
Ženi LEBL

CHILDHOOD FRIEND – AND “WAILING WALL”



Ženi Lebl was born on June 20, 1927, in Aleksinac, to father Leon and mother Ana, née Robiček. Of her closest family, her father and elder brother Aleksandar survived the Holocaust, while her mother perished. From 1933 she lived in Belgrade where she completed primary and lower secondary school. Before Jewish women and children were taken to the Sajmište camp, she fled to Niš and lived under a false name in the house of Jelena Glavaški. Because of their illegal activities, they were both arrested on February 22, 1943. Jelena was later shot. She was proclaimed,

posthumously as Righteous Among the Nations.

Since September 1954, Ženi Lebl has lived in Israel, where she has devoted herself to the history of Jews on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. To date she has published fifteen books, of which nine are in Serbian. She also translates Israeli writers and poets from Hebrew into Serbian. She is the recipient of 23 awards for scientific and literary works in competitions of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.

On September 1, 1940, I enrolled, happy and contented, in the fourth year of the First Girls' General Secondary School in Belgrade. This was in Bitolaska Street, the famous “Blue School”. I was thirteen

years, two months and ten days old at the time. We had returned just before that from our summer holiday which, for years, we had spent in Milićevci, a village close to Čačak where my father was manager of a magnesite mine. My most beautiful memories were linked to this place. The only thing missing, at least for me, was our Lady, a beautiful female German Shepherd who my brother had brought to our home in a little bag five years earlier. At the time she looked like a ball of fine wool. Who ever would have thought that this would grow into such a large, beautiful, devoted and noble creature, who became part of the family and had her own yard and a summer and winter residence.

In Milićevci there were neither electricity nor running water. It was the same in the mine house in which we lived, but my father had brought a huge, one-eyed radio with enormous batteries and he solved the problem of running water by pumping water onto the roof into a big metal barrel. Every day we took turns pumping the water from the pump beside the house. As there was now running water in the house, the impression was that everything was exactly the same as in Belgrade.

We had a beautiful, clean stream, one course of which father dammed up and thus made quite a large pool through which the stream kept flowing. On the terrace where we would eat lunch, swallows had built a nest and each year they would return to Milićevci from wherever in the world to lay their eggs and raise their young.

We also had guests from time to time. During the 1939 summer holiday we hosted the Glavaški sisters, Jelena and Ruža in our "villa". Jelena had been my nanny in the period when my father had been the manager of a coal mine in Aleksinac where I was born and spent the first five years of my life. I remember Jelena talking about how she had moved to Niš. I don't know why I registered this fact because it wasn't at all important to me at the time.

At the beginning of the 1940-41 school year, my brother Saša, who was five years older than me, expected to enrol in the first year at university in October. There was no indication that there would be any problems. And why would there be? And then, on October 5, 1940, unrest crept into our peaceful home: trepidation, presentiment or, better to say, foreboding. Something was going on, something that no one had ever thought could happen: Saša was told that he could not enrol in the faculty, neither he nor certain other friends of his. But why, for the love of God? Because he was a Jew. Because he was a Jew? Could that have been the reason?

It turned out that a decree about this had been passed. I learned that it was called the *Numerus Clausus*. However the decree also included certain paragraphs by which it was perhaps possible to bypass this decision, if not for all Jews then at least for my brother and a few other people, if it could be proved that the fathers of the future privileged students had earned merit for the homeland, that is if they had fought “on the right side” in the Great War of 1914-18.

Our home started to look like a beehive. Father usually only came once every two weeks to spend two or three days with his family; now he came very often, but was busy all the time. I saw that they were searching for old documents all over the house and in various institutions. This is when I learnt that my great grandmother, Jelena Lebl, had been a volunteer nurse in the Serbo-Turkish war in 1877 and had even been given a medal. I learned that my grandfather, Aleksa Robiček, was a recipient of the Albanian Commemorative Medal. But it was my father who most filled me with pride: not only had he fought in the Serbian Army, been wounded and crossed over to Albania, he had also received high praise from the Allies because, during the breakthrough on the Salonika front, he had found coal which had enabled the Allied Forces to establish an energy supply. I learnt all of this only thanks to the *Numerus Clausus*. And so, in about the beginning of March, 1941, my dear brother received permission from Education Minister Miha Krek personally to enrol in the first semester of the of the Engineering Faculty at a time when the second semester was already well under way.

Shortly after he had taken care of his son’s university enrolment, Father was called up for a one-month military exercise. It seemed to me as though it somehow did him good to forget to some extent all the strain and, even more, the humiliation we had experienced over the past few months. I never dreamed at the time that this “military exercise” would last four years and four months and that it would save my father’s life. Somehow during those days our long-time maid, Rozalija, suddenly disappeared. Mother, my brother and I were left alone at home. And, of course, our Lady.

I heard about the beginning of the war on April 6, on Radio London. I was supposed to start a first aid course in the cave in Tašmajdan at 8.00 a.m. that day. This was a “conspiratorial course” which had been organised by SKOJ in the First Girl’s General Secondary School, with Ružica Vasikić heading it. Ružica had recruited me in October 1940 to

be a sort of class commissioner for SKOJ and this first aid course was my first concrete assignment. I had asked my mother to wake me at about 6.30 a.m.

By 7.00, all I had left to do was brush and plait my hair. Mechanically I turned on Radio Belgrade, which was silent. I found this odd so, although I don't really know why, I switched to Radio London which at that time of day would broadcast a program in Serbian. And now a miracle: Radio London was broadcasting the Yugoslav National Anthem, "God of Justice". I pricked up my ears because I knew this wasn't any kind of Yugoslav holiday. So, what's this about – why this now? I soon found out. The announcer began the broadcast in sombre tones.

"This morning at 5.00 a.m., Germany declared war on Yugoslavia. German bombers are flying towards Belgrade..."

I was beside myself with agitation. I burst into the bedroom where Mother was reading *Politika* in bed, shouting:

"Mother, the Germans have declared war on us, they are coming to bomb us!!!"

Mother, astonished, put her finger to her mouth and whispered:

"Calm down. You'll wake Saša up!" She obviously thought something was wrong with me, but I continued in the same raised voice:

"Mother, the war has begun..."

