
Rebeka "Beka" HARA

FROM PRISTINA TO BERGEN-BELSEN



Rebeka "Beka" Hara (*née Baruh, and known at school as Baruhović*) was born in Jerusalem on April 4, 1927, to Isak and Tamara (*née Rubin*). She married David Hara in 1948. They have two sons, Isidor and Leonard, and two grandsons.

After the war she worked briefly in Smederevo as a seamstress for the Milan Blagojević company, later moving to Belgrade where she devoted herself to her family.

My parents were born in Pristina and moved to Palestine in about 1925. They lived in Jaffa where they had a small grocery store. The house has been demolished since then, but my older brother showed me the site where it once stood. I was the sixth of seven children, the last of whom died soon after birth. My parents, being very religious and superstitious, then adopted a child, the daughter of my aunt.

Rašela, the eldest of us, was born in 1915 and was killed in the Bergen-Belsen camp, together with her husband and one of their children. The other child died after the war. My adopted sister Klara (whose married name was Kamhi), was born in about 1915. She had seven children and was carrying an eighth when she and her entire family were killed in Treblinka, together with the Skopje Jews. Emanuel, born in 1919, was in Bergen-Belsen, then in Mauthausen and Dachau. When he

came to collect us, he found only me left. Baruh, my eldest brother, was born in 1917 and had been in high school before the war. He was killed with the Partisans near Danilovgrad during the Allied bombing. Jošua, known as Ješa, was born in 1921. He was in Albania in hiding during the war. Later he was captured and imprisoned but managed to escape and save himself by hiding in the woods. He is a dentist by profession. After the war he travelled to Belgrade and was immediately sent to the army, but was released from service in order to take care of his sister. He moved to Israel in the first Aliya and continued working as a dentist. He now lives in Mexico where I have visited him a number of times. He has three children and three grandchildren. His daughter (married as Frenkl) has two children. Jakov died when he was two years old and was buried in Jerusalem where my brother took me to visit his grave.

Estera, born in about 1929, died in Pristina from typhoid fever. It was because of her death that my parents adopted my aunt's child.

My parents returned from Israel, where they made a good living, because their elderly parents and my father's unmarried sister were still in Pristina and, they said, because they couldn't stand living with their other son.

They were comfortably off and had two houses with a large garden. My grandfather owned a textile store which my father and uncle took over when we returned to Pristina. I was about one year old at the time. My father, a very religious man, went to the temple every morning and, when he had time, would also go at noon and in the evening. At home we spoke Spanish and this was the first language I learnt to speak. I remember my grandmother telling me the story of Ali Baba in Spanish, because my mother had no time for stories. I remember various Sephardic pies and pastelas and other dishes. My favourite



Beka Hara, Belgrade, 1947.

was *kačamak*, polenta with cream and cheese baked in the oven in a special pot.

We all completed high school and my brother Manojlo graduated as a pharmacist. Before the war began we had a Jewish refugee from Poland living in our house for about a year. Once the war started refugees began arriving from Belgrade as well.

Under the occupation, the Jews in Pristina were forced to wear armbands and all our property was confiscated. The young men were interned in Kavaje and Berat in Albania. Then the Italians arrived and life was much easier under them. They kept saying that they didn't want war. At this time, in 1942, my mother, father, sister and I went to Berat and stayed there until the following year. My grandfather died before the war began and my grandmother went to live with their daughter. In Berat we lived in private houses, paying rent. I remember Berat as a town with many windows. We lived there with the Orthodox priest, a very kind man, and had to report to the Carabinieri every day.

When Italy capitulated the bombing began and the Germans arrived. My father found a truck and we fled to Skutari where we hid with some Christians. Later the Albanians began blackmailing us for gold so we decided to return to Pristina. A month later we were all caught, all of us in Pristina. They came at ten in the evening in trucks to our house at 60 Kralja Aleksandra Street. We weren't allowed to dress ourselves properly or take anything with us and they forced us onto the truck, hitting us all the time. My mother was in a housecoat and I was barefoot in the snow, which in Pristina in that year of 1944 was still falling in April. There were my father and mother, my brother Manojlo and I from our family and about another three hundred Jews from Pristina in the group. We were immediately confined in the barracks, which were close by. All through the night they were collecting all the Jews in Pristina and bringing them to the barracks until eight in the morning. An Albanian in an SS uniform threatened to slaughter us and with this threat collected everyone's jewellery. There were others there who were also stealing things. Some of them took only rings, some took bracelets. I threw my watch out of the window, deliberately, not wanting them to take it from me. We were strip searched and everything was taken from us. There was a bizarre episode when they brought in a woman to search all the females, stripping them naked. One Jewish woman put her jewellery in her sanitary napkin so as not to be exam-

ined, but the woman doing the searches removed her napkin and found the jewellery.

It was the night of May 14, 1944, when they rounded us up and the next morning they loaded us into cattle wagons to begin our month-long journey. Our first stop was the Sajmište camp in Zemun where we spent several days. We were so hungry while we were in Sajmište that my brother took my earrings and tried to trade them for some bread. I had worn these earrings since I was four years old and no one had noticed them because they were covered by my hair. No one was willing to give us bread for them. I finally removed them only a few years ago when I was being examined by a doctor in Toronto. During our journey there was a barrel with some kind of swill of corn flour and we were each given two spoonfuls. Our next stop was in Hungary to pick up more Jews. When the train finally stopped at our destination, we had no idea where we were. We heard someone speaking in German. When we emerged from the train the Germans were astonished at our wretched and ragged appearance, not knowing who we were. They thought at first that we were Gypsies, and were confused by the light colour of our skin. They were used to the Jews arriving from the Netherlands and other countries, nicely dressed and carrying suitcases. We had arrived in Bergen-Belsen.

