
Josip ERLIH

A BOY IN THE CAMP



Josip Erlih was born in the Našice district of Croatia, in the village of Koška. His mother Berta (née Polak) and father Vilim Erlih were killed in the Holocaust, together with about fifty of their relatives.

After the war he worked as a civil servant in the military until his retirement on January 1, 1973. He continued to work part time for another ten years as a clerk in the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.

Josip Erlih has two daughters, Ružica and Branka, and four grandchildren.

I was born in the village of Koška in the district of Našice on November 27, 1927 to Vilim and Berta Erlih (née Polak). I was only a small boy when the war broke out, but I remember our concern as Hitler attacked Czechoslovakia, Poland and other countries. I was at home in my village of Koška in April 1941, when Yugoslavia fell, because it was no longer possible to attend grammar school in Osijek, 33 kilometres to the east. In our village a military unit disintegrated when some of the officers responded to the call of the Nazis and the Ustashas while others stayed with the unit. Serbs and Jews were the first to bear the brunt in our neighbourhood. Early in the autumn of 1941 the Ustashas arrested a number of Našice Jews and brutally killed them, even going so far as to forbid them to be buried in public.

It was sometime in October when the full fury of the Ustasha rage was unleashed on us. One night we heard a car screech to a halt in front of our house and then everything happened in a flash. The Ustashes took my father and three other Jews: Teodor Flajšer, Bernard Kon, his son Oto and an elderly woman. None of them ever returned. We heard later that they had first been taken under guard to Našice, then to Gospić, then to Krapje and, finally, to Jasenovac. Not until I was in Jasenovac myself did I discover that my father's life had ended in the camp in late 1941 or early 1942. I learnt this from my uncle, my mother's brother, who was still in Jasenovac when I was taken there from Stara Gradiška in June, 1943.

But in that harsh and terrible winter of 1941-42 after my father's arrest, the rest of the family was still together with my mother. First the Ustashes moved our family and the Flajšers to the apartment of another Jewish family in the village, the Kons. We stayed there with them, waiting for our transfer to Našice. The Jewish community in Osijek had by now organised a flying squad and they transferred me and my schoolmate Milan, the son of the Flajšer family, to a family in Osijek. In this way, at least we children were temporarily saved from the camp. My mother, together with the Kons, the Flajšers and an elderly woman, Fanika Štajn, was taken from our village, first to Našice and then to Jasenovac. All of them were murdered on arrival.

My heart was heavy as I moved from Osijek to Slavonska Požega where I had relatives. My uncle, Armin Rehnicher, was very active in the Croatian Falcon organisation and they hoped they would be saved from persecution. This was not the case, of course, and all of us were arrested late in August 1942. A few days later we were in a convoy heading for the camp.

There were about eighty of us in two barred vans, most of them Croats, along with a fair number of Serbs, some Jews and even two Ruthenians. We left the train in Okučani and continued on foot towards Stara Gradiška. There they imprisoned us in the notorious Kula prison, on the west side of the top floor. I remember the body searches there: once I was beaten when they found some money hidden in my pocket in a piece of gauze. While we were there they separated the men from the women and I never saw the women again, despite them taking us out for exercise every day. All we could hear was the crying of infants. There was even a group of psychiatric patients from the Pakrac Institution for the Mentally Ill.

There were quite a number of Croats among the prisoners, so the farms nearby began seeking them for labour. I even applied once myself, because I wanted to be in the sun outside the prison walls. I came across two relatives, a father and son of the Kraus family who gave me some food and so I began applying regularly to work. One day, returning from the farm, I had a real shock: not one of the vast number of women who had been in the courtyard were there. All the Jewish and Serb women had been taken off by the Ustashas and nobody knew where they had gone. Among them were my Aunt Ružica, her son Vlada and her baby daughter, just a few months old, whose name I don't even know.

The pace of the arrests was steadily increasing. I remember an enormous number of people appearing one morning. The Ustashas had begun rounding up all the Serbs from the neighbouring villages of Pakrac and the Požega valley. They brought in the villagers of Kukunjevac, cramming the men into the empty solitary confinement cells, while the women and children were kept in the courtyard, in the open air. The numbers were swelling from day to day. They also brought in the Serb population from the Mount Kozara area.

One day they drove about fifty peasants from Srem to Kula, claiming that they were all Partisans. A few days later they bound them with wire, pushed them up against the wall of the Ustasha hospital and sprayed them with machine-gun fire in front of all the other prisoners. As they fell, some of them were still alive, begging not to be buried alive. A similar fate awaited the psychiatric patients: one day over lunch they were all given injections. Once they collapsed, the Ustashas dragged them out to the mass graves they had prepared.