"Who told you that, child?"

"Mother, it was just on Radio London!"

"What's London got to do with it?"

I saw that Mother didn't believe me. I ran out into the street, just as I was, with one plait and a comb in my hand. The street was empty on this Sunday morning at 7.00 a.m. Suddenly sirens blared out from above, like alarm sirens, making the blood freeze. Then the blast of a bomb was heard here and there. In our street, neighbours began opening their windows. First, heads appeared, looking up to the sky. Immediately after that, people began coming out into the street in their pyjamas, talking loudly about how "our planes are looping loops" as though these were our army pilots giving an aerobatic display. I was shouting at the top of my voice that these were German bombers, but no one heard me. At that moment my mother also appeared and pulled me back into the house, straight to the basement. She too had probably heard what Radio London was saying.

The war had really begun. Belgrade was bombed, there was rubble everywhere. The country was in disarray and was soon occupied. The Germans entered Belgrade.

*

My brother Saša went to compulsory labour. He began working on clearing the rubble and pulling decomposing bodies out. I think this had a worse effect on Mother than on him. And then our small home began to fill up. First came Grandmother Regina, then Aunt Šarika, then Aunt Mina, who had been evicted from her luxury apartment in Jovanova Street. Of course they were all wearing yellow armbands and the only one not obliged to wear one was me, because I had not yet turned four-



*The Lebl family before World War Two:
mother Ana, father Leon, brother Aleksan-
dar-Saša and little Ženi*

teen. As Jews were not allowed to go shopping before 10.00 a.m. (by which time there was nothing left at the green market, when there was no green market), I was “our foreign affairs minister” as my mother used to call me. In the morning, before the curfew, I would go down to Aleksandrova Street and there I would wait in a shelter for the baker to open. And by some miracle I, who had always been skinny and fussy about food, suddenly developed an appetite. I would pick chunks out of the warm loaf of bread. Mother couldn’t scold me because she understood what hunger was.

And when we had nothing to eat, our problem was how to satisfy our Lady's hunger. Several times mother wanted Lady to leave and took her out into the street, knowing that because she was so beautiful and wonderful someone would certainly take her in, but Lady would return to Mother and it even seemed to me that she looked at us reprovingly for wanting to get rid of her.

Two months after the beginning of the war, on June 4, 1941, the first card arrived from father. It read that he was alive and well and in the Oflag XIII B prison camp near Nuremberg. The most important thing for us was that he was alive, but Mother was thrown into despair by his signature: "Your Number 6547". A few days later a form arrived, the *Paketschein* which we had to have in order to send him parcels. It explicitly stated that we could send sweet beans, onion, flour, raisins, sugar, cooking oil and prunes – none of which we had. However Mother would not allow Father to think that we were in trouble, that she was taking from her children, as my grandmother used to complain, just to make the difficult prison life easier for him. She began selling jewellery.

In the middle of August, three people from Banat were "allocated" to us, two from Vršac and an elderly lady from Pančevo. Aleksandar Molnar was from Vršac, as soon as the war broke out his German wife had left him, taking their daughter, and he was taking this very hard. Also from Vršac was Livija-Lili Kampf; her husband was German but never left her side, not for a minute. (He even got her out of Sajmište in the end and, after the war, they moved to Israel.) Our pantry, which was always well stocked with jars of jams and pickles, was emptying rapidly.



Ženi at thirteen

Soon after this they locked Molnar up in Topovske Šupe, a camp near Autokomanda in Tabanovačka Street. Mother sent me there a few times to take parcels to him. This was difficult for me, but hardest of all was when they told me there was no longer any need to bring him parcels.

Our garden which had once been beautiful, full of roses and peonies, was now full of nettles, but this was intentional. The woman from Pančevo was a real artist and made something from them which tasted like spinach. I could only think about how Lady was suffering and once I went to the restaurant of Hotel Moskva where the German officers would go with local girls. I could see that they weren't so interested in the food and left a lot on their plates. I immediately collected some of the pieces they left behind and took them home for the Pančevo woman to make Lady some soup.

There are two events from this time which remain in my memory. The first was a card from Father in which he told our mother "Be prepared to be both mother and father to our children."

The second unforgettable incident was when, during the first months of the occupation, I was with my mother who was wearing her "label" and two neighbours came up to us and said: "We're really sorry you have to suffer because you have a Jewish husband." Mother didn't hesitate to explain that she wasn't suffering because of her husband, but that she was also Jewish.

"Good God, it doesn't show on you!"

Mother didn't reply, but I did.

"And what exactly is supposed to show? A tail? Horns?"

The women were astonished, and walked away as mother gently advised me "You must learn that silence is golden!"

The beginning of the school year was approaching. I had never before had so much determination to study than when I was deprived of that right, having been banned from even before the notorious *Numerus Clausus*. And life went on, the schools were working.

And somehow it was exactly during this period that they began arresting Belgrade Jews who, up to now, had only been sent to compulsory labour. Mother began to despair and was trying to find a way to secure false documents for Saša to go to Italy, because she had heard that the Italians had a more humane attitude to Jews. Several times Mother went with jewellery and money, but she didn't get the passport. Of course she couldn't complain to anyone. Finally, at the very last

moment I think, Saša got papers in the name of Giovanni Marlemco and travelled to Split. I remained at home with Mother, my grandmother, Šarika, Mina, Lili and the woman from Pančevo. And our Lady.

On December 8 the gendarmes passed a decree which affected everyone except Mother and me. This obliged everyone to report the next day to the Special Police for Jews at 21 Džordža Vašingtona Street. The following day we went there to see Grandmother off. It was a terrible sight. There were Jews, mostly women, children babies and an occasional elderly man standing in the freezing cold. After they listed them all, they began putting them in trucks and taking them to Sajmište.

