
Andrija DARVAŠ

WAR YEARS



Andrija Darvaš was born in Subotica on April 2, 1928, to father Stevan, from Stari Bečej, and mother Irma, nee Szenta, from Vilany in Hungary. When the 1941 war began, he was in Belgrade in the third year at the Third Belgrade Boys' Secondary School. He lost his parents, grandmothers, uncles, aunts and most of his relatives in the Holocaust.

After the war he enrolled in the sixth year of secondary school in Novi Sad and matriculated in 1948. In the same year he began studying biology at the Belgrade

University Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences, graduating in 1953. He obtained employment and the possibility of post-graduate studies at the Republic Institute for Health Protection in Sarajevo. In 1964 he was awarded a doctorate in biological sciences for a dissertation on human parasitology. Shortly afterwards he was nominated assistant professor.

In 1970 he moved to Subotica where he worked at the Public Health Institute until his retirement. He held the title of senior scientific associate at the Medical Faculty of Novi Sad University. His wife Olga is a retired biochemist. They have one daughter, Sanja, a physician specialising in microbiology.

Andrija Darvaš has dedicated this memoir to his wife, Olga, because, as he says, she made it easier for him to bear these mem-

ories and endure them throughout his life. He sees his daughter as the sole guardian of his memories and his roots.

THE LAST BAR MITZVAH IN PRE-WAR BELGRADE

Saturday, April 5, 1941, was a beautiful sunny day in Belgrade. All the members of our household were up early for last minute-preparations for the arrival of visitors. It was the day of my Bar Mitzvah.

The preceding lessons with young Rabbi Kaufman had paid off: in the synagogue at 19 Kosmajka Street, the ritual unfolded according to plan. The synagogue was fuller than usual. Relatives, friends of different faiths, including our German neighbour, filled the seats. Everywhere you could hear “*shkajah*” My father’s eyes were on me as I came down from the *Torah* with the *thalit* around my neck.

The house was full of guests until after midnight. I sat in an armchair with my legs crossed to show off my first long trousers.

We were woken early on the morning of the next day, April 6, by the screaming of the *Stukas* and the exploding bombs. In the cellar of our high-rise building we held anxious discussions with the neighbours about whether the basement could sustain a direct hit. My father was reassuring my mother, grandmother and me.

After the first wave my father went to report to the army while my mother, grandmother and I sat, now in the cellar, now in our apartment, depending on the German Air Force. Finally our German neighbour advised us to evacuate into the countryside. There were quite a few rural people from the surrounding villages with horse carts, offering transport and accommodation outside Belgrade, for a solid payment. We took the opportunity to go to the village of Starčevo in Banat, near Pančevo.

The days passed and the pace of the war picked up. The *Wehrmacht*, the German Army, was now stationed in Pančevo. We felt helpless, not knowing what to do. In fact our situation had become dangerous because we had no rational explanation for why we continued to stay in Starčevo. We declared ourselves to be Hungarians but there were immediate suspicions about our Hungarian identity. We dared not go back to Belgrade precisely because of who we really were. It seemed as though only a miracle could save us and that’s what actually happened: my father appeared.

My father had been taken prisoner as a soldier. After he was captured the Germans carried out a selection of the prisoners on ethnic lines. People from the "allied nations", Hungarians, Croats, Bulgarians and so on, were set free, provided they had proof of their nationality. The verification wasn't very thorough. My father declared himself to be Hungarian and, thanks to his surname, his mother tongue and his "Aryan" physiognomy, he was released from the prison camp and given a pass by the German military command, ensuring him freedom of movement "on the way to his domicile". He came to Belgrade, learned from our German neighbour where we had taken refuge and found us. My father immediately tried to assess the risk of continuing to live in Starčevo. The same day he returned to Belgrade, found the rest of the family and established contact with the Hungarian military office in the occupied city. Two officers, in exchange for a large amount of money, agreed to smuggle us in an army truck to Bačka in the Hungarian occupied zone. They obviously had no idea who and what we were.

Two days later our host from Starčevo drove us to the port of Pančevo. My father nonchalantly waved his pass and we boarded the ferry to Belgrade. We landed in Belgrade and passed through ranks of German soldiers and local police without being stopped, just a casual glance at my father's pass.

