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## Vilma JOVANOVIĆ

### HIDING IN BUDAPEST



**V**ilma Jovanović was born in Osijek on June 5, 1923, to father Julije Šternberg and mother Irma, née Papai, a housewife. Her father Julije, who was born in Pakrac in 1892, was the director of Paromlin and the Croatian Savings Bank in Osijek. Her mother Irma was born in 1897 into a large family in Barcs, Hungary.

Up to the war and the occupation of Yugoslavia in 1941, the family lived in Osijek. In April that year Vilma matriculated from the Osijek Secondary School. At the time her elder brother Zdenko, also

born in Osijek, was a student of chemistry.

Her father and mother did not survive the horrors of the Auschwitz camp. Her brother Zdenko survived the war. She lost a large number of relatives from both sides of her family in the Holocaust.

After Yugoslavia was liberated she graduated from the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University and still lives in the city as a pensioner. From her marriage to Borivoje Jovanović, who died in 1993, she has one daughter, Svetlana. She also has a granddaughter, Irma, who lives with her mother in the USA.

Following the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia in April 1941, and the entry of the Germans into Osijek, our life changed considerably. Measures of discrimination and persecution of Jews were introduced. Also imposed was the obligation to wear a yellow armband

with the sign "Jew", then time limitations on leaving the house and a ban on using main city streets, a ban on sitting in trams, limitation of times for buying goods in shops, dismissal from employment and the confiscation of shops. At the same time a hostile attitude to Jews developed among part of the population. Many people changed, including those we had once considered friends, even my school friends with whom I had shared a bench for eight years and kept close company with. On top of this, Jews and even Serbs were faced with the threat of night raids, taking young men away to compulsory labour. New repression could be expected every day.

I grew more and more convinced that survival in this environment was no longer possible and that we must flee as soon as possible in order to save our lives. My brother Zdenko did this in August 1941. He left Osijek with a travel permit he had bought and went to Sušak, planning to escape to Italy. I chose to take refuge in Hungary because my mother had a brother in Budapest. However my parents had no intention of leaving Osijek. They could not see the danger approaching and believed that they could cope with the problems of life there. All attempts by my brother and me to persuade them were in vain.

It was not easy to organise flight from Osijek and the border crossing. My father somehow managed to get in touch with an Ustaša commissioner appointed to a furrier shop by the new authorities. He had a friend, a clerk at the railway station. For a lot of money the railway worker agreed that, when an opportunity arose, he would put me on a German Army transport to Hungary.

I finally succeeded at the fifth or sixth attempt. In the meantime I would pack each time, bid farewell to my parents once more and go to the apartment of a friend opposite the railway station, where I was to wait for someone to take me to the train. During one such attempt I was taken to the office of the railway clerk. However, when he went out to check the situation with the train, an Ustaša from the police who knew me came into the office. This Ustaša, whose surname was Đurić, sat across the table from me. He put his revolver down on the table and asked me why I was not wearing the yellow star, what I was doing at the station and similar questions. In the end he threatened me, saying that I was never to attempt anything like this again and sent me away from the station. I later found out that Đurić also blackmailed my parents, asking them for money because they had allowed me to escape.

One evening, at the end of December 1941, I managed to leave Osijek. The railway clerk got me into a car with German soldiers, asking them to take me only as far as Pécs in Hungary. Aware of the danger of being handed over on the journey and of the surroundings I was in, I was afraid and stayed awake all night. When we got to Pécs, a German soldier took my suitcase and led me to the ticket counter. The station was packed with police but, thanks to my escort, they did not suspect anything. Because I spoke Hungarian I bought a ticket without any problem and soon continued my journey to Budapest. However the police boarded the train to check documents. I had only the ticket and was very frightened. Not knowing what to do, I pretended to be asleep. Fortunately they didn't wake me and I reached Budapest without any problem.

My relatives in Budapest received me rather coldly, which was a great disappointment to me. My uncle and his family were well-off, but at the time they had still not grasped what was going on, so they failed to understand the gravity of my situation or the conditions in which Jews were already living in Croatia. At this time, Jews in Hungary were not yet being persecuted, so everything I said seemed unreal to them. After a few days they said that I could not stay with them and that I must find a job.

