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*Paula HIRŠLER*

## HIDDEN AWAY IN LITTLE HOUSES

*This testimony is part of an address given by Paula Hiršler in Zagreb on December 15, 1957, at the reopening of the Lavoslav Švarc Home for elderly Jews in Zagreb. As she herself said, she was speaking on behalf of the nine elderly men and women still surviving in the home at that time. The others were Klementina and Jakob First, Ivka and Emanuel Majlender, Jakob Kon, Ida Kon, Matilda Grinvald and Mici Popper.*



*The original Švarc Home in Maksimir Street in Zagreb*

of their officers to order Singer, the manager of the home, to have us all moved out within 24 hours. They then took over our entire premises and everything inside.

At the beginning of 1941 there were a hundred senior citizens in the former Švarc Home in Zagreb. Of those 78 women and 22 men, only nine of us are still alive today.

Our troubles began on April 8, 1941, when the German occupiers, after entering Zagreb, sent one

You can imagine what a terrible blow this was for all of us. With this one order we lost our home in which we had lived happily and comfortably for so many years, confident that we would spend many more years there, to the end of our lives.

As we left our home we had to hand over all our personal bedding, all our belongings, for their officers and soldiers to use. Those of the elderly who had relatives in Zagreb moved in with them temporarily while a few of the very sick and frail were kept for a few days in the cellar of the Švarc Home. Another thirty residents were taken to houses in Rapska and Draškovićeve streets. They never returned and we never discovered what happened to them. A few of us were accommodated in a house at 3 Boškovićeve Street but, after a short time, we were moved, along with the sick and frail from the cellar of the Švarc Home, into two small houses near Stenjevac, not far from Zagreb.



*Lavoslav Švarc (1837–1906) in his will, dated May 4, 1905, bequeathed funds for the building of a home for elderly people*

These little houses, standing in an open field, were provided for us by the then president of the Municipal Council, Dr Glikstal.

There were seventy of us living in those little houses and we were not allowed to leave them without special permission from the Stenjevac physician, Dr Pinjuh. We were short of everything, especially food, because we were not permitted to take anything with us, and the occupiers gave us nothing. We were taken care of by our community which, from time to time, brought us the essential groceries. Our period of bare subsistence in these unhealthy little houses was one of great fear and suffering, insomnia and stress, and frequent visits from the Ustashas.

They broke into our little houses one day in October, 1941, and took away Mr Singer, the manager of the home, Mrs Najman and her two children and our nurse Micika, who was an Aryan. By a stroke of luck one of Mrs Najman's daughters managed to escape, while she herself and her six-year-old son Tomica were executed, along with Mr Singer.

Late one night in November of the same year, the Germans suddenly stormed into our little houses and selected thirteen of the elderly people, including me. They took us to Jankomir, where they immediately began interrogating and torturing us. They then threw us, all thirteen of us, into a dark bunker where all we had to sleep on was a little damp straw. We had trudged on foot in heavy rain all the way from Stenjevac to Jankomir, so we all had colds. There in the bunker we went hungry for forty hours until, to our delight, one of the elderly ladies from the huts, Katica Preger, now deceased, managed to bring us some food. She had dressed in peasant clothing and bought food from the farmers.

In the bunker we lived in constant fear, our nerves on edge with the constant feeling that we would end our lives there. We were there for ten days until they finally took us back to those little houses with the other elderly people. Later we found out that we had the then Swiss consul in Zagreb to thank for our rescue from Jankomir.



*Returning to Zagreb from Brezovica, 1947*

We eked out a miserable existence in those little houses near Stenjevac for more than three years until, one day, we were told that we would have to move to Brezovica, near Zagreb.

On December 5, 1944, a few open trucks arrived and we were loaded onto them along with our belongings. We travelled, in the cold, rain and snow, to Brezovica, where they put us up in a very small and dilapidated house which had once been a police station. It had only two small rooms which could normally hold not more than ten people.

Our Municipal Council, realising the difficult situation in which they had placed us, built on another two rooms of about ten square metres each, so that we could be more comfortably accommodated, especially those of us who were severely ill. The municipality also occasionally brought us some food. In Brezovica we barely survived until the liberation of the whole country. We were visited there by Dr Glikstal, Kišicki and Dr Milan Švarc, who had been our ophthalmologist in the Švarc Home.



*The new home, the endowment of Lavoslav Švarc,  
built in 1957 in Bukovačka Street, Zagreb*

The worst days of our lives were just before the liberation in 1945. One afternoon Luburić's Black Legion came and told us that we had all been sentenced to be slaughtered. Fortunately, later the same night, a group of Partisans appeared and liberated us.

Even after the liberation we remained at Brezovica until April 1947 when we moved to the home which had been prepared for us at 25 Mlinarska Street, where we still live to this day, thanks to our Zagreb Jewish Community.

In the days after the liberation in 1945 we were frequently visited at Brezovica by Mr Montiljo, our president, and Mrs Blanka Doner. They asked how we were living and what we needed, often bringing us food, clothing and other items which they had obtained for us through the Jewish Community. The women's auxiliary also organised children's performances and musical programs on several occasions, so that our miserable elderly people could have some comfort and, at least for a little, forget some of the horrors of the past years as they waited to be moved to Zagreb.

These good friends, each time they visited us, would comfort us and assure us that we would soon move into better and healthier premises in Zagreb, and in the spring of 1947, this finally happened.

For us, the elderly people who had survived all the terrors and horrors of World War Two, the happiest days of our lives have been the day of the liberation in 1945, the day we moved from Brezovica to the home in Mlinarska Street, and this day, when we have lived to see our magnificent new home.