

---

*Rikica VOSTREL*

## TRAVELLING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY TO THE PORT OF SALVATION



**R**ifka-Rikica Vostrel, née Altarac, was born in Sarajevo in 1929 to father Leon Altarac and mother Roza, née Atijas. She has a younger sister, Lea-Lilika.

*All members of Rikica Vostrel's family – her father, mother and sister, survived the Holocaust.*

*After finishing secondary school she worked in Split, in the City Headquarters of the Pioneer youth organisation, then in Zagreb and the Central Youth Committee, in the department for Pioneers. After her marriage she devoted herself to her family and began accompanying her husband on his assignments in diplomatic missions.*

*She has two sons, two grandchildren and one great-grandson.*

*She lives in Zagreb.*

My journey to El Shatt really began in 1943, in September, when Fascist Italy capitulated. Until then I had lived with my parents in Split where, in June 1942, I experienced one of the saddest days of my life. This was the day when Fascist units, the so-called *Figli de la Lupe* (the sons of the wolf) suddenly burst into the Jewish temple.

My father, Leon Altarac, was an employee of the Jewish Community and *shamas* of the temple, so our family lived in the Community building next door to the temple.

The Fascists entered the temple during prayers. Many of the congregation were beaten and the temple and our apartment were demolished. They threw all our things out of the windows and then set fire to them right in the middle of Narodni Square. We were left with nothing but, which was most important, we were uninjured and alive. We were rescued by good people who found us temporary accommodation and helped us with clothing and footwear. However this ominous day left a deep impression on my soul. This was why, as a girl of thirteen, I became involved with the illegal activities of the League of the Young Generation and SKOJ (the Youth Communist League of Yugoslavia). I'm almost certain that I was the youngest SKOJ girl in Split at the time.

When Italy capitulated, I knew that I had to leave Split, because I could not stay and wait for the Germans and the Ustaša to arrive.

With my parents, my little sister Lea (Lilika) and my elderly grandmother, I headed off into the unknown, going to join the Partisans. Along the way we were separated. My family went to a Partisan refugee camp and I went to a unit. For about four and a half months I stayed first on Mt Mosor and then on the islands of Brač and Šolta, where I was a member of the District Committee of USAOH (the United League of Anti-Fascist Youth of Croatia) for these two islands.

However a new enemy offensive began so, at the end of 1943, we had to evacuate from Brač. The journey to the island of Vis remains an unpleasant memory. We crammed ourselves into a yacht which wasn't very big. There were so many of us that we were practically lying on one another. I thought that we wouldn't make it because of the strong *bura*, the north-eastern wind, which was swinging the yacht around like a small gondola. But in the end all was well and we reached Vis.

I knew nothing about my family except that they had been evacuated from Mt Mosor, from Srnjin where they had been staying in a Partisan refugee camp. I assumed they had been evacuated to one of the islands, but they weren't on Vis.

On Vis there were Partisans, the wounded, women and children, in other words this was an army base and a camp for refugee Partisans from all over Dalmatia. There were also Allied soldiers and sailors there. Among so many people I felt lost and on my own. But this was merely my feeling because, along with many others, I was chosen to set off to Bari (Italy) where, under an agreement between the Supreme Headquarters of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia and the

Allied forces in the Mediterranean, there were already many refugees and wounded people.

In Bari we were met by many of our people, including acquaintances of my parents. From these I learnt that my loved ones were in the Carbonara reception camp, not far from Bari. I wanted to go straight to them, but for this I would have needed a special permit which I couldn't obtain. I managed to send them a short letter letting them know that I was moving on with a group of Partisan refugees and that they should find out where we were and follow me.

From Bari we were moved to Tukurano, where there was a reception camp for refugees and the wounded. The camp was in two parts, one for reception and quarantine (disinfection, washing etc.) and the other part, known as the clean camp. I was in quarantine, but in a "clean" barracks, part of a group whose job was to disinfect children. One night, after a few days in Tukurano, I was lying on the floor of the clean barracks, covered with a thin borrowed blanket and was slowly dropping off to sleep. Suddenly I heard familiar voices and saw Mother and Father with Lilika in their arms. This was an unforgettable moment. I managed to obtain a permit to join my family and continued my life as a refugee with them.



*Meeting Jews from the British Army, El Shatt 1944. Marked in the photograph: (1) Mira, (2) Lea and, (3) Rikica Altarac and (4) Nada Levi*

From the clean camp, where my family was, we continued on together. We were given accommodation in abandoned villas in Santa Maria di Croce, near Otranto, and other groups were also accommodated in villas in Santa Maria di Nardò. Here we waited for them to organise a convoy to leave for Africa. From a number of tiny places in the region we gathered together in Taranto where the convoy would leave from. We were put up in huge, cold and uncomfortable halls while we waited for a couple of days for permission or an order for us to board the Allied ships which would take us far away. This was not a pleasant period. We couldn't wait to leave, despite not knowing what awaited us at the end of the journey. In about the middle of February, 1944, we boarded a large warship, one of three in the convoy.

The ships were full of refugees, mostly from Dalmatia, and wounded Partisans. I never thought about the danger but it most certainly was dangerous. There were mines and submarines in the sea and the danger of bombs from the air. We had one real alarm on the voyage when enemy aircraft flew overhead, but everything was all right in the end, and we arrived in Port Said in Egypt. I remember that we then travelled on some strange train and that we finally reached our destination travelling through the desert in an army truck.

The entire trip from Port Said to El Shatt had a devastating impact on us. The desert, the sand, the incredible heat, no settlements, no greenery anywhere, deserted and sad. Nor did we have a better impression when we reached El Shatt. There were a large number of tents on a huge, sand-covered space which were lined up in a way that they formed some kind of streets and sectors. There were also buildings which housed the kitchens and bathrooms.

The camp we had reached was close to the Suez Canal, it was known as Camp 2, and there were three more camps in the vicinity. Camp 1 was nine kilometres from the Suez and Camp 3 was two kilometres west of Camp 1. For a brief period there was also a camp in Khatatba, about two hundred kilometres from El Shatt. The camps in which we were accommodated had been used before our arrival as quarters for the British Army.

Our family: mother Roza and father Leon, grandmother Lea Atijas, sister Lilika and I, together with my aunt, Regina Albahari, and her son Albi, were accommodated in Sector B, Tent 30B. There were also four other families and one single man living in this tent. There was the Kario family from Belgrade, with a son my age whom we called Bubi;

Jozef and Sara Klajnodštajn and their adopted niece Nada Levi Klajnodštajn, whose parents had perished (Nada Klajnodštajn, whose married name is Čuk, now lives in Zagreb); Finika Šnitlinger and her daughter; my peer Hari Štajner (who became a journalist in Belgrade after the war) with his mother, and the one single man, a lawyer named Franić from Makarska.

The camp cots were lined up next to one another along both sides of the tent. The living conditions were quite difficult, given that people of all ages, men and women, children and the elderly were all together. Across from our family was Jozef Klajnodštajn, who was very ill and who, unfortunately, died there.

We lived in a kind of commune. There would be a bell for breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. We could eat in the dining room or take the food to our tents. In several places in our sector, in small, walled spaces, there was water which was warm and unpleasant tasting, so we mainly drank tea.



*White clothes for the white sand and heat in El Shatt: Rikica's younger sister Lea in her mother's arms, Rikica in the centre in white dress*

There was plenty of food, although we didn't like it much. A few times Mother cooked something herself. Father would earn some money as a barber so he was also able to buy some things in the can-

teen. A good friend of ours made us a small tin stove with an oven, so my mother would sometimes bake a pie. We received clothes from the Red Cross, and skilled hands could make dresses out of nightgowns, so you could say that we were decently dressed. The women did needlework and decorated their parts of the tents. These were usually decorations from the bags in which the food arrived.

It was extremely hot during the day, while the nights were cold. Sometimes there were hot and unpleasant winds and we once even experienced a real desert storm which tore down many of the tents.

After several months in the camp, the seven of us in my family were given separate accommodation in half a tent. The other half, separated by a canvas wall, was given to another family.

Life in the camp was very organised. Everyone had their own assignment, or a place to be on duty. There were camp committees which were responsible to the Central Committee of the refugee camp. Sector committees were directly in charge of the needs of their sector and these needs were coordinated by the camp committee. I myself was a member of the Camp Committee and later also of the Central Committee of USAOH (the United League of Anti-Fascist Youth of Croatia) for the refugee camp. I worked in the sector education department and attended the third year of secondary school. For my excellent results I was commended as the best student of the IIIa class and was given the booklet "Declaration of the Second Session of AVNOJ" (the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia).

After some time in the camp, there were various workshops organised, such as tailoring, shoe-making and a barber, and these offered their services free. They used all kinds of materials such as cans and old rags. Skilful women took threads from the tent ropes and knitted various items of clothing.

The cultural and educational work was done in groups. There was a camp choir led by maestro Josip Hatze and a theatre group which, as far as I remember, even performed in Cairo. Later there were also brochures published about youth and pioneers. As I already mentioned, my father worked as a barber, but he was most active as a member of the camp religious club and he performed Jewish religious ceremonies. These rituals were also attended by Jews who were members of the British Army stationed somewhere nearby. They would mostly visit us on Jewish festivals. The others also practised their religious ceremonies and customs.

A British Army member, Jakov Mizrahi, gave Father a prayer book which he used in El Shatt. On the empty pages he wrote down the names of Jews who died in the camp and were buried there with a funeral service. He also wrote down the names of three Jewish children who were born there. Jakov Mizrahi was from Jerusalem.

People were born, lived and died in the camp. People were also married there, but the harsh conditions cost the lives of a large number of newborn babies and children under two and, especially, elderly people. There was a cemetery established in the camp and a monument built. Unfortunately, over time, this cemetery was devastated and is no longer recognisable. As far as I know, steps are being taken to restore it.

We learnt about the end of the war during the night between July 9 and 10, 1945. We all came out of our tents and celebrated like mad. After this we were impatient to return to Yugoslavia. Our repatriation was organised in groups. In July 1945, we returned to Split.