

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

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SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

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BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

Dina REMER

I WAS SAVED BY A TRANSPORT WHICH I
COULD NOT AVOID



Dina Remer was born in Sombor in 1929, of father Geza Singer and mother Mirjam. She lived in Sombor as the only child in the family until the war broke out and, after the Bačka region was occupied first by the Hungarians and subsequently by the Germans, the family was at risk and was deported.

Both her parents and all members of her greater family perished in the Holocaust.

After her return from German concentration camps she lived in Subotica and in September 1948 moved to Belgrade and started her medical studies. In December the same year she immigrated to Israel where she graduated from a medical nursing school and worked in health care until her retirement.

Dina is married to Đuro (Jichak) Remer, they have two daughters and six grandchildren.

She is living in Israel.

At the time of my childhood Sombor had a population of about 30,000. It was a pleasant and peaceful town, with some monumental buildings. While Sombor was under the administration of Austria-Hungary it was the center of a district. The majority of the population was Hungarian, with a significant share of Serbs as well, and about 1,200 Jews.

At home we spoke Hungarian, while we children at kindergarten and at school spoke Serbian, which was the official language. Most of my friends were Jews.

My father was a book-keeper, as well as my mother. They worked together in a big company. Father was a silent man, he loved his job, and work related problems were much talked about at home. My father's hobby was growing cacti, and we had dozens of cacti at home. I remember that I would often go with him to the nursery of young plants, where he selected cacti. He also liked to waive carpets and we had many carpets at home that he made himself. My mother was doing petit-point. Her whole life she was a book-keeper, she was very skilled at it, and this was her hobby. She also loved books and was always reading. She did not go into the kitchen – it was my maternal grandmother who was in charge of the household. Until I was about five years old we lived on the second floor in an apartment building, and on the ground floor was a store selling furniture materials – the working place of my parents. At 8AM they would go down to the shop, coming back at noon, and at 4 PM they would go down again to return at 6 PM.

My mother suffered from asthma, so in winter she could not go to work, and the house would become full of book-keeping ledgers as she was doing her work from home. The owner of the business, a Jew, respected her very much. She could speak German, and she was very well versed at typing in Serbian, Hungarian and German and she was versed in short-hand writing as well. My mother was the youngest of eight brothers and sisters in her family. My maternal grandfather died before I was born. My mother's family lived in Sombor for about 70 years. Her sisters and brothers and their families lived in towns across Vojvodina and in Belgrade. They often came to visit grandmother and us.

My grandmother was a very good-spirited woman; she went to the market place every day with our maid. All the women selling produce at the market knew her and she talked to them about their family problems. She always wore dark colors. She spoke Hungarian and only some words in Serbian. However, when the Hungarians occupied us in 1941 she demonstrated her resistance to the occupier by starting to speak only Serbian in the market place.

Our family was not religious. I used to go sometimes with my grandmother to the synagogue. In the home of my paternal grandmother and grandfather Kosher rules were observed. They were religious. They lived in Novi Sad and we often went to visit for high holidays. For Pessah Seder it was always me to say the "Ma Nishtana". I was their only grandchild. I was skinny and spoiled in a way and did not eat much. They wanted me to gain

some weight while I was staying with them. They decided to buy for me food that is not eaten at their table. Assuming that I love ham, they bought it for me and put it on a piece of bread and butter, and wrapped in paper they put it on a table, but not on a plate!



DINA going to kinder-garten, as a four-year old girl

In Sombor I attended kindergarten and school. The primary school lasted for four years and I completed it at age 11. That is when I started my secondary school. I also had friends who were not Jewish – I used to go to their homes and they would come to my home, although most of my friends during childhood were Jews. That was also the case with my parents. My mother, born in Sombor, had some friends who were Hungarian with whom she went to school, but my parent's friends were mostly Jewish as well.

I started slowly to be aware of the notion of war; I remember very clearly the image from 1 September 1939. My mother's brother was visiting us from

Belgrade. Early in the morning he went to buy newspapers. When he came back, he was beating hysterically on my parent's bedroom door shouting that the war had broken out. I was ten years old and did not understand what war meant. My parents were very excited and there was talk of someone named Hitler. I do not know whether the adults were thinking that the war would spread and affect us as well.

