
Dvora ACMONI

THE JOURNEY ON WHICH I GREW UP

Dvora Acmoni was born in Belgrade in 1928, to mother Ela, née Nestel, and father Aleksandar Göre, from Temerin near Novi Sad. At the end of the nineteenth century many people took Hungarian surnames and her grandfather also did this. His brothers, and all other members of her father's family took the surname Komloš only her grandfather chose to take the name Göre. Her father's brother, who was two years older than her father, was named Emerih-Imre-Mirko. His son, Đuri, was born in 1925. The uncle died in 1938. Đuri was wounded on December 24, 1944, when the Soviet Army began bombing Budapest. He was admitted to hospital where he died two days later. His mother, Elizabet, née Grunberger, returned from Auschwitz, emigrated to Israel, remarried and, from there, resettled in Argentina.

Her father attended school in Novi Sad for eight years. When he turned fifteen, he continued his schooling in Budapest at the Commercial Academy and later studied management.

He married Dvora's mother, Ela Gabriela Nestel, in Budapest on May 11, 1925.

When her father graduated, he returned to Novi Sad and took Yugoslav citizenship. In a very short time he had a business up and running and then set off for Belgrade, together with Blazius Nestel, his best friend, partner and brother-in-law.

Shortly afterwards they were joined by a wealthy gentleman, Mr Simon, as a silent partner.

Following some difficult years, the company began to prosper and comfortably supported three families. It manufactured paints, ultramarine (for laundry whitening) and, during one period, laundry soap.

In the meantime Dvora (1928) and her sister (1934) were born to the Göre family, and two sons were born to the Nestel family: Pavle (Pali) in 1929 and Tom (Tomi) in 1933.

Dvora's father was executed by firing squad on November 16, 1941, at the age of 41.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany, my uncle and Mr Simon, foreseeing what would happen, decided to emigrate. They quickly went into action. My father was passing through a difficult period, and there a number of reasons for his decision not to join them. These were primarily reasons connected to his constant optimism, his concern for the factory, and particularly for his mother who had lost her husband, concern for my mother's parents and for her younger sister who was not married and was taking care of her sick parents. Mr Simon emigrated to the USA in 1938 and my uncle, with his family, boarded the last passenger ship which left Europe in 1939. My father bought them out and became the sole owner of the factory.

When the war broke out we were living at 28 Vojvođanska Street (now called Zrenjaninska Street). The war began with heavy bombing in Belgrade which did not stop for six days. Most civilians were fleeing the city, taking some belongings with them. My father decided we should stay in the bomb shelter of our building. He made this decision on the basis of his impression from newsreels showing residents of Paris and other cities leaving their homes to escape from bombing by the German Army. These people didn't manage to save their lives by running away, because the Germans attacked the refugees on the roads, dropping bombs on them and machine-gunning them from low-flying aircraft.

On the first night of the bombing friends of my parents whose buildings had been destroyed by bombs, or who were fleeing the city centre, arrived at our place. Some of them arrived the following morning after an unspeakable night. So there were sixteen of us there.

Only the Ajzler family stayed behind; Mr Dezider Ajzler was born in Osijek, but had lived in Belgrade for years (I don't remember his profession). His wife was Lili Kenedi, who was born in Košice, and their twenty-year-old son Zlatko had finished the first year of architecture studies.

My father continued to work at the factory. He was arrested on a number of occasions, but released each time thanks to Bahts, a commissioner appointed to the factory by the authorities. Every factory, store and workshop was under this or some similar kind of supervision.

Father's employees would bring food staples from their villages. Even villagers from Temerin, which was under Hungarian occupation, used to cross the border illegally and bring us meat, just as they had done in earlier years. My non-Jewish school friends would queue for bread early in the morning, while we Jews were not allowed to shop before 11.00 a.m. The village women at the market, who had known my mother before the occupation, used to save the best products for her. More than once we had no need to accept these offers because we were already well-supplied.

Zlatko's friends, most of them Christian, used to come and beg him to join them and go with them into the forest, but his parents were against this. Zlatko was thin and weakly and his parents coddled him like a small child.

There was one more Jewish imperative – don't separate, stay together at all costs. Under these circumstances there was no thinking about what was the smartest thing to do.

At the end of September, the male members of the Ajzler family were arrested and interned in the camp for men in Belgrade. They were only able to take one rucksack each to Topovske Šupe.

On October 18, 1941, my father went to work. That afternoon my sister and I were sitting in a room from which we could usually see him returning home. We waited in vain. Our hearts ached from worry. Then Mita Dujanović appeared, father's clerk who had worked in the factory for years. He was an honest, kind and responsible man who was much closer to my father than just an employee. He told us that father had been arrested. I no longer remember how they arrested him, whether he turned himself in or whether they arrested him in the factory – I shall never find the answer to this. What I do know is that October 18 was the last wave of arrests.

