
Vera OBRADOVIĆ

FROM SOMBOR TO UPPSALA



Vera Obradović was the second child of Dezider and Julia Rip (née Bred-er). She was born on February 8, 1922, at Bezdán. Her older sister Ružica was born in the same town on September 10, 1914. In 1923 the family moved to Sombor.

Vera lost her sister, Ružica, a young doctor, on March 25, 1942, when she was hanged in Kolašin. She lost her mother immediately on her arrival in Auschwitz on May 2, 1944. Her father died in the Wüstergierdorf camp, in Silesia, in June 1944. Vera, the only surviving member of the family, returned to Sombor in 1945 and married Branislav Obradović the same year. They settled in Belgrade where she graduated from the Belgrade University Economics Faculty. She spent her entire working career in Belgrade.

I lived in a happy, stable family in the beautiful town of Sombor, famous for its broad streets and a wealth of greenery, parks and flowers. The town was also known for its many cultural monuments. It was very much a town for students. During my time at school there was a Teachers' College with boarding facilities, a secondary school where my sister and I spent eight years, the Commercial Academy and several primary schools. Between the two wars, many Jews from the surrounding villages and neighbouring countries came to live in Sombor.

Before the deportation there were more than 1,200 Jews in Sombor, of whom 836 were murdered. There was also a large synagogue and a separate temple for Orthodox Jews.

At school, I was the only Jewish pupil in the class. Even before the outbreak of World War Two, anti-Semitic excesses had begun to emerge in the school. In the higher boys' classes there were students from the surrounding villages which had a predominantly *Volks-deutsche* population. The majority of them were already oriented towards the National Socialists.

At the time there were still many things emerging which I didn't understand. Nor did my parents acquaint me with the political situation, wanting to spare me from evil thoughts and deeds. However there was one incident that indicated something very serious was going on. I remember that Dr Gergelj, my uncle Dr Rip and Mr Brajer gathered in our house. I think this was in 1939. They withdrew into the living room and talked behind closed doors for a long time. After this meeting all of them looked very gloomy. It was only after the war that I learnt that they were a group who had been chosen by the Jewish community in Sombor to go to Bezdán taking medicines, food and other necessities to help the Jews living in barges on the Danube. These were refugees from Germany and Austria who wanted to reach Palestine by travelling down the Danube and across the Black Sea. Because my father and uncle had grown up in Bezdán, they were chosen for this group helping the refugees. They applied for resident permits for these unfortunate people but, apart from humanitarian and medical assistance, nothing could be done for them.

I matriculated from high school in 1940 and enthusiastically set off for Belgrade where, that autumn, I enrolled in the Medical Faculty of Belgrade University. By October that year I was forced to abandon my study because the *Numerus Clausus*, the Korošec Law, had come into force and under this no more than five per cent of students enrolling at universities could be Jewish. Thus, for me, began the time of persecution, suffering, arrests, plunder and murder.

My only sister, Dr Ružica Rip, just out of medical school, was arrested in February, 1941, and taken to the notorious Glavnjač Prison. She was arrested at Belgrade railway station because she was carrying some compromising material printed in Sombor. She and I lived at 28 Lamartinova Street, close to the clinic. This is where Ružica used to live as a student and, later, as a young doctor. After her arrest the noto-

rious Special Police agent, Kosmajac, visited me with two other agents. He interrogated me but I really had no idea who had given the material to Ružica nor who she was supposed to deliver it to in Belgrade. I later found out from my sister that, even while being beaten, she had not betrayed anyone. Kosmajac slapped my face so hard that I staggered and fell into the arms of my good landlady, Marija. I was allowed to visit my sister in prison, with an agent present. Every day I took her lunch from the canteen for Vojvodina students. My sister was released from prison three days before the attack on Belgrade.

Ružica and I were together in Belgrade when the city was bombed on April 6, 1941, and it was not until the end of April that we returned to Sombor. In May Ružica returned to Belgrade at the summons of the Communist Party, of which she had been a member since 1939. However she had to leave the capital because her prison file had been given to the police and she ran the risk of being arrested again. She fled to Montenegro.

After the uprising in Montenegro, Ružica moved from Podgorica to Kolašin. She was the only doctor in the Komski detachment and she treated the wounded, organised a hospital in Kolašin and conducted courses for nurses. The Chetniks captured her at Crkvina, where she refused to leave the wounded. She was taken to the Kolašin prison and condemned to death. She was hanged on March 25, 1942. We heard about this tragedy the same year, but not the whole truth, just that Ružica was no longer alive. My parents had already learned of their daughter's death before they were deported to the camp.

