
Piroška PERINOVIĆ

IN THE HANDS OF DR MENGELE



*P*iroška Perinović was born in Bački Petrovac to Laszlo and Emma Schonbrunn, née Kraus. She had two sisters, Rozsika and Malvina, and a brother, Imre. None of them survived the Holocaust.

After the war she worked in the tobacco industry in Niš. She has a son, Mirko, and a daughter, Branislava, and three granddaughters.

I was born on September 27, 1927, in the Slovak settlement of Bački Petrovac, thirty kilometres from Novi Sad. My mother was born in Pivnica, near Odžaci, and my father in Jaszbereny in Hungary. There were four of us children, my brother Imre, my sisters Rozsika and Malvina and me.

When Yugoslavia capitulated in 1941, all the Jews in Bački Petrovac, a total of 22 families, were arrested and their houses put under guard. The Fascists took a roll call of all family members. We were ordered to pack only necessities and sent to one of several collection points where army trucks were waiting for us. They took us to the Novi Sad airport where we stayed for a month in military barracks. We were then taken to Pustara, in Begeč, where they put us in stables, tool sheds and curing sheds. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the Hungarians took my father to a place called Bilke. He never returned. We stayed in the Begeč detention centre until September, 1941.

We were then taken to Sarvar in Hungary. This was a larger camp and we were packed into the storehouses, curing sheds and other auxiliary buildings. The storehouses were multi-storey buildings in which we slept on the straw-covered floor. There were also Serbs in the camp, most of them from Vojvodina. Later on they gave us three-tier bunks, but this was no better. It was particularly difficult when the winter came. The younger women all worked in the factories, digging ditches and building roads and doing whatever other kind of work, but I was a child and didn't have to work. We were there for two years.

In April 1944 we were taken to Baya, to a Hungarian collection camp for Jews. I was there for only two weeks before the Germans took us over in April, 1944.

One day they took us to the train, packing us into cattle wagons where we suffocated from the stench and the lack of air and water. They wouldn't let us out of the train for days and people were sick and often vomiting. When at last the train stopped and the wagons were opened we rushed outside. Once out we were stunned to find ourselves surrounded by SS men with rifles aimed at us as we staggered beside the rails. We were in Austria, at the most remote end of the railway station in Wiener Neustadt. They separated the men from the women, taking my uncle away. As dark fell we were again shoved into the wagons and the train set off.

It was a four-day journey to Auschwitz. Our train passed through Auschwitz, stopping at eleven o'clock at the main loading ramp in Birkenau, across from the broad road which separated the male and female sections of Collection Camp B and divided the Birkenau K1 complex. There on the platform Dr Mengele awaited us. He immediately divided the arrivals into three groups. As we climbed down from the wagon they lined us up in fives for Mengele to separate us according to his own criteria. Everyone from my family except me was sent to the group he deemed unfit for work. This included my stepmother, my two sisters and my brother. I tried to follow them, saying "I want to be with my brother and my mother." He seized me by the shoulder and slapped me hard.

"You have to work. You'll see them later."

Then he continued separating us. My two aunts, the elder, Giza (née Lisov), and the younger, Olga Kraus, whose married name was Mijajlović, were also classified as fit to work.

Once we were inside the camp they took everything from us, including our clothes. They marched us naked into the bathroom, shaved us and, after we were washed, gave us some ragged clothing. I was put into the female Collection Camp B, in barracks with three-tiered bunks. Running down the centre of the barracks were heating ducts with chimneys at each end. These gave us no warmth at all because the fires were never lit. On each side was concrete floor where we would lie. The area where the dilapidated beds were was wet and muddy because of the leaky roof. At the end of each barracks there was a room, closed off from us, where the block wardens and kapos were. They were extremely cruel and would often beat us. By the fourth day I knew that I would be beaten if I ever dared to ask about my family. They would hit me as they gave me my answer: "They're in the same place as everyone else: the crematorium." I didn't understand and would go to my aunts asking them to explain. But somehow I understood that I no longer had my stepmother, Ilonka, nor my sisters Rozsika and Malvina, nor my brother Imre. Malvina, the youngest, was only four years old.

It was a gruelling life in the camp. Not only was the accommodation terrible, the food was inadequate, doled out in rations meant for the dying, not the living. I experienced first hand the *in vivo* experiments of Dr Mengele which became notorious after the war. I was given an injection in the arm, below the shoulder. Soon my arm became swollen and a yellowish bloody liquid began to ooze from the injection site. My temperature rose and I became feverish. Thanks to the elder of my aunts and her determination, I managed to live through this crisis. Some time later my aunt was moved to the kitchen and, thanks to her courage and perseverance, I was moved there too. Both of us were in the kitchen duties group. We peeled potatoes: each of us had to peel a hundred kilograms of potatoes in twelve hours. For six and a half months we worked in the kitchen, until December 18, 1944. I remember being beaten many times and seeing many terrible scenes, all the time fearing that my aunts and I would have our turn soon.

From December, 1944, it seemed that the end was drawing ever nearer. We heard artillery, there were aircraft flying overhead, the towns and factories were bombed and pamphlets were dropped. My aunts and I were loaded into the last train and evacuated along with another hundred women. Three days later we were unloaded in Wansdorf, about 150 kilometres from Leipzig. From the railway station we were

marched under guard to a place called Georgental where a new camp was established. Once again my two aunts and I were together in the kitchen with the rest of the kitchen crew from Birkenau. The other camp inmates worked in an aviation factory. Here life was easier, I was beaten only once, after I secretly gave a Romanian woman four onions for her sick sister. The Germans found the onions during one of their regular searches.



Children and the elderly were sent directly to the gas chambers on arrival in Auschwitz.

We stayed in Georgental until May 1, 1945, when we escaped during the night. This was thanks to Maja, a local woman who worked in the camp, and a guard, a *Volksdeutscher*, who cut the wire fence and allowed us to escape. He also advised us to mingle in with the mass of civilians who were fleeing ahead of the Russians so as not to be recognised. We ran as fast and as far as we could. By dawn we were in among the fleeing mob.

After walking towards Leipzig for several days, we fell in with a group of more than twenty Yugoslav prisoners of war. Finally the Russian troops reached us. By now I could hardly walk after days of strenuous hiking in my shoddy shoes which had cut and bruised my feet. One of the Soviet soldiers gave me a pair of boots. The Russians were escorting German prisoners while fierce fighting raged in Leipzig, now about ten kilometres away.



Piroška in the warm atmosphere of her family.

We walked with the Soviet army from Leipzig to Dresden. This was the centre of the fighting which by now was coming to an end. From Dresden we were sent on to Czechoslovakia and then continued our journey through Hungary. We crossed the Yugoslav border at Subotica and, at the end of June, 1945, we finally reached Bački Petrovac.

Our house was deserted and ruined: only the bare walls remained, with neither doors nor windows. The roof was now a gaping hole and the house was surrounded with weeds and devastation. I stood looking at what was once my home, weeping.

When the mayor of Bački Petrovac heard that we had returned, he sent police to take us to the hospital. After convalescing there, we went to Senta where I had an aunt. I never returned to Bački Petrovac, there was nowhere to go. I now began a new life, no longer inmate number A-11799.

I have lived in Niš since my marriage in 1957. I worked there for sixteen years but retired early in 1981 because of my poor health.

Now I live with my daughter Branislava and my granddaughter Olga. My other child, my son Mirko, lives separately with his family, his wife Ljiljana and their daughters, Anita and Tijana. I have one great-granddaughter, little Milja, who is two years old.

This is my story and, now I have only one wish, that there will never again be such stories to be told.