
Tirca GINZBERG

WARTIME ADOLESCENCE



T*irca Ginzberg, n e Kraus, was born in Zagreb on June 4, 1924, to Artur and Fanika Kraus. She had two sisters, Tonka and Lea. She completed her primary and secondary education in Grada ac in Bosnia, where she lived with her family until the war. She completed commercial academy in Osijek immediately before the war.*

She lives today in Belgrade. From her marriage to Dr Ervin Ginzberg, a pulmonary surgeon at Belgrade's Military Medical Academy she has a son, Igor who is

an engineer and a daughter, Tamara, a biologist. She also has three grandchildren.

In 1938 or 1939 I went to Osijek to enrol in commercial academy. There I lived with the Jewish family of the dentist, Dr Rac, who took care of me as if I were their own.

There were a number of Jewish girls in my school. I became friendly with Lilika Gerek in Osijek and was welcomed by her parents. She was an only child. When I was not at school I slept at her house at least once a week. We celebrated all the holidays together. Her parents, who never allowed her to leave the house, did let her come to stay with me at Grada ac. They were wealthy people with two hotels in Osijek.

Gradačac had no electricity and we were the first to have a battery radio. Everyone would come to our house to listen to the news. We heard the news about what Hitler was doing. My aunt, my mother's elder sister, left Germany and came to Zagreb before emigrating to Israel.

I remember people from Jewish families saying "Nothing can happen to us. We're honest people. We earn an honest living. No one in Gradačac was wealthy; most of them were small shopkeepers. The only intellectual among them was my father, the pharmacist.

The Gereks were Hungarian Jews and I heard them speak about the hatred of Jews, but we girls were busy with other things. We wanted to look attractive, to be noticed when we went out. I don't remember being afraid and I never thought anything could happen to me or my parents, although I knew that my aunt who left Germany had emigrated because of her fear of Hitler.

About that time a group of Jews had come to Brčko. I think they were from Austria. Later, they all perished. A collection was taken up for them and I know that my father made a contribution. I don't know whether it was of any use, but I know that donations were collected.

I stayed at school in Osijek until 1941. I didn't want to return home so my father sent me a telegram, telling me to drop everything and come home immediately.

I returned to Gradačac at the very last minute. My father thought we would be safer in a small place than in a large town like Osijek, where the majority of people were Croats and their support for the Ustashas was already obvious.

In mid-April, 1941, the Germans entered Gradačac. The majority of the population welcomed them but the Jewish families were in despair. They knew what was in store for them. We had a house with a garden and one large group of Germans came directly to us. They made themselves at home in our house. I don't know whether they were sent by the municipality or by someone else. In any case they were billeted wherever there was plenty of room and in the better-looking houses. They occupied the entire house, leaving us a single room. They were extremely arrogant. I remember them sitting in our garden, opening champagne and drinking it. Even though it wasn't warm they undressed and took showers. There was no running water and they had to bring it in. They were happy and cheerful. They had

no idea that we were Jews but, after realising to their surprise that my parents spoke good German, they became a little suspicious.

My school friend, Mirko Baksa, was a year older than me. Later he became a prominent Ustasha, but in those days he was at school in Osijek. During the vacations we always travelled home and back to school together. One day he told me out of the blue "From today on I don't want you to speak to me. We don't know each other. I'm in the Ustasha organisation." I don't know whether he had been an Ustasha before that. All I know is that the Partisans killed him after the war.

Gradačac had a town crier. He would go around with a drum and shout out announcements. One day he read an order restricting the hours in which Jews could move around the town, ordering them to draw the curtains on their windows and wear yellow armbands. We were also forbidden from walking in some streets. I had to put the yellow armband on my sleeve. We made these ourselves. I remember that my sister Tonka had already returned from Zagreb. She wore a yellow dress and tied the armband over it. She said that if she survived the war she would never wear yellow again. I remember meeting one of my teachers in the town. He told me he was very sorry that I had to wear this sign. He was a Croat.

