
Edita Armut KAŠIKOVIC

EVERYONE CARRIES THEIR OWN FATE WITH THEM



Edita Armut Kašiković was born in November, 1922, in Budapest, to father Oto, a trader and mother Olga, née Lichtenstein. In her early childhood, the family moved to Zagreb, where Edita lived until the second world war broke out.

Until 1944 she lived in Bakarac, taking an active part in assisting the liberation movement and saving Jews by sending them to Italy or finding accommodation for them in Dalmatian coastal towns governed by the Italian occupation authorities. In February, 1944, the Germans arrested her on the island of Rab. She was then deported to Auschwitz II – Birkenau – the notorious death camp, whose atrocities she managed to survive.

Her father, her younger sister and many members of her immediate family, particularly on her father's side, perished in the war.

After the liberation she worked in the Information Office of the Croatian Government Presidency, in Radio Zagreb and in other Zagreb institutions and companies. For health reasons, she lived a good part of her life in coastal towns. When the war broke out in Bosnia she was offered the position of president of the Jewish Community in Banjaluka, a position she filled successfully until her death on April 9, 1995.

She recorded this testimony at the request of Mr Sade, a representative of Sohnut, the Jewish Agency for Israel.

My father had not yet turned 21 when I was born. My mother also bore twins, six months before my parents divorced. The court awarded custody of me to my father. I was not quite two and a half years old. At the time my whole family on my father's side was moving to Zagreb, except for one of his sisters. My father left me in her care. She was in charge of my upbringing until I turned nine. At that time my father remarried in Zagreb and so I was sent there. Not knowing the language, I lost a year of schooling and enrolled in the third grade of primary school again the following year. I attended the Jewish school in Palmotićeveva Street. I was not brought up with strict religious customs, but I did grow up in a typical Jewish family which celebrated the religious festivals. I would go with my grandmother and the women in the family to the synagogue regularly and I attended religious classes until the fourth year of secondary school. I also regularly went to the Maccabi gymnastic association, to all performances at the Jewish Community and so on. In this period, Nazism had already raised its head and there were already many German Jews in Zagreb. As with many other Jewish families up to 1941, we had a family who had just arrived from Berlin regularly eating at our place. This is when the Zionists from Zagreb would assemble high school children. In my class, in the secondary school, ten of the forty students were Jewish girls. We listened to lectures and learnt various crafts, all as a kind of preparation for emigrating to Palestine. I enrolled in a course for hair stylists because I always liked arranging the hair of my friends.

After I had completed primary school, my father decided that I should continue my education at the commercial academy, saying that if I completed grammar school I would be left without a trade and, because war could break out, he didn't want to live with a guilty conscience thinking that he hadn't equipped me with a way to put bread on my table. My resistance to this was in vain. These new surroundings, my new friends (I was the only Jewish girl in the class there) weakened my earlier friendships. In this new environment, I found myself in a leftist, communist-aligned society. In this new circle of friends there were a lot of activities which were attractive to young people who already had a progressive way of thinking, progressive for that time at least. I continued to attend Maccabi and lived and worked as before.

Then came April, 1941. My father, his younger brother and several uncles were rounded up at about the end of May and taken to what was then the Zagreb fairground. They were held there for almost three

weeks. I would take my father lunch every day and he would tell me over and over again that we must take urgent action to organise getting me out of Zagreb. This wasn't easy, especially because we females were alone in the family. There were also two small children, the daughter of my father's younger brother, who had been born in December, 1939, and my little sister Vlatka, born in October, 1940. Our house had been sealed by the Ustaša so we all moved to my grandmother's apartment. Thanks to the father of a friend of mine I managed to get a genuine pass for Sušak without paying a single dinar. I remember it was a Saturday. I took lunch to my father and told him that I would be leaving the following morning. Tears welled up in his eyes, tears of joy. This was our last meeting. He told me that it looked as though they, too, would soon be leaving in some transport, but that he didn't know where they would be taken. My father was everything to me, both my father and my best friend. I managed to work up the courage and the will to survive everything I lived through only with the hope that we would meet again when the war was over.

