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Vera BRUNER

## THERESIENSTADT, CELL 33



Vera Bruner was born on June 4, 1925, in Bač in Vojvodina, to mother Alis, née Herlinger, and father Aleksandar-Šami Vais. She completed her primary education with nuns in Bač and began attending secondary school there before completing the fourth year of lower secondary school in Osijek. Her father had a brickyard.

After the war she began studying economics, but did not complete this. She married Mirko Bruner, a lawyer who worked in Yugoslav diplomatic posts abroad as a legal advisor. She has two children and two grandchildren.

Up to the beginning of the war I lived with my parents in the village of Bač, in the north-eastern part of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia known as Dunavska Banovina.

The discriminatory laws against Jews began to be implemented immediately after Hungary occupied Yugoslavia in April 1941. One of the effects of these was that my father was banned from continuing his business. At the beginning of April, 1944, following occupation by the Third Reich, even more stringent racial laws against Jews were introduced. All Bačka Jews were deported, with the wholehearted assistance of the Hungarian authorities, to camps in Europe, mostly to Auschwitz.

I was arrested in April, 1944, in my family home. My parents and I were taken to a collection camp in Bačka Topola, near Subotica, close to the pre-war border with Hungary. I was 18 at the time. From Bačka Topola we were sent via Subotica, in overcrowded cattle wagons, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The journey took several days, with no food, water or toilets.

We arrived in Auschwitz on May 2. As soon as we arrived we were divided according to gender, and then again into two groups: those capable of hard physical labour and those who were sent to the gas chambers.

Our heads were immediately shaved and we were tattooed. The number 81258 was tattooed on my mother, I was number 81259. I remember that we were in Block A and that the name of the *Blockälteste*, the head of the barracks, was Fani. After a week, or perhaps ten days, there was a new selection process and I was sent, along with a number of other young girls, to the Gleiwitz camp.

The Deutsche Gasrusswerke factory made synthetic soot for the manufacture of artificial rubber. Everything around us was covered in coal and the air was grey. After a tiring day we too would be covered in coal dust. One of the directors, perhaps he was the main director, was called Dr Schenck. He supervised the facility in which we worked.

Our kapo's name was Sonja. I was selected to work in a half-built bunker. The work was hard, the conditions unbearable. Anyone who was incapable of working, or who was ill, would be sent back to Auschwitz and killed. We spent about nine months in this factory, until January 1945, when the Germans suddenly began to evacuate us to Germany, via Czechoslovakia.

The evacuation began in heavy snow. It was a harsh winter and we had only our light clothes from the camp. On our feet we wore wooden clogs which we would cover with paper. We heard that the column was moving towards the city of Breslau, or Wroclaw in Polish. I fainted so my friends dragged me through the snow. In the morning the Germans ordered us to walk to the railway station where we had to climb up into open freight wagons.

We were carried by train for several days with no food or water. The wagons were packed. We had no water and the guards around the wagons refused to even give us a little snow. Several of us, half-crazed and desperate, decided to jump from the train.

When the train left Kosztalanetz station we jumped. The guards opened fire. I wasn't hit but when I fell I broke my left shoulder. My friend Hadasa Dagon (known at the time as Ivka Kostolić) and I set off to the nearby village of Litovice and there we knocked on the door of the first rural house we saw. There were already posters in the village ordering the locals to report any fugitives, and this is exactly what they did.

Two gendarmes arrived. They took Ivka to the police station for questioning and left me in the house because of my injury. Ivka and I had agreed earlier that, if we were caught, we would claim to be Serbs to lessen our chance being killed. Ivka said that we were sisters, daughters of a Yugoslav officer who was an Orthodox Serb.



*Vera Bruner among her loved ones: grandson David, daughter Vanda and son-in-law Ettore Columbini*

That evening the Gestapo threw us into prison, where we saw several girls from the transport. From the prison in Litovice we were sent to another in Olomouc. After two days in Olomouc they sent us to the prison in Brno. At this time I began to suffer pain in my shoulder. After a lot of begging, the prison doctor sent me to a clinic where they put a cast on my shoulder. We stayed in the prison in Brno for more than ten days and were then sent to the Gestapo prison in Prague (Pankrác). After being interrogated there we were sent to the Small Fortress in Theresienstadt (Terezin), which was also a Gestapo prison for political prisoners. After the roll call we were locked in the starvation cell (*Hungerzelle 33*), or death cell.

There were many other prisoners from Gleiwitz in the cell. Among the people I met there was Ruža Presburger, a student of medicine. She had jumped off the train after five days of travelling without food. She was my acquaintance and my friend.

A few days later, Ivka and I were moved to a different cell which was supervised by two SS women and two prisoners from the women's camp, Maruška Polak and Dr Daša Tidlitatov. Daša was the infirmary doctor who later removed my cast. If I remember rightly, my cast was removed in February, 1945.

I recall the cell very clearly. It had three auxiliary sections. In one there was a man in a coma who died soon after our arrival. In the second part there was an elderly woman who was mentally deranged and I heard that she was later killed. Ivka and I were in the third part, together with a woman who had a three-year-old child with her. The woman's name was Erna Haas and the child was Tomiček-Frita, known as Tomi. He was the son of her closest friend, a famous painter who had been killed in the ghetto in Theresienstadt. (After the war a film was made in Germany about Tomi's life, about Theresienstadt and Israel. In the film, Ivka speaks about Theresienstadt and also mentions me.)

I spent more than three terrifying months in this cell, on the concrete floor covered with straw. The food, mainly some watery soup, was pushed through the door for us and left on the floor. We were constantly hungry. We had only one, small, barred window, through which we could see only a glimpse of the sky. I was unable to sleep because of the itching of insect bites and the infection spreading under my cast. Every morning we would hear the sounds of killing and we spent our days in fear that we would be next.

