
Dr Etelka NAJFELD

“GOOD LUCK, LITTLE IGOR!”



Hospital Medical Director Dr Etelka “Eta” Najfeld was born in 1916, in Slavonski Brod to Rudolf and Helena Špicer (née Adler). She had a younger brother, Zdenko. Fifty-six members of her immediate and extended family perished in the Holocaust.

She completed high school in Slavonski Brod and enrolled to study medicine at the University of Zagreb.

During the second world war, she spent time in forced labour in Bosnia, treating endemic syphilis. She collaborated with the resistance movement and later actively joined the struggle against Fascism.

After the war she specialised in microbiology at the Republic of Serbia’s Hygiene Institute in Belgrade. She lectured in her specialty at postgraduate level and worked at the Serbian Institute for Public Health in Belgrade until her retirement.

She has two children, a son Igor, who is a mathematician, and a daughter, Vesna, who is a geneticist.

When I was born my father was still at the Russian front, fighting in the Austro-Hungarian Army. My mother had a small store selling various goods and in this way supported us. When my father, who was a textile merchant, returned after the war they opened a fabric shop. I remember them both being very diligent and working long hours. They

soon amassed enough assets to open a large store where everything needed for clothing and home decoration could be found, from needles and thread to shoes and carpets, from fabrics by the metre to ready-made clothes. The stock was mostly purchased from abroad: the fabrics from England, silk from France, linen from Czechoslovakia and the ready-made clothes from Vienna and Budapest. The range was of good quality and wide variety.

My brother Zdenko, who was five years older than me, graduated from a textiles school in Brno to equip himself for taking over our parents' shop as a qualified textiles professional.

While we were still very young, our parents engaged a German governess who not only took care of us while they were working but also taught us her language. Once we were both fluent in German, another governess came to teach us French. Our parents put great emphasis on wanting us to learn foreign languages, underlining this with the proverb "You're worth as much as the number of languages you speak." They apparently wanted to make up through us children for what they had lacked in the way of education. Both of them had only completed primary school. It is extraordinary that at that time they managed to provide us with such opportunities to acquire a sound education, managing to implement this systematically in a small town while at the same time creating a wonderful, warm atmosphere in the house. Our parents lavished us with endless care and they were interested in everything we did. Today, after so many years, it seems to me that my happy childhood is the greatest wealth of my life, and gave me the strength to endure all that happened later.

At home we spoke Serbo-Croatian and German. When our parents wanted to discuss things we weren't supposed to know about, they would speak in Hungarian, with some Yiddish words.

We were aware from our early childhood that we were Jewish. I think that our mother warned us that we could face unpleasant situations because of this. The small town in which I was born was not free from anti-Semitism, which could be both heard and felt. I remember them shouting at me when I went into the first grade of primary school: "You Jews with tails, you'll soon be finished, I'm sorry for the shovel that will dig your grave." To this day I get a lump in my throat when I remember this. Once I came home distressed and in tears. My calm and wise mother knew how to comfort and hearten me so that I was always

courageously Jewish, even to the point of defiance. I was not ashamed of it, even at the most difficult times.

We had Jewish newspapers regularly at home and would discuss issues around the table. There was a small, blue and white money collection box for Keren Kayemet prominently displayed and we children, and of course the adults, would regularly put coins into this. There was not a lot of discussion about Zionism, but it was taken for granted that we should collect money for the purchase of land in Palestine.

My mother had a large family in Brod and on Sunday afternoons and holidays they would all come to visit us. This was always a pleasant occasion. On the holidays, especially Purim, we would exchange plates of cakes called *Schlachmones*. We children would wear fancy costumes and go to the Purim Ball in the Tri Gavrana tavern, whose owner was Jewish. I remember my little brother reciting a poem from Hanoar about the yellow citrons from Palestine at one of these parties. My favourite memory of Purim is the good *kindles* and plenty of other kinds of cakes.