The Hungarian Army truck was waiting, as agreed on, in the port. They put us under the tarpaulin and we were on our way. At Petrovaradin the Ustashas tried to search the truck. The Hungarian officer refused this and ordered his soldiers to cock their rifles. The Ustashas gave up. The little boat bobbed across the Danube and we arrived in Novi Sad, in the Hungarian occupied zone. We continued our ride to Srbobran (Szenttamás) where my father's brother had a timber business. We were all overjoyed to arrive: we had been saved, at least for the time being.

The Hungarian military truck then returned to Belgrade and brought the rest of our family, together with all our household effects into the Hungarian occupied zone. For cash, of course.

HUNGARIAN OCCUPATION

In the Hungarian occupied zone (as in the rest of Hungary), the attitude of the authorities to Jews was still relatively tolerable in 1941. In comparison, that is, with the Independent State of Croatia and occu-

pied Serbia. Through the corrupt bureaucracy we secured false documents and legalised our residence in Srbobran. My father worked in my uncle's timber store and I attended the fourth year of high school.

I remember the occasional beating in those days by jingoistic Hungarian boys who, in groups and on me, proved their racial superiority and demonstrated their patriotism.

In the evenings the family would sit around the radio, drawing hope from the BBC broadcasts. In fact there was no reason for optimism. The German troops were advancing on the Soviet Union, Allied ships were being sunk, Europe was overrun and England was being destroyed by the *Luftwaffe*.

January 1942 was exceptionally cold. The mercury seldom rose above minus 20° C. The schools were not functioning. Almost all activity in the small town had come to a standstill and people left their houses only in the case of dire need. Then one morning this sleepy atmosphere was disturbed by the town crier's drum. He announced that there were a number of prohibitions in force until further notice: no leaving the town, no leaving houses, no use of telephones, no sending messages and so on. Anyone breaking these bans was threatened with a court martial, there would be raids.

We were disquietened, but not afraid. We had already heard something about the ban on travel to Novi Sad and some localities in Šajkaška where, according to the official announcements, "isolated bands of Chetniks have been successfully liquidated". No one could suspect that, behind this euphemistic formulation which was presented in such a way as it was hardly noticed, lay thousands of murdered Bačka Jews, Serbs and Gypsies, men and women, children and old people. We interpreted the word "raid" as meaning an organised pursuit of people who breached the public order. We didn't see ourselves as being in this category and so did not feel threatened.

To my knowledge no description of the Great Raid in Srbobran has ever been published. This is how it was for me:

At about midday, four policemen, armed with rifles and fixed bayonets, entered our home. They searched the apartment, ostensibly looking for weapons. Then everyone in the household, my father, mother, my father's brother and sister, my two grandmothers and I, were escorted to the local school. In one classroom they carried out a personal search and officially confiscated my father's and my penknives. Unofficially, our watches, fountain pens and the contents of

our wallets also went into the already bulging pockets of the policemen. They robbed us casually, with no visible compunction.

The people who had been brought in before us, about a hundred of them I think, were facing the wall and standing motionless. Every movement was punished with a blow from a rifle butt. After being "searched" we were sent to join the others. Throughout the day they brought more and more people and the classroom soon filled up.

In the evening they began separating the "guilty" from the "innocent". The selection was done by a "commission" of local Hungarians. Each one of the people detained was called out by name and made to stand in front of the teacher's podium where the commission sat. According to the scenario they had planned, the "innocent" were to go to "the small room" and the "guilty" to the "big room".

Most of the detained Serbs were charged with being "Chetniks" or "volunteers". The criteria were not explained and the charge was at the same time the verdict (the

big room). The qualification "Jew" was enough in itself to be sent to the big room. Along with a few Serbs, my two grandmothers (both about eighty years of age) were the only ones among the Jews present to be sent to the small room.

A line of soldiers stood between the "courtroom" and the big room. They beat and kicked those who were "convicted" as they made their way to the big room. All of them, women and children included, were bleeding all over by the time they reached the room, some of them on hands and knees.



Andrija Darvaš as a boy

Night fell. We stood without moving and listened to the machine-guns on the dais being cocked from time to time. The soldiers were amusing themselves.

In the middle of the night they brought from somewhere an elderly retired teacher (his name was Rozenberger or Rozenberg). He was well-known and well-liked in Srbobran. In his old-fashioned tailcoat, with his monocle and gaiters, he looked like someone reincarnated from the time of the Emperor Franz Joseph. He always carried his hearing aid with him, a largish trumpet which he held to one ear. He was welcomed with a resounding slap in the face and fell, breaking his monocle and dropping his ear trumpet. He was unable to hear a single question and so could give no answers. They beat him and then beat him again, shouting "You're the teacher who mistreated our Hungarian children at school!"