NO FAREWELLS

During the Hungarian occupation my father was frequently taken into forced labour. The Germans entered Hungary on March 19, 1944, and at the beginning of April he was taken to Bačka Topola, then to Baja, then to Auschwitz and from there to Wüstergierdorf. The last time I saw him was at Bačka Topola on April 29, 1944, where I also spent a night in a wagon on my way to Auschwitz. I managed to get in touch with my father. I gave him the food which we had brought with us from Sombor the previous day. He took the news that my mother and I had been taken to a camp very hard. We barely managed to exchange a few words because he was continually begging me to arrange for him to meet my mother. I didn't even say goodbye to my father and was already hurrying to get my mother. However the guard was deaf to my

entreaties and wouldn't allow us to leave the barracks. We were not able to say goodbye to my father who stayed behind waiting for us.

Early in the morning of April 29, 1944, we left Bačka Topola in wagons, headed for Auschwitz. My mother was 49 years old. While we were in Sombor, they had selected women from 15 to 45 years of age for work. So that we could stay together, my mother said that she was 45. Unfortunately we remained together for a very short time. On May 2 we arrived in Auschwitz. There we were met by an SS doctor with an entourage of SS men. Later we learnt that this was Dr Mengele. Our transport, the first from Hungary, numbered about three thousand people. We were divided into two groups. I was on the side which was to go directly to death, to the gas chamber. A German moved a few of us younger girls to the other side, which meant that we would live for some time longer. After they separated me from my mother I called out to her at the top of my voice "Mama, come over here!" She came to our group and we held tightly to each other, but she was the sixth in the rank. I didn't know that the Germans used ranks of five to count. I discovered this later when we stood for hours at dawn every day and again on return from work while being counted. When the German came he asked who was sixth in the rank. My mother was taken back to the other group. She was killed and cremated the same day. I never said goodbye to her either. Each time I was the last one my parents saw. I survived, but 48 members of our immediate and extended family perished.

DODGING DR MENGELE

I had been in Auschwitz since May 2, 1944, and had been through the entire procedure of admission to the camp. They tattooed the number 81113 on my left arm. After quarantine I was assigned to work in Union-Weberei. This was a workshop working for the military industry. Early in August I fell ill with typhoid fever and was admitted to the hospital, which was a barracks for infectious diseases. There was no treatment, no medicines. I don't know how I managed to get well, as I left the hospital early because of the frequent selections. I was helped in this by a woman doctor from Sombor who I knew only as Ibika. I was put into the *Schonungsblock*, a special barracks for convalescents and escaped the selection in the hospital, but Dr Mengele came to this block as well. I saved myself by jumping through the window and remaining hidden until he had finished his selection.

In the infectious diseases block were those who had scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid fever and other contagious diseases. Many who recovered from one contagious disease would catch another, unless they were already immune, and would die very quickly. Those convalescents who managed to survive the infection were forced to give blood for the manufacture of vaccines for the German soldiers. Dr Mengele was tireless; he kept making selections, except when he was occupied by his "scientific research", which was always experiments *in vivo* and with twins. He was always running around the hospital, selecting the weak and the sick and sending them to the gas chamber. He had nothing to gain from this category of the people selected. With the newcomers it was a different matter: they took their gold and other valuables. But Mengele wasn't even satisfied with this booty. At one time he allegedly said "*Bei der Familie Wallenstein ist viel mehr Gallenstein, als Edelstein*". (The Wallenstein family have more gallstones than gemstones).

Late in the summer of 1944, Birkenau was visited by an international commission of the Red Cross. The camp was cleaned up thoroughly and decorated with flowers and lawns. There had never been so much as a blade of grass in Birkenau because no sooner would one grow than it would be eaten by the camp inmates. Now there were no piles of corpses in front of the barracks, nor were the crematoriums working, although previously they had been operating day and night. The guests walked through this Potemkin village. To enhance the image of the camp idyll, women inmates who were still strong and looked human were chosen. They were sweepers (*Stubendiest*), clerks (*Schreiberinnen*) and others. They were dressed in new, striped camp uniforms and given scarves for their heads, clean and washed. The women's orchestra played some pleasant music. We, the rest of the inmates who remained in the camp, were locked in the barracks, confined to the block (*Blocksperr*) because we were skin and bones, *Musulman*² they called us, and we were not to be seen. The international commission of the Red Cross walked

² Camp slang for someone who was at the end of their life from exhaustion. The expression probably comes from the German words *muschl* (mussel) and *mann* (man). The meaning is that the mussel keeps its form even after losing its content. In Serbian literature the expression *musulman* is often corrupted to *musliman* (Muslim)

through the camp and, perhaps, did not want or did not dare to see the reality of the camp. Those of us who were closed up in the barracks weren't allowed to even make a sound, let alone speak out and tell the truth about the suffering and murders for the rest of the world to know the truth about Auschwitz-Birkenau.

