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*Dr Emil FREUNDLICH*

## THE TRAGEDY OF ZAGREB'S YOUNG JEWS



**D**r Emil Freundlich was born in Zagreb on May 6, 1921. He was educated in his home town of Zagreb where he was studying medicine at the time of the attack on Yugoslavia. In spite of the horrors he experienced during the war years and that his parents went through, he returned to Zagreb, completing his medical studies after the war, in 1948, as a military student.

Soon after the end of the war, in 1947, he married Felicia (Licika) Sretna Klugmann, who had lost her parents and her brother in the Holocaust. After the war, he emigrated to Israel with his wife and worked as a physician in Jerusalem, Haifa and Nahariya. The Freundlichs' daughter, Edna, was born in Jerusalem. He lives in Israel.

For Yugoslavia, the second world war began on April 6, 1941, with the attack of the German Army. Several days later German troops entered Zagreb without resistance. Yugoslavia was defeated and the Independent State of Croatia was proclaimed on Croatian territory under the Ustaša regime with no resistance whatsoever.

Anti-Jewish laws and decrees were quickly passed. People were dismissed from their jobs and many were evicted from their apartments. And then the arrests began. My father was thrown out of the office he

ran together with several friends. But this was just the beginning, far more difficult things were to follow.

I was a medical student at Zagreb University. In the early days a decree was issued, written in large letters, that Jews were not allowed access to the faculties. At the time I was required to perform a brain dissection in the Institute of Anatomy, without which I would not be able to complete the second year of my studies. At the end of April some colleagues informed me that my name had been posted along with the time I was to perform this. Despite the ban I went to the faculty, none of my colleagues said anything. I completed my work in peace that day and the next, and so completed all the requirements for my second year of studies. I was not aware at the time just how dangerous this was and what could have happened to me, but everything turned out all right.

### *Arrest, imprisonment*

I was arrested on May 17, 1941. This was just five and a half days after the German troops entered Zagreb and eleven days after my twentieth birthday. Ustaša police agents came at night to our apartment in Martićeva Street in Zagreb, turned my room upside down in an unsuccessful search for compromising materials, and took me to the prison in Petrinjska Street.

The cell they put me in was overcrowded, the stench was awful and the lack of oxygen was palpable. There were five wooden beds in the room, it was a cell for five prisoners, but there were more than thirty of us in there, even one day as many as forty! We slept on the concrete floor, crammed up against one another like sardines. New prisoners would be put into the cell and many taken out to unknown destinations. One night, with a lot of noise, they opened the iron doors of all the cells. There was one guard standing at each door. They were calling people out by their names. One of the prisoners knew what this meant. He told us that they were taking them away to be shot, and that this list had been put together entirely without any court decision, that its purpose was solely to entertain the guards. There were probably about ten of them taken out. When the roll call ended and all the iron doors were again closed I felt an incredible pressure. But I also had the feeling that I would still be alive to see the light of the next day.

One morning I heard loud music from the radio. Someone said that they were taking a prisoner to beat and question him. And indeed, after

a short time, I heard cries. There was complete silence in the cell, no one could utter a single word.

I was interrogated in a room that looked like an office, with a police agent in civilian clothes and a secretary who was typing. The agent told me that I had been arrested as a communist and that I had written enemy slogans on the walls of houses. Of course I denied everything, but I signed the interrogation protocol and was taken back to the cell.

After nine days in prison I was dispatched, with a group of prisoners, in a closed police vehicle, the Black Mariah, to the Kerestinec camp.

### *In Kerestinec*

At first glance, everything in the camp seemed to me a pleasant surprise after the prison cell. The building was an old, eighteenth century castle, quite well preserved. At first we were accommodated in the rooms of this old castle, about fifteen of us to each room. There was a lot of space and we slept on straw. We were locked up, but allowed out three times a day into the courtyard where we ate and where we could talk to prisoners from other rooms. There were three groups of prisoners in the camp: the self-styled communist collective, then those who had been arrested as communists, leftists or something similar but who had not been admitted into the communist collective, and a group of Jewish lawyers from Zagreb. The lawyers were living in a barn next to the castle building which had once been used as a horse stable. I wasn't admitted into the communist collective so I remained in the other group.

