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*Mirjam CAJNER*

## ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER

**M***irjam (Mira) Cajner was born in Šid on May 1, 1925, to Majer and Sima Francoz. Her father had a jeweller business in Šid.*

*Together with her younger sister, Ela, she attended primary and junior secondary school.*

*After the war her entire family moved to Israel.*

I was educated in Šid, in the primary and junior secondary schools. When I wanted to go to Novi Sad to matriculate and continue studying, I was rejected because of my Jewish religion. The *Numerus Clausus* had already been introduced. There were very few Jewish families in Šid, perhaps ten or so. They maintained good relations with their neighbours. I would say that half the Jewish families were well off.

The beginning of the war happened on the Passover. That evening we were sitting at the table, eating *matzah* and other holiday food. Suddenly we heard tanks coming. We were frightened, not knowing what would happen. The following day my father went to his shop. Immediately Germans arrived with the Ustashas. These weren't the local Germans. They asked where the Jews lived. The Ustashas brought them to our house. Unlike the Germans, these were local Ustashas. I don't remember everyone who came to the apartment then, but I do remember the Ustashas. There was an ironmonger's shop next to us, owned by a Croat. I think his name was Stokić. He was very anti-Jewish and anti-Serb. No one had known this before the war.

His daughter and I had been good friends. I was young and had no contact with her parents. I only knew the friends of my parents. I was popular in secondary school. It was common knowledge that I was Jewish, but no one ever called me a Jew or a *Čivutkinja*, no one.

When the Germans came they said the shop was no longer ours and that my father must take them to his house because they wanted to search it and find what we had hidden. We had no opportunity to hide anything because it all happened overnight. They came to our house and found us two daughters. They wouldn't allow our father to talk to us. They began searching for things in the cupboards. Mother became frightened and began shouting and they put a gun in her mouth so she was unable to speak. They turned the whole house upside down and took whatever they wanted. I don't remember what they found, but there wasn't any gold in the house.

Later they summoned us to the Municipal Council. We spoke good German in the family and my father and grandfather spoke perfect German because they had been in the Austro-Hungarian Army. They told us that we had to go to work under German supervision. My sister and I were assigned to translate books from Serbian to German in the taxation department (which was in the Municipal Council building). In addition to my sister and I, there were another two older Jews. I saw that they were issuing pass cards to Serbs so that they could go from one village to another and that people from the municipal authorities were stamping these documents. One day, early in the morning, I took some blank identification cards and stamped them. Why? My Serb school friend who had come from Šabac had said to me "Mira, if you and your family don't flee you won't be alive tomorrow." I asked her what she meant and she told me that in Šabac all the Jews had been killed and thrown into the Sava. Later she was married in Slovenia, where her husband died. I went to Slovenia to look for her, but couldn't find her. Her name was Anđelka. When I heard this I decided, that same evening in February 1942, to take two identification cards and come home.

During the occupation my father worked at the railway station. For nine months he had to clean officers' boots. He took a lot of beatings, his teeth were knocked out, I don't know how. Other Jews also had to work. There weren't many of them, ten families, perhaps eight or nine men. The attitude of other locals to us didn't change when the

Germans arrived, only the Croats stopped speaking to us. They immediately seized our shop and appointed a young commissioner who was not from Šid. We had a good relationship with him, but he never came to our house. My father didn't receive any earnings from the shop.

When I returned home that evening I told my father what my friend from Šabac had told me and showed him the two blank identification cards I had taken. Father said that my mother and I should remove the yellow armbands we had to wear, go to the station in the evening and wait for the first train to Zagreb and beyond, towards the Italian border. Father knew some man over there whom he had helped a number of times in the past. He gave us his address and said that he would get us across the border.

There was heavy snow in February, 1942. Mother and I removed our yellow armbands at the station and threw them into the toilet. Then, when night fell, we boarded the first train for Zagreb. Near the border they came to check documents. We didn't have any so we went into the toilet and closed the door. They banged and banged on the door, but we didn't open it.

We crossed the border and arrived in Ljubljana. People had told us that in Ljubljana there were many people who had fled from other parts of segregated Yugoslavia, that they were in a building called Cukarna. This was a sugar factory where a large number of Jews were accommodated. When we arrived there they told us we could have beds. We didn't report to the Italian authorities. There were representatives of an Italian Jewish organisation in Cukarna. They welcomed people and told them that they could save themselves. There we waited for my father who, according to our agreement, was to follow after us with my sister. We found a man who was going to Croatia, so we sent a letter with him describing where we had crossed the border and everything else.

Fourteen days later they came to Zagreb on the same train and then to Karlovac. There was a Jewish woman in Karlovac who worked with the Germans. They took her to my father and he told her that he needed to cross the border with his daughter. She told him that she would give him a German officer's or soldier's uniform. She told him to lie down in the train and, because he spoke good German, to keep saying that he was wounded, sick, so that they wouldn't check him when he crossed the border. He had no documents, he just sat next to

the soldiers in the train. My sister, who was fourteen, was with the other children crossing the border, in a wagon in which these children travelled and crossed the border every day to go to school. She was silent and afraid, but she sat with the children.

When the train stopped at the border they began checking the passengers. Through the window she saw that two Germans were taking my father somewhere and that he was pretending he was unable to walk. She didn't know what to do. She got off the train, not exactly where father had, but a little further away. In the meantime the train left and her coat and all her other things were still on it. They immediately turned father over to the Italian gendarmerie and said that they thought something was suspicious. They put him back on the train, now very frightened, and took him back to Karlovac where they locked him up. He was told that he would be taken to court.

