Irena VAJNMAN

TO HELL AND BACK

Irena Vajnman was born on August 28, 1924, in Novi Sad, where she attended school. She was a member of the Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair and, from 1941, a member of the League of Communist Youth. She was arrested on September 9, 1942, and sentenced to two years in prison but, as a Jew, she spent another year in various camps.

After the liberation she returned to Novi Sad in 1945 and married Robert Vajnman. In 1964 she moved with her family to Vienna.

I was born Irena Lustig. The occupation caught me in Novi Sad, at the age of seventeen. Like all of Bačka, the city was occupied by Hungary.

My activities as a SKOJ member were in a group led by Marta Husar, in which were also Mara Kolarski, Gerta Kadelburg, Mara Dudvarski and Nada Velicki. We met under the patronage of the Mikeš and Kolarski families, both of whom approved of our meetings.

They arrested me as a member of SKOJ less than two weeks after I turned eighteen. Immediately after the arrest they took me to the notorious Army building, which had this name because before the war it had been the seat of some army command and this was where the Hungarian authorities set up their counter-intelligence and secret police

(*Kėmelhrító*). When they took me there I found many acquaintances already there.

I knew about the Army building because in autumn 1941 my cousin, Andrija-Bandi Lederer had been taken there. They beat him really badly. Despite that, despite the beating, he did not denounce anyone, only telling the agents the names of people who had already been arrested. They sentenced him to death and hanged him that autumn. They shipped his family off to Auschwitz. Only one of his sisters survived.

In the Army building they beat us endlessly, until some even lost consciousness. They beat me on the soles of my feet, on my palms. My soles were so blue and swollen that I couldn't put my shoes on. And my hands were the same way. All day long we would stand facing the wall. If anyone attempted to speak or move they would be beaten heavily. We were constantly in fear of who they would take for "questioning". This meant only beating. When the "investigation" was finished they took us to court. I was sentenced to two years in prison, my "guilt" being that I had helped the Partisans, written slogans on walls, delivered leaflets and strewn nails on the roads so that the tyres of army vehicles would be punctured.

After the trial we were taken to prison in Konti Street in Budapest. We had a very difficult time there, but at least they didn't beat us. The cells were overcrowded. There were ten of us in each cell, sometimes even more, although they were meant for only a few people. We slept on straw mattresses. During the day we had to pile the mattresses on top of one another, we weren't allowed to lie down. We could only sit on the floor. It was far too hot in summer and very cold in winter. Once every three months we were allowed to receive a parcel and a letter. Before my family were deported they used to visit me regularly. Later, only my sister would come. She was not deported because her husband wasn't a Jew. We made knitting needles from pieces of broken glass from the windows and from wooden spoons which we were allowed to buy. We would unravel pullovers and knit new ones. We walked for half an hour every day in a small yard without any greenery, without a single tree.

It was easiest for me when I was in a cell with two women from Pest. One was called Eva Lakos and the other Ilika Blasz. Both survived the war. Eva was intelligent and well-read, she recited Heine to us and many Hungarian poets. After the war she graduated in economy

and taught at the university. Because her parents were communists they spent more time in prisons than with her so, as a child, she spent most of the time with relatives.

Ilika married Astalosz, a man who was killed as a communist during the uprising in 1956, and she was left alone with four children. She lives in Pest. I am still occasionally in touch with her by letter.

One of our fellow-sufferers in the prison was Olga Szentgyörgyi Braun. She was earlier a teacher in Subotica but now lives in Szeged in a nice home for old people. Her husband died in 2004. Her son also lives in Szeged and takes care of her, while her daughter lives in Budapest. She is an English language teacher and is in an important position. Another is Eva Gyenes Arsenić, a prominent physician in Belgrade. And the third is a graduate technologist, a doctor of technical sciences, Eva Zucker Čavčić, from Sombor. We are all today in our old age, but the days we spent together in the conditions that we lived in cannot be forgotten. Of the Jewish women who were also with us I shall also mention Gerta Kadelburg, who began coughing while in the prison and I was told after the war that she had died of tuberculosis in Bergen-Belsen, in the worst possible conditions. Dusi Senes took care of her as much as was possible under such circumstances. Dusi left her ten-year-old daughter with her parents and she would always tell me that, if she did not survive and I did, I should take care of her child. She was ten years older than me and so thought that I was more likely than her to survive. Fortunately she did survive the war and now lives in Subotica.

