of the infirmary was a warrant officer, Dr Istvan Bedo, and Dr Ladislav Kohn from Subotica took care of the Jewish inmates.

The camp command fell under the Hungarian Bor headquarters, which until the end of 1943 was headed by Andras Balog, a lieutenant-colonel from Szeged. He was a very strict commander who was not in favour with the senior Hungarian military authorities. When he left he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Ede Maranyi, a callous Fascist and sadist, a shocking anti-Semite who implemented harsh measures against the Jews. With no respect for any of his country's laws and regulations, he gave orders for the Jewish camp inmates to be tortured, mistreated and even killed.

At that time there were also free workers of various nationalities in Bor. The labour gang bosses, foremen and supervisors were Germans, *Volksdeutscher* and Russian White Guards. They lived in barracks in a separate settlement. The camps were divided into a number of categories, each with their own rules and their own food.

Some camps had stricter rules. Inmates from these camps could, like the Jews, only leave their workplaces when escorted by guards. Jews were escorted by Hungarian guards while German or Serbian state

guards escorted the others. There were only a handful of Jewish inmates who had German passes and were exempt from the ban on movement outside the camp without an armed escort. These were Stevan “Đurika” Adam from Bačka Topola who was the coachman for the mine directors Gabela and Krebs, Đorđe Kaldor from Novi Sad who was a draughtsman on the building site, Đorđe Fišer from Titel who ran the administration of the open cut mine, Tibor Cserhat, a teacher from Budapest who was an orderly in the German officers’ barracks, and I, Pavle Šosberger from Novi Sad as head of construction on the Bor river regulation works, together with some couriers and warehouse workers. Some camp inmates would leave the camp and building sites to go into Bor illegally, but they were putting themselves at risk of being arrested.

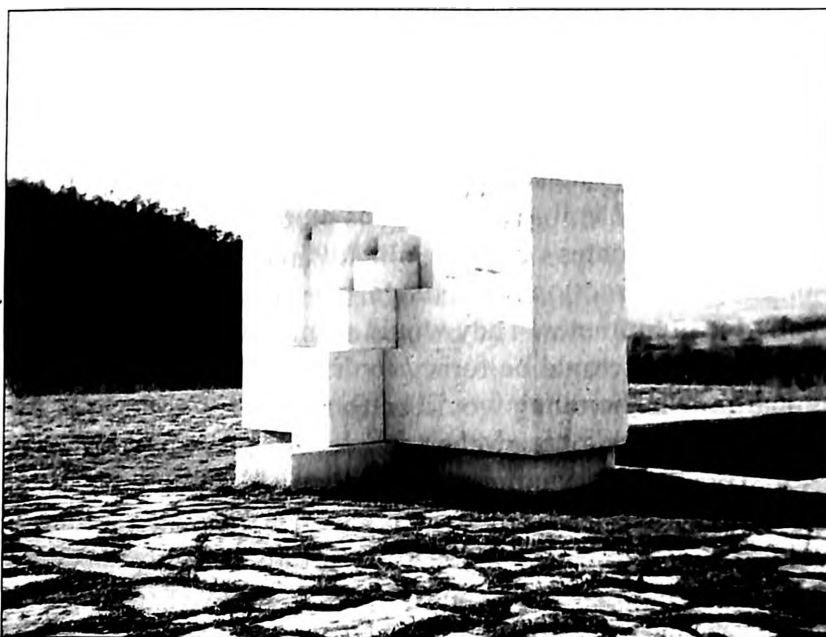
Decree number 1340/30.3.1944 of the Bor Police Commissariat forbade civilians having any contact with Jewish inmates, including the sale or purchase of food and other items.

The attitude to the inmates in the camps under Hungarian command was much worse than it was on the building sites. The Germans were interested only in the work and inmates rarely had any problem with this. The Hungarian soldiers, however, egged on by their officers, tried to make life miserable with various punishments and by torturing the Jewish camp inmates who were already in torment. For the smallest trifle or alleged infraction, the Hungarian soldiers would punish and physically torture inmates. They would summon them to their barracks where the offender would be forced to drink five litres of water “so as not to be afraid”. Then they would be forced to crawl through mud, to jump like frogs, slap one another and so on. The officers were even worse: they would order inmates to be suspended with their hands tied behind their backs for two hours, hanging on a post with their feet barely touching the ground. This mediaeval torture probably survived only in the Hungarian army. Sometimes inmates would be tied in a ball for six hours, or shut in potato pits. There were also killings and shootings. In an effort to protect themselves, the camp inmates would try to spend as long as possible at work, often staying longer than the compulsory ten hours.

There was a kind of slang created in the camp, drawn from the Yiddish, Hebrew and Serbian words used in the Budapest underground. There were words like *šmaser* for guard, *tre* for danger, *sojre* for goods or material, *hekuš* for soldier or policeman, *nije košer* (it’s not kosher)

for don't touch or not good, *cores* for misery or evil, *cices* for money, *ganef* for thief, *termometar* for shovel and many other expressions.

