
Blanka POLICER-TASIĆ

MY MOTHER AND I IN KIND HANDS



Born in Županja on September 28, 1932. She is a physician specialising in microbiology. Lives in Montreal, Canada, occasionally in Belgrade and in the Sveti Stefan area. Her mother Stanislava (née Filipović), a teacher, died in 1948 during surgery in Ljubljana at the age of 39. Her father, Dr Stjepan Policer, an epidemiologist, was born in Bogojevo in 1894. After the liberation, he worked in the police emergency clinic. During the difficult years of Cominform, as a doctor he was faced again with human tragedy and the difficult fate of political prisoners. Although he did not share the beliefs of these prisoners, he was indignant at the "re-education" techniques employed and did not attempt to hide this. Subjected to pressure and daily harassment and threats, and deeply disappointed in the outcome of the great idea for which he had fought, he took his own life on February 3, 1951.

When the war began in 1941, I was eight years old. We lived in the small Bosnian town of Derventa. On the eve of the war, my doctor father was appointed head of the epidemiology service which was battling the typhus then endemic in the area. My mother wasn't Jewish, her mother was a Croat and her father a Serb. She was baptised in the Catholic Church and because she married a Jew she had to promise her family that the children of the marriage would be baptised as Catholics.

My parents weren't religious. My father's only request was that his daughter bear the name of his mother who he had adored and who he had lost very early. And so I was named after my grandmother, Blanka, née Erenvald, who was married to Dr Moric Policar, a district doctor in Bogojevo.

Derventa, where we lived, was a town of mixed nationalities: there were Serbs, Croats, Muslims and a number of Jewish families, most of them merchants or doctors. I don't remember anyone ever asking me about my nationality or religion before the war. It wasn't spoken about, either at home, at school or in the street.

After the bombing on April 6, 1941, my father returned very quickly from the war and I began to feel that my family was in great danger; the atmosphere in the house was very tense and heavy with evil foreboding. When I went to play with my friend, Mira Štraus, I saw that her parents had packed their things as though they were planning to travel somewhere. Her older sister told me not to come any more because I might be taken away with them. I realised then that we were not in the same kind of danger as them. Mira Štraus was my best friend and we used to sit together in school. I never saw her again.

My father didn't go to work and I didn't go to school. Instead I played by myself or with my father in our yard. One day in April we were playing *klis*, our favourite game, when two German soldiers with red stripes on their sleeves interrupted us. My father had to go with them so he hastily bade us farewell. After that, my mother would take food to him in the Ustasha prison, always coming home in tears. They wouldn't let her see him and she had no idea whether the food she took was reaching him. One night not long afterward we heard chains clanking and the Ustashes shouting as they took the prisoners to the railway station. The prisoners were respectable people, most of them Serbs, and among them was my father. At this time the Jasenovac camp had not yet been built and they were all taken to a temporary camp at Gospić.

Our next door neighbour, Dr Grinberg, and his mother took their own lives before they came to take them away. My father's friend and colleague, Dr Hirš, was taken away with his daughter, a young woman married to a Serb who was already a prisoner of war. Their baby, just a few months old, was given to a Serb family to take care of. The night they took all the Jews away, they took this grandson of Dr Hirš's as well. The mother had been forced to tell them where the child was. They didn't spare him.

My maternal grandmother lived in Županja, so we went there, thinking we would be safe. One day, I think it was at the beginning of 1942, we received a letter from a peasant in the village of Jasenovac. He told us that my father was alive in the camp and had given him his address while he was out cutting wood with other camp inmates. The man also gave us his own address in the letter. Without much hesitation, my mother prepared some food and some warm clothes and we set off to visit this Jasenovac villager. The Jasenovac station was swarming with armed Ustashas. We were very frightened, as was the man who was waiting for us. He took us to his house and told us we should return to Županja on the first train because if anyone found out who we were and why we'd come here we'd soon be behind the wire ourselves. He explained to us that this was no ordinary prison: no one who went in ever came out; people were being tortured and killed in the most cruel ways possible. This was how we found out what the Jasenovac camp really was and what was happening there.