The district surgeon in Gradačac was Dr Bravo, a Muslim married to a Czech. I went to sleep in his house because my parents were very concerned about me. My sister, however, was very brave and stayed at home.

My father continued working until 1942, when another district commissioner came from Brčko. His name was Montani and he was a notorious Ustasha. He summoned my father to his office in the district administration offices, up on a hill in the town. When my father climbed up there, Montani said to him "Listen, you're a Jew and you're in a position to make the wrong drugs and poison us all. If you do anything like that we'll kill your entire family".

Then a Muslim who had served time in prison in Zenica for killing a man before the war came to my father's pharmacy. He had been appointed to supervise my father's work. My father had special lamps in order to see better when he was working. The Muslim asked for these lamps and furniture to fit out the Ustasha house. "I will give you anything, but these lamps are my life. I can't see without them," my father said.

To this day I remember the man leaving the house and saying "Tell your father that we will kill you all if he doesn't take those lamps down." I started crying.

"Father, what does it matter! Give him the lamps. Why should we all die for them." Of course my father gave him everything he demanded.

Then one day a man called Taslidžić came. He owned a tavern in Gradačac. There was no railway line to Gradačac and people came by bus from Modriča. It was Friday, market day, and the pharmacy was full of people. The farmers came in once a week for their purchases. My mother was preparing a big lunch. There was a chicken in the oven. Without warning this Taslidžić came and said. "Get out of here right now. I've arrived on the bus with a new pharmacist who will replace you." The new pharmacist was a *Volksdeutscher* whose name was Vajsokr or something like that.

We left everything, even the chicken in the oven and all our belongings; we only picked up our coats and left. I remember as though it were yesterday the dark blue coat which had been made for me in Osijek. We left on foot and crossed the part of the town known as Gypsy Town. We used to have Gypsies working for us and Gypsy women did our laundry. Old Rašida said "The Krauses are *sadaka*," or "upright" as we would say.

We arrived in a village called Vida and spent the night there with some Muslims. The next day we moved on and came to Trebava. It was autumn. In Trebava, the Serbian Orthodox priest, Father Savo, was waiting for us and welcomed us warmly. He put us up with the local mayor. This was a godsend for us, a warm house. At that time there were Chetniks in Trebava who were fighting the Germans. These were Bosnian Chetniks who were well-disposed to Jews.

My mother and father had a bed while we slept on corn husks. I remember my parents constantly complaining about their bed. My sister and I, being young, laughed at them. We had barely saved our lives and they were worrying about their bed. We stayed in Trebava for eleven months. Father Savo and his wife really loved us, feeding us because we had no work.

I met my husband, Ervin, in Gradačac in 1941. He had come from Osijek as part of a campaign to wipe out the syphilis endemic in the area. A group of Jewish physicians were working on this. In 1941, Ervin brought me a letter from my friend in Osijek. She had told him

that there was a Jewish family in Gradačac who would help him to find accommodation and that he would also find her best friend there.



Tirca's mother Fanika and father Arthur with her younger sister Tonka and elder sister Lea, in about 1921

So, one day, Ervin appeared together with a Dr Špicer. The latter was an elderly gynaecologist who was also working on the anti-syphilis campaign. "Where is Tirca?" Ervin asked.

I was wearing a white coat at the time because I was helping my father. "I'm Tirca," I replied.

"We have a letter for you from your friend," he said. I was very pleased about this and then Dr Špicer added:

"And this is your future husband."

My father, who was very patriarchal and very taciturn said "All I need are Jews like this to make my position even more difficult." But that's how it began.

Ervin came every day. The day we left he arrived to visit us and saw that people were taking things out of our house. He then heard that we had fled. He managed to salvage some flour. A few days later Ervin appeared in Trebava on a horse, bringing us flour. He had arrived at night.

In Trebava they gave us a small patch of earth. We planted onions and parsley and made a little vegetable garden. All this time we were living in the mayor's house and the priest's wife would always bring us something.

In 1943 the Partisans arrived and captured Trebava. They had come from Gradačac. There was an officer with them who asked us what we were doing there. He introduced himself as Petko Kamhi, a Jew from Sarajevo. We told him the way we were living and he said that we must not remain there because the Chetniks would come from Serbia and kill us. Instead, he said, we should leave with him and join the Partisans. So, in September of that year, we joined the Partisans. As far as I know, Father Savo was killed by the Partisans just before the end of the war. He had allowed the Germans to march through his parish and for this he was prosecuted as a war criminal. He had been a very good man and when I said later that he had saved our lives I was told that I was too young to get mixed up in such things.

The Partisans occupied Gradačac so we too returned home. There I married Ervin, in the first Partisan marriage in Gradačac. Dr Bravo put my parents up in his house.

When we were about to get married, Ervin and I went to the local council. There I met some people I had known at primary school and asked them if they would be witnesses to my marriage. Thus I received my marriage certificate, which I have to this day. When I returned to my parents they began weeping. They asked me to promise them I would get married in the synagogue after the war. It was very important to them.

We stayed in Gradačac for a few days and then all joined the Partisans.

I joined a Muslim brigade with the 17th Division. This brigade was formed in Gradačac. Nijaz Dizadarević, who was a very good speaker, was the youth leader. After he held a meeting, young people joined the Partisans in droves.

While I was in Trebava, Ervin had brought his mother and brother to Gradačac. His father had died in 1942. In Gradačac he rented a small cottage for his family. His mother, although quite young, was seriously ill with gout and was bedridden. Ervin worked and his brother cooked, washed and took care of their mother. When we joined the Partisans, Ervin found accommodation for his mother in the Muslim village of Srebrenik. With him was my aunt, Roza Haker, my mother's sister.

Ervin's brother Vlado, who was barely two years younger than him, also joined the Partisans. But before the Partisans came to Gradačac, while it was still held by the Ustashas, Vlado was arrested. Ervin then went to the district office and said that his brother was protected under an agreement covering the families of physicians engaged in the campaign against syphilis. They told him that a brother was not regarded as close family. Ervin fought like a lion for his brother and eventually went to Osijek. There, in the Ustasha police, he found an Ustasha who had been his friend at school. He was extremely surprised to see Ervin, who told him "You have to help me." Ervin refused to leave until the Ustasha gave him a letter for the Gradačac district asking for Vlado to be released. So in this way Ervin managed to get his brother out of prison. At the same time that Vlado was arrested, all the Jews, all six families in Gradačac, were detained.

Our unit marched towards Majevisa. I came down with typhus and then pneumonia. They left me in the Partisan hospital, where I recovered from both. Meanwhile, Ervin had gone on with his unit. We were all attached to the hospital as a family. My father helped as a pharmacist, my sister taught women from the Antifascist Women's Front to read and write and I did the cooking.

The Seventh Offensive was under way. We were living in dugouts on Mt Majevisa. These were holes dug in the earth and covered with branches, soil and leaves, so that they looked like the floor of the forest. The sick lay in these dugouts. I was there with my mother and my sister Tonka. The Handžar Division was operating in this area and

slaughtered whoever they found. They discovered us, too. Once we heard footsteps on the roof of the dugout and shouts of "*Los! Los!*" They demanded we come out. All the doctors and nurses came out I remember Dr Dajč, an orthopaedic surgeon from Zagreb, and Dr Han. Dr Dajč had prescribed insoles for me when I was a child. They were also working on the anti-syphilis campaign.