The following morning, Sunday October 19, we were allowed to visit the camp. Mrs Ajzler came with us. She knew the way to the camp because she had visited her loved ones the week before. We packed food, medicine and clean underwear for father.

There was a long line of people standing outside the gate, mostly women and children, along with a few men, employees of the Jewish

Hospital (who were still free at the time) and Christian friends. There were guards standing around us. We already knew that the Wehrmacht was responsible for the camp, and so we were a little calmer. We didn't spot a single black SS uniform.

The gate finally opened and the crowd hurried inside. The men were standing in the middle of a square – several hundred of them. Within a few minutes everyone had found whoever they had come to see. Smaller groups were formed, depending on the number of family members. There were a great many people, but I didn't mind. The four of us were hugging one another. The Ajzler family were standing next to us. I was afraid there would be shouting, crying and pushing, but it was quite the opposite. There was silence. Quiet sobbing could be heard here and there.

After the first few moments, quiet conversations, papers rustling, parcels opening, could be heard. I couldn't say how long this visit lasted. My father's embrace separated me from the outside world. I didn't even pay attention to my mother – was she weeping? As far as I remember I didn't even look her way. My seven-and-a-half-year old sister was standing still, as usual. Her behaviour during the six days of bombing had been shocking. We sat in the hallway of the shelter – she didn't complain, didn't cry. She just sat between our parents.

I asked my father where he slept. He pointed towards something I could barely see. I was small and the people around me were tall. We heard a command saying the visit was over. We left the camp promising to see one another again the following week.

I remember the second visit, the following week, even more clearly. The same scene was repeated and the silence was less threatening. The main topic of conversation was fleeing the city as soon as possible. Father was firm, he was trying to convince us to run. He was sure that Bahts, the commissioner, would manage to free him. It would be easier for him to cross the border alone and he would feel much better knowing that we were somewhere safe. For us, Budapest was the only option: family, friends, accommodation and a familiar language. To this day I have the feeling that my father's words did not really get through to my mother. She just repeated the sentence "We won't leave you alone," over and over. Knowing how stubborn she was, my father spoke to me, in an authoritative voice which I had never heard before, saying "You take Erika, even if mother stays. I'm counting on you." He spoke in Serbian. He hugged me very tightly. A few minutes later we left for

the exit. I don't remember whether I replied or just nodded in agreement, but his posture and the strict look on his face were so unlike him that I have never been able to erase them from my memory.

Two days later two men appeared who had come to get us out. They brought with them a short letter from my aunt, Elizabet Erži, who was already in Novi Sad with her son Đuri. From there she was taking action aimed at saving us and her family. "There's nothing to wait for! You can still get across the border." The two strangers asked no question, they simply gave instructions. Our fate was in their hands. They promised to send a hackney. We were to be ready at two in the afternoon. They added that the exact destination was on the bank of the Danube. We were to be there at three in the afternoon. Although we knew they were coming, we still weren't ready. The suitcases were only partly packed. Aunt Lili was very busy, but Mother just sat on a chair in the dining room. In the meantime I asked her to help me close a suitcase. My sister wasn't at home, she was waiting in a queue for coffee outside a shop in our street. I grabbed her coat and ran down the street. She was still standing outside the shop. I pulled at her to come with me, threw her coat over her and whispered, in German: "Hurry, hurry, we're leaving." We arrived home a few minutes later, out of breath because we'd been running. Mother was still in the very same position as when I'd gone out. I immediately realised what her plan was. I had no idea how to make her stand up. First I asked, her, quietly and gently. My sister joined me. We mentioned the reasons that Father had spoken about. I begged, made promises, but she persistently repeated: "We are not going without Father." Like a broken record player repeating the same parts, the same melodies. I lost my patience and raised my voice. I began making threats, my voice almost shouting with hysteria. "I am not going. I am not going," my mother kept repeating, an ice-cold expression on her face.

I looked at the clock. The scheduled time was approaching. My hysteria mounted and my voice was shaking. I couldn't control myself. Without thinking I hurled words at her – something I could not even think of before. In a hoarse voice I was shouting: "If you want to die, you can! But we want to live!"

Mother was so lost in her own thoughts that I doubt she even heard me. My sister's eyes opened wide. She hadn't expected this. In her eyes was a feeling of fear and despair. Even if she didn't understand everything, I could see that she felt it all. She was torn between me and

Mother. And then, as though I were playing a role in a play, I walked into the bedroom, opened the small cupboard next to my mother's bed and took the pills that she used for headaches – a drug called Rofein, made in France, which the pharmacist had managed to get even during the months of the occupation. With a triumphant smile on my face, right before my mother's eyes, I shoved them into the pocket of my coat.

