

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGREB

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

Vera ŠTAJN

THANK YOU TO THE GERMAN WOMAN
HILDA MILLER



Vera-Estera Kelemen, married Štajn, was born on 3 February 1926 in Novi Sad, of father Jozef and mother Julijana Johevet, née Štern. Father Jozef, born in 1892 in Kanjiža, was an electrical technician, and mother Julijana, born in 1892 in Bačka Palanka, a housewife. Vera completed her elementary and secondary civil engineering school in Novi Sad. She was member of Hashomer Hatzair.

Her parents perished in Auschwitz.

She had an elder sister Sidonija-Sida, born in 1920.

In 1948 she married doctor Andrija Štajn; they have a daughter Mirjam and son Ruben, and three grandchildren. Since 1951 she has been living in Israel.

My father Jozef Kelemen was an entrepreneur, spending very little time at home. He was remembered as a good and pleasant man, willing to help others. He was president of the football club „Makabi“ from Novi Sad. He perished in Auschwitz in 1944.

My mother Julijana came from a family of Orthodox Jews from Ilok. It was through her that my elder sister Sidonija – Sida and I received our Jewish upbringing. She was such a kind person, she lived for us. She had lost her mother when she was only four years old and, as she used to tell us, she never felt mother's love. She was the youngest of eight children.

I loved my mother very much. She was a dedicated housewife, taking very good care also of me and my elder sister Sida. In order for us to be closer to our religion and acquire religious education, sister and I went to the synagogue to sing. That is how our mother built our link with the synagogue and that was where we went for Erev Shabbat and holidays.

In Novi Sad I attended a yeshiva elementary school which was right next to the synagogue. There were two teachers working there: Mihajlo Boroš and Mavro Fan. Next to the synagogue, on the right, was the building in which my two teachers lived with their families, as well as Rabbi dr Hinko Kiš.

After completing my elementary school, I attended the public school in which I had many good friends among the German, Hungarian, and Serbian pupils. However, after the Hungarian occupation of the Bačka region in 1941, many of my Hungarian and German friends no longer wanted to know us! We, Jewish girls, were very hurt by this because until that time we literally shared our school lunches. Once it no longer suited them to have Jews as friends, they pretended not to even see us.

As I was good at drawing, I wanted after completing the public school to be a painter and go to art school. But, being a Jew, I could not enroll in the school of my choice.

My mother, who found it very hard to cope with all this, told me later that I should not just sit at home, that I should be doing something. She very much wanted me to learn to sew. That is when I started my apprenticeship as tailor with a lady who was my mother's tailor. Since I did not like it there, I decided to stop sewing, and I told my mother so. So, the following few months I stayed at home, helping my mother, drawing and reading.

When in April 1941 the Hungarians occupied Bačka, they soon started rounding up Jewish men and taking them for forced labor. They always kept coming up with new ideas. On one occasion, they issued an order that Jews are to submit their money to the authorities.

Already in summer 1941 they started arresting communists and all opponents of the Hungarian Fascist regime. Among the arrested were some members of Hashomer Hatzair, where I was also a member. They would take them to the building called „Armija“, where they would beat and torture them, and where some of them were hanged. One of them was Timar. Another young woman and a young man were also hanged, but I have forgotten their names.*

*The Hungarian court marshal in Novi Sad, on 21 November 1941, sentenced to death the following Jews: Lilika Livija Bem, Andrija Lederer, and minor Zoltan Timar (see the book by Jaša Romano: *Jews of Yugoslavia 1941–1945, victims of genocide and fighters of the National Liberation War*, published by the Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade 1980, Pg. 247; editor's note).

The next devastating blow was the Novi Sad raid from 21 – 23 January 1942 resulting in a mass massacre of Jews and Serbs. That was when my mother's uncle was murdered, although his two sons survived. They told us that there was a huge pile of corpses of Jews at the graveyard, they even named some of the victims, including our family members. During the raid, my late husband and his young wife that he was married to before our marriage were taken to the bank of the Danube where they took group by group of those rounded up, lined them up and murdered them. Whoever was out in the streets could hear the shooting. The two of them were close to the line of those whose turn had come to be murdered, but an order arrived from Budapest to stop the massacre and take the rest to the theatre building. Although the order had arrived, they continued to round people up and soon they came to our house. They asked who lived there, but they did not take us to the Danube; instead they took us to the theatre building. Others were also being brought and kept there in terrible cold until midnight; an official came and without mentioning the massacre, told us that they are not going to do anything bad to us. In his words, what had happened was a result of Chetniks who had killed some Hungarians.