The old teacher didn't understand a word, but kept repeating, his voice softer and softer: "Gentlemen, what kind of misunderstanding is this? I am a teacher." Finally he was quiet and they took him away. Nobody ever saw him again.

The following day they took us to the railway station, loaded us in wagons and took us to Bačka Topola. We were interned in a camp between Bačka Topola and Bajša and there we spent the next three months.

In May, 1942, they released us without explanation. We returned to Srbobran and, for some time, lived under official police supervision, which meant obligatory reporting to the police station. Eventually even that stopped. My uncle and father reopened the timber business and resumed work. I wasn't able to continue my regular schooling and was registered as having abandoned school. Just the same, as a part-time student I passed the fourth year secondary school exam in Budapest in 1942 and the following year I passed the fifth year exam in Debrecin.

The period from our return from the camp at Bačka Topola until March 19, 1944, was a time of relative safety for me and my family. The timber yard supplied a living while I prepared my exams with no tutor and enjoyed reading novels. The BBC was stirring up our hopes night after night. Allied squadrons kept flying overhead. The only disturbance came when my father was visited by an army recruiting officer. Jews in Hungary didn't do military service in the armed forces but were mobilised into labour battalions. This meant physical labour in military or industrial facilities or clearing minefields on the eastern front –

mostly with their own bodies. They were required to serve in their own civilian clothes wearing only a military cap and a yellow armband. Their commanders were Hungarian officers or non-commissioned officers who treated them extremely cruelly.

My father served a few months of his time as a batman to an officer. He polished his boots and sword, washed and ironed his underwear and took care of his gambling debts. When they parted, the officer shook his hand and said "Son," (he was about twenty years younger than my father!) "If the Jews were all as decent as you this long-suffering motherland of ours would have prospered!"

But my father's "decency" was to bring us close to financial catastrophe.

PRISONER NO. 58179

On March 19, 1944, the German Army occupied Hungary. Power in the country was taken over by a government willing to implement "the final solution to the Jewish question" in Hungary. The existing anti-Jewish laws were supplemented within days with new provisions. Regulations were passed on the sequestering of Jewish property, the obligation to wear the yellow star, restrictions on movement in public places, a ban on travel and so on.

My uncle's timber yard closed down, we wore yellow stars and, at my father's suggestion, my mother and aunt made seven rucksacks, one for each member of the family. At night, surreptitiously, my father and uncle moved some of our belongings to our neighbours' houses while other things were buried. The days passed in gloom and the nights in insomnia. Our wireless had been seized as soon as the German troops arrived.

On April 26, a number of Hungarian gendarmes walked into our house. They found us at the table, having lunch. "Finish your lunch in peace," they said. "It's your last lunch at home." They made an inventory for the confiscation of money and jewellery and a list of food in the house.

Finally they sealed the doors and then escorted us to the assembly point for the Srebrenica Jews. Two policemen walked ahead and two behind us. The reaction of the people we passed varied: some laughed and pointed, some looked solemn, others pretended not to notice, while some turned off into a side street before they reached us. Only

one Hungarian, an acquaintance of my father's, walked up to us, greeted us and shook hands, wishing us luck.

Late in the afternoon we were taken under escort to Bečej on a horse cart. The Bečej Town Hall was the assembly centre for all the Jews of middle Bačka. The shouting of plainclothes policemen shattered the night as they demanded we hand over any money we had hidden and threatened to shoot us.

The next day we were taken by rail to Szeged where they accommodated us in the already overcrowded synagogue. We sat on the floor to reserve a place for the family to sleep. The more resourceful tied rope between the pillars and hung blankets, clothes or towels preserve the illusion of privacy. The guards didn't come into the synagogue or the yard. They guarded us from outside.

The Szeged Jews were still in their own homes. They were given the duty of feeding us. Every day at noon, under the supervision of the guards, they brought us food. They knew that their own freedom was temporary and brought us the best cooked food in more than adequate quantities. Some kind of management system began to be set up in the synagogue: order was maintained.

Different categories of prisoners began to emerge.

The older generation seemed crushed. They passed their days exchanging dark forebodings. Many of them became apathetic and withdrew into themselves.

The devoutly religious stayed together. They prayed at regular times, performing ritual movements.