When I saw that she still wasn't moving, I lost control. I was running from room to room, collecting the few remaining things that were still not packed, banging the doors of rooms and cupboards. I was swearing loudly, in Serbian, using words which had never before been heard in this house. I was in the grip of uncontrollable fear and even hatred for my mother. I began to close the suitcases. Finally, I went to my room, took two large notebooks and, when I thought my mother wasn't looking, slid them in between the clothes.

We were not allowed to take anything written in Serbian with us but, a few weeks earlier, I had worked out a plan for smuggling these notebooks. One was my personal diary which I had written every day from the very beginning of the occupation. I had been writing everything down, the announcements that were posted on walls, especially those which referred to Jews. I was even cutting articles from newspapers and pasting them into the notebook. I wrote down the exact dates of events which had happened in the past six months. The second notebook was full of novellas that Pali and I had written together before they emigrated. Our souls had gone into that writing. I still remember the names of the ships which belonged to the heroes and the villains.

And finally something happened. Mother saw what I was doing, probably because she knew my body language when I wanted to hide something. We had never talked about this. Slowly she rose from the chair, took the notebooks out from among the clothes and said: "You're putting us all in danger." I was hypnotised. I couldn't utter a word. She slowly closed the suitcase and took her winter coat. We heard the sound of a horse-drawn cart approaching. I don't remember whether we locked the house.

The hackney driver helped us load the luggage. My mother, Lili and my sister were sitting under the roof with their backs against the back of the cart, almost invisible. I was sitting opposite them, on a narrow seat, between the suitcases. I could still see outside. I became lost in thought. My face was wet. Tears were running down my cheeks. I was crying silently. I didn't care about anyone, I was only thinking

about parting. Silently, to myself, I was humming a song I really loved: "My hometown, dear heaven in which I was born."

We reached the bank of the Danube. I looked for the boat we were to board but saw only an old raft with several masts over which a large sheet of canvas was thrown, its ends hanging to the floor. In a few seconds the porters took our bags and put them on the narrow wooden gangplank which connected the raft to the land. Everything was happening so fast that I couldn't tell what was going on. Someone opened a small passage and let us into a covered space. About twenty people were already crammed in there. They were sitting on trunks. When we entered it was even more crowded. People began to grumble, but someone said sternly "Be happy you're here. No one is going to die from overcrowding." I couldn't see this man's face, it was completely dark. Someone came in, perhaps it was the captain, and asked us to be quiet. Officially, he was transporting cargo. We would reach Novi Sad at night. We weren't to go on deck before dark and he would let us know when dark had fallen. There was a bucket on the deck, we were to use it only one at a time and only to empty our bladder, he emphasised, only the bladder. The engine was already running.

The man's voice and the sound of the engine had a soothing effect on us. Some of the refugees were quiet, some were whispering. Despite the cold October day, it was hard to withstand the heat and the crowding. People were wearing several layers of clothing in order to keep as many of their things as possible. Winter was coming and there were people who had nobody in Budapest whose help they could count on. Nor did they have any money. There was no bank in Hungary which would take or exchange Serbian dinars.

Despite the silence, the tension and fear could be felt. The first and most important task was crossing the border. our lives depended on this. I wanted so much to go out onto the deck, to say my farewells to the surroundings, to everything, but I was unable to. Only an hour had passed. This meant it was still light outside. I suddenly remembered the words of the captain, who spoke about his boat. I had an outburst of wild, uncontrolled laughter. I was thinking of my cousin Pali, who was already in Sydney by then; he was a faithful partner to me in uncontrolled laughter. When would I be able to write to him and tell him all about our journey? After the war?

My mother knew Pali's laughter very well – it sometimes sounded as if he was imitating the barking of dogs. She forced my head forward,

into the collar of my coat, to silence my voice. I felt tired, and a thousand different thoughts were going round in my head and that's how I fell asleep. When I awoke, I saw that people were going out, one by one, to the deck. My turn came. The bucket was full. No one in sight. The pressure in the lower part of my body was getting stronger and stronger. I didn't dare shout. I was standing on the spot, desperate. Obviously my long absence was noticed. Suddenly a crew member appeared from out of the dark. He casually lifted the bucket and emptied it. Then he disappeared just as he had appeared.

