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*Agnesa EREMIJA*

ORADEA, NOVI SAD, BUDAPEST



*Agnesa Eremija was born on January 26, 1919, in Oradea, Romania, to Melanija (née Levinger) and Andor Valdman. Her mother died in the Holocaust, as did Agnesa's first husband, Dr Imre Gal.*

*After the war she worked as a translator for the export-import division of Jugoslovenska Knjiga and then in the Yugoslav delegation to the Allied Control Commission. She worked in the same capacity in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia diplomatic mission in Budapest and also for a time at the Budapest bureau of the Yugoslav state news agency, Tanjug. In January, 1949, she moved to Belgrade to work for Radio Yugoslavia and Radio Belgrade. While working, she completed a degree as a part-time student and was then employed as a secondary school French teacher, retiring in 1979.*

*She is an active member of the Belgrade Jewish Community, particularly in the women's section. She is married to Boško Eremija.*

I only lived in Oradea for the first six months after I was born, before moving to Novi Sad, my mother's birthplace, where my father worked as a private clerk and my mother was a housewife. At home I spoke only Hungarian with my parents, German and Hungarian with my maternal grandmother and occasionally Serbian with my grandfa-

ther. My family was not strictly religious, but we observed the Jewish customs. Candles were lit in the house on Friday evenings and we celebrated the holidays. However my father's family in Oradea was strictly orthodox.

I remember that my grandmother, who read a lot and recommended literature to me, used to say that Zionism was a magnificent idea and that in the synagogue at Yom Kippur my grandfather always gave the most money for Palestine.

My other grandmother raised eight children and lived in humble surroundings, but she was a great optimist, a role model for modest Jewish housewives. She never despaired or complained and our grandfather held her in such high esteem that he would tell the children that they should kiss the ground she walked on.

The environment in which I lived was multinational and tolerant. I never experienced any discrimination directed at me or other Jews. I went to a Jewish primary school and then completed eight years at a public secondary school for girls. In the Jewish Community we had religious lessons from the senior rabbi, Dr Henrick Kisz, who conducted these classes for eight years. This was very useful for my general education and I also acquired some important ideas from Judaism. We were given special lectures on Maimonides, Spinoza, Yehuda Halevi and other important Jewish thinkers and writers. At the recommendation of the senior rabbi, I also attended Hebrew classes with the younger rabbi, Mordehai Silberer.

At fourteen, I joined Hashomer Hatzair and was an active member for three years. My father was a very conservative man and he was afraid that something unpleasant might happen to me, because I was by then a fairly well-developed girl. So I left Hashomer Hatzair and its basic idea of preparing us to go to Palestine and build a free, independent Jewish state. Some of the others succeeded in doing so: Cvi Loker, Avram Štark, Rahela and Mirjam Vajs, Šragaj Vajskopf, Vera Nađ (whose name is now Zipporah Ben Michael), Imre Levinger, known as Bimbača (who assumed the surname Ben Michael in Israel) and many others.

I finished secondary school but my father, for the same reasons he gave for me leaving Hashomer Hatzair, didn't want me to enrol at the university, so I completed a course in shorthand and typing. Blanka Gins-Epštajn, who later died in the Holocaust, ran her own private school in Novi Sad. She taught typing, shorthand and correspondence in four languages and I finished a one-year course in those four lan-

guages. I was offered a job but didn't accept it because the salary was so low. Instead I gave lessons in mathematics and languages to secondary school students and knitted pullovers.

When the war broke out in Europe in 1939, we began to feel insecure. However it was not particularly dangerous for Jews in Novi Sad until the terrible raid of 1942. My family escaped this thanks to the superintendent of our building on Dunavska Street. She protected us by declaring that we were Hungarians and respectable people. Unfortunately many of our friends and relatives were killed at this time. Fearing another raid, my parents sent me to my father's family in Budapest.

In the Hungarian capital I had to hide, because my relatives were afraid that the police might discover that I had once associated with people like Oto Blam, Lilika Bem and Sonja Marinković who later committed acts of sabotage under the occupation. I went from one cousin to another, never daring to say that I was from Novi Sad, but telling people I was from Oradea. Then, in 1943, at the house of some acquaintances, I met my first husband, Dr Imre Gal, a Jew who had just returned from a period of forced labour near Minsk. We moved from apartment to apartment on the edge of Budapest and managed as best we could. Both of us worked at the Goldberger textile factory as manual workers, despite my husband having a doctorate in law. The factory soon became part of the war drive, producing textiles for the army and, because of this, an army unit was stationed on the premises.

When Szalasi and his Arrow Cross came to power in 1944, all Jewish workers were interned. My husband had already been called up again for forced labour and was working in a suburb of Budapest until the end of October, 1944. He was then taken to the Austrian border and I received a postcard from him dated November 7 of that year. It was the last I ever heard of him. He had left convinced that we would have a child and that he would leave someone after him, even if he were to be killed.

The Jewish women were housed on the premises of the factory. In the morning we had to work in the kitchen, preparing food for the army unit, while in the afternoon we stood at the machines for eight hours. We ourselves had to worry about where to find food. We slept on straw in an empty store house like cattle and were forbidden to leave the factory grounds without a special permit, which was granted only in exceptional cases. We cooked on hotplates which we could buy in a small store within the factory. The wages we received for our work in

the factory were extremely modest and we received neither wages nor food for our work in the mornings. It was slave labour: the whole morning we worked hard in the kitchen suffering insults and humiliation then, already exhausted, we had to work standing up for eight hours with very poor materials. The yarn was so weak it kept breaking. For eight hours each day without let-up I would be tying knots.