The younger generation, between the ages of 16 and 20, very quickly adapted themselves to the new situation. People quickly struck up acquaintanceships and associations according to inclinations, mostly on an intellectual basis.

My group sat in a corner of the yard and discussed Freud or Adler, or someone would read to us, translations of Baudelaire or Gerdani. Almost everyone had brought a book with them. One of the boys, his name was Kalman, had a violin and would occasionally interrupt a violent quarrel with the sounds of a Monti *Csardas*, masterfully performed. We didn't accept the objective reality and instead enjoyed our intellectual banter.

It was a mixed company and mutual sympathies soon arose. Secret smiles, lingering handshakes, embraces in dark corners, discussions about life. Later, some drew strength – and survived – thanks to these

last moments of tenderness. Some evoked these last days of intimacy as they died, as their last thoughts.

After about twenty days we were moved from Szeged to Baja, to a former furniture factory. The atmosphere became tense and dark forebodings hovered among us. There were ideas of something very bad ahead. Various rumours circulated including the one that "they kill you with gas over there". Nobody believed it, but the tension edged up.

After six or seven days they took us to the railway station where a long line of freight wagons were waiting for us. So were the German soldiers. We began to board the train.

We were afraid, but the Germans seemed good-natured. They were unarmed, polite, even affable. They carefully helped elderly people climb into the wagons. There was no hurrying, no swearing or ugly language. And so thousands and thousands of people went to their death without panic, accompanied by "*bitte*" and "*danke*".

The wagons were locked from the outside and the train set off. The bars on the windows were interwoven with barbed wire. Through them we watched our Pannonian Plain go by. Shepherds were tending their flocks and pitching stones at us. The wagons rang when they hit.

Our final farewell to Hungary.

There was a bucket in the wagon which we used with an incredible feeling of shame. Two or three times the train stopped. The soldiers would form a semi-circle around the train, machine-guns at the ready. They allowed us out of the wagons to empty our buckets within the semi-circle and relieve ourselves. The elderly, children, women and men were squatting, their eyes downcast. The Germans barked commands. Not a trace of their former politeness.

We had no idea where we were or where we were going. The names of the stations sounded Czech or Polish.

After about three days of travel, we saw through the windows a large camp of barracks buildings and people in striped prison clothes. The train slowed down and eventually stopped. The wagons were opened and we were met by lines of soldiers, their weapons at the ready. The soldiers were holding back dogs which were barking furiously and pulling at their chains. The commands rang out: "Don't take your belongings with you; they will be brought to you by truck! The elderly and sick should wait for the Red Cross vehicles to take them. Men form up on one side of the platform and women on the other side!"

Dozens of camp inmates in striped uniforms were putting us into ranks, according to the orders. They were silent, they wouldn't answer questions, but one of them would occasionally whisper through closed lips: "Choose work!"

One of my grandmothers could barely walk and we left her to wait for transport. She was afraid and felt abandoned, but my mother reassured her and promised we would be reunited soon. My other grandmother, mother and aunt walked away and stood in line with the other women. We watched them as long as we could.

The column of men moved forward and, eventually, each of us stopped before an SS officer. From photographs I saw later, I believe this was Dr Mengele. With his baton, he carelessly waved me to the right side. My father, my uncle and I all went in that direction, into the column of younger and stronger men. They took us to a building where we had to strip naked. They shaved all the hair from our bodies. Then we went into a shower room through one door and, after showering, came out through another door. There we were given some underwear, prison clothes, caps and shoes with wooden soles. Before we dressed they painted some liquid in our armpits and around our genitals. "It's for the lice," they said. Then we were taken to an empty concrete room where we sat without moving until the morning. We were supervised by two older prisoners. They beat one of the newcomers to death, casually, because he was "undisciplined". Several times the silence was interrupted by the arrival of prisoners, messengers, wanting to know if there were any twins among us, promising excellent accommodation and food in the hospital. We were envious of the twins, not knowing they were to be guinea pigs for Mengele's research.

In the morning they accommodated us in barracks with wide four-tier beds of wooden planks. Each bed served for ten prisoners, as long as they lay on their sides.

We learned from the older prisoners that we were in Poland and that the camp was called Auschwitz-Birkenau. We asked about the section for older women. One Polish prisoner nonchalantly pointed at the thick smoke gushing from a high, wide smokestack. "There they are, they're coming out!" We didn't understand him. We asked two other prisoners as they passed:

"What are they burning? What is this cloying smell?"

