

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE





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## Lea ŠRAJER

### WHY DID I LET GO OF MOTHER'S HAND?!



*Lea Šrajer, née Rajh, was born in Subotica on 31 August 1927 of father Lajčo Rajh and mother Mancí, née Kesler.*

*Of the twelve members of her immediate family, only Lea and her father survived the Holocaust.*

*From her marriage to Martin Šrajer, concluded in 1946, she has daughter Eva and son Đorđe, and five grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Eva and her family live in Toronto, Canada, while Đorđe and his family live in Oak Park, a small town near Chicago, USA.*

*Her husband Martin died in Subotica in 1984.*

*Lea lives in Toronto, Canada.*

I lived a happy childhood in a harmonious and typical Jewish family. We observed all the holidays, including Shabbat every Friday evening. At home we ate strictly kosher: not only that we had separate sets of dishes and cutlery for dairy and meat food, but the food was also separately cooked in the kitchen. On Friday mornings I would go with my mother to the open market place to buy a chicken for the Shabbat dinner. We would then take the live chicken to the kosher butcher *shakhter* who would do the slaughter according to Kashrut dietary rules. The *shakhter* had an „office“ in a small room in the synagogue yard.

I remember that several days before Purim my mother always baked a lot of cookies. Triangular cookies with poppy seeds and hazelnuts, called

*kindla*, were especially everyone's favorite. Traditional packages with cookies, shlahmones, were distributed to our neighbors.

Before Passover we would change all the cooking pots and cutlery. We bought matzo bread in the Šibalić bakery. I particularly loved the circular matzo as it tasted best. Of my many pleasant memories of Passover, one is special – a new dress as a present. Once, along with the dress, I even got black lacquered shoes, very fashionable at the time.

Rosh Hashanah was a joyous holiday, and we would always go to the synagogue for service. The tradition in our home was that during Rosh Hashanah we eat at least one sweet dish per meal so as to have a "sweet" year ahead. My mother's choice, but not my own, was a carrot dish. I preserved this tradition in my own home although it seems that my children are not too enthusiastic about it, just like I used not to be. But, they display heroism and eat at least one spoonful of carrots, anyway. After so many years I see once again that my grandchildren also are protesting when served the carrots dish at Rosh Hashanah.

I also have clear memories of Yom Kippur, especially for becoming very hungry around 4 PM. There would not be food at home and we used to spend the whole day at the synagogue. Yom Kippur was the only holiday in my youth that I could hardly wait for to be over.

My grandmother, Flora Kesler, lived in Sombor. She was very religious. I remember that any time she visited Subotica she would insist that we go to the orthodox synagogue. Services in the Great synagogue (the main one) were simply not religious enough for her. She was taken away from Sombor in 1944 and we never heard of her afterwards.

In April 1941 Hungarian authorities occupied Subotica. We lived in great fear. Arrests of distinguished citizens, especially Jews, communists and all enemies of the regime happened on daily basis. It was enough for a person to be an enemy of the regime. It would result in being arrested and taken to the infamous prison „Žuta kuća“ (the yellow house). Many people were tortured in the „Yellow House“. Fifteen distinguished persons, of whom nine Jews, including the son of the Chief Rabbi Gerzon – Nikola, Lola Vol (Wohl), dr Singer, and others were hanged. At present there is a commemorative plaque at the entry to the „Yellow House“.

I could not continue my education in the grammar school because of the introduced „*numerus clausus*“: only a very low number of Jewish pupils could continue their education. Thus, I started a photography apprenticeship, since my father did not want me to stay at home all day long. Photographer Roži Hirš had a studio in the house that we lived in. That was where I met my husband to be, Martin.

Martin grew up in dire poverty. His father left the family when Martin and his sister Kata were still small children. Their mother, Julija Epštajn, supported them by cooking food in other people's homes. This need made Martin get a job as assistant worker in timber trading business when he was only 14, the usual business at that time trading in coal and wood for heating fuel. Seven years later he opened his own business and became the youngest owner of this type of business in Subotica. During the Hungarian occupation, Martin was identified as enemy of the regime and taken to the „Yellow House“, where he was tortured, and it was only thanks to the intervention of his first wife Lilika that Martin managed to get out alive. Most of his friends were executed before a firing range or hanged.



