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*Lili TIŠMA*

IN OCCUPIED  
ZAGREB AND VUKOVAR



**L**ili Štraus was born in Zagreb on July 27, 1912, to Regina (*née* Herman) and Josip Štraus, a veterinary surgeon who worked as an inspector in the Ministry of Agriculture of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Her uncle was the painter, Oskar Herman. She has a sister, Anika Kovač, who survived the second world war together with her five children. Her mother Regina was killed in Jajinci, near Belgrade in 1942.

After the war she worked in the Presidency of the Government of the Federal National Republic of Yugoslavia, then in the Putnik tourist agency, and Jugobanka. Finally, she worked until she retired as a secretary in the Mathematics Institute at the University of Novi Sad. She married Teodor Tišma in 1963.

From her marriage to the non-Jewish Bogomir Herman, she has a daughter, Maja Herman (married as Sekulić), a doctor of literature who now lives in New York.

The German occupation of Yugoslavia and the Ustasha creation, the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia, had their most direct and painful impact on me by the deportation of my mother, Regina (Beba) Štraus (*née* Herman), to a camp and the arrest of my husband, Bogomir Herman.

Even today, under the burden of the years, I see my mother's face before me, her dark, deep eyes which could blaze with anger but which, for the 44 years they looked upon us, so warned my father, my sister and myself that we could never forget them. Nor could we forget her velvety mezzo-soprano which thrilled us every Friday and Saturday in the Vukovar temple.

My mother Regina was arrested in February, 1942, in Belgrade. We had lived in the city since 1934, with my father, Josip Štraus, who was a general inspector in the Ministry of Agriculture. When he died, in 1935, my mother remained in Belgrade, thanks to my father's pension. The pain of her arrest, of them taking her to the Sajmište camp and then to the death camp of Jajinci from which she never returned, was made worse when we discovered that she had been arrested after being denounced, anonymously, by a neighbour who was keen to acquire our garden.

My husband Bogomir Herman, an ethnic German and a publicist by profession, had been a member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia since it was founded in Vukovar in 1919. He was a man of strong principles and he paid a high price for this during his lifetime. As his wife and companion in life, despite all the problems caused by sticking to those principles, I felt safe and secure because I knew him as a profoundly conscientious man. This was also the kind of father he was to our daughter Maja who was the centre of his world.

When the Ustasha state was created, my husband was in Vukovar where his father, mother and brothers were. The Ustasha authorities knew about his political convictions, but his being German saved him, at least for the moment, from more severe consequences. However he and a number of other like-minded people from Vukovar were under observation and the Ustashes were only waiting for the right moment to arrest them. That moment came once the Ustasha regime was stable and arresting people with a Communist background became a way of showing their cooperation with the German authorities. Bogomir was arrested at the end of April, 1941, and taken with a group of political prisoners to Koprivnica, a transit camp from which people were sent on to Jasenovac. There was a stroke of luck here because his friend, Dr Branko Oberhof, lived in Koprivnica with his wife Tea, who was also a doctor and a daughter of the Koprivnica rabbi. Dr Oberhof was assigned to examine the prisoners and immediately "diagnosed" my husband as having appendicitis. He kept him in hospital with this diag-

nosis as long as he could but the Ustashes eventually sent him to Jasenovac in December, 1941.

We wives of the arrested men from Vukovar agreed that one of us would go each month to Stara Gradiška to take food to all our husbands in the Koprivnica camp. I was arrested for the first time on my way to Stara Gradiška with food but was released soon afterwards. Apparently they didn't investigate my origins in any great detail. But one night in prison was enough for me to see the long lines of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies, being led somewhere far away, with no idea of the fate which awaited them.

My husband's German surname, which I had taken when I married him, no longer offered me protection.



*Left: Lili Herman in 1944. Right: Her mother, Regina "Beba" Štraus.*

Apparently someone became suspicious about my regular visits to Bogomir and the parcels being forwarded and, on my next visit, I was again arrested. I spent the night in prison in Stara Gradiška and was released the next day without any special interrogation. I returned to Zagreb in fear with a feeling that this would not be the end of it.

In Zagreb I lived with Dr Koporac, a friend of the family, and had meals with my uncle, Dr Anton Gotlib and his wife Anka. Knowing that

Bogomir was in poor health, I wrote to his father, Franja Herman, asking him for help. In these letters I used the name of my other aunt, Micika Gotlib, naively thinking that her German surname and Catholic religion would be less suspicious.

It was a cold Sunday in May, 1942, when there was a sharp knock on the door of my uncle's apartment in the middle of the family lunch. An Ustasha policeman came in and called my name, ordering me to accompany him at once. I remember I was wearing a dark blue suit with gold buttons. In the first moment it occurred to me that I should keep them as I could trade them if I was in prison for any length of time, but then gave the idea up because they would certainly have taken them from me during the search.

