Suzana CENIĆ

TWINS AND EXPERIMENTS IN VIVO

Suzana Cenić was born on June 2, 1925 in Sombor to Josip Vitenberg and Margita, née Perlštajn. She had a twin brother, Mirko, and a sister Vera, born in 1926. She was the only member of the entire family to survive.

After the war she completed Commercial Academy and, in 1949, began work in a roller bearings factory in Belgrade. After her marriage to Živorad Cenić, both were sent to Brčko, where they stayed for eighteen months and where their daughter was born. The family later returned to Belgrade. Together with her husband, Suzana took a job in an automobile plant in Rakovica, where she worked until her retirement in 1981. She has one daughter, Svetlana Zdravković, and two grandsons, Mirko and Miloš.

We lived very happily in our family home in Sombor until 1941, when our problems began with the Hungarian occupation. I had been involved in the work of the Jewish community for some time as a young girl, but I didn't really enjoy it because I was very lively. My brother, and for a time my sister, also helped in the community.

As far as I remember there had been no destruction or damage to Jewish buildings and other property in Sombor up to 1941. However on April 13, 1941, real chaos began, in retaliation for an alleged Chetnik

attack on the Hungarian Army. They began to kill Jews and Serbs and take them hostage and, from our gate, I watched them carrying the dead to the Serbian Orthodox cemetery. That night my brother was in the town and was caught. Despite our fears for him he finally returned. Needless to say there had been no attack, it was all concocted to justify the brutal crimes the Hungarians committed. These were Hungarian occupation forces whose police wore feathers in their caps. From that time on there were limitations on the kind of work and education available to Jews.

In 1942 or 1943, my mother and father were arrested and thrown into prison. My father was released after some time but my mother remained in prison and returned only immediately before we were all taken to a concentration camp. They had been arrested because my mother had tried to have some Jewish boys released from prison where they were being held as Communists. She had attempted to do this through a Hungarian friend of my father, who appears to have been an informant.

We three children stayed at home alone. I went to see where our parents had been taken. My grandfather, my mother's father, didn't want to be involved, so I went alone to the Municipality and later to the police before I finally found out where they were imprisoned. I pushed my way through to the head commander who looked at me in amazement, this girl who told him that she had brought food for her parents. Because I was rather persistent, he eventually allowed me to take them food in prison. Every day I took them three meals. These were usually made from geese brought to us by nearby farmers. We were a moderately well-off family. We had a yard full of old iron, which my father traded. Just before the war began he set up an iron and metal foundry. Until 1941 he was able to work alone but later had to employ someone so that the business would be under a non-Jewish name. They looted our property, not in 1941, but in 1944.

The Germans occupied Hungