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*Mira ALTARAC*

## LIFE UNDER CANVAS



*Mira Altarac was born in Zagreb in 1938 to father Mordo Marko Altarac from Tuzla and mother Regina Altarac, née Koen, from Sarajevo. After emigration she returned to Zagreb where she completed primary and secondary school and then enrolled in Zagreb University to study comparative literature and English in the Faculty of Philosophy. She worked in the Mladost publishing company and in the Zagreb City Library. For some time she lived in England where her son, Daniel*

*Ilan, was born. He is now a physics engineer, married to Ana Domaš.*

After our sojourn in Split, which is where we were in 1943 when Italy capitulated, Mother and I joined the Jewish colony in Vela Luka on Korčula for a short time. From there, after the Germans occupied Korčula, we went to Vis and then, with a group of Dalmatian refugees, we set off to El Shatt, a desert in Egypt near the Suez Canal. There were about thirty of us Jews. Father joined the Partisans.

I remember with anxiety the flight from Korčula. The news spread in the middle of the night: the Germans were coming! In pitch dark, without turning the lights on, we were boarding the boats. As a child of barely five, some of the dramatic things that were happening seemed funny to me: a man in a coat, with a hat on his head and a briefcase in

his hand, fell into the sea and had to be pulled out. The weather was awful and the sea rough, the boats were rolling. There was rain pouring down the walls, children were crying and everyone was vomiting.

I remember the nine day voyage on the Mediterranean. However, before we reached Port Said, we had stops along the way, in Italy, in the villages of Santa Croce and Santa Maria della Salute. They put us up in empty, abandoned villas. Before that the Allies disinfected us: mothers with children were put under hot showers and we were dusted with DDT. The village women from the Dalmatian islands were reluctant to undress and go naked under the showers. There was also a possibility of us being sent somewhere across the ocean, but Mother and I stood firm – we wanted to meet Father after the war. Cleaned and disinfected, we continued our adventures by boat: Bari, Brindisi, Taranto, and then nothing for days. After three years of fleeing and hiding, this journey seemed like an idyll, practically a holiday. I enjoyed sleeping in hammocks on the ship because I could swing in them. There were also members of the British Army with us. I remember one young officer who showed us his family photographs, with a little girl my age, and he would offer us sweets. All the same, just so it wouldn't all be seen as idyllic, I have to say we had daily drills in case the ship came across a mine – there were many of them scattered in the sea. Despite all the potential danger every day, the island people had a very nice time and found the voyage so pleasant that it was with heavy hearts that they disembarked in Africa!

And so, after a long voyage, we approached Port Said. The ship was surrounded by little boats with Arabs in them, famous for their skill as traders. All of them persistently offered their goods for sale; obviously they didn't know we were refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia and not some idle tourists. Our first shock came on the first night. They put us in a huge abattoir, where we slept on the bare concrete. We had slept in a meadow, under the stars, back in Mosor, but this was something different. In the morning they put us in trucks and we stopped in the El Shatt desert, close to the Suez Canal. The tent settlement was already in place. There were large tents waiting for us, twenty or so people to each tent. Of course for me, as a child, this tent city was interesting, but I think it was something of a shock to the adults, in fact they were scandalised. There was also the tropical heat, and we weren't used to that.

That first night, no one slept well. Children could be heard crying all night. In the morning a rumour spread that some members of the group – children and elderly people – had already died during that first night.

However life soon settled into a normal state. By this I mean that our basic needs were met: latrines were built, the kitchens began working: people would go “to the cauldron” with plates for their rations and stand in lines. Soon we were given tropical hats for protection from the hot sun. We were accommodated in Camps I, II and III. We were free to move around, people would walk to the Suez Canal to watch the big ships pass by, but returning and finding your way around this tent settlement wasn’t easy, at least not in the beginning. However, this problem, too, was soon solved: streets were set up and named. We also fought with the *ghibli*, the desert wind. Anyone who has been in the desert knows how difficult it is to find protection from the winds there.



*On the hot sands of El Shatt: Mira  
with mother Regina, 1944*

We shared a tent with the three members of the Salom family, former owners of a match factory from Travnik, the only ones who separated their space inside the tent with some pinkish, sheer fabric in an attempt to create an illusion of privacy. To this day I am grateful to Mr Salom, who would tell me the tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, the only one I heard in my early childhood, while mother sang a lot. In addition to them there were also a father and daughter, old Mr Jungwirth and his daughter Olga, and there was also the elderly and nervous Mrs Lustig. She was worried about her daughter who had stayed behind in the country

and simply couldn’t accustom herself to the new living conditions, constantly objecting “Dreadful, dreadful!” There was also a family of five from Brač, with one extra person. After the war we stayed in touch with them for some time.