I also remember meeting my relative, Ervin Šmelcer in Kula. He had escaped from Jasenovac in 1941 with a group of his friends from Našice. He managed to contact the Partisans and went to Kozara. However, after fighting there, he lost his contact and was again caught by the Ustashas. He was first locked up in the Black House in Banja Luka and then transferred to Stara Gradiška before ending up in Kula. One day he, too, was tied with wire and taken to Jasenovac where he was murdered in the most brutal way.

During 1942 we began to realise the gravity of our situation. More and more prisoners were killed in front of the whole camp, an ever clearer signal of the fate that awaited us all. I once saw a guard walk up to a woman and shoot her in cold blood. The evil Vrban killed a woman

at the gate of the Kula camp because he found her carrying a handful of corn. He also killed another woman he caught there.

The rainy autumn had set in when we were taken from Kula to a detention centre. I begged to be put in the shoemakers workshop, from which I was expelled, and later went to the tailors. I stayed there until June, 1943, when I was transferred to Jasenovac. The hardships in Stara Gradiška are too many to list here. They included epidemics, typhoid in particular, when a considerable number of people died every day. I was also infected and it was only sheer chance that I recovered. The work was arduous and excessive, we worked in three shifts until 10.00 p.m. The food was scant, mostly frozen potatoes. We were crawling with lice which were later joined by bedbugs. And then there were the roll calls. We would be lined up to wait for orders, or for our execution by firing squad. I had to watch one Ustasha called Majstorović shoot a group from Bistrica dead. I remember Sergeant Grubišić, the head of the tailoring workshop, shooting a number of people dead in front of us inmates, and the murderer Maričić did the same thing. Incidents like these followed one after another and I was dying of fear. Then came the typhoid. The doctors described it as “Gradiška flu”: If they had told the truth the Ustashes would have liquidated the whole camp. I too was sick with this, spending some time in the attic of the workshop and some in the camp infirmary under Doctor Polak from Vinkovci. I was lucky because my friends – one of them the room warden, Čičin – smuggled me out of the infirmary and hid me, sick as I was, in the workshop. This was in the spring of 1943 and in June that year I was signed out for transfer to Jasenovac.

In Jasenovac I was immediately put to work in the brickyard, where I shared a shack with Ilija Paripović, a notorious criminal with no legs but hands of steel. It was my job to take the hand-made bricks out of the moulds. We worked from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. with a break for lunch. The food was even worse than in Gradiška. I worked with David Pinto, who now lives in Israel, and Philip Grinvald, who was later killed. The work was exhausting, but worse still were the roll calls, as we waited for the arrival of the Ustasha officers and guards. There were now more and more shootings: again the executioner was Zrinjušić, or Šakić or other notorious murderers.

There in Jasenovac I found my uncle, Marko Polak from Zagreb, and learnt from him the fate of my parents. My poor father's life was terminated in late 1941 or early 1942 and my mother was slain on her

arrival at the camp. My other female relatives who had been in the same convoy were also killed.

Late in 1943, in the winter, the camp warden, Viner, known to the inmates as an extremely good man, transferred me from the brickyard to the indoor chain workshop. I was assigned to the tinsmiths, together with my friend David Pinto, but in the spring he was sent back to the brickyard while I was kept on at the tinsmiths, where life was a little easier.

Once in the brickyard, Major Pićili came and noticed that the wagons carrying new tiles had stopped and that the engine wasn't running. He punished the entire brickyard, having us put in chains and ordering that we were not to be fed for several days. They shackled us once again when a group of prisoners from the brickyard tried to escape. This happened after the fall of Italy when the Ustashas went completely berserk.

Once I had started work with the tinsmiths I stopped sleeping in the dormitory shacks where we were often beaten. I now slept in the attic of the tinsmiths building where I worked alongside many good and courageous men. The head of the tinsmiths workshop was Arpad Vajs. He had been born in Slavonski Brod, but had worked in Vienna for many years, right up to the annexation of Austria. There were also Ignjo Langfelder from Osijek, Marko Haham and his sons Izik and Abraham who were all tinsmiths from Osijek; then there was Altarac, the two brothers Bela and Filko Štajn from Zagreb and others. Among the younger ones, as well as me there were two other boys, one was called Gaon and the other one, Cikić, from Kozara.

