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*Frida MEL, Dr Miša MEL, Dr Eta NAJFELD*

## THE PATH THROUGH LIFE OF FRIDA AND DAVID MEL



**F**rida and David Mel are no longer alive to see the publication of this record of their strange fate and the account of their lives and survival. The authenticity and documentary value of this information draws on a recording of fragmentary memories of Frida Mel. Additional

material comes from the memory of their close friend Dr Eta Najfeld, in whose memory their discussions are deeply etched, and from their son Dr Miša Mel's recorded memories of the stories told in his parents' home.

During the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the paths of these two people, one from Slovakia and one from Poland, crossed in a third country, Italy, from where they travelled on together to spend the rest of their lives in a fourth country, Yugoslavia.

Dr David Mel's considerable contribution to medical science, which goes far beyond the borders of the country in which he worked, obliges the editors of this book to publish the story of the miraculous fates of these two people and prevent it descending into oblivion.

Editorial Board

*FRIDA MEL:* I was born in January 1919, into the Grinfeld family in a place called Dunajska Streda in Slovakia, close to Bratislava. My father died very early and my mother did the worst kind of physical labour to support us children, four daughters and three sons. Because of the grave financial situation I was unable to stay at school. My mother decided that I should learn the tailoring trade so that I could begin earning as soon as possible to support myself and help the family.



*Frida in 1939*

I was very young when I became active in Trumpeldor, the Jewish youth organisation. By this time people already felt that war was coming so, at our meetings, we decided that we would go to Palestine. We didn't have any special documents. Five hundred and fifty of us, women, children, elderly and young people, rented a ship called the *Penčo* and, in 1939, sailed down the Danube. The *Penčo* was really a wreck used to transport cattle and was very uncomfortable. When we reached Kladovo we were unable to continue our journey. We remained in Kladovo for a month with no

means of support. However the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities of Yugoslavia learnt of our plight and helped us out. Rural people in the area also helped us a great deal, bringing us as much supplies as they were able.

I don't remember exactly how or who it was that gave us approval to continue our journey via the Black Sea towards the Mediterranean. We were caught in a terrible storm near Rhodes and were shipwrecked on an uninhabited island. The waves kept pounding the ship and we saw that it would soon fall apart. We had just enough time to take a boat and a few wooden planks from the ship. Everything else sank. We spent seven days on this deserted island, sleeping under the open sky, with no food or water. Desperate, we began to light fires in the hope that someone would spot us and come

to our rescue. On the morning of the eighth day we saw a ship approaching. It was an Italian navy ship. When it came close a few sailors came ashore by boat. At first they didn't believe that we had been shipwrecked. However when they saw the children and the elderly they accepted us, collected us and took us to their barracks – a camp on the island of Rhodes. There we stayed for about a year. The Italian soldiers treated us really well. They gave us food, but we were allowed to move around only inside the camp.

Sometime at the beginning of 1942, the Italian administration informed us that they would have to move us. "You will have to leave here to save your lives." And so we arrived in Italy, in the Ferramonti camp."

### TRACKING EVENTS

MINUTES of the 18<sup>th</sup> Session of the Executive Board of the Alliance of Jewish Religious Communities of Yugoslavia held on June 5, 1940, in the Alliance offices.

Present: Dr Fridrih Pops, deputy president of the Alliance; Bernard Robiček, Isak Mašiah; Supreme Rabbi Dr Isak Alkalaj; Secretary-General Šime Spicer, Chief Rabbi Ignjat Šlang. Dr Fran Hercog, David A. Alkalaj, Pavle Vinterštajn, Dr Isak Amar and Avram Izrael.

1. ...

2. According to reports received by the Alliance, the Penčo has arrived in Bezdán carrying about five hundred Jewish refugees. The Alliance has no further information on the make-up of this transport, nor does it know who organised it. Regardless of this, if the information that the passengers are in poverty is correct, it is necessary to provide them with urgent assistance.

Resolution: if this ship is still in Bezdán, ask the JVO in Sombor to send a representative there and, in accordance with their findings, provide the passengers with urgent assistance to the amount of 20,000 dinars at the expense of the Alliance.

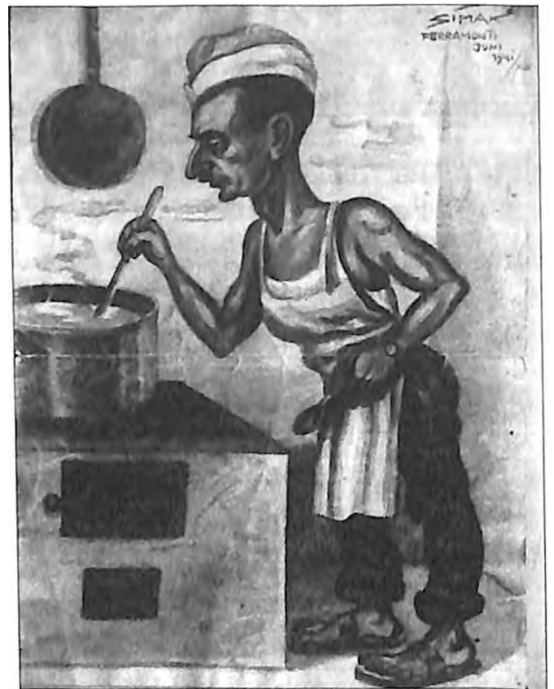
(From the archives of the Jewish History Museum in Belgrade)