They laughed bitterly. "Don't you recognise the smell of your relatives?"

Only then did we understand. We were in shock. I couldn't even weep. My emotions were completely numbed. The process of transformation from a man to a prisoner had begun. The process in which ethical and moral standards, along with emotions, give way to the biological instinct for survival. It is a process, but it advances, fast and inexorably.

The days followed one after another. They didn't register us and we weren't given a personal number which was the usual procedure after the selection. The older camp inmates saw this as indicating that we would be transferred to another camp which would take over the function of the main camp. In fact we had been brought to Auschwitz only for the purpose of selection and the culling of those who were of no use.

Meanwhile I was getting used to sleeping on the boards, using my shoes as a pillow and standing still for two or three hours each morning and evening for roll call while they counted us. I was also becoming accustomed to the camp food: half a litre of "tea" or "coffee" in the morning, half a litre of soup made from mangel-wurzels or grass at midday and, in the evening, a piece of bread and margarine the size of a little finger. The tea and soup were served from old washbasins and chamber pots.

Prisoners of different nationality communicated in the camp slang. This was a vocabulary of about a hundred German, Russian, Polish, Yiddish and French words. Some words or terms were replaced with gestures as the need arose. It took only a few days to adopt the slang, and it served its purpose well.

I saw the camp documentation after the war and saw that I had arrived in Auschwitz on May 30, 1944, and was transported, together with my father and uncle, to Buchenwald on June 6 of the same year.

Buchenwald became our base camp. Here they recorded our personal information, photographed us and gave us our numbers which we sewed on our jackets and trousers. They vaccinated the new arrivals, all with the same needle.

It was the established practice for groups of prisoners from the base camp to be sent to wherever a labour force was needed.

In the middle of June, they transported me, as part of a large group of prisoners, to a ruined factory near Jena. We worked twelve hours a day, plus the roll calls, seven days a week, with the food and accommodation as described already. We were not experienced at

physical work so they “motivated” us with copious beatings and spectacular executions “as an example”.

My father and uncle were taken to Magdeburg for similar work and under similar conditions. After a few days of this I fell ill. In a first-aid station the French doctor, also a prisoner, diagnosed pneumonia. Thanks to a combination of circumstances I wasn't killed, but was returned to the camp hospital in Buchenwald. The doctors there were also French prisoners. They had no medicines, but I was given good care. Incredible as it sounds I was fit again in ten days. I had taken French lessons from my earliest childhood because my parents had wanted me to study in Paris. This dream failed to come true, but I believe my knowledge of the language saved my life.

After my successful hospital treatment I was sent to one of the convalescent barracks. This was the place for invalids, often without arms or legs, who were unable to work. From time to time we were visited by Red Cross commissions. These barracks served as demonstrations of “humane German treatment” and an apparent contradiction of the “enemy propaganda” about the killing of camp inmates who were unfit to work. Here my father and I met again. I learned that he had been seriously wounded in Magdeburg, during a raid by the Allied air force. He was returned to Buchenwald as an invalid. He was very feeble, but meeting me helped to restore some of his vitality. I fed him the illusion that perhaps my mother had survived the selection and the family would be together again after the war. I also found a way to improve our food a little by voluntary night work in the camp kitchen, trading tobacco, selling shoes and clothing of questionable origin and so on.

I struck up a friendship with three fellow-Jews my own age, two of them from Transylvania and one from Budapest. One of them was missing a leg and the other two had lost arms. They suffered both because of their handicaps and because of mistreatment by other camp inmates. There weren't many Jews in Buchenwald, but they ranked at the very bottom of the national hierarchy, as they did in the other concentration camps. Verbal and physical abuse of the Jews was a kind of entertainment for the others, mostly Polish, Ukrainian and Russian prisoners. Invalids were easy prey.

The four of us often met for discussions with intellectual pretensions, reading, singing popular hits and sharing our memories and

plans. We made our own simulation of life and were able to spend part of our time as normal people.

It was difficult to get any news from the front, but there were many indirect signs that Germany's power was almost spent. There were Allied planes flying overhead every day. Camp inmates with German blood were invited to volunteer for the army in return for a pardon for their earlier transgressions. Non-Jewish camp inmates were asked to volunteer to give blood. The reward was a whole big sausage. Towards the end they began checking even the inmates of the invalid barracks and all who had four limbs were declared fit for work.