Celebrations of the important holidays were taken very seriously. For Rosh Hashanah (which we called Rosheshone) we would get new clothes. I would usually get a velvet dress and my brother a sailor suit. My parents fasted for Yom Kippur, going to the temple dressed very formally with a clove-studded quince to make the fast easier.

We had a lovely temple, built in 1895 in the Moorish style, with two domes and a Star of David rosette in the centre. The outside was clad in yellow brick and separated from the street with a wrought-iron fence. The vast interior had space for the whole community. There were pews for the men on the ground floor and a gallery for women and the organ. On important holidays the service was conducted with singing by the cantor, Hendle, accompanied by the organ and the choir, according to the Eastern European liturgy. The entire ritual was very solemn, although the congregation wasn't particularly religious. When the Ustashes came to power in 1941, the temple was desecrated and turned into a warehouse. I even heard from some people that they kept horses there. It was finally destroyed in a bombing raid towards the end of the war.

My mother had an extraordinary voice and used to sing in the choir. I still have great nostalgia for some of the Yiddish songs I learned from her.

During my childhood and right up to my eighteenth birthday, when I left to study in Zagreb, there were about four hundred Jews living in Brod. Most of these were merchants and tradesmen, but there were also doctors, lawyers and engineers. Brod was a well-developed industrial centre. It was a rail gateway to Bosnia and an important port on the Sava River.

The Jewish Community, which was Zionist in orientation, was very active and well organised. In 1919 a Jewish youth conference was held in Brod to establish a federal youth organisation. There were regular lectures, performances, afternoon teas and dances at which money was raised for the purchase of land in Palestine, to buy clothes for children from poor families and to assist the Bitola Jews. The collections were always for worthy causes and in the name of Jewish solidarity. We had speakers who were able to convince everyone present that these causes were justified and all the community's activities were successful in every way.

I wasn't involved in the Zionist movement because I had too many other commitments after my school hours, but I often went to Hashomer Hatzair meetings. However my path in Judaism, apart from the things I had learned from my family, lay in a different direction. In my high school, were there usually three or four Jews in the class and we had compulsory religious lessons. These were supposed to be given by our rabbi, Dr Leib Weisberg, who had come from Poland. He was not a good lecturer and did not know our language very well, so his wife, Dr Ada Weisberg, who spoke the language excellently, often replaced him. She was a very interesting lecturer, a good teacher and an extraordinary person. She proved this when the Jewish women and children were taken from Brod to the concentration camp. They were taken on foot to the Stara Gradiška camp in the harsh winter of 1941–42, and many of them fell, exhausted from trudging through the deep snow, losing their will to live. Ada Weisberg would stand at the head of the column with her two small sons, singing, praying and urging the women on, although she knew the fate which awaited them.

This clever woman introduced us to Jewish history, taught us to read and write Hebrew and unobtrusively planted in us a love for our people. I no longer remember how she managed this and nor do I have the words to express it, but I know that I think of her often with respect and gratitude, and with the same sorrow I would feel for someone close to me.

After I matriculated in 1934, I went to Zagreb to study medicine. Immediately after I arrived I registered for meals at the Jewish refectory. The refectory was the centre of our lives and I spent the happiest period of my youth there. It was also there that I met my husband, Alfred Najfeld. He had come from Poland to study because, as a Jew, he was unable to enrol at Krakow University.

My time in the refectory gave me a broader outlook on life in a variety of ways. It was there that I met people from various parts of the country: from Vojvodina and Macedonia, from Bosnia and Dalmatia, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, Orthodox Jews and atheists, assimilationists and Zionists. It was a beehive, buzzing with argument, persuasion and criticism. Despite our many differences, we felt the deep connection of belonging to the same people. It was at this time that the anti-Jewish propaganda had begun in Germany and the Spanish Civil War had erupted. There were a number of people from the refectory who went to fight with the Spanish Republicans. Refugees had begun to arrive from Czechoslovakia and Austria and we began to hear about persecution in Germany. Restrictive measures began in Yugoslavia in 1939, especially against Jews who were not Yugoslav citizens. This particularly affected my future husband who from this time on was living in Zagreb without papers.

