Irena FIŠER

SAD CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH*

Irena Fišer was born on May 9, 1924, in Srpski Miletić, in the Odžaci district near Sombor, to father Lajoš Ungar and mother Karolina, née Breder. Srpski Miletić was a village almost solely populated by Germans, that is Volskdeutscher. There her parents had a manufacturing business. Her father died in 1930. She was left with her mother, who remarried four years later, to the village doctor, Dr Bela Haim who, according to her account, treated her better than many real fathers would. Her mother died in 1937. She continued to live with her stepfather, at his request, and with her maternal grandmother. After primary school she went to school in Osijek and then to a private boarding school After completing the fourth year, she returned to Miletić where she took on the running of her parents' shop.

From her marriage to Dr Đorđe Fišer she has a son, who finished medicine, and a daughter-in-law and grandchildren Dejan and Maja. They live in Australia.

Life and all routines changed radically when the war broke out in 1941. We were in a purely *Volksdeutsche* village but, because I had been born there, everyone knew me and up to then had seen me as their

* Irena Fišer submitted this testimony to the Editorial Board in December 2003, before her death. She died on October 18, 2004.

child, so I thought I was safe. It was tragicomic to watch the whole village prepare to welcome the enemy with German flags on flagpoles and on the Municipal Council building and the huge disappointment when the Hungarian Army marched into the village instead of the Germans.

They began to manipulate us in minor ways. My stepfather, who up to then had been their favourite doctor, felt that he should leave the village so he went to Budapest for specialist training in one branch of medicine.

We were forced to sell our shop. Because I was an orphan, and the shop was in my name, my assets were taken care of by a Welfare organization. We wanted to buy an apartment in Novi Sad but that was not permitted because, at the time, Novi Sad was a border town. The court ruled that the money from the sale of the shop should be invested on Hungarian territory, well away from the border. A house was purchased in Pecuj and put in my name but after the war, as a foreign citizen, I didn't have the right to own this house and to this day I haven't succeeded in getting it back.

As for life in the village, our status had now significantly changed. One night they broke all the windows on our house. A few days later they came with an order to search and this search lasted the whole day. It was carried out by people who, shortly before this, had seen me as their own child, just like all the others! During the search they even opened some boxes for injections in my stepfather's office. This culminated in them calling me into the Municipal Council one day. All these people were my acquaintances. In a very official tone of voice they informed me that I must leave the village urgently, within 24 hours. I was taken by surprise. After appealing I managed to have my departure postponed for three or four days so that I could organize leaving the house in which I had been born and lived my entire life up to then. My stepfather was in Budapest at the time, where he had had surgery for a hernia, so my grandmother, who bore her age very well, and I packed our things and, at midnight on April 2, 1943, right on Easter, we arrived in Novi Sad. There my stepfather's brother found us an apartment at 63 Militićeva St.

A new life began, among new people. My stepfather put a sign reading "Doctor" on the building, but with little success. There wasn't enough work. We lived like this until March 19, 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary. Immediately repression began, wearing the yellow star, various kinds of restrictions and a lot of harassment.

On April 26 we were taken from the apartment with just one rucksack on our backs. They assembled us in the synagogue and, from there, took us to Subotica where we spent two or three weeks. The locals brought us food. One day were moved to Baja and two or three days after that we were packed into cattle wagons and shipped straight to Auschwitz! Almost all of us caught infections because of the water in Baja, so many travelled with stomach problems and even fever.