The physical relief, the stars in the clear sky and the fresh air had a healthy effect on my mood. I was still on the territory that belonged to Yugoslavia, although occupied and annexed by Croatia, but I knew that this was temporary. I returned to my place. the narrow passage was now open and a little air was coming in. It was ten in the evening. Another four hours to our destination. Lili produced a small sandwich and held it out to me.

I wondered when she had made it. Probably during my fight with my mother. She also had some hot tea in a thermos flask. I drank it greedily. Usually I hated tea, I associated it with being ill. What struggles there had been at home for me to drink just a few sips of tea! I would pour it out whenever I could. But there were times when I was lying in bed and Mother wouldn't leave my side until the glass was empty. And now I heard myself asking for more! "Not now," said Aunt Lili, "we have several more hours of travel ahead of us, you'll have it later." I didn't complain.

After a while the captain returned and gave instructions for the remainder of the voyage. Most important was not to speak Serbian. Those of us who could not speak Hungarian were either to speak German or not speak at all. The part of the river bank where we would stop was not a quay, it would not be easy to disembark. We'd need to climb up the steep bank to a hill. This stretch of bank had been chosen because the Hungarian gendarmes rarely appeared there. It wasn't very likely they would expect civilians and children to be able to climb such a hill. The captain's men were to escort us to a cabin where we would stay until the sun came up. We were also to leave the cabin gradually. When we set off to town we should take only one small piece of hand baggage, as though we were going to work. We would receive the rest of our luggage that evening or the following day. Everyone began talking at once. They were confused by the luggage arrangements. If their

luggage were to be stolen, they'd be left with no possessions. That was all they had. The same authoritative voice which had spoken earlier – I still didn't see the face – tried to allay suspicions. "If they've brought us all the way here, that means they are taking care of us. They're not going to steal our luggage." Some people accepted this, but others were still grumbling. This man's voice was nothing like my father's, but I was certain that my father would have said the same thing.

The captain person, as I called him, came through and stuck a piece of paper to each suitcase. He took out a lamp, asked each of us for our name and address and quickly wrote this down.

By the exit he stopped, turned to us and said: "Try to get some sleep. It will be a difficult night and, from now on, forget Serbian, the children too. Then he left. Silence took over. I wasn't thinking about the future or about our instructions. I focused on just one thing – forget the language, forget... I had no doubt that Father would join us soon. With him there, nothing would be difficult for us. We would survive the war together. But to forget the language – that was impossible! It was beyond my abilities. I quietly went out onto the deck. I approached the helm and stood next to the captain. I wanted to talk to him, to ask him to rescind that instruction. He looked at me, but didn't say a word. At that moment we heard the sound of an engine similar to ours. A small boat was approaching us from the opposite direction. They exchanged greetings. "What are you carrying?"

"Live cargo. What about you?"

"Same as you," said our man, and continued: "How is it over there?"

"All calm. See you later."

When he disappeared, the silence took over again. After a while the captain turned to me and said "You're lucky." He said nothing more. I was silent. I don't know how long I stood there, but I remember what I was thinking. I felt as though I was the main character in a book. The only witness to this night. "Live cargo," no one's ever heard that before. If I were to write a novel would people believe me? My cousin Pali, my best friend, would he be jealous? My fear had evaporated. I was relying on the captain, on his calmness. He was my new hero.

The boat turned towards the bank. I wanted to thank him but I felt a lump in my throat. I had lost my voice. I crawled under the big canvas. Some passengers were dozing, others were sitting, awake, ready for departure. It was nearly three in the morning. We heard the engine

stop. Two men appeared at the entrance. They put their fingers to their mouths and once more we crossed the gangplank. The climb up the hill began. It was steeper than we had expected. We were grasping at the grass with our hands. We could hear stones rolling down. Two of the crewmen were going from person to person, giving help where it was needed. We were lucky not to have our luggage with us! I clenched my teeth, I didn't want help but, obviously, I couldn't do it, so they helped me too. I don't know how long the climb lasted. Finally we reached the woods, the hut. Our smugglers waited for the last person climbing the hill to arrive. One of them gave us instructions and explained the shortest route for us to the city.

Time passed really slowly. We still weren't sure whether we would make it. Dark clouds began to gather in the sky. It was getting darker and the tension was rising. The sun was unable to break through the clouds and the night seemed endless to us. But finally, the dawn came.

The four of us were first out, perhaps because of the children. Mother combed our hair. A wet towel appeared from somewhere and she wiped our faces, then her own. At last she was behaving normally. My huge anger had begun to drain away. We left the company of the group, only saying "We'll see you!" After a short walk we came out of the woods. Mother spoke to us in a normal tone of voice, as though we were going to work or to school in the morning. We approached a small bridge. There were Hungarian soldiers there, standing guard. Mother was talking about ordinary things. The guards paid no attention to us, a group of women talking about domestic work and cooking. They didn't ask for papers – if they had we would have been lost! Only one village cart with fruits and vegetables passed us.

