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Eva ČAVČIĆ

## OUT OF OUR MINDS WITH HUNGER



**E**va Čavčić was born on June 23, 1923, in Bačka Topola, to Franja and Jelena, née Herman. She matriculated from the Sombor secondary school in 1941. Her parents and close relatives perished in the Holocaust.

She spent the period from November 1942 until the end of the second world war in prisons in Vojvodina, in camps in Hungary and in the notorious Bergen-Belsen camp. After her return from the camps she graduated from the Faculty of Technology at Belgrade University in 1951. She was awarded a Ph.D.

by the same university in 1965. She spent the greater part of her career at the Vinča Institute for Nuclear Sciences and in the Pančevo Chemical Industry. In 1959 she married Milan Čavčić, who died in 1994.

Eva Čavčić lives in retirement in Belgrade and is an active member of the Jewish community.

I was an only child and lived up to the age of five in Bačka Topola, where my father was a grain merchant. In that year he went bankrupt, so we moved in with my grandmother and grandfather who lived in Sombor, where my grandfather had a grocery store which my father took over after my grandfather died. However he was forced by Parkinson's disease to let the business go in 1937. I was much loved as a child, pampered by everyone in the family. I was obedient and

always a brilliant student. I matriculated from the Sombor secondary school in 1941.

I learnt about the persecution of Jews in National Socialist Germany at the age of ten, when the first refugees from Germany began to arrive. A shelter was set up for them at the Jewish Community in Sombor. My father's aunt lived in Berlin and we helped her by sending parcels.

At that time we lived a normal life, making plans for the future. Mine were mostly to do with what I would study. I was learning languages and dreaming about the life which lay ahead of me. In order to satisfy some of the desires which were beyond my parents' means, I began earning money by giving mathematics lessons while I was in the fifth grade of secondary school.

Hungarian troops entered Sombor on April 12, 1941. Yugoslavia disintegrated and the occupation of Bačka began. With the arrival of the Hungarian troops the position and social status of Jews changed fundamentally. The execution of Jews and Serbs began immediately. Jewish men were taken to forced labour. My father was spared because of his poor health. I passed my matriculation exam on June 23, 1941, a day after the Axis Powers attacked the Soviet Union. Following the occupation of Bačka, Hungarian laws came into force, including laws against Jews. There were many limitations imposed, but we still lived relatively normally in our homes. Children continued going to school, we weren't required to wear identification, we could still be involved in business, although with certain restrictions. I couldn't enrol at the university of course so, from 1941 until my arrest in November 1942, I supported myself mostly by giving lessons to children while I myself learnt English, German and, in secret, Russian. My two elder cousins, with whom I grew up and was very close, were already active members of the Communist movement and so, in 1942, I followed in their footsteps. Even before that, when I was fifteen or sixteen, I was a member of the progressive Zionist Youth organised by Tehelet Lavan. I wanted to be in some way part of the anti-Fascist struggle.

So I joined in the activities of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia and was admitted to the organisation in August, 1942. My activities consisted mainly of collecting donations for Red Aid, translating pamphlets from German to Serbian and reading progressive literature. My main task was to be a courier between the secretary of the

district committee for Northern Bačka and the secretary of the county committee. Both of them operated underground.

## IN HUNGARIAN PRISONS AND CAMPS

The Hungarian police had already been searching for both secretaries for more than a year, so every meeting with them carried great risk and required a great deal of caution. As is well known, after the Revolution was crushed in 1919, the police and the counterintelligence service had a long tradition and highly refined techniques for fighting Communism.



*Eva Čavčić, nee Cuker, in August 1941, in Sombor*

In November 1942, a new wave of arrests of Communists and their sympathizers began in Novi Sad. Once this was complete, the Hungarian counterintelligence service's flying squad turned its attention to Sombor and the arrests began there. And so I, too, was arrested on November 24, 1942, and charged with being a courier. Because the secretary of the district committee had killed himself while being arrested and they had been looking for the secretary of the county committee for more than a year, they wanted to get a confession from me so that they could catch him immediately. According to the tried

and true schedule and technique, they began beating me severely immediately after my arrest. Without going into details of the torture which took place, I would note that within 24 hours of my arrest I could no longer stand up or move my fingers. My appearance can best be illustrated by the fact that I was given a tetanus shot in my chest, because it was the only part of my body which was still white. After a

two-day break because I had festering sores all over my body, they continued the interrogation, but with new methods this time. Today I am a disabled veteran with forty per cent disability and the scars are still visible on the soles of my feet. Of course these thugs put a little more passion into their investigation because I was a Jew. About twenty of us were arrested. We were all in one room, facing the wall; we took turns standing and sitting, hour by hour, in the constant presence of the gendarmes. All conversation among us was banned and the agents would come down to the room and take us away one by one for questioning. In December the whole group was taken to Novi Sad, to the Armija, where the investigation was completed and the records made.

