
Dr Teodor KOVAČ

SAVED BY A GUARD



Teodor Kovač was born in 1923 in the northern Banat town of Novi Kneževac, where his father, Arpad, had moved after the first world war to work as a barrister. His mother, Olga Berger, was born in Dalj. Both perished in the war; his father in the Topovske Šupe camp in Belgrade and his mother in the Sajmište camp. Many of his relatives were killed in a raid in Novi Sad. Only Teodor, his brother Karlo and his father's sister, together with her family, survived the war.

After the war Teodor Kovač graduated from the Belgrade Faculty of Medicine and specialised in internal medicine. He retired as head of endocrinology at the Novi Sad clinic for internal medicine, at the same time resigning as president of the Yugoslav Association of Endocrinologists. As well as being a member of many international medical associations, he is also an honorary member of the Hungarian Diabetes Society. In May, 2000, he became president of the Jewish Community of Novi Sad.

His wife, Ana, is also retired. He has one daughter from his first marriage, Olga, a physician specialising in biochemistry.

There was no high school in my home town of Novi Kneževac so, after finishing primary school there in 1933, I began high school in Novi Sad. My mother's parents lived there so I stayed with them. I wasn't

familiar with the city and didn't even know where the high school was. My grandmother introduced me to Đura Polak, who was to be at the same school. By chance, we were in the same class and remained good friends until the war. Unfortunately he was seriously ill with tuberculosis and spent more time in sanatoriums than he did at home. He did not survive Auschwitz.

I was an average student, completing every year with a grade of "very good", apart from the second year when I scored "excellent".

As far as I remember, Đura first took me to Hashomer Hatzair when I was in the third or fourth grade. If I have any positive qualities, I can attribute most of them to this organisation. Today I look back on my five or six years of active involvement with nostalgia and pride.

When the war broke out in April, 1941, I was in the eighth grade. After the coup of March 27, 1941, school was abandoned. My brother Karlo, my only sibling, had graduated from law school in Subotica and I spent most of my time with him during the most difficult period of the war. At that time he was finishing his articles in our father's office in Novi Kneževac. He was a reserve officer but had no standby orders for wartime deployment. Nevertheless, as soon as he heard that war had broken out he saw it as his duty to report. He was sent from one command post to another, finally ending up in Novi Sad.

Our parents stayed at home in German-occupied Banat. Novi Sad was under Hungarian administration. Life was more bearable there for Jews than in Banat, as Jewish life in Hungary was not under any great threat at that time. There was talk of the Hungarian army being about to arrive in Banat, so our parents told us to stay where we were, with our grandmother. All the Banat Jews were deported on August 14, 1941. Those from the north were imprisoned for a month in Novi Bečej before being transported to Belgrade. The women and children were allowed to find their own accommodation as best they could, but were banned from leaving the capital. All the men were incarcerated in the Topovske Šupe camp. I think that they killed my father on October 12. My mother, and the wives of other prisoners in the camp brought lunch for their husbands as usual that day but were told not to bring food to the camp any more because the prisoners had been taken elsewhere. The executions were mainly carried out between Pančevo and the village of Jabuka.

My brother and I, still in Novi Sad, tried to rescue my mother. At that time, in the second half of September, a large-scale operation began

to smuggle Jewish women and the occasional well-hidden Jewish man from Belgrade to Hungary. This business was mainly handled by the sailors and railway workers whose jobs gave them the opportunities needed. German soldiers were also engaged in smuggling, of course, for large amounts of money. We soon discovered our mother's address in Belgrade and my brother found a sailor who agreed to smuggle her to Novi Sad. My grandmother didn't have the amount of money demanded by the smuggler and it took us a long time to collect the sum required. Sadly, our plan failed.

After I matriculated from high school in late September, I found a job in a zincographer's shop and began an apprenticeship there. Most of my work was couriering material to and from newspaper offices. There was a doorman at the *Deutsches Volksblatt* daily with whom I always spoke German and who, thinking I was his compatriot, always greeted me with "Heil Hitler". About ten days after I started work he began leaving me on my own in his booth while he went to deliver the material and fetch me a new package. I always took advantage of this to pilfer a few valid permits to pass out around the city. He never caught me. I gave the permits to people I knew who were in contact with members of the underground resistance, but I don't know whether they ever used them or not.

We were in touch with members of the Communist Youth for several months. We helped them in our capacity as Hashomer Hatzair members, painting slogans on the walls of houses, giving them Hungarian pass forms and strewing nails in the streets to damage military vehicles. In our dealings with them we always insisted that they should accept us not as individuals but as Hashomer Hatzair.