*Photograph from the wedding of LEA'S parents, father LAJČO RAJH and mother MONCI KESLER, in Sombor 1925*

Martin, my father, and other men were taken by Hungarian authorities to what they called forced labor – to the forest. Since in the evening they could return home it was a relatively good part of the occupation. The situation changed when those in forced labor moved to Sombor to build an airport. In Sombor they lived in barracks. Martin managed to get a job in an office. He was in charge of issuing passes for going home, often ignoring the authorities in doing so. His friends from forced labor honored Martin after the liberation for the courage demonstrated.

In the summer of 1942 some of the workers were taken to Russia. Very few of them ever returned. Those who did return, among them my father Lajčo, were taken to Groskirchen, Austria, for work. That saved him from imminent death. Martin was sent to Mauthausen, where he stayed until the US troops liberated the camp. He returned to Subotica right after the end of the war, in 1945. As was the case with most returnees from camps, soon after the liberation Martin was sick with the spotted typhoid. For months he was between life and death and it was only thanks to excellent care by one (unknown) US nurse that Martin managed to survive.

In spring of 1944 we thought that our lives were back to normal. How wrong we were! That year, on 19 March, German troops marched into Subotica and persecution of Jews continued and even accelerated. Immediately after the German occupation, the authorities ordered Jews to wear the yellow Magen David. In the evening, after the curfew began, we could not be out in the streets. On top of that, they established a separate part of town for the Jewish ghetto. We had to leave the apartment that we used to live in. Confiscation of property and jewelry, as well as murders, became everyday reality. On Friday morning, 16 June, with the last stocks of food remaining, they took us to a mill in Bácsalmás, a small place near Subotica. Bácsalmás, which was the location of a collection camp, was full of Germans – and a strongly anti-Semitic place. Around the mill there was a tall fence, with no opportunity for escape.



*LEA with parents in 1934 in Subotica*

I must note here that Subotica was liberated on 22 October 1944, four months after our deportation.

After a week in the mill, we were loaded onto livestock wagons – there were eighty-five of us in the wagon. I was together with twelve members of my family, including among others my mother, aunt, my grandmother's sister, a niece with a five-year old child.

The journey was horrendous, with very little water, food or space. Five days later we arrived in Auschwitz on 29 June. We all thought that nothing could be worse than the journey there. Again, we were very wrong.

We marched in through the gate with the writing „Arbeit macht frei“ on it. That gate is now exhibited in the Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C. Right away, I was separated from my mother who at that time was forty-four, but her hair was already completely grey. To this day, so many years on, I still cannot forget one scene – the moment when I let go off her hand and I never saw her again. For years I was haunted by the thought that maybe if I had not let go off her hand she could have been saved. Or possibly, I would have ended on the „other side“ and perished with her. It has been 61 years since

that fateful day, and it is as if it was yesterday. Of the twelve members of my family, only my father and I survived those horrendous years.

After the arrival to Auschwitz, when we found ourselves naked and barefoot in the showers, I managed to recognize some people from the transport with whom I had travelled, despite the fact that all our heads were shaved. After the shower I was given some shoes and a worn out dress. We were then lined up and taken to the barracks.

The roll calling happened twice a day, early in the morning, while it was still dark and cold (although it was summer), and in the afternoon, in the sun or the rain. This torture would take hours. But, who cared? I remember that we were always hungry and that during the roll call we always stood five in a line. Of our five I am the only one alive today, with memories and thoughts that cannot be described.

There was practically no water for washing our face. We would get one glass of water for five or six persons to wash their faces. The latrines, twenty per line, were outside, without a roof or fence, so people relieved themselves in everyone's sight. The spotlights were continually moving, and the high voltage wire was everywhere around the barracks. I could always feel the smoke and the smell of burnt meat. For a long, long time I was not capable of comprehending what it was – the thick black smoke coming out of the high chimney!