In these dark days, the war began. Belgrade was bombed. We were still not married and didn't know what to do. In the confusion, my husband decided to enlist voluntarily as a doctor in the Yugoslav Army.

No sooner had he got his uniform than a muffled roar was heard. The Germans, together with the Ustashas, rolled into the city in tanks. This was April 10, 1941. The crowds in the streets were cheering enthusiastically, strewing the path of the tanks with flowers, sweets and oranges. We were struck dumb with despair, helplessness and the awareness of what was to come.

That same day the Independent State of Croatia was proclaimed. This German-Italian-Ustasha creation was set up under Nazi laws. A few days later we had to register as Jews and soon after that we were forced to wear yellow Stars of David on our chests and backs so that we could be recognised from all directions. Every day there would be new regulations limiting our movement, our education and our right to health care. We were stripped of our property, evicted from our apartments and forbidden to have stocks of groceries, except in the time when nothing more was available.

And so each day the noose was tightened, with more and more discriminatory measures until, finally, the worst arrived.

By then my parents and brother had already been thrown out of our large apartment in our own building in Slavonski Brod and been put in a small room in the attic. My father and my brother had been conscripted into forced labour, cleaning the streets with the other Jews. Our neighbours took the furniture from the apartment, the piano, carpets, beautiful paintings and other valuables, anything they could get their hands on.

An "Aryan" commissar was appointed for our shop. This meant that the business was now owned by the Independent State of Croatia and the commissar had to hand over the daily takings to the authorities. Of course they'd already started stealing goods and money, but it didn't matter any more because now we were struggling just to survive. My father was in forced labour until the end of July when, lashed with wire around his wrist to a Serb, he passed through Zagreb under Ustasha guard. I don't remember how I discovered that he would come through the town, but I ran to the railway station to see him. We exchanged a few words in the presence of the Ustashas. He appeared calm and composed, but his bottom lip trembled as we spoke. That is how I remember him: I never saw him again.

My father's road to death was terrible. I heard about it from my uncle, Arnold Adler, who escaped from Jasenovac and whom I met after the war. My father was taken from Zagreb to Jastrebarsko, where there was a camp, from there to Gospić, and finally to a camp on the island of Pag. There the inmates worked in terrible conditions in salt factories. They worked barefoot, their feet cut and inflamed from the salt. Because of the Ustashas' exceptionally brutal treatment of the inmates and the screaming of the sick, the camp was transferred to Jasenovac at the request of the Italian occupational authorities. As soon as they arrived, my father was taken to Gradina, where he was killed with a mallet blow to the head. Gradina had been a Serbian village on the opposite bank of the Sava before all its residents were murdered and it became the site for the most brutal and bestial mass murders of Jasenovac inmates. The camp was certainly the most criminal in Europe. Victims were executed with knives, mallets and axes, hacked to pieces and thrown into the Sava. Bloody, evil handiwork.

My brother was still cleaning the streets. He was connected with the resistance movement and was assigned to distribute pamphlets at

the railway station. This was an unforgivable mistake, sending the son of a well-known Jewish merchant on such an assignment. It was as though somebody had done it on purpose. Of course he was immediately arrested and remained in prison until all the Jews were taken from Brod to Stara Gradiška and Jasenovac. This was in February, 1942. My uncle told me that as soon as he arrived in Jasenovac, my brother was executed after a drumhead trial.

My mother was left alone in the little room in the attic until she, too, was taken to Stara Gradiška in February, 1942. I managed to see her in October, 1941, before I left for Bosnia.

In the meantime, we were in Zagreb, our rucksacks already packed for the camp, wondering what to do. We tried to find a connection with "the woods", with the Partisans. The uprising had not yet gathered momentum and we couldn't find anyone in the city to put us in touch with any of them. It was out of the question to leave the city with yellow armbands and no travel pass or permit. We waited helplessly. At that time, Jews were barred from receiving treatment in hospitals and other state medical institutions, so the Jewish Community in Zagreb organised its own medical service. My husband immediately reported there and was given a certificate exempting him and his family from deportation to the camp. It was then that we decided to get married. Ours was the last marriage performed by the senior Zagreb rabbi, Dr Gavro Švarc before he was taken to Jasenovac and executed.