With the money I had brought from home, I bought an address registration with false personal information. With the help of this document I could get a job. A month later, on the recommendation of my uncle, I found a job as a governess with a Hungarian family who had two children. After staying with them for seven months, I received, in August 1942, a postcard. It had been written by my mother during the transport of Jews to Auschwitz. While the train had been standing in the station in Zagreb, she managed to send this card with someone. She was saying farewell, writing that I should not worry, that she was happy even though she was going to her death, because she knew that her children had been saved in some way. My employer, Ana Silasi, helped me a great deal in overcoming the crisis I was in because of this card from my mother. She was a good woman and she was the only one in the house who knew the truth about me.

That same year, 1942, because of the persecution of Jews in Austria, my other uncle, Jene Papai, managed to escape with his family from Vienna to Budapest. They fled with nothing and led a very difficult life. They spoke no Hungarian and so aroused the suspicion of

their neighbours. Because of this they frequently changed their place of residence, but they were caught in 1944 and taken to a camp from which they never returned.

I had many relatives in Hungary. As well as these two uncles, three of my mother's cousins also lived there with their families. However they lived outside Budapest, so I would never see them. My grandmother also lived in Hungary, in Barcs, with her eldest daughter.

I spent 1943 with the family for whom I worked. In order to avoid the raids and dangers which lurked at every step, I tried to go out of the house as little as possible. The Allies had also begun sporadic bombing of Budapest. We were at the same time happy about this bombing and in fear of it because of the danger of being killed.

That year I managed to discover, through the Red Cross, that my brother Zdenko was alive, and that he was in Italy, interned in a place called Gravedona, on Lake Como. He had no money and was in a difficult situation, hungry a lot, but his life was in no immediate danger. We even found a way somehow to write to each other. This correspondence lasted until the end of 1943 when he fled to Switzerland. With great difficulty he crossed the Alps on foot and managed to get into Switzerland, thus escaping the danger of being caught at the border and being returned to Italy.

In March, 1944, when the Germans came to Hungary and the Hungarian Fascists came to power, the persecution of Jews who were Hungarian citizens began. This changed the position of the family for whom I worked. I had discovered in the meantime that they, too, were of Jewish origin but had changed their name and their religion. Because their household staff and many of their neighbours were aware of this, I saw the danger and began preparing to leave them. I felt obliged to warn them of the dangers they would probably be exposed to. I advised them to hide somewhere and save their lives. Probably having learnt from my experience, they soon left the house and managed to survive the war. The husband hid for almost a year in the basement of a friend's house and the wife and children found shelter in a convent.

This began a very difficult period for me. The carpet bombing of Budapest began, almost every second night. However it was not the bombing itself that was so disturbing for those of us living there illegally. We even took a certain kind of satisfaction in knowing that the end was approaching for the Germans and that better times were coming. A much greater problem for me was that of obtaining better documents

and a job. Good documents and employment were the safest way of dispelling the suspicions of the police and the people who collaborated with them. Most people who were there illegally drew attention to themselves by hiding and not working.

After I left my job as a governess, I lived with Lilika Blum, a friend of mine from Osijek who was living in Budapest under an assumed name. We lived in the abandoned apartment of a cousin of hers. We didn't stay there more than a couple of months, because the building supervisor reported to the police that there were suspicious people coming to our apartment speaking, they thought, Russian and who did not go down to the shelter during the bombing. Not long after that a police officer arrived and took us in for questioning, at which point he discovered that we were refugees from Croatia. The war was drawing to a close and the Russians were already on Hungarian territory so, that same day, we managed to call some friends. They immediately found money and offered it to the police officer. He accepted the money, but set another condition. He asked that, when the Russians arrive, we testify to the new authorities that he had behaved decently and set us free. Our friends agreed to this and the two of us were released. However, we did not keep their promise. Later we discovered that the police officer, whose name was Desaknai was one of the main participants in the bloodshed in Novi Sad in 1942. When we were released from prison, Lilika and I moved away and, by so doing, covered our tracks.

There were great difficulties involved in obtaining documents. I was without anything for almost four months, changing my name a number of times depending on the situation I found myself in. Finally, with the help of some immigrant friends from Croatia, I obtained an original birth certificate issued somewhere in Vojvodina and an address registration. These were in the name of Aranka Višošević, a Catholic. Using these documents I was able to get an employment booklet. I lived under this new name until the liberation of Budapest. With the employment booklet I was able to get a job and survive the frequent raids more easily. On several occasions when they checked my identification, they checked to see if I knew the prayers of the religion I supposedly belonged to, but I was prepared for this kind of test and had learnt them by heart in advance.

When I obtained my employment booklet and address registration, I found a job in a can factory. The factory manager, a Vojvodina

Hungarian, helped me a great deal when I was getting the job and during the time I worked there. His surname was Bogdanfi. After the war he returned to Yugoslavia where he worked as a journalist and writer. He is famous, among other things, for translating Tito's biography into Hungarian.

The job in the factory was extremely hard and the work was done under very difficult conditions. We often worked with cold water and carried crates weighing about twenty kilograms up the stairs from the basement. There was a lot of overtime work, even during the bombing. At that time I was living in Buda, quite a long way from the factory in Pest. It took me more than an hour to get to work and the same time to return. We started work in the factory at six in the morning which further exhausted me.

At that time, beginning April 1944, fourteen of my cousins, that is my mother's cousins, were taken to camp. What most affected me was hearing that they had simply thrown my 85-year-old grandmother out of bed and carried her outside. She died that same night because it was very cold outside. I never heard anything more of my aunt who lived with her and who was over sixty at the time. I only know that she did not return. Nor did my other aunts return, nor any members of their families. I found it very difficult to deal with my occasional encounters with the daughter of my landlord, who was the secretary of a minister in the Fascist government. Among the things she talked about with the greatest of pleasure were the heinous crimes committed against Jews. Unfortunately I had to listen to her stories without saying a word.

The uncle to whom I had first gone when I arrived in Budapest and his family were the only ones who managed to escape death in the camp, although he died in an accident sometime before the end of the war. I was not in contact with them in 1944, but I discovered that they lived in what were known as "protected" houses. From November, there were houses like this in Pest in which Jews with passports from Sweden, Switzerland and other countries were concentrated and protected. The consulates of certain neutral countries kept them safe and this was tolerated by the Germans and the authorities of the day. This was put into operation after October 15, 1944, when the Nyilas, the most cruel Hungarian Fascists, came to power.

In December 1944, along with the frequent bombing, Budapest was seized. The Russians surrounded the city and were slowly advancing into Pest, where battles were fought for each and every building.

Aircraft flew over the Danube and prevented anyone crossing the bridges between the two parts of the city so that Buda, where I lived, was cut off. Later about ten thousand SS men encircled Buda and those who survived were taken into captivity. Because it was virtually impossible to get to Pest, I stopped going to work. Soon hunger took over. About ten days after the beginning of the siege, all the food shops were plundered so there was nothing to buy. In the meantime there were soup kitchens opened which somehow helped feed the population.

At that time I became friends with Gabrijela Verner, a journalist from Romania. She was Jewish and was living illegally in Budapest. She lived very close to me so we would go every day together to look for food, ignoring the bombing, street fights and other dangers. Several times we also went to some distant parts of Buda, running to cross the steep streets with Russians firing non-stop from the top.

One day Gabrijela and I decided to go to Pest. We planned to discover whether our friends were alive and how they were surviving. We were also carrying food which Gabrijela's neighbours had prepared for their child in Pest. Somehow we managed to get close to the Erzsébet Bridge. But when we got to the bridge itself, we saw that Russian aircraft were constantly flying over the bridges and machine-gunning them. We waited quite a long time then, between two flights, we ran across the bridge and managed to get to the other side and hide before the aircraft again flew overhead.