Visits were allowed every day in the early afternoon. So my parents came, bringing me food, as did my dear friend Pavao Mayerhofer who told me that one or other of my friends would visit me every second day. Unfortunately this did not happen, because the young Jewish people of Zagreb were all taken to a labour camp three days after I arrived in Kerestinec. From there they were taken to the Jadovno camp and I never saw them again. A month later our small group was separated from the others and moved from the castle building to a barracks about two hundred metres away.

In the early evening of July 5, they took ten leading communists from the camp. These included two from our group, Prof. Zvonimir Richtmann and Ivan Korski. These ten were executed that same evening in retaliation for the killing of a police clerk. Of the ten shot,

six were Jews. From that time on, the situation in the camp deteriorated significantly. The guard was reinforced, visits were banned and days of uncertainty began. We now knew that we were being held as hostages.

During the night of July 13, I was awoken by the sound of gunfire. The guard at the door of our barracks shouted that we should all lie down or sit on the floor. If anyone came close to the door he would shoot without warning. One person from our group said that they were probably shooting everyone in the castle, and another added that they would come to us once they had finished the job over there. We waited. After a while the shooting died down and the sound was coming from further and further away. Gradually it all calmed down.

I was awakened early the following morning by shouts and the order that we were to line up outside the barracks. I was the last to arrive and received a blow to the ribs. They counted us. I heard the guard tell the Ustaša officer next to him: "They're all here."

They allowed us to move around freely in the barracks and in the courtyard. Several men from our group talked to the guards and heard from them that the whole communist group had escaped from the castle after killing a guard and the camp commandant, and that all the escapees had been either killed or arrested. As for us, they said, we were to be moved to other camps. The communists' escape had been a total failure: of the 89 prisoners who fled, only fourteen survived. Apparently the reason for this failure was betrayal in the communist ranks.

### *Transport to a new camp*

The same day, July 14, at about noon, they took us in police vehicles to Zagreb, to the courtyard of a police building in Petrinjska Street. There, a short distance away, I saw my parents who were shouting to me that we would be sent to a Jewish prison. I thought that this was good news for me because it seemed that it would be better to be locked up as a Jew than as a communist. Late that night they took us to Velesajam, on the Savska road, put us in a hall and ordered us to sit on the floor in two rows, without moving. Then the Ustaša began their sadistic performance.

As we sat on the floor, the Ustaša walked around us, continually cocking their rifles. They called one man out and ordered him to lie down, forcing him to do so by hitting him in the ribs with rifle butts. An officer ordered him sharply to stand up, and then again to lie down. At

first these orders were slow, but then began to be faster and faster. The prisoner was trying to carry out the orders while he could, but he soon began to stumble, lost consciousness and fell. He was then kicked and struck with rifle butts, but just lay there, unconscious.

Then it was someone else's turn, and this was repeated twice more. Later they called out a man, shouting that he had been a judge and used to pass sentence on them, the Ustaša. He was struck hard in the face with a fist and collapsed on the floor unconscious. The Ustaša were moving among us, shouting that we were not to move and that we were to watch what they were doing. There was one of us, a very fat man, who they pushed around with rifles and bayonets and ordered to sit still. There were maybe seven or more men who went through this torture. After this the Ustaša suddenly left the hall and we were able to sleep on the floor.

The following morning, July 15, they put us into cattle wagons and the train set off.

This was a hard and difficult journey. We were completely closed up and crammed in, with no hygienic conditions.

### *Arrival in Gospić*

A few hours later we arrived at a train station. They opened the wagons and we got out. It transpired that this was Gospić. We saw that our train was unusually long. People began coming out of other wagons, whole families, men women and children. The Ustaša were screaming at the them to hurry up out of the wagons. This was a great blow for me: up to now I had been in prison only with men, where everyone could take care of himself, but now I saw entire families coming out of the wagons, tired and exhausted. I cannot forget this image outside the cattle wagons in the station. When we spoke to them we discovered that they were from Varaždin, and that entire families had been arrested together and shipped off. They were wearing Jewish signs. We advised them that this sign should not be worn in camps.

