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*Eva TIMAR*

## FROM ANNEXED HUNGARY TO A GERMAN CAMP



*Eva Timar was the only child of Julijo and Julija Balog, née Soltesz. She was born in Sombor on March 30, 1926. She graduated from the Faculty of Engineering of Belgrade University and worked as a civil engineer until her retirement. Her mother died in the notorious Auschwitz camp.*

*She has a son, Aleksandar (Saša), a daughter, Lidija, and four grandchildren.*

My parents were Hungarian Jews. My father, Julijo Balog, was born in 1896 and graduated as an engineer in Budapest before settling in Sombor in 1922. My mother, Julija Soltesz, was born in 1903 in Košice, which is now in Slovakia. They were married in 1924 and lived in Sombor until 1944. Our home had a warm, family atmosphere.

My family's pleasant life of harmony was suddenly disrupted when the war began, especially when the Hungarian army occupied Bačka in April, 1941. We Jews lived in constant fear under the Hungarian military administration until September 1941. They shot six Jews in the town, took hostages and extorted enormous sums of money which the Jews were forced to collect. The men were taken off for weeks at a time to forced labour camps where they were ruthlessly tortured and humiliated.

When the military administration was replaced by the Hungarian civilian administration, the tension eased a little and our lives returned to normal, at least to a certain extent. The other Jewish students and I returned to high school where most of the teachers and other students treated us with tolerance.

In the summer of 1942 a large number of Jewish men between the ages of 21 and 45 were taken to the Eastern front, to Ukraine, where almost all of them died under the cruellest conditions. I think that only six of them returned to Sombor. My family escaped this fate: my father was over 45, so we remained together at home. But our survival was in jeopardy because, under the rigorous anti-Jewish laws, my father had no permanent job. Nevertheless we managed to get by somehow.

In the spring of 1944, we believed that the worst was over and that we had avoided the tragic destiny of Jews from other parts of Yugoslavia. The Soviet Red Army had reached the northern border of Hungary. But on March 19, 1944, Hitler's army swarmed across Hungary. It was this which sealed our fate. Long lists of anti-Jewish decrees were issued, a new one every day, and all kinds of prohibitions and limitations were imposed, together with the obligation to wear the yellow star. The school stopped working, although the Jewish students were permitted to prepare for final exams with the others. I passed the written examination, but on the day I was to have taken the oral, I was on a train bound for Auschwitz.

My father had been taken in the early days of April with other Sombor Jews. First they were transferred to the camp at Bačka Topola. Our apartment was requisitioned for the Hungarians so my mother and I moved to another Jewish household, to our closest family friends. The tempo of events then quickly accelerated. By the end of April mass arrests began and all Jews were deported in an operation which lasted four days. My mother and I were among the first to be arrested and we were taken to Baja the next day. On the night of April 27, we were taken with a group of women to a camp in Bačka Topola. At dawn on April 19 we were loaded into wagons.

My father, together with a few other engineers and doctors, was kept in Bačka Topola until just before the liberation, when he was transferred to Budapest. At the end of October he fell into the clutches of the Nyilas, the Hungarian Fascists. He walked the tortuous path to Mauthausen and then on to Gunskirche, where he was liberated at the beginning of May, 1945.

My mother and I were squeezed together in a dark wagon for the three days and three nights it took to reach Auschwitz. We could imagine nothing worse than this, but in subsequent trains they packed men, women and children all together with the sick and the elderly, as many as ninety of them in a single wagon. We were put into a group of those aged between sixteen and fifty who were able to work. This turned out to be a dreadful mistake. Of the three thousand people on the train, less than a quarter made it to the camp, and even fewer survived beyond that. We were allowed out beside the wagons only a few times during the journey. There, under the gaze of police and SS troops, we said goodbye to human dignity.

### AUSCHWITZ – BIRKENAU

Eventually the train stopped. The scene at the railway gate has been described over and over: the shouting of the SS men, “*Wer kann laufen?*” “Who can run?” Thus they separated the young from the elderly.