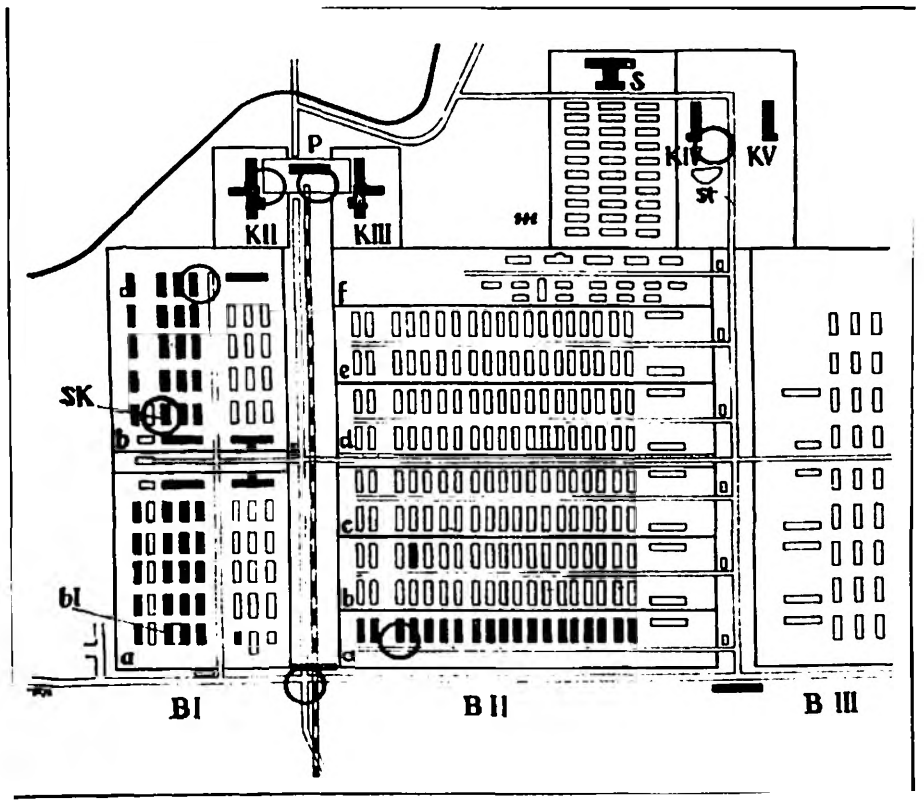
We arrived in Auschwitz on May 29, 1944. Chaos, shouting, loud noise, dogs, people in striped uniforms. In no time it was women on one side, men on the other. We came face to face with Dr Mengele, who selected those capable of working and separated the others, along with the children of course, to the other side. In the midst of this commotion, tiredness and fever, it wasn't until the evening I realised – "Where is my grandmother?"!

To the left, the crematorium, but for us, shaving our heads so that we no longer recognised one another, and then showers. We were allowed to keep the soap and shoes (I took them home!). Dresses: one an evening dress, the other so small that it couldn't be worn.

After this procedure we were put in the C Lager, Barracks no. 7. Days would begin with getting up early in the morning, lining up for the *appell*, often kneeling, minimal food, if it could be called food at all. Sleeping on triple bunk beds, thirteen people, so when one person turned over all the others had to turn as well. We also used to fall out of the beds often. After the roll call they would seize those of us who worked and send us off to one-off jobs. I usually managed to escape, but on two occasions I did not. So once I was pounding clay in the hottest sun. It's much easier to be hungry than to be thirsty! My second time out was during the *Blocksperre*, the lockdown of the barracks. Eva Berković and I were given the job of pouring chlorine on the path for disinfection. We wore very visible Red Cross signs. While we were "doing our job professionally", we heard weeping and cries for help. We approached, as far as we could, and saw a horrifying sight. There were Roma there, imprisoned in the *Zigeuner Lager* (camp for gypsies), whole families. When they were first arriving, there were no selections. Now, when they needed people to send to Germany for labour, there were selections. The unfit and the children were thrown into trucks like sacks, while those capable of work would stay behind. I don't know who were weeping and crying more, those thrown in the truck, or those

who were left behind. The ones at the bottom of the truck were probably already dead because the others were piled on top of them.

There was a road running right through our *Lagerstrasse* (camp street), which was used by groups going to work in the area. So my cousin, my aunt's daughter, Vera Rip, whose married name is now Obradović, also passed down this road. It's lucky she recognized me, seeing me with my head shaved. The next time she passed she threw me a scarf, a toothbrush and a piece of bread, which was rather a risky thing to do. We didn't see each other again there. Vera told me after the war that whenever she passed we were kneeling down.



Plan of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp. KII, KIII, KIV and KV mark the gas chambers and cremtoriums

One day in August, all 1,050 *Häftlinge* (prisoners) from C Barracks, Block 7 were lined up. Mengele was selecting, and he separated two hundred of us girls for transport to labour in Germany. We went to Camp B where they accommodated us for one night. I thought of Vera and, crawling, trying to avoid the floodlights, I got to her bar-

racks. There I learnt that Vera was in the *Revir* (hospital) and that she had typhoid. Later, when I returned home, I told everyone that Vera had died of typhoid. (Thank God she returned through Sweden and, in September 1945 she reached Sombor. She was the only person close to me who returned). We travelled with guards. Open wagons, fresh air – what a pleasure – and we arrived in Silesia, in Wistegirsdorf. We were put up in barracks. Here I realised how little it takes for a person to feel happy. I had my own bed, we sat on chairs, we had our own plates and spoons – what a pleasure! We worked about 2.5 kilometres from the camp in the Krupp factory which made hand grenades. We would get up early, *Zelle Appell*, then walk to the factory, twelve and a half hours of work with a lunch break. One shift was extremely difficult, the one on which the basic parts for hand grenades were made. Work was done in two shifts, day and night. It wasn't easy, there was a lot of deprivation, hunger and exhausting work. That was how things were until April, 1945.

