

---

Ivona FRAJD

## A GERMAN SAVED MY LIFE BY CHANCE



*Ivona Frajd was born in 1923. Her father was from Novi Sad and her mother from Budapest. The war caught them in Novi Sad where her father was working as a building contractor and Ivona and her brother were attending school. All the members of her immediate family perished at the beginning of the war.*

*Following the liberation she studied pharmacy and worked for pharmaceutical companies. She lived in Belgrade after her retirement. She died on October 7, 1992 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery. She is survived by a daughter and two grandsons.*

*This interview with Ivona Frajd was conducted by Jaša Almuli for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, USA.*

I was ten when Hitler came to power in Germany and the image etched in my memory of those early childhood years is of my father sitting by the radio, frantically listening to the news, and of all the voices. Hitler's voice coming closer like some ominous thunder. A few years after these first forebodings, refugees began arriving from Germany and Austria. They passed through Novi Sad in smaller or larger groups. Horrifying rumours of what was happening began to spread.

The adults around us were rather disturbed. They were thinking about what could be done to save the children, to avoid something that they knew was terrible although they couldn't really imagine what could actually happen. My uncle, my father's brother, who was a physician, went to America in 1940, but my father said "I'm an old man, I can't make a new life for myself. Maybe things will be difficult, but to leave now, to start from scratch... I can't do it!" My father was 52 at the time. This was more or less the way many people thought. My father was a building contractor, he built roads and had a good reputation, status, and apartment. He had a settled life.

We had lived in Yugoslavia without any anti-Semitic incidents. But then came March 27, 1941. I was in the eighth grade of secondary school. All the students from our school joined the demonstrations in the streets of Novi Sad. We passed the German *Kulturbund*. These were peaceful demonstrations. The next morning I was sitting in the dining room getting ready for school. The radio was on and we heard an official announcement in which King Petar proclaimed that he had seized power. There was a delighted outburst, especially in Serbia, in Vojvodina. We thought that this meant that the pact had been broken. People were shouting slogans: "Better the grave than a slave! Better war than the Pact!"

March 27 was a sunny spring day but, as the war approached, the weather also seemed to change. We weren't going from spring into summer, but into winter: it began to snow and, on April 6, bombs also began to fall on us. Germany attacked Yugoslavia without declaring war.

There weren't any air raids in Novi Sad, but the sirens sounded again and again; we heard what was happening in Belgrade and about the ongoing conflicts. The Germans didn't arrive: we were occupied by the Hungarians on April 13, 1941. As they entered Novi Sad, people were also killed in the very centre of the city, respectable people were killed, hostages were taken, Serbs and Jews. My father was also taken as a hostage. The Hungarians asked for ransom for the Jewish hostages. The Community collected a considerable sum of money, I don't know how much, and the hostages were released. Life went on under the terror of the occupier. In the morning no one had any idea what would happen during the day. Refugees also came to us, to our house, my aunt and uncle and their children from Belgrade. However, on May 15, there was an official announcement that all newcomers to

Novi Sad must leave the city. They prepared to return to Belgrade. On the morning they were supposed to leave, my cousin, who was a physician, tried to commit suicide by poisoning himself. By doing so he actually saved himself and his parents because they got out of the deportation to take him to hospital, where he eventually survived. He managed to stay both alive and in Novi Sad.



*Ivona Frajd's mother and father, killed in January 1942  
in the Great Raid in Novi Sad*

That year, 1941, I completed high school. I found it rather strange that we were given a course in Hungarian history and geography in which we had to take an exam for our graduation. My brother was four years younger than me. We didn't speak Hungarian at the time and he went to the only Serbian high school in Novi Sad. The summer after I finished school was very difficult: my father was taken to forced labour

and was badly harassed. Mother tried to get in touch with her relatives in Budapest. They spoke sometime in November, although my brother was enrolled in the fifth grade of high school in Novi Sad. Mother agreed with the headmaster that he would not go to school in December but would return on January 12, after the holidays, to finish the semester. And so, in November, we arrived in Budapest, my mother, father, brother and I.

