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Eva LEVI-JOVOVIĆ

## LIBERATION IN AUSCHWITZ<sup>1</sup>



**E**va Levi was born on January 25, 1924, at Žabalj in Bačka. Her father, Dr Julije Levi (born 1884), a lawyer, was killed in Bečej during the Great Raid and her mother, Riza Levi, née Gutman (born 1896) died in Birkenau, together with her sister Vera (born 1930). In the Holocaust she lost twenty members of her immediate family.

She was completing the seventh grade of secondary school when the Hungarians occupied Bačka and matriculated during the occupation, in June, 1942. She graduated from the Medical Faculty of Zagreb University in May, 1951, and immediately began specialisation in bacteriology at the Public Health Institute of Serbia. She was appointed assistant professor of microbiology and parasitology at the Medical Faculty of Niš University in 1961 and worked there until her retirement, since when she has continued to live in Niš.

*Eva Levi-Jovović is an honorary member of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the Serbian Society of Physicians. In 1958 she married Ivan Jovović, a lawyer and former inmate of the Goli Otok prison. She has a son, Dragiša (born 1961).*

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<sup>1</sup> "When the Soviets arrived in Auschwitz on January 26, in three camps they found only 2,819 invalids and the majority of these camp inmates they managed to cure." (Ward Rutherford, *Genocide: The Jews in Europe, 1939-1945*. Ballantine Books, New York, 1973)

My father was the eldest of seven children of a small village merchant in Gospodinci, about twenty kilometres from Novi Sad. He attended six grades of primary school there before his father decided he should commute to secondary school in Novi Sad. He matriculated in 1904 and enrolled at the Faculty of Law at Budapest University. Because of the high cost of living in Budapest he continued his studies at the Faculty of Law at the university in Koložvar (now Kluž) in Romania. After graduating and completing his articles he passed the Bar examination in 1912 or 1913 and set up a practice as a solicitor in Žabalj. In 1914 he was mobilised into the Austro-Hungarian Army and sent to the Russian front. He was in the fortress of Przemyśl when it was besieged in 1915. The siege continued for several months before the city fell to the Russians and my father was taken prisoner. Przemyśl is about 250 kilometres from Auschwitz as the crow flies. If I were a believer I would call this the finger of God or the finger of fate.

As the eldest son of parents who were already of advanced years and having many concerns about his younger siblings, he twice tried to escape from the prison camp. After his second unsuccessful attempt he was sent to the Asian part of Russia, to Krasnoyarsk, and from there to Siberia. There he spent the hard years of the birth of the Soviet Union. Not until 1921 did he leave Vladivostok to return home by ship. Back in Žabalj he reopened his solicitor's office and married my mother in 1922.

My mother was born and raised in Žabalj, where she finished primary school and what was then called junior high school. From her early childhood she had to help her mother with the domestic chores because my grandmother was running the shop after the death of her husband. There were more obligations when, during the war, my mother's sister came to her grandmother with three small children, aged one, three and five, because her husband was at the front.

I had a sister, Vera, six years younger. As a child she caught every possible contagious disease (measles, chickenpox, rubella, diphtheria and scarlet fever), all of which resulted in the weakening of her heart muscle. Despite this she was always cheerful and a good student.

Our family lived very modestly. During the spring and summer when the rural Vojvodina people had no time to engage in lawsuits, my mother had to work magic to meet all the basic needs of the household from the extremely modest income my father brought in.

I still remember one morning there was just enough milk in the house for three cups. Two were for us children obviously and, while I was preparing my books for school in the next room, I accidentally overheard our parents each insisting that the other take the third. My mother knew that my father would be kept at the court long into the afternoon and my father didn't want his wife to miss out on this very modest breakfast. Because of this I could never understand some of my school friends when they boasted that if they didn't feel like milk for breakfast they would pour it down the drain when nobody was looking, in order to avoid arguments. We were a happy and harmonious family.

I completed primary school in Žabalj and the first two years of secondary school in Bečej, sitting private exams. Because my sister had begun primary school and would be starting high school in four years, we moved to Bečej in 1936.

Life went on as usual, although we kept hearing more and more about the difficult position of Jews in Germany. Some distant relatives of my mother, having fled from Hamburg, came to Žabalj and told us about the harassment and problems they had experienced in Germany. One evening my father came home from a lecture on this theme given by an official of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Belgrade. I remember the words he heard at this lecture, which did little to hearten us.