The pursuit of Jews was stepped up more and more. By May, 165 young people had been deported to the camps. Only five survived. Then Jewish lawyers were arrested. Some of these were taken to the Gospić camp while some were temporarily released. After them came the Jewish doctors. Again, some were released and some were taken to camps. In this way the Ustasha authorities played with our nerves and our lives until they dreamt up what they called the "contribution". One day there was an announcement that the Jews had to collect a thousand kilograms of gold in order not to be sent to the camps. We all took off our rings and gave everything we had to meet this ransom demand. The gold was collected, but the Jews were taken to the camps anyway. The Jewish Community in Zagreb has precise data on the quantity of gold collected.

Every day there was something new, and each day worse and worse: new evictions, new deportations, new executions.

One day we heard that Jewish doctors were being sought to go to Bosnia to treat the syphilis which was endemic among the Muslim population. The idea was proposed by Dr Miroslav Schlessinger, an epidemiologist, and was accepted by the Health Ministry. My husband registered immediately and in October, 1941, we were assigned to the Medical Centre in Tuzla. On our way to Tuzla we stopped in Brod to see my mother. This was an awful meeting. I don't know what we talked about and I don't know whether we had any idea at all of how to save her.

When we arrived in Tuzla we were sent to work in the villages around the Banović mines. I had not yet graduated because I still had to pass two exams, which I was not permitted to take because I was a Jew, so I worked under my husband's supervision. We had to go to a different village every day. We were relocated to the village of Živinice in order to be closer to our work territory. A forest train set off at 5.00 a.m. every day for the mine. We would get up at four every morning, come rain or snow, to catch the train in which we would travel to the mine in open coal wagons. We carried all our medicines and other material we needed on our backs. From the mine we walked or rode horses in order to reach the village where about 150 or 180 patients would be waiting for us. The work was both physically and emotionally exhausting.

Our residence in the field was regulated by a document which nominally protected us and our families from being taken away to camps. However this document proved to have little effect, because seven doctors from the group were taken and executed in various camps. Needless to say we were all under surveillance and, from time to time, some of us would be summoned to the Ustasha police station over our alleged links to the Partisans. Not that we didn't have those connections; we were all keen to support the struggle for liberation. This was demonstrated by the fact that all the doctors from the syphilis service sooner or later joined the national liberation struggle.

In the meantime, in February, 1942, my mother was taken to Stara Gradiška and then to the Đakovo camp. On the basis of our indemnity document we immediately submitted an application to have my parents and brother released. The reply to this application was that my father and brother had died of natural causes in Jasenovac and that my mother was to be released from the Đakovo camp and I could collect her by presenting the reply. We immediately brought my mother back. She had lost thirty kilograms and was almost unrecognisable, but this wasn't the

worst. She had nightmares night after night. She had seen my brother at the railway station in Brod. He had been heading for the Jasenovac camp in a train parallel to the one in which she was travelling to Gradiška. He saw her through the window and shouted "Mother!" She recognised him only from his voice, because he had changed so much in the prison and had no teeth.

She knew that she would never see him or my father again but never spoke about this. She had a constant compulsion to talk about everything she had been through in Stara Gradiška and especially about the crimes of a Catholic priest named Miroslav Filipović-Majstorović. In front of everyone he would slaughter Serbian women and children from Kozara; he would open the floodgates on the Sava dam and flood the prison cellars, drowning the women and children. The shouting and screaming of the dying was meant to be a warning to the living about what awaited them.

Now that we had my mother and our new daughter Irina with us, life became a little calmer. We had the feeling that we had someone of our own. But not for long!

