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*Catriel FUCHS*

JOURNEY OF A REFUGEE CHILD



*Catriel (Karl) Fuchs was born on December 19, 1925, in the small village of Landsee in the Austrian province of Burgenland, to Aron and Helena, née Gruner. He had a younger sister, Ruth, born in 1928, who was killed together with their mother in Minsk in 1944.*

*Many of his close relatives, uncles and aunts and their children, as well as his paternal and maternal grandparents were killed in the Holocaust.*

*In 1943 he joined the British Royal Navy as a volunteer and was demobilised in 1946. He then took various jobs, mostly as a mason, a truck driver and a heavy equipment operator, as well as working on oil wells, in a chemical factory and many other jobs. During those difficult times he did not have much choice. At the same time he was a correspondent for the English-language Jerusalem Post.*

*As a member of the secret organisation Hagana, he took part in the battle for Haifa in 1947 and was then mobilised into the new Israeli Army, serving from 1948 to 1950. As a reserve member he served again in the Sinai campaign of 1956 and in the Six-Day War in 1967.*

*From 1962 to 1987 he worked for the National Navigation Agency ZIM, where his positions included agency representative in Paris, Frankfurt and Taiwan. He ended his career in 1998, at the age of 73, in the Austrian company R. Fuchs & Co.*

*For the past 59 years he has been married to Hilde, who was born in Vienna and is one of the survivors from the Kladovo transport. By coincidence they travelled on the same train to Palestine, the last to leave Yugoslavia via Turkey in 1941, but did not know each other at the time. They met when both living in the same kibbutz. They have a son, Josef (born 1948) and a daughter, Ruth Helen (1952) and four grandchildren.*

I shall start with a barn in Graz, Austria, where a small group of teenagers lay huddled on the floor, waiting for the proper timing for the dash across the border into the Karawanken mountains, straddling the Austria-Yugoslavia border. The barn belonged to a man later known as the "Styrian Schindler" for his tireless endeavours to hide and smuggle Jews out of the Great German Reich, of which Austria had recently become a part. His name was Josef Schleich; for his efforts he was imprisoned several times by the Gestapo, and later drafted into a mine-clearing outfit as punishment.

Being bilingual (German and Slovenian), he bribed both the German and Slovenian border guards to look the other way when we raced across the clearing in no man's land. He then hired locals to guide us through the woods and across the River Sava to a pre-arranged meeting point. From there we were taken at midnight to a point along the railway line to Zagreb, where a generously remunerated locomotive driver would stop his train for a few moments, enabling us to scramble on board a specified freight wagon. Once we arrived in Zagreb, we would be met by representatives of the local Jewish Community.

For the entire group all proceeded well according to plan, except for myself, who slept soundly throughout the whole action. My absence was not noted as it was pitch dark – and the train chugged off into the night without me. The reason from me sleeping peacefully was the amount of strong country wine I had imbibed at the inn, where we had awaited the right time for our rail journey. Thus I awoke at dawn, utterly alone beside the tracks, without the slightest idea of where I was or what to do next. This uncertainty was soon dispelled by the appearance of a huge, uniformed person who spoke to me in a language I had never heard before. The short of it was that I was escorted to a Gendarmerie post, where it was quickly established that I had

no papers, no money and no official reason to be where I was. The country officialdom decided that, as an *Austrian*, I was to be expelled without further ado. I was taken on an escorted march on foot to the border, where the kindly guard waved me over to the opposite sandbagged bunker, over which the German flag fluttered in the wind. The walk across the tank-defence obstacles in no man's land took no more than a few minutes, but seemed to me to last hours. A bored SS guard was duly surprised by my appearance, and all I managed to say was "Well, here I am, back again..." At the international railway border station of Spielfeld, I was kept for a day or two, during which the guards put me to work piling up logs and, when the job was done, demolished it with a few kicks of their boots, making me start all over again.

The devil must have been riding me when I made the decision to board the train to Vienna, when no one was paying any attention to me, and thus I was on my way on the wrong train, in the wrong direction, to the very place I had started out to escape from, only a few days ago. The train was full of soldiers in their wartime gear and panic gripped me as the ticket collector made his way through the carriage. All I had were the ten Reichsmarks we were allowed to take out of the country, way below the price of a ticket. My apprehension must have been apparent to a young woman in the opposite seat – without a word she paid the man – I shall forever be beholden to this blonde angel, who didn't say a single word, but only smiled knowingly now and then. I never saw her again, I do not know her name – I shall always cherish the memory of her selfless, humane help, and wish I could have been given the chance to thank her – these many years later. She was surely aware of the terrible danger to herself if found to be giving succour to a "Jew boy".

I arrived in blacked-out Vienna at midnight, way past the Jewish curfew, but no one challenged me as I made my way through the deserted streets. Where to? My poor mother almost fainted as she heard my knocking on the door – who could this be if not the Gestapo, at this hour, yanking Jews out of their beds! It was only me, her only son, whom she assumed to be safe in Yugoslavia. When I was really safe, a few months later, the feared knock came indeed, and she and my sister were rounded up for deportation. I never saw them again.