I was arrested on October 28, 1941, as I returned by bicycle from the printers. I left my bicycle in the courtyard and went into the workshop. Then I heard the owner say to a man I'd never seen before "That's him!" Suddenly another man arrived and I was told I was being arrested. I handed over the material I had brought, said goodbye to the boss and the older apprentices and left with them. They didn't tie me, but frogmarched me straight across the street from the workshop to the police. I was in no position to escape: the area was teeming with policemen and, had I tried, they would have killed me. I didn't know why I was being arrested but I presumed it was because of my Communist connections. They only once asked me if I had any weapons. The officer handling my case asked me when I had left Banat for Novi Sad but

didn't ask anything about my activities with the Communists. Quite offhandedly he told me that I had been arrested because I had fled Banat to escape the deportation of the Jews. I replied that this was an absurd charge because they only had to telephone the high school to confirm that I had been in Novi Sad since the beginning of the occupation. I had just matriculated that summer – I had my certificate at home – I worked in the city and hadn't left it, even for a minute. He wasn't interested.

I had only just been thrown into prison when my brother, who had been arrested at the same time, arrived. He told me that while he was being interrogated he had seen a demand from the District Administration of Kanjiža (which had also been annexed by Hungary) to the Novi Sad Police for us to be arrested for having escaped deportation and advising them that we were wanted by the German authorities in Novi Kneževac. We had probably been denounced by Ida Valai, a non-Jew who worked as a law clerk in my father's office. I don't know what favours she did for the Germans but, as our parents had already been deported, she probably thought it would be easier for her to grab the property of her former employer if she got us out of the way.

At that time, Dr Jozsef Konyoki, a career policeman from Hungary, was appointed chief of the Department for Foreigners in the Novi Sad police. We heard later that on his arrival in Novi Sad he had said "Now it's time to make some big money." Only Hungarian citizens, or those who had residence permits, were allowed to stay in Hungary and he was responsible for the issue of these permits. It wasn't easy for Jews to acquire all the documents necessary to prove their citizenship. Pending the legal procurement of the documents, the only alternative was to apply for a residence permit. Approval of these requests was at Konyoki's discretion. In practical terms this meant that, when an applicant was asked to say on what basis he was living in Novi Sad, he should leave a hefty envelope full of money on Konyoki's desk. The extent of the fortune he made in this way became obvious when he left the city on the eve of the liberation with three full truckloads. We were just what he needed and anyone who didn't play the game by his rules would meet the same fate as us, which was to be turned over to the Germans or the Ustashas. It was through no fault of our own that we served as an example to others, we were scapegoats. It didn't bother him in the least that there was not a grain of truth in the alleged reason for handing us over to the Germans. The fact that all our ancestors had lived on both the past and the present territory of Hungary was worth

nothing. He sent many people to their death. After the war he was captured in Hungary and sentenced to death by hanging in Novi Sad.

After spending three days in the Novi Sad prison we were handed over to the Germans in Novi Kneževac and taken along the banks of the Tisa River to prison. Along the way we unexpectedly met an acquaintance, a local merchant. I remember he was absolutely petrified to see us being taken away by German police. We heard later about the fatal consequences of this chance meeting. The merchant went to Belgrade on business that night and met our mother there. I don't know whether this was coincidental or whether he had sought her out, but he told her about seeing us being taken to prison in Novi Kneževac. Within a day or two of this the smuggler my brother had hired to bring our mother to Novi Sad came to collect her. To his surprise, because this had never happened before, our mother refused to leave. She told him that her children were about to arrive in Belgrade and that if she left there would be no one to bring them food. The smuggler gave up, and was honest enough to return the payment he had received in advance.

I could perhaps forgive Ida Valai for having denounced us, but I can never forgive her for the loss of our mother. During the occupation she became rather intimate with the then authorities and before the liberation she fled to her sister's farm near Bečej. We were not the only ones to whom she had caused great harm and she was soon discovered hiding there, but it was not until 1946 that she was arrested. The courts were no longer so harsh and she was sentenced to only a few years' imprisonment. Because she was by now advanced in years and in poor health, she didn't remain in prison long. About twenty years later, while working as a hospital doctor, I returned from my annual holiday and examined the list of patients in my ward only to see her name on it. During my rounds I made no gesture to show that I recognised her. Soon after the rounds, a nurse came to tell me that a certain patient had suddenly demanded to be discharged, although there had been no discussion of this because her condition did not indicate it was appropriate. I told the nurse that we could not keep anyone in the hospital by force. If she signed a waiver that she was leaving of her own free will she had to be discharged. I heard that she died several years later after having suffered a great deal of pain.