They often took us outside to work, to the Ustasha hospital in Jasenovac, to the prison, to new Ustasha houses. I would go with the master tradesman, all of us under guard, but these outings were always welcome because we would sometimes come by some food, hiding it inside our trouser legs to bring it back to our friends in the workshop.

Gradually these outings became fewer and further between, while the roll calls, with their torture and shootings, became more frequent. They would usually happen in the morning or late afternoon. I shall remember the horror of one particular incident, at the end of May or early June, as long as I live.

There was a student from Zagreb who worked with the builders. His name was Ivan Volner and he played the accordion very well. He played in the camp orchestra and everyone knew him. One night a group of Ustashas came in, they may even have been local guards,

nobody knew, and took him, apparently with the knowledge of the camp administration, to play for him at a party in the nearby settlement of Dubica. They got drunk and simply slashed his throat. The camp administration was told that he had tried to escape and that he had been caught and executed. There was a new camp commander, Dinko Šakić, a very young Ustasha, and it appeared that he had been waiting for just such an opportunity to begin executing inmates and committing other murders.

They announced a roll call for all camp inmates in front of the shacks. The Ustashas put the word around that there would be a lot of shooting and we were all out of our minds with fear. Volner's body, his throat slashed, was brought out on a stretcher and placed in front of the rows of inmates. Šakić then arrived with his entourage. They began to question inmates who worked with the builders about who had been working with Volner, who slept next to him, who ate with him. Šakić kept looking at his watch the whole time, waving his hand in irritation. Then he ordered the builders to step back and all members of the camp orchestra to step forward. There were a number of really fine artists among them, including Arpad Vajs. There was also a barrister from Zagreb who was nicknamed Čele. They bound the musicians with wire in front of us. At that point one of the prisoners, either from fear or perhaps because of the diarrhoea raging in the camp, messed his pants. The prisoner standing next to him smirked and Captain Mihić, spotting this, turned to Šakić: "Look at them, they're laughing at you!" Šakić called the two to step forward and, as they approached, shot them dead with his revolver in front of us all. I knew one of them, a young tailor, Leon Perera. The other young man was Avram Montiljo.

Šakić now barked an order. "All Jews step forward in three rows! A Jew has tried to escape and the Jews are now going to pay for it." Many of the Jews lined up and Šakić ordered one of the Ustashas to fetch an Ascher rifle and told the chief clerk to bring the list of Jews in the camp. The two returned quickly, the Ustasha with a Schmeisser and the clerk with the full long list of Jews. I was still standing back with the brickyard workers, wondering what to do. If they called me and I wasn't standing in line with the other Jews they would shoot me on the spot. Slowly, cautiously, I moved closer to the three rows of Jews. A handful of others followed behind. The clerk proceeded to read the list out as ordered, assembling a large group. Šakić ordered them bound with wire and sent them together with the musicians towards the bell-

tower, a blood-soaked prison within the camp. One of the inmates tore himself loose and tried to flee. He was riddled with automatic rifle fire by the Ustashas.

These “roll calls” now became regular events. First they hanged a group of Serbs, alleging they were Chetniks, then there was the shooting of prisoners from the electricians group because of an attempted escape. In another event, on a grand scale, 21 prisoners lost their lives. The Ustashas apparently learned something about the activities of the underground Communist party and threw a large group of inmates – Serbs, Jews, Croats and Moslems – into the prison cells. Among these was Remzija Rebac, later proclaimed a National Hero, two named Bošković, one an architect the other a physician, a veterinary surgeon named Ladislav Matej and many others. In the bell tower, the Ustashas tortured a large number of inmates, burning them with oxy-acetylene torches and dragging them, bones broken, to the gallows and the stake. All of them were hanged there, except Dr Bošković, who begged to be shot. Šakić obliged personally. I was standing in the front row so I not only saw everything but heard every word that was said. There are no words which can describe that terrible day.

No sooner would one of these “roll calls” be over than, hot on its heels, another would begin, or perhaps something even more shattering. It became regular practice for all the working groups to supply men for labour to the forestry group or others working outside the camp. There were frequent outings to the woods to fell timber. One group would go out to work two or three times then the next time they wouldn't return, all of them executed in the forest. I was lucky never to have been selected to work in the forestry group.

In 1944 we had some rare moments of joy when squadrons of Allied aircraft began flying over the camp almost every day. They were flying out and returning from bombing missions. In the early days,



*Reborn: Erlih in uniform
after Jasenovac.*

there would be an occasional German aircraft trying to attack the squadron, but the supremacy of the Allies was obvious and the roar of aircraft engines above our heads brought us joy and hope. Despite our isolation, some news leaked through: we heard about the botched attempt to assassinate Hitler, about the bombing of Osijek, and we heard that Belgrade had been liberated.

The end was approaching, slowly but surely, for these evil creatures. But they made no secret of the fact that they were also preparing the end for us. After so much suffering and torture it seemed there were still more difficult days ahead. Death lurked around every corner. First the Stara Gradiška camp was liquidated, meaning that all the inmates were killed. We heard this from a handful of Jews and Croats who had been saved from the massacre by some miracle, probably because they were needed by the Ustashas to attend to other jobs. Certainly all the Serbs in the Stara Gradiška camp were killed. The Ustashas didn't dare take the Jews and Croats from the camp along the road for fear of Partisan attacks, so they took them from Gradiška to Jasenovac along the bank of the Sava River. They made them run, and anyone who couldn't run would get a bullet in the back or a sledgehammer in the head. The Sava carried their bodies away. My uncle was among the camp inmates from Gradiška who reached Jasenovac in this race for life. But my joy at seeing him was short lived. He was denounced by a group of criminals who claimed he was planning to escape and the Ustashas killed him on the spot.

In the meantime a large number of Chetniks suddenly appeared in the camp. There was a rumour that they had been lured by the Ustashas to join them in the fight against the Partisans. Many of them were well dressed and almost all were wearing brand new boots. Then one day, in front of the storehouse by the camp headquarters there was a large pile of uniforms and boots. The Chetniks had all been executed with axes. Other groups of inmates from Granik, on the bank of the Sava, met the same fate.

By late 1944 the numbers in Jasenovac had begun to thin out. There were fewer and fewer of us as people simply disappeared. In the winter of 1944-45 a small aircraft dropped a bomb on the camp. We never knew whether this was deliberate or an accident, but several prisoners sleeping in the brickyard were killed. The main bombing began on the Catholic Good Friday in 1945, signalling the approaching end. A small group of aircraft, we thought they were either Partisan or English

Spitfires, began to circle the camp. First they dropped just one bomb, on the wall and the wire surrounding the camp. Then a second hit the electric power generators and a third fell on the door of the brick kiln. Flames gushed out, setting fire to the brickyard and the chain workshop. We fled in all directions, not from the planes and the bombs, but from the Ustashas who had opened fire on us from the watchtowers. We were forced to put out the fire. We saw Lieutenant Zrinjušić shooting anyone who refused to climb on to the roof to remove the burning tiles or to use the fire hoses on the fires around the brickyard and the chain workshop. We were caught between the fire on the burning roof and the Ustasha bullets on the ground. Comrade Volf fell and died during this nightmarish frenzy, but I somehow managed to take shelter in the scrap iron store. Volf was a well-known trade union leader who had worked at Hlavka in Zagreb.

The air raids continued over the next few days. Anything that could be identified as industrial facilities was demolished, together with the administration building of the Ustasha headquarters, while the camp shacks remained untouched. "See, you're being killed by your allies, so we don't have to do it," the Ustashas yelled at us, but in fact very few prisoners were killed by the bombs. Almost all the deaths were from the Ustasha bullets which whistled all around us.

So began the days of dread and horror. I can't remember the exact date, but it was certainly April 1945, when the news spread that all prisoners were to be moved in three groups to a camp in Sisak because the Srem front had been broken. Orders had already been given for the railway tracks to be cut into shorter lengths and for the oil and petrol supplies to be taken to Gradina. Every day, large numbers of inmates were sent with spades, shovels and pickaxes to work in Gradina. None of them ever returned, but a tall, thick column of black smoke soared up from the area. It was clear to us that they were burning the bodies of the newly dead as well as those buried in mass graves long before in an attempt to obliterate every trace of the Ustashas' crimes.

On April 20, the first group was given orders to move to Sisak and set out the same day. The next day we saw the horrifying column of black smoke which told that they had gone not to Sisak but to their death. The second group was scheduled to be "moved" on April 21 and the third on April 22. I was in this last group. But late in the afternoon on April 21 the siren called us for dinner earlier than usual and we were told that both groups, a total of twelve or thirteen hundred

inmates, would leave at once to “new accommodation”. These were buildings within the camp but outside the wire, between the camp’s wire fences and the wall, near the side exit from which the road ran out of the camp downstream along the Sava towards Košutarica. All the camp inmates were taken under guard to two buildings, a very suitable place to assemble a large group of prisoners and execute them quickly.



Josip Erlih with his parents, 1939.

I can neither forget nor describe the night which followed. In havoc, horror, terror, rage, torment and hope we moved, more or less consciously through this nightmare of reality, among the hanged, among those who had succumbed to the depression of the camp and killed themselves. I remember the bodies of the Bek brothers, Miro and Raul from Bjelovar, and others, all in these new buildings to which they moved us. We men were in one and in the other, just across from us were about seven hundred women, possibly more.

The Ustashas took the women first. They threw away their belongings and we heard them singing defiantly as they proudly met their death. The men in our attic who could see what was happening told us that the Ustashas burned the women alive.

It was almost dawn when the Ustashas took away some of the leaders of the working groups and other important inmates such as Salamon the engineer, the Grinberger brothers from Pakrac and the leader of the brickyard group.

The day dawned, April 22, 1945, cold and chilly. The party organisations decided we should mutiny and the word spread from mouth to mouth. At about ten or eleven in the morning there was a loud crash and we all rushed for the door. At least one of the Ustashas was killed. We had a relatively short distance to run between the building and the gate, sprayed all the way with deadly Ustasha fire from the watchtowers and dodging the grenades they hurled at us. Our comrade Ante Bakotić, the man who had inspired the whole breakout, fell at the exit. Many men made it out, and many fell. Many stayed in the building, those who were too weak to even take a single step towards their own salvation. There were some who broke through the gate but were later felled by a bullet and some were too exhausted to run any further and sought salvation in the cold and muddy Sava.

I was with a group which managed to break through the wire beside the gate. Edo Šajer, who was with us, ran to the road to cut the telephone lines and stop the Ustashas from calling for reinforcements. Another hero was our comrade Milan Ristić, who seized an Ustasha machine gun and threw it away only when he ran out of ammunition.

We managed to make our way in small groups towards the Košutarica woods. Each group then struck out on its own. Our group, led by Comrades Marić and Delibašić, headed for the forest between the Sava, the railway and the road. We couldn't swim across the river, nor could we cross the road or the railway because there were armoured trains and German and Ustasha vehicles passing, so we continued in the same direction. We came across one off-duty Ustasha and forced him to take us across the little Struga River at its shallowest point and guide us to the outlying houses in a nearby village. However he managed to trick us and escape. Fearing that he would report us, we hurried all the more to save ourselves.

I threw almost all my clothes off, because everything was slowing me down. In any case, I was only wearing rags. My feet were pricked and torn by thorns and my arms bleeding in several places. I could hardly keep up with the others. Savo Delibašić, who was later an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army, was the only one who was familiar with the area and said he would go to the nearby village of Klenik, near Vrbovljani, to check for Ustashas. If it was clear he would come back to our hiding spot in the corn and cabbage fields. Some time before evening he returned. There were no Ustashas around and he led us on to the village.

The Serb peasants remaining in Klenik welcomed us with corn gruel and milk. We had barely shaken hands with our hosts before we were gorging ourselves with food. Then a shot rang out. A girl who was keeping watch about ten metres outside the settlement came running, shouting in horror that the Ustaschas were coming. We ran off quickly, hiding in fields and ditches. But soon we discovered it was a false alarm: an elderly farmer had fired his rifle into the air to celebrate us being saved. We returned and finished our meal then went to a nearby grove of trees. There we were joined by another group, so that there were about thirty of us altogether. And then, on April 25, word came from the village that the Partisans had arrived. It was an extremely moving moment when we finally met the fighters of the 21st Serb division. They photographed us and offered us transport to our homes, but most of us opted to set off with them for Trieste, where we saw the end of the war. It was also the end of our suffering. Some of us were admitted to the military hospital in Lipik with diarrhoea, following the unit a few days later to Zagreb where everyone was appropriately deployed.

Have I told the whole story? Nowhere near.



Eight barbed wire fences surrounded the Jasenovac camp

Among the Jews who escaped from the camp with me and whose names I remember were David Pinto, Julio Đusi-Bing, Edo Šajer, Adolf Fridrih, Marko Flajshaker, Ješua Abinun, Leo Klajn, Oto Langfelder, Karlo Vajs, Jakov Finci, Jerko Gaon, Rafo Levi, Jakica Atijas, Šimun Abinun, Joco Morgenštern, Šimon Montiljo, Ervin Miler and Leon Maestro.

Perhaps they can speak about the details I have missed, because Jasenovac was an extermination camp, worse than the concentration camps in Germany. The Germans killed efficiently, on an industrial scale, while in Jasenovac it was manual labour, with axes, sledgehammers, knives and other similar tools of the murderer's trade.