As so many times later in my life, fate also took a hand at this point, toying with me. That Sunday morning when I set off to Sušak, a cargo train was waiting on the second track. My father was in it. We set off at the same time: he to death and I in an attempt to survive. I stayed in Sušak for two months until there was a decree ordering all Jews to leave. My uncle (my father's eldest brother who had managed to flee Zagreb before my family was arrested) was in Rijeka. But when we had to leave Sušak, he didn't even mention the possibility that I could emigrate to Italy with him. So, feeling abandoned by him, inexperienced as I was, I went to Bakarac with a handful of other Jews who had previously lived in Zagreb. At that time Bakarac was a place in the border area between Italy and Pavelić's Independent State of Croatia, with a special status and predominantly under Italian rule. However, because I was already active in the illegal movement, I didn't register under my real name and my friends did not denounce me. From there I was active in the Hreljin and Bakarac area. My family in Zagreb would send me money to live on through a young friend of mine, also a member of SKOJ who came to Bakarac occasionally (he wasn't a Jew). However, at the end of 1942, all Jews in the Croatian coastal region were rounded up and taken to the Kraljevica camp and I ended up there as well. From there we were taken to the camp on Rab. There I continued to be constantly involved in the illegal organization. When Italy fell and the camp was disbanded, I

stayed behind on Rab and worked in the District Propaganda Section. As far as possible I helped with the transfer of Jews who wanted to go to Italy. All of this, of course, was expensive. But the pressure was so great that sometimes it wasn't enough to have the money, good connections were also needed to get a place on a boat. Part of my family was on Rab (my grandfather's brother, his wife and his daughter-in-law, with a young daughter who was six at the time). They wouldn't leave although I kept begging them to do so, mostly for the sake of their daughter-in-law and little Iva. My aunt claimed that they didn't have money for it. I knew that this was not true but there was nothing I could do about it. I don't know what they believed lay ahead.

In February, 1944, Germans landed on the island of Pag. We knew that they would come to Rab very soon. It was now too late for all of us who had stayed behind. Unfortunately there were terrible storms at that time. We were unable to cross over to Jablanac, on the mainland, so a group of us who worked in the committee hid in a nearby village, waiting for the sea to calm down so that we could leave. However somebody denounced us and, on the second night, the Germans, who had landed on Rab that morning, arrested us. We were taken for questioning. With the Germans there was a man from Rab who knew me and he pointed at me and said I was Jewish. He was an undercover Ustaša, but we hadn't known this earlier. I was separated from my group of friends and moved to a group of Jews who had stayed behind on Rab. From there, via Rijeka, they took us to the notorious Gestapo prison in Trieste known as Risiera. This was a huge rice warehouse and we were put in the attic. They brought me out for questioning every day.

One day, just before they were due to take me out for questioning, my aunt removed her corset and from it took a handful of diamonds which she asked me to throw in the toilet. I thought I would kill her on the spot. She could have saved all of them, especially her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. But she had chosen not to. It was about ten days, perhaps even longer, before they had gathered enough people, mainly women and children, to make up a transport. There were somewhere between 250 and 300 of us. We set off in freight wagons. The journey lasted six days and five nights. Not once in all this time did we leave the wagon. We were so crammed in that we could only either stand or squat. We all relieved ourselves on the spot. Once each day the train would stop, they would open the doors and women wearing Red Cross armbands would pass out dishes of food without any spoons, so

that you ate whatever you could take in your hand. They also passed around containers of water with no drinking vessels.

When we arrived at the Auschwitz station there were five dead and several who had gone out of their minds in our wagon alone. Of course we had no idea where we were or what Auschwitz was. At that time the railway line had not yet been built between the women's camps and the men's camp in Birkenau, at the end of which lay the crematoriums. They took us there in trucks.