I first started to feel anti-Semitism in 1940. That is the year when the „Numerus clausus“ law was adopted in Yugoslavia.

In the first grade of grammar school there were about 5–6 of us who were Jews; under the new law only two of us remained.

The Germans occupied Yugoslavia in April 1941. The Bačka region was occupied by the Hungarians.

The Hungarian troops took Sombor without any fighting. My parents were under great tension – what is going to happen?! Hungarian soldiers soon started shooting all over the place, under the pretext that Yugoslav soldiers were hiding in individual homes. We lived in a house on the main town square. We were not allowed to walk in the streets. Through the open shades we saw that the Hungarians have placed a cannon aiming at our building.

Suddenly they came bouncing at our door and stormed in; they were shouting loudly saying that they were being shot at from this apartment! Father replied that it was impossible, because we have no weapons at all. A soldier slapped him across his face so ferociously that he fell on the floor. This frightened me, the fact that someone is beating my father.



With father during vacations in Dubrovnik

We were told that we have to leave the apartment without taking anything from it. They gave us a piece of paper allowing us to move in the streets, which were completely empty. That was the first time that I saw a dead human body. After some ten minutes of walking on foot we came to the house of my mother's good friend, Hungarian, a widow whose husband used to be a rich Jew. We rang at the gate, and we heard coming from the house the singing voices and music. My mother's friend was surprised to see us. We told her that we were expelled from our apartment and had nowhere to go. She said that she was very sorry that she could not take us in, because she was celebrating with Hungarian officers the liberation from Yugoslavia! We found refuge in a Jewish family.

This illustrates that the Jews could rely only on Jews.

Some 5 or 6 days later we were allowed to go back to our apartment, which was significantly damaged by the Hungarian soldiers.

In September 1941 I continued to attend school; the lectures were in the Hungarian language, which was not a problem for me.

After the initial trauma of the encounter with the Hungarian occupation, life went back to normal. My parents were doing their job, I was attending school. But in fact it only seemed so to me.

For my parents everything had changed. Two brothers and a sister with their families were living in the parts of Yugoslavia that were under German occupation. The sister and her husband were killed in Belgrade together with other Jews. My mother's brother managed with his wife in June 1941 to escape to Bačka and come to be with us in Sombor. They lived with us for several months, until they rented their own apartment. That uncle was taken the following year for forced labor and was killed during the war.

I had an uncle in the Banat region, which was occupied by the Germans. He and his wife, together with all Jews from that region of Banat, were closed in a synagogue; under very difficult conditions, thanks to the fact that he managed to bribe a German soldier with a huge sum of money, he and his wife were transferred across the river Tisa into Bačka. Right away, they came to us. With their arrival our apartment became crowded. There was one family in each room. After a couple of months both uncles had rented apartments.

The Germans occupied Hungary on 10 March 1944. Since that time numerous appalling events just followed one another.

Since the beginning of April we all had to wear yellow stars sewn to our clothes to the front and to the back. When I first came into my classroom with the yellow star, the friend who shared the desk with me for three years immediately moved into another desk. It was humiliating to walk in the street with the mark saying that the person so marked should be hated. Within a week, Jews were prohibited from attending schools.

Arrests of Jewish families began at the end of April. My mother and grandmother packed the things which they thought we would need. Where we would be taken – we had no idea.

The town was closed for three days while the army rounded up all Jews of Sombor. Some images are still very clear in my memory. From the window of our apartment I saw Jews escorted with their belongings, surrounded by soldiers. I was watching people whom I knew all my life in a miserable situation. I saw in front of me how people were being expelled. On the third day the Hungarians came for us. We were carrying heavy stuff with us. They put us into an empty huge storage that was already full of Jews. The same evening they took us to the railway station, which was quite a distance away. We walked the dark streets surrounded by a great number of soldiers who were forcing us to move faster. For my old grandmother this was very difficult, she could hardly keep up, and she left some of her luggage in the street. Our journey by train to Baja took two or three

hours. We got into a huge wheat warehouse. We were on the second floor, where we slept on the floor with the blankets that we had taken with us. That is where we stayed for about a month. I do not know where the food was prepared, but the food was sufficient. In my eyes, from the perspective of a girl of fourteen and a half, the stay in Baja was not tragic, because I was constantly with my friends, and sleeping on the floor was not too bad. My mother did not have a single attack of asthma, but for her, and especially for my grandmother, being on the floor was very difficult. Life was becoming more and more miserable.