The director of the Tuzla Health institute, our friend and protector, Dr Luka Šimović, summoned my husband and told him we should move immediately from Živinice to Bosanska Krupa. He had learned in the police station that we were suspected of collaborating with the Partisans (which was true enough) and that a report denouncing me had arrived from Slavonski Brod. We hurriedly packed our beds, the most essential cooking needs and jumped on a freight wagon meant for six horses and forty soldiers and travelled about thirty hours to our destination. This was in June, 1943.

Bosanska Krupa was a small town on the Una River which was alternately controlled by the Partisans or the Ustashas and Germans. It was a strategically important spot inhabited mainly by Serbs who were gradually being killed. As the Partisans held quite a number of liberated territories in the Serbian villages in the neighbouring region of Podgrmeč, there were a lot of armies represented in Krupa: the Ustashas, the Civil Defence and the German Army. The Partisan Supreme Headquarters were located nearby in Drvar. So there we were, in this hornet's nest. My husband worked as district doctor, because there was no one else, and had an infirmary full of medicines. We were accommodated in an apartment opposite an Ustasha unit so that they could keep an eye on us.

Not long after this a peasant woman named Milka came to our house with a bottle of milk. I refused to buy the milk, telling her I hadn't ordered it, but she was persistent. Not until we were on our own did she tell me the real reason she had come. There was a message for me in the corncob stopper of the bottle. She was a courier from the Podgrmeč division of the Partisans and the message was an invitation to collaborate. We accepted the invitation and made a connection through Milka. The collaboration consisted of sending medicines and information about the movements, number and types of military units in the area. We had a code which we used to pass on the relevant information and the messages would be plaited into Milka's hair or inserted into her vagina. This Serb peasant woman considered this activity her human duty, because the Ustashas had executed all the men in her family.

We had some very dangerous moments in the course of this activity. Once the police stormed our apartment, searching it for compromising material which would justify arresting us. Another time they sent a message saying they would arrest us because they had received a report from Bihac denouncing us.

And then came May 29, 1944. It was a lovely, sunny day and from early in the morning we could hear the dull roar of the Allies' flying fortresses. My husband had a bad feeling and decided that we should flee the town because they might bomb the Bihac railway line. He went to a village to look for accommodation for us. The house in which we lived was at the bottom of a hill through which ran a railway tunnel. My mother and I decided to leave the house and hide in a wooden cottage, just not to be in our house. And then the bombing began. It was as if the earth had opened, everything was shaking, and yet we could see nothing. When it was quiet again, my mother and our little girl lay dead beside me, buried in the earth which rained down the hill onto them. I tried to dig them out with my hands, but I couldn't, and it was too late. Then my husband arrived. We were in despair.

We dug them out, wrapped them in sheets and buried them at the edge of the Muslim cemetery. What a cruel and ironic trick Fate had played on us! Krupa had been bombed by the Americans and the English, our allies. The attack had not killed a single German or Ustasha soldier, only two Jews, my mother, an inmate of the camps, and our two-year-old child. I don't know how we were able to endure it.

We were shaken out of this by reality. My elbow had been broken in the bombing and my husband now put a plaster cast on my arm. I was

eight months pregnant. The bombing continued and we would run to the tunnel every day to shelter. One day a train entering the tunnel was set on fire by the bombing and panic erupted. People were falling between the train and the walls of the tunnel while others ran over them, fleeing the smoke and the flames. I also fell, but my husband grabbed me by my free arm, shouting to the others to run in the direction where the fire was dying down and, in this way, he managed to save me. I don't remember how we got out of there, but I know that we decided to join the Partisans. Long before this we had told our Partisan connection that we were under surveillance and that they were threatening to arrest us, but the Podgrmeč division kept delaying our escape, saying we were their only source of information in Krupa. Now we could no longer endure it. My pregnancy was approaching full term and this would only have made it more complicated to join the Partisans. Finally the date and place of our departure was set in agreement with the detachment headquarters. We were to pass a wrecked tank in a place called Otok on the way to Bosanski Novi. We would travel in a horse-drawn carriage and be identified by the plaster cast on my right arm.