Among the victims of the raid were my mother's cousins with small children, three girls and a boy. They were wealthy, had several maids, Hungarians, who did not allow the soldiers to take the children. They sheltered the children and hid them behind their backs. The parents did not return. They were killed on the banks of the Danube, thus the only ones remaining in the house were the girl Olika, nine; the boy Robi, five; the small girl Marta' only six months old, still breastfeeding; and the girl Eva, five. The oldest among them, Olika and Robi, perished in Auschwitz, after arriving there with their grandparents. Eva was given to a family without children, which adopted her and thus saved her life. The baby Marta was adopted by relatives from Budapest who had two children of their own, but they managed to raise them and take them to Israel. Marta is now living in a happy family, has a daughter and two sons and five grandchildren.

After the raid, mother was fearful about what else could happen, and that the fact that I was not working could be bad. That is why she found for me a new place where I could learn to sew. There were fourteen other young girls working there. We learned together, and I was making good progress in my work, although I did not like it.

Until the arrival of Germans in Hungary in 1944, although discriminated on the basis of anti-Jewish decrees and laws, the Jews were living there relatively peacefully without major turmoil.

*See the testimony of Marta Flato in this book, page 349–354; editor's note)

With the arrival of the Germans, rumors started to spread that we would be deported to forced labor. That was why we got our backpacks ready with key necessities. We knew in advance the day of our deportation. When they came for us they told us that we could not take any money with us, but to take it all out and put it on the table. We were told to take off any gold and other jewelry that we had on or in the house and put it all on a table; and we were told not to close the doors of our houses and leave with them. That is how we left the house. I remember clearly that my mother was told to take off her wedding ring and that she did so unwillingly, starting to cry as it hurt her terribly.

As we were walking along our street, the neighbors with whom we lived in friendship and who knew that the Jews were being taken away, upon seeing my mother cry, were calling after her: „Mrs. Kelemen, do not cry!“ we came to the synagogue, where they were getting us all rounded up. The Hungarians were no better than the Germans. As they were taking us to the railway station, they did not speak. We moved in lines of five and walked in the middle of the road. Once we arrived at the railway station the trains were ready.

In the wagon with us there was a woman with her daughter. She left her younger daughter who was 3 or 4 with her maid to take care of her, so she could see them from the train moving to another train for Budapest, where she was to take the girl. The woman and her daughter who were travelling with us were killed in the camp, while the child whom she left with the maid had survived. We were in a train which was going to Subotica, and upon arrival we got off and were taken to a ghetto, within a factory.

We stayed there for about three weeks. I was with my mother and sister. All of a sudden our father arrived, saying that he would be separated from us as he was being taken for forced labor. While people were looking for a place to settle down and place their belongings somewhere, soldiers lined us up and asked who wanted to go and work. Since my father had a good qualification, he applied. I think they selected about two hundred people for work. Father came to say goodbye. Although I was eighteen at the time, I did not fully understand what was happening. My elder sister started to cry. That was the last time that we said goodbye to father – he was taken to Auschwitz with his apprentice Bruno Hofman, who survived.

In the ghetto we slept on the wooden floor.

The food we had was what we managed to bring with us or what the Jews and good people from Subotica brought for us. We were in Subotica for three weeks, after which we were taken to Baja, again to stay for three weeks, this time however under more dire conditions in terms of accommodation and food.

We were put on a horse farm, with sand in the ground and very dirty. There was a doctor among us, a Jew, and we asked him if it was possible to get my younger sister out of there, since she was suffering from tuberculosis. However, she remained with my mother and me. One day they came to take the men, while we were to continue on our way and be displaced again. Of course, they did not tell us where we were going. When we were leaving Novi Sad, there were many people who came to see us off. They gave us different things. Every time we were moved we thought that we were being taken somewhere to do work and that things would be better for us if we work. In Baja we were loaded on animal wagons and after a three-day journey we were unloaded at the railway station in Auschwitz. Although I did see people in striped clothes on the stations that we passed on the way, I did not realize that they were camp inmates.