With heavy hearts we returned home. Mother was convinced that we hadn't been summoned because she was, after all, the wife of a Yugoslav lieutenant colonel. However the following day we were summoned for December 12. And then something happened which changed my fate. The Germans arrived in a three-wheeler on December 11. They stopped outside our house and asked where Regina Robiček lived. They had come to seal off her part of the apartment. While they were walking down our garden path, our Lady barked at them, foaming at the mouth. Then she jumped up on the fence and, when that didn't work, she ran and jumped over the fence which she had never done before. While she was still in the air, one of the Germans fired a bullet to her head. This was the first time I had seen a living creature killed, and one I loved infinitely. As I was hugging her dead and bloody body, mother begged me to leave her. How could I leave her when she had not left us even in the worst of times? "They'll kill us like that too!" I shouted to my mother who may already have thought this herself. I couldn't bury our faithful Lady. I covered her with a layer of snow. I couldn't get over her and kept crying all the time.

Mother prepared two rucksacks and filled them with the most essential things. She embroidered our initials on all our things and on each rucksack. Later in the afternoon she went to say goodbye to some of our neighbours and I simply got dressed, took my rucksack and headed to the railway station. There was a group of miserable and unfortunate men and women there. I mingled with them and, when they got on the train, I did also.

I occupied a seat, if it could be called a seat at all, in the net for suitcases. This was the only empty space between the bundles of my fellow travellers and a suitcase here and there. I had the impression that all the people in the train were a single group. I didn't know who they

were nor where they were from, until they began talking and grumbling. I could tell from the way they spoke that they were from Vojvodina. They began talking about the atrocities of the Hungarians in Bačka, about the town of Sombor and now and then they would mention the names of families who had perished. Of these I remembered the Lazić and Maširević families. After travelling for several hours, sometime before midnight, at some station, someone said:

“Everyone out!”

I had no idea where we were until I saw the sign “Niš” on the station. We all got off and, once again, I was among the crowd. Someone said that if anyone had relatives in the town this would be helpful because it would be less accommodation the Commissariat for Refugees would have to find. I was among the others who registered. I told them that my aunt lived in Niš, but I only knew her name – Jelena Glavaški - I didn't know her address. This wasn't a problem. At the station they had a list of all the residents of the city. They established that my aunt lived at 12 Hilendarska. They began explaining to me that it was “right beside the road to Pirot” and then, even more precisely, in the Canićeva building, but I had absolutely no idea where either the road or the Canićeva building were. I was alone and small, so someone took pity on me and decided that I needed to get to my aunt that evening. They called a police officer to take me, not only because he knew where the Canićeva building was, but also because this was now after the curfew. The police officer tried to strike up a conversation with me, asking me about this and that, but I asked him to leave me alone so he gave up.

I was well dressed in a winter coat, a woollen jumper and warm trousers. Everything was dark blue (like my school uniform), except for the rucksack on my back. From the knitted cap on my head, under which only my thick braids showed, to my woollen socks and warm, heavy boots, I had everything to protect me from the terrible cold. However, despite being so warmly dressed, I was still very cold. It was snowing, but it was in my soul that I was cold. I was also tired, frightened and worried: what would happen when we reached my “aunt”, how would she react when she saw me? I had no idea what her political position was, her view of the world or her attitude to Jews.

Finally, after a rather long walk, we reached the Canićeva building. This was a building of four stories with an entrance from a courtyard. Because both gates were closed, the policeman looked for a bell. He rang and, somewhere at the top of the building, a tiny window from the

stairs opened and a head appeared asking who was there. The policeman replied by asking the woman to come down and open the gate. She asked for a few minutes to dress and disappeared from the window. The policeman asked me if I had recognised my aunt's voice and I said I had, although I wasn't sure.

Quite some time passed, seeming like an eternity to me, before she appeared in front of us. She looked at me in silence. I spoke up, saying we should thank the man for bringing me to her. I shook his hand and he was gone, even before Jela had unlocked the gate. She was still silent, and it wasn't until we were on the stairs somewhere around the second floor that she spoke:

"Well, you're all I needed!"

Now it was my turn to be silent. I stopped, and then the first thing I could think of to say was:

"Well, nothing then. I'll go back."

Jela came to me and hugged me:

"I'll explain!"

We continued up the stairs to the garret. From the door I could feel warmth and smell burnt paper. Jela told me that the reason she had taken so long to come down was not to get dressed – she had already been dressed – but because she had to burn some "compromising material". She explained that she now worked with the Red Cross and the Partisans, and that she had leaflets to give to activists from the village of Lužani the next day. This was such a weight off my chest: if Jelena was working with the Partisans she was definitely not on the side of our common enemy. Because she had destroyed everything, she now needed to make them all over again. She went to the attic, which was on the same level as the garret, brought a typewriter and put some sticky copying device on the floor. This looked like an oilcloth table cover covered with honey. She was typing the leaflets and I was copying, laying the papers on this mixture and going over each copy with a rolling pin. When we finished working it was almost dawn.

A short while later, Jela left for work, telling me to think about how to get some kind of identification document, because life was impossible without one. Her apartment was tiny, but all the others had been requisitioned, there was a German living in each of them and there was the obligatory "list of tenants" in the entrance of the building. She needed to register me as a tenant and for that I would need documents.

I began to think. I remembered those people from the train being told that they would be registered at the Commissariat for Refugees. I dressed so that my face wasn't showing at all, only my heavy braids hung down my back. Out in the street I asked the first woman I saw where this commissariat was. She didn't know, but some other woman also stopped and she not only knew where the commissariat was, but also told me that I would have to go there with my father and mother, because you had to be over 16 to have your own identification document. I thanked her sincerely for this valuable information and set off. There were a lot of people outside the commissariat and inside the building. Somehow I got myself into the middle of the queue and reached the counter, which was quite high. I could only just see the clerk, who asked me who I was with. No one. How old was I? Well, sixteen and a half. Why was I so small? Because the Hungarians had killed my parents and I had had nothing to eat. I even began to cry so the clerk took pity on me. He asked me for my personal information and, because I had the initials JL embroidered on all my things and had heard on the train about the family from Sombor, I said Jovanka Lazić. Where and when was I born? Well, in Sombor of course. And the date to match my age of sixteen and a half. Father's name? Milorad. Mother's name? Here my brain stalled, until I managed to mutter: "Anka". Her maiden name? Again Sombor helped me out: Maširević. Tears began to well up in my eyes. The clerk asked no more questions. He gave me a temporary refugee identification, saying that I would get a permanent one when I brought two photographs. He told me to go to the police with the refugee identification and they would give me a temporary identification card. He explained to me how to find the police building. I thanked him warmly. This procedure was repeated at the police and I had to make sure I repeated the same information I had given at the Commissariat. Here I played the role of my life, cried at the right moment and was given a temporary identification card, to be replaced with a permanent one when I brought two photographs.