We hired a carriage and horses and invented an appropriate reason to travel: I had to go to the hospital in Bosanski Novi for an x-ray to check that my arm was properly set in the plaster cast. We might have needed to stay several days and so we were taking clothes and baby things in case I delivered in the meantime.

We set off early in the morning. A few hundred metres before the meeting place, we saw German soldiers patrolling the railway tracks. My husband told the horseman to speed up because the aircraft would soon begin bombing. The moment he whipped the horse, three men jumped out of the scrub in strange uniforms and caps with five-pointed red stars. "Are you the doctor?" they asked, then turning to me "Show us your right arm, Comrade." They immediately started unharnessing the horses, which they needed, while we began a frantic dash towards the forest. The patrol was almost upon us. In our hurry, we left all our belongings in the carriage: our documents, family pictures, and all the baby things. The patrol began firing heavily and I was unable to run, so a soldier put me on his back and ran with me up the hill towards the denser forest. My husband ran with the horses until they stopped shooting. The soldiers who had covered our escape came up to us. I had never seen any of them before. I don't know how or where, but somehow they found a cart. They put me in it and harnessed the horses. We

set off quickly in order to get deep into the liberated territory as soon as possible because there was a danger that the German patrol would call for reinforcements. As we raced against time, one of the soldiers was whipping these horses, with which he wasn't familiar; they broke into a gallop down the slope and the cart overturned. I found myself under the cart, my legs bleeding, my arm in its plaster cast and pains in my abdomen. I was in labour. They put me back in the cart, harnessed the horses and pressed on. My husband walked behind the cart, his head bowed in deep concern.

It was night when we finally reached the headquarters of the Podgrmeč detachment. This was a two-roomed house in the village of Srednji Dubovik, under Mt Grmeč.

The soldiers and guards settled themselves to sleep on straw on the floor and gave me the only bed, which someone had already been sleeping in. It was covered with cornhusks and a dirty hemp sheet. The soldiers were lying on the floor. Not a word was heard, and there was no light except for the torch in my husband's pocket. I was well into labour, my contractions came faster and faster and, finally, at about three in the morning, my son was born. I couldn't see him until the sun came up. Then I saw a small, dirty creature, with a louse on his tiny head. In the morning we had to move on, deeper into the liberated territory: I needed medical care for my lacerated skin. My son and I were loaded into an ox-cart and, accompanied by the soldiers, we set off for the hospital. The cart trundled slowly along the rutted road. I was in terrible pain, but could only think about how my son could be saved under these circumstances. My husband followed on foot behind the cart. We didn't speak. After all we'd been through, any conversation would be redundant.

It was June 28 and the sun beat down on us as we headed along the treeless mountain terrain. It was then that I struck up a conversation with Jova, one of the soldiers.

"What are you going to call the little one, Comrade?" he asked me.

"I don't know, Jova, but the name has to begin with the letter žI'," I told him.

"Why the letter 'I'," he asked.

"Because my daughter's name began with žI' and she was killed a month ago," I replied.

During this conversation the name žIgor' occurred to me and I told him that this would be my son's name. Then he noticed that the child's

skin was reddening from the sun and the heat. He went to a walnut tree, tore a branch from it and set it above the baby's head.

"Good luck, little Igor," he told him.

After a long and painful trip we arrived at the hospital. I was laid up for three or four days while they treated the wounds on my legs. Then we were given our postings for the hospital in the 39th Krajiška Division. My husband was appointed as medical director of the hospital and I worked as a doctor in the typhus department. The commanding officer was Voja "The Spaniard" Todorović or Samuel Lerer, our friend from the Zagreb refectory and one of ten Jews proclaimed National Hero of Yugoslavia. The hospital administrator was Dr Jaša Romano.