Our mother stayed on in Belgrade. We presume she was in an apartment with our uncle's daughter. Six weeks after we had been taken to Banat she was interned in the Sajmište camp near Belgrade together

with the other women and children who were still “free”. We don’t know how she died – whether from the cold of that winter, one of the harshest of the century, or of disease or starvation, or whether she suffocated in a gas chamber.

In Novi Kneževac we had our share of beatings. The seat of my trousers was falling apart so that my underwear could be seen. After three days they took us to Petrovgrad, which is now Zrenjanin. We were surprised to find about twenty Jewish men in the court cells and even more Jewish women. All of them had either fled Belgrade or had been caught trying to reach Hungary after hiding in Banat. The prison regime was tolerable and only occasionally harsh. We were hardly well nourished, but there was no real starvation. Still we suffered a great deal from the cold. In the Novi Kneževac prison I had mislaid one of my shoes. As a replacement I wore some kind of slipper and the frostbite I suffered plagued me for years, long after the war was over.

Imprisoned with us was Alexander Herzfeld, a German invalid, a veteran of the first world war who now worked as a pharmacist in Zrenjanin. After the war he had married the widow of a fallen German officer and adopted their daughter. He returned to Zrenjanin with his family after the Nazis rose to power. When the persecution of Jews began, his wife went to Belgrade. The German general who now commanded Serbia had been a classmate of her first husband. She obtained a guarantee in writing from him that her husband was to be exempted from all anti-Jewish measures. Herzfeld later told us that before we arrived an officer (or perhaps a non-commissioned officer, I no longer remember) whose name was Harry Zeller had called him in and taken this permit from him. Then a new commander of Serbia was appointed and Herzfeld was arrested. However he was spared the most extreme humiliations. His wife was allowed to visit him every day, bringing him food and underwear and talking to him as long as she liked. He didn’t go out to work with us, instead he spent the whole day in a closed room and so he wasn’t as cold as we were. In the middle of January, 1942, he told us that his wife had heard that we were to be interrogated soon and that we should insist that we were Hungarian citizens so that they would transfer us to Hungary.

About ten days later we were indeed called for a hearing. They made a hasty record of our claim to have arrived in Banat by mistake. Suddenly, on February 10, they sent us back from work to pack our belongings, telling us that we were to leave that evening by train for

Novi Bečej, also in Banat, where they would hand us over to the Hungarian authorities. There were eight of us altogether, seven men and one woman. They told us that we were the first group and the others would follow. Unfortunately we were not only the first group but also the last: the others were all killed. A month later some were shot in retaliation for the assassination of an agent. This was proclaimed on posters. We never found out where the others were killed, nor why we eight had been chosen, as we had all maintained that we were Hungarian citizens.

We spent a day and a half in Novi Bečej before being escorted under guard across the frozen Tisa to Bečej on the Bačka bank of the river. We stayed there overnight and on the following evening were taken to Budapest, to the transit camp of Tolonchaz.

We remained in Budapest for a month before being transferred to the Garany camp, about three hundred kilometres away. The majority of prisoners in Garany were “foreigners” like us. At the time we were classified as “politically unreliable elements” of undefined citizenship. The prisoners also included a group of Hashomer Hatzair members, most of them from Budapest, with whom I made contact. The prison regime was tolerable enough: there was no harassment and we were allowed to receive parcels from home. Some time in September they transferred us to the newly opened camp of Csorgo nearby. There were only “foreigners” in the camp and the regime was similar to that of Garany.

For a long time there were rumours that prisoners in a certain age group would be drafted into working parties, known as *musoši* to build fortifications on the Russian front. In the middle of December they announced the age bracket for the working groups, whose members were to be drafted into the military. My brother was taken but I was too young for the age selection. We were given permits allowing us to have visitors and we were also allowed to send telegrams. We cabled our grandmother in Novi Sad, telling her that my brother had been drafted as a *musoš* and was about to leave. She arrived the very next evening, having travelled, at the age of 67, more than six hundred kilometres in a day to see her grandchildren. It was the first time we had seen her since we had been arrested.

