
Alisa FRANCUSKI

“DADDY, WILL IT HURT
WHEN THEY SHOOT US?”



Alisa Francuski, née Najhaus, was born in Subotica on April 13, 1928, to Judita Holender and Josef Najhaus.

She survived the Holocaust together with her parents. She has a daughter, Sonja, married to Mirko Levi, and two grandchildren, Aleksandra and Ivan.

I attended the Queen Marija school, a Jewish school financially supported by the Jewish Community. Great emphasis was laid on religious education in this school so they took us to services in the big synagogue. At that time in Subotica there was also what they called the small synagogue, where services for school children were held in order for them to learn the whole ceremony. These were held only on Saturdays and the teaching was conducted by a rabbi and a deputy cantor.

I was thirteen when the Hungarians entered Subotica. They immediately began arresting people. Until 1943 and even up to the beginning of 1944, they left our family alone.

In 1942 I went to visit my aunt in Novi Sad. The winter break holiday had been extended because there was no fuel for heating, so we could not go to school. Because of this my aunt invited me to stay. I was caught there by the Great Raid. Together with my aunt I was among the Jews on the bank of the Danube. They say that the temperature was 27° C. below zero. We stood in line waiting to be shot, ten or twelve people, the last ones. One Novi Sad physician and his wife asked us to let them go before us because they could no longer stand. We thought that we were all going to be killed and that no one would be saved. These poor people were executed and, right after them, the orders came to stop the shooting. I was in shock and it's as though I saw nothing, as if I didn't go through any of this. But I remember... There was a family in front of us, Jews. The girl, about eight years old, asked her father. "Daddy, will it hurt when they shoot us?"

The father explained to his daughter that all it takes is just a second and "after that we won't feel anything any more".

After that they took us to the SOKOL building and later let us go home. Two days later, in the morning, we arrived in Subotica. In those two days my mother turned grey.

In Subotica we wore no symbols until 1944. However once the Germans arrived we had to wear yellow stars. Later we had to go to a ghetto which had been set up in Subotica, near the railway station, and we stayed there until we were taken to the camp. While we were in the ghetto, some Hungarian neighbours of ours took care of us. They brought us food because we were not allowed to go to the market before noon.

When the occupation began my father had to stop working. We raised money mainly by selling our belongings, jewellery and gold coins and other things which could be sold. The first thing we sold, very cheaply, was a villa and a vineyard at Palić.

The Germans arrived in 1944. We were immediately forced to wear yellow stars. I didn't find this humiliating. I remember one day, in front of the school, I was approached by a Catholic priest who taught religion at the girls' secondary school. Quite by chance he caught up with me and took me by the arm. "I'm wearing a yellow star," I told him.

"That's shameful only for those who put it on you!" he replied.

There was a Hungarian officer living in our apartment. He took all our valuable paintings and things and drove off with everything.

One day they moved us out of the ghetto into wagons. I don't know how many of us there were. First we went to Bacsalmas, a place in Hungary. There we were accommodated in and around the synagogue. After a few days in Bacsalmas they again loaded us into wagons and took us to Austria. After the war I learnt that an agreement had been reached, in June 1944, between Eichmann and Dr Kastner, the representative of the Jewish organisations, to set up labour camps in Austria, in return for the payment of millions of Swiss francs to the German Reich. About 18,000 Hungarian Jews were on those transports. Among them were some Jews from Bačka, mostly from Subotica. This transport was spared the horrors of the concentration camps. Most of these people survived the Holocaust. The first camp was Strasshof. We were there for about a week. All who were fit were sent to work. I spent the longest time in Durnholz. We were building up the banks of the river Taja. I was loading and unloading stones that we then built into the bank. I did this from morning to evening with another girl, a friend of mine. They gave us some food from the estate of the Lichtenstein family. They really helped us a great deal. Now and then the locals would give us some food, usually beets and there would be some cooking done. There was no wire fence around the camp. There were just 41 of us there. When they took away all the ones they thought were unable to work, nineteen of us remained, mostly women and a few men. There were a number of Hungarians from Szegedin. My father, my mother and I were together, we managed not to be separated.

The camp was an empty abandoned house. We slept on wooden beds, bunk beds. We had brought our blankets, which they didn't take from us, so we covered ourselves with them. We would get up at 4.30 or 5.00 in the morning. Then we made and drank warm water, something like tea, and then went to work. We would return in the evening. What they called food waited for us again in the camp. The guards were all individuals, quite different from one another. One SS man was horrible, while the others weren't like that. We were forbidden to talk to them and only spoke among ourselves. We would recount our memories, wonder about whether we would ever return home, talk about what we would do when we got back. Most of the time we invented menus. With all our hunger we thought about what we would eat if we survived.

After this camp we were again moved further on. This was 1944 and the Russians were getting closer. We moved from place to place every day for more than a month. As the Russians advanced the Germans drove us further and further. On May 8, we arrived in Grosau and stayed there. They put us into some stables in a castle. We were not alone there.

The SS men made us dig trenches. At one point we told them we could no longer do this. "We can't do anything any more. If you want to shoot us, shoot us, but we won't dig any more trenches!" Then, suddenly, they disappeared. The SS men, the guards, they all vanished. We were quite alone. We went up to the loft for hay. Someone saw that there was hay there and that there was no reason for us to lie on the bare ground. Just as one of the girls and I began throwing down the hay we were frightened by a man appearing out of the dark. He asked if any of us spoke French. I told him I did.