I was relieved when we reached Novi Sad. I was the first to find my way around. I used to spend a lot of time there with my grandmother and I loved the city. I was connected to it by many pleasant memories. My father often visited his mother and I almost always went with him. Since Grandfather had died, Grandmother lived in Futoški Road, the longest street in town. It began to drizzle. Finally we arrived. Our reunion was quiet, unlike our usual meetings. Father wasn't with us. Grandmother brought in a large white washbowl. Mother first washed my sister, head to toe. I took off all my clothes and my shoes and crawled into Grandma's big bed, where I quickly fell asleep.

I woke later, during the day. Aunt Elizabet and her son Đuri came. Overcome with joy I clung around their necks. Then the chain of events

became clear to me. There were many smugglers, but some were untrustworthy, they would take the money and vanish. In any case, there was a lot of money involved. Aunt Elizabet had still not found documents for us. She wrote to my mother's good friend Piri Buk in Budapest, asking her to get us documents, because our goal was Budapest, not Novi Sad. We were to stay at Grandma's house and not to go out into the city. There were frequent checks, mainly conducted by the police.

We had no choice. Grandmother would go every day to the market to buy groceries. The fruit and vegetable season was over, winter was coming soon. Our aunt came every day, despite relations between her and our mother having been strained before the war, mainly because Mother didn't approve of the way she was raising her child, running her household and other things of which I was not aware. But during our two weeks in Novi Sad, I could see they were becoming close. I loved Elizabet very much. Father's cousins, who lived in Novi Sad, also visited us often. Their kindness was sincere, especially towards us girls. They would bring us supplies and sweets and offer to help with everything. Most of them were comfortably off and we were the first refugees in the family. I remember during those days my mother kneeling down next to the washbowl and washing clothes every day so they wouldn't mount up. At night she'd dry the laundry next to the stove after the last guests had left.

Our suitcases arrived on the first evening. A hackney driver delivered them to the various addresses marked on them. Nothing was missing. Father's new winter coat was in one of the suitcases. Mother had been worried that he would not have time to go home to get it. At Grandmother's, she took it out to air.

I suppose that the overcrowding and the modest living conditions were difficult for the adults. Lili was also with us, she had no relatives in the town. But I enjoyed the crowd, the heavy traffic in the small apartment. Our cousins were older than us. I'd met them during my many earlier visits. From time to time we'd find a hidden corner and speak Serbian. We all shared a hatred of the Hungarians. They were three or four years older than me, a big difference at that age, but the German occupation and the flight across the border – something they had not experienced – made me more mature in their eyes.

I once asked them whether the Dornsteter patisserie still existed. This was one place we never missed when we visited with our father.

Their cream slices were famous even beyond Novi Sad. The next day my cousins brought me a plate of cream slices. My initial delight was followed by confusion – I had no money and felt embarrassed. They realised this immediately and laughed: “You’ll pay us back after the war.” This made sense. We shared everything as equals. Unfortunately, none of them survived.

Two weeks after our arrival, Piri Buk came with the documents. They were authentic – with a stamp and an obscure signature. I don’t remember how much they cost but I know that it was a fortune. The address on them was our grandmother’s – our mother’s mother – which had been our address until 1944. Lili set off to Košice. Her brother’s address was on her documents. Without these documents we would have been unable to get food stamps.

Dear Piri – no one ever repaid the enormous sum of money she spent on those papers.

The next day we set off for Budapest and Lili continued on to Košice. In 1944 she was deported to Auschwitz and never returned.

The road to Budapest was familiar. I knew every stop. There were no borders, no customs, no customs control. It was all Hungary! From the Germans they received a Yugoslav granary as a token of gratitude for their cooperation. This was the first time that I didn’t take the window seat.

I had completed the assignment my father had given me. The euphoria of pride and heroism had vanished. I wasn’t crying, but I was overcome by a sadness such as I had never known. I felt empty, my very active and vivid imagination had ceased to function. There was nothing but sadness, endless sadness. It was only many years later that I realised this had been the end of my childhood! On that journey I became an adult.

In Hungary we lived with false documents and managed to get by thanks to the help of our friends. Because I had not been admitted to high school (at that time the eight-year lyceum), I began working at the age of thirteen. My sister was attending primary school. A relatively calm period ensued. The new government’s policies were relatively soft compared to those of the previous one.