“The Jews in Austria also said that what was happening in Unter den Linden Street in Berlin would never happen in Vienna. Don't think that what Jews are now going through in front of Stephansdom in Vienna may not happen one day in Knez Mihailova Street in Belgrade.” I have to point out, though, that we had never experienced any anti-Semitic provocations in multinational Vojvodina before the war began.

At home we observed Jewish customs to a moderate extent and never did any serious jobs on Saturdays. While we lived in Žabalj, where there were ten or so Jewish families, my father went to the synagogue on Fridays to make up the *minyan*, the quorum for the service. We did, however, strictly observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the first two days of Passover, when the entire family would go to my grandfather in Gospodinci for Seder evening. At home we also had little saving boxes where we put money to buy land in Palestine.

The beginning of the occupation found us in Bečej, where the Hungarian troops marched in on April 10, 1941, with no particular resistance. "Hungary is certainly a legal state", my father said, trying to reassure us. Just how far that was from reality at the time is shown by the fact that, as a Jewish solicitor, he was immediately banned from practising his profession. He was sent, at the age of 57 years, to forced labour in our town but, after a few weeks of being mistreated there, was allowed to go home. In order to earn something he began to give lessons to less successful secondary school students. He taught mainly Latin because, under the Hungarian occupation, this was one of the major subjects in classical secondary schools.

He was abducted from our home on January 10, 1942, when the Great Raid began in Bečej. This was the operation carried out by Hungarian Fascists to destroy the Šajkaš Partisan detachment which also served as a general measure to persecute both Serbs and Jews. We learnt later that several hundred people, after being brutally tortured, had been murdered and their bodies thrown under the ice of the frozen Tisza river, at the lock where the Danube-Tisza canal joins the river. The temperature was 40° Centigrade below zero.

My mother, sister and I survived the Great Raid but now, as well as attending school regularly, I had to take over my father's private lessons because, in the extreme mid-winter, we were left in the house with very little firewood and even less money.

My sister and I continued to attend school. We endured various degrees of harassment, but I finished seventh grade of high school and matriculated with excellent grades in June, 1942.

The next two years or so were relatively peaceful. My sister continued her schooling and my mother took in two Jewish boys after the relatives with whom they had been living died in the Great Raid. I continued giving lessons and during the mornings, when my students were at school, I would do the shopping to spare my mother from anti-Semitic insults and provocations.

In the middle of March 1944, we suddenly noticed that at every checkpoint there was now a fully-armed German soldier as well as a Hungarian. The German Army had flooded into Hungary and the relatively tolerant Hungarian government was replaced by members of

the Nyilas, the ultra-right wing Arrow Cross. It was obvious that nothing good lay ahead.

One day, early in April, a Mr Varga visited us. This gentleman, with his wife and son had moved from Sarajevo to Bečej in 1942. They were Seventh Day Adventists. Mr Varga believed that, as a Hungarian, he would be better off in Bačka. However his son, although Hungarian, spoke the language very badly. After he was given many poor grades in school, his father came and asked me to teach him. With the greatest effort I managed to get him through and the boy succeeded in passing the year. The following year they moved to Vrbas. Then Mr Varga, knowing what lay ahead for the Jews, came to Bečej and offered to take me and my sister to Vrbas by pretending that he was related to my mother. He thought that Vera was old enough not to betray her origin. When my mother and I put this idea to my sister she rejected it out of hand, saying that she wanted us to remain together to await our common fate. To this day I can't forgive myself for not having been more resolute. I should have forced my sister to go with Mr Varga, particularly because the liberation of the whole of Bačka and Vrbas was only six or seven months away.

The Germans, backed up by the Hungarian Arrow Cross (or perhaps it was the other way around), were very fast, thorough and efficient. Within just a month they collected all the Jews who had survived the Great Raid, the men who had not been taken to labour camps and even those people whose parents had converted to Catholicism after World War One. We Jews didn't see such people as one of us. We were first taken to the synagogue in Szeged, then they kept us in the yard and storehouses of a factory in Baja and eventually, on May 29, we arrived in Auschwitz. Mengele immediately selected my mother and my sister, who had turned fourteen on May 21 in Baja, for the gas chamber. I, being able-bodied, was sent to Birkenau.