We set off in single file, not looking back at those who couldn't walk, who would be taken in trucks. After all, we'd see each other later, wouldn't we? We passed camp inmates with their strange, empty stare. We were taken to a large barracks where we spent a whole day, being tattooed with numbers, giving our personal data. From time to time a camp inmate would appear with what passed for tea, a disgusting, foul-smelling black liquid. It was late in the afternoon when we entered the bathroom, where we shed our clothes and stood naked in the long corridor, where the Germans and an occasional male inmate walked by. Shame? That was not for us, that was for human beings. Then our hair was cut and we were sprayed with disinfectant by female Jewish inmates who were rude and cold to us. After this we were showered for several minutes before being allowed to fetch our clothes: mismatched shoes and what passed for dresses. We were a miserable sight: shivering, hungry and thirsty. We were assembled in front of the bathroom and led away by our *Blockelteste*, our block warden, a Slovak Jew named Fani who had been in Auschwitz for many years. We asked her where the others were and where the smoke was coming from, but she avoided answering us. We were put into boxy partitioned cubicles, six of us in each.

Twice a day they counted us, we would stand for hours in the cold mornings, hungry and freezing. They told us that we would stay in quarantine for six weeks, after which we would be allocated to labour groups.

The mornings were terrible. I would dream that I was at home and then the call to get up would wake me. It was here in Auschwitz that I first heard Yiddish and Polish spoken. We brought coffee from the kitchen in shifts. This was terrible: we would stagger in the dark with the heavy cans, spilling the hot liquid on our legs. I remember rushing to the toilet, then some kind of washing, before rushing back to the block to tidy our straw mattresses and cubicles then waiting for the roll call.

At the end of the second week I fell ill with scarlet fever and spent the next six weeks in the camp hospital. The doctors were mainly Polish women and occasionally one would be Jewish. In those horrifying conditions, of course, it was difficult for them to treat even themselves, let alone others. Mengele did rounds every day, accompanied by a tall, self-confident Jew from Prešov, Doctor Ena.

It was while I was in hospital, from May to June, 1944, that the largest and most efficient killing operation in the history of Birkenau began. The crematoriums and gas chambers worked to capacity as trainloads of Jews, most of them from Hungary, arrived day and night. Flames leapt from Birkenau's four chimneys and the air was heavy with the stench of burning flesh. We would hear the locomotives whistle, especially at night and the shouting of the SS men. By this time we had already been educated. We had learnt that the smoke did not come from the bakeries and the Germans reminded us every day that the chimneys were the only way out of Auschwitz for us. Day after day the trains arrived. I knew the day my grandmother, my sick aunt and my little niece arrived. I loved them endlessly but had no illusions about their destiny. My tears dried up, instead I felt only a deep, numbing pain which has never stopped. It will never stop.

My mother was 41 years old when we arrived together in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We were together there for six months until she was selected. I simply cannot write about her suffering, about her being taken away to Block 25, the death block, and her terrible end in the gas chamber.

After the obligatory six weeks hospitalisation for scarlet fever, they discharged me and took me to what we called the sauna, the bathroom, to be allocated to a barracks and a labour group. Everyone from my train who had survived to reach the camp had already been put into

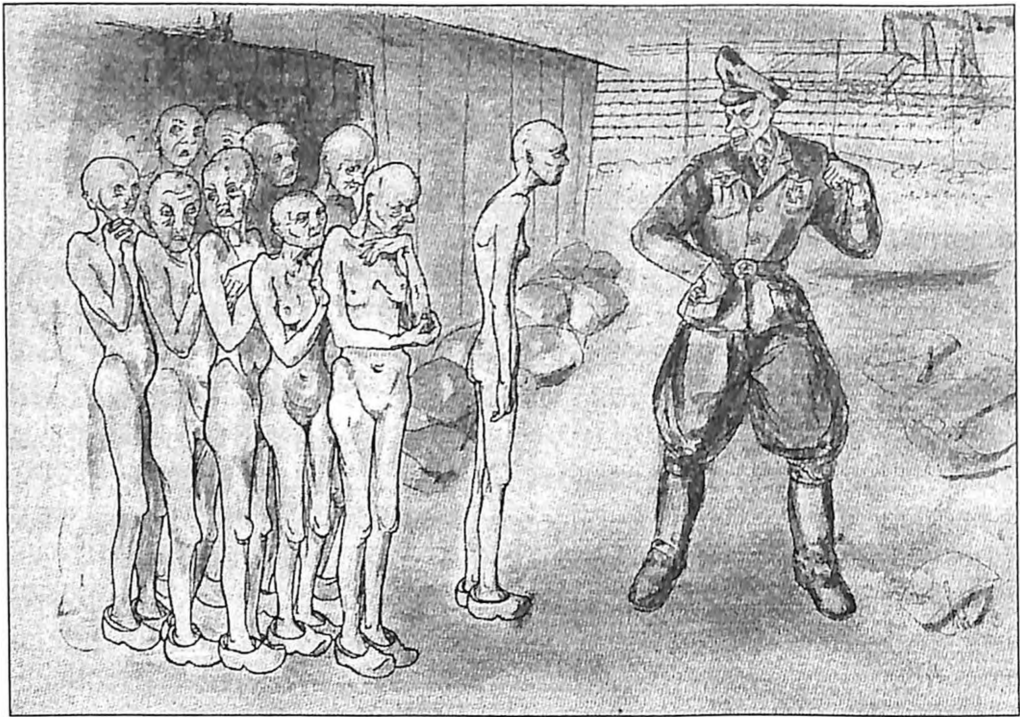
work groups while I had been in the hospital. The groups included the Union and Weberei which made military supplies while Canada and Brežinka were warehouses which stocked the belongings taken from new inmates arriving in the trains. Thanks to the block warden, a Czech Jew named Elena, I was allocated to the same block as my mother. It housed the Brežinka working group. We worked the night shift for weeks, when the Hungarian Jews arrived. The work itself was not physically difficult, but every morning we walked about five kilometres to work and returned the next morning to the camp, to B-Block. (A-Block was the quarantine area). The Brežinka warehouse was a large barracks piled high with various items. Nearby there was a sauna for the newly arrived and, behind the hedge, not far away, were the gas chambers and crematorium. We sorted clothes according to type throughout the entire night. Somehow these nights were bearable but the mornings were terrible. The trains nearly always arrived in the morning so, as we stood lined up across the bathroom, we were witnesses to the most moving scenes: grandmothers leading their grandchildren, mothers carrying babies in their arms, so many sights. We were forced to run without stopping as we passed the crematorium. From behind the hedge we would hear the murmur of those unhappy souls who could not even imagine the place they had arrived in, let alone where they were being taken and the fate that awaited them.