After a year they moved us to the Márianosztra prison. This was a really large prison, run by nuns, in which many criminals were serving sentences. Quite a few of them were sentenced to hard labour for life for grave crimes such as murder, robbery and similar.

The Catholic nuns were intelligent and pretty. Every morning and evening they would pass saying the same prayer. Nevertheless they would sometimes punish us in various ways for no reason at all. For example, they would deny us the right to receive parcels, letters or visits. The Catholic and Orthodox inmates went to the Catholic church while the Jewish women went to the Evangelical church. At first we boycotted church visits, but later decided to go because this was the only opportunity for all of us from different cells to meet. The priest, who was an elderly man, didn't care much about what we did. For example, we could even sit when we were required to stand. And while he was holding the service we would talk and giggle. He saw how we

were behaving but did not use this against us. Sometimes I felt sorry for him because of his powerlessness to have us form any sort of bond with his church.

Political prisoners from Bačka and Međumurje, territories occupied by the Hungarians in 1941, in the Marija Nostra prison in August 1943: last row, second from (L), Irena Vajnman; fifth from (L), Marta Husar-Doder; and sixth, Magda Simin; third row, first from (L), Eva Čavčić

During summer we were allowed to go out into the yard, which was full of greenery. We sat around a big table and sewed dolls for poor children or pulled up weeds. There were also a number of Jehova's Witnesses among us. Under these conditions I particularly admired them because they were unswerving in their religious beliefs. I remember that they sang really beautifully. The nuns hated them, I suppose, more than they hated the rest of us. They often put them in solitary, in dark rooms, giving them only bread and water, but even this harassment did not force them to abandon their faith.

Fascist Germany occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944. In the prison at this time they isolated us Jews from the other convicts and we

had to wear yellow stars. In June they moved us to Budapest where there was a prison – a ghetto for all Jewish convicts from the territory of Hungary. The conditions were very bad.

When my two-year sentence was finished, I bade farewell to my friends, thinking I was going to freedom. However there were gendarmes waiting for me outside and they immediately handed me over to German soldiers. They put me into a larger group they already had in custody. This was September 1944, the solders were older people, they didn't want to pay any special attention to us. They were escorting us through Pest. If someone had wanted to escape they could have done it. There were young people standing along the road and shouting to us that we should join them and go off with them. After two years in prison I didn't know what this was supposed to be, whether it was perhaps some provocation. However I did step out at one point, but I didn't go with them. I had been given an address in Pest and I went there. The man was decent, but the woman kept arguing with him because she didn't want to hide me. I even think she reported me because soon the police came and asked for my documents. Of course I didn't have any. I began telling them a story about how my documents had gone missing during one of the earlier bombing raids. It was obvious to them that I was lying. They took me to the police where I saw one of the agents who used to beat us back in the Army building. He recognised me immediately, so they moved me to what they called the Toloncház, a kind of prison in which prisoners were held only temporarily until they decided where to take them. This happened at exactly the time when the Hungarian Nazis, the Nyilas, took over power in the state. It was horrifying. Through the windows we saw people with legs and arms cut off, a lot of blood, many dead people. Of course we were afraid that the same would happen to us. With us there were also criminals and prostitutes, as well as Jehova's Witnesses. As an inmate with two years of "experience" I tried to calm my fellow-sufferers down, to comfort them. What calmed them the most was when the Jehova's Witnesses sang their hymns.

After a few months in prison in Konti Street we stopped menstruating and they told us that we had lost our femininity. Fortunately this wasn't so. After the war, when we returned to normal conditions, we married, bore children and lived as normal women.

When the Nyilas from the prison turned us over to the SS men there were a large number of us. Men and women were mixed together

on a barren piece of land. I met my friends there and it was easier for me now that we were together again. We stayed there on this barren piece of land for perhaps a day and then they put us into wagons. We travelled for days with no food or water. Finally, after this ride, we arrived at the Dachau camp.

Dachau was a men's camp so we didn't stay there long either. They again crammed us into wagons. Some of us were taken to Ravensbrück, but I was among those who were taken to Bergen-Belsen.

