

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

Isak-Iso Finci: <i>I remember not my parents, i know not my saviors</i>	262
IV HIDING IN THE TERRITORY OF YUGOSLAVIA	267
Dr Estera Mrčarica: <i>The neighbours did not betray us</i>	269
Natalija Kovačević-Tajtacak: <i>A long race with death</i>	275
V PROTECTED BY MIXED MARRIAGE	281
Berta Postružnik: <i>Halid Muftić – saviour of the jewish family</i>	283
Dr Lucija Rajner: <i>For those who have long been gone</i>	291
Ivan Ninić: <i>The perishing of my dearest</i>	299
VI IMMIGRATING TO PALESTINE.....	309
Stela Švarc: <i>A long journey to the port of salvation</i>	311
Cvi Raam: <i>A long way to salvation in Israel</i>	317
VII FORCED LABOUR IN AUSTRIA	323
Ruža Lihtner Krndić: <i>People of negotin, thank you for saving my life!</i>	325
VIII AT FORCED LABOR	339
Dr Đorđe Bošanj: <i>From the line for execution my mother pushed me into life</i>	341
IX KASTNER'S GROUP.....	347
Marta Flato Ladanj: <i>Saved from the raid as six-months old baby</i>	349
X BORN IN THE CAMP	355
Drita Tutunović: <i>Born in the camp</i>	357
XI APPENDICES	365
GLOSSARY.....	383
Contents of the first volume of „We Survived“	389
Contents of the second volume of „We Survived“	391
Contents of the third volume of „We Survived“	394

Jelena VICULIN

RETURN FROM A HOPELESS JOURNEY



Jelena Viculin was born in 1922 in Budapest, of father David Hoffman and mother Helena, née Safir. From 1922 the family lived in the town of Ada in the region of Bačka, where her father was a rabbi. The family had nine children: five sons and four daughters. At the outset of the war one of the brothers was in Switzerland and one in Budapest. The oldest sister Olga was married in Austria and, after the Anschluss, together with her husband, she fled to Yugoslavia, to the region of Bačka, where she lived in Stari Bečej and where she and her husband were executed in the raid in

January 1942 and thrown under the ice of the river Tisa. Other children lived with the parents in Ada.

Together with her mother and three sisters, her father and three brothers, she was an inmate of the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp, where the parents perished. Apart from sister Olga and the parents, many other family members on both maternal and paternal side perished in the Holocaust.

After the war she married Jadran Viculin, with whom she has a son and a grandson.

Before the Germans completed the occupation of Hungary in March 1944 and installed in power the Hungarian Fascists, we lived in our apartment in Ada. But, at that moment, our life changed completely. The decrees came into effect for Jews to wear the Magen David star. The elders were much concerned, and we younger ones were not yet fully aware of what

was to come. Rumors started to spread about our forthcoming deportation, which soon happened.

At the beginning of April we were ordered not to leave our homes. The following day, a German officer came to our home with a number of Hungarian gendarmes and officials of the authorities. They searched the apartment. They took my father to a separate room and ordered him to tell them where he had the money and other valuables. They ordered us to pack. They said we should not pack too much as we would not need it.

We were taken from our home, where we left practically everything that we had, towards the railway station and into a big yard which was otherwise used for sale of fuel wood. That was the collection point to which they brought other Jewish families from the region of Ada. From the yard we were taken the same day to the railway station. We were loaded onto the train and taken to Szeged. There we were put into a synagogue to which Jews were brought from different places across Bačka. There we lived and slept on the floor: women, children, the elderly. There were few men, because they were taken away earlier for forced labor. Jews from Szeged, who at that time were still at their homes, brought food for us as much as they could and they tried to relieve our difficulties. Very soon they were to experience the same destiny as we were then going through.

The camp commander, a Hungarian officer, had the task to compile a list of all the inmates. As he had no one to assist him apart from the guards, he asked a number of us to help him in this. That was where they were getting us ready for Auschwitz. At the same time there were rumors that we would be moving on. The camp commander, the Hungarian whom we helped with the list, summoned some of us and said in a serious voice that he did not need us any longer and that he wanted to do us a favor. In the evening, when it gets dark, he would withdraw the guard from the camp gate, and we can remove the yellow armbands and go wherever we wish. We did not understand and, confused as we were, we asked him where we could go. You are free, go where you wish. We asked – what about our parents? He said – go, because tomorrow you will be taken from Hungary. That was all he said. We told our parents about this and they were surprised to hear it. We decided to stay with our parents, we were very close.