My brother left the following day together with the whole group. He wrote from a town not far away that they were being kept there for a day or two, waiting for the rest of the draft to arrive from Budapest to

complete the work group. Their guard on the trip from Budapest was Sergeant-Major Matyasovsky an anti-Semitic thug. He knew one of the newly arrived Jews, a man by the name of Strauss whose father was one of the directors of Weiss-Manfred, an enormous metal works in Csepel, near Budapest. It was the largest firm of its kind in Hungary and was heavily involved in military production. The anti-Semite Matyasovsky singled Strauss out, saying something along these lines: "We're off to the front in a couple of days. I couldn't care less if you die there, you don't deserve any better. But I could get killed there too, and I don't feel like dying. So I'm going to give you a soldier to escort you to Budapest. Get money from your daddy and our doctor will declare a typhus epidemic and we'll be quarantined here for six weeks." I can't remember how much money he actually wanted but it was a sizeable sum.

This actually happened, and the whole procedure was repeated again late in January, 1943. It was March by the time the second six weeks had expired and Stalingrad was already over. The Hungarian front had completely fallen apart so there was no longer anywhere to send work groups and the men who had originally been taken from the camps were sent back to them. They didn't send my brother back to Csorgo but to Garany.

In the middle of June I was released from the camp on the condition that I report to the police in Pecs. This meant I was under a kind of house arrest there. I was free, but wasn't permitted to leave the city and had to report regularly to the police. When I arrived I went to the local Jewish Community and they found me accommodation. I took care of the grounds and the flowers at the Jewish cemetery.

The Germans occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, and my brother arrived in Pecs the same evening. Both he and my grandmother thought it was safer for him there. In the chaos at the beginning of the occupation he had no difficulty in surviving and reported to the police, although not as a "foreigner" because nobody asked for documents. We wondered what to do. My brother and I returned to Novi Sad to look for a way to reach Srem and join the Partisans. He was told that it was possible but that we needed to wait for a connection to leave. But where could we wait?

Deportations had begun and Novi Sad was one of the first cities where this happened. After the war we discovered that our grandmother had reached Auschwitz alive but had never made it out of there. In the raid in Novi Sad we lost many relatives, we had already lost our par-

ents in Belgrade and, of all our many relatives, only my father's sister and her family survived, hiding in various parts of Hungary.

After my brother returned from Novi Sad we thought about hiding somewhere and waiting for the Russians to arrive. In the end, we didn't succeed. Suddenly, on May 10, I was arrested, having been found on a list of "foreigners". I spent three days in prison before I was brought before the investigator only to find my brother already there. He presented an urgent call-up notice to join the *musoši*. The investigators asked me if I accepted this and I did. Even before my arrest we had thought it less dangerous to be with the military in a working group than in prison. We learned later that shortly after my release the "foreigners" had been dispatched from prison to concentration camps outside Hungary. It was obvious that the military disapproved of the action the civil authorities were taking against Jews. They saw the state's main priority as the speedy deportation of Hungarian Jews in accordance with Eichmann's orders, but these authorities had no influence on the military.

Our call-up notice gave Mohacs as our destination and we set off the following day. At the Municipal Command we were directed to the yard of an unfinished factory where a few dozen *musoši* had already gathered. We learnt that an entire *musoši* work group had been redeployed shortly before and that this one was now waiting for its full complement of workers. Scores of new men arrived daily. We worked on stripping the houses of Jewish families who had been taken to the ghettos as well as on the dozens of tugboats anchored along the riverbank in Mohacs because of the mines in the Danube. Our number included *musoši* from Mohacs itself and it was not uncommon for them to find themselves stripping their own houses. I will never forget them calling us over one evening and handing us some money, I don't remember how much but I know it was a considerable sum. While emptying out their own apartments, some of them had managed to retrieve valuables hidden before their families had been taken to the ghetto. While the others diverted the guards, they unearthed the concealed items. Having succeeded in getting their hands on their money they thought it only natural they should share it with us. The money itself didn't mean so much to us, because we all had a little in any case, but their kindness touched us deeply.

In the middle of July about a quarter of our working group, my brother and I included, were transferred to Kaposvar. There too we

stripped the houses of Jews who had been deported from the ghetto while about ten of us were ordered to bale straw. But the straw was never brought in because in those days every morning, as regular as clockwork, Allied aircraft would fly over and every kind of traffic was forbidden.

In mid-September our work group was moved to Budapest. I no longer remember where we met up with the Mohacs men. In Budapest they put us up in the industrial zone of the city, again in an unfinished factory. My brother and I were put to work in a nearby brewery. It was hard work, carrying hundred-litre barrels of beer and washing barrels, but there was no harassment and we worked side by side with the locals. The brewery was in cellars cut into rock and food supplies for Budapest were also stored there. There were trucks coming and going all the time, bringing food for the city or distributing it to the population. The loading and unloading was done by the non-Jewish *musoši*. They wore the Hungarian tricolour on their armbands instead of the yellow star like us. Nobody was able to control this mass of people: drivers, guards, workers and *musoši*. In the chaos it was even possible to steal food but we mostly bought margarine from the *musoši* who were loading food onto the trucks.