In the middle of December, 1944, I said farewell to my father and my friends. Along with hundreds of other camp inmates I was sent to a small place called Berga am Elster. This was an idyllic spot in North-Eastern Germany, untouched by the war.

We were accommodated in a mill which no longer operated. We slept in the same four-tiered beds. Lying close together we tried to keep ourselves warm. Work, work and work, twelve-hour shifts, night and day. We were using pneumatic drills to dig holes in a hill, presumably for the building of an underground factory. The German workers would do the blasting and we would take out the rock, or load it into small wagons. The work was hard, the pace unendurable and there were beatings all the time. It was unbearably cold and our clothes were thin, our food weak and inadequate. As soon as anybody died the nearest prisoners would immediately take his clothes and put them on. The foreman would wet the dead man's chest and write his prisoner number in large figures with an indelible pencil. This was the usual procedure in all the camps because the corpses were also counted during the *Appell*, the roll call. Roll calls were held after work and would sometimes last for hours as we stood at attention in the snow, ice or rain. The death rate was high and every two weeks they would bring new prisoners in as replacements.

After the work and the roll calls were over, the dilemma would be whether to sleep on the upper or lower tiers of the bunks. On the upper tiers it was warmer, but the prisoners on the top levels rarely woke up in the case of need and would urinate on those below them, after which they would be harshly beaten. Sleeping on the lower tiers it was colder and the prisoner would often wake up wet.

More than two months passed. Few of the prisoners with whom I had originally come to Berga had survived. They had died at work, died

when being beaten, died in their sleep. I could hardly move and I would work in a semi-conscious state. I was becoming a living skeleton. We were so exhausted that we could even fall asleep as we walked. We would go to work and come back in ranks of five, holding each other arm in arm. The first, third and fifth would walk awake while the second and fourth would walk and sleep.

At the end of February, 1945, during the usual selection, I was put into the category of *musulman*⁴.

I was returned to Buchenwald and found myself again in the invalid barracks. The same day I had a visit from a prisoner, a Serb from Srbobran. He gave me a piece of bread and half an onion. He was silent, silent... then: "Your father died two weeks ago." He patted me on the back and left.

I was now quite alone. I collected another ten Jews together and kept repeating after somebody: "*Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'may rabo...*"

I tried to discover the circumstances of my father's death, but all I knew for certain was that after my departure he had become apathetic. He lost the hope that my mother might have survived and nor did he believe that I would return. Perhaps he was suffering under the burden of a bad decision: when we left Hungary, in Wenerneustadt, the Germans had opened the doors of the wagon and given us ten minutes to think. Anyone willing to volunteer for farm work could get out, along with their family members. My father was against any kind of volunteering. Nor did he have any luck with his choice of friends. In Magdeburg, up to the time that he was wounded, he was working beside his best friend from Srbobran. This friend was appointed as a foreman (*Vorarbeiter*) by the Germans. From that moment on my father became his main victim for beatings. I think he probably lost his will to live.

I was moved to a new barracks. There I discovered that the food was distributed by a Dalmatian. I spoke to him in Serbian and he just looked at me and walked on. But from then on my rations became ampler, my soup thicker, my piece of bread a little bigger. I began to recover a little.

During March the mood in Buchenwald grew tense. We could hear the artillery fire in the distance. As the days passed the roar of the canons became louder. We could even hear machine guns. We didn't

⁴ See footnote, 2, p. 134

know whether the Germans would hand us over to the Allies alive. The end was near, but what it would be was uncertain.

One morning, late in March or early in April, 1945, the inmates from that part of the camp called Kleinlager were led to the gates of Buchenwald. They formed a column which must have numbered thousands of prisoners and, surrounded by guards, were quick-marched along the road to Weimar. Many were exhausted or invalids and they fell behind. All of these were shot dead. The road behind us was lined on both sides with corpses in striped clothes. We arrived at the railway station in Weimar. A hundred people were pushed into each wagon and we set off.

Here my memory begins to fail me. My consciousness was oscillating between clear images and complete darkness. What remains now are fragments with no clear sequence of events and that is how I shall present them.

The journey took between ten and twenty days.