They put us into quarantine for three weeks and then into separate wooden barracks for men and women. I was with my mother, sister and cousin. The older people and mothers with children were not put to work. My first job was in the kitchen, chopping carrots.

Worst was the roll call. We would assemble at five in the morning and stand in snow up to our knees for hours, waiting to be counted. Then we would go to work. I stayed in the kitchen for about two or three months and then the Polish women arrived, large and stout.

The hunger was terrible. We ate animal fodder, beets and kohlrabi. A piece of potato would delight us. Once they gave us boiled sour beetroots and I said I would eat this every day, but now, to this day, I can't stand the sight of it. The women who arrived with suitcases would sell their clothes for a piece of bread. I once bought a sweat suit and was even hungrier.

I worked in the shoemakers workshop of the military command until the end. We picked overcoats apart, separating the whole pieces of cloth from the torn and burnt parts. We didn't dare damage the material, they would have killed us. I was painfully thin and had to unpick

eleven overcoats a day. Sometimes someone would give me a razor blade, a real stroke of luck, but if I had been caught I would have been thrashed unconscious.

One day I collapsed and was taken to the hospital with an acute infection from all the dirty fabrics I had been handling. I had a temperature of 41.8 degrees and because of this was released from work for three days. I survived all the severe complications but, after the liberation, I was diagnosed as having cancer. But then Dr Papo operated on me in the military hospital and discovered that I didn't have cancer after all.



Bergen-Belsen. "Dead bodies cover the ground under the pine trees. Children turn their heads away from the dead. They no longer even had the strength to cry." George Roger, Life Magazine photojournalist.

I was in Bergen-Belsen for almost a year, from May 15, 1944, when we left Pristina, to April 15, 1945, when we were liberated. The Yugoslavs were kept until August 29; they refused to release us before that because of the crisis around Trieste.

My mother didn't have to work in the camp, but she had to attend roll call. This would last longer and longer because they would count us

repeatedly when the numbers didn't add up. They kept killing people, and others died of exhaustion and then they would claim that someone had escaped and that that was why the numbers didn't correspond to those on the rolls. There was no possibility of escaping, as we saw for ourselves on many occasions when we went to the forest to fetch wood, guarded by five or six dogs.

A month before the capitulation the Germans began to behave as if they were insane. No one knew if it was day or night. They had realised that it was the end of the war and they wanted to evacuate the camp, burn the barracks and leave no traces. We were just waiting to die. Allied aircraft would fly overhead and we were confined to our barracks. We would pray for a bomb to fall and end our suffering once and for all as we could no longer bear the hunger, the illness and the torture.

As the end of the war approached, the Germans organised a train with an endless number of wagons. It stood on the tracks nearby as they loaded all the Yugoslavs into the wagons. Only those who were unable to walk, my mother and I included, remained in the barracks. We slept together in a bed sixty centimetres long.

The worst day was the day my mother died. She was only 54 years old and was nothing but skin and bone. I myself weighed only 24 kilograms at the time. I saw her lying with open eyes. "Mummy, mummy!" I called, but there was no sound from her. We had some kind of bed sheet in which we wrapped her. I was so ill I couldn't even walk, I couldn't even farewell her properly. When everyone was leaving a friend of mine came and saw I was the only one left in the barracks, that I had no strength to reach the train. She took me in her arms and carried me out to the road. She couldn't stay with me as she had to attend to her sick father, but she thought that someone would see me there and carry me to the train. But everyone just stepped over me, no one even turned around. When everyone had gone, my friend came back to see what had happened and found me still in the same place. I begged her to carry me back to the barracks, but she was afraid the Germans would burn the buildings before they left and didn't want to take me back. I stubbornly demanded that she carry me back into the barracks, even if it was going to be burnt down, and she did so. Two days later the Germans came with a truck into which they loaded everyone, the living and the dead. They took us to the train, which was still standing there, but it was already overloaded so we stayed in the truck. I was so sick I don't know

how much time passed. From the truck I saw a pile of guns and the Germans fleeing.

I crawled with another woman to a house where we wailed "*brot, brot!*" The people in the house asked who we were and we hesitated, not knowing what to say. "Hungarians," we said eventually, thinking this would be the safest. They let their dogs loose on us.

Later we traded the belongings of those who had died for bread.

It took the British Army twenty days to cover the ten kilometres to the camp. We were left alone with the SS women who were in the watch towers. The English arrived on April 15 and forced the Germans to carry out the dead, but there were only a few of them left to do this as the officers had already fled. They put us into the accommodation where the Germans used to live.

The British then gave each of us a whole loaf of bread and a piece of bacon, which caused the death of many people. By this time I already had typhus and dysentery and was unable to eat, which saved me. Nobody could reach the toilet, there was just a great puddle.

They took me to the hospital. Until then I had not had a camp number, because we were among the last convoys to arrive, but now in the hospital they registered us according to numbers given to us by the Americans. I still have the travel document from the camp under which we were transported back to Yugoslavia. I arrived in Belgrade on August 29, 1945.