My poor sister had no idea what to do. It was cold and she asked a Slovenian who worked on the railway for something to wear. He asked her where she was going and who she was. She told him that her mother was in Ljubljana, in Cukarna, that she wanted to join her mother and asked him to put her on a train. And that's what he did. She arrived in Ljubljana where we met her. However she had caught a cold on the way and now had pneumonia. I took her to hospital where she was treated. For them we were *spolatti*, refugees.

Father was kept in custody in Karlovac. My father was a good man and he had helped many people, both financially and in other ways. Some time before the war, someone had written to him telling him about a good, but poor man who father should help if he could. My father had sent this complete stranger a large parcel of food. On the return address of the parcel he wrote "Majer Francoz, Šid".

Now in prison, the guard asked my father what his name was. When father told him the man shouted "It's not possible! That man sent me a large parcel for Christmas. You sent me that parcel from Šid?" Father confirmed this and the man told him he would no longer be held there. He closed the door and said that he would come the next day. He had decided to find someone he could bribe to save my father. Father then sent a letter to Šid, to the Jewish woman who worked with the Germans and who had earlier given him a German uniform. In the letter he explained to her where he had buried our gold. He asked her to bring it and she did. Father gave her a third of

it, paid the man in the prison and also paid the man who took him across the border on foot, through the snow. However he was caught again by the Italians and detained in Ljubljana. When they asked where his family was he didn't know what to say. If he told them his family was in the same city, they would be detained as well, if he didn't, something even worse could happen. He decided to reveal that his family was in Cukarna. The Italians immediately came but, because my sister was in hospital, they didn't find us where they looked for us.

Father and mother spent about two months in prison, where my father fell ill. He was only 55, but he lay in bed all the time. When he recovered a little, they told us in the prison that our whole family would be sent to the Ferramonti concentration camp. They put us on a train to Naples. There we spent two days in prison before they put us on another train to Kozenca, the station from which people travelled to Ferramonti. In Kozenca there was a car waiting to take us to the camp. This was sometime in May or June, 1942. We stayed in the Ferramonti camp until the end of the year.

The camp was for Jews, of whom there were about 2,500 or 3,000. We lived in barracks, about thirty people to each and slept in bunk beds. The food was bad, there was no water for people to wash their faces, but at least they didn't punish us. There was no hospital in the camp, but my father was still ill. Because of this they decided to put us in *confino libero* in a place called Pizzoli, near Aquila in central Italy. In this free confinement we were obliged to report to the police three times a day. We lived in a rented room and were given eight liras a day for food.

Unfortunately for us, when the Allied invasion of Italy began in mid-1943 and the Ferramonti camp was liberated, we remained behind the front line. We then had to flee into the hills where we met Partisans from Yugoslavia who had escaped from Italian camps. They helped us a great deal, despite the fact that they themselves hadn't eaten for days. Whenever they got bread from the rural people they'd give us some. At night they would go down to the villages but, in that region, the rural people were so poor that they had nothing to eat themselves. We had some rings and some gold. For every gold item they would give us a piece of bread. My sister and I became very sick; I had pleurisy. It was cold, we had nothing to eat, we couldn't sleep. We were living in caves. It was a harsh winter that year, the winter of

1943–44. All day long we would listen to them bombing Monte Casino and other fortified German positions. The advance of the Allied forces was very slow.

When the Germans came closer to us we went down from the mountain to a tiny, impoverished hamlet of about ten houses with the name of Carrufo. There we stayed with an elderly woman. We said that we were Catholics and went to services in the church so that the locals would think we were much the same as them. We were there for some time until the Americans liberated us in the summer of 1944, in June I think. From there they took us to Cinecitta near Rome where they were assembling refugees from various countries. They told us that anyone who wanted could go to Palestine, that they would take them to Bari, which was where the soldiers returning to Palestine were and we could travel with them. We agreed to this and went to Bari by train and stayed there for a few days in a camp until an English ship came to take non-Jewish soldiers to Egypt on holiday. In Egypt, we Jews went ashore and transferred to Palestine via the Suez Canal. There were about eight hundred people in our group. We arrived in Palestine on April 23, 1945.

I had two aunts, sisters of my father, who lived in Belgrade. One was called Judit Francoz. She was unmarried and lived in the Izvozna Banka building, on the third or fourth floor. My other aunt, Debora Francoz, was a widow and also lived in Belgrade. After the first or second day of the bombing of Belgrade they fled to Šid. I think they told us that they had reached our place on foot, which means that they walked about a hundred kilometres. My father was overjoyed when they arrived and told them to stay. They said they couldn't, because they couldn't leave their things behind. "What things? We are fighting for our lives here!" my father replied. But they refused to stay and returned to Belgrade by train. They were killed at Sajmište. I learnt about this after the war from Milan Emil Klajn. The rest of my father's family, four brothers, were all very religious and had a large number of children. One had nine, one had five and the third had eight, and they were unable to flee with so many children. They lived in Ilok, eighteen kilometres from Šid. One of my father's brothers returned from Ilok to live with us because my father was wealthy and was helping him out. He told my father that he could not escape. All of them were deported to Auschwitz. We heard another story from a man who

now lives in Israel about Estera Francoz, the eldest daughter of my father's brother, Jakov Francoz. She had been married before the war and had a child five or six months old. She was very pretty. At the camp entrance they told her to go to one side and that her child was to go to the other. A soldier took her child but she began shouting, ran after the child, took it in her arms and, together with the child, went into the gas chamber. I only once met the man who told this story. None of the 23 members of my father's family returned. Only some of the children of one of my uncles were saved and now live in New York.