One morning we were woken by shouting in German that we should be getting up; pack quickly and get going. Within one hour the building was empty and we were all on our way to the railway stations. There, a train was waiting with livestock carriages, into which the Germans were pushing us and shouting that more people should get in. There were about seventy of us in the carriage. We were so tightly packed inside that one could hardly sit. My mother, grandmother and I were together. Father was elsewhere. The train soon started. We had no idea about where we were going. Some people inside the carriage managed to get on the luggage and look through a small window. They kept telling us which stations we were passing and which direction we were going.

We crossed the Austrian border and stopped at the place Wiener Neustatt. That is when the Germans for the first time opened the doors of the wagon and ordered families capable of working in the fields to get out. The Germans were letting only families of young and strong members to get out. I find it difficult to use the word "selection" when speaking about Wiener Neustatt because over those two days the word got a completely different meaning. The Germans did not allow our family to get off the train. We were not even trying too hard to get off, since we did not know where the train was taking us. In the carriage which was packed in Baja with seventy people there was only one bucket of water, which was soon empty. There was another bucket there for people to relieve themselves which soon became full. Three old people died in the carriage during the journey. My grandmother suffered. We were sitting for three days on our luggage, there was not enough air. The stench was suffocating; there was no food.

We arrived to Auschwitz in the evening; from the outside they opened the wagon door. Down below us were people in striped clothes, their hair cut very short, with striped hats on. That was the prison uniform which I knew from movies. Those people were shouting at us, forcing us to disembark and shouting not to take anything with us. Coming down, frightened by the shouting of inmates, some were falling and those coming after them were walking on top of them. We came to a paved road, long and wide. At a

distance of some meters, SS officers were standing next to each other, with dogs on leash. The dogs were barking terribly. The whole scene was lit by strong lighting. It was an entry into hell. I understood nothing except that it was an awful place.

They were shouting that women and men should form separate lines, five persons per line. I got into a line with my mother and grandmother. I do not know who was in front or next to us, all I know is that we were slowly moving ahead. All of a sudden, we were in the first line and across from us were four or five German officers. One of them would be looking in front of him and pointing his fingers left or right. Everyone would understand from his moves which way he or she was to go. At this point there was no shouting any more, the dogs were not barking, it was dead silence. The officers signaled me, and subsequently my mother, to move to the right. It was all as if in a dream – so slow, and yet so quick. Grandmother was no longer next to us.

For quite a while we were walking along a road surrounded on both sides by high wire fence, with plates indicating high voltage. I got closer to my mother, terrified; I somehow felt that our lives were at risk. We knew instinctively that if we were to do at least a little detail differently than we had been told or implied in the shouting in German, we would die. I did not know how, or why, but I felt that we had come to a terrible place. The dogs were barking, the Germans were shouting: „Los, los, los!“

Hundreds of women, including us, came to a big building. Inside, there was a huge hall; on both sides there were women sitting down, ordering us to get completely naked. They shaved us. I was looking for my mother, but she was nowhere. Suddenly, I heard her calling me. I turned in the direction of her voice; she was standing next to me, but I did not recognize her. She was shaved and naked. We went into the shower room and water started coming out of the showers, not gas. As we were exiting, a dress was thrown in front of us. I was given a huge dress. My mother tore off a piece of the dress so as to be able to walk in it. We walked a long way to the camp „C“. On both sides of the road in camp „C“ there were buildings. All buildings in German camps were called “block”. We were put in „Block 23“. There were thirty „blocks“ in the camp altogether. „Block 23“ did not have bunk beds. We were sleeping on the floor, on bare concrete, terribly cramped together. There were about 1,000 women in there. There was not enough space for us to stretch when lying.