The situation in Bergen-Belsen was awful. After the war we heard that it was the same in the other camps. What we were given to survive could not be called food: in the morning there was warm water called coffee, perhaps 150 or 200 grams of bread for a whole day, at noon there was soup which was in fact more warm water. The best was when we would get a whole loaf of bread and eat it all at once. When we arrived, some who had already been in the camp for years were completely mentally deranged. We tried to calm them down so that everyone would get at least a few spoons of "food", but they would rush at the cauldron and spill it so that, in the end, no one would get anything. They put us in large barracks with bunk beds. It was cold, November, and the worst thing was when they would force us out of the barracks to stand for hours in the so-called roll-call – an assembly at which they called out names.

Once I heard that there were women from Novi Sad in one barracks. I went to look for them. I found one acquaintance, I think it was Agi Rajter. She was on the upper bed so I took off my clogs and went up to her. When I got down, the clogs were no longer there. Not having at least some kind of footwear in such cold and in such conditions meant death. Luckily they were soon found. A young girl who was on the edge of insanity had taken them and hidden them under the head of her bed.

Later I also encountered my cousin, Etuška Ajsman. She was covered in boils, all skin and bones, in the cold, in a thin dress. I don't know how I had managed to keep my underwear, I was wearing several items. I took them off and gave them to her. Just before the end of the war the Swedish Red Cross took her with other very sick patients to Sweden. There she recovered and returned home, got married and moved to Israel, where she died of leukaemia.

Still engraved in my memory is something that was perhaps the most terrifying – those moments when they separated mothers from

their children. These most terrifying, most shattering partings resulted in screaming and crying which tore at the hearts of all who happened to be there. We also wept. In Bergen-Belsen, the children were in barracks, at least fifty of them, from the ages of two to twelve. The children were crying all the time. They would let us take care of them during the day but we were unable to comfort them. I looked after a girl of twelve and her four-year-old brother. She was completely lost, and her little brother even more so. I didn't manage to calm them. The girl was pretty, with curly hair and beautiful blue eyes, and the boy was remarkably beautiful. The children were from Amsterdam. It was obvious from their clothes that they were from well-to-do families. We heard that the Germans wanted to exchange them for money from the Americans. I don't know how much truth there was in that. Unfortunately they didn't get the money and they gassed all the children to death.

One day some civilians arrived and selected young girls for labour. I was not among those who were chosen. One elderly woman was crying because they had selected her daughter and she would be left alone. I changed places with the girl, not knowing where this would take me.

We reached Fallersleben, not far from Braunschweig (Brunswick). There we learnt that we would be working in an arms factory. This irked us, because we did not want to be the ones working on manufacturing weapons for the Germans. We were working on the night shift. We slept during the day and were exempt from roll-call. We resolved to sabotage as much as possible. The German workers were standing in a corner, apathetic and doing nothing. They looked completely uninterested as they explained to us what we were to do. We heard that we were working on the production of what they called the V-2 weapons. We shorter women were given two bins. Bad metal parts were to be thrown into one and good ones into the other. We very frequently did the opposite. Marta Husar, who became a professor of gynaecology at Belgrade University Medical Faculty after the war, was tall, so she had to work on the metal stamping machines and cut out bigger parts. She had no opportunity for sabotage there. Perhaps it was because of this that she became depressed: she put her thumb in the machine and cut it off. We had a doctor there, a prisoner from Italy. He was short. He skilfully stopped the bleeding, sutured the wound and bandaged it. Marta had to continue working despite this. The food was better. On Sundays we were also given potatoes with a piece of meat and some sauce on top.

By now it was 1945. The Germans were aware that they would lose the war. Nevertheless they took us to a camp, in Salzwedel. We were outdoors for days on end, with no roof over our heads. However the coldest winter months had passed with the coming of March, so we overcame all these difficulties with no problems.

One day we noticed that the camp gates were wide open. The German guards had disappeared and we were able to leave. Salzwedel was a small place. Several of my friends and I saw some bicycles nearby, so we went for a ride and then returned them to where we had taken then from. We then went into a house whose door was open. The people who lived there had probably seen us coming and hidden in fear of us, perhaps in the basement. We didn't look for them. We came to the dining room where there was a table set for breakfast, with beautiful china, soft bread and pastries and coffee which was still hot. We ate heartily, but took nothing else. We left everything the way it was.

Then we returned to the camp. That day the Americans arrived. Their arrival changed everything. They kept us quite well supplied. One day, during that period, a man in civilian clothes arrived. He told us he had come from a camp but I think he was lying. He asked us if he could stay the night. Of course we let him. However, while we were still asleep, he disappeared. Later we came to the conclusion that he was probably an SS man who was fleeing.