On May 8, the guards left the door open. It was the end of the war. I still hadn't turned twenty. My parents were already dead.

The Red Cross took us in trucks to a ghetto where we were examined by a doctor. We were given discharge documents in our real names. The Red Cross Ambulance drove us to Prague and, at the beginning of June 1945, we crossed the Yugoslav border at Subotica.

### *Confined in Cell 33 in the Small Fortress In Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia*

I heard the following story from Ruža Presburger one of the survivors, who now lives in Israel. She was a student of medicine at the time. Presburger was her maiden name in Yugoslavia, and her nickname

was Baba. When she married in Yugoslavia after the war, her name was Ruža Beck. She moved to Israel in 1948 and is known as Rachel Beck. She is married with a daughter and has three grandsons, one of whom is serving in the Israeli Army as a social worker. She now lives in Hod Yerushalaim, at 3 Guatemala Street.

Ruža Presburger (now Rachel Beck) was a diligent worker in Gleiwitz, close to Auschwitz, between May 1944 and January 1945. In mid-January, 1945, when the Russians were getting closer and closer, the internees were evacuated from the camp and marched through the snow to the railway station where they were crammed into open cattle wagons (about 150 people per wagon) in trains which were travelling through Czechoslovakia towards Germany. After five days she jumped from the train and, without food, drinking only water from snow she melted in her hands, she staggered to a village.

She headed towards a rural house, in the dark, in the eastern part of the former Czechoslovakia, and there she fainted. She was still wearing her striped suit and because of this was denounced to the Czechoslovakian police. They took her to Prague, to the Pankrác prison. There she met another sixty or so Jewish women who had also jumped from trains. Soon after this they were moved and locked up in the Small Fortress in Theresienstadt, two kilometres away from the “showcase” Theresienstadt camp. All sixty of these prisoners were crammed into a small room with only one window, which was almost completely boarded up. Very little fresh air reached the room. This Cell 33, the Death Cell, had probably been allocated by the Nazis for human experiments. The women were given very little food, once or twice a week, probably in an attempt by the Nazis to see how long it would take them to die from starvation. Perhaps it was a perverted study of human behaviour. One of the experiments was to keep people for a long period of time in a dark room. They did not manage to get out of there until the time of liberation. Afterwards they had to protect their eyes from sunlight for a very long time. In another cell they would put people on narrow wooden boards over water. If they lost their balance, they would drown.

The women realised they would all die if they fought among themselves when the food was distributed. They elected one woman to distribute the food and no one argued with the way she did that. If one woman was sicker than the others, her friends would give her an extra portion. When the Nazis put a Czech prostitute who was dying from

syphilis into their cell, hoping that she would infect the others, the prisoners held a meeting and agreed to kill her. However none of the women was prepared to carry out this execution with their own hands. Instead, and in spite of the hunger, they fed her and shared their scanty meals with her until she died.

In order to pass the time, and in an attempt to preserve their sanity, the women set up a school. Sitting on the cold concrete floor, without any books or other equipment, each of them took her turn teaching the others whatever she knew, be it European history, the Hebrew language, art or photography. One wrote poetry, another recipes on toilet paper. The only disturbance happened when the poet “stole” a scrap of paper which had been given to the woman they called the cook. They also knitted, pulling a broom apart and using the twigs from it as makeshift knitting needles. The wool came from unravelling their own things and making new ones from them. There was a serious discussion about whether the new sleeves should be plain or should have some Swedish pattern like the front of the garment.

All of this was an effort by the inmates to retain their sanity and support one another in these inhuman conditions. One woman from Poland managed to keep her thirteen-year-old daughter with her by bribing a German with a handful of jewellery. They were visited frequently by two Germans in black uniforms who were surprised and displeased to find them still alive. They survived solely thanks to the fact that two inmates managed to persuade the camp authorities that they were Christians, Yugoslav women, sisters who had come to visit their father, a prisoner of war. Their assumed names were Ivanka and Vera Jovanović, and they were in a nearby cell. Seventeen-year-old Vera never left her cell. She had broken her shoulder when jumping from a train. She was taking care of a five-year-old boy named Tomi, an orphan brought from Theresienstadt. Twice a week, at the risk of her own life, Ivanka would receive a basket with fifteen loaves of bread from a Czech guard who got this bread in some mysterious way from the male section of the camp. There was probably also medicine provided, although memory of this is unclear. The guard covered all this up for Ivanka and taught her to pull the bread through a small ventilation hole in the toilet of Cell 33 which overlooked the interior yard.

As the capitulation approached and the Russian Katyusha rockets could be clearly heard, the German authorities began taking the inmates out, cell by cell, and killing them, in order not to leave live witnesses

behind. When the women from Cell 33 heard about this, they decided to stay inside, hoping they'd be forgotten, as they had been in the previous few weeks. One day, at the beginning of May, 1945, a Czech supervisor asked them to vacate the cell and told them that the Czech Red Cross was there. They were to line up outside their doors, several hundred metres from Cell 33, because they were now free. The women, now very weak from malnutrition, headed for the door. Many of them were still wearing the striped uniforms of Auschwitz. Freedom was just a few metres away. At that moment the German camp commandant noticed them and jumped angrily towards them, swinging a wooden baton. He was chasing them back towards Cell 33, planning to kill them. Jews in camps were not to be permitted to survive the war. This cruel turn of fate was about to overtake them on the threshold of liberation. However the Czech guard managed to raise the alarm with members of the Czechoslovakian Red Cross who were nearby. They hurried to Cell 33 and sat on the floor among the women, thus preventing the Germans from killing them at this moment when the Allies were so close.