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Ljubica PERUŠKO

REMINISCENCES OPEN NEW WOUNDS



**L**jubica Peruško was born on May 10, 1925, in Sombor, to father Anton Ernst and mother Aranka, née Singer. She was raised in a family of five, with her two brothers, Josip, the elder, and the younger, Oskar. Of her immediate family, her mother and younger brother Oskar perished: they were killed immediately after their transport arrived at Auschwitz. Her grandmother Frederika, known as Frida, and her grandfather Solomon Singer, her mother's parents were also killed, as well as her two sisters and two brothers with their families.

A number of her father's close relatives from the Kadelburg family also perished in the camps. After the collapse of Germany she returned home, as did her father Anton and her older brother Josip who had been in the labour battalion, mainly in Hungary. Josip emigrated to Israel, married and had two sons. He later died there and his sons remain in Israel.

After her return from the camp, on July 21, 1945, Ljubica lived with her father Anton and brother Josip in Sombor, at 13 Jevrejska Street, at the home of relatives named Šenbrun who, unfortunately, did not return. Until her marriage in 1949, she worked as a cutter for a shoemaker from whom she learnt the trade and as a junior agricultural associate of the Sombor and Apatin railway stations. When she married, she and her Istrian husband moved to Pula in his home region.

*She has two daughters, Sonja and Alida, both of whom are now married with families. In 1999, she moved to Canada where she now lives with her younger daughter, Alida.*

Until the unhappy day of April 27, 1944, when we were deported, I lived a carefree life with my family. I was learning my trade, visiting my grandmother and grandfather and our many close relatives, because my parents both came from large families, with whom we socialised. Then, suddenly, everything changed, and we could not have imagined the real hell on earth which awaited us. Together with our closest relatives, crammed into cattle wagons, about a hundred people in each, they took us first to Baja, then soon afterwards deported us to Birkenau, in other words Auschwitz II, part of the Auschwitz camp complex. There they immediately separated the men from the women, and also mothers with children and the weak, whom they took straight to the gas chamber. Adults, people capable of labour, were on the other side. I was among them. They immediately undressed us and took us to the bath houses. From there, half naked, wearing only small dresses with short sleeves and with bare feet in clogs, we were taken through the snow to the blocks in which they accommodated us. These were what they called *koja*, incredibly small rooms. I don't think they were more than a metre long and wide, and the same height. In these they would put ten people so that we slept pushed up against one another in a cramped position. First they made five or six of us pull carts full of garbage out of the camp. After a while they reassigned us to digging pits around the camp. All this happened in Birkenau. After that, we would go to Auschwitz, accompanied by music at the camp exit gate. In Auschwitz we worked at the Union hand grenade factory. I made the inner threads on hand grenades. All the time they were feeding us really poorly. We were given 100 grams of army bread per day, some swill with bran and potato peelings for lunch. We were so starved that some people used to rummage through the garbage to find potato peels. If they were caught doing this they would get a beating.

But I will never forget something that happened to me while I was working in the hand grenade factory. The machine I was working on broke down, so I went to the German repairman and asked him to come and fix the machine. Because we were alone, he asked me if I was

hungry. I said I wasn't, but he just looked at me and took out a piece of bread from somewhere and put it in my hand. He just told me to make sure no one saw me eating it because he would probably be in trouble as well. This was the one bright moment in the otherwise gloomy and tough life we were living and experiencing.



*Ljubica Peruško with her cousin Teodora Milosavljević, also an Auschwitz inmate, Belgrade, September 2004*

All this time I knew nothing about my family or my close relatives. On one occasion they made us write home and say that we were alright. The return address was Waldsee, to mislead the recipient, because Waldsee sounded like a summer resort – a summer lake! I've forgotten the minor details and I don't like to recall those terrible times. With me was Pirika Fišer, her married name is Dunderov, who lives in Novi Sad with her family. I was with her all the time. Also my cousin, Teodora Zam, the daughter of my aunt, whose married name is Milosavljević, was also with me for a short time. She now lives in Aleksinac. While we were together, she was working on parcels which were being confiscated from the Jews who arrived. She sometimes managed to bring some food she had found in the parcels,

which was very brave of her because if she had been caught she would have been taken to the gas chamber.

In January, 1945, along with the other inmates, we were taken to Ravensbrück, again in cattle wagons. We travelled for three days and three nights, because the Germans were retreating ahead of the Russian advance. The Germans left us lying in the snow all night. The snow was thawing from the warmth of our bodies, so we were completely wet. I don't understand how we didn't all get pneumonia. Somebody must have been watching over us.

We stayed in Ravensbrück for a couple of months, I don't remember exactly how long, and then, because the Russians were advancing, they moved us again, to Neustadt-Glewe, which is where we were liberated.

In Auschwitz, after working in the factory, we always had showers. However, in Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe, where we did no work whatsoever, the hygiene was awful. We all got lice and spent all day every day trying to get rid of them.

I was in Neustadt-Glewe at the time of the liberation. First the Americans passed by, then came the Russians. The journey back to Yugoslavia took a long time. I no longer remember the details except that, in Prague, we were able to freely go for a walk. I don't remember who was with me, but I remember that we went to taverns. The Czechs were very kind. They would give us food and, when they heard that we were from Yugoslavia, they told us to say hello to Tito from them.

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## SUPPLEMENT TO THE AUSCHWITZ ORGANISATION DIAGRAM

AUSCHWITZ WAS SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER CONCENTRATION CAMPS. IN AUSCHWITZ, THE NAZIS DEVIOUSLY COMBINED THE EXTERMINATION OF SEVERAL MILLION PEOPLE WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GIGANTIC INDUSTRIAL PLANTS, FOR WHICH THEY USED THE SLAVE LABOUR OF INMATES CAPABLE OF WORK.

OF THE TERRITORY OF FORTY SQUARE KILOMETRES, ONLY TWO KILOMETRES WAS RESERVED FOR THE MASS LIQUIDATION OF PEOPLE, AND THAT WAS IN BIRKENAU!

THE DIAGRAM REPRESENTS THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF AUSCHWITZ, WHICH INCLUDED:

AUSCHWITZ I – THE CENTRAL CAMP

AUSCHWITZ II-BIRKENAU – THE DEATH CAMP

AUSCHWITZ III – THE INDUSTRIAL DIVISION.

AUSCHWITZ III INCLUDED 39 “AUXILIARY” CAMPS (*NEBENLAGER*), WHICH ARE LISTED IN THE DIAGRAM. WE NOTE THAT, IN THE MEMOIRS PUBLISHED IN THE FIRST THREE VOLUMES OF *WE SURVIVED*, MOST TESTIMONIES FROM AUSCHWITZ REFER TO AUSCHWITZ II, THAT IS TO BIRKENAU. THERE ARE ALSO SOME TESTIMONIES FROM LABOUR CAMPS TO WHICH INMATES WERE SENT ON THEIR ARRIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ II, SOME OF THE 39 CAMPS PHYSICALLY DISTANT FROM, BUT ADMINISTRATIVELY PART OF, THE CENTRAL CAMP. THUS, FOR EXAMPLE, VERA BRUNER, WAS SENT TO THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY GLIVICE II AND WORKED THERE FROM MAY, 1944, UNTIL HER EVACUATION IN JANUARY, 1945.

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