We arrived to Auschwitz on 1 June 1944. The abominable daily routine started early at dawn with the awful sound of whistles and the shouting of capos to get up and come out. One of the blocks housed a line of latrines, which were in fact holes made in concrete; next to them was a line of wash-

ing taps. Along with the whistle blowing and shouting, they placed us in rows of five women, next to our blocks. We would stand there two or three or four hours. The Germans counted us. That was what they called the roll call („apfel“). Camp „C“ had altogether about 30,000 women. Two SS officers counted us. At dawn it was terribly cold, and when the sun came out it was very hot. Sometimes it was raining heavily. We were not allowed to sit or move. I once collapsed, and the women next to me were shaking me in order for me to come back as soon as possible, so that the capos would not see me. Sometimes the number of inmates did not match the German records, and the roll call would start all over again. In such cases there would also be punishment. All of us (30,000 women) had to kneel down and hold our hands above our heads.

After the counting, we had to continue to stand in our rows and lines of five women. Food was distributed. We were given a piece of hard bread, and a black liquid called coffee. The capos poured coffee out of huge pots, and the same pots were used in the evening to pour soup (pots of one and a half liter or two liters for a line of five persons). When I stood fourth or fifth in a row I anxiously counted the women ahead of me, wondering if there would be something left in the pot for me. As the piece of bread that we were given was to last us the whole day, during the first days I decided together with my mother to have the first piece right away and the second during the day. We could not put this in practice. We were so hungry that we could not help it and we ate the second piece of bread right away as well. I remember one time when our bread was stolen from us. The food was abominable, but as of the first day I always ate whatever we were given. All day long we were not allowed to go inside the block; we moved around and lay on the ground. After the evening roll call and the soup, we were allowed back into the block. Every evening there was terrible rushing in order to get a place on the floor.

Two weeks after our arrival my mother got diarrhea (diarrhea was the typical camp disease, due to the awful food and stress). Her condition deteriorated every day. Finally she was in such a state that the capos did not force her to leave the block. Sick people were lying in a separate part of the block; they received no medicine or treatment, they were given the same food as others. I did not see her during the day, as it was forbidden to enter the block. In the evening I was running there to be with her. Later on I would have to look for a place for myself on the floor to sleep in. My best friend's mother promised that she would keep a place for me next to them, while I go to see my mother. One evening when I found them in that mess, she told me: „Bebi, this is a different world, in here everyone should care for herself. I cannot keep a place on the floor for you“. I think my mother was severely

ill for a week or ten days when there was another big selection. After the morning roll call we were ordered to take everything off until naked, hold our dresses in our hands, and our hands above our heads. We entered the block one by one. On both sides there were SS officers watching and assessing who was still capable of work and who was so emaciated that she was not useful any longer. The emaciated ones did not get into the block. After this selection, the block was half empty.

As we were slowly entering the block, I saw my mother on the side. All sick inmates were taken outside and they were lying down on the ground. I ran to her and tried to get her up, but she was so weak that she kept falling down. I left her there, because the capo was shouting at me and got the whip on the ready telling me to get back in the line. Once again I saw my mother at the time when we were allowed to get out of the block. I asked those in charge of the block („Blokelteste“) where were those who did not enter the block? They directed me to the last block of the camp. I saw my mother, but this encounter is something I cannot talk about. That event was and has remained for me terribly painful and traumatic. As of that day I was alone. I was with women from my town, but I felt alone.

The Germans would now and then be selecting women fit for work, for jobs in Germany. These were groups made up of 200–300 women. So, once I was included among the selected but, instead of being taken to the railway station we were transferred from camp „C“ to camp „B-3“. That is where I met my aunt Ela, my father's sister, and I moved into her block. I stayed with her until the day of liberation. I am convinced that if it had not been for her I would not have survived. She could not help me physically, but she was a huge spiritual pillar for me. Finally, I was not alone.

