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*Jolan STRAPAČ*

WITHOUT FRIENDS, NOT EVEN A BAPTISMAL  
CERTIFICATE WOULD HAVE HELPED



*Jolan Strapač was born on April 12, 1926, to father Dr Sigismund Schapringer, an engineer, and mother Ana, née Paunz. Her father was born in Pécs in Hungary, and her mother in Osijek. They married in Osijek in 1922.*

*The entire immediate and extended family of Jolan's mother perished in the camps, from Jasenovac and Dahau to Auschwitz. She has an elder sister, Valerija, who was born in Osijek on July 28, 1924, and with whom she lives in their family home. Her father Sigismund died in 1940, so they lost one parent very early and faced many difficulties together with their mother, especially in the years of general suffering which followed the death of their father. Although all three were interned in the Tenje camp near Osijek, they managed to escape and save their lives thanks to the efforts and kindness of their friends.*

*From her marriage to economist Lovro Strapač she has a son and daughter, both university graduates, and three grandchildren.*

*She lives in Osijek.*

My parents were Jews. My father lost his father very early so my uncle, Oskar Weissmayer, who lived and worked as a banker in Zagreb

but had no children of his own, put him through school. My father Sigismund studied in Germany, in Karlsruhe where, during his studies, he converted to Catholicism. He never spoke about his reason for this, but my mother Ana also converted at the time they were married. So we children, Valerija and I, became Catholics at birth. During our schooling we went to Catholic religious classes. Religion and nationality were never spoken of in our home. We celebrated all festivals, Catholic and Jewish.

My first encounter with anti-Semitism occurred when they registered us and gave us yellow bands with stars. The consequences of the yellow stars which we were required to wear on our sleeves included being avoided by some people who up to that point had claimed to be our friends. My good friend Neda Lukac was not one of these: she helped me as much as she was able, given her age. In our house nobody was involved in politics. My father used to say: "There is only one God, everything else is created by people." The most important thing is to be good and to respect everyone. Life has taught me that there are good people, just as there are bad.

For me and those closest to me, 1941 was a very difficult year. First they labelled us with the yellow arm-band while some people who were not only Jewish but also Freemasons wore bands on both arms. Every day there were new bans proclaimed in the newspaper *Hrvatski List*. For example, in the tram we were only allowed to ride in the trailer and only in the open section. We were allowed to go to the market only after 11.00 a.m., by which time everything had sold out or what remained was what people didn't want to buy, so it was always very difficult for us to buy anything. Jews were dismissed from the services and those who owned shops had administrators appointed to them before they were eventually confiscated. The Croatian



*Walking with her future husband, end of 1942*

authorities, together with members of the German *Kulturbund*, introduced what they called the contribution. This meant imposing on all members of the Jewish community the obligation to pay a certain amount of money with which they would somehow secure the right for themselves and their family members not to go to the camps. Bank accounts were also seized. An order was issued requiring all Jews to move out of the city centre. And so the family of Julije Herzl came to stay with us, his daughter Ilze, whose married name was Mirjana Mihić. As an officer of the general staff, her husband had been taken into captivity, while she had returned to Osijek with her two sons, Mihajlo and Danilo. So our family grew by six members. Their estate, a desolate stretch of land called Drvaruša had been seized from them. Fortunately they had an honest administrator who used to send them some food from the land.

It was a very hard blow for me when they expelled me from the sixth year of secondary school only because I was a Jew. There were also many Jewish teachers who were dismissed, for example Professor Miroslav Pollak, and Professor Dežma, who was an excellent mathematics teacher, Professor Gaun and many others whose names I don't remember. The Osijek Jewish Religious Community, as it was known, organised a school in an apartment, a secondary school with no public rights, so that the children would not waste time. Many people had no idea, or did not believe, all the things which were to happen. So I, too, attended this secondary school in 1941 and 1942, which helped me more easily to matriculate after the war. Things were getting harder and harder every day. When the harassment of Jewish families began, anyone who was able, and who had the money, tried to flee to Split and from there to Italy in an attempt to save their lives. Unfortunately only a small number of Jews managed to do this and to escape the camps and compulsory labour. Then large numbers of arrests began when the Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška camps were set up. All that was needed was for someone, out of sheer spite or for the sake of personal gain, to denounce a person as a communist or a Jew and that person would immediately be taken to the camps or, at best, to compulsory labour. When we went out we were only allowed to walk in twos, or at the most threes, and were required to keep out of the way of anyone coming in our direction.

In the spring, on March 1, 1942, the Jewish Community received orders to build a camp outside Osijek, towards a place called Tenje. Every day we had to finish school early and go to compulsory labour or,

as they called it, construction of a settlement for Jews. There were engineers and builders among us who, unfortunately, had to employ their skills in this way and we, the others, were unskilled labourers helping them. The famous Rijeka master craftsman Neurat was in charge of building the hygiene facilities, which did not include a classical bathroom, but just one room with taps and squat toilets. Given the situation in other camps this was a luxury.

