Žuža MARINKOVIĆ

THE MOST HARROWING JOURNEY INTO UNCERTAINTY

Žuža Marinković was born in Subotica on November 15, 1921, to father Đeno Bek and mother Jelisaveta Bek, née Berger. She had one sister, Lili, who died in Novi Sad in 2001. Her mother died in Subotica in 1948, and her father died in Subotica in 1973. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Subotica. More than twenty members of her family perished in the Holocaust.

After the end of the second world war she worked in Subotica and Novi Sad. Since 1954 she has lived in Belgrade. She is the widow of engineer Miloš Marinković. She has two daughters, Nada and Rajka.

On April 12, 1941, the *Honvédség*, the Hungarian armed forces, marched into Subotica. Apart from a few shots which the Chetniks fired to greet them, there was no battle. At that time we lived at 21 Laze Mamužića Street. We were the only Jewish household in the street – most of our neighbours were Bunjevci with whom we got on very well, apart from one Hungarian household who raised the Hungarian flag on the very first day after the "liberation" and welcomed the *Honvédség* with great pomp and cordiality. The first thing they did was to denounce our household as "suspicious" because there were Jews living there and

perhaps also some Chetniks hiding. The soldiers scoured the house from basement to attic, with bayonets drawn, forcing me, as the most suspicious individual, to show them every nook and cranny. My father was arrested as a hostage, but was quickly released. He was then taken ill with tuberculosis. He was lying in bed at home with an open cavity because the military authorities refused him permission to travel to Budaker in Hungary, which was the only place medical treatment was possible, as we were by then cut off from Slovenia and Serbia. The Hungarians introduced a law on Jews which limited our movement for the duration of their military administration, but we still lived in our apartments. That was the way things were until April 5, 1944, when we received orders to vacate our apartment within 24 hours, taking only essentials with us, and to move to a ghetto which had been set up in advance. At the time my father was already away on compulsory labour, as the last generation required for this (he was born in 1896). My sister Lili had been deported to the Kistárcsa camp near Budapest.

In September 1941, my sister Lili, who had not yet turned sixteen at the time, was arrested and subjected to terrible torture in what they called the Yellow House. She was then tried before a Hungarian court martial on the same day, November 18, 1941, as fifteen progressive people, nine of them Jews, including Dr Adolf Singer, were sentenced to death by hanging.

As a minor, Lili was sentenced, in March 1942, to fourteen months' imprisonment. I was also harassed and questioned as an accomplice in the sabotage of setting fire to corn.

In the spring of 1944, when the German Army occupied Hungary, a ghetto was set up in Subotica. In spite of his poor health, my father was taken to compulsory labour. Lili was again arrested and taken to a camp in a place called Kistárcsa. Mother and I had to leave our home; with just our bare necessities we were moved to a ghetto located in the houses next to the railway station. The residents of these houses were moved out temporarily to accommodate us. Mother and I had one small room. The Bek family also had a room n the same house: mother, father and three daughters. Ani (now a widow, her surname is Kožar and she lives in Ljubljana), her sister Klara (now in Jerusalem) and the youngest (who at twelve years of age was suffocated with her mother in the gas chambers in Birkenau). The Vig family was in the third room. My old German language teacher and her daughter were also in our close neighbourhood in a laundry measuring two metres square.

I still remember how she put a wooden board over a laundry boiler and on it put her books, the only valuables she took with her to the ghetto: classics by Goethe, Lessing, Heine and Shakespeare translated into German.

The ghetto was under Hungarian guard. We had limited freedom of movement. We younger people went out to work wearing yellow stars: we spent ten hours a day sewing army uniforms. We were allowed to go shopping for groceries only after the market closed when, basically, we couldn't find anything. All of us had friends who would manage to smuggle a little food and give it to us. There was no running water, so we used to go to the well to get water and it was there our Christian friends would leave food for us.

Our life in the ghetto didn't last long. At dawn on May 25, German police appeared and ordered us to prepare to leave in an hour, taking only what we could carry. At the Subotica shunting yard, after we were searched to ensure we had not concealed any valuables, they pushed us into cattle wagons.

Žuža (L) with her sister Lili, Subotica, 1943

Soon after this we were deported to the assembly camp in Bácsalmás. In this camp I remember my friend Lili Šrajer having a six-month-old child. When we were being deported from the ghetto, she left her little child with a Hungarian family in order to save him. However someone denounced the family and said they were harbouring a Jewish child, so the child was "arrested" and taken to his mother at the camp. It was the Hungarian gendarmes who did this. Both mother and child perished in the Auschwitz gas chamber.

The SS men took charge of us. In the worst heat without any water – although we did have some food – elderly women, elderly men, women, children, the sick, all crushed against one another without even a place to sit, they took us on a journey of uncertainty. This journey was the most harrowing thing and can't even be imagined. My mother kept losing consciousness and I couldn't even let her down to lie on the floor or give her a drop of water.