In 1944, when the bombing became more frequent, I worked clearing rubble. I was the only female member of the team. This hard work had one advantage: we were allowed to stay outdoors longer. Jews were permitted to be outside only from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., while we labourers

could leave home at 10.00 a.m. In this way we managed to buy basic foods before they were sold out.

At that time in Budapest we were obliged to report to the police and the superintendent. This made things difficult for people who didn't have a permanent place of residence and for those who were fleeing the law for various reasons. These included petty criminals, opponents of the pro-Fascist regime, refugees from neighbouring countries and so on. The doormen of apartment buildings were a threat to them because they were required to inform the police about illegal tenants. In return they would get a roof over their head and the minimum wage of a building superintendents, which secured their basic needs. Without the documents in which reporting was recorded, no one could obtain food stamps.

Three years of life as refugees with false identities destroyed everyone's nerves. Our despair grew when the Germans entered Hungary. Many refugees from Yugoslavia, from Slovakia and even from Poland were experiencing fear for the second time. There were attempts to flee to Romania or to the territory liberated by Tito's Partisans. A handful of them succeeded in this but most were captured by the Hungarians or the Ustaša.

On October 15, 1944, the Fascist Arrow Cross party came to power under its leader, Szalasi. Many people were arrested. Gangs of these Nyilas, stormed wildly through the city killing individuals and groups of people. Groups of Jews were force-marched to the banks of the Danube where they were executed by firing squads, their bodies falling into the icy water. Those who survived were sent to the ghetto.

I remember November 9, 1944. We heard a loud banging on the gate of the building in which we lived. A large Star of David used to mark buildings in which Jews lived made the job of rounding up Jews easier for the Germans. The Nyilas ordered that all Jews from 16 to 40 years of age assemble in the yard, each with enough food for three days. We assumed that they were taking us to compulsory labour. I was young, mother was 40 and my aunt was younger than her. Only the children and the elderly were left at home, among them my sister and grandmother.

We were escorted by the Nyilas and the gendarmes. The first stop was the brickyard in Old Buda. There we found Jews from other parts of the city. It was a very tense situation. There were many people in a small space, stepping on one another and arguing, while the guards were shouting. We tried to find some quieter corner in one of the large halls, but we weren't fast enough. We slept on our coats on the bare floor.

On the third day they herded us outside. They took us to the Danube where we were all loaded onto a barge. People were screaming like crazy. We were all afraid they would drown us. We passed the night lying on the bare boards of the deck. In the morning we got off the boat and began walking. The roads were full of people walking. We took main roads and side roads, passing towns and villages on our way.

We were walking through muddy areas and it was raining almost all the time, which slowed us down. The young Nyilas, boys between 15 and 18 years of age who were escorting us to the Austrian border, threatened the exhausted people, opened fire at them or simply left them by the road, depending on their mood at the time.

Food was usually distributed only in the evenings, usually bean soup and a thin slice of bread. Farmers sold food to those who still had money. Sometimes I would get an apple peel from those people. Among the farmers there were some who felt sorry for us and would throw us apples. My mother kept saying "Always be in the middle of the line." She believed this was safer. But I usually went to the end and that was how I managed to catch the food they threw us. I remember one night when we slept next to a pigsty and a pig licked me through the fence.

When people stopped walking they would shout out the names of their relatives and friends, along with their addresses. We heard someone looking for us. It was Anči First, Doctor Klara's sister.

Dr Klara First had been our family doctor from 1938 to October 1941. My parents respected her a great deal and liked her as a children's doctor and also became friends with her. Through her we met her younger sister, Ana-Anči. Anči managed to flee to Hungary in the autumn of 1941 and we ran into her in Budapest a few weeks later. This was when our friendly relations with Ančika grew stronger. She was a seamstress and was working in her trade there. She lived alone and never complained of the hardship, but often changed her place of residence. It was not until later that I learned why she changed apartments so frequently.

We were overjoyed, if that word is appropriate. Anči's friend Magda Ast, known as Magula, was with her; she was also from Yugoslavia. From this point until the liberation we remained together. We lived together in conditions of slow death from starvation. Our relationship was one of mutual moral support and assistance, the taking of bread and sharing it, taking care of the few personal belongings we had, cleaning one another of lice. It was now that Anči told us why she had

had to change her place of residence so often. She had been a communist from earlier, as had been her sister Klara, and continued her activities in connection with that in Budapest, although to a lesser extent. Thus the danger hanging over her head was twofold: being a Jew with forged documents and being a communist.

When we arrived in Győr, close to the Austrian border, we scattered around the town. We walked through the streets. Mother said we should hang our water flasks on a button of our coats to hide the Star of David. Mother still had some money left. Her plan for us was to get to the railway station and return to Budapest. However we were stopped by three gendarmes who took our water flasks and saw the signs we were trying to hide. They questioned us and eventually said we would stay one more day in Győr and continue our journey two days later, in the morning. There was a rumour going around that the group we were to be put in had been transported to Mauthausen.