FROM CAMP TO MINE

After a selection on October 28, 1944, I was transported from Auschwitz to the Bergen-Belsen camp. I arrived early in November and spent about seven weeks without working. We whiled away our days in the barracks with the bare minimum of food. I arrived in Bergen-Belsen together with Eva Timar-Balog.

In mid-December we were taken to Braunschweig to clear rubble in very difficult conditions. Eva and I were together until we were separated at Braunschweig in February, 1945.³ Without Eva I was terribly lonely. She had been sickly and weak and we all believed that she had been picked out for transport at a selection for the seriously ill. I was sure I would never see her again. Of the handful of women from Sombor remaining, she was the only one I said goodbye to or, rather, it was she who said goodbye to us. It was a great joy for both of us to meet again in Sombor, at the end of September, 1945.

I remained in Braunschweig for some time. We cleared the rubble in the centre of the city, half-naked, starved, in the snow and freezing wind. We slept on bare concrete in a stable for the horses of SS officers.

At the end of February, 1945, we were again crammed into the cattle wagons and sent to the Beendorf camp, which was located in a salt mine. There was salt everywhere around us, nothing but salt: floor, ceilings walls, an enormous hall, eight hundred metres underground. There was a military plant for the manufacture of aircraft parts in the mine. We worked the night shift, twelve hour shifts. We travelled about 45 minutes each way from the camp to the mine. Both before and after work we stood for hours to be counted. We slept in shifts in three-tier bunks – the night shift slept during the day and the day shift at night. We were lowered down the mine by two lifts, in two stages, because we had to travel more than eight hundred metres down. The lifts took a long time to come. From the

³ See *We Survived...*, vol. 1, pp. 103–104

lifts to the enormous working halls we went through narrow salt corridors. There I worked on a lathe for the first time in my life. I weighed no more than thirty kilograms and was covered in lice and scabies. Always hungry, constantly tired, I shivered in my thin dress. We were forbidden to talk along the way, particularly in the hall, while we were working. If one of the *Aufzeherinnen*, the women SS overseers, saw us talking they would just take our number and later, back in the camp, we would get a terrible beating.

UNRECOGNISABLE – EVEN TO MYSELF

As the Allied troops approached Beendorf we were again loaded into cattle wagons, on April 8, 1945, and travelled to the north of Ger-



*Dr Ružica Rip, Vera's elder sister,
hanged in Kolašin in 1942*

many via Magdeburg and Wittenburg to Hamburg. There were altogether about 750 women and more than 2,000 men on this withdrawal and several hundred of them were Jewish women. Between April 8 and May 2, one in every five of the 2,770 camp inmates died.

In Hamburg were accommodated in military barracks. The city was in ruins. We were again put into wagons but now there were only fifty women in each. We were surprised by this and even more so by the fact that our guards were now German Army veterans from the world wars. Near Padeborg we crossed into Denmark. There Swedish Red Cross representatives took charge of us and put us into nice, clean wagons. We were given a warm welcome

with sandwiches! We arrived the same day in Malmo, Sweden. This was May 2, 1945, the same date as our arrival in Auschwitz and the anniver-

sary of my mother's death. From this point on we were taken care of by the Swedish Red Cross. We had been saved by a member of the Swedish Royal Family, Count Folke Bernadotte.

When we arrived in Malmo we were exhausted, tired and starving, because along the way we had had hardly any food and had only seldom been given water to drink. The Swedish Red Cross people separated us according to our nationalities: the French were in the majority, followed by the Poles, Czechoslovaks, Hungarians and so on. Of all these women I was the only Yugoslav. I no longer belonged to the Hungarian contingent, because I had been given the chance to choose for myself. I was so weak that they had to carry me to the bathroom. In Malmo they placed us under very strict quarantine in the Tennis Stadium. After bathing and delousing we were given clean, new clothes. I was under constant medical supervision because my life was hanging by a thread. There were large mirrors on the walls of the Tennis Stadium. When I passed these and looked, I felt as if I was seeing a familiar face, but in fact it was myself whom I didn't recognise. They sent me to convalesce in Osby in the southern Swedish province of Scania, where I gradually became my old self, because my body was able to accept the food I ate. Someone from the Yugoslav Embassy gave me some money to help me. He told me that in Sweden, especially in Uppsala, there were a lot of former Yugoslav prisoners. These were our prisoners from Norway who had been helped by good people to cross into Sweden.

ALMOST LIKE HOME

After convalescing in Osby, I accepted the invitation of some Yugoslav comrades and went to Uppsala. The day after I arrived there, they told Mr Hugo Valentin, professor of history at the University of Uppsala, that a former prisoner who had survived Auschwitz had arrived. He immediately wanted to meet me, because the horrors of the camp had been published in stories and photographs in the Swedish newspapers. The Swedes had not been to war for a hundred and fifty years and were horrified by the pictures and the stories told by the women inmates who had survived. The professor asked by telephone for me to be immediately brought to his apartment.