"Miss, the war is over," he said, in French.

I immediately rushed down thinking that perhaps he was an agent provocateur. There were a number of French prisoners downstairs throwing chocolates to the children from packages. The English prisoners were also good to us. They had been interned in the same place in Austria as we were, but they had been in military captivity. They had been treated completely differently from us. They were allowed to walk around the village, they received parcels and had food.

The next day the Russians came, liberated us and slaughtered an ox. Fortunately my mother would not allow me or my father to eat any of this. We got some potatoes and somebody cooked them. A number of the inmates who ate this rich food died because of their starving stomachs.

On our return we first arrived in Zmanevo in Czechoslovakia. This was a provisional collection centre where we spent a few weeks. Because we wanted to get food for our parents, a girlfriend of mine from Szegedin and I went to a restaurant and asked if we could wash dishes. They didn't pay us, but we were given food which we would take to our parents. This lasted for about two weeks, then we again got transport and, by a roundabout route, reached Budapest. There was a Jewish collection camp there where my father received assistance for the whole family. We spent a week in Budapest and then moved on, towards Subotica.

When we arrived in Subotica our house was full of people. There was a whole family living in each room, it was dreadful. For three years we were not able to enter our own house. We lived in some apartment, in fact an apartment belonging to my aunt's parents who had not returned from the war.

When we returned home, none of our things were there. The only things we got back were two old silver candlesticks which were returned by an old Gypsy woman, a beggar our mother used to give food to. "Here," she said, "I stole these from your house and now I'm returning them."

One day they announced that they were distributing coupons for shoes. Because I had no shoes I went to this place in Subotica and stood in line for a coupon. What should I see but a girl working there who used to be a member of the Hitler Youth. She had worn the Hitler Youth uniform during the occupation. I told her that I had come for a coupon and she replied: "You're not entitled to a coupon: they're only for fighters." I knew that everyone was getting this assistance so I went to the regional secretary to complain. When I walked into his office I thought he was sitting in our living room. All the furniture, the carpet, everything was from our living room. When I recovered myself he asked me what was wrong. I told him that everything was ours.

"What do you mean, yours?" he asked.

"Everything in here, it's ours," I repeated.

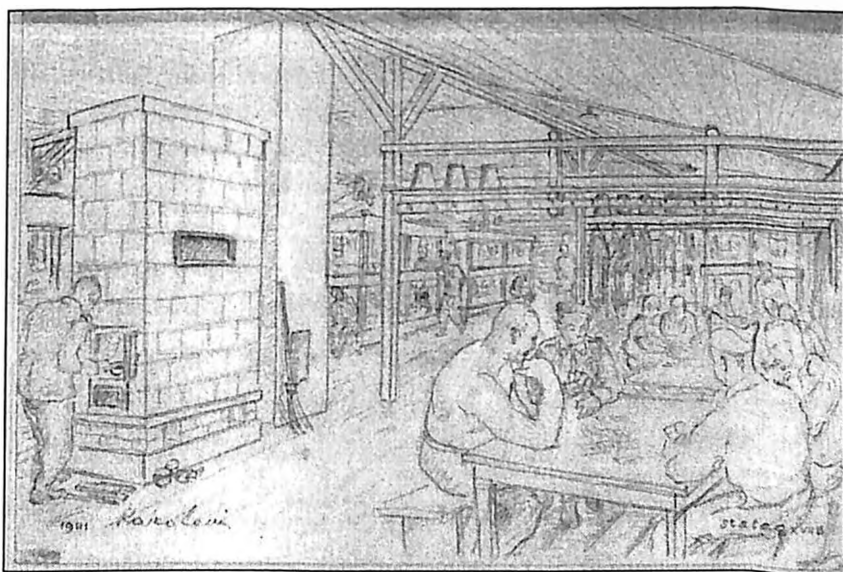
He asked me where I had lived before I went to the camp and I told him. He then agreed that the things were ours and told us we could come and take it all back whenever we wanted. The woman didn't stay in her job. I mentioned what I knew about her. Later on I heard that she was also a member of the Communist Party.

Very soon my father began working again, he was in charge of mills, working for a Swiss company with which he had also worked before the war.

I was transferred from Subotica to Novi Sad where I worked in a polyclinic. I had to attend classes and take the state exam. My future husband was a lecturer there. That's how we met. We were married for 46 years until his death in 1997. He was not a Jew but was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade. He was a great friend of the Jews and did a lot of work for the Community.

My mother had nine brothers and sisters. One brother died during the occupation and another before the war. Those who returned

home were my mother, her two sisters and the children. Their husbands did not return. One aunt lost her son, who was my age, but her other son and daughter returned, as did my other aunt's six sons. Today they all live in Israel and America. Of my father's family, the only one who was saved was his sister, who had hidden with her daughter in Budapest. Her son was killed. There is no one else on that side, but we are in constant contact with our relatives on my mother's side.



*Painter Rajko Levi, German prisoner of war from 1941 to 1945.
Drawing from his prison camp days, 1941*