On several occasions during our early days in the Berlin camp, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Balog, we were allowed to present some kind of show on the field in front of the infirmary. These would open with an address by Balog, known as "the speech from the hill". After the speech, there would be a variety program presented by the camp inmates, who included a number of well-known musicians and performing artists. These included the cellist Horvat from the Belgrade and Zagreb operas and a pianist and trumpeter called Barta from the Budapest Vaudeville. There were short sketches in the program with titles like "This is Radio Bor, Futog and Kecskemet" or "In Five Years". They were written and directed by Klein the shoemaker, who was a student of philosophy. These shows were soon forbidden.



*Monument to Jewish forced labourers who died in the Bor mine,
by sculptor Moma Krković.*

The German Todt organisation arranged work in and around Bor. Jewish labour gangs began work there on Wednesday, July 19, 1943, regulating the Bor river, working on a tunnel beneath the hills of Tilva Mika and Tilva Roš, at the open cut mine of Tilva Mika and on laying

the railway line between Bor and Žagubica over Crni Vrh. A number of camp inmates were engaged in skilled work. I led a group of self-taught surveyors regulating the Bor river. Đorđe Fišer worked on the open cut mine with a group of engineers. We worked ten hours a day except on Sundays. Every day the building site management would issue certificates for the number of hours worked and the inmates had to give these to a Hungarian officer in the camp.

The work was arduous: we loaded and unloaded wagons, drilled holes with compressed air drills, laid and relaid tracks, carried out the earthmoving operations and laid the sleepers for the lines. Some of the workers were later trained as assistant miners, stokers on the locomotives and dredge operators, and some worked on geodetic projects and drafting.

The food was poor: black water called coffee for breakfast, a litre of soup for lunch and for dinner a cube of something with sawdust which passed for bread and sometimes a little jam or something similar. The Germans would give the inmates who worked the night shift in the tunnel an extra litre of soup. The Hungarian soldiers were driven by the bad meals to steal food and cook extra meals for themselves, or they would barter lard, jam and bread with the inmates in return for watches, jewellery and other valuable items. Often the soldiers and non-commissioned officers would accept IOUs for large sums of money and while on leave in Hungary would extract payment of these from the inmates' families who were still in their homes awaiting deportation.

When Lieutenant Colonel Maranyi arrived as commander of the Hungarians, the situation deteriorated. On his explicit command, the Jewish inmates were more frequently mistreated and terrorised. A military court would hand down sentences for the most trivial infractions and torture was a daily occurrence. The worst perpetrators of this evil were first sergeants Csaszar, Vagvari and Macsai, Junior Sergeant Fischer and the murderous Corporal Horvat.

There was some contact with relatives through the occasional sending and receiving of postcards using the German military mail service. In March, 1944, there was approval from Hungary for inmates at Bor to receive one parcel of clothes each. There was an illegal postal connection through the Hungarian soldiers and non-commissioned officers who would courier letters, small parcels and even money back and forth for a large fee. A woman from Novi Sad would occasionally come

to Bor bringing letters and money for some individuals. There were also other channels used by some people.

There was a market established in the field in front of the Berlin camp where inmates would sell their watches and jewellery, and any clothes they had which were in good condition, to buy food. Through the camp inmates, the Hungarian soldiers and non-commissioned officers would sell thread, leather for shoe soles, bedding, soldiers' boots, lard and bacon. The other form of trade was via Dr Bedo, who went from Bor to Budapest several times to fetch gold, supposedly to be used for dental repairs.

The well-known Budapest painter Ciiag was caught attempting to send an illegal letter with a caricature of Maranyi. The unfortunate artist was hanged by his hands for eight hours a day until, after several days, he was completely broken. One morning Corporal Horvat took him out of the camp and shot him.

Immediately after arriving in Bor on August 14, 1943, a number of prisoners fled from the camp. These were Bernard Fišer from Subotica, Vajda and Kunc, then Mandi Iric, Oto Levenberg, Gavra Bokor and Đorđe Atlas. As the situation in the camp deteriorated, the number of escapes increased. On July 14, 1944, Ljudevit Rajić-Ronai fled, as did Ipoly Feri, Miklos Semze, Mihalj Izrael, Karolj Presburger and Janoš Strauss. They were followed by a group of eleven inmates, including Istvan Engler, Gabor Gal, Imre Orova, and a man called Grunberger who was also known as Grinšpan. This group was captured outside Bor by a White Guard Cavalry patrol and returned to the Hungarian authorities.

On Lieutenant Colonel Maranyi's orders, a drumhead court martial in Bor sentenced nine camp inmates to twenty years each in prison. Every night they were chained in the potato pit of the Berlin camp. Another two inmates were sentenced to death and publicly executed in the camp yard. All the inmates were brought from Bor to witness the execution. The Germans and their families were also invited. The escapes continued, nonetheless.

The Jewish cemetery was at the right hand side of the Berlin camp, near the Orthodox burial ground. There were about forty Jewish inmates buried there and two others were buried in the local cemetery at Laznica. There were several Jewish women living illegally in Bor at that time. I knew about Vera Demajo from Belgrade and the wife of the engineer Kostić who later became commander of Bor. There was also a woman called Estera. All of them survived the war.