At least people were able to relax and joke. In the evening, as we returned from a walk to the Suez Canal, Mr Salom, who had stayed at home, would improvise, rolling a piece of cord on the sand he would give them a good scare, there would be panic and frightened screams of "Snake, snake!" The more resourceful people tried to grow watermelons in the hot sand, or boil eggs on it.

There was a hospital set up and I was admitted to it. I had mumps. All of us were vaccinated against tropical diseases. A cultural life was organised, a school was started, a very active folk dancing group began and even a theatre.

I turned six and began attending the first grade of primary school. At first we sat on empty petrol cans and wrote on the sand, but before long we were given exercise books (with inscriptions in English on one side and Arabic on the other) and textbooks. I've kept all of these! It's very interesting to leaf through them, especially from today's perspective. Along with Partisans and the Red Army, they also contain various names, such as Zlata, Mile, Cvijeta and Džafer, and places of worship, Catholic churches and mosques. On one photograph of my father I proudly wrote in my newly learned letters "My father is Partisan!"

There was even a working mail service. So indirectly, through someone else, Mother received the news that her mother had died in the Sarajevo hospital. The news was sent by Marica Guina from Metkovići, who had saved our Lotika from Sarajevo and was later proclaimed as Righteous. She died this year, 2003, at the age of one hundred and one. Immediately after the war, Mother went to the Sarajevo hospital to ask where her mother was buried, but they wouldn't tell her anything.

It was possible to maintain personal hygiene, but not to peacetime standards. I don't remember washing in the mornings, but there were shower stalls where people could go and shower when they wanted, first checking whether there was any water. If the Arabs were something of a curiosity for our people, they too were interested in white women, so it would sometimes happen that a young Arab man would peep curiously inside the showers. I remember they used to go to work in trucks and would clap their hands and shout in rhythm "*Aha la bib azi ze,*" which is supposed to mean "I love a pretty girl".

The small Jewish community observed the feast days. These were celebrated modestly and, later, a cantor from Zagreb, Leon Altarac, would say prayers on holidays and at funerals.

There were a large number of American and British nurses in the camp, they were nice and discreet. My mother had never in her life known how to be idle, so she worked for one of them who was known to everyone as Miss B. Mother would clean her tent. Miss B would sometimes leave her some clothing or toiletry item with a discreet note to my mother: "For you, Regina." We still have a photograph of her with an inscription to my mother: "To Regina, with much thanks, Wilhelmina Healey, Miss B."



*Unhappy childhood: Lea (second from L) and Mira Altarac (third from L)*

There were many courses begun in the camp, so my mother signed up for a course in English. The teacher took his students on a day trip to Cairo, from where I got a pretty pair of blue sandals.

Later we laughed at Mother's story of how she began talking to the trader in all the broken languages she spoke and how, in the end he asked her: "*Quantas linguas parala la signora?*" to which she replied "*Ninguno!*"

There was also a love story which began in our camp. Thirty-seven-year-old Nina Salom, was a plump, pretty brunette who had been married before the war to her uncle, but this marriage, in today's language, "was not consummated". She fell in love with Dr Vučković, who was in El Shatt with his wife and two sons. Mrs Vučković committed

suicide by jumping into the Suez Canal. Nina, Dr Vučković and the Salom family did not return to Yugoslavia. We heard that they stayed on some Indian reservation in Canada. None of them are still alive.

In the spring of 1945 came the resounding news that US President Franklin Roosevelt had died. The war was nearing its end. After fifteen months on the burning sand of Africa, we again faced a long journey home.

I vividly remember our arrival in Split: euphoria in the streets, cheerful people singing, flags waving. I was walking along the street with Mother who was holding my hand and weeping.

“Why are you crying?” I asked.

“Well, the war has ended! Yes, ended...” she replied sadly. She still did not know that seventy members of her family would not return. In Split we met Father wearing a Partisan, or rather an Allied, uniform. It was a three-day journey to Zagreb in an open truck with armed Partisans. Lots of shooting along the way. We arrived in Zagreb late in the evening, it was drizzling and the city was dark.

And in exactly the same way as we had left our apartment in Derenčinova Street in 1941, as though we were going out for a coffee, we were now given an abandoned three-room Ustaša apartment, fully furnished, just as ours had been in 1941, and which also had some Jewish things in it. As was usual at the time we shared the apartment, with the three members of Jakica Montiljo’s family (all of whom went to Israel).

A “new life” had begun.