My aunt stuck to the principle: „We shall not work for the Germans“. Every time that we would be selected for a transport, we managed to get away. I did as she advised me. I was happy to have an older person and relative with me; I was not yet fifteen. Once, however, we were not able to get away with the selection; now I know that it was for the best. We were transferred to camp „A“, located next to the railway station. Camp „A“ housed women who had tattooed hands and who were going out of the camp to do different jobs in the area. They knew exactly what was going on in Auschwitz, they knew about the gas chambers and the crematorium. While I was in camp „C“, the supervisor and capos told us that if we do not do as demanded we would end up in the black smoke that loomed day and night over Auschwitz. They were shouting: „Up there your mothers and children are burning!“ At the time I thought, like the others, that they were trying to frighten us, and that what they were saying was not true.

The whole day we were closed in the block, in camp „A“. In the evenings my aunt would show up by the window. We talked for a long time. She would tell us that Auschwitz was an extermination camp, where all the elderly and the children incapable of work were exterminated. She also told us that we should be glad to leave that hell behind. My aunt would cry and tremble with fear all night long. All the months spent in Auschwitz (we had no idea that that was the name of the camp), through starvation, beating and shouting, we learned from my aunt that all that is nothing compared to what can yet happen to us. I was crying for my mother and grandmother.

The following day we were taken to the railway station. The journey took three days in an animal wagon. This time the wagons had no roof, therefore it was not suffocating. We arrived at a camp completely different than Auschwitz. It was fenced with wire fence, but no high voltage. Around the camp, all the way to the fence, there was a forest (in Auschwitz there was nothing around the camp). Here, there was never any roll call, we were not counted; the food was somewhat better; we were accommodated in huge tents; we hardly ever saw Germans. We stayed in the tents for about two months, until a terrible storm destroyed the tents. We were moved to wooden blocks.

That camp was Bergen-Belsen. The camp served as a reservation for workers in different parts in Germany. My aunt and I somehow managed to avoid transports. The blocks became partly empty, and the Germans were transferring us from one block to another. That is how we ended up not knowing anyone around us. Nobody knew anybody else's name. There were women from Poland, France, Greece, Hungary and other countries (Jews from all European countries occupied by Germany). As months went by, the number of inmates was increasing – Jews from camps in Poland, where the Russians had already arrived. We were sleeping on the floor and it was becoming ever more packed. While sleeping we could hardly extend our legs. We were sharing the ever smaller rations



The beginning of a new life: a photograph from the wedding of DINA and JICAH REMER in Israel in August 1952

of food and were getting more emaciated. Our strength was reducing; there was a prevailing sense of apathy everywhere. No one cared about the other. Everyone was just trying to survive the day. It was a very cold winter in the north-western Europe. Bergen-Belsen is not far from Hanover. In December everyone got one thin blanket. During the day we used it to wrap ourselves up (I had a summer dress on my naked body, the dress I was given six months ago in Auschwitz). At night the blanket covered me while I lay down on the floor.

From August, when we arrived in Bergen-Belsen, until April, we were taken only once to have a shower. We were awfully dirty. My dress was partly torn; on my feet I had heavy wooden clogs. We were covered by thousands of lice! The food was becoming more meager by the day: a piece of bread in the morning and soup in the evening. Whoever was never there cannot understand what starvation is. In February the typhoid epidemic set in. Many died. Every morning those who got up were still alive, those who remained lying down were either dead or in a coma. My aunt and I would go out, specifically – we would stumble out of the barrack. It was very cold and snowing. We waited for them to collect the dead, and afterwards so exhausted we would return and lay down. The dead were thrown on a pile in front of the barrack. Those who were in charge of this task would then come and pull the dead from the pile either to the crematorium or to the trenches where they were buried. Those who were moving the dead were themselves close to death.

Bergen-Belsen was not far from Hanover and Hamburg. The Americans were bombing these cities day and night. It is true that we were afraid that the bombs could hit us as well, but I was talking with my aunt Ela about how it did not matter; what mattered was that the Germans should suffer and the liberation should come as soon as possible.