When we climbed out of the trucks we saw in front of us beautifully maintained lawns. We entered a nicely decorated entrance hall, very spacious, with tables and chairs. We were greeted by people in striped uniforms, clean, tidy and smiling. Later we learnt that these were members of the *Sonderkommando*, or the "command of the living dead", as they called them. These carried out special tasks: the destruction of men, women, children under fourteen, the elderly and the sick. Apart from a group of Soviet prisoners of war and the Gypsy camp – about 4,500 of them – all the prisoners were Jews. This was a group of 860 selected men, Jewish inmates. Every four months new ones were brought in and the previous group killed by the new. In this way the secrecy of the crimes was maintained. They brought us tea, even sweets for the children. There were no Germans in sight. A girlfriend of mine and I (she is now in Israel) were bored and began to wander around. At the end of the entrance hall we saw several heavy doors which had small windows in them through which you could peep. I still remember standing on tiptoe to see through the window. One of those men came up and told me to step away. At that moment two Italian women, who had three children with them, began to shout, saying that they didn't belong with us, that they were not Jewish, only their husbands were. Because they wouldn't stop, one of the men who were there when we arrive went out and called the SS men. Suddenly a group of them walked in, led by Dr Mengele. He introduced himself to us. He told us to line up. I speak German and heard him saying to a man standing next to him "well there are young ones among them, too." I was standing next to my aunt's daughter-in-law, and she put her little daughter in front of her. One of those clean and tidy inmates passed by us and, speaking under his breath, told Enika (my aunt's daughter-in-law) to distance herself from the child and hand her to the elderly lady standing next to her (my aunt). Enika just shook her head. I was confused so I didn't try to persuade her. Mengele and another two men began walk-

ing past us, indicating with their fingers which women should step out of the line. They pulled about twenty of us out. He told us to go immediately to the labour camp, while the others and the children would spend two weeks in quarantine before joining us. What happened to them from that point on is now common knowledge.

We were again put into the truck and taken to Birkenau, into the barracks where all the admission procedures were carried out: recording of personal information, tattooing, shaving, baths, distributing smelly dresses without underwear. We became numbers. Mine was 76481. If you were to wake me in the middle of the night I would tell you that number immediately. All of these procedures were carried out by the Slovakian Jewish women, about 2,000 of them, who had come on the first transport, when Birkenau had just been set up. About ten of them had survived, they were no longer people but beasts, in the service of the SS men. One of them, whom I asked to tell me where we actually were, smiled ironically, slapped me in the face and kicked me in the stomach with her boot so hard that I fell down. Sobbing, I stood up and asked her why she had done that. I can never forget the words with which she replied: "You're in the place where everyone dies and the kick was your punishment for being free until now."

Soon I was approached in the camp by two young girls, a Russian (who was my contact until the very end) and a Pole. It's difficult to know just how, but in that place it would become known in no time who someone was, where they were from and all the other important information needed about someone. They told me that Marjuša (that was the name of the Russian girl) would be my contact and that when something needed to be done she'd be sure to find me. At first I worked in what they called the exterior commands, as well as in the interior ones (removing faeces from our big septic tanks and, while doing this, we would be in faeces up to our waists). Outside the camp we did hard physical labour which was, of course, pointless, such as loading stones and other material onto a pushcart and then unloading them over and over again. At that time there was a selection almost every week, at the morning roll call. Someone only needed to have a pimple, or a little wound on their body (we had to be naked), to be immediately separated.

We'd been in the camp for perhaps a month or so when, one morning as we were preparing for roll call, my friend looked at me and screamed. I asked her what the matter was and she told me:

“You’re grey!” Our hair had grown a little and it seems that I had turned grey overnight.

And then the summer came, and the day of the assassination attempt on Hitler. Of course we didn’t know about this. That evening, as we were returning to the camp from work, several hundred of us (the whole command was divided into groups of about a hundred) were taken to the entrance door of the crematorium instead of to our barracks. They lined us up and told us that we were there in retaliation for the attempted assassination of Hitler. We didn’t react at all, we were completely indifferent, because we were already aware of the fact that only a stroke of luck could save us from death. However no one opened the crematorium doors, we were just standing there, while in our minds we felt we were already dead anyway. Sometime in the middle of the night a message was passed from line to line that, when we started to go in, each of us should have a stone in our hand, because there were stones everywhere, and that we should throw these stones at the SS men. Just for the sake of doing it, to show them that we were not cattle. However the dawn began to break and suddenly there was a command: “Left turn!”. None of us moved, we were simply frozen. But then they set the dogs on us and we began to return to our barracks.