For a few months I lived a strange underground existence – as far as the authorities were concerned I was no longer to be counted

as present, I was illegally in the country, no address, no food stamps etc., but it felt sort of adventurous. Anyway, for reasons beyond my understanding, the Vienna Jewish community and the Youth Aliyah organisation once more made it possible to enjoy the rough hospitality of Mr Josef Schleich, but this time in freezing winter temperatures. Again – the same routine, rushing into the shelter of the snow-laden trees of Slovenia, and the long trek over icy trails, over ravines and through deep gullies, at one point lying motionless in metre-deep snow, hoping to escape the notice of Yugoslav border patrols.



*Katriel Fuchs, from the period when people grew up as much in one day as they normally would in several years of peace*

I was clad only in shorts, a shirt and a light jacket, the sweat on my body immediately turning to ice: besides a small backpack, I also carried a small boy, as his mother was hardly strong enough to struggle on by herself. An older man, who had refused to part with the belongings in his suitcase, despite having been warned not to carry heavy baggage, lost his balance over a narrow ledge and fell screaming to his death hundreds of metres into a gorge. Our smuggler-guides just hurried us on, and we stolidly struggled forward. Finally we arrived on the bank of the Sava river, near a highway where we were picked up by a few waiting cars. Three of us were bundled into the boot of an automobile, which

took off at breakneck speed towards the – for me – unknown destination. When I woke up from delirious dreams, I found myself in a hos-

pital bed with, as explained to me in beautifully accented German, a severe case of pneumonia.

What worried me more than my illness, was the possibility of another forced return to the German Reich, from which there would not be another deliverance. Somewhat naively I tried to obscure my identity by hiding my *laissez-passer* – which was useless anyway – under the pillow, but I was finally released into ephemeral, Zagreb freedom. I rejoined all my friends and comrades from the youth movement, the Jewish Community assigned me to two families: Mrs Boros and her daughter Lidija for sleeping arrangements, and the Kronfeld family for meals and company with their son Saša, who gave me lessons in the Serbo-Croat language. At the Boros household I found two earlier arrivals, who slept in a double bed, forcing me, the latecomer, to try to get a decent night's sleep between the two of them, who were alternately snoring and making other strange noises. Besides, it was impossible to lie in the free space in the middle, thus I found myself snuggling up to one or other of my bedfellows, who did not particularly appreciate my encroachment into their space. But it was quite some innocent fun. My – admittedly limited – language skills enabled me to buy cinema and bus tickets, as well as the occasional bite of *ćevapčići*, which I much later encountered in their metamorphosis as kebabs.

One day we had a rather scary encounter with a group of obviously Hitler-oriented youths, who overheard us speaking German and evidently believed us to be a sort of fifth column, *Volksdeutsche* like them. We managed to get rid of them, by playing a mysterious and secret undercover assignment. This encounter jolted us out of our newly-won complacency and made clear our precarious situation in an increasingly nervous Yugoslavia, fearful and suspicious of practically every political and national grouping: Banat Germans, Serbs, Nazis, Communists – whoever. And indeed, late one evening I was caught in one of the occasional *racija*, a police dragnet in which a street was hermetically closed off from all sides and anyone without papers clapped into jail. Thus I found myself with another 25 involuntary jailbirds in a cell intended for ten inmates at most. Once again I became the *Austrianac*, and an object of desire for some of the more fearful characters. It was probably the dense multitude and extreme crowding that saved me from a “fate worse than death”. One thieving “specialist”, however, managed to strip my beloved new sweater off my sleeping body without my becoming aware of it. Upon awakening in the chilly

morning. I saw another captive nonchalantly wearing it. There wasn't much I could do about it.

After a week or so, the Jewish Community managed to locate me and at first sent packages of food into my cell, half which, however, was eaten by the various jailers, the other half by my fellow inmates, while I was generously allowed to sign the receipt. But all's well that ends well, against the payment of an agreeable ransom I was let loose again, minus a sweater, and host to a fellowship of fleas and lice – but still free.



*Katriel Fuchs today*

Throughout those few months in Zagreb we were under the care and supervision of our devoted youth leaders, known as *madrihim* – Joško, and Armando Moreno, who saw to our spiritual and material needs and continued to give us guidance and hope in the world we found ourselves in – between the loss of families, friends and our familiar surroundings, on the one hand, and our intended destination, Palestine-Israel, on the other.

Of course we were totally unaware of the forces, deals and machinations at work which had direct bearing on our future. In any case, finally we were able to move on, as it turned out in the

nick of time. Those of us lucky enough to leave boarded a train to Belgrade for the second step of our Odyssey. During the one or two day stopover in Belgrade I again managed to get myself arrested, having wandered off following my ever-curious nose, and once more fate, in the shape of Armando, rescued me from the clutches of the police. I don't believe that all the carriages were sealed off in order to prevent me from straying away from the herd, but this was in fact done – the last train out of free Yugoslavia finally rolled across the border into Greece, just as the German army assaulted this country in the north. We, the lucky few, were on our way to our new homeland, while most

of those left behind did not survive. Much later I located Joško at a kibbutz in the Negev, and only in 2001 did I manage to re-establish contact with Armando, now living in Los Angeles, who has his own adventurous survival story to tell.

By an odd coincidence, my future wife Hilde happened to be on the same train, her group having joined us from their internment in Kladovo. We had no idea of each other's existence and we only met a year later, and married after another two years.