This is when our troubles began. They marched us direct to Bijeljina where there was an assembly camp. Here they mistreated Dr Dajč and his son. Dr Dajč was rather a small man and they gave them sacks to carry which were too heavy for them. They then threw water over them. They fell, unable to take the strain. Then we went to Brčko. The bedridden patients stayed behind on Majevisa. I don't know what happened to them. The Germans came to Brčko and began interrogating us. They lined us up and immediately demanded to be told who the Jews were, to separate them. Suddenly a Muslim who had known my mother stepped out. "She is a Jew," he said, "She is the wife of the pharmacist Kraus, from Gradačac."

I didn't know this man, nor have I ever seen him again.

And then the singling out began. We were in barracks, or perhaps it was a stable. Mostly we were on the floor. Among us was Olga Lekić, a Partisan and a pre-war Communist. She was very strict and threatened everyone in the barracks: "The Partisans are going to win this war and anyone denouncing Tirca as a Jew is going to be in deep trouble." No one betrayed me.

One morning a truck came to collect those of us who had been identified as Jews. My mother managed to be very brave. Someone had given her a piece of bread and she said to a man "Take this to that girl over there." When she climbed into the truck she didn't look back, she didn't want to betray me. My sister Tonka, was with me; she had also not been identified as a Jew.

After some time the truck returned, empty, with only their belongings. We heard that they undressed them and... I don't know the details. But I saw my mother's dress among the things they brought back. Later I learned that this group was murdered by the Ustashas and members of the Handžar Division. I remember the truck and them being taken away, and the truck returning with their personal belongings. And I remember Olga saying "Don't you dare take any of those things."

In Brčko they loaded us into cattle wagons. We were to be sent to a labour camp in Germany. Our group consisted of able-bodied men and women. This was the beginning of 1944. The trucks into which we were loaded had no windows. We passed through Osijek and came to Belgrade. There they put us into the Milišić brickworks in Zvezdara. Milišić was probably the owner of the brickworks. We were in the open and my feet were hurting terribly. We were poorly clothed and didn't even have socks. There was an Italian doctor, himself a prisoner. He examined us and assessed our ability to work. He was free to move around and could even go into the city. He was a wonderful person. He gave me Ichtjol ointment, the black one, and paper bandages.

Olga Lekić was with me all this time. She was a passionate smoker. She told me "You have to ask the doctor for cigarettes". I told her there was no way I could do that. Then she told me it was a Party order and that because I was now a Communist Youth member I had to obey her. She forced me to go and ask the doctor for cigarettes. "He likes you," she explained, "and you must take advantage of that." So I went to the doctor and begged him for cigarettes. He actually brought me some. Olga was overjoyed.

The Italian doctor spoke German and we were able to chat a little. Then, gradually, he began to flirt with me. I told him that I was married, that my husband was a doctor and that he had studied for a semester in Bologna. The doctor even gave me sick leave so that I didn't have to work. We worked at Kalemegdan, where they were building some kind of wall. I stayed at the brickworks, in bed.

One day Olga told me that I had to give the doctor a letter. I protested that I could not do this, but Olga insisted and told me that it was not any ordinary letter. I had no idea what it contained. In fact she had written to the Party organisation in Belgrade and suddenly parcels began arriving for us. I had taken Olga's letter and handed it to the doctor and he had sent it on. I don't think he had any idea that it was a Communist letter.

So food parcels began to arrive. One day Olga ordered me to tell the doctor that she had tuberculosis and must be sent for X-rays. These were done in Zemun, which was then in another state. Again I protested and asked how I could tell him she was sick when she looked the picture of health. She was one of those strong Montenegrin women. "He'll do anything for you," she replied.

I went to the doctor who told me that he had listened to her chest with a stethoscope but had not found anything wrong with her lungs. Nonetheless he sent her to the hospital in Zemun. There, in the hospital, the doctor said that she had no tuberculosis and that she was in the best of health. Then he sent her back, but not to our barracks. There were a number of barracks in the camp and there was an epidemic in ours, so she was sent to another where the people were going out to work. In any case she wanted to work.

One day as we passed each other she said "Nada," – this was what they called me – "I'm off. You won't see me here again. What do you want me to tell Ervin? Do you have a message for him?"