One day Marjuška came and told me that I was to be transferred to the Canada Command (the barracks which received all the clothes and footwear from people who had gone to the gas chambers). My assignment was that, when we searched these belongings, I should put as much as possible of any medicine I found in the hem of my dress, and that she would come to me every evening to collect it. This was a very dangerous task because the SS men were constantly walking among us and I had to hide whatever I put in the hem of my dress until evening. When we returned to the camp at night the SS men almost always carried out spot checks and searched us. One evening, when we reached the gate, we were ordered to jump up and down. That day I had quite a few injection ampoules in the hem of my dress. The ampoules rattled and an SS man who was passing by heard this. He began to beat me and then he took me to the room of an SS woman named Dreschler. She was the top SS officer of the women’s camp. After the beating, and the questioning about who I was to have given the ampoules too (of course I said that I had not had any special reason to take them) she sentenced me to two months in the *Strafkommando* (punishment command). I was separated into a special barracks with

quite a few others, we slept in solitary cells and, during the day, they took us to the Vistula where we used shovels to load sludge from the river onto boats. After this I was sent back to my old barracks. Of course I had contracted a really bad inflammation of the ovaries and was in terrible pain. A Czech woman, a doctor, who worked in the *revir* (what passed for a "hospital" barracks) would come every evening to give me injections. She was sent to me, which meant that, like me, she must have been part of our illegal organization, although neither she nor I ever spoke about this.

There were transports with Jews from Hungary arriving at the time so, because of the great number of trains which came, they built a special railway line to shorten the process preceding the liquidations. At first, when they came there was no selection at all; the transports were taken directly to the crematoriums. I don't know exactly but I think that this lasted for more than two months. The crematoriums worked night and day, flames blazed from the chimneys and the air was so saturated with the smell of burnt flesh that we could hardly breathe. It seems that they weren't using sufficient Zyklon so the bodies, when they were being thrown into the ovens, would be revived and then sometimes, at night, when everything was silent, cries could be heard. My barracks was near the end of the camp, relatively close to the crematorium.

At that time something really horrifying happened, something I dreamt about for years. One morning after roll call they lined us up, girls from two barracks, in front of a huge hole in the ground, not very deep. Suddenly two trucks arrived, full of children, very small, six years old at the most. Some of them were holding dolls. The SS women were hugging the children and taking them to the hole. A second truck arrived full of barrels of petrol. They quickly unloaded it, opened the barrels, poured them over the children and set them alight! This sight, this crying can really never be forgotten and I don't need to explain what we who had to watch this lived through. They then brought in quicklime, threw it over the heap of children and ordered us to get to work. That evening three of my friends threw themselves on the electric fence. They didn't have the strength to go on living with this sight in their memories.

One morning during those days, guided I suppose by some sixth sense, I told my friends that we could try to hide after the roll call, not go to work and wait to see the transport arrive. I knew that my step-

mother had managed to flee with my little sister to Hungary at the end of 1942, and that she had gone to her family in Dombóvár. When the transports began arriving from Hungary, I always thought somewhere in the back of my mind that they would be picked up too, although I always hoped that they would somehow manage to hide. So the two of us succeeded in staying behind. We walked towards the wire fence. A transport arrived, the doors of the wagon were opened and I saw my stepmother coming out of it with my little sister, who had not yet turned four at the time. At first I froze, then began mechanically running towards the fence. I wanted to shout. My friend realized that something was happening to me, she ran after me and put her hand over my mouth. She scolded me, still with her hand over my mouth. I told her what I had seen. She was calming me down, telling me that I could have been killed on the spot if the SS man had seen me, and that it would have been no good to them because my stepmother would never have recognised me in the state I was in and there was nothing I could do to help her anyway. I realised that she was right. The only thing we did was to keep moving around that area. People were going quickly to the crematoriums. We went to the end of the camp where we waited for her to also go in with my sister.