Irena Fišer's son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren

In October, 1944, returning from work in the factory, I saw coming along the road in the opposite direction a convoy of farmers' carts, laden with people and goods. Suddenly I heard, in a German dialect that was very familiar, "Hey, it's Irena!" It was then that I realised that my compatriots were in the convoy, *Volksdeutschen* from Srpski Miletić. They had set out from Bačka and arrived in Silesia. I don't know where

they ended up. There were whole families in the carts with their belongings, women and children, only the young men were missing, still at war or in captivity. Who knows, perhaps they were guards in concentration camps. I made no sign to show that I recognized them because we were being escorted by guards with German shepherds and I would have been punished on the spot.

One day, in April 1945, they lined us up for roll call. We were afraid that we would be shot by a firing squad. The front was getting closer and by now it was clear that the Germans had lost the war so there was reason enough for killing the remaining inmates. As we stood there, in rows of five, a German woman in uniform arrived. We had often seen her at the *Kommando Führer* (the chief's office). She had a long talk with the leader of the work party. Finally, to our joy, she told us *Los* (at ease!). And so, she saved us! We later learnt that this woman was operating illegally, that she had her own radio station in her factory. There were Italians, Russians and certain number of French people working for her. Her name was Ella Schmidt. After we returned to Belgrade she stayed with us as our guest for a few days. We felt she deserved this much for saving two hundred of us.

Life continued as usual. Berlin fell on May 7, and our night shift was again working on May 8. That's when our guards deserted us, the SS men were taking out the ones with their tattoos, but they left us behind. On May 9, a group of Russian soldiers walked in. What happiness, what joy, it was unbelievable that our Calvary had come to an end! The Russians took us to a German restaurant for lunch, to German houses, where they would open the cupboards and tell us to take whatever we needed. Surprisingly enough, none of us took anything. The men suggested that we at least supply ourselves with sugar cubes from the German storehouses. And we did. These came in handy on our long journey as we headed on foot towards our homes. From that day I value sugar cubes very highly and I'm sure to never be without them.

The same day some men arrived and suggested that we head for home the very next day, May 10, because an epidemic of typhoid had broken out so, having already lived through so much horror we should leave while we still could.

Twenty-eight of us girls and two men set off on foot. A German engineer advised us not to go further because the world was not yet aware that the war was over and they were still shooting in the woods. But there was nothing that could stop us.

As we crossed Czech territory we were received very warmly. Did we need medical assistance, were we hungry, did we want to rest for a while, and so on. The same could not be said for the attitude of the Slovakians to us – there it wasn't even easy to get a piece of bread. Walking like this we headed for Budapest, sometimes a little way by train or some other kind of transportation. In Budapest we learned that we could go no further without documents. We were already at the end of our strength, exhausted, so we reported to the authorities for transport to Yugoslavia. There we received our first document, a "Russian passport". Finally some kind of personal identification! However we discovered that there was a long wait for transport, that the repatriation was badly organized, so we set off on our own. We went to the station and slept the night on the floor – we were already quite used to that – and, in the morning, we joined a group of prisoners who were returning to their homes. In this way we managed to get on a train. After three days of quarantine in Subotica, I reached Novi Sad on June 2, 1945.

Where? For what? To whom? How? It was the hardest day of my life! Had there been any point in surviving? What now? People there were already leading normal lives, the war had ended on October 23, 1944. I was there alone, with no money, with no one. It was very difficult.

I found accommodation with a colleague of mine and her mother, they were really kind to me. A little later, on September 1, 1945, I began working in a private dispatch company. I paid for room and board. I found some of the jewellery that we had handed over with people I knew. I sold that and began a new life.

My grandmother perished in Auschwitz, my stepfather died in some camp in Bavaria, everyone in my family disappeared except my cousin Vera, who returned from Sweden and now lives in Belgrade.