VERA in her youth

When we were pushed out of the wagons three days later, we were already half-dead. We had thought that things would be better where we were going, but they were worse. When we got off the wagons it was afternoon. I remember that it was Shavuot. The Germans knew how to do horrible things to us on our holidays. I saw again people wearing striped clothes and soldiers, this time German soldiers. They were shouting at us, hurrying us up and beating us. They were ordering us to get out of the wagons. They started beating my older cousin, who would not part with her chest with documents. It probably happened to others, but I saw her as she was right next

to me. My mother advised her to do as told. There was overwhelming panic around. They guards were urging us to be quick, shouting „schnell, schnell“ all the time. I recall that we were very much confused and not grasping what was happening.

They separated men with sons from women with daughters. To the left were men, to the right women. Suddenly, there was a young woman, with two lovely babies in her arms, a girl and a boy with curly hair, sobbing. The children were sobbing along with her. We could not understand what she wanted – she wanted to give her children to us, but we did not know what to do with them. Later I found out that there was a part of the Auschwitz camp to which twins were sent to be subject to experiments. Was that what

this woman was afraid of, or was it the fact that women with children were taken together with the children to the crematorium? As I was standing in line I saw a German officer with a stick in his hand pointing to people and ordering them: left or right! So naïve was I that I thought that he was just randomly separating people to the left or to the right. Certainly that was not what it was. I held my mother under her arm, next to me were my sister and my cousin, and I told them to stand behind my sister, so that we would all go together to the same side. That, of course, did not help. When we got to the officer who, as I later found out, was dr Mengele, he hit me hard and pushed my mother away as we were holding on to each other. We just turned around and looked at each other. I did not understand what he meant. At that time I felt heartache, as if I was torn apart, I cried out loud. People around me told me to stop crying.

It was all happening at the railway station. My mother and I were separated, and later we moved towards the camp. Once there, I stopped crying and watched around me at what was happening. I saw women in dresses with a red line across their backs. I saw that they were completely lost walking up and down, without hair. My first thought was that I was in a mental asylum. I thought that this was what I will become as well. We continued to walk until we came to a big room, where we were told to undress and stay in our shoes only, placing our clothes in one spot and move on. There were women there who shaved our heads and all our body hair as well. Then they took us to a place where we were to leave our shoes. Subsequently we were given other clothes and shoes. We were taken to the shower room; once we all got in, they turned on the hot water. It felt good to take a shower after so much time. When the water stopped, we moved on to the next room, before we were given dresses. First we got shoes. Again, we were lined up and taken to the camp, which consisted of 32 barracks, wooden structures housing about one thousand women each. It was terribly packed, 13 women sleeping in each bed. When one wanted to turn around, everyone had to do the same. They were bunk beds with three levels.

I remember what happened before we went into the barrack. I do not know why it was conceived in this manner, but we were standing in a circle. A woman collapsed. By that time there were capos already there and, instead of getting her up, they started slapping her face and that was how she became conscious again! That happened before we got into the barrack.

At the entry we were given dinner – a piece of bread with a small spoonful of margarine. Being in shock due to everything that was going on, especially regarding my mother, I did not feel like eating, so I placed the bread next to me on the ladder by the bed, thinking that I would eat it in the

morning, if I become hungry. And, truly, I was hungry in the morning, but the bread was not where I had left it. During the night, someone was more hungry than I was.

The food was abominable. In the morning we were given some liquid, the color of tea or coffee. There was no place where we could wash up, we felt untidy and dirty. We used the tea that was given us to slightly wash our faces!



The happy days of the family: mother JULIJANA, VERA, the elder sister, SIDA, and father JOZEF KELEMEN

When clothes were distributed, I was not lucky to get a normal dress. In fact, it was a very pretty dress, but not suited for Auschwitz, rather it would be a party dress. A long dress with a pretty detail on the breasts, my whole back was open. I looked ridiculous in it. As if I did not have enough trouble, now I was the laughing stock! The rain season started. During the roll call we had to stand there. The dress was made of such material that it was completely wet when, after the roll call, we were returning to the barrack. I used to take it off and put it by the bed to dry. Already at five in the morning we were getting out for the roll call. I struggled to put on the dress because after the rain it shrank and became too small.

One day we were standing for roll call. They were counting us and looking for someone who was missing. We were standing until they found a woman, undernourished and probably sick, who had hid in the toilette as

dr Mendele was doing the selection. They took her away and told us to turn around. We saw a woman lying on the ground with a belt around her throat, like a dog.