- The Germans would occasionally open the wagon. We would press ourselves into one end of the wagon and, one by one, cross to the other end. Those who couldn't walk were shot on the spot. The corpses of those who had died and those who had just been shot would be taken in a blanket to the last wagon, the wagon "for the dead". This gave us an opportunity to pluck some grass to eat or to wet our mouths when it was raining.
- The Allied air force bombed our locomotive. We stood and waited. The Allies were strafing us. There were many dead prisoners. The "wagons for the dead" were filling up and were uncoupled at the next station.
- The Germans no longer rode in their special wagon behind the locomotive. They were now deployed in pairs among the prisoners' wagons, sitting by the open doors. We had air to breathe.
- Every now and then there would be a problem with the railway line. We would wait for a long time, then move, then wait again.
- We were crawling with lice. The prisoners picked at the lice, picked at them and ate them.
- The hunger and thirst were terrible. Some people wet their lips with their own urine.

- We got water from somewhere and rushed for it. I managed to get two or three sips.
- There was no bucket. We were surrounded on all sides by our own and other people's excrement.
- People were dying in large numbers. We dared not take the corpses out of the wagon. If anyone should trip and fall they were shot dead. The corpses stayed with us, decomposing.
- One prisoner arranged a deal with a guard. For a cup of water he offered his gold-crowned tooth. The German pulled his tooth out with a bayonet and brought him water.
- The train was standing at a station in Czechoslovakia. An elegant blonde woman, wearing a hat, was negotiating with a German officer. Then villagers arrived bringing food for the soldiers and barrels full of boiled potatoes for us. The Germans distributed them to us. The whole village was at the station watching us. We also got some water.
- I was talking to a young Pole. A captured Partisan. He was talking loudly. The German guard at the wagon doors raised his rifle and shot. The Pole's brains splattered across the floor. A number of hungry hands reached out.
- The train stopped, the command rang out "*Alles raus!*" We crawled to the wagon door and fell out onto the ground. It was raining. Everyone pushed their dry lips and tongues into the puddles. We saw more prisoners around us; even they were astonished to see how we looked. They whispered to us that we were in Dachau. We crawled to a barracks and were given soup and water. We heard heavy artillery fire. I completely lost orientation in time and space. All I remember is the door closing and the ban on leaving the barracks.
- The barracks doors were open and we were crawling towards the exit. There were American soldiers standing there. Horror in their eyes. One of them stood there and vomited. They were stupefied.
- I was standing completely naked while they showered me from a hose. Then they sprayed us with white powder from a pump. DDT, they said. Haircutting and shaving.

- They were driving us in ambulances. I was on a stretcher. The soldiers were very careful. They put everyone into their own individual beds with white sheets. American military hospital, they said.
- We slept or lay half conscious. Our days were filled with doctors, injections, infusions, visits, carefully chosen food. We were all suffering from dysentery. There was a very high death rate.

Within a few days my consciousness gradually returned. I could tell day from night. I talked with my neighbours. There was an Austrian lying on my left, on my right a Pole. I could also communicate with the doctor. After an X-ray examination he told me I had tuberculosis of the lungs. They removed the tubercular scrofulae from under my arms. The scurvy was rapidly going and my teeth were no longer loose. A dentist removed dead tissue from my mouth.

I walked around the hospital ward where there were now fifty or sixty former camp inmates and found two Jews from Budapest and Novi Sad. We struck up a friendship. Sometimes we would sit in front of the hospital barracks. One of them had a mirror so we looked at ourselves to see what our bodies looked like. We saw that we were skeletons covered with skin. The widest part of our legs were our knees. We had no muscle mass and had to use cushions when we wanted to sit.

The national committees which had been organised took a census of the inmates. Someone from the Yugoslav committee came and noted my personal details. From then on I regularly received *Dahavski poročevalac*, the newspaper for Yugoslav prisoners, in Slovenian. Most of the Yugoslav internees in Dachau were Slovenes.

One day passed after another. The Americans came up with the idea that the German prisoners of war should clean our facilities and maintain hygiene. Bad idea! The former camp inmates didn't respect the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war.

A month passed. I learnt from the Yugoslav Committee that the next day, June 4, 1945, we were to depart for Yugoslavia.

At six in the morning I was at the assembly point. There were American troop transports waiting for us. The former camp inmates were now wearing German uniform. A uniform from Rommel's Africa Corps was hanging on my body. We set off. Our journey took us through Austria and we entered Italy via the Brenner Pass. We were plagued by dysentery. Locals in the villages through which we passed

stared in amazement at the “German soldiers” on American trucks with their bare behinds hanging outside.