*The son of Frida and David Mel, DR MIŠA MEL, now supplements his mother's testimony with family stories about how his parents met.*

Army colonel and teacher, Dr David Mel, was born in 1912 in the small Polish town of Sieradz, about sixty kilometres from Lod. He grew up in the Orthodox family of a wealthy grain merchant who owned a large number of grain silos and agricultural properties. Despite having completed his primary education in the *heder*, the father wanted his three sons to attend a classical Polish secondary school so that they could enrol at the university. He wanted all three of his sons to become doctors. Because the *Numerus Clausus* was in force in Poland, the three sons enrolled in the medical faculty in Brussels.

David remained in Belgium for only a very short time because his father encountered financial difficulties. Because schooling in Belgium was expensive, he moved to Italy, to Modena, where it was much less so. There he was caught by the second world war. As a foreigner, a student and above all as a Jew, he was interned in the Ferramonti camp. There he became a cook.

Among the group of shipwreck victims from Rhodes, David spotted a skinny, starving girl named Frida and immediately offered her his food reserves. And so, from the impulse to help a starving girl, a love was born which culminated in a wedding in the Ferramonti camp, a wedding conducted according to proper Jewish ritual, under a *hupa*, in front of a



*A 1941 caricature of David Mel by another inmate of the Ferramonti camp in which Mel worked as a cook for some time*

rabbi and with a signed *ketuba*. It does no harm to add that the couples' outfits were borrowed from various people. There is even a photo of the wedding.

Following the fall of Italy in September, 1943, the English entered Ferramonti and closed the camp down. Because there were people of many different nationalities in the camp, the English offered to send the former inmates anywhere they wanted, to America or Australia, or to repatriate them to their homes if they had been liberated from the Germans. David, as a Pole, said he wanted to fight Fascism in the Krajova Army (the Polish national army led by General Anders). However they refused him because he was a Jew.

The Mels made many Yugoslav friends in the Ferramonti camp and from them heard about the national liberation struggle. David decided that they should apply to travel to Yugoslavia. And so they went to Bari, because this is where the Yugoslav base was. There he was received by Dr Herbert Kraus, the deputy head of the Supreme Headquarters Medical Corps, who approved his departure to join the national liberation struggle. At first David worked in the English hospital in a place called Grumo, near Bari, where seriously wounded partisans were admitted for treatment and rehabilitation. Frida worked beside him as a nurse. Later he was transferred to the island of Vis. There he met Dr Kulušić, the head of the Dalmatian Units' medical corps.

Asked what he wanted to do, David replied that he would like to focus on epidemiology. Kulušić replied that he needed surgeons, not epidemiologists who didn't even speak the language. Kulušić was caught by surprise and didn't know what to do with him but, as he was there already, allowed him to stay. He found it strange, however, that a Pole had come, without coercion, to join the Partisans and wanted to stay among the Yugoslav Partisans.

Luckily the war was drawing to an end and Dr Mel was assigned to the naval base in Kumbor. Soon after this he arrived at the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade to begin his specialisation in epidemiology.

*Family friend DR ETA NAJFELD adds to the story told by Frida and David Mel's son Miša with her recollection's of David's career:*

The course of his specialisation took place under very difficult circumstances because he spent practically all of the time in Kosovo and Metohija fighting the infectious diseases that raged there constantly after the war. Dysentery was most common in the army. In the course of this very difficult and onerous work he also turned to scientific research. Thanks to his painstaking efforts, his specialisation abroad and his knowledge of a number of foreign languages, he managed to create a vaccine for dysentery. His vaccine has been recognised by the World Health Organisation as a very effective measure against this disease. The vaccine is known as Mel's vaccine. After gaining an international reputation for his scientific work, he was nominated on the broad list of candidates for the Nobel Prize.



*Friendship and love in the Ferramonti camp culminated in a proper Jewish wedding, 1943*

He was also recognised within the country: he was decorated a number of times by the army, promoted to the rank of colonel and finally appointed a professor at the Military Medical Academy. Professor Lea Rozencvajg, who was present at his nomination for this chair, told me the following:

Professor Vukšić, David's superior at the time, speaking for the proposal to promote David, said "Two Polish Jews have put the medical corps of this country in their debt. In the first world war, Dr Hiršfeld came as a volunteer, with his wife, to the Salonica front to help the Serbian Army. In collaboration with Professor Kosta Koča-Todorović they discovered the Paratyphus C bacterium. Now another volunteer, David Mel, has given us the dysentery vaccine."

This is how these two displaced Jews continued their life in this country, Jews who were treated with full equality and who received recognition for their work.

Professor David Mel died in 1993 and Frida in 1998.