We had relatives in Budapest. Life there was relatively normal. I think that Jews were banned from working in the public service, but doctors were allowed to work. Jews ran shops, there were no limitations on enrolment in high schools. However they began to force young people to join labour battalions. My brother was too young for this so, as agreed, he returned with my mother to Novi Sad on January 12, 1942. My father and I stayed in Budapest. Father became very restless and so he also left soon afterwards.

It was the coldest winter I remember. I was then enrolled in a French school, just for the sake of studying something. I had been left alone and tried to get in touch with my parents and my brother. I tried to phone Novi Sad from the post office on the evening of January 21. They told me that the lines had been cut because of the cold. The lines were cut on January 22, the lines were cut on January 23 and, on January 24, refugees from Novi Sad suddenly began showing up in Budapest! My relatives discovered that something had happened, but didn't have the heart to tell me. "If you want to find out you can go to this address, they have relatives who are with your parents." I didn't suspect the truth, I thought they had been arrested, that father had been taken hostage again.

When I arrived and saw my neighbours' relatives wearing black I still didn't understand immediately. "They were together," they said.

"Not the children, too?"

"Everyone!"

"What happened?"

"In front of the house, on the morning of January 23, at 9.30, in a temperature of 20 ° C below zero, drunken Hungarian gendarmes... "

I know the very spot at which my father, my mother, my brother and all my neighbours were killed, where there were Serbs and Jews who were later loaded into trucks and thrown into the Danube River. And the Danube was frozen. Later they said that there were bodies floating down the Danube to Belgrade all through the spring. They

have no grave. I have been to Yad Vashem and stood before the Jerusalem monuments and saw that the Great Raid went down in history. It is called the Novi Sad Raid and is recorded as a tragedy of the Jewish people. But it is also my personal tragedy, for life, for each and every day. At my age now, no one has parents, but this happens to people in the normal course of life. I can never escape this.

I later discovered that the Novi Sad Raid in which my parents perished was the continuation of a murderous operation which had begun a few days earlier in Žabalj, a small place north of Novi Sad, and then spread to the city. Posters were put up in the city on January 21 proclaiming a ban on residents going out into the streets. The Hungarian gendarmes combed through the city street by street. They went into houses, Jewish and Serb, and took people out. On the first and second day they took people to the Strand, the beach on the Danube in Novi Sad. There they waited in long lines and could see what was happening. The official pretext for this massacre was that it was a reprisal for some alleged rebellion against the Hungarian occupation in Bačka, and they showed some soldiers who had allegedly been wounded. The gendarmes were given large quantities of alcohol and, in terribly cold weather, were forced to massacre people. By January 23, the last day of the Raid, they no longer took people to the Danube but killed them in front of their houses. In Miletićeva Street, where my parents lived, in the centre of Novi Sad, there were at least a few people killed from each house. My parents were taken out at 9.30 in the morning and at 1.30 the order came from Budapest to abort the operation. In the meantime a large group of people, Serbs and Jews, were taken to the Cultural Centre in Novi Sad to await their turn. However the identity documents of these people were checked and, sometime during the evening, between six and seven, they were released and allowed to return to their homes. My aunt's family was among them. Later, when I returned to Novi Sad, I went into the apartment and saw breakfast things still on the table. No one had been there. I heard that there were cases where they looted everything after the massacre, but at our place everything was in place as if my family had walked out into the street right in the middle of breakfast.

I who had never been alone and who, until the age of eighteen had been surrounded by love and attention, suddenly found myself all alone in the world, a dangerous and malicious world. I stayed in Budapest where life was very strange. I was staying in the apartment

that my parents had come to in November. I was able to support myself. My parents had been well-off and my mother had also had a house so we also had income. I didn't have any financial problems.