In the middle of July the trains stopped arriving from Hungary and so the Brežinka working group was disbanded. I was moved to a block with Polish and Ukrainian women who worked outdoors, the *Aussenkommand*. I don't know which were more terrible, the days or the nights. During the day the sun beat down ruthlessly and, already tortured by thirst, we were sworn at and beaten as we dug deep ditches and carted soil. We weren't used to physical labour so it was very obvious that we were less productive than the strong Polish and Ukrainian women, most of whom were from rural backgrounds. The consequence of this was beatings, beatings and more beatings! The group leaders, Polish and Ukrainian women, gave us no quarter as far as physical abuse was concerned, not to mention the swearing they directed at us constantly. We were alien to them, from another world.

At noon we had a break of half an hour for lunch, a bowl of turnip soup. We finished work late in the afternoon, but our return to the block brought no relief. After walking back to the camp we stood for hours to be counted. Dinner was a piece of bread with margarine and a slice of

sausage. We had to fight for a place by the tap, for a place in the toilet. We were in a mixed block whose warden was a Polish woman who wore the green triangle of a criminal, so it's not difficult to imagine our position. We Jews slept in dark holes under the cubicles with rats scurrying over us all night. During the hot summer nights the block swarmed with bedbugs.

Although the trains were no longer arriving from Hungary, there were still massive execution operations. The night the Gypsy camp was liquidated was terrible. Whole families were herded together into the gas chambers. The Czech camp followed; families brought in en masse from Terezin lived in Birkenau for several months before being given what they referred to as the special treatment, *Sonderbehandlung*, in the crematorium.



*Selection, by the Czech Jewish painter Helga Weissova, herself a former inmate. The old, the weak and girls under fifteen are sent to the gas chamber.*

Again I fell ill. My leg, burnt under the fierce sun, burst into a festering wound and I was again hospitalised. It was autumn, time for the regular selections for the gas chambers. On October 13, Mengele and

his escort appeared. We had been expecting him for several days, our fear mounting. "*Jüdinnen herunter! Ausziehen!*" "Jewesses! Strip" the order came. We walked past him naked while he decided who could live and who had no further need of life. They noted down the numbers on the arms of the unfit and then the waiting began until, one night, they were taken away.

During one of the last selections, I lost my mother.