When this sad procession headed towards the town I could see that they were all carrying, in their arms and on their backs, supplies, clothing and bedding for themselves and their children. Many were carrying small and bigger children who were so tired they were unable to walk. Deeply etched in my memory is the sight of a young man, short, very muscular. He was carrying on his back a large parcel, next to him were three little girls and a woman who was also carrying a heavy load. This

was their entire belongings, all that could be carried, so that the children would have something to sleep on, cover themselves with at night and dress in. We helped them carry their things as far as we could.

The journey was long and tiring, the heat was immense. On the way through the town, the locals were standing along the road. They were watching our transport and it seemed to me that they were totally indifferent, as if they were watching some almost normal scene.

We reached the prison courtyard and there we found a large number of Serbs. The Ustaša were standing at the windows of the first and second floors with rifles aimed at us. Here they separated us, Jews from Serbs, and we continued our journey into the town.

### *At the cinema*

We arrived at a hall which turned out to be a cinema. It was completely empty, the chairs had been folded and placed against the wall. An Ustaša officer met us there and told us that if even one of us tried to escape, they would immediately shoot five of us. After this greeting, the Ustaša left and they put guards on the door, on the outside.

We took our places on the floor of the hall. We were crammed in, each family and small group used their belongings to fence off their space. We kept the place clean as far as possible, despite the difficult and cramped conditions. They allowed us to dig two latrines in the courtyard, separate for women and men. We also set up a space for showers, similarly separate.

In various ways we managed to feed ourselves. The Varaždin people had one man, very skilled and resourceful, who had permission to buy food in the town. Along with this we also received parcels from Varaždin and Zagreb. We used our supplies economically, from one day to another.

The discipline and order in the cinema and the impeccable behaviour of all these people are etched forever in my memory. In the three weeks I spent in the cinema, I didn't hear a single serious fight or quarrel.

We tried to organise ourselves as much as possible. The doctors set up a kind of infirmary in one corner, using their own instruments which they had brought with them. The way the children were cared for made a particularly strong impression on me. They were to have some kind of entertainment during the day and that was organised as a kindergarten where the children gathered. They played with the toys they had

brought from home and entertained themselves so that they would be as little affected as possible by the difficult and depressing situation.

We were allowed to leave the cinema and go into the town with a guard. The guards were ordinary young soldiers, judging by the way they spoke, villagers from the Gospić area. They seemed rather primitive. Some of them spoke to us briefly and invited us to eat in neighbouring taverns owned by their cousins or friends. This was good business for them. It was also a chance for us to walk a little through the streets of the town.

While we were staying in the Gospić cinema, the Ustaša carried out mass executions of Serbs and Jews in other camps in the vicinity of the town. It was not until later, just before we left Gospić, that we learnt about the liquidations in these camps.

### *Gospić street sweeps*

Walking around the town outside the cinema one day, I saw a group of my friends from Zagreb. They told me that they had been in the Jadovno camp, with all the other young people from Zagreb. Conditions there were terrible. About ten days after they arrived in the camp, an Ustaša officer, Janko Mihajlović, also came there and recognised a few of his Jewish acquaintances and school friends. He ordered that ten of them be sent to Gospić to clean the streets there. Most of those sent were my friends and people I knew.

Several days after their arrival in Gospić, one of them, Saša Blivajs, was set free, following his father's intervention. The others asked that he be replaced and that a few more inmates from their group be included. This was because the work was easier. They were given approval for only one more to join them, but not anyone from Jadovno. So they decided to ask for me, from the camp in Gospić. My friend Viktor Rosenwasser came to get me, escorted by an Ustaša. And so I became one of the small group of "city street sweeps" as we called ourselves. It was only much later that I realised that the Ustaša had not approved their request for an inmate from Jadovno to join them because these had already all been killed at the beginning of August.

It was easy work. They didn't watch us much and we were free to move around the town. We could easily have escaped, but we knew that they would then kill people from the camp. In any case, we had no idea where to flee or to hide.

One day, perhaps about the time I joined the street sweepers, while I was at work I suddenly saw my parents. They had come to Gospić with a pass issued by the Ustaša police in Zagreb which allowed them to travel to Sušak or Split, anywhere in the occupied Italian territory. The travel pass included my name. The Ustaša record-keeping was obviously sloppy because, at the time the pass was issued, in July 1941, I was already in the Gospić camp. They tried to get me out of the camp using the pass, but this was refused. Not knowing what to do, they stayed in Gospić, rented a room and moved freely around the town. We often saw one another and were able to talk, but only briefly.

I saw a great deal in the streets of Gospić during this time and began to realise what dreadful crimes the Ustaša were committing. I watched them drive processions of Serbs, tied to each side of long metal chains, barefoot and in peasant rags. They were being taken towards the Velebit Heights and it was clear they were taking them there for execution. I remember well one column of Serbs which passed through the town. One of them was singing, in a thundering voice the well known Chetnik song: "Get ready, get ready Chetniks, it will be a great battle."

One day while I was working, an Ustaša officer came up to me and asked me to follow him because he needed my advice. He took me to a room full of table settings, crystal and vases. It was obvious that these items had been stolen from Serbian houses. He wanted me to choose for him the finest and most expensive table setting, plates, cups and glasses, because he was getting married and wanted to take all these things for his new apartment. He was not the slightest bit ashamed to take possession of these stolen items.

There were Italian officers moving around the streets of Gospić and throughout the area; they saw everything that was happening and yet did nothing to save these people from certain death.

### *The tragedy of Zagreb's young Jews*

At the end of May, 1941, young people in Zagreb, between the ages of 16 and 24, were arrested. They were told that they were going to a labour camp. There were 165 young people from the city, apart from a small number who either weren't in the records because of some mistake or who had managed to flee Zagreb in time, before the arrests, or those who were children of mixed marriages. Among those arrested was my wife's brother, Solomon Klugmann, a 23-year-old medical student, and many of my close friends, colleagues, friends from school and



acquaintances from my younger days. They came for me too, but I was already in the camp.

At first they were in the Danica camp, near Koprivnica, where they were forced to work on filling in anti-tank trenches. Conditions in the camp were harsh, the work was hard, the supervision was cruel and the food was inadequate. Despite all this the group had an enviable level of morale, with anyone who was able helping those were finding it very difficult.

After a month and a half they were transported to Gospić and from there to Jadovno camp. This camp was up in the hills in the middle of a forest, far from any inhabited places. The conditions there were particularly harsh. People slept on the ground under the open sky and were not permitted to change clothes when it rained. The work was very hard, up to twelve hours a day, accompanied by beating and swearing from the Ustaša guards. The rations bordered on starvation. Ten of the inmates were separated from the group and brought to Gospić. These were the self-styled street sweepers who I met. This group of young Jewish people from Zagreb, together with a group of Jews from various parts of Croatia and a large number of Serbs, were all killed in Jadovno at the beginning of August that year. How they were killed is not known.

The young people who were in compulsory labour in Gospić were later taken to Jasenovac and were all killed except for one, Božo Švarc, who escaped from the camp, joined the Partisans and was in the battle until the end of the war. Of the 165 young people arrested, only Božo Švarc and Saša Blivajs survived.

An article entitled *The arrest of 165 young Jewish people in Zagreb in May, 1941*, was published by the Zagreb Jewish Community in 1998 in their publication *Novi Omanut*. This article describes the tragic fate of these people and lists the names of all who were in the group. When I saw the names of my dear friends, I swore that would do something to preserve the memory of these wonderful young people. So I launched a campaign to erect a plaque with all their names. Today there is a beautiful plaque on the Jewish Community in Zagreb and another at the Ghetto Fighters House museum near Nahariya in Israel. The names of all the young people who perished are on both plaques.

### *In camp on a farm*

In mid-August we heard that the Italians would take over the military administration of the whole area and that the Ustaša would with-

draw from the region. All the inmates of the cinema were moved to a new camp. We “street sweepers” also received orders to move to the new camp, set up in an abandoned farm outside the town.

There was much more room than there had been in the cinema but there were also more people. The attitude of the Ustaša guards was much more cruel. One day, in the early evening, we were made to stand in the rain. There were about thirty or forty of us in the group. As soon as the rain stopped, the Ustaša put us in a tiny room. We were crammed in, leaning against one another, wet and freezing. It wasn't possible to sit because there was no space. We spent the night standing up and passed urine in our pants because there was no option. Not until just before dawn did the Ustaša allow us out of the room.

At that time new transports arrived in the camp from various parts of Croatia, mostly entire families. Groups from the camp on Pag also arrived. They said that they had been kept separate from the women and did not know what had happened to them. Later we found that the women and children had been killed shortly after their arrival in that camp. We also waited in vain for the inmates from Jadovno to arrive.

I was in this farm camp for several days. We were prepared to be transported to the interior of Croatia. The men were transported to Jasenovac and the women to Stara Gradiška. The Italians saw everything, but made no move to interfere.

### *Rescue*

On the morning of August 20, we received orders to proceed on foot to the railway station. We passed through fields on the outskirts of the town. We were surrounded by armed Ustaša guards forcing us to move forward. It was a very hot summer day. Suddenly I saw some people putting their belongings, their bags, on a farm cart. I hurried and also put my things on that cart. At that moment the driver shouted that there was no more room and told us to step away. He drove off and a wheel of the cart ran over my left foot. The pain was so intense I passed out and came to only once my friends had put me on the cart.

We were heading towards the railway station. I was screaming from the pain on the way and began to think that it could possibly be helpful to scream as much as possible.

We reached the railway station. I saw cattle wagons and people being forced into them. At this point two Ustaša officers came to me, took me from the cart and put me in their car. I was sure they were driv-

ing me out of town to execute me. It was a short drive. We pulled up outside a low building on which a sign in large letters read "Hospital".

The Ustaša took me from the car, into the building and put me into a bed. A doctor came and asked the Ustaša to leave the room. He asked me what had happened. I told him that I had been in the Jewish camp and that I had been injured. He examined me and told me that there was no damage. He then called the Ustaša who were waiting outside and told them, clearly and sharply, that I had to stay in hospital. The Ustaša left. I have been unable to find out who this doctor was who saved me with his persistence and dedication. But I have never forgotten what he did for me.

A few minutes later a young doctor whom I recognised came into the room. I knew him from the university and from secondary school I knew his name: Fulgozi. He didn't recognise me because I was younger. At first he didn't believe me when I told him who I was, so he asked me questions about who my teachers were. After I answered everything, he told me that a bed needed to be arranged for me in the hospital and left. After a short time he came back and told me that I actually didn't need any medical assistance and that I could disappear, because the Ustaša had left. He gave me a short note written on a hospital prescription form which read that I was receiving outpatient treatment in the hospital. I still have the note to this day.

I had no idea what to do, everything was happening so quickly. I was sitting in the hospital hallway, there was no one around. Suddenly I saw my parents. They had been at the railway station to see the transport and had heard that I was injured, so they came to the hospital. They took me into the town, to the room they had rented. I lay there in bed for five days, because I was still unable to walk and also so that, if anyone came, they would see that my leg was injured and that I was sick. The people in whose house we were living must have known what had happened to me and where I had come from, but they did not betray me.

The transport left with all the inmates. I have no information on how many saved themselves and survived all the horrors in the camps. I believe that the number who survived was small: almost all of those who were in that transport perished in the camps.

Five days later there were no more Ustaša in the town. Father found a taxi driver and made a deal with him to drive us to Crikvenica which, at that time, was just outside the Italian border.

The roads were completely empty, with no traffic. Suddenly we saw a car standing on the road and two Ustaša officers next to it. They stopped us and ordered the driver to get out of the car. We realised that their car had broken down. The driver managed to fix it and, in no time, we continued our journey. My mother was as white as a sheet.

### *Italy*

We reached Crikvenica. We crossed over to Sušak by boat and were already in Italy. There we met my grandmother who had come from Zagreb. We learnt that the Italian police were arresting refugees and sending them back to Croatian territory. However we managed to stay in the Sušak area for more than two months before we were arrested, put in prison for two days then transferred over the border, from where we again managed to return to Sušak.

Late one afternoon I was in the town when I suddenly noticed two people looking at me, talking to each other and slowly approaching me. It was obvious to me that they were police agents. I turned around and ran as fast as I could. They ran after me. We lived up a hill in the town. I ran as far as I could, up stairs and down narrow alleys. They didn't catch me.

At the end of December, led by a guide who received very good payment from us, we crossed the old border and reached Trieste by train. The journey was very complicated: we set off by boat, reached the other side of the border then travelled by buses and train before arriving. In Trieste we reported to the police as refugees and asked them to lock us up. They were very kind to us and said that they would accommodate us in a village, as prisoners, what they called *confino libero*, and that we could choose where we wanted to go. We asked for the province of Asti in Piedmont, because we knew that some cousins of ours were staying there. They gave us a ticket for travel and a letter for the mayor of the village of Cocconato, which was close to the town of Asti.

In this little village, not far from the city of Turin, there were about sixty Jewish refugees, twelve families. We were free, we could move around the village, but we needed to obtain permission, which was easily granted, to go into the town of Asti. We also received a little financial assistance. The villagers were really lovely people and the whole situation during our stay was very pleasant.

In the summer of 1942 I developed iridocyclitis, an eye inflammation which I had had several times previously and was sent to the hos-

pital in the town of Asti. I had a bed there in the main hospital and received very good treatment, all at the state's expense.

At the beginning of March, 1943, we received a letter from the mayor informing us that we would be moved to Ferramonti, a concentration camp in southern Italy, in Calabria. Families who had children or elderly members were permitted to stay in Cocconato.

The camp we now arrived at was officially known as Campo di concentramento Ferramonti di Tarsia. It was located in a very sparsely populated area, in the deep south of Italy, and was nothing like the concentration camps set up by the Germans or the Ustaša. The area was fenced off with wire (not barbed wire). Everyone had their own place to sleep. We were completely free to move around the camp during the day; in the evenings and at night we weren't allowed to leave the barracks. There were many activities in the camp: school for the children, lectures, concerts, religious services, various performances and active political work. The food was very poor, but we weren't starving. In the six months I spent there (from March to September 1943), no one died of abuse or of hunger.

At the beginning of September, 1943, the British Army crossed over from Sicily to southern Italy. The camp administration immediately opened the gates, took down the wire and we were free to leave the camp and walk around in the area, in the fields and woods, and to hide if retreating German troops should try to get into the camp and kill the inmates. A few days later British soldiers appeared and we were free.

I stayed in Bari for some time. I managed to enrol in the medical school there and was admitted into third year. I passed three exams and then signed up with the Partisans. I was sent to a Partisan hospital in a place called Grumo near Bari and, later on, I worked in the base headquarters in Bari. At that time my eyes became inflamed again and I spent more than two months in bed in a British military hospital.

### *Return home and emigration to Israel*

The war came to an end. I returned to Zagreb. It was sad and miserable. My parents had remained in Italy and most of my closest friends were no longer with us. I walked the city streets, looking at the windows of houses where my friends had once lived. There were now other people in those apartments.

But the hardest blow for me was when some people I know saw me and shouted "You've come back, too; actually a lot of you have come back!" It was very difficult to hear this.

I continued studying medicine as a military student. A year later I met the woman who is now my wife. We were married in 1947. I graduated in 1948 and became a physician.

My wife, Felicia (Licika) Sretna Klugmann, had endured a great deal during the Holocaust. She had been sixteen when the Germans entered Zagreb. Her father (Sigmund Klugmann, a Yugoslav Army colonel with a master's degree in pharmacy) was killed in Jasenovac, her brother (Soloman Klugmann) was in the group of young people in Jadovno and she herself was arrested with her mother in 1943 and put into the transport for Auschwitz. She managed to escape from the transport on the first day, from the yard of the prison on the Savska road, and hid for several months in the basement of the Jewish Community in Zagreb before joining the Partisans in Moslavina where she remained until the end of the war. Her mother was killed in Auschwitz.

In 1948 the state of Israel was founded and it became possible to emigrate to the new country. We applied for permission to leave the country, but I was denied this as a military student. With great difficulty however, I did get permission, thanks to President Tito after my wife spoke to his secretary and was granted an audience with him. It was mainly because of my eye that I received permission. However, in order for my demobilisation to be approved I had to pay an enormous sum of money to the Yugoslav Army.

We began a new life in Israel, first in Jerusalem, where our daughter Edna was born. I worked there as a doctor in the University Clinic for seven years. After that we moved to Haifa and later to Nahariya, where I was head of the department for children's diseases for 26 years.

We tried to forget everything we had been through, partly on purpose and partly because this happens over time. However I have never been able to forget the summer months of 1941. The faces of people I was with in those difficult times, and who are no longer living, often come to me in my sleep. I have never forgotten my friends from childhood, those with whom I grew up and who so tragically lost their lives at an early age.