Happy and satisfied with two, albeit temporary, identification documents in my pocket, I set off down the main street where I saw a photographic studio. As I was about to walk in, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see a bearded officer, one of Kosta Pećanac's Chetniks, with a rifle on his shoulder and wearing a uniform decorated with cartridge belts, on his head a fur cap with a skull and crossbones.

"Ženi, I recognised you by your braids!"

It was Rade, my neighbour from Belgrade. I barely recognised him because this was no longer Rade the modest student. I froze.

“Is your family here?”

I didn’t know what to say, how to behave. I just managed to say:

“You can report me... You can turn me in...”

He was silent, looking at me. It seems that my desperation and hopelessness was reflected in my face. He spoke:

“You know, it would be best for both you and me: we have never seen each other, we have never spoken to each other! “Bye now.”

He turned around and blended into the crowd. I stood there frozen, my eyes wide open with fear and I almost forgot that I was on my way to have my photograph taken. I went into the shop, the photographer told me to sit down. I sat down, I was numb. I barely heard the man shouting:

“Are you deaf? It’s finished!”

My God, what was finished? Ah, I was to come and collect the photographs the day after next.

I wasn’t sure whether perhaps Rade had set a trap for me. Maybe his soldiers were following me. I began walking in the other direction from Jela’s home. I became lost in this town that I wasn’t familiar with. I went into buildings and, a few moments later, I would come out, to hide all trace if someone was following me. I wandered like this the whole day, sucking pieces of snow when I was thirsty. The dark fell early this December winter day and I was completely disoriented. With great difficulty I managed to find the house just before curfew. Jela was furious.

“In God’s name, where have you been? What were you doing out in this cold?”

Proudly I held out to her the two temporary identification documents. She whispered.

“Only a Jewish mind could come up with something like that!”

I didn’t know how to react. Perhaps this was some kind of compliment, but I was affected by it. I took a deep breath and told her about my encounter with Rade. She was beside herself.

“How did he recognise you?”

“By my braids,” I told her honestly.

Without a word she went to a drawer, took out the largest pair of scissors she had, walked up to me, took one of my two braids and began cutting it. It was pretty difficult, but in the end she managed. Holding it

in her hand, she walked to the furnace and threw it into the flame. The other braid met the same fate. I clutched at what was left of my hair with my hands. I was wretched and miserable. I felt as though I was lying under a guillotine, but I didn't say a word.

*

Life at Jela's was very exciting. She was no longer working in a kindergarten but at the Red Cross, and this was on orders, so that she could keep in contact with prisoners. I thought she was an active member of the Communist Party, but she wasn't. In fact she was active, probably more so than all the most active members, but I never asked whether it was she who didn't want to join or whether they didn't want her in the ranks. Perhaps she needed to prove herself. And she was most certainly doing that. She was writing leaflets, which I would copy; she would tour villages, distributing them. We were getting medical supplies from the head of the mental hospital and occasionally people from a Partisan unit came to our place to collect them. The apartment was also a warehouse for jumpers and caps, as well as mittens for fighters, with the thumb and index finger separated from the other three fingers. Because Jela went out to work, I was the "liaison officer". I knew the couriers and would open the door when they gave the password and hand the material over to them.

Jela strictly forbade me to go out into the streets. She would only let me out for a few hours at a time to go through the narrow back streets to visit her best friend from Aleksinac, Darinka Dinić, a teacher who had a son, Racko, two years older than me. He had to be persuaded that I, who had been his best friend from childhood, was dead. Her other friend, Goka, was a seamstress, so I would also go to her place to warm up a bit and help her as much as I was able to.

The last time I had seen Racko was at the consecration of the memorial church in Deligrad, which had been built with the help of donations from the women of the Kneginja Ljubica association in Aleksinac. My mother was very active in this and I had also been involved, as a four-year-old, in performances for the consecration of the church, reciting "Three Brigands", singing "Adio Mare" and performing some "pynastic", which was what I called gymnastics in those days. When the building was finished and the church was to be consecrated, Mother and I travelled from Belgrade to Aleksinac. From there people

travelled to Deligrad in hackneys. They put us children in one. In order to keep us occupied, they bought us each a flute which needed to be filled with water so that it would work. I put water in mine, but Racko didn't, so I teased him until he lost his temper and took my flute and threw it so hard that I heard it crack like a grenade. That was when I started hating him, but he was now the only friend in Niš with whom I came into contact. I knew who he was, but he didn't know who I was. Aunt Darinka used to tell him that all Jews had been killed. I was trying to speak with a drawl, in a Vojvodina accent, adding their "*Ta, kasti...*" to everything, and he was amused by this and would laugh at it. So several months passed until one day Aunt Jela and I took the narrow back streets together to Aunt Darinka's place. Jela went into the room with her and I stayed in the kitchen with Racko. He suggested that we sing and I began singing "Adio Mare". Racko shuddered and raised his voice "Anything except that!" So he did remember his childhood friend. I insisted and continued to sing until he banged his fist on the table saying "Enough!" I stopped, but insisted that he tell me why he was forbidding me to sing this song of farewell to the sea. I kept pestering him until he "confessed" that it reminded him of a small Jewish girl from his childhood who was no longer alive. I felt a lump in my throat. In the whole of Niš, only Jela and Darinka knew about me, the real me. So I decided that if that was the way Racko felt I would take a risk and tell him. I asked him:

"And what would you do if she appeared here and now?" Racko interrupted me:

"You really have no heart, have you? You shouldn't joke about things like that!" Dear Racko, if only he had known how serious I was! And I told him:

"I'm that friend of yours."

He looked at me in astonishment: "She wasn't from Sombor!" he said.