#### BERGEN-BELSEN, OCTOBER 28, 1944

Dark red flames leapt from the chimneys as they belched smoke. *Block-sperre*, the shutting down of the block! The whole camp was on alert. Transport was arriving. *Entlassung*, break-up! As I stood in the sauna as in a nightmare, mentally broken, Vera Rip approached me. "I know what has happened. I went through the same thing six months ago. We'll stay together." She pulled me back from the brink of despair. The journey to Bergen-Belsen took days. At the time we arrived the camp was not yet overcrowded, the typhus epidemic had not yet taken hold, there were no chimneys, no smoke and flame, no stench of burning corpses. For the first few days we were accommodated in tents, but these were soon torn down in a storm. Later we moved to the barracks, two to a bed. I was with Vera. I wanted to believe the well-meant lies of my friends that what had happened in Auschwitz towards the end had not been a selection, but a transport of prisoners. New trains arrived from Auschwitz which was now gradually being evacuated. The notorious Commander Kramer arrived with them. On the morning of December 18, there was a roll call and a selection for further transport. Vera and I hid. There was another roll call in the afternoon so we emerged from our hiding place. You never knew what would emerge as the right choice to make, which transport would lead to something better. We were unlucky: they took us to Braunschweig.

We arrived there on December 18, 1944. There was no barbed wire or high voltage electricity, no watch towers, only two buildings on the outskirts of the town and between them an area with taps which were difficult to get to. The town was beautiful, with mediaeval churches and picturesque architecture. The bustling streets ran between gardens and villas with windows draped in soft curtains. Through these windows we would see shocked glances, as though the residents were asking themselves "Who are these beggars?" It was so painful to pass through the

residential area of the town, with its scenes which could have been from my previous life, my real life, with our home and family, when we would walk along the footpaths.

They had brought us here to clear away the rubble because some neighbourhoods had been almost levelled to the ground. Every morning we would pass through the busy centre like a crowd of beggars. The bomb-damaged area was at the opposite end of the town from where we lived. It was bitterly cold as we carried stones from one place to another, but the guards, all of them war veterans, treated us like human beings. Returning to the stable at night was terrible. At the entrance we would be given some kind of disgusting soup and a piece of bread. A thin layer of straw was spread out in the stable, crawling with lice, like the whole building. We would spend half the night trying to clear away the lice because they kept us awake. For weeks we didn't wash.

There were frequent air raid alarms. They would herd us into a half-demolished church during these. In those difficult days there was one extraordinary woman, Mrs Hodosi, who should never be forgotten. We called her Manci-Neni, and she cheered us up, helping us not to despair. She would even wander around the cellars of the ruined houses and find us food.

Our accommodation was under the leadership of two Slovak Jew kapos, Edita and Magda. Incredibly, they were fat, clean and nicely dressed, but they were rough and ruthless. I don't know anything about what happened to them after the war but I wonder, if they survived, whether they could sleep at night.

Women were dying every day. There were no medicines.

One day the news spread that there was to be a selection. I was sick with a high temperature, but Vera dragged me with her to work. Didn't we know what would happen to anyone who was ill? I sat on a rock while Vera wandered among the rubble with a rusty can, looking for some water as I was burning up from my fever and tormented by thirst. Nothing happened, but the following day, February 21, they divided us into two groups: the sick and the sicker! I was among those who were more ill. They separated me from Vera<sup>1</sup> and I was convinced it was the

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<sup>1</sup> I did not meet Vera Rip again until after the liberation of Sombor. She had gone through her own hell before finally returning to her home in Yugoslavia. During the war she lost her parents and her sister Ružica, a Partisan doctor, who was sentenced to death by the Chetniks and executed in Kolašin at the beginning of 1942. Vera Rip Obradović today lives in Belgrade.



end. The SS men threw us into trucks, shouting the whole time. I remember that the sun was shining and at least this did me some good. I was completely numb and apathetic. I had reconciled myself to the end.

Late in the evening of February 21, 1945, we arrived in trucks in front of the hospital barracks of the Wattenstatt camp. There we were met by a Polish doctor, a small woman, not a Jew. She showed no sign of the anti-Semitism which was very common among Poles, instead she was nobility and humanity personified, an attitude which also rubbed off on the nurses. They gave us what they could: a few warm, human words, relatively good hygiene and silence. There was nothing else they could offer under the circumstances. This respite came too late for the many who died during the first few days of our stay in Wattenstatt. By now there were Allied bombings nearly every day, the circle was closing as the Allies moved in from every side. At the beginning of April they put us in open railway wagons and we set off again. Nobody knew where we were going.

I remember it was a long train. We sat, crammed up against one another with nothing to eat or drink. We circled around, going from one camp to another. There was no room anywhere. From Oranienburg to Sachsenhausen. There was an alarm from time to time and the SS men would hide in trenches, well away from the wagons. Finally, on the night of April 12, we arrived in Ravensbrück. "*Raus, raus! Roosevelt wartet euch!*" the SS men shouted. "Run, run, Roosevelt is waiting for you!" It was the day that Roosevelt died.