Soon after this, on January 18, 1943, the Higher Military Court sentenced me to six years' imprisonment. I spent the period between sentencing and the day the ruling became final with all the others who had been convicted in these proceedings in the court prison in Novi Sad.

On April 30, 1943, they moved me and the other women from the Novi Sad prison to the Marija Nostra women's prison in north-west Hungary and the men to the Csillag prison in Szeged.

The women's prison in Maria Nostra was run by Catholic nuns and only the guards were men. The prison was mainly meant for criminals. When I arrived in Maria Nostra there was already a large group of political and military convicts there from Budapest. These women immediately welcomed us so we newcomers managed to fit into the organised life of the collective. The prison regime was very strict: there were three of us in each 4 metre by 2 metre cell, we slept on straw mattresses on the floor and wore prison uniforms. Of course Jewish women were put in cells together with other Jewish women. A special regime applied to Jews, they could receive only three 6-kilogram parcels per year and three visits. We were allowed to write letters once every three months. In the same period of time the other prisoners received six parcels and were allowed six visits. We had to go to church – Jews to the Reform Church, where we also had religious teaching.

### LAST MEETING WITH PARENTS

After Italy's capitulation in September, 1943, the prison regime became somewhat more liberal. They allowed us to receive larger parcels and each Sunday afternoon, the deputy warden, who was in

charge of us, would assemble us in the courtyard or in a hall where we were allowed to mix under her supervision and perhaps even prepare some kind of short performance. In the summer we went to work in the fields, in the winter we made hand-made watches and knitted things for sale in the big hall. On March 2, 1944, my father, my mother, and Aunt Paula, my father's sister, came to visit me. There was a special room for visits, divided in half by a wall above which hung a small-gauge wire mesh through which only a finger tip could pass. I stood on the inner side of the wall with a nun sitting next to me. On the other side were my parents with a guard. On this occasion they made an exception and allowed me to go to the entrance hall to take the parcels and so I was able to kiss them quickly. This was my last meeting with my parents, but I saw my aunt once more in Bergen-Belsen.

History records that the Germans occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, and that was when the "final solution" of the Jewish question in Hungary began. A month later even we women prisoners had to wear a yellow star and were then completely isolated from the other prisoners. At the end of June, a ghetto prison was set up in a wing of the Gyűjtőfogház assembly prison in the Budapest suburb of Köbánya. Here Jews were brought from all Hungarian prisons, regardless of what their conviction was for. Now we too were moved from Maria Nostra to the Budapest prison. The regime in the prison was adapted to the situation. The only belongings we were allowed to keep were our underwear and personal hygiene items. We wore uniforms at the height of summer, a skirt and jacket made of thick baize and shirt of hemp cloth. They didn't let us wear shoes so we were barefoot. I was the only one, because of the state the soles of my feet were in, allowed to wear specially made moccasins. Again in this prison we were in a collective and had our own illegal organisation.

In August 1944, Budapest was bombed heavily, day after day. At this time we learnt, from a leaflet thrown from an aircraft, about the Auschwitz gas chambers where 450,000 Hungarian Jews were killed. In fact it was then that I realised where my parents had been deported to at the end of May and I became aware of the fact that I would never see them again. Not my parents nor any of my other closest family, my grandmothers and aunts.

After Horthy's proclamation under which Hungary quit the Tripartite Pact on October 15, 1944, the extreme Right, the Nyilas Arrow Cross, came to power in Hungary. Our exodus began on October 20.

We were moved from the Budapest prison to Komaron, to military prisons, to the Csillag where, on November 7, they turned us over to the German SiPo (*Sicherheitspolizei*). It's worth noting that in Komaron they again put us together with political prisoners, non-Jews, who had been brought there from Hungarian prisons. At about eight in the evening on November 7, the door of our room, in which there were about ninety of us, suddenly opened. We were ordered to line up in the hallway without our luggage. We heard them say "Ten at a time, put them in front of the machines." We were convinced they were taking us to be shot by a firing squad, but luckily these machines turned out to be typewriters and they were used to register us. (My list and the lists of some of my friends are now in Yad Vashem). When we ran out into the hallway we were really sorry to see our friends who had remained in Maria Nostra because, naively, we had believed that they would not share our fate, but they too had been deported a few days after us.