As was the case with most Hungarian Jews from the last deportation transports, we were not tattooed. But selection was moving along at full speed. If one was to become ill, in the evening he or she was to climb a truck which collected the exhausted and the sick. We never again saw those who were taken away in this manner.

The food which mostly consisted of beet otherwise intended for livestock was horrendous, but we all ate it as we needed the energy to survive. We would get one bowl of it for the five of us in a line – and each was to take just one swallowing – not two – because otherwise there would not be enough for all. In the evening we were given a piece of bread with margarine (that remains to the present day the only food I cannot eat). Otherwise, I have learned that everything is to be eaten and nothing to be wasted. I cried for days because it was an awful feeling to lose so many family members in a short period of time! I do not remember exactly (or possibly I do not want to remember) how we spent the days in the Birkenau camp. But I do remember that if we even attempted to sit down during the roll call – the „capo“ would be there right away and would beat us without any obvious reason – just because we were „stinking Jews“. The nights were even worse, there were so many of us in a barrack, and we slept (those who could!), packed like sardines. If one was to turn around, then all in that row would have to



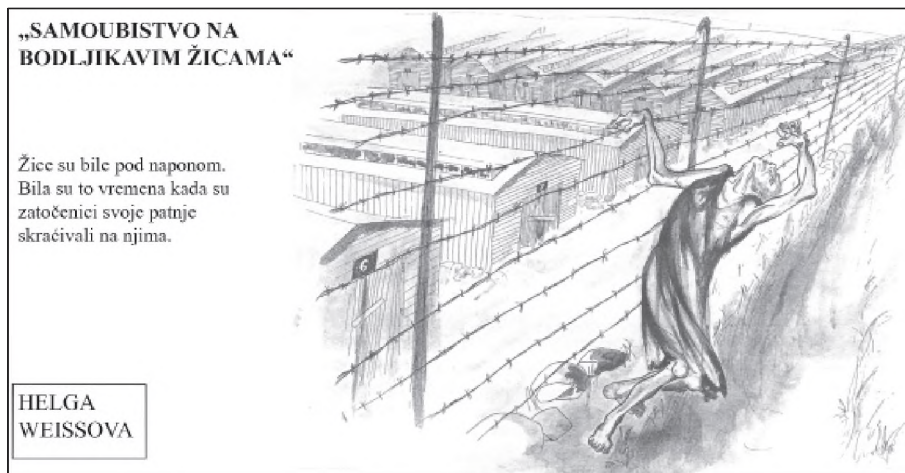
turn around, as there was not enough room. Throughout the night we felt a mixture of fear, terror and hunger. Our emotions were completely dumb as a consequence of all the horrific circumstances.

One day at the end of August (possibly beginning of September, I am not certain) a rumor spread around the camp that 300 young women will be selected for forced labor. We thought we would be taken to the gas chamber. We were to march before doctor Mengele, who was doing the selection personally. My cousin Anica Šporer did not want to apply for labor, but I persuaded her that, if „work“ in fact meant being taken to the gas chamber, than it is better to die than live like we were living. In the first round we were not selected. But we were lucky in the second round. Anica, I and a number of other girls from Subotica (Lili Lederer Šachter (Schachter), Iluš Beder Šporer, and Rožika Bader Vajs (Weiss) were put in a separate barrack. At that time we did not have a clue of what was in store for us. We were obviously lucky, because the majority of those who stayed on in the camp, including many from Subotica, never returned. Later on we heard that the Nazis had executed all those who stayed behind, they were thrown into a big pit that the women camp inmates had to dig themselves.

That special barrack had no roof and no floor. During the night we were shivering with cold, while during the day we were burning in the hot sun and heat. Due to frequent rain we were wet, but we did not mind, because the only thing that mattered was that we were still ALIVE! We were hardly getting any food. The lack of food was compensated by plenty of beating. I remember that we spent three days like that. The fourth day, early in the morning, we were escorted by the SS to the railway station. In contrast to our journey to Auschwitz, the railway carriages this time were for passengers, not animals. I need to note here that SS women were much more cruel than SS men. The train finally started. We made the first stop in Katowitz, where we changed into another train taking us to Langenbilau, the Upper Slesia. Langenbilau was an industrial town with factories producing thread, cloth and other materials.