The River Elbe flowed close by our camp. The Russians were already on the other side of the river. We, still full of idealism, crossed over to them after a while. However they took no care of us at all. We had to find food ourselves and weren't allowed to help them. We were surprised by the fact that the Russian women didn't want to go home. They were weeping. They knew they'd be returned to their country and then sent to Siberia because they had allowed themselves to be captured! We were also surprised to see that they were dragging along with them everything they could get their hands on.

We waited for days for approval to return to our homes. Finally we decided to take the trains going east. The fact that Marta Husar and Magda Bošan were with us meant a great deal to us. They were some kind of leaders for us and they really took care of us, they gave us advice and looked after us. We fed ourselves with potatoes we found in the earth, we'd put them under hot ashes and bake them. We passed through Prague. The women there welcomed us with hot tea, coffee and bread. We were also given bread in Bucharest.

It was a very long journey. Many prisoners had already returned to their homes. My sister was afraid that I would not come. She had stayed in Novi Sad with her husband and two small children. We hoped that our parents and brother would return. Unfortunately they had killed them all. They killed my mother and many of our relatives, together with their children, in Auschwitz, and they killed my father in Buchenwald, where he died in suffering. My brother defected and joined the Russians somewhere on the front near Voronezh. They called them over a megaphone to cross over to their side. Many believed them, including my brother. However, once they were there they threw them into a camp together with the Germans and others who had fought against the Russians. My brother contracted typhoid in this camp and died at the end of January, 1942. My grandmother née Hefter was eighty at the time and was very ill. Her youngest son, Dežo, and my nephew, Tibi Hefter, were already in the labour squads where they were often tortured. Many of these people were either killed or died from the torture. Grandmother would ask: "Where is Marci? Where is Jene?" They would tell her that her sons were unable to come. They killed her son Moric with his wife, his seventeen-year-old daughter and six-year-old son on the bank of the Danube, in a massacre known as the Raid, in January 1942. Jene was shot dead in his house, together with his wife. They also shot my niece, married name Rotštajn, her husband and their small children. I lost 24 members of my immediate family.

On my return to Novi Sad I married my pre-war friend from the *ken*, Robert "Robi" Vajnman. He too had been locked up in the Army building and then in Szeged, in the notorious Csillag. He was then taken with the convict labour company to the Eastern Front where he got frostbite on his legs, from which he suffered for years after the war. In the first years following his return, he kept dreaming that they were persecuting him and would shout in his sleep. At the front, before his very eyes, they had decimated his comrades because one member of their company had defected to the Russians. After the convict company returned to Hungary he was locked up again. He was released in October, 1944. He joined the Partisans and, when the war ended, he was reassigned to Smederevska Palanka as captain first class. It as there that a military doctor, Rajko Đurišić, managed to cure him. Unfortunately, Dr Đurišić died of a heart attack at an early age. We still keep in touch with his widow who now lives in Cetinje. She is from Osijek where her parents had a match factory.

We lived modestly in Smederevska Palanka. All the furniture we had was one iron bed, but we were satisfied because we were together, because we had survived the war after so much suffering. The householder they forced to take us in behaved like a mother to us. She was about the same age as my mother. It was from her that I learnt lot of necessary information about housekeeping, mainly about cooking. Even now we are still in touch with her daughter. From Smederevska Palanka, my husband was transferred to Niš, where our son and daughter were born. Then they moved my husband to Skopje and there, after great effort, he managed to be demobilised and we then returned to Novi Sad. Before the war, in 1941, my husband had graduated from a commercial academy and after the war he graduated from the university faculty of economy. After his demobilisation he obtained a position in the business sector. He was a successful businessman and this provoked the envy of many people. They created a lot of difficulties for him but this merely hastened our decision to leave the country. In 1964 we moved to Vienna, which is where we still live. My son is an architect. He finished primary school and technical secondary school in Novi Sad before graduating from the Faculty of Architecture at Ljubljana University. My daughter, four years younger than her brother, finished secondary school in Vienna and after that the famous Vienna Reinhardt Seminar before beginning a career as an actor, but she is no longer involved in that.

From my son I have two grandsons and one granddaughter and from my daughter I have a grandson. All of them have either finished or are finishing school and, to our joy, all are healthy.

The war stole our youth and killed our families, our friends and our acquaintances. I have great faith that our children and our grandchildren will know about the kind of things that my generation and I lived through only from stories and books.