I don't remember arriving in Yugoslavia. Perhaps I had dozed off. However we were greeted in Ljubljana with festivities: a military brass band, people showering us with gifts. Speeches, music, merriment. Night time. I was tortured by dysentery.

The next day I was admitted to hospital. But this is no longer a story about the war.

EPILOGUE

The concentration camps have been described by many authors. Historians, writers, politicians, former inmates, sociologists and many others have made valuable contributions to the understanding of this twentieth century phenomenon. In most of the descriptions, both of the camps and of the camp inmates, the story ends with the end of the war. The reality, I believe, is rather more complex.

Jews were taken to the camps to be exterminated. Depending on their physical condition, the extermination was carried out immediately on their arrival, or delayed for some time in order to exploit whatever physical strength they still had.

After the initial selection, if he survived it, a Jew would end up in a camp where the usual norms of civilisation as he knew them didn't apply. The battle being fought here was one to stay alive as long as possible, and there was no choice in the way it was done. In this struggle for biological survival, ethical principles and moral norms were of no significance. The new value system favoured prisoners who were adaptable, able to adjust rapidly to the changing conditions of the concentration camp. A regression in civilisation would take place.

After the liberation the inmate would leave the camp as a partly changed person. Resocialisation was essential, mostly spontaneous and, more or less successful, it touched on every area of life. After the complete change of personality in the camp, the former inmate had to learn everything from everyday behaviour to the traditional values of a civilised society. This is a long and painful road, regardless of any professional or personal affirmation either planned or achieved.

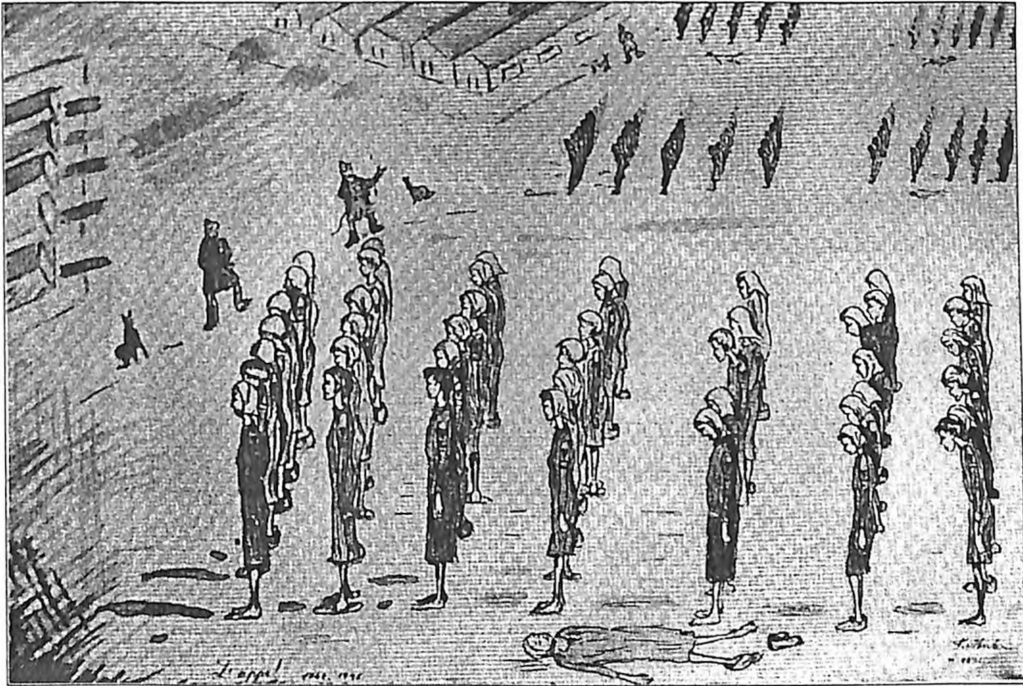
But one question remains unanswered. Do the camp traumas disappear, or are they only successfully repressed? Perhaps that's an individual matter. For my own part, sometimes, in my thoughts, I recognise

the spirit of Buchenwald. These aren't memories of the camp but thinking in line with the camp model. The camp marching song perhaps expresses it best.

*“Buchenwald ich kann dich nicht vergessen,
weil du mein Schicksal bist...”*

(Buchenwald, I can't forget you,
because you are my destiny...)

Subotica, March 2002



Roll Call (Appellstehen)

*From a collection of drawings by Belgian painter Felicie Mertens,
inmate No. 10465 in the Ravensbrück camp*