From the Langenbilau railway station we were taken to the camp consisting of small houses. I simply could not believe it – everyone had her own bed – it was such a luxury! It was about 1,200 young women distributed to do various kinds of work. The camp was surrounded by a high voltage wire fence. The guards constantly shouted at us. The camp was about six kilometers away from the factory. The working hours in the factory were from 6 AM to 6 PM, including a 30 minutes break. Since we needed more than an hour to get to the factory, we always got up at 4 in the morning in order to be in time for the start of work. I worked in the factory Dierig, in the spinning department („Spinnerei“), working on machines producing thread. I oper-

ated two machines. Since the spools of thread were on both machines in two lines, I was constantly running from one to the other end of the machine. In the evening, exhausted of fatigue, I walked back to the camp. The food was very sparse and I was hungry all the time.



*HELGA VEIS, a distinguished artist, also detained in Auschwitz, author of moving graphics regarding the life in the camp and the ways in which inmates dealt with their tribulations*

In order to somehow get more food, I started stealing thread from the factory. I also managed somehow to get knitting needles so at night I would knit scarves, gloves, hats, which I changed during the day for food. The girls who were working in the kitchen could get additional supplies, and they were the source of food. I am sure that knitting saved me from imminent death. Sometimes in late autumn I was ill with scarlet fever, the disease which spread and infected practically everyone in the camp. Right away I was transferred to the *Krankenzimmer*, the room for the sick, and luckily there was a nurse there at all times. The doctor would also visit sometimes, but the SS guards were there every evening to accurately count the patients. Sometimes the SS would bring in new patients. Again, I was incredibly lucky. Since I was knitting sweaters and other winter clothes for the doctor, she protected me against the SS staff who tried on several occasions to take me away. After I recovered from the scarlet fever, I very soon got diphtheria, and the following three months I spent in the patients' room. These three months were the "best" period.

At end of January or beginning of February 1945 the Russian troops came close to the camp, so the SS ordered evacuation. We were given shoes

with wooden soles and some worn out coats, since the winter was at its peak with abundant snow. Of course, we were moving by marching under the strict escort of the SS. Five days later we arrived all frozen, hungry and thirsty to the town of Parschnitz, where we were distributed to factories to work under much worse conditions than in Langenbilau. The Russian troops withdrew, and after about a month which we spent in hard and dreadful working conditions, since labor was needed in Dirig, we were returned by truck from Parschnitz to Langenbilau. The journey back lasted only three hours. In Langenbilau we continued to work according to the earlier routine from 6 in the morning to 6 in the evening, and it was so until 8 May 1945. The guards around the camp disappeared and soon we saw the first Russian soldier. He told us that the war was over and that we were free. At first we could not grasp the meaning of his words, but I know that I will never forget that day.

My cousin Anica Šporer and I left the camp right away. We moved into an apartment abandoned by the Germans. Liberation brought with it many tragedies. Many inmates who had been hungry for long, unused to normal food, could not resist the sudden abundance of food and the overeating led to dysentery and death.

Since it took some time for transports back home to be arranged, we returned to work in Dirig. This time we received salaries and reference letters as exemplary workers.

With the Yugoslav transport which was starting from Brno I returned home at the end of July. On the way to Subotica I found out in Budapest that my father was alive and had returned to Subotica. I will also never forget his face when I saw him at the railway station in Subotica.

After my return, one day in the street I saw my old friend Martin, who returned from the camp but had lost his wife Lilika Hirš and their nine months old son Pišta in Auschwitz.\* From the rubble of our memories, looking into the future and encouraged by our mutual love, that autumn of 1946 Martin and I started slowly and with difficulty to build our life together.

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\*See the memories of Žuža Marinković in the book „We Survived ... 3“, pages 124–129.