That summer I had also suffered from typhoid fever and recovered from it. Here too, it could be said that I was lucky, if such a word can be used. The room I was in at the time was guarded by two SS men, *Volksdeutschen* from Vojvodina. There were several of us Yugoslav girls there. They were very kind to us, speaking our language and sometimes giving us a piece of bread. When I fell ill and had a high temperature, the Czech doctor said that she didn't dare move me to the infirmary because from there every day they sent those with typhoid to the crematorium to prevent the spread of the disease. She gave me medicine and injections every day. My friends would hold me up between them so that I wouldn't collapse. In this way I managed to get through the roll calls and then, when we set off for work, they would press themselves hard against me to hold me up and I just took steps like an automaton. As soon as we arrived at our workplace, the two *Volksdeutschen* let me lie down (they would give me their blankets) and there I would stay until it was time to return to camp.

Sometime in the autumn, my Marjuška came and told me that I would be moved to the *Schreibstube*, the clerical office, which was located in the small camp in Auschwitz (Auschwitz I). We called this

camp the *Musterlager* because it was the only one that the International Red Cross knew about. The commissions which came to inspect were always taken there because these were solid buildings, rooms with bunk beds, everything was tidy and, I could even say, pleasant.

This was the period in which the camp had gradually begun to be emptied out. Groups were being taken to Germany, mostly political prisoners and we had heard that they were being taken somewhere in Germany to be killed. I was told that I would be given a list of numbers each day. When I copied the lists with the numbers which were to be sent the following day, I was to substitute those from the list they had given me. I never found out who these others were and I wasn't able to ask. Just as in the Canada Command, this was a dangerous assignment because I had to keep the paper hidden and constantly check the numbers on it while an SS man walked up and down the room. The day before I was reassigned to this job I received a nice, clean dress, underwear, shoes and stockings. I worked there for about a month.

I think it was sometime in November that a new command was formed which worked on dismantling the crematoriums. Bricks were removed one by one and a special unit would mark each brick with some sign and number, with the assistance of the SS men. At this time there were no longer any selections and the number of inmates in the camp was falling constantly. What they called Camp A was now completely empty. This had been newly built outside the women's camp, some distance away, and had been used to accommodate Jews from Hungary, because they had subsequently decided to separate out some younger people after all. We worked on this dismantling until the beginning of January, 1945. We heard that they would set these crematoriums up again in Gross Rosen (Czechoslovakia). At about the beginning of the second half of January, the Red Army began a major offensive. At night we could hear the thundering of artillery. We knew that the end was closer and closer and we would also get information from the Polish Partisans with whom the illegal organization was in touch. We were well informed about all events on the fronts.

One day they assembled all of us women who were still in Birkenau. They told us that the final liquidation of the camp was beginning and that it had to be completed within two days, that we shouldn't attempt to escape because we wouldn't get anywhere, that the camp was mined and we shouldn't attempt to hide. The evacuation was done according to plan, and with German style discipline. An hour or two

before leaving the camp, each group was given access to the warehouses which were full of clothing and bread, sugar and margarine. I set off with the Polish group at about midnight. This was a treachery which we didn't realise until the morning, when the day broke. Each of us had dressed in several layers of underwear, two or three dresses and boots and packed our bags with as much bread, sugar and margarine as possible. The Germans had actually used us to empty the warehouses. Only those who couldn't stand on their feet stayed behind in the camp.

We didn't know then that they would be saved in just a few days, while ahead of us lay almost three months of terrible suffering which not even half of us would manage to survive. We walked all night in heavy snow and extreme cold. At dawn we saw corpses along both sides of the road and bread and food scattered around. Any woman who lagged behind was shot on the spot by the Germans. There was a special group of SS men at the end of each column which was responsible for this. Exhausted women were shedding pieces of clothing one by one and throwing away food as they walked because they didn't have the strength to carry it. So there were fewer and fewer of us. On this journey they would sometimes put us into open wagons in which we spent days without moving more than a few kilometres, then they would let us out and again we would walk. At one point along this journey to Calvary we spent about ten days in the Malhof camp where we recuperated a little. This was actually a munitions factory, but in those days we didn't work. We were put up in a sturdy building (separate from the female inmates who were there permanently) and given relatively decent food.