In March some kind of anarchy began in the camp: the number of German soldiers had reduced significantly. The food, which was coffee and bread in the morning and soup in the evening, was sometimes skipped. We were starved and emaciated; it was very difficult to move. We had no more strength left to kill the lice. We were in a state of apathy; often aunt Ela would embrace me, and I would embrace her; we spoke very little, there was nothing to talk about, and there was no strength for it.

There was more and more floor space in the camp; people were dying. We could distinguish who was alive and who was dead by whether there were lice on them (the lice abandoned the dead!). One morning I woke up, my aunt lying next to me as usual, but there were no lice on her! I went out of the block and away, as far as I could. I was waiting, lying down on the ground, for the dead to be taken away. I could not stand to see her

being pulled on the ground. For months she was wearing a purple dress. Returning to the block, on the pile of corpses I saw a purple dress. The pile was getting bigger; people were dying at a greater speed than the corpses were removed.



Commemoration monument at the cemetery in Sombor, for Sombor Jews who perished in the Holocaust, including names of parents and grandmother of DINA REMER

I entered the block and collapsed. I was so desperate that I could not even cry. A while later I heard from the outside unfamiliar sounds and great shouting. I went out and I saw – three meters away from me was a huge tank! Until this day I can remember the stunned faces of the soldiers. They were looking at us and could not understand what kind of creatures they are looking at – dirty skeletons, moving in some way. From the tanks they were throwing all the food they had. Those who were stronger than me got on the food. I was afraid to get close fearing that they might cause me bodily harm. I had no strength to fight for food. That turned out to be my good fortune. Those who were eating out of the cans, with lots of meat and beans, got terrible diarrhea. Not even a day passed before the British gave us food suited for our ill stomachs. Still, of all the things that the British did for us, it seems to me that disinfecting us with DDT spray and freeing us from lice was the most important.

The liberation day came: it was 15 April 1945. Not far from Bergen-Belsen there was a prisoner-of-war camp, among them there were Yugoslav PoW's from 1941. They came to Bergen-Belsen looking for Yugoslavs. They arrived to my block and wrote down my name. I remember the feeling when I was asked my name! For about a year I was nameless. I had been an anonymous person and nobody cared for me. I never thought that I would not get over that horror, but I felt that I was literally nobody and nothing.

Yugoslav officers came back after a few days and seeing the state that I was in they took me to the hospital. There I stayed for about two months.

All inmates of Bergen-Belsen were transferred to the big camp previously used by the German army. Yugoslav women were put in one building, men in another.

As soon as the last person was removed from it, our previous camp in Bergen-Belsen was burnt to the foundations by the British.



DINA with husband, present time

In mid August 1945 all Yugoslavs were returned to Yugoslavia.

I went back to Sombor. The truck took me to the main square, in front of the house in which we lived and from which I was taken away. In the windows I could see our curtains still hanging, but from the window looking down were a man and a woman I did not know. I understood that

there are people living in our apartment and I could no longer go in. There I was – standing in the street, not knowing where to go. So, I went to a Serb family that my parents had worked with. They gave me a hearty welcome. There were lists made up in the Jewish Community, with names of Jews from different parts of Yugoslavia, who had come back. In the list, I found my uncle in Subotica. I went to see him. It was not only my uncle who had returned, but also his wife and daughter. Our greater family had had 26 members. Of them, five had survived, including myself. My uncle took good care of me, but in 1947 he died.

I graduated from grammar school, matriculated and enrolled to study at the Medical Faculty in Belgrade.

In December 1948 I immigrated to Israel, where I settled in Jerusalem, intending to continue my studies. Soon I realized that the chances for me to study at university were meager, primarily due to lack of resources. I earned my living by working as a maid. I could rely only on myself, I had nobody.

I enrolled to study at the nursing school, and in 1952 I graduated from three years of study.



*DINA'S daughter Michal with husband AVI
and three children – IRAN, NETA, and NIRA*

I married Jichak (Đuro) Remer, born in Novi Sad. We have two daughters and six grandchildren.

At our family gatherings and celebrations I look at my beautiful and successful family and I think to myself that I won over Hitler.

All the horrors and suffering happened only because I was a Jew. Now I live in the Jewish state, created after 2000 years, possibly thanks to the Shoa.

I retired on 31 December 1990.