The days were going by and becoming increasingly difficult. My sister and I wished that they would take us and send us to do some work, just to get out of Auschwitz. There were rumors that that was possible. One day, when we came out for the roll call, we saw a group of people, I think they were from different factories. The Germans were selecting stronger inmates for work, so I, my sister and our cousin were fortunate to be selected. We were transferred to another barrack, to quarantine, which consisted of being separated from the others. We were not even allowed to leave for the latrines, but we had a bucket there for such needs.

One day they came and said they were taking us for work. The place where we were accommodated in Auschwitz was called camp C. There were also camp A and camp B, and we were transferred elsewhere but I do not remember what it was called. They let us come into one of the barracks and in the evening they sent us away to shower. The shower water was very hot, we dressed ourselves and came out. It was already night and very cold. I could not stand there, and while my sister was standing and talking to someone I laid down on the ground and fell asleep. She panicked and started looking for me until she found me sleeping on the ground. That was when I woke up.

They took us to the train and we got in. It was not as packed as when we were coming to Auschwitz. There were about two hundred of us, almost all very young, only a few who were married. Upon arrival to our destination, next to a barrack there stood a German woman, *commando fuhrerin*, in charge of managing the women. The place was Wüstegiersdorf.

From Auschwitz to Wüstegiersdorf we were escorted by a supervisor (Aufseherin) with a list of our two hundred names. When we just arrived to Auschwitz we were not tattooed, I suppose because the Germans thought that we should be destroyed right away and sent to the crematorium; fortunately, it turned out that we were taken for work. The supervisor came into the barrack and said: „Girls, it is going to be much better for you here, you will each have a separate bed with a mattress and a blanket. Each will have her own plate and spoon“. We could not believe what we were hearing. But it was true. We worked in the factory producing aircraft parts.

We walked every day to the nearby small town to work. My sister and I were given easy tasks, consisting of checking the size of manufactured parts.

We had only just started our work, and I got a high temperature. I could not stand up and work, so I laid my head on the table. I needed to sleep. Everyone was shouting that I must not do that. I told them that they could

kill me, but I could not stand on my feet any longer. That day I got pneumonia. My sister continued to work.

It was already winter and it was snowing, the snow sticking to our shoes. The shoes were high, with wooden soles, and it was difficult to walk. My sister hurt her foot and could not walk, so she was in the room with the sick, including me. She was with me several days. One day the Lagerälteste came and told us that we were not brought there to take care of each other, but that my sister would have to go and work. She told us this in the morning, but in the afternoon my sister went to the toilette and came back with red eyes. I asked her what had happened, why she was crying. She did not manage to answer me, she became very sick. She coughed blood. I gave her my night gown. There was panic. The lagerelteste came with another girl – we could not hide her situation from the commando fuhrerin. They told the commando fuhrerin everything, because anyway every evening in every room there was the routine counting.

Fears came over me that my sister would be taken to the crematorium. Lagerelteste told the commando fuhrerin everything, she had seen our eyes red and crying; she asked us what it was and we told her. She asked nothing else, just told me to come to her room. Being as I am, I told her everything openly, without lying: I said that my sister was already ill when we were still at our home, that she suffered from tuberculosis, that she had been to hospital and that her situation improved greatly, but it seemed to have come back. I also told her that the lagerelteste came to see us in the afternoon and told us that we had not come there to lie around, but to work. She was deeply touched by my concern over my sister, and told me not to cry and not to worry because my sister, after she recovers, would be given an easier task inside the barracks so she would not have to walk long to work. She really did as she promised. My sister was in the sick room for 12 days and she was coughing blood. The bleeding was difficult to stop, so the commando got injections of calcium, and my sister's situation improved although her health remained fragile until the liberation. One day, after I was well again, the commando fuhrerin came for the counting and again called me to her room. She asked me if I was strong enough to clean her room, care for the fire and clean her boots. She also told me that it was not a whole day's work, and that after I finished the tasks I could take care of my sister. That was how it was. We were there until the end. I could speak and understand German, and I felt some kind of sympathy from her side because until that time nobody had done for me or my sister anything nearly as good. Her name was Hilda Miller.

One day she took me to the factory where we saw emaciated people, of dry skin, dressed in rags. From her bag she was getting food and giving it to

them to eat. I saw something good in her eyes. She once took me for cleaning to the Dörnhau camp; it was a kind of a hospital in which half-dead people had to sew. It was dreadful to look at how those people were suffering and going for work.