That day a group of Communist Partisans were waiting for Olga under the Kalemegdan ramparts. She jumped down and broke both her legs, but her comrades picked her up and took her to a place where her fractures mended. Then she went to the Partisans again, to our old unit, the 17th Division. There she found my husband and told him that I was alive.

They were celebrating the New Year and asked Ervin to dinner in the headquarters. Then Branko Kada Petrović said to him: "Doctor, you have to buy us a drink. Your wife is alive!"

"How do you know?" asked Ervin.

"Well, there are brave women who are taken prisoner and jump to freedom so they can bring good news. Your wife is fine." And that's how Ervin discovered that I was still alive.

The Milišić brickworks were on the outskirts of Belgrade, in Zvezdara. We were fenced in with barbed wire and guarded by the Germans. In the camp itself, the men and women were segregated. The food was bad, but we were not harassed. This was a labour camp, not a camp for Jews. The prisoners weren't punished for Olga's escape, they only threatened reprisals if it should happen again.

One day they took us to the main railway station and put us on a train. We passed Auschwitz, seeing it in the distance. By that time everyone knew that this was where Jews were sent. Then we arrived at an *Arbeitslager* at Welten bei Berlin, near Berlin. This is where the labour camp was. We worked in two shifts, twelve hours in the day and twelve hours at night.

It was a huge factory and very cold inside. We slept in barracks. I think there were about 25 of us in each barracks. We slept in tiered beds on straw mats.

The food was dreadful. We were given 800 grams of bread for a whole week, but this bread was no bread at all. There was more sawdust than flour in it. We also got some kind of soup. Meat was nowhere to be seen, although there was something floating in the soup. Once a week we were given a piece of margarine. No one stole food, although some people ate everything immediately because they were starving. I was able to restrain myself, but there was a young girl from Tuzla, the youngest in our group, only seventeen years old. She would always ask me "Look, you've got bread. Give me some!" She couldn't restrain herself and always ate everything at once.

The workers in the camp were mostly from Ukraine, but there were also some from Poland. Once we were carpet bombed. It was terrible, but we had bunkers where we could shelter.

I often fell asleep at work during the night shift. I remember we had an overseer. He wasn't a bad man but we had a quota to fill. I worked on a lathe. We always made the same thing. Later we found out that we were making parts of weapons. The machine kept working and we kept turning and pushing something through it.

All this time I was wearing wooden clogs, I had sores on my feet from them; I had no socks and it was very cold. They had given us blankets, but they weren't made of wool. We only had the clothes we stood up in. The camp was guarded by Germans, ordinary local people. The place we were in, Welten bei Berlin, was not bombed. We only heard the explosions from bombing targets nearby.

I worked in the factory for about eleven months. Then the Russians came and brought bread and flour. They took great care of us, making sure that we had food and freedom of movement. The works director and the camp commander vanished before the Russians arrived and we never saw them again. I don't know whether the Russians killed them or whether they simply fled. The Russians harassed the girls a lot, but they held out extremely well. Some of the girls wanted to take some kind of revenge for being in the camp. They began to steal the Germans' belongings, things like German porcelain. They tried to persuade me to take something but I said I didn't want anything. I remember that these former camp inmates once found some Rosenthal plates and, instead of washing them after they used them, they threw them away. I asked them how they could do that and they said "What, do you feel sorry for the Germans?" I tried to explain that I wasn't sorry for the Germans but that I couldn't watch them break

things. They replied that I didn't know how to take revenge for what I had been through.