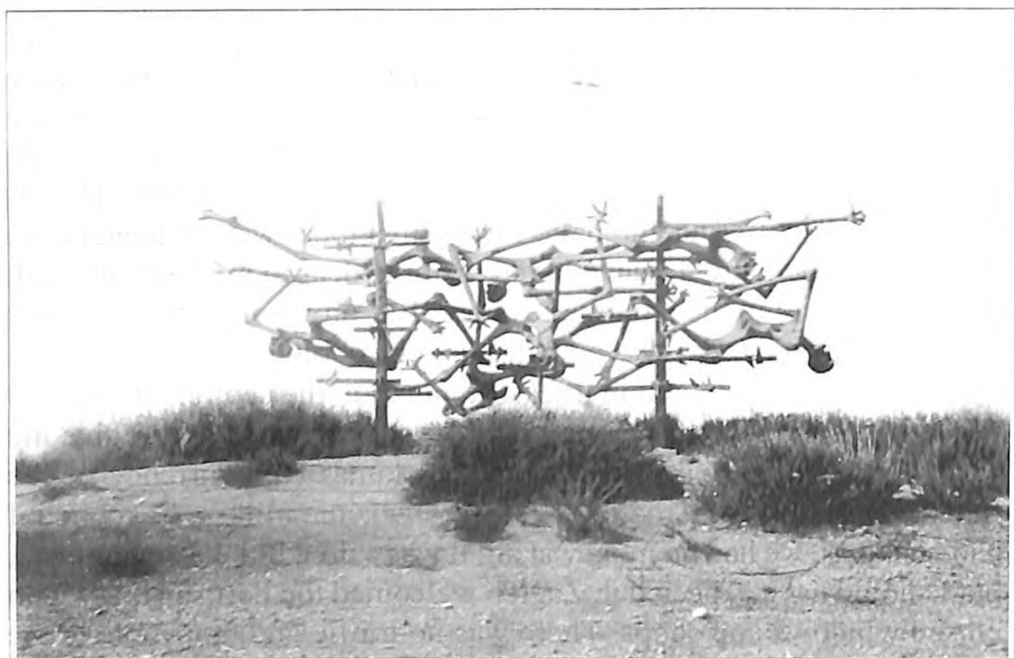
Everyone was very considerate and took care of me and my baby. One of the nurses would take care of the child while I was working and I would get extra rations of milk, sugar and everything else that was available. When we were on the move the soldiers would help me carry the child and during the final battles for Zagreb I was always in a truck or a car. The travelling was very difficult both for me and the baby. We drove for three days and three nights, stopping only for destroyed bridges and roads, hungry and exhausted. My son was crying from hunger the whole time. There was no chance to change his clothes or bathe him. I don't know how I coped. Finally we arrived at the bridge over the Sava River, the entrance to Zagreb. I was seized by a strange feeling. Here I was, a persecuted and humiliated Jew, coming into Zagreb with the victorious army, into the city where I had been subjected to so much suffering and pain. I knew that there was no longer anyone close to me there. I knew that everything dear to me had vanished. I had a sudden impulse to take revenge. But on whom, after so many deaths? And suddenly I was convulsed with sobbing.

We came into Zagreb in trucks, stopping in the central city square. I saw a peasant woman carrying a milk can and asked her to give me some milk for my baby. "If you've got kunas (the currency of the Independent State of Croatia), I'll give you some milk," she replied. I had no kunas, we had no money at all. It was a dreadful disappointment, but I should have expected it. Zagreb welcomed the Partisan army with closed windows and shops. There was no traffic and no people in the streets. It was all very sad.

I stayed in Zagreb long enough to finish the two exams I still needed to pass in order to complete my medical degree, then went to

Belgrade. I worked in Belgrade as a doctor until I retired and still live in the city.

As I finish the story of my life, I am left with only an infinite sadness, the everlasting memory of the 56 members of my immediate and extended family who were executed, the memory of my dear, close friends from the Jewish refectory who are gone, and of the six million Jews who vanished into smoke and ashes in concentration camps throughout Europe.



Sculptor Nandor Glid's monument to Holocaust victims on Mt Herzl in the Yad Vashem Memorial Complex in Jerusalem.