The following morning the order came for us to leave. We got together the few things that we had taken from our homes. A soldier who was watching this told us that we would not need any of this in the place where we were taken. They pushed us into animal carriages, tightly packed next to each other, as many as possible. The taller ones were peaking out through the open carriages and said we were being taken towards Austria.

We stopped not far from Vienna, in Gänsendorf. They took out the dead ones and separated those who volunteered to stay and help with the farm work. I think that most of them had survived. The rest of us were told that we were moving on to a place where we would all be together. While standing in the closed carriages at the railway station, we heard the alarm sounding. There was bombing around us. The guards went away to hide and left us in closed carriages. We had to wait for the railway to be repaired so that the assembled cargo carriages full of Jews could move on. We did not know where we were being taken. I do not remember how long the journey took. The long composition of carriages finally stopped on 1 June in Auschwitz, by the well-known gate with the writing on it saying „Arbeit macht frei“.

We were pushed out of the carriage, carrying the few belongings that we had. We were told there not to bother because we would no longer need these things. The men were separated and taken away immediately, so the three of us – my mother, my sister and I – never again saw father and our three brothers. The women were taken a bit further away to the crossroads at which soldiers were standing. Among them was an officer, the infamous Dr Mengele, who performed the inspection. We approached him, four in a row. He said nothing; he only made signals with his hand indicating left or right. The three of us, I and my sisters, were separated from our mother. We were sent to the right and she to the left. We never saw her again. To the left meant those who were not fit to work and who were sent to the crematorium the same evening to the gas chamber.

As we were approaching Birkenau it seemed to me as if we were getting into a madhouse. We saw women with hair shaved off in torn clothes standing behind the fence. Some hours later we were looked upon with the same wonder by the new arrivals. We were taken to a barrack, our hair was shaved, we were stripped naked and everything was taken away. We were not to keep anything. They gave us a shower and took us to camp C, where the block commander told us that in here there is no asking questions, all one is to do is listen and say „yes“. The key role in the barracks was played by Czech and Polish Jews who came before us and knew how everything worked. Camp C consisted of 32 barracks, each housing about one thousand women. I was put with my sisters into barrack number 23, which was known to be the worst one as it leaked when it rained. We lay on the concrete floor as there were not enough wood planks for everybody. In the morning we were to get up very early for the roll call. We ate once a day, some gray liquid from a pot for four or five persons. Without our food utensils, we would each take couple of sips and a few pieces of bread. We washed ourselves without soap or towel. We were freezing without any underwear in torn silk dresses. We looked like savages. Even the basic hygiene was impossible. The „head“

in our barrack was Franka, from Katowice. On several occasions she comforted us. Persevere, it will not last for much longer, the front is near. Don't even think of touching the fence wire, it will kill you. She gave us hope. I ate the food, I wanted to survive and go back home.

On the other side across from us were Gypsies, with many children. One night they all disappeared. That was how life was in Auschwitz.

The daily roll call was a special torture. If the number of inmates did not match, we would have to stand or kneel for hours in the cold.

At the beginning of September we had a new „head“ of our barrack, her name was Klara. One day she told us that they would be asking for inmates to do hard labor but that would be an opportunity to survive as the war would not last for too much longer. And truly, after a few days Dr Mengele came to the camp to select „workers“ for hard work. He said nothing, we were just passing by him. Those who were weak were sent back by him to the barrack. They took us to camp B. That was the place for the women who worked and they were tattooed. We from camp C did not have tattooed numbers because camp C mostly served as a place to proceed to the crematorium and the gas chambers. We washed and were given gray dresses and head scarfs. We were loaded onto carriages in which there was room and one could lay down. There was even a bucket of water there, which meant a lot and gave us joy because earlier we could not get any when we wanted some. It was as if we came from hell to heaven! Our „head“, Klara, saw us off to the camp doors with tears in her eyes and said we were saved. The train started. I think there were about 3,000 women on it. The journey took a long time and we arrived somewhere in the vicinity of Danzig, to Stutthof camp, where we stayed several days. Red Cross people came. They registered us and we were assigned numbers. Not tattoos, but numbers on a piece of fabric sewn to the sleeve of our dresses. After this we were taken to hard labor, digging of trenches near the town Torn. Later we were also taken to dig trenches elsewhere, around the town Argenau. They made for us a separate camp of tents in the woods. From there we were taken every day for work. The food was meager, but better than in the camp before. Winter came and snow. We were digging frozen soil, hungry, freezing and exhausted. We slept on the ground with a little straw on top of it, one blanket each. To keep warm, we slept close to each other. In the tent there was a small furnace that we could use to build a fire but we did so seldomly because we were so exhausted that we did not have the strength to do it. The tents were made of thin plywood. Every tent had its „head inmate“ who represented us before the whole camp – Lagerälteste – and who communicated with the Germans. It was two older German officers, experienced SS, who passed on their orders through her to us. The „head“ was from Berlin, I think she was a journalist. The “head” for our tent was Maria from Budapest,