In Pest we visited Lilika who was living in the basement of her building. At that time everyone was living in basements and shelters. When we headed back, Gabrijela and I decided to take the shorter way, over the Chain bridge, even though we knew this was the scene of the worst battles. As we approached the bridge, heavy bombing began. We stood beside the police building near the bridge, looking for somewhere to shelter. However at that moment the police building came under machine-gun fire and both of us were badly wounded. Gabrijela died soon afterwards. I was wounded in the legs and arms, and I had also been hit in the collar bone.

When the situation calmed down they carried us into the police building. A doctor who had been arrested as a Jew immediately examined us. He established that Gabrijela was dead. They carried me on a stretcher to the underground German military hospital near the Chain Bridge. After waiting for quite a long time, I found myself on a table where German doctors examined me. They were undecided as to

whether they should amputate my left leg, on which there was a deep wound, in order to prevent infection. Because I understood them, I refused to let them amputate my leg. They then put both my legs in a cast and tied my arm behind my back because of the broken collar bone.

Pest was mostly liberated. The Russians reached the bridges. The next night there was a loud explosion in the hospital. We patients immediately assumed the Germans had blown up the Chain Bridge. We thought this because of the force of the explosion and also because all the German doctors had left, leaving us without any supervision. They had joined their remaining compatriots in Buda, who were still defending themselves there.

The Russians soon came into the hospital and began identifying and questioning people. They didn't understand me very well, but they realised that I was Yugoslav and that I had been captured there. Because of this they were very lenient with me, even kind. Sometimes they even gave me a little food. They treated the others rather harshly, especially the men, because there were many Hungarian police officers and German soldiers among the patients.

After a week I managed to send a message to my friend Lilika and to other friends. After a few days, when I was feeling better, they carried me to an apartment in which a large number of our Yugoslav friends lived. Most of them were living in Hungary illegally. There were about ten of us in the apartment. They took care of me and found a doctor, a Jew, who would come and replace my dressings. They even found me a bed in a clinic from which I was discharged after three or four days because it had neither heating nor food. There was general hunger. People were trying to find ways in which they could feed themselves somehow. The Russians would sometimes drive by in trucks and throw bread out into the streets which would be grabbed by the starving people. We managed in various ways, one of them being to exchange the few things we still had for small amounts of staples.

In January 1945, when the whole city was liberated, we saw that the Germans had killed the Jews in the ghetto before they withdrew. Passing by the synagogue, I could see through the open door that it was full of piled-up bodies and that it was not possible to go inside.

Immediately after the liberation of Budapest, a group of people who had been living illegally there set up a Yugoslav Committee which issued documents proving that we were Yugoslavs. These documents were sometimes helpful, because the Russians were in an enemy city



and behaving accordingly. The Committee also provided other kinds of assistance, mainly in the form of food, just enabling one to survive until the next meal.

In the meantime, repatriation began. It proceeded with great difficulty. In May, 1945, trains began arriving from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Germany, packed with repatriates, mainly Yugoslavs. They reported to the Committee, asking for permits to return, money and other assistance, before continuing their journey in overcrowded freight wagons. My health wasn't up to this kind of stress, so I waited to recuperate. Then, accidentally, I met a boatman who was returning to Yugoslavia from Vienna and I set off to Osijek on this boat. This mode of travel suited me better, because I could travel to the confluence of the Drava and the Danube, which was just a few kilometres from Osijek. I wanted to go to Osijek because my brother was there, having returned from Switzerland in the meantime.

Travelling by boat I met a lawyer. His surname was Štajn and he was returning from Auschwitz where he had been taken with my parents. He was one of the few who had stayed alive for two and a half years in Auschwitz and returned. He told me that when they had arrived in Auschwitz on August 30, 1942, my mother was put into a group which was sent immediately to the gas chamber. When he spoke about this he added that she certainly would not have survived the atrocities which were practised there. He told me that my father had lived for another three months and that he had died a natural death. This natural death was death from starvation.

When I arrived in Osijek, because I had no documents, I had to prove to the authorities who I was, where I was from and why I had come. In order to get an identification card and sort out the other documents, I needed the help of people who had known me and my parents, which was not a problem. I found nothing of what my parents had left behind for me, but I was not concerned about this, because I found my brother Zdenko. The meeting with him was one of the happiest moments of my life but, at the same time it was sad because of our lost parents and relatives.