We stayed there the next day, gathering our strength for the days ahead. Two more stations before Austria: Mosonmagyaróvár and Hegyeshalom. The Nyilas thugs were screaming: "Everyone over here... so you arrive clean for the Germans!" They were checking our backsides, which was terribly humiliating. I had diarrhoea and used a corn leaf. (Many years later I was rewarded by my grandson, Omar, for this dreadful march when he asked my son, Amos: "I walked thirty kilometres in the army and it was terrible. How could Grandmother walk three hundred kilometres?" His words released me from the burden I had carried from the time of that march. My grandson was thinking about me, about what I had been through – is there anything which can compare with that?)

At the Austrian border there were Austrian and German police waiting for us. They told us to get on a train which was standing there and said we would be given food. Many people felt relieved at this, thinking that from now on we would be in the hands of civilized people.

In the train we were in a third class carriage and were given adequate food, bread and cheese. The salt cheese made us thirsty. I was unable to fall asleep. I kept thinking of father's glass of water he used to put on his night table every evening, to drink during the night. The next morning we were certain we'd reached Austria; however, once we saw a sign on a shop reading "Fruit and Vegetables" in Hungarian, we realized they had sent us back to the Arrow Crosses.

We left the train in Kópháza. People were put into pens and barns in three villages. Everyone was given a number so that, after we returned in the evenings, the guards could monitor the presence of every individual. The farmers sold food for jewellery and money. There were also some who gave us food for free. We heard these rural people muttering in German about “stinking Jews who have been sent to Burgenland to dig anti-tank trenches and build fortifications.”

Every-morning we dug anti-tank trenches to stop the advance of the Red Army. The food was disgusting, we could barely eat it, it was made of stock feed. Those who had any money left bought food from the farmers. We had no money left. One day a woman went into labour at work. We called on an old doctor, another Jewish prisoner, to come. An SS guard first killed the doctor and then the woman who had given birth.

My mother and aunt fell ill with dysentery so I worked instead of them. Mother was very depressed the whole time, although we talked a lot. She was concerned about my younger sister who had stayed behind in Budapest with our grandmother. My Aunt Nora suffered from fainting spells so we would bring her sugar as long as we had any. In the winter we froze from the cold, but my aunt never complained.

Whenever they asked the women for voluntary labour for special jobs, I would volunteer, because this meant a double portion of soup. Once we were part of a group working beside a machine which was pumping out sludge. I was standing in for my mother and aunt who had diarrhoea all the time. It wasn't only the work that was hard, but also the beating and humiliation which were part and parcel of it all. The moment they noticed anything the slightest bit out of order, the Germans and the Hungarian SS guards would beat us mercilessly with whips and clubs.

I worked with a very beautiful curly-haired girl. We became close. She had a hump on her back so they noticed her. I would try to protect her as much as I could. She would usually smile and say: “My hump is protecting my back”. We didn't lose our sense of humour, even in the most difficult of times.

At night they would lock us up. We were locked up with animals. We could hear their sounds and we breathed their stench.

We spent a month in this place. We worked constantly, regardless of the weather conditions, in rain and snow. We battled strong winds and frozen soil. I worked every day. I was sixteen years of age. Anči

also worked. On December 18, we were ordered to gather up our few belongings and to move.

We walked for several kilometres and reached some cattle wagons which they packed us into and then locked us in. It was a terrible journey. They crammed sixty or more women, hungry and thirsty, into each wagon. Some were even stealing from other women's rucksacks.

We left the train the following morning near Lichtenworth station. We walked a few kilometres and came to a factory, completely empty without a single piece of machinery in it. This place was a concentration camp. There were three huge halls, with broken windows and bare floors. The fourth hall was smaller and they put people who were dying in it. They would bring out those who died during the night in wheelbarrows. The camp was once a section of the larger Mauthausen concentration camp. People were shoving one another, trying to find a spot where they could rest their head against the wall. We found a place between two pillars for the five of us. I remember the first thing I said to my mother – that it was Father's birthday, December 18, and that this was a good omen for our reunion after the war. This proved to be a false hope.

We didn't work in Lichtenworth. The camp was run by SS men and there was also one Jew among the camp management. He was given a death sentence after the war. All the kapos, male and female, were Jews. We were lucky, our kapo was not like the others. He told us that he had studied medicine and used his knowledge to help us.

There weren't many men in the camp, perhaps about ten per cent. They were dying faster than the women. Once some compulsory labourers arrived from Ukraine, but they were so exhausted that they all died within a few days.