How can I describe our suffering in Auschwitz without repeating the same stories which have been told so many times already? Slave labour under the scorching sun and in the freezing November rain, food which didn't meet even our most basic needs, humiliation and the destruction of the last remnants of human dignity, hours of standing in ranks for counting at the *Zahlappell*. All of this accompanied by the fear of Mengele's visits and the possibility of being sent to the gas chamber. This has all been described in the memoirs of the survivors as well as by literary figures such as Erich Maria Remarque in his

*Spark of Life*. So instead I shall present some of my thoughts about things which were not at all clear to me at twenty years of age. Nor are they today, when I am well into my eighties.

Why did the German SS need the unthinkable, unnecessary, insolent lies which they hurled at us from the very beginning. "Don't carry your suitcases, just write your names and addresses on them so we can send them to your homes", they said, as they threw us out of the wagons in which we had been transported to the camp. When we asked them why they were separating us and when we would see our relatives after the first selection, their reply was "As soon as tonight. It wouldn't be proper for the young girls to bathe, to shower, together with the children and the older men."

Nor could I understand the crudity and arrogance of the older camp inmates. I don't mean the German women criminals, but the Jewish women who were sometimes put in charge of a block. On one occasion, when she was in a good mood, I put this question to Marika from Czechoslovakia, who was the *Blockalteste*, the head of our block. Her reply was succinct: "For the past two years you've been sleeping on feather pillows while I suffered in Auschwitz."

Eta, the Polish Jew who ran our block, would often beat us mercilessly for the slightest of reasons. One night, when we returned from work, we found the Germans in an uproar, running in all directions. We waited for hours to be counted and for our festive "march" past the camp orchestra to go to our barracks. It was not until about midnight that we were allowed to return to the barracks. Eta met us, tears streaming down her face (and tears in the camp were a very rare occurrence). "I thought you wouldn't come back," she said. We forgave her everything because of those tears. Later we learnt that this abnormal waiting and the counting and recounting had been because the *Sonderkommandos*, the Jews specially chosen to work in the gas chambers and the crematorium, had rebelled. These people took the bodies of the dead from the gas chambers, searched them for any hidden jewellery, took their rings, pulled out gold teeth and transported the corpses to the crematorium. After working there for three months they were also poisoned by the Zyklon B gas so that they might not live to be witnesses. This, to my knowledge, was the only rebellion that happened in the camp, but I believe that none of the rebels remained alive. Their only satisfaction was that, in the course of their mutiny, they managed to kill a few SS guards.

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At first I had strength and the will to live and I held up fairly well until October. But as the cold and rainy weather settled in, I began to grow weaker. Our clothing consisted of only one set of underwear and our dresses, which we kept on at night so that they would be dry by the morning. On still nights we could occasionally hear distant artillery fire and, occasionally, there were "visits" by the Allied bombers. As I was no longer able to stand on my feet, and the selections and gas chambers were no longer operating (the Germans had destroyed the building in order to leave no evidence), I was admitted to the camp hospital on December 8, my mother's birthday. The food in the hospital was even worse, but the rest and the fact that I was no longer exposed to the rain helped to improve my health. Despite this, when the liberation came (I saw my first Red Army soldier on January 27, 1945), I was still in such a terrible condition that they wanted to photograph me as an example of a living skeleton. I eventually escaped being immortalised in this way because they found another woman who was in an even worse condition.

Transportation home did not begin until March. Crossing Czechoslovakia, Romania and Banat (Bela Crkva and Vršac), I arrived home in the middle of May.


I was again in Bečej, the war was over and I, by mere chance, had remained alive, alone, without my family.

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Finally, I would like to mention a few incidents connected with the suffering of Jews under the Fascist regime, although some of these took place twenty years after the end of the second world war.

The first happened in May, 1945, the first week after my return to Bečej. There was a memorial service for all the victims of the Great Raid and, although it was very difficult for me, I went to the lock on the Danube-Tisza canal. As I walked through the town I noticed posters in the windows of some shops with excerpts from the interrogations and the sentence handed down at the time on the local dogcatcher who had been involved in killing people in the Great Raid. In his statement he named people whom he had killed on January 10, 1942 and whose bodies he had pushed under the ice: "Engineer Edo Bulat (reserve captain,

the last military commander in the retreat of our army who, after the collapse escaped and returned home in order not to be taken prisoner); Boško Petrović (bank clerk, before the war he had the highest rank of any reserve officer in Bečej, lieutenant-colonel, I think); Braca Davidovac (just graduated from secondary school, or perhaps already at university, the elder son of Velinka Davidovac, the owner of a large estate in Bečej) and an elderly Jewish solicitor whose name I don't remember."