an opera singer, who had just graduated from conservatory. In the evening, when we would go to bed, we would ask her to sing. One evening she sang an opera aria. The German officer who was doing a round of the camp heard the singing and opened the door of the barrack. We got frightened. He asked who was singing. Maria answered to say it was her. He said that she should report to his office tomorrow. She did so and as reward she got a loaf of bread and a package of margarine, which at that time was very valuable.



JELENA in her youth

My younger sister got sick. She was called Roži, and from early childhood at home we called her Babuka. She felt very weak and I was concerned for her. To spare her, I took upon myself to dig her sections of the trench, while we were digging, guards stood around us. One of the guards who was standing close to us, was eating an apple while doing his guard. I was trying to complete my section and my sister's section as soon as possible. He called me to himself and offered me an apple. I was looking at the apple which was for us a true rarity. We were not allowed to talk with the guards or ask them questions. So, I took the apple, thanked him and put the apple in my pocket.

As I did this, the guard shouted at me:

– Why don't you eat the apple, do you think it is poisoned?

– I cannot have it now – I replied.

– Eat it – he persisted.

– I cannot now, today I am fasting, and should not have anything to eat.

– What is today?

– For us today is a great holiday and we fast – I said.

– What is the name of the holiday?

– Yom Kippur – I said.

Hearing this, he nodded as if he understood, and he moved on. I was in fact fasting. In the evening we shared the apple.

Sometimes, while digging trenches, we would come across some potatoes and we would eat it uncooked as a speciality. For Christmas we were given some potatoes and meat, and a spoon of sugar each. There was with us

a nurse from Novi Sad, the wife of dr Goldman. She advised us not to eat the sugar right away, because even more difficult days are ahead. The front was getting closer. The army was passing by. From Polish farmers who were also brought in to dig trenches we heard that the Russians are close and that this would not go on for much longer.

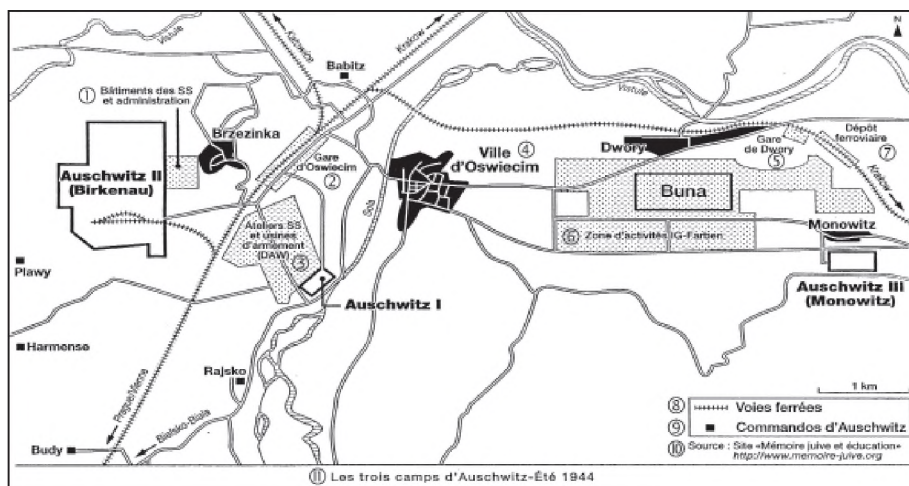
One day we were lined up and an officer in charge of us delivered a speech saying: the end of the war is near. We are withdrawing and taking you towards the German border. We tried as much as we could to make your lives easier. We wanted you to go back to your homes. We will select those who can walk on foot. We three sisters were sticking together. We were among those who started the walk. Later we heard that some days later those who stayed behind were all executed.