HILDA MILER, the German woman with "goodness in her eyes", who saved Vera's and her sister's lives in the camp

On another occasion I was again given a cleaning task in town. At that time I saw a notice saying „evacuation“. I heard that the Russian army is close and that some men, capable of moving, had already been taken away. I understood that the war was soon coming to an end. We women were allegedly supposed to be evacuated, but the commando fuhrerin prevented that – and she managed to prevent it until the very end of war, 8 May 1945, when the Russians liberated us. It happened at a place on the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia.

From the camp we went to the nearby small town of Dörnhau, and some inmates left the place by walking on foot. Since my sister could not walk, we joined a group of 15 Czech Jewish women, who found a horse and a carriage and got some food. They claimed to know the road to Budapest.

As we were leaving, Hilda Miller came to say goodbye, since I had told her that we were leaving. We were both very excited, but neither of us asked the other about the place where the other would be, some future address. That was how we parted.

At the Czech border the horse and the carriage were taken away from us. We continued on foot until we came to a small town; the Checks there gave us yogurt and cake. We continued on foot to a school building, where we stayed overnight.

The following morning we continued on foot again. A bus came our way and took us to Brno, where we slept overnight in the street.

There, we were robbed of the little that we had with us, so all that we had left was what we were wearing. We continued until we came to the rail-

way station, and we waited for a train. We continued by train, packed together on the roofs of cargo cars.

Once we arrived to Budapest, we were received by the Jewish Community and taken to a school building where we could wash ourselves. While walking along the street, someone behind our back shouted at us: „The stinking Jews are coming back“. This distressed me terribly, after all that we had been through.

It was four of us together – I, my sister, and two other girls, and one of them suggested to go to the Yugoslav consulate office and inquire how we could return home. They advised us to go to a shelter and wait there for other inmates and go back as a group. We did not do so, but we took a train to Subotica, and started for our homes.

However, once there, we did not know where to go. We had no parents. Some people said we should go to the hotel. My sister and I said we would go to our home, the apartment where we lived with our parents. When we got there, we found people unknown to us. We told them that we would like to see if something remained that is related to our parents, we knew they were no longer living. The woman who was there got for us a family photo and said she had kept it in order to give it to someone of the family! After what had happened to my parents, I was very touched by seeing the photo again. The word soon went around that we were back and people gathered around us.

A Jewish woman, married to a German, invited us to her house to sleep overnight and made lunch for us according to our wishes. The following day the woman who was now living in our former apartment came to tell us that we could stay in her daughter's small apartment until we figure out what to do next.

We registered at the Jewish Community, which was already organizing food for returnees. I continued to care for my sick sister. Right after our return I wanted to continue my education, but my sister said I had to work so we could sustain ourselves. We did somehow manage to get by, and sometimes good people were willing to help.

One day a man who used to work with our father approached us and gave us quite a considerable sum of money, saying that his brother and he owed it to our father. Every time they saw us, they gave us some money.

Although Novi Sad had been and had remained a beautiful town, with many parks, we missed those who had not come back. I very much wanted to immigrate to Israel. I could not make this wish come true in 1948, due to the severely poor health of my sister who, regretfully, died in 1949.

In 1948 I married a doctor, Andrija Štajn. Due to his profession – he was treating patients suffering from infectious diseases; he could not get the immigration permit. This wish only came true in 1951 when we immigrated to Israel. I had a wonderful husband, who had passed away and left us in 1993. His first wife was taken with an eight months old baby in 1944 to Auschwitz, where they both perished.

In Israel we settled in Acre where my husband worked until his retirement. We started our family.

One day, 18 years later, I heard from an inmate that our former lageralteste Lili in Germany at the funeral of their German friend met Hilda Miller. Hilda right away asked her whether she knew what had happened to me. She told her that I was living in Israel, but she knew nothing else about me. When she later told me about it, I was very happy that Hilda was alive and that nothing bad happened to her. She was working in a hospital as a nurse, in the place where we used to work.

When I got her address, I wrote her a letter. Since then we were in regular contact. Since we wanted to see each other, during one of our journeys to Germany with my husband, we arranged a meeting. We met in Austria, near Innsbruck. She came with her adopted son. We spent the day together. We wrote to each other until her death.

My grandson Eliad was seven when at school they talked about the Holocaust. Upon returning home from school, he talked about it with his mother. She then told him that his grandmother was a Holocaust survivor. One day he asked me to tell him how I survived. I told him that he was still too young and would not understand my story, but I promised that someday I would tell him all that I went through. With this story I am doing it now.

I am ending my life story thankful that I have had the opportunity to keep my promise.