	SERVICE INTERNATIONAL DE RECHERCHES
	INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE
	INTERNATIONALER SUCHDIENST
Bad Arolsen, le 31 mars 1998 kaf/r	
Croix-Rouge de Yougoslavie Présidence Service de Recherches Simina 19 YU 11000 Beograd	
LEVI/1 EVY Ewa, de nationalité yougoslave, « étudiante », lieu d'origine : Subotica, a été incarcérée au camp de concentration d'Auschwitz (date non indiquée), numéro de détenue A-9027, où elle a été libérée le 27 janvier 1945 par l'armée russe.	
Les documents mentionnent : le 9 février 1945 et le 7 mars 1945 à l'hôpital d'Auschwitz ; transportée le 11 mars 1945.	

*Letter from the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany, confirming that Eva Levi was an inmate of the Auschwitz camp*

This elderly Jewish solicitor was my father, the only Jewish lawyer seized on January 10, 1942.

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In 1960 or late 1959 I was sent by the Union of Veterans to Frankfurt am Main to negotiate with representatives of I.G. Farbenindustrie for compensation of former Auschwitz prisoners. I should immediately point out two things:

- The Germans explicitly asked to speak to a former camp inmate because, as they said, they did not want to talk to politicians.
- I have never been particularly active in the Union of Veterans. I joined the organisation of veterans of the liberation war only when the division for former prisoners and internees was set up.



I was accompanied on this trip by Dr Smiljanić, an advisor to the Union of Veterans who was well versed in compensation issues. One free afternoon we visited the German antifascist association VVN (*Vereinigung der Nazi Verfolgten* – the Association of Nazi Persecution Victims). We were received very cordially. Their representative began explaining that not all Germans had followed Hitler, as was demonstrated by the fact that about 400,000 Germans had also passed through the concentration camps. I said that I felt sorry for anyone who had been in a concentration camp and mentioned that perhaps their struggle in Germany may have been even more difficult because they were fighting their own government whereas we in the occupied countries were fighting Fascism and an occupier and these are never welcome. I presented statistics to them as an objective criterion: of about 60 million Germans in pre-war Germany, only six or seven per thousand had been in concentration camps, while in Yugoslavia, 1,700,00 people from a total population of 14 million people perished, more than 12 per cent. As for European Jews in general, of approximately nine or ten million, according to various sources, between 4.5 and 6 million people died, between 50 and 60 per cent.

It is obvious that the gentlemen in VVN accepted and remembered my thumbnail calculation because, about forty years later, in May, 1999, I received from the same association their best wishes (“*Viele herzliche Grüße an Frau Prof. Dr. Eva Levi*”). This was sent through the Faculty of Law at Niš University which had contacted VVN during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in order to provide objective information to the German public about these events.

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In the mid-1970s, the Union of Veterans organised a tour of Auschwitz. As far as I remember the occasion was the opening of a memorial pavilion in honour of Yugoslavia. During the tour of our pavilion I noticed on one wall a photographed section of the list which the Germans fastidiously kept while prisoners were being tattooed. My name “Eva Levi – Yug. A 9027” (the camp number tattooed on my left forearm) was underlined in red ink. I wanted to photograph this detail but my hands kept shaking and I had to ask my good friend Zora Raković, now deceased, to kneel down so that I could rest my camera on her shoulder. Later many of my colleagues and associates at the

Medical Faculty in Niš told me that they had seen my name in Auschwitz during their stay in Poland and their tour of the concentration camp.

After the Yugoslav pavilion we toured the other pavilions. It was the Polish pavilion which left the deepest impression on me. In it, as in a series of shop windows, were exhibited piles of hair, suitcases on which the owners had written their names and addresses on the orders of the SS, piles of clothing, spectacles and orthopaedic appliances. I looked at all this in silence, fervently hoping that I should not discover something that may have belonged to my late mother or sister. When we came to the last exhibit, with children's toys (I had at home a son who was then three or four years old), I was overwhelmed by an attack of sobbing such as I had never before experienced. My friends led me from the pavilion and, for me, the tour was over.

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“Forgive we must, forget we must not,” they say. But can we forgive the death of millions of people poisoned or suffocated in the gas chambers or killed in the heavy bombing of women and children in undefended cities, people who starved or froze to death in Leningrad under siege or the approaches to Moscow? Is the mere memory of evil sufficient for it never to be resuscitated? I am not a pessimist by nature because if I had not always had some flicker of optimism I would certainly not have survived Auschwitz. But is merely remembering, not forgetting, enough to prevent the vampire of evil from rising again?