Every day at the crack of dawn, from March 1 until we were finally taken away to camp on July 21, 1942, my sister and I went on foot to compulsory labour five or six kilometres away, taking short cuts across the fields. We worked from six in the morning until six in the evening, with a one-hour break for lunch, if anyone had anything to eat, which had to be brought from home. We were building a barracks, about three metres high with a roof. I remember well one hot summer noon before our lunch break. I was carrying buckets with mortar. As I passed a bucket to a young man named Eliša, he was overcome by heat and exhaustion and fell from the top of an almost completed wall of the barracks. Although he survived with only some major bruising, I'm not sure that this was a lucky escape because, as far as I know, he was taken to a camp in Germany and did not return. The camp was to be finished as soon as possible because people from nearby places were already being moved in. As far as I know there were about two thousand people in the camp.

I was still going to work every day when some of the inmates who had survived the camp typhoid epidemic were moved from the Đakovo camp to the Tenje camp. It was at this time that the secret, nocturnal removal of Osijek Jews to the Tenje camp began. Just as we thought they'd forgotten all about us, a man from the police rang at our door and asked us what religion we were. We were honest and said that we were baptised at birth but that our parents were Jews. He didn't know what he should do, so he took us to the police. That very day an officer named Tolj, a notorious anti-Semite had come to the Osijek police from Vinkovci. They took my mother, my sister and me to him. I still remember as if it were happening now the horrifying way he looked. In great fear we explained to him that my sister and I had been baptised since our birth and our mother since her marriage. Having heard this he said that my sister and I were free to go but that our mother had to go to camp. We both said that if she was going, we would go too. He just laughed cynically and said: "Well, then, go!" And that is how we came to arrive in the Tenje camp on July 21, 1942.

We had to report to an office at the camp entrance. There they asked us to turn over any valuables, our gold. They took the chains we wore around our necks, our earrings and a gold watch. They wrote everything down neatly and gave us a number, but I can't remember what it was.



*Saviour and saved: Neda Lukac (L) through whose efforts Jolan was saved from camp and (R) Jolan, from the days about which she writes*

On the second morning we were assigned to work. It was harvest time and I was assigned to work in the fields. I had never done this before, nor had I even held a shovel in my hand before that day. Fortunately I was given the job of binding wheat into sheaves. I was young and naïve at the time so, in some way, I thought this was the worst thing that could happen to me and I just accepted it as a fact, as something that had to be. Mother was assigned to work in the kitchen, and my sister in the garden. We slept in barracks, my sister downstairs and my mother and I upstairs. The lights were turned off at eight-thirty in the evening and the officer on duty would tour the barracks, checking that everyone was asleep. To this day, if I speak about this I see the officer passing through the barracks and, from my position, I see only part of his cap. I often squinted so it would seem as if I were asleep, because I was afraid, but in reality I would be watching through my eyelashes, to see if anything would happen.

A group of young people we called the “flying squad” went to the city every day to obtain supplies we were short of and to move inmates’ belongings out of their apartments. They also visited the Home in Donji Grad where elderly Jews who were unfit for work were interned. Once I managed to sneak out of the camp with the flying squad and visit the Home. This was the last time I saw my grandmother, my grandfather and my aunts alive. It was very hard to watch them. Some could hardly walk and there were others who were just lying on the stairs. On the way back I was very scared because, having sneaked out of the camp, I didn’t know how I would get back in. Fortunately for me, outside the camp there were children playing under the supervision of women who had been put in charge of them, so I managed to mingle in with them and return to the camp unnoticed. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I had been caught.

Had it not been for my best friend Neda Lukac, whose father was a senior officer in the Independent State of Croatia, I don’t know how my life story would have ended. Thanks to them we were released from the camp on August 7, 1942. I later discovered that, although he was an Ustaša, he saved two other Jewish families as well as us.

When we returned home we had to start our life again and find jobs, although we were not Aryan. I was fortunate that, before she fled to Italy with her family, Mrs Vinski had recommended me to Mr Ferdinand Speiser Jr. Mr Speiser didn’t care who was what but only about how someone worked and whether they wanted to work. When I began working, my great advantage was speaking German, which we used at home. I worked with Mr Furman, the chief book-keeper. What was even better was that this same Mr Furman worked in the factory at the time when my father was director there.

When I returned from the camp I met a very wonderful young man who could not seem to understand why they had taken me away to camp. He lived near me and saw them taking us away. This was my future husband, with whom I spent 56 years in a happy marriage. I have a son and a daughter who both have university degrees and have started their own families. I also have three grandchildren.

I am sorry about all my fellow sufferers who weren’t lucky enough to survive. This was an extraordinary young generation whose lives were destroyed as they were just beginning, and I always wonder why, because of whose insane ideas. With our memories of these grievous events, we also want them never to be repeated.