## DACHAU AND BERGEN-BELSEN

They loaded us into wagons on November 10. After travelling for four days, during which they opened our wagons only once, the train with its load of three hundred detainees arrived in Dachau. There was an artist with us in my wagon, a violinist, and she played the violin all night as we were crossing the Hungarian border, bidding farewell to her country.

When we saw the Dachau sign at the railway station I knew we had arrived in one of the most notorious concentration camps and that from that point on we could expect only evil. However at the time we still had no idea what suffering we would actually go through. It was a beautiful, sunny winter day, the snow-clad mountains shone all around us. It was there, at the Dachau station, that we first met camp inmates. They wore clean, striped suits, with caps on their heads, but their faces were like masks, completely expressionless and the shine had entirely disappeared from their eyes. We found this completely impossible to understand at the time. They lined us up in ranks of five and we walked in these to the sub-camp Allach, a men's camp where we were accommodated temporarily. We stayed there for about ten days. They didn't take any of our things from us. In Allach we were contacted by

French inmates who were active in the resistance movement. They gave us a box of medications and a lot of useful advice.

I would like to point out that in Komaron, and even during our transport, we were always a cohesive, organised group and this made all the suffering we went through a little easier. I was never a lonely individual, I was always with my friends and we helped one another. In the Allach camp, and even later, we were together, Jews and non-Jews, all the women political prisoners from Hungarian prisons. This once triggered an unpleasant incident. A few young girls, probably from fear of receiving worse treatment if they were together with the Jews, wanted to ask to be separated. However, after we talked to them everything was calmed down and we stayed together in the collective.

From there, after travelling another few days in wagons without enough food and water and walking for several kilometres, we arrived, on November 25, on a night as black as pitch, in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. At first we shared a barracks with Jewish mothers and their children from Slovakia. Of course it was very difficult for these women to see their children going hungry and they were concerned about their fate. I still remember one of them shouting angrily at her son, a pretty, dark-eyed child of six or seven, and the boy replying to her in a serious tone of voice "Why are you shouting at me? It's not my fault we're here!" Fifty years later, at a celebration for the fiftieth anniversary of the camp's liberation, in 1995, I learnt the happy epilogue to this. The woman survived the war with her daughter and her son, and this boy is now a dentist somewhere in Switzerland.

Life in the German concentration camps was very precisely organised. All internal authority was in the hands of the camp officials, who were chosen from among the inmates: head of the camp, heads of barracks, heads of various services, the *kapos* who, together with the Germans, had the power of life and death over the inmates.

At the beginning we managed to organise to have one of our friends as head of our barracks block. We distributed the food and looked after the hygiene ourselves. Because I'd completed a Red Cross first-aid course, I was assigned as nurse in our block. The role of nurse shouldn't be taken too literally, I wore a white scarf on my head and a white armband and all I had of the usual requirements were a thermometer, a few aspirins and two small tins of ointment, yellow for mange and black (Ictiol) for boils and festering sores. It was my job, whenever necessary, to take the sickest patients to the quarantine area.

## WORK, THE SALVATION FROM DEATH

It should be mentioned that some of our friends worked in various workshops such as the SS tailoring shop, or in the warehouse where various confiscated goods were sorted out, or in the bread warehouse. Because we were in a collective this made it possible to help one another and so make our lives a little easier. This went on until the first half of January, 1945. A large convoy of exhausted Polish women and Hungarian Jews arrived in January, after having walked for a long time, and many of them died soon after their arrival. At this point a low-capacity crematorium began operating in Bergen-Belsen. I still remember the cloying smell of burning human flesh which came from it. We realised that conditions were deteriorating, that death was drawing closer. We came to the conclusion that, under these circumstances, it would be best, if we could, to leave the camp in Bergen-Belsen as soon as possible. The easiest way to do this would be for us to try to be included in a transport leaving for work. In January, a hundred women from our group were selected for work. They were lucky; they were taken to the Volkswagen factory in Falersleben. All of these women, the whole hundred, survived, while sixty per cent of those of who remained in Bergen-Belsen died.

At the beginning of December 1944, Kramer, the notorious Auschwitz commandant, became commandant of our camp. He was followed, later, by his whole team of camp officials. This is when our living conditions deteriorated rapidly.