On Sunday, October 15, 1944, Hungary officially sought a truce with the Allies and by that evening the Germans had seized complete control of the whole country.

The commander of our work group was a lieutenant in the reserves, a sickly country schoolteacher. His deputy was an undergraduate mining student in Budapest who came from somewhere in northern Hungary. His name was Gyula Wagner. He was a German who could hardly speak a word of the language, having been thoroughly assimilated as a Hungarian. These two were ordered to transport all Jewish working groups to the then border between Hungary and Germany. The Russians had already moved onto Hungarian territory and the orders to move west were intended to get us as far away as possible from the Russians. This meant we would soon find ourselves in German hands.

That evening Wagner called about ten of the older *musoši* from our group together and told them that we were to leave on October 28. Anyone who wanted to escape and go into hiding in Budapest was free to do so and he swore on his own life that the others would not be handed over to the Germans. We had no idea how he planned to do this and

we were at a loss about what to do. We got an address in Budapest where we could hide and went there, narrowly escaping a raid on the way. There we found an empty timber yard and a woman who told us that we could stay in the cellar of one of the sheds. We hesitated for a moment, uncertain whether we should put our lives into the hands of this woman we had never met in a place we had never been to before. We decided to return to the group and did so without any problems.

The next day we set off westwards as ordered and had covered more than forty kilometres in the autumn rain by the evening. We arrived in the village of Manyi and, in pitch dark settled ourselves in the attic of a school. I simply took my shoes off, poured the water out of them and fell asleep. I woke to find that an SS unit had arrived the same night and was staying below us. In the morning, while it was still dark, the Germans found out about the Jews in the attic. They climbed up and started kicking us down from the attic. Luckily we all more or less made it and my brother even managed to save his spectacles. Suddenly Wagner arrived, I don't know where he had been until then. He shouted at the SS men, roaring in a mixture of Hungarian and German. In the half-dark they couldn't see and probably couldn't discern the rank of the man who was treating them in this way, so they let us go. Wagner even managed to retrieve our belongings and then found another place for us.

Then we realised what his plan was. As a connoisseur of Budapest night life he knew the managers of a number of large farming estates around Budapest. They were all fond of dropping in to a certain tavern on their business trips to the Hungarian capital. Wagner had tracked them down and told them that, if they saved the Jews now, the Jews would save them when the Russians came and they agreed to this scheme. Wagner then divided us into several groups, "discharged" the sickly commander with a fake document and sent him home with a car-load of food along with a soldier who he had also "discharged". This made it easier for him to make all the decisions. He took the initiative of hiding us in the surrounding forests. We had a little food we had been given for the journey and the estate managers gave us more. Wagner made a trip to Budapest to see if anyone had noticed that we were missing, and returned with the happy news that nobody seemed to be interested in us. Someone denounced him for hiding Jews, but he managed to get out of this with no consequences. Every twenty days or so he would move us to a new hiding place.

In December, we moved to an estate about a kilometre, as the crow flies, from the highway connecting Budapest and Vienna. The road leading to the estate meandered through the hills, but there was a shortcut through the forest. Endless convoys of civilians and various armies roared along from Budapest towards Vienna.

On December 24 we woke to utter silence, with not a whisper to be heard from the highway. For two days nothing moved on the highway and then, one morning, a tank appeared before us with a large, red, five-pointed star on its turret. Soviet soldiers! They told us they were just an advance patrol and the whole unit would arrive shortly. The meeting with the Soviet troops, however, was not so pleasant: they immediately confiscated the wristwatches of everyone who was wearing one and also took my new boots, which I had acquired by barter at the farm a short time earlier. But what mattered most was that we were no longer in danger from the Germans and their collaborators. At long last we were free! Ten days later we arrived in Novi Sad and my brother and I were finally no longer in danger of annihilation.

Gyula Wagner had kept his word, he had saved us all, with no exceptions. After the war he was proclaimed Righteous Among the Nations in Yad Vashem and his name is inscribed on a memorial plaque there.

We had been saved. Could we have saved any of our relatives, at least our parents and grandmother? I simply don't know. Today, more than half a century later, this question still haunts my sleepless nights.