We set off again and eventually arrived at Ravensbrück, dying of thirst. When we reached the camp gate, the Germans said we would be given water. There were several great water barrels just inside the gate, each the height of a person. When we began running towards the barrels we were stepping over one another just to get to the water. Some fell into the barrels trying to climb up on them, but none of us tasted any water. Lying behind us, as though on a battlefield after a battle, were dead and deformed bodies. We spent about three weeks in this camp. Then we were back on the road. We were already deep into German territory, sandwiched between the Russian and American fronts. The thunder of weapons came from all sides and we would pass columns of refugees. The Germans were no longer paying such close attention. They, too, were in panic. Aircraft would fly over our heads

and, because they couldn't tell whether we were refugees or prisoners, they would fly low and machine-gun us. Many were killed this way. We passed Dresden, all in ruins. As we left the city a group of us decided to try to escape. We were no longer receiving food, instead we ate the spring grass. We were at the end of our strength, we could barely lift our feet. So even if we tried and didn't make it, we had nothing to lose because we could no longer go on like that. We agreed that when we reached the first crossroads, if there were no SS men at the end of the column, we would simply turn off the main road (by now there were rarely SS men at the end of the column because they were looking after themselves). And that's how it went. We came to a crossroads. Thirteen of us turned right, in rows of four. We knew that this was the way people going to villages to work would move. We hadn't got very far when we spotted a German heading towards us on a motorcycle. We were petrified. He stopped and asked us where we were going. There was a village in sight and we said that we were going there to work. He didn't even ask us why there was no one escorting us. He looked at us, reached into his bag, carefully took out a big, snow-white piece of bread, gave it to one of the women, wished us luck and set off. Probably everything had been clear to him. He wasn't an SS man but a soldier from the Wehrmacht.

We came close to the village. On the opposite side of the road there was a small forest and we hid there. And that is where we were when the Red Army soldiers arrived. At night we would sneak out into the village from the other side of the road and dig up potatoes. I don't know how, but one of the women had a small knife which we used to peel them. Of course the raw potatoes gave us all a fever, but we survived. Of the thirteen of us, I was the only Yugoslav. The others were Poles, Russians and French, and there was one Belgian woman. On April 10, the Russians arrived in the village, which was called Kirche. We went into the village and asked the first soldier we came across to take us to his commandant. This was a young officer. We told him everything. He started hugging us. Other soldiers came, we were all crying, but we were happy. They took the thirteen of us by truck to a nearby village which belonged to a former aviation colonel. Doctors came there to examine us every day. We were given a special cook because we needed a special diet. There were guards standing outside the house day and night so that no one would disturb us. After about ten days there I went out in front of the house one day and saw a group of men in old

Yugoslav uniforms and English khakis with a horse-drawn cart. A few of them were on bicycles and there was a Yugoslav flag on the cart. I stood in front of them, told them who I was and asked if they were going home. They said they were and I asked them to take me with them, because I was in a great hurry, my father was probably already waiting for me in Zagreb. They hesitated at first, but when they saw how important this was to me they agreed to give me a khaki uniform and a Red Cross armband so that I looked like a nurse. The Russians had allowed them to go home on their own, without having to wait for organized transport.



Visiting Auschwitz in the 1970s

I arrived in Subotica at the end of May, and went to a refugee shelter. Three days later I was issued with a document certifying that I had been cleared. I set off to Zagreb. As all the trains were full, I arrived home after sitting on the roof of a wagon most of the three-day journey. I went straight to the house of my childhood friend (whose father had got me a pass for Sušak in 1941). When I rang the bell and her mother opened the door, she just stared at me blankly, not recognizing me, and I burst into tears. My friend then also came out, she was looking at me but not until I spoke did she recognize me. I shall never forget those moments of my return. She told me that she thought I had been killed

because those kind of rumours had been going round. Before I arrived she had been in touch with a cousin of mine who told her that my whole family had been killed in Jasenovac. He was a freemason and the Masonic organization had got him out of Jasenovac at the end of 1941. He had hidden in Zagreb until the end of the war. I went to see him and he confirmed what I already knew. I was wondering whether it had all been worth surviving, because the one for whom I had wanted to stay alive was no longer among us. Nevertheless, I was happy to be alive.