In the summer of 1942, we saw my father in the Đakovo hospital. In Đakovo, as everyone knows, there was a camp for women and children. When a typhus epidemic broke out there, the camp authorities sent my father and another two doctors, a Serb and a Croat, to treat the women in the camp; the Ustashas in the camp were concerned about their own health as well. My father had a colleague and good friend in the Đakovo hospital but unfortunately I don't recall this brave man's name. Because they were afraid of the epidemic spreading outside the camp, the doctors in the Đakovo hospital were in constant contact with the three inmate doctors and so my father would be escorted to the hospital every day by an Ustasha guard. My father's colleague wrote to us and invited us to Đakovo. That day the Ustasha assigned to guard my father was diagnosed as being "seriously ill" and spent the whole morning undergoing all kinds of examinations, and my mother and I spent this time with my father in his consulting room. We returned to Županja and didn't tell a soul where we'd been.

The camp in Đakovo was liquidated and my father and the other two doctors were sent back to Jasenovac, but he managed to escape to the Partisans. Dr Nikola Nikolić later wrote about this incident in detail in his book on the Jasenovac camp, but at the time we found out about it from the Ustasha newspapers. They wrote that the Partisans were an ordinary gang of mainly Serbs and Jews, and among the names they mentioned were Dr Paja Gregorić and my father. My mother was arrested

soon after this and taken to the prison in Vinkovci, near Tolje. This place was noted for its cruelty.

The husband of my mother's sister was an officer in the civil defence. My mother was released on his guarantee that she would live in his house and have no contact with the Partisans. So from then on we lived in Nova Gradiška in my aunt's house.



Blanka in her youth.

I didn't go to school and my mother didn't leave the house. My cousin was the same age as me and she would come home cheerful and full of stories. I wasn't at all sorry about not going to school. I remembered the school in Županja where my teacher would come to class in his Ustasha uniform. He would always insist on me reciting poems praising the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia and its leaders. He enjoyed watching me tremble in fear and disgust. Fortunately there was a

woman teacher who often replaced him because he had "other duties" in the Jasenovac camp.

We exchanged letters with my father through my uncle's orderly. He was from Podgradci on Mt Kozara and would frequently go "on leave" and bring us letters from my father. By this time he was working as a doctor in the Partisan hospital in Podgradci. Before the liberation we had to flee to Bosanska Gradiška where we were taken in by a Muslim family whose son was with the Partisans. Their house was right beside the bridge over the Sava and the Ustasha camp of Stara Gradiška was opposite on the other bank. I knew that people were being killed there every night because we saw the bodies of peasants from Kozara floating down the river. It seemed to me that the majority of them were women. The bodies would often catch in the reeds along the banks. We would dislodge them with long pitchforks and let them float on down the Sava. My mother was unable to stay silent as she did this and

from her mouth the whole time would come dreadful words which no one dared hear.

At the end of April, 1945, we were waiting in the house by the bridge for our liberators, the Partisans. I remember the soldiers being very young, almost boys, from around Knjaževac, from Stara Planina.

One day three completely exhausted, starving but happy men knocked timidly on our door. They were inmates from Jasenovac who had taken part in the breakout from the camp. I remember one of them was called Moni Levi. He knew my father from the camp and told my mother about one episode. My father had a fur-lined leather jacket which he was wearing when he was arrested and so he also wore it in Jasenovac. The camp inmates were often taken out to cut wood and an Ustasha who was escorting them one day noticed the jacket and ordered my father to remove it immediately. My father hesitated but the Ustasha soldier was impatient and stabbed my father in the chest with a knife and took the jacket. Moni Levi saw that my father was still alive, but bleeding profusely. He carried him back to the camp on his back and hid him. He would secretly bring him some scraps of food, potato peelings and water. My father told us later that Moni Levi had saved him from certain death.

We kept the escapees in the house for a few days until they had recovered enough to go wherever they were going. In those days, people mainly travelled either on foot or in farm carts. Sometimes, if there was room, they would get a ride in a truck. The trains were not running. We set out for my grandmother's house in Županja. It took us hours and hours and was very hard going but we were happy. We were no longer living with the awful fear, and now "our people" were everywhere around us. We heard that my father was still alive and happily looked forward to embracing him and freedom.