There they met me with open arms and said "From now on you will be our dear child." I had no reply for their kindness, but my tears fell in floods because I had again felt parental love. These wonderful

people became my foster parents and I addressed them as Uncle Hugo and Aunt Fannie. They had three daughters, two were married and the youngest, Susanna was the same age as me. Uncle Hugo found me a job in the Biological Institute where refugees from Germany and Austria mostly worked. At the Institute I made friends with many friendly people. Uppsala is a lovely city, similar to my home town of Sombor, full of parks, greenery and flowers and home to many school children and students. Uncle Hugo enrolled me in the Biology Faculty of Uppsala University. I was unable to enrol in the Medical Faculty, which was what I wanted, because foreigners needed special permission from King Gustav V. I was given a stipend equal to my salary in the Institute. I kept in close contact with Uncle Hugo and Aunt Fannie until they died. They continued to take care of me, often sending me parcels. When Uncle Hugo died, the Jewish Community in Uppsala wrote about his good deeds in their bulletin.

Meanwhile I had the opportunity to send a radio telegram to Yugoslavia. I wrote to my great love from my school days and he replied that I should return immediately and that he was waiting for me.

FINALLY IN SOMBOR

We Yugoslavs, about 1,200 men and women, were included in the first transport and, on August 24, 1945, we left for our homeland. I didn't arrive in Sombor until September 10. Of my own family I found no one in Sombor except my uncle, my father's only brother, the physician Dr Nikola Rip. In Novi Sad I found my cousin, Irena Fišer, née Ungar. She had also survived Auschwitz.

I was unable to enter my house because the City of Sombor had taken it over as an old peoples' home.

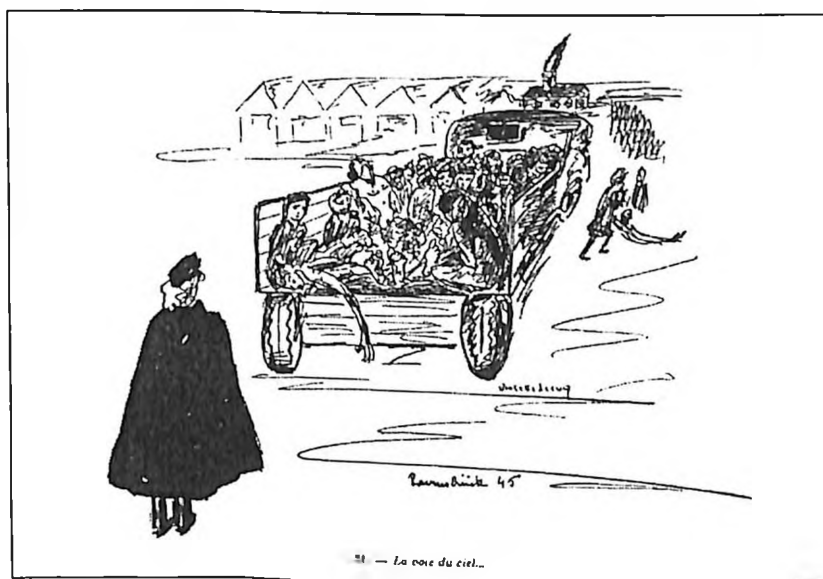
When we were forcibly abducted from Sombor, our house had been immediately occupied by the head of the counter-intelligence service, a notoriously evil Hungarian by the name of Istvan Bodi. Before Sombor was liberated he loaded everything in the house into trucks: furniture for six rooms and the full equipment of the house. He took everything with him to Hungary, to the village of Bacsalmas. My neighbours told me about this when I returned to Sombor. I applied for a passport and permission to travel to Bacsalmas to get my things, but our authorities would not permit this. I didn't get a passport and so was unable to make any attempt to collect my family's stolen property.

After my return to Sombor I was approached by a complete stranger who introduced herself to me and told me that during the war she had lived in Kolašin as a teacher. The Chetnik authorities there had ordered her to take the primary school children to watch the execution by hanging of Dr Ružica Rip.

This horrifying and painful information left me fainting. I didn't know where I was or where I should go. Although I had been hardened by all kinds of misfortune, even five concentration camps had left me quite unprepared for such sadism. I had thought that my sister had been shot or perhaps killed in battle, because she had joined the Partisans in order to attend to the wounded. My sister Ružica, at barely 28 years of age, was the only woman doctor whose life ended in such a cruel way.

In October, 1945, I married my first love, Branislav Obradović, with whom I still live in a happy marriage after 56 years.

After my marriage I studied at the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University. After graduating I worked in the Federal Statistics Bureau and the Federal Health Protection Institute in Belgrade.



Road to Heaven

From a collection of drawings by French Resistance member Violette Lecoq, prisoner no. 24571 in the Ravensbrück camp