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*Irena VUKOV*

## IN HUNGARIAN AND GERMAN CAMPS



*Irena Vukov was born on September 1, 1930, in Šid to mother Margita, née Epštajn, and father Vilim Wollberger. She has a brother, Janika.*

*Of her immediate family, her father and her father's brother perished in the Holocaust.*

*After returning from the camps she went to Israel, to the Shaar Haamakim kibbutz where she completed training as a motor mechanic. With her new family she moved to Hungary where she was employed as a motor mechanic in an ironworks. She then worked for the International Department of Ironworks until 1987. She is a member of the Committee for Autonomy of the Serbian Minority in the local government in Dunaujváros. She speaks four Slavic languages as well as German, English and Hebrew. She has a daughter, Vera.*

My name is Irena Vukov, née Wollberger. I was born on September 1, 1930, in Šid, in the house of my grandfather Geršon and grandmother Katica Epštajn, née Fišer. My father worked as a dentist in his home town and from there he was transferred to Čantavir. This is where, on February 8, 1933, my brother was born. He now lives in Israel, in Beersheba, Omer. He has the academic title of doctor and is a professor of biology at Ben-Gurion University.

My parents separated when I was five and my brother two and a half years old. I returned to Šid, where I attended the first year of pri-

mary school. My mother found employment as a seamstress in Vinkovci. It was there that I finished second, third and fourth grade of primary school. At the beginning of 1941 my mother remarried in Čantavir. Her new husband was Izrael Neumann. On April 12, the Hungarians occupied Bačka, after which the harassment and killing of Jews and Serbs began. In September 1941 I was enrolled in the first year at the Subotica Girls Secondary School. Two months later, on the basis of the *Numerus Clausus* decree, all Jews from the first grade were expelled from school. In September, 1942, they admitted us into the civilian high school, again in the first year. A month later we were again expelled. In September the following year, 1943, the Jewish Community organised a Jewish secondary school in a building in the synagogue courtyard. For the third time I was in the first year. At the time there were about 5,500 Jews living in Subotica. On March 19, 1944 ("Black Sunday") the Germans occupied Hungary. In April, they took my father and stepfather to what they called the Jewish Labour Battalion. My father and his brother were killed at the front in Ukraine,



Facsimile of a card sent in September 1944 to Germany from a labour camp in Ostmark (the German name for Austria after its annexation to the German Reich). The seal reads: The Fuhrer knows only battle, work and care. We want to take over part of that, that part we are able to take over.

where they were forced to walk through a minefield. My mother, my brother and I were taken by force to the ghetto and then to the assembly camp at Bácsalmás.

Three or four weeks later they put 84 of us into wagons. We were in the last wagon, the last to be forced in. The last three wagons were uncoupled somewhere in Hungary. We stood there the whole day, hungry and thirsty. They then hauled us to the Strasshof camp. After a week of "disinfection", they took us to Lundenburg (now Břeclav) in the Czech Republic where the SS men met us with dogs and "selected" those of us who would be agricultural workers for the Sudetes region. We were again put into new wagons. We 28 Jews arrived in a village then called Unterthemenau, now Poštorná, to an estate of the Jewish Lichtenberg family, which had been granted to the district Gestapo man, Franz Stangl, by the German Government. We took up residence in the cattle barn.



*Irena in Subotica in 1946 after the end of all the atrocities that she had experienced*

At the end of October, 1944, they loaded us into wagons, after the estate was bombed. In the middle of the night of November 12, we came to a place four and a half kilometres from the Bergen-Belsen camp. From there they made us walk to the camp. We saw thousands of dead people lying on both sides of the road.

At the beginning of April, 1945, a day or two before the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, they forced us, about two thousand Jews including mothers with children, into wagons. Over the following two weeks we were driven to

Theresienstadt, where the Soviet Army freed us on May 8, 1945, at seven o'clock in the evening.

It took us twelve or thirteen days to reach Subotica and Čantavir in a variety of cars and vehicles and on foot.

In the summer of 1946 we decided to join an Aliyah to what was then Palestine. About 4,500 of us, young Jewish people, boarded the Knesset Yisrael on the Adriatic at Bakar Quay. Just off the Israeli

coast we were surrounded by the British, who took us on their ships to Cyprus. Not for another fifteen months did we arrive in Israel, where we spent two weeks in quarantine. They fed us, carried out a medical examination, and we received Israeli identification papers. I was in the Shaar Haamakin kibbutz until June 1, 1948, and then in the army until June 5, 1950. While in the army I learnt the motor mechanic trade. In August, 1952, I passed the entry examination for the University of Haifa. The exam was a success, but that year I married a Hungarian Jew and, on October 23, 1955, our daughter Verica was born in Haifa. My husband's entire family, apart from his brother, were killed in Auschwitz. He decided that we should return to Hungary. We separated in 1959.