At this point we were stripped of what little independence we had. They moved us to another part of the camp and appointed a barracks chief who brought in assistants for the distribution of food. They stole from our already minimal rations. Some of our friends worked in what they called the *Gemüsekommando*, the vegetable headquarters. There, sixteen or eighteen of them, instead of a horse, would draw a cart laden with mangel-wurzels, potatoes and cabbages into the kitchen. This was considered very hard work and so they would each get an extra two pieces of bread and margarine. They were also able to get hold of some extra beets, potatoes, carrots or a cabbage leaf. The constant hunger was tearing me apart, as it was all the others, but I was a little better when my friends managed to get me included in this work. I did this hard labour from dawn until late at night, but I was less hungry. There were also two French women, two Ukraine women



and others from our group pulling the carts. We were in the labour section of the camp, in tidy barracks. We slept in three-tier beds, two to each bed. Meanwhile, our friends who were not working were sinking lower and lower and now slept on the bare ground!



*Eva Čavčić (front row, first on left), on July 1945, with a group of inmates liberated from Bergen-Belsen*

As the spring came, the conditions in the camp became horrific. There was hardly any water, the lice were multiplying and typhus began raging through the camp. At the same time, Germany's territory was being squeezed tighter, so more and more new inmates were being brought in from camps which had been closed down. The camp

was overcrowded and there was less and less food until, in the last few days before the liberation, the camp was left with no food at all.

Typhus fever was raging in March, and for some time before that: hundreds of inmates died every day. People were dying of hunger, of typhus fever, of exhaustion. The capacity of the crematorium was small so bodies were burnt in piles. Transporting the bodies was a problem in itself. Because there were no trucks or cars, the bodies were carried "manually". This was done by tying a belt or rope around the hands and legs of a body and then four inmates, four living skeletons, would drag the corpse down the road through the dust. To this day I have a vivid picture in my memory of those endless lines. Sometimes someone would fall, they would have not strength to stand up, so in the next round they too would be dragged off.

The hunger was dreadful. After the liberation of the camp the SS men left and Hungarian soldiers took over the internal guard duty completely. This changed nothing, they were no better than the SS. I remember once when a Hungarian soldier who was walking behind us, beside the cart, killed three starving inmates at point blank range when they ran up to us to try to grab some raw potatoes.

I must emphasise that the collective remained in existence and functioned all the time. Those of us who worked and who were in a position to get some food did our best to pass some of it on to our friends. When we managed to do this, we traded potatoes for something which could more easily be smuggled back when we returned from work. Thanks to our joint efforts we even made a small stock of food so that, during the last days before liberation when the food supply was virtually cut off, each of us had a spoon of sugar and little cube of margarine each day.

The camp was liberated in the early afternoon of April 15, 1945. By that time we were already totally apathetic from hunger. When my friend from Budapest and I spotted the American armoured vehicles with a white star, we didn't realise they were the liberator's armoured vehicles but thought they were German tanks.

When the camp commandant, driving in a jeep, announced that the camp had been liberated, we pushed our cart, still escorted by guards, to the kitchen where we were supposed to go. Then we suddenly realised that we didn't have to work any more and refused to unload it. The SS woman in the kitchen began shouting at us for being

disobedient. She was also unaware that by the next day she would be removing corpses with the other SS people who had been caught.

At the time of the liberation there were about forty thousand living souls in the camp and tens of thousands of bodies. I don't know how many people had typhus, how many had recovered from it. All the inmates were living skeletons and totally listless.

The next day, April 16, I came down with typhus. For fifteen days I had a temperature of 39.7° C. During my illness I was moved from Bergen-Belsen to an improvised hospital in what had once been military barracks in Bergen. For the first few days in hospital I lay in a clean bed but with no nightgown, no medicine, and none of the food a typhus patient ought to have had. The nurses were Hungarian men, prisoners of war.

I will always remember with gratitude our officers, prisoners of war from the Falingbostel camp, who came to our assistance within days of the liberation and took care of us as they would their own children.

Finally, on May 1, I awoke without a temperature. That's when it sank in that I had survived the war. Of course I was still exhausted and very weak but, on May 9, I left the hospital and returned to my friends in the collective.

Our officers, the prisoners of war, did all they could to help us return to normal life. They organised our departure to a summer resort, Steinhude am Meer, for recuperation, gave us some spending money, found us materials for dresses, in short they sorted out our lives.

I returned to my country on about August 20. In Zagreb, in a shelter, I met my cousin, my aunt's eldest daughter, who was a doctor and a Partisan officer. I didn't want to stay with her, although she tried to persuade me to do so. Instead I went to Sombor, where I found no one from my family nor anything from our house.

Now began the period in which I had to make the conditions for a new beginning. Those first few months my feelings were torn between happiness because the political goals I fought for had been won and deep sadness because I had lost all those dearest to me and carried the burden of the horrors I had gone through. Thanks to the help of JOINT, I was able to make my wish come true, the wish which had kept me going during the worst days in the camp. In December, 1945, I came to Belgrade to study and this was the beginning of a new life.