"Neither am I." He asked me to tell him my name and when I did he said I must have heard it from Jela. Then he asked for my sister's name. When I told him that I didn't have a sister, only a brother, I thought he was pretty convinced, but then he remembered, and said I had to tell him something that only he and I would know. And so I told him our story about the flute on the way to Deligrad. He came over and hugged me hard and whispered:

"This is our secret. Mother and Jela mustn't know that I know!"

From that point on, life was more bearable. I had someone to complain to, to tell things. He never reacted, never comforted me, but I know that I could confide in him, that he was my "wailing wall".

*

Our attic, which was on the same floor as the apartment, became the centre of activity of the resistance movement. There was a false wall in one area, behind which we hid the typewriter and the gelatine duplicator. The rest of the attic was covered in sand and we used it as a library for banned literature. We remembered where we had buried each book. Fighters who had to spend the night in town could also find temporary shelter in our attic.

One day a man with a shaved head arrived and asked for shelter. We immediately found him a spot in the attic. We learned that this man had killed a German officer and it had only been with great difficulty that he had reached us. He told us his name was Srba. The next day when I went out into the street, I saw that there was a wanted poster for his arrest on all the buildings. Srba had to stay in our attic for about a week. I used to take him food. He always had a big revolver and a grenade by his side. I asked him what he did for a living. "Metalworker," was his reply. At the time this was a very modern occupation. "What about you?" he asked me.

What could I tell him? "I'm an intellectual," I replied cheerfully and, in order to prove this, I dug up Marx's "Capital" from the sand.

"Come on then, tell me what it says in here," he insisted. Somehow I managed to get out of the situation and left him to amuse himself with "Capital". (Years later I learnt that "Srba" was Dragi Stamenković, and that he had been certain that Jela and I had perished. When I told him that "that little girl" had survived, he recalled me telling him that I was "an intellectual".)

A man called Zoran began visiting our little apartment. Jela told me that he was the secretary of the local committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia for Niš. Unbelievable as it sounds, I didn't like this man from the very start. He was always chewing something green which would get stuck between his teeth. Jela told me that I should tell him my story, or rather consulted me about this, saying that if I were discovered, he might be able to intervene. I strenuously refused, using Jela's own argument: that the fewer people who knew about me the

safer I would be. But Zoran was something different. I was insistent: there was no way I would tell him! One day Zoran came to me with "an order" for me. I was to go to Belgrade and take something to some address and return with a letter for him. I refused. Rade had recognised me in Niš and God knew what would await me in Belgrade. I told him that I didn't know Belgrade and that I didn't want to travel, but that I would arrange for someone else to carry out this mission for him. He agreed. I found a boy about my age, he was our neighbour and his father was a captain in captivity, so we called him Aca – the captain. He knew about the resistance movement and, although he didn't know any details, he saw me and Jela as role models for resistance against the occupying forces and was prepared to undertake any task given him. I asked him to travel to Belgrade and to do this job for Zoran, without revealing to him who Zoran was. And Aca –the captain – did it. When Zoran came to collect what he had brought, he insisted I tell him the name of the person who had brought it. I refused energetically. Jela still had full confidence in him, but she respected my personal aversion to the man.

On Saturday, February 20, 1943, Jela travelled to the village of Lužane, to her friend Zaga, and took leaflets with her. She was to return on Monday, directly to work. On Monday, February 22, in the morning, our regular courier, Aca, was to come and collect the medical supplies that had been passed on to us by Dr Jekić. We had agreed that after that I could go to Goka. And everything went as agreed. Aca came, bringing some little bag that expanded so much because of the material he put inside that I said someone might be suspicious, but he told me that he was certain that no one had followed him. He convinced me too. Aca left and immediately after that I also left to go to Goka's. When I arrived I immediately attached myself to the furnace. Goka advised me not to do that because I would only feel colder later on. I accepted this and walked over to the window. The street was blocked and every three metres there was a Bulgarian soldier in full gear. They all had rifles on their shoulder with bayonets fixed.

"Goka, they must be going to arrest someone!" I started to say, but I had not even finished the sentence when Bulgarian soldiers suddenly burst through the door.

"Is Jovanka Lazić here?" they asked.

"Yes, she's here," I replied, not knowing what was going on.

"Get dressed!" they ordered. Goka, scared and surprised asked

“Me too?”

“No, not you!”

I got dressed, trying to pull the collar of my coat high enough to hide my face. And that was all I had to hide because I no longer had those treacherous braids of mine. We set off, a strange party, little me with huge soldiers in front and behind and on both sides of me. This suited me very well because it meant I couldn't be seen. I asked where they were taking me, and the reply came short and clear:

“To prison!”

In the distance I could see a similar group. I could just make out that among the four Bulgarian soldiers was none other than Jelena. They wouldn't let us talk at all but regrouped the column. There was one Bulgarian soldier in front, another three behind him, in the third row a soldier, then Jelena, another soldier, me, then another soldier. Behind us were three soldiers and behind them one more.

We were heading for our apartment. The yard outside the entrance was full of Bulgarian officers. In the middle of them, talking to them, chatting, was Zoran! When we came to the entrance, Zoran stepped aside with one Bulgarian officer who asked me:

“Do you know this man?”

“No, not at all!” I replied, honestly, because I didn't know him like this, as a Bulgarian agent. Zoran laughed.

“Of course she does, she knows me well.” What luck that he didn't really know me. And Jela definitely knew that too, in this situation. The same scene was replayed with Jela as well. She also denied knowing him.

Zoran, whose real name was Miša Obradović, stayed downstairs with his friends while the two of us, escorted by several soldiers, began climbing up. They wouldn't let us talk. We reached the apartment and the search began. They didn't find anything, because everything was in the attic, behind the false wall. I thought this was the end of it and began removing my coat but they stopped me and reminded me we were going “to prison”.

Zoran and his friends were no longer in the yard when we came down. We resumed the same formation through the streets of Niš until we reached a building with a sign “Administration of the Bulgarian Army in Yugoslavia”. We passed the guards and climbed to the second or third floor. We stopped in a broad hallway. They separated us so that Jela and I had one soldier guarding each of us. I was outside a room

from which some pleasant, but rather loud, music could be heard. Well, I thought, this isn't really so terrible. As we stood like this I began feeling faint from hunger. I had not eaten anything since my scant dinner the night before. I was more concerned with this than with the fear which had begun to emerge. The guards had already changed shifts once, which meant more than two hours of standing, and then the door of the "music" room opened and two soldiers appeared, dragging a bloodied body, face down, by one arm each. I could barely recognise Aca who, just that morning, had collected the medical supplies and assured me that no one was following him. They dragged him through the hall to the sound of the beautiful music from the open door. Camouflage to drown the cries of the victim. About fifteen minutes later, Aca walked with great difficulty down the hall, his face had been washed and he managed to show me with his fingers that they had put electrodes on his forehead. They returned to the room and the interrogation resumed. Now I was no longer hungry, I was thinking only about whether I would survive the suffering.

The guards changed three more times before they decided there was no point waiting any longer to question us. We went down the stairs to the basement, to an enormous, filthy room, where there were two men standing in corners, facing the wall. I recognised them both. One was a Bulgarian officer who had been transporting our leaflets in a suitcase with a false bottom. He was still in uniform, but with no insignia of rank. The other was an old railway worker. There were two guards standing in the middle of the room. They put Jela in one of the free corners and me in the other. We were told to stand with our backs to the room. I couldn't do it. I sat on the floor, facing the guards. They began to shout at me but I simply said I was hungry and unable to stand. One of them, a non-commissioned officer, came over to me and said quietly that he would bring me something to eat on his next shift. I thought this was a good joke, but it was at least some kind of comfort. At about midnight they called Jela in for questioning and this NCO began his next shift immediately after that. He walked over to me and gave me a piece of bread with beans. This was my first and, for a long time, my only meal. He had arrived just in time because I was called in for questioning soon after this. We arrived outside the "music" room. On the left was a large table with a bright lamp shining in my face. I couldn't see the man on the other side of the table, I could only hear his voice. Standing next to me was a tall, skinny man, elegantly dressed

and nice looking. The questions were coming from the other side of the table and, at first, I thought I was safe. However every time I gave a negative answer, blows rained down on me from the elegant civilian. (Later I learnt that his name was Angel Popov). It was not too bad while they were just slaps in the face or blows with a fist to my head and body. But then, apparently, his hands began to hurt so he showed me a truncheon, a wooden stick with rubber on one end. The wooden part read "I know everything" (*Az vsičko znajem*, in Bulgarian). He asked me if I understood. I told him I did not and immediately felt the force of the truncheon, especially when the blows landed on my head, which was, for me, the pinnacle of pain. I was bloody, miserable and wretched. The elegant civilian then ordered me to take off my boots and placed me across two chairs, facing the floor. The blows of the truncheon now landed on my feet which hurt more than anything up to that point. After each few blows the invisible voice would ask me questions and every negative answer from me resulted in more blows. And the music from the record player went on, and on, and on.

I didn't ever cry during the interrogation, but I wept constantly in the basement, which was now filling up with people. There must have been more than fifty of us in there. The old railway worker encouraged me. I saw Jela only once more, all beaten. Later they moved her to some other basement.

They formed a transport from us prisoners. No one knew where they were taking us but we knew that the Germans were now responsible for us. The Bulgarians had played their role. They drove us in freight wagons. We were hungry and thirsty, but our fellow-sufferers advised us that, if they opened the wagon doors in the Independent State of Croatia, we should not accept any food, because the Ustaša would poison us. But I was so hungry that I accepted the little bit of slop they offered, I was the only one to do so, and I stayed alive. Eventually we arrived in a large transit camp where they ordered us to strip naked. They removed our things and took us to a bathroom where we showered. When they returned our clothes to us we could barely squeeze into them because everything was wrinkled and had shrunk during the disinfection. Some young inmates came over to me and told me I should flee because I was too young to die. That was when I realised, for the first time, the direction our transport was heading. My first attempt to get out didn't succeed but then, late in the afternoon, two men took my by my arms and legs and simply flung me over the high,

barbed-wire fence like a sack of potatoes. Under normal circumstances I would have been all bruised and battered, but now I immediately stood and began running. I came to an overpass and turned right. There wasn't a soul in sight I could ask for directions to the railway station. After quite a long time I came across a boy about my age who was driving a horse and cart full of soil. I spoke to him and he became frantic with fear and asked me if I knew where I was. I didn't, so he explained to me that I was in Marburg, which had once been Maribor but was now part of the Reich, and that it was now forbidden to speak Slovenian, let alone Serbian. He explained to me where the railway station was – in



Ženi Lebl's false identification in Niš, in the name of Jovanka Lazić, 1942

the opposite direction from where I had been heading. He knew from my wrinkled clothes that I had escaped from the camp. When I finally reached the station I saw that it was full of German soldiers but, right at that moment, there was a train passing through so I jumped into it. It was full and I sat on the floor. All eyes were on me, on my wrinkled clothes which gave away the fact that I had escaped from camp. A little later a German patrol passed through. They didn't ask me many questions. At the next stop they took me from the train and put me into a camp which was full of women from Poland and the Soviet Union and an occasional French woman. They were repairing enormous cables. I learnt that this was an auxiliary airport near a place called Wiener Neustadt. Here they repaired aircraft and aircraft parts. I made friends with a French woman called Gabrielle. The Germans were almost certain that the Allies would not bomb this auxiliary airport because they knew there were a large number of prisoners and internees there. One day during the Allied invasion of Sicily, one inmate, a former pilot from Poland stole a JU-88 after he had repaired it, but the Germans shot him down a few kilometres away. Then the Germans brought in twelve brand new six-engine aircraft called Gigants. Apparently Allied intelligence learnt about this and despite the prisoners being used to shield the airport they decided to destroy these aircraft before they could even take off on their first mission. Many of our people were killed in this attack, my friend Gabrielle among them. They then divided us into groups and sent us to various parts of Germany. My group was in Berlin. We lived in a rather large apartment. Every morning they took us to work at the BPW factory. There I worked on various machines for making metal parts. Because I had short arms I had to stand closer to the machine. One day a drive belt caught my hair and tore it out from the roots which was terribly painful. After that we had to wear scarves. I thought that I was going to be bald for the rest of my life but my hair later began to grow again. One day German soldiers came to search the place we were living in. I found this very strange. We were not in contact with anyone (or so I thought) and now we were being searched. I didn't follow my mother's advice but began shouting at the soldiers: wasn't it enough that we were prisoners, did they have to harass us as well? The others all remained silent. It was just my luck that they found weapons there and came to the conclusion that I had been shouting to try to cover things up. Apparently I was the only one who didn't know about these weapons. This was not long after the attempt to assassinate

Hitler. They took me out in the thin dress which I wore all the time until the liberation. Outside the house was a small, black car with a gas producer on the back. We set off through the streets of Berlin and stopped next to a monumental building at 30 Oranienburgerstrasse. I later learnt that it had been a synagogue and next door to it, at no. 31, was the Jewish Old People's Home. The gate opened and we drove into the courtyard.