I remember that while the women from the suburbs of Budapest were working in the factory, their loved ones were taken away to internment. It is impossible to forget their despair when they learned that their children and parents had been deported. Their husbands had already been taken to forced labour camps far away, which is why there were many more Jewish women than men in the factory.

We also had some rare moments of rest and relaxation. On Sundays, when the weather permitted, we would sit on the grass and reminisce about the happier days not long before. The handful of middle-aged Jewish men imprisoned in the factory would join us. Crushed with concern for their loved ones, they mostly listened to us in silence. But one of them, whose identity I never discovered, distinguished himself by his singing, which echoes in my ears to this day. When our conversation died down, we would hear his sonorous voice singing the songs of his native land with a sensitivity which came from the depths of his heart.



*Agnesa, January 1944.*

Life continued in this way for about four months and then, apparently, Szalasi's Nyilasi became fed up with having Jewish women "holidaying" in the war factories. They dreamed up new and more painful tortures. In the second half of 1944 they issued an order for all Jewish women between the ages of 16 and 45 to report at a particular place on

a particular day to leave for a forced labour camp. They took us on foot, through the cold, wind and rain, across muddy, sodden fields all the way to Ferihegy, where Budapest's airport now stands. They put us in new buildings, with gaping openings where no windows or doors had been installed. There was no straw so we slept on the bare concrete. I was torn by the dilemma of whether to lie on the blanket I had brought with me or cover myself with it. It's not difficult to imagine the draughts and the cold of that autumn weather when, exhausted from a day of digging trenches, we would fall down onto the ice-cold concrete. The trenches we were digging on the outskirts of Budapest were allegedly designed to foil enemy attacks, but in reality they were intended only to humiliate and exhaust us. As well as the digging, they harassed us in other ways, humiliating and mocking us to the extreme by ordering us to jump across ditches for no reason at all. I was in the early stages of pregnancy and on the very first night I miscarried. I was forced back to work the next day. The consequences of this have stayed with my whole life as I was never able to become pregnant again.

Some time in early November, 1944, when the Allies were already so close at hand that the roar of their heavy artillery could be heard, an order came for us to be taken closer to the Austrian border, in the direction of the Nazi camps. Many of the women trench-diggers completed this next journey only to end their lives in the gas chambers, some perished along the way and a few luckier ones returned from the hell of the camps. I managed to escape by taking advantage of an air-raid alarm. I hid in Budapest and managed to get fake documents. Some friends from Novi Sad who were also hiding there gave me a blank birth certificate form. Following their suggestions I was able to complete the form to suit myself. I gave myself the name of Veres Agnes, naming my father Veres Adras and my mother Maria, née Svoboda.

At first I roamed from one relative to another, all those who were married to non-Jews. At best I could spend a night with each of them. They gave me food if they had any. I was employed as an aide at the International Red Cross shelter for abandoned children, which was run by Evangelist deaconesses. Together with my other duties I carried food from the adjacent courtyard during the bombing and washed the staircase in mid-winter. We slept in the Evangelical high school building on makeshift stretchers in a cold room. I felt safer than before, but it was hard physical work and the bombs were falling all around.

We spent the last days and nights of the war with the children in the basement of the building. Soldiers from the Red Army liberated us in mid-January, 1945. These were elite units and their behaviour was most decent and humane. Because of the dangerous conditions we had to leave the building and everyone scattered wherever they could. I headed, under the shelling, with a woman and her two children for the suburb of Pestszenterzsebet. There were aircraft flying overhead and firing on the city and we could hear the roar of rocket launchers nearby, belching flame everywhere. All around us were the corpses of horses, with dead Hungarians, Germans and Russians on a thick layer of red brick dust. This was Heroes Square. We stayed in the suburbs as long as the fighting in the streets continued. Later I went to my uncle, who had returned from the ghetto with his family and my father.

My parents' destinies were different. After the situation in Novi Sad deteriorated, my mother had managed to talk my father into escaping to his relatives in Budapest, thinking that only the men would be taken into forced labour. My father made it to the Budapest ghetto and survived the war, but died in an accident in 1947. In April, 1944, my mother and her entire family were taken to Auschwitz, where all of them met their death. My mother wrote her last postcard to me from the Novi Sad synagogue on April 26, 1944, to tell me that they were about to be taken to an unknown destination. I have presented this correspondence to the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade.

My father never returned to Novi Sad, having neither anywhere to go nor anyone to go to. I met him in secret several times during the war and, after the war, we lived together in Budapest in part of a rented apartment.

I myself never returned to Novi Sad to live. I no longer had any relatives in the city, they had all been exterminated.

I was employed by the Yugoslav diplomatic mission in Budapest as a translator and later worked in the same capacity in the Budapest bureau of Tanjug. In January, 1949, I moved to Belgrade and was employed at Radio Belgrade where I worked for five years as a proof reader, translator and Hungarian language presenter. At the same time I completed my university degree part time, majoring in French and German. From 1954 until my retirement in 1979, I worked as a teacher in Belgrade secondary schools. Soon after my arrival in Belgrade I met my present husband, Boško Eremija, who is a publicist. He had survived a similar fate to mine, having lost his whole family in Jasenovac.