When I got into the car I was astonished to see my Aunt Micika already inside. Obviously the letters I had been writing with her name as the sender had been intercepted. I comforted the frightened Micika, assuring her that nothing could happen to her. And, indeed, she was released immediately and I was taken to the basement for interrogation. The first interrogation was conducted by a female investigator and was brief, covering only my personal data. I remained in the police station until the evening, when a policeman took me to the railway station. At my request he allowed me to stop at Dr Koporac's apartment to change into warmer clothes. While I was there, I asked the maid to take my suit to Aunt Anka.

When the train set off, I realised that we were heading towards Jasenovac. We stood overnight at Jasenovac station and in the morning they took me to the reception centre where I waited until the evening for interrogation. I was interrogated by two Ustasha policemen who sent me under an Ustasha escort to an old mill nearby to spend the night. The mill had one floor and a toilet right next to my room. My escort suggested to me that I sleep with him, so that I would be "warmer". I was astonished, and replied that I was an honest Christian woman who loved her husband and that I would not betray him even at the cost of my life. His reaction was the last thing I expected, given the circumstances. He blushed, and mumbled, "Forgive me." Later he brought me a blanket and a pillow and the next day some food and fruit, sent by his wife after he told her about me.

During my several days in the mill, I met Ada Klajn, the twin sister of Hugo Klajn, an old friend of Bogomir's and mine. Ada had her children with her and whenever I could I gave them some of the food

the Ustasha brought me from his wife. Neither Ada nor her children ever returned from the camp.

After several days in the Jasenovac reception centre they took me back to Zagreb, to the prison on N. Square, where I was interrogated by two investigators. I remember the scene well, the two of them giving me superior looks and sneering, then giving me a piece of paper and telling me "State your origins and your religion before you married Bogomir Herman." I had long known I would eventually be asked this question under circumstances similar to this. The faces of my father, Josip, and my gentle mother, Regina, appeared clearly before my eyes, marching on in the column without returning, and then my dear husband, looking pale and ill. If I wrote "Catholic", there was a slim hope this might save my life, but it would be a betrayal of these three dear souls and my life, if I kept it, would be empty and worthless. I took the pen and, without hesitation, wrote "Jew". They underlined it in red down to the bottom of the page.

From the prison on N. Square, they took me to the Savska Road prison and ordered me to stand in the corridor with other prisoners. I was desperately tired, but, looking up, I recognised Hans Celinščak, drab little Hanzika, who tried long and unsuccessfully to win my friend Zlata Šik, coming down the corridor towards me in an Ustasha uniform. When he recognised me he winked and barked rudely "You'll be in front of the firing squad tonight." He walked past me and began calling out the other female prisoners. That night I imagined someone bringing me fresh bread and hot coffee in the morning. And in the morning there indeed arrived an Ustasha with a pot full of hot coffee and a piece of bread. He asked for Ljiljana Harvej. I realised that this was me so I stood up and went over to him. He told me Mr Celinščak had sent me the coffee and that he would come back later to take me to him for interrogation. I shared the coffee and bread with the other women for whom this was the first hot meal for many days.

The same Ustasha soon returned and took me to Celinščak. He kept reassuring me, promising he would do all he could to help me. I remained in the Savska Road prison until the end of July, 1942, when I was released.

After getting out of the prison I stayed with Mrs Jančić, the mother of my friend Dragica Kajfeš, the wife of Dr Kajfeš, who was an assistant to my uncle, Dr Anton Gotlib. During the summer of 1942, my husband Bogomir and a group of other prisoners with German

surnames were transferred from Jasenovac to Vukovar where they were obliged to report to the police three times a day.

I was safe staying with Mrs Jančić until late autumn, 1942, when the Ustasha authorities issued an order that everyone born a Jew must report with their landlords to the authorities. Failure to do so would carry the death penalty.

I had to leave this dear woman who had done all she could to make me feel secure. I accepted an offer from my friend Đina Buterin, whose married name was Sarić, to live with her and her husband. He was a lawyer and was able to protect people with German surnames through his connections with the authorities. In the meantime, at the beginning of summer, 1943, my husband was transferred from Vukovar to Zagreb to work in the administration of a civil defence unit. At the same time, he was drafted. Sarić also took him in and so, after a long time, we were again together. However it became too dangerous to stay with the Sarićs any longer after I was recognised by an Ustasha driver who had lived with my aunt in Vukovar. We managed to move to Đina Sarić's mother's in the short term, but we knew we had to find a way to join the Partisans as soon as possible. Through the Gotlibs, I met Oberol, the head of the hospital motor pool. I knew he had been a Communist before the war and was sure he would be able to get us to the Partisans. It had become extremely dangerous to stay in Zagreb with Mrs Buterin, especially after the Italian capitulation in September, 1943. We had to search for a new refuge where we could wait for news from Oberol about when we could be moved to the liberated territory.

Mrs Frangeš, the wife of Dr Frangeš, a professor at Zagreb University, put us up at great risk to herself.

Finally, at the end of September, 1943, Oberol managed to get us through Dubrava to the liberated territory, to the Partisans.

One of my reasons for writing this is to record the series of circumstances by which a young Jewish woman who was married to a German managed to survive Ustasha-controlled Zagreb, join the Partisans and make her contribution to the struggle against Fascism. But primarily I am writing it to record my gratitude to everyone who, at great risk to themselves, offered me help and protection.