After six days of travel we arrived at the Auschwitz railway station. There the sign "*Arbeit macht frei*" awaited us. The wagon doors opened, we had to leave behind the few belongings we had, and the first selection began. Men to one side, elderly women and children to another, and we to a third. The SS men hurried us along with their dogs, shouting: "*Los, los*!"

We arrived in Birkenau. We saw women in rags, with their heads shaved, wire and more wire. We were lined up and pushed into the anteroom, a huge bath house. We were stripped naked, they took all our things, they shaved us, both the upper and lower parts of our bodes and then put us under the showers. The water was turned on. We received one "dress" each – a rag, and a red rag for our backs. They didn't tattoo us because they didn't have time. There were trains coming in carrying hundreds of thousands of Jews from Hungary. The gas, the chambers, the crematoriums all worked day and night.

They herded us into wooden barracks. There wasn't even room to lie on the floor. We sat, crammed up one against each other, and the roof leaked. My mother had another of her attacks and I was unable to put her on the floor to lie down because there was no space. Each morning and evening we stood for *zelle appell*. They would count us. I would hide my mother when she was falling down because whenever they noticed that someone wasn't standing still they would pull them out and send them into the unknown. We would never see that person again. After a few weeks (we had no sense of time, it was only by sunrise and sunset that we knew another day had passed), Dr Mengele appeared one evening. He was selecting girls for labour. We were standing in rows of five. I was the first he selected; I was still fairly strong. My mother stood in front of him: "I want to go too!" He turned her around and looked her over, we were completely naked, he waved his hand and so we stayed together. Seeing this, a girl standing next to me with her mother tried to do the same but without success. She went back into her line; unfortunately we never saw them again.

We were taken to the bath house. It was not gas that came from the taps, but water. We were given canvas dresses with a star on both front and back and shoes made of some kind of fabric with wooden soles, then, thus equipped, we waited until the morning when we set off from the Auschwitz railway station, in normal carriages, on our journey. In the town of Breslau (now called Wroclaw), we changed stations. As we passed through the town they spat at us, shouting "*Jude, Jude!*"

We reached our destination: Parschnitz, in the Sudetes, not far from the town of Trutnov. The camp was under the command of the Gross Rosen concentration camp. I was given the prisoner number 28911.

Žuža Marinković, Bled, 1946

The SS woman (*Lagerfuhrerin*, the camp commander) selected me for work in the kitchen. As menial staff we carried coal, bags of potatoes and beets, scoured cauldrons and so on. The cooks were Polish women, and they also distributed the food. Every day at dawn we were the first to get up, we would light the fire in the cauldrons and make "coffee" for our friends who came in to work in the textile factory (*Weberei*). There they sat next to the machines weaving fabrics of artificial fibre and old rags. In the afternoons we would wait for them with dinner. Mother also went to work. My great advantage was that my mother could also take my food ration at the counter while I could eat an extra potato or two or some stolen beet from the kitchen.

The SS woman (*Aufseherin*, female supervisor) in the kitchen was a beast of a woman. She abused us in every way possible. One day, in the early spring of 1945, she chose me to go with her to collect the meat delivery. We used to receive horse meat once a month. There I had the opportunity of meeting some inmates. In a short conversation with one of them I learnt that the end

of the war was drawing near. The SS woman noticed this, slapped me several times and punished me by sending me to dig pits instead of working in the kitchen. I managed to put my mother in the *revir*, thanks to a French doctor who was a wonderful woman.

Until the very last day, March 7, 1945, I dug trenches every day, despite the fact that the Soviet units were coming closer and that shooting could already be heard. The Germans were fleeing westward so that they wouldn't fall into the hands of the Russians. When we awoke on May 8, the gate was open, the guards had left the camp and we were there alone, in anticipation. In the afternoon tanks appeared and, with them, Red Army fighters, tired, covered in dust, straight from battle. We carried the first Soviet officer into the camp ourselves. When we put him down on a table, in a tired and husky voice he told us: "The war is over, you are free." We kissed his dusty boots, our joy and happiness knew no bounds.

However my mother, who had held up really well to that point and even encouraged us younger ones, was completely lost. She was unaware of anything. Again, the doctor saved us. She poured her a handful of bromide and put her in a bed in the hospital. I curled up at her feet and so also saved myself from potential rape, which was something that was happening.

With no organisation, without giving it a moment's thought, I set off with my mother in the direction of home. Sometimes we got a lift in army trucks, sometimes we managed to get on a train, we climbed into open wagons, and we experienced many different things along the way. But we wanted to get home at any cost, because we had learnt that our Subotica had been liberated back in 1944, on October 20. So after a terrible journey of perhaps a week, we arrived in Budapest, where a shelter had already been organised for repatriates.

After disinfection and something to eat we were supposed to get some documents, but we heard that my father and sister had already been in Subotica for some time. So without waiting, we got on the first train transporting prisoners of war and reached Subotica. We were one of the few families who returned – all four of us. When Mother and I returned to Subotica in May 1945, our neighbours told us that on the very day they shipped us out trucks had come into the ghetto and taken away all our belongings. We found an empty house.