Some men and women tried to escape through the fence. Most of them were caught and punished with a whipping. In the camp, everyone was trading. I sold all my belongings – a turquoise chain with a locket and a fountain pen – for two portions of bread. I was sorry about the pen, which had been very precious to me.

In the mornings we would be given some awful liquid which was not coffee; at noon there was a disgusting soup made from leftovers and, in the evenings, bread. The five of us shared everything, divided everything equally. We tried to save some bread and would sleep on it so it would not be stolen.

My weight went down to 26 kilograms. Mother was even thinner. When we ran out of sugar we began to worry about my aunt who need-

ed sugar to survive. However, at this very point she recovered. She couldn't sit still, she encouraged the women and would talk to them about the sufferings of Jesus. I didn't understand how I, weak as I was, could debate with her about Jesus. Anči, who was a communist, was shocked. However my aunt kept her calm; she would walk around the people who were dying, those who were sick, mainly from typhoid, and give them the little bread she used to get.

In the camp we would help one another. For example, we cleaned the lice from one another three times a day. In the mornings we would wash ourselves under a tap over a trough. We would wet a piece of cloth to clean our bodies as much as possible. Soap was a rare commodity and people would kill for a piece of soap. I remember feeling cold all the time. The fact that we used a latrine – a series of holes – was conducive to the spread of diseases, especially typhoid.

In February, 1945, they called for fifteen volunteers for work outside the camp. I volunteered. We walked eight kilometres in the almost spring weather to the village of Felixdorf, where we were to clear the rubble of a large building. On our way we met a group of plump Jewish women with children. We were shocked. They turned out to be from Szeged, Bácska and Debrecen. Under the agreement with Eichmann, they had not been deported to Auschwitz, but worked for Austrian farmers. The women emptied their pockets to give us all they had.

When we were told the kind of work that awaited us, I spoke about my experience in Budapest and said that I had been sent to do the same kind of work there. However this time it was much more difficult because I was very weak and thin. For three or four days we worked from dawn to dusk. In the morning we would be given some awful drink and, at noon, carrot soup. When the work was more or less finished, a train arrived with men who were half dead, compulsory labourers from Ukraine. Within a few days, hundreds of these died. Their bodies were driven off to Lichtenworth. Those who survived were inside the building. We ate the food allocated for the dead men. My mother's words are imprinted on my memory: "We are alive thanks to the dead." At the end of March I heard the first Katyusha rockets. They didn't allow us to go out. We all had typhoid, despite the extra food from the dead men. The Russians liberated us on April 22.

The camp gates were opened and the starving mob ran out with no supervision. Some of the people who were freed attacked nearby village houses, others, who still had some strength, set off towards the east

and south-east, towards their homes. My mother, Aunt Nora and I didn't go, because we were in very poor health. I was in the worst condition because I had had typhoid only a week earlier. Because of this we stayed in the village. Anči and Magula said their goodbyes to us with the following words: "Until we meet again in Belgrade."

About ten days later we were picked up by the army. They took us to a hospital where we were cared for with incredible dedication by nuns. Mother and Aunt Nora succumbed, their lives taken by typhoid and hunger.

At about the end of May I returned to Budapest. There I found my younger sister. I began to search for Anči, but with no success. I established contact with the Joint Commission in Belgrade, but they knew nothing about her. All trace of her had been lost. Nor did I find Magula. Years later I ran into her when she was visiting Israel. She told me that she and Anči had parted somewhere along the way.

In 1946 I was on a refugee ship on my way to Palestine. The British stopped us, took us to Cyprus and put us in a camp. Next to us was a group of young people from Hashomer Hatzair who later formed the Shomrat Kibbutz in Western Galilee. They spoke Hungarian and Czech so we socialized with them. When the weather became cold and the rain began, one girl from this group began wearing a winter coat, rather modern for that time, black wool with a fur collar. From the very first time I saw this coat I was mesmerized by it. Something about it was familiar, although there were many similar coats. At night I scoured my memory in an attempt to find something, but in vain. A few days later I spoke to the girl, whose name I don't remember, and asked her where the coat had come from. She responded immediately, telling me that, like hundreds of refugees, she had walked the roads and pathways of north-western Hungary. Along the way she fell ill. Fortunately for her she was taken to a hospital in the town of Sombateli. In the bed next to hers there was a woman of about thirty. She was from Yugoslavia and her name was Anči. She had been raped mercilessly and savagely by a group of Soviet soldiers. She weighed about thirty kilos and, like most of the sick people, she was very weak. However the physical collapse and the mental shock killed her. The coat had belonged to her.