After the reception procedure they took me down a hallway to cell no. 3. The cell had a heavy wooden door with strong locks and spy holes. Written on the door, in chalk, was the number of inmates in the cell. My cell, which was two metres by three metres, contained about twenty women. The floor was concrete, the window was bricked up and there was just a tiny opening high on the wall. Bedbugs fell from the walls at night and sucked our blood. In the morning they would return to the wall, heavy and sluggish, so we could easily kill them with the wooden soles of our shoes, leaving bloody stains on the walls. New inmates were very scared thinking this was human blood. They were right, of course, but it wasn't from beating. There was a toilet behind cell no. 12 and, beside it, a washroom. They took us to the toilet in line once a day, cell by cell, giving us only a short time, and the line was guarded by two soldiers.

The name of the prison warden was Artur Bernd. He was a short man who did not wear a uniform. The guards were brutal. There were three categories: SA men, SS women and "Vlasovci", Russians in German uniforms from the Army of General Vlasov.

The SS women were the most brutal and Frau Wachmeisteren Müller was the most notorious of these. Her specialty was to hold up a raised boom gate and, when all of us inmates were under it, to drop it on our heads with as much force as possible. This made her laugh hysterically.

The Vlasovci were no less cruel. The most despicable of these was named Yuryev. His specialty was to hit inmates in the head with a revolver butt, not infrequently spilling their brains out. This almost happened to me. I woke up one morning totally paralysed. To make things worse, I had been in the cell longer than anyone else and so had to report on how many of us there were in the cell. I remembered that there were fourteen of us. I asked my cellmate Ženja (who was a translator there) to report to Yuryev, but he pushed her away, screaming at her, asking her where I was. When she told him I was sick and unable

to move, he walked over to me. I saw him take his revolver out and was certain that he would spill my brains. I closed my eyes but the blow didn't come. I dared to open my eyes. Yuryev's arm was being held by a German officer who was in the hallway while the guard was counting us. Luckily for me this officer was interested in seeing what was going on in the cell and so he saved my life.

From the third group of guards, the cruellest was an SA guard named Nahtigal. This "nightingale" would walk through the hall with a whip in his hand and, if there were no victims available, would lash at his boots and the cell doors.

They would call people out for interrogation from the end of the hallway. They would shout a name and the inmate had to report through the peephole, identifying the cell they were in. They would usually shout my name as "Jofanka Lacik". (I remember the person who was called most frequently was named Zelenjin-Larski who we nicknamed Rimski-Korsakov.) My interrogator's name was Betzin and his assistants (who were more cruel than him) were a *Volksdeutscher*, Adam Lang (I later learnt that before the war he had a shop in Belgrade selling birds as a cover) and a pretty, young Serb woman, Persida Lukanović. They constantly demanded that I tell them where the weapons had come from and what they were intended for.

At New Year 1945, the prison at 31 Oranienburgerstrasse was packed, so they took quite a large group of inmates to the temporary Burgstrasse prison, a bombed-out three-storey building of which all that was left were the toilets on the ground floor and they weren't working. It was very cold. There was snow falling on us. And then the sirens sounded for an air raid. We saw searchlights moving across the sky over Berlin and then felt the ground shake from the bombs. We stayed in this toilet prison for a few days and were then returned to Oranienburgerstrasse.

On Hitler's birthday, April 20, 1945, a civilian came into our cell and read each and every one of us a death sentence signed by Himmler. As there were many of us in the cells, some were taken out. They were putting a stamp shaped like a minus sign on the back of our hands. They lined us up and took us on foot through the streets of Berlin to a neighbouring street, Grosse Hamburgerstrasse. There they locked me in cell 44 on the first floor. Had I stayed in cell 3 in Oranienburgerstrasse I would certainly not have survived.

There was an inmate in our cell who always knew whether it was the British or the Americans bombing Berlin and what kind of aircraft they were flying. I had no idea how she knew this. And perhaps she didn't know. We just really wished that there would be as much bombing as possible as long as they didn't fall on us, in the centre of the *Reich*, in the centre of Berlin. Those days, when the bombs were dropping on all sides, our expert was in a dilemma, she didn't know what kind of aircraft were bombing us or whose they were. At this point Ženja spoke up and said that these were *katyushas*.

“*Katyushas?*” asked our expert, “What kind of aircraft is that?”

Ženja calmly explained that these were not aircraft at all but a kind of mortar. Fantastic! This meant that our liberators were somewhere close to Berlin, that our liberation would come soon, if we lived to see it.

Eight days later, while there were heavy street battles going on, two guards opened the doors of our cells and told us that we were free. It was not possible to walk through the streets, but somehow, among the bodies of the *Hitlerjugend* boys, Berlin's last defence, we came across the body of a horse, still warm. Some former inmates, Italians, managed to get organised: they found a butcher's knife somewhere and began cutting the horse's thighs and giving them to us. Someone else found a huge can of milk and brought that over. This was a terrible combination for our starved stomachs. The pain, the vomiting and the diarrhoea began almost immediately. We needed to find a building where we could shelter from the bullets and mortars coming from both sides, the Germans and the Soviets. Finally we found it, the only building in the area, a two-storey building with two entrances to the basement. On one of the entrances the French immediately wrote FRANCE, on the other the Dutch wrote HOLLAND. However they then moved to the first floor and the Polish moved into their entrance and changed the sign to POLLAND. Dana, a former inmate who came from Zemun, and I moved into the French part so I changed their sign to FRANCO-SERBE. Then we felt something like an earthquake. This was the German counter-attack. One of their mortars had hit the first floor and killed the newly-liberated Dutch. Then came the Soviets. They forced everyone but the Italians out of the basement and set up their command there. The two of us moved up the rickety stairs to the second floor. There was neither water nor food and the two of us, wretched and miserable, ill and crawling with lice, couldn't wait for the fighting to end. But then came a nuisance of another kind, one we hadn't expected.