Both the refugees and workers of Bor accepted the Jewish inmates with a great deal of understanding and friendship. As well as the Hungarian Army battalion, there were various armies in Bor which were collaborating with the occupier: a unit of the Serbian Home Guard, a Russian White Guard Cavalry troop, a Bulgarian battalion and in 1944 a guard unit arrived from Bukovina, wearing Italian uniforms and carrying Italian weapons. All of these soldiers showed the utmost hostility towards the Jews. During their retreat in August 1944, the Bulgarians secretly took two Jewish inmates to Bulgaria. After the capitulation of Italy, there were Italians brought to Bor as prisoners of war.



The remains of those killed in Crvenka were exhumed after the war and moved to a common vault in the Jewish cemetery in Sombor.

At the end of August, 1944, the situation in Bor changed completely. Romania had also capitulated and the Partisans became active around Zaječar. All the prisoners from the surrounding camps were brought to the Berlin camp and many of them escaped at this time. Mining work came to a halt in Bor in September, 1944, and bunkers and ditches were dug to fortify the camp. The regular supply of bread dried up and any inmates who were bakers were put to work in bakeries. One of them was a man called Bandel who managed to smuggle a loaf of bread into the camp on a few occasions. We no longer went

out for work apart from a few necessary exceptions. On one such occasion I was arrested and, with my forged identity card, handed over to the military court.



Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti with his wife before internment.

Bor was now in chaos and the military court was no longer working. I managed to escape from prison. On Maranyi's orders, 23 inmates from the potato pit were handed over to the Germans. These included Stevan Engler from Subotica and Imre Orova from Bačka Palanka. They were shot the same day near the brick factory, four kilometres

from the town. Dr Ištvan Szikar, a lawyer from Budapest, was also handed over to the Gestapo and shot.

On September 17, 1944, Maranyi flew out by plane and the first group of inmates, 3,600 Jews and Jehova's Witnesses and about sixty Hungarian soldiers and officers left Bor. Everything went smoothly until they reached Smederevo, and then the first victim fell. According to the documentation, *Volksdeutscher* killed eight near Pančevo, 146 near Jabuka and 250 Jewish inmates in Perlez. Once on the territory of Bačka, a number of prisoners ran away: twenty of them hid in the cellar of the Novi Sad hospital. Twenty were killed in Srbobran, ten in Vrbas and 680 camp inmates were killed in Crvenka in October, 1944. Two inmates, Wilhelm Poteman from Subotica and Đerd Laufer, managed to drag themselves alive from the mass grave. The killings continued with forty in Sombor, 26 in Bački Monoštor, another 10 in Bezdan then fifty more followed by seven in Baja. All of these were killed by German and Hungarian soldiers. Another 21, including the famous Hungarian poet Dr Miklos Radnoti, were killed in the village of Abda. Only about 1,500 of the camp inmates remained and were escorted to camps in Germany. About twenty of these former camp inmates lived in Yugoslavia after the war.

A second group of inmates left Bor on September 29, 1944, and were liberated the same day by the Ninth Brigade of the 23rd Division of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia. They held a court martial on the spot and sentenced First Lieutenant Rožnjaj and Sergeant Fišer to death by hanging. The liberated camp inmates headed towards Romania and home. Some of them joined the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia. Another group of about two hundred liberated inmates who were retreating towards the Romanian border, were cut off by the Second German Motorised Division near Klokočevac. There is no record of anyone surviving the slaughter that ensued.

Bor was liberated on October 3, 1944, by units of the 23rd Serbian Division of the National Liberation Army. The same day about two hundred camp inmates who had been too sick and exhausted to flee with the second group were liberated. The former inmates were given food and accommodation and the officers and soldiers of the Hungarian Guard were imprisoned. Among the officers from this group were several with Captain Bela Nagy and the notorious Casar. A number of the liberated camp inmates joined the National Liberation Army.

Chetniks near Bor killed camp escapee Oton Levenberg from Novi Sad. His remains were later exhumed by his relatives and reburied in the Jewish cemetery in Novi Sad. Franja Krishaber from Novi Sad disappeared in fighting near Nikolićevo.

After the war, the remains of 23 inmates who were shot four kilometres from Bor were exhumed and reburied in the Jewish cemetery in Subotica where a monument to them was erected.

The remains of 680 former Bor mine inmates were also exhumed in Crvenka after the war and transferred to the Jewish cemetery in Sombor.

At the end of 1964, the remains of Jewish inmates buried in the old Jewish camp cemetery near the Berlin camp were exhumed and transferred to a common vault in the New Cemetery in Bor.

On the site of the former Berlin camp in 1982 a monument to the camp inmates was unveiled, the work of Lidija and Miroslav Kovačević.

A monument to the slain Hungarian poet, Dr Mikloš Radnoti, was unveiled at the Bor Lake in May, 1984.