The situation in Hungary was strange. As time went by the Hungarian authorities, sometime in 1943, felt that they hadn't taken the right side in the war and were doing things which didn't exactly give the impression of a close alliance with Germany. At the time Hungary was full of Polish refugees. There were Jews with false papers, there were Poles, there was even a large camp for Poles. The Poles received assistance from the Hungarian government. Gradually, whenever an opportunity arose, the Hungarians began taking the other side. However, on March 19, 1944, the Germans arrived and occupied Hungary. They had seen through the Hungarians' game. We panicked, especially I, who knew what this meant and what could happen to us. I had Polish friends and I moved from the apartment where everyone knew me and found accommodation in another part of Budapest where nobody knew me. However, on April 20, 1944, a man from our group was arrested by the Gestapo. He was not a Jew and, on April 28, I was also arrested. In fact almost everyone from our group was arrested. This was a student group. I had obtained false papers which described me as Christian. There were both Jews and non-Jews among the Poles although, on paper, they were all Aryans. The Germans knew exactly who I was, what my name was and everything else. The man who had been arrested had betrayed us.

I was taken to the Gestapo for interrogation. They asked me for my identification document and asked me where I had got it. I told them that I had bought it but that I didn't remember from whom. I told them my name. I was then registered under my real first name and surname.

From April 28 to May 15, 1944, I was in prison in Budapest. After that they moved me to a nearby camp called Kistarcsa, where I remained for about a month. This was a camp-sanatorium where we all wore our own clothes, the food was like that in the prison and we were allowed to receive parcels. I even received one with some clothes. After about a month in Kistarcsa they sent a paddy wagon, a small truck, just for me and I was returned to prison. I spent just one night in the prison in Fo Street. The next day we were transferred by train to a prison near Vienna. There I was again among a group of Poles and with another two or three people whom I had not met before. We were in a labour

camp for foreigners, although we were not working, but in confinement. We were waiting for them to take us somewhere else.



*From carefree days to family tragedy: Ivona and her brother Ivan, who was killed together with their parents in the Novi Sad Raid* ...

I think it was about a week later that they moved us to a prison in Vienna where we spent the night. There was a woman there who had been brought back from Auschwitz to be tried and she told us what was happening there. By this time they were already releasing information through Radio London on what was happening in the German camps, but what we heard was far too horrifying for people to believe. This woman told us that there were fake showers in Auschwitz which were actually gas chambers, that they had crematoriums where the corpses were immediately burned and that entire trains full of people were being sent there. We listened to her but could not believe it. The next day we set off. By some miracle I wasn't on a transport from the ghetto but on a normal train, with police guards. We were a mixed group. There were Jews, there were people from Vienna, there was also a woman from a mixed marriage who had lived in Vienna until July, 1944. She had also been picked up. We arrived in Auschwitz on the evening of July 6. Because we weren't a ghetto transport this wasn't such a big train and so we didn't arrive at the Birkenau station, right in

front of the gas chambers, but at the main Auschwitz station about three kilometres from Birkenau. We left the train and were taken to the camp. We walked the three-kilometre road, getting closer and closer to hell. I had the feeling, a feeling which did not leave me as long as I remained in the camp, that I was on some other planet, that this was something which had nothing to do with anything I had seen before or anywhere I had been up to that point. The nightmare loomed as we came closer. The crematoriums could be seen from the distance: there were three of them, three that I saw, and they were all operating, flames shooting high out of them. First a big flame, then smoke over the flame. Heavy smoke and heavy flames.

We entered the camp and saw living people walking around it, strange-looking creatures with shaved heads. We couldn't tell men from women. They walked around in rags. We approached the admission section where a group of women inmates admitted us and told us "Now sit there, you'll go to the showers." We immediately thought that we would be sent to the gas chamber. However we were really sent to the showers. After that our heads were shaved, then they tattooed us, took our things, gave us some rags and some odd shoes. Some were even given two left shoes, some got one wooden clog and one sandal.