They took us through the forests, for kilometers, without food. With our fists we took snow from the ground and that was our food. That is when Rozika, the nurse, told us – now you can take that sugar. We walked for days listening to the canon fire. When we finally arrived to a big abandoned farming estate, we found some food there. There was a cow there as well, therefore also some milk. We rested. We were called to line up again and they told us:

„The front is near. You can hear the canons. We want to save those of you who accompanied us. We tried to make it bearable, as much as we could. Listen to us! The last Gestapo troops will pass by here tomorrow morning. While they are passing by, none of you must be in the yard, because if they see you they will take you with them“. And then he asked: „The Russians are near; we save you, and would you do the same for us when the Russians come?“ We were all silent.

They left us there. They went into a car and left. In the morning, just as they said, Gestapo arrived. As women were running around the yard looking for food, they noticed us and again they took us to move on with them. The cannons were heard more and more closely. We were no longer guarded by guards. At the insistence of my older sister Adela, who insisted that we must get away, us three sisters and a few friends found a good spot in the forest and jumped into snow up to our waist. The soldiers were off, and we were there alone, while it was getting dark. We were free but with no idea where to go. We came to a road. In the distance we saw a chimney. As we approached we realized that it was a small house of a poor Polish family. They listened to our story and took us a bit further away to an estate that was abandoned by German soldiers. There was still cattle there and quite a lot of food. The Poles, who were working there before, came to feed the cattle. They gave us milk, and there were potatoes and other food. They told us that we were free, that the Germans were not coming back. That is how we experienced liberation.

The Russians were very close, we were expecting them any minute. Soon afterwards, one morning, the first Russian soldier came to the door with a shot gun pointed. We jumped all over him shouting with happiness. He was appalled and afraid of us because we were looking so miserable. We explained to him who we were. He told us right away with enthusiasm that he was going to Berlin.



- | | | |
|--|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Buildings of the SS and documentation | 4. Town Auschwitz (Oswiecim) | 9. Operating command Auschwitz |
| 2. Railway station | 5. Railway station Dvori | 10. Source of information „Jewish memories and education“ |
| 3. SS workshops and armaments factory | 6. Zone Manovic – I.G.Farben | 11. Three camps of Auschwitz – summer 1944 |
| | 7. Railway depot | |
| | 8. Railway lines | |

Layout of the Auschwitz camp, where Jelena Viculin was incarcerated

The house on that estate, where we stayed, was a big house with no other houses directly close to it. Soon, other Russian soldiers and officers started coming to it. The HQ of one of their units was accommodated there. In the evening they set the table really nice for dinner. They asked questions about who was in the house, where we were from, and they invited us to join them for dinner. When we saw all that was there, we started to cry. They were comforting us by saying that they were going to Berlin and that they would revenge all the evil that the Germans inflicted. The following day they moved on. They left a lot of food for us, and I got sick from eating it, so I had to be taken to Kronovo, a town completely in ruins, but the big hospital was operating. The recovery was not easy. In the hospital I met many camp inmates, Jews from Hungary, and this made my recovery easier. It was thanks to my sister Adela that I recovered. She saved my life several times.

After my recovery we were in the Red Cross building, where a transport was being assembled. We were transferred to the collection centre in Bromberg. Afterwards, through another transport we travelled by train, via Hungary and Romania, to Ada.

Our apartment from which we were taken to the camp was already lived in. Our things were gone. Some returnees, a few Jews, arrived to Ada before we did, and they offered us accommodation in another house that was not occupied at the time. As my father and the whole family enjoyed great respect in Ada, many people offered their help. We were waiting impatiently to see whether any other members of our family would be coming back, but regretfully no one else did. We lost numerous members of our family. I cannot even count how many. My younger sister Babuka, when the opportunity arose, went to Israel. She married and had two sons and is still living there. The older sister Adela married Pavle Fišer who was for four years in a German prisoners of war camp as reserve officer of the Yugoslav Army. Some time later they also immigrated to Israel, and they have been living there happily. In Ada I met a Partisan officer, fell in love and married him. He is a wonderful man and I have lived with him since then in a happy marriage. I have a son and a grandson.