Then a very pleasant-looking man appeared. I think he was a Pole, in the Russian Army. I don't remember why I approached him, but I do remember I noticed his unusual features. He looked Jewish to me. He told me he was a journalist and I asked him if they had any contact with the Yugoslav Army. "We're in constant contact," he said. What kind of contact this was I don't know, but he told me that his name was Arthur Schwarzenwelt. I was surprised and asked him if he was Jewish. He told me that he was and then I told him that I was also Jewish. He asked me who I had in Yugoslavia and offered to send a message there. I told him that I had a husband, an army doctor, but that I wasn't sure whether he was still alive. He even gave me some money, Polish money I think, and said that I should have something on me in case I needed it. I never used it.

I didn't much think about his promise to get in touch with Ervin. Ervin had heard from Olga that I was alive, but that had been a long time ago. This time he was with his unit in Slovenia and received my message there, in Russian, that I was alive and well, where I was and that I would soon return home.

On our way back to Yugoslavia we stopped in Poland because there was no transport. We arrived there by train, but I don't even know the name of the city. There was chaos everywhere.

In this place where we were put up we cooked and cleaned. The army also ate there. We stayed in Poland for four months in the summer of 1945.

We arrived in Yugoslavia, in Subotica. There we were met by Yugoslav soldiers. They thought we had volunteered to go and work for the Germans and we had no way of proving that we were returning from forced labour. They kept ordering us around, behaving as though they were the occupying army.

Then a major arrived and said he was in the 17th Division. Somehow I managed to make contact with him and told him that my husband was the commander of MedSanBat, which is what we called the medical and sanitation battalion in the Partisans. I reiterated that we had not volunteered but had been taken prisoner. Eventually they let us go.

There was a woman named Mira, from Vrbas. I told her how worried I was: "Where should I go? Who will I find?" She invited me to

spend a few days with her in Vrbas. She told me that her father was a butcher and promised I would get a bath there. So I set off with Mira to Vrbas. There was no running water, but they filled a tub for us to take a bath. Her people were Serbs. While I was there, Mira's brother returned from Dachau. He weighed 35 kilograms. After three days I decided to be on my way. "I can't stay any longer. I'll get to Gradačac somehow," I told them.

From Vrbas I returned to Subotica. At the railway station, on the platform, I found a neighbour from Gradačac, a Muslim businessman. I ran to him and hugged him. We'd never been close but he was the first person I'd seen from my town. Then he told me, without being unkind, that both my mother and my sister were dead. I had known about my mother, but not about my sister.

Somehow I reached Gradačac. Somehow I managed to get there. I have no idea how long it took me, but I changed trains again and again. When I arrived in Gradačac I found my father and another local Jew, Moric Kabiljo, who had just returned from a prisoner of war camp.

My father told me that Ervin had been in contact from Bled, where his unit was. He was commander of a hospital. Ervin wanted me to go straight there, I think he sent me a telegram, but my father wouldn't hear of it. "You're not going to leave me now? I'm all alone!"

So I stayed a few days with my father and then set off to Bled. Ervin really couldn't wait any longer.

Later I learned how my sister was killed. The last time I saw her was at Majevisa. I had stayed with the hospital while she went on. She was later taken prisoner by the Chetniks and immediately executed. My other sister, Lea, who had been in Spain, was ordered by the party to stay in Paris. She had spent the whole war under a false name with no legal status. She returned to Yugoslavia in 1945.

After a short stay in Bled, I returned to Gradačac. By now I was pregnant. Then my father fell ill. So, for a while, I shuffled between Bled and Gradačac but during most of my pregnancy I stayed in Gradačac, that was where I had the best conditions. Our nanny, who had looked after me as a child had also returned. We had our own house.

My father's pharmacy was returned to him and he began to work again. We had food on the table, and I had my own bed. I assisted my father in his work. During this time, Ervin was still in Bled. Then he

had the chance to specialise in plastic surgery in Belgrade. He spent a few months there and then chose to do surgery. He began to specialise as a surgeon at the Surgical Clinic of the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade, and I moved to the city just before I was due to give birth. Here, in September 1946, our twins, Igor and Tamara were born. Apart from a few years in Skopje, we remained in Belgrade from then on. Ervin died on July 7, 1990.