They pushed us into the barracks. I climbed in the dark up to the top bunk. I collapsed and fell into a delirious dream. There in Ravensbrück we did no work. The camp was in complete chaos. There were rumours that the war was near an end, that there would be an evacuation. There was no food prepared in the camp, instead they gave us cans from parcels. These cans claimed their victims, those whose bodies were too weak to digest the stronger food. But the extortion, the theft! The hunger to which we had been exposed for a whole year was a ruthless destroyer.

For two miserable days we camped outside the barracks before we finally started walking on April 28. The march was led by SS men and women with German shepherd dogs. They threatened to shoot us if we fell behind.

The roads were blocked from every side and in all directions. The local Germans had loaded a few belongings onto horse-drawn carts and

were fleeing westward. We walked and walked or, rather, dragged ourselves with our last remaining strength, with no idea of where we were going. The front was all around us and aircraft buzzed overhead. The end was very close but we were still slaves. In the evening we reached Malchow where we fell on the floor and slept.

When the day dawned, we lined up in our usual five rows and waited. And waited. There were no Germans anywhere. And then the first Red Army soldier appeared, borne on the shoulders of the French from the neighbouring male camp. It was the end of the war, our liberation. Was this a joyful occasion for me? I don't know. I only know I felt an infinite loneliness. I had begun this journey with my mother and now I was alone.

There was chaos in the camp: it looked like an anthill as people scurried around searching for food. At that time I was with a girl from near Budapest. We were crawling around the camp in rags, like skeletons, each of us weighing only thirty kilograms. In the evening we were told that all camp prisoners would be transferred to the neighbouring SS settlement. This consisted of pretty one-storey villas which had been abandoned and completely ransacked. All that was left were beds. We moved into the attic of one of these houses.

That's how we spent our first day of freedom, numbed and in a nightmare. It would be many days before I began to feel alive again. After May 8, the Soviet military command organised food for us. We got our meals from the former SS kitchen where the liberated French prisoners now cooked. One day we heard that the ablutions block had started functioning: hot water, cubicles with bathtubs, everyone with a cubicle to themselves! When I heard someone singing in one of the neighbouring cubicles I began to cry.

In the middle of May we were told that there was a collection camp for Yugoslav repatriates in Neubrandenburg, so we headed for the town. One evening, before we left, Julika Ofner, a seventeen-year-old girl from Sombor appeared. She'd been sent out on a train from Auschwitz in the early days. Our joy at seeing each other was boundless. We belonged to the same world and had spent our childhood in the same town. We remained together.

The trip to Neubrandenburg was a real adventure for us. The railway lines were in ruins and there were only a few trains so we often had to walk.

We arrived in Neubrandenburg where the camp consisted of five collection centres on a hill. We met other former Yugoslavs prisoners. They greeted us warmly, moved by our appearance. We looked terrible. They took us to the commanding colonel whose name, I think, was Bošnjak. He was kind and gentle and arranged our accommodation. It was only then that we began to relax. It was the first stage of our journey home.

From Neubrandenburg, where I fell ill with a lung infection, we set off on Czech buses for Prague. We departed at the end of July, travelling through devastated Germany, Dresden and Berlin. We spent three days in quarantine in Prague before boarding a train with an endless number of carriages. It was a long journey to Yugoslavia. On August 9, we arrived in Petrograd, now known as Zrenjanin, where we were given our papers and headed towards our homes, although they no longer existed. On my arrival in Sombor I stayed with friends. I had returned without my mother, but my father arrived ten days later.

My father soon recovered and began work on the construction of a bridge in Baranja. This was the only cure for his tormented soul. I resumed my studies, away from school, studying privately for my matriculation. In the spring of 1946 I enrolled at the Engineering Faculty of Belgrade University, majoring in civil engineering. I lived in the Jewish students' hall of residence, along with most of those who had endured enormous losses and suffering. This gave me the strength to carry on and start living again.

But the wounds are very deep and will never heal.

I spent my working life in Belgrade as a civil engineer. My husband, Nikola Timar, an electrical engineer specialising in electronics, also survived the Holocaust, after losing his entire family. His brother Zoltan was hanged by the Hungarian occupiers in Novi Sad in 1941. We have a son, Aleksandar (Saša), a daughter Lidija and four grandchildren. These are our only consolation for the sufferings we faced in the past.