Drunken Soviet soldiers began pursuing us. It was more than unpleasant to discover that we needed to hide from the people we had thought were there to liberate us. The only one of whom we have a pleasant memory was a young Soviet soldier who promised to take care of us because he had two sisters of about our age – and he kept his promise. The next day I asked him who he was and where he was from and he replied: “Sasha Tsukerman, from Vladivostok!”

On May 1, 1945, Dana and I set off on foot from Berlin. Straight ahead to the south-east. We were weak and ill, but free. We walked more than eighty kilometres until we reached a place called Kotbus. There we saw the first train, which was clearing mines. What was important to us was that it was going in the opposite direction to Berlin. We got ourselves onto it and somehow arrived in a place called Liegnitz. The train stopped outside the town and there we found a group of soldiers, former prisoners from Yugoslavia, mainly villagers. They immediately adopted us as guides. They were also hungry so they scattered and began gathering everything they found in the fields: cabbages, carrots and so on. On May 8, at about midnight, shooting began. We were frantic, thinking that this was the German counter-offensive. Then we noticed that there was no blackout in the town, that everything was lit up, and learnt that this was actually the Soviets celebrating the capitulation of the Reich. We continued our journey and arrived in a small Polish town called Rawicz.

Because I spoke Polish, they delegated me to find the Red Cross. The woman I asked began to explain to me, but then my Yugoslav friends appeared from around the corner. The woman realised that I wasn't Polish and refused to continue her explanation. In the end we somehow managed to find the humanitarian organisation and begged them to give us something to eat. They told us loud and clear that we could have some food if there was any left over after the Poles had eaten. There wasn't. So again my companions scattered and again we had fresh agricultural produce, though often at the expense of being chased with shovels and rakes. We again got on a train and reached a place called Częstochowa. The train was continuing on to Warsaw, which didn't suit us. We needed a train going south-east. So we reached a place called Sosnowiec where we learnt that transports for the repatriation of prisoners were being put together in a nearby place called Katowice. There was a man among the Yugoslavs they called “professor”, the only one of them who could read and write (much later I

learned his name was Andrija Radenić). He asked us to help him write a list with the names of the Yugoslavs and I agreed, stipulating that, in return, “my group” would have to be included in the list of repatriates. He promised to do this and he kept his word. Our transport set off. In the wagons of the freight train were liberated Czechs, French, British and Yugoslavs. The first stop was Krakow. We were not being given any food so, once again, my experienced cadets were our saviours. The train was passing along the Czech border so I was certain that we would soon part with the Czech group, but this didn’t happen. We continued the journey and, because it was very hot and humid in the wagons, we would usually climb up onto the roof. I know that we were completely sooty after passing through tunnels so, at various stations, the train driver would turn on for us the water which was used to fill up the locomotives. We passed Tarnów, Jarosław, Przemyśl and reached Lviv. My sense of geography was whispering in my ear that Lviv wasn’t exactly on the way to France and England, and that the Czechs were now travelling away from their border. Nor did we Yugoslavs have much in common with this part of the world. I told the professor of my suspicions, but he berated me for having no confidence in our liberators. Nevertheless I asked him to go with me to the Soviet command in this town and ask them to explain and tell us the details of our itinerary from here on. They told us that it was no mistake, that they were taking us to Odessa, and that from there everyone would go to their own home. God! I remembered seeing them closing liberated Soviet prisoners into freight cars and writing on them “Don’t trust the returnees!” I told the professor openly that I was sure they were taking us to Siberia.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” was his reaction.

We continued our journey to the east and, after about thirty kilometres, arrived in a place called Lawoczna. I got off the train and told “my group” that they should join me if they didn’t want to go to Siberia. Everyone got off, the whole wagon. Only the professor stayed behind, but he too jumped off the train as it started moving. We stayed there for a few days while the professor and I negotiated our repatriation with the authorities and then one day they put us in a freight wagon. I took note of the places we travelled through: Jasi, Skole, Tuhle, before arriving in Debrecin from where they transferred us to Kikinda.

I arrived in Belgrade at the beginning of June 1945, after a journey of more than a month after my departure from Berlin. The arrival in Belgrade was traumatic. The city had been liberated for more than

seven months, but the two of us, Dana and I, got on a tram, we were frail, dirty, full of lice and without a single dinar in our pockets. The conductor insisted we get off if we didn't pay, he signalled to the driver not to move the tram, but I dug my heels in. Then I noticed another returnee from my street in the tram, they had informed his parents back in 1941 that he and his twin brother had been shot. There was hugging and kissing and some good people who were there paid for tickets for us and the tram continued on its way. And so we reached the home of the Janković family. The reunion of mother and son was very moving, and then Dana and I continued to my house. I wanted to see my mother. Over the fence I could see that the yard was full of fruit: the apricot tree was bent under the weight, but Lady's yard was bare. I rang. A woman appeared, asking who was at the door. I asked her to come closer and explained who I was.

"You have no place here. This is my house now!" said the woman, whose husband had been one of the local traitors and had been given our house as a gift from his employers. In the meantime he had been killed, but his widow and his son continued to enjoy themselves in the Jewish house. However the woman didn't stop at that, but went on "Are your family going to return as well? God forbid!" With this the conversation ended. The gate remained closed and the woman returned to "her" house.

Did I hear this properly? Where was I? Was it possible that this was Belgrade in June 1945, seven and a half months after the liberation of the city?

At that moment I felt that the past had not yet passed, and that the better future I had so looked forward to had already ended.