Suddenly we were in hell! It was now for the first time that I thought "Thank God my parents didn't live to go through this!" We were actually in Birkenau. In the summer of 1944, Birkenau was the biggest death factory that had ever existed. I learnt later that 14,000 people were killed there every day.

Our transport didn't go through the selection, so we all entered the camp. With us was an elderly lady who, luckily, remained with us. We all entered the camp and were given our numbers. I have the number 82479.

We were accommodated in barracks in *kojen*. These were wooden bunks in tiers with room for two people on each bunk. But here eight people slept on each bunk, on both the lower and upper tiers. There were about thirty women on each set of bunks and they could hardly move. It was summer and the stench spread everywhere. When night fell, the bedbugs would begin their invasion.

The day began at dawn when we had to leave the barracks for the roll call. We would line up in ranks of five and stand there until the entire camp, all the people in the camp, were counted. If the numbers didn't add up, the whole procedure was repeated and prolonged



another two or three hours, in any kind of weather, be it sun, snow or rain. We came out in the clothes in which we had slept. Those who hadn't already had their fingers burnt and didn't know what would happen if you didn't sleep with your footwear under your head would wake up in the morning without shoes. In conditions like this, human solidarity breaks down. There is no solidarity. No one ever dared make a joke of not immediately eating the bread that was handed out for breakfast. And if anyone wanted to save it until the next meal, it would certainly have disappeared by then. The living conditions, if this could be called living, were such that it was impossible to imagine anyone surviving here for even a few days. In the first days no one could even touch the food. Later the hunger became so bad that we no longer thought of anything except another portion of this same food. We would be given what they called *Jager* soup, made of leaves, flour and bread. At the end of the roll-call they would hand out some liquid and call it coffee. Of course people soon began losing weight and various diseases spread. First was a really bad form of dysentery. Dysentery like this meant dreadful suffering. We used shared toilets. These were really just holes fenced off with bricks where people sat next to each other, it didn't really matter who sat next to whom. As for the water we used to wash our faces, if someone managed to win the struggle to wash once a week then this person would feel like a czar for the next two or three days.

Skin diseases emerged, from vitamin deficiencies to mange. Then vitamin deficiencies affected people's mouths. People died. Selection was carried out in the camp. In a crowd like this you were always close to one or two people because, among such a large number of people, there is always someone you grow close to. And that's how it was with me and a friend of mine who was taken away in the selection. Her name was Felicita Slandal and she was from Warsaw. Her entire family had already been killed, as had mine, and we spoke about this all the time. That was what brought us close together. During the selection, Dr Mengele and another two men came into our barracks. All of us women had to strip naked and walk past him for review. He would stop some and ask for their number to be written down. Her number was written down. She knew at that moment, I also knew, and we all knew what this meant. Two days later they came and called out the numbers they had written down. At first she was silent and then she left. She was twenty years old and she went to join her parents.

I didn't go. I survived this and, sometime at the end of December, I ended up in hospital. I was sick from exhaustion.

On January 12, 1945, the Germans were preparing to close the camp down. The Russians were approaching. Those of us in the hospital didn't even have the kind of clothes they wore in the camp.

The Germans were taking the prisoners away, but what would they do with us? And again there was someone with whom I was close. We began to talk about what we should do. It occurred to us to report with the others. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and went out into the cold. The German organising the transport asked us "Where are you going?"

"To report," I said.

"Get back!"

I have this man to thank for my life, because the people who left then were decimated. They suffered for a while, travelled by train and then they made them continue on foot. Further and further, from one camp to another, across Germany. Some of them were not liberated until May 1945.

We were liberated on January 27, 1945. I returned to the hospital. That was on January 18, 1945. The Germans left the camp. The Russians had not yet arrived and the Germans had left. They came back once again. They returned on Thursday, killed a group and then left again. On Saturday afternoon, at the time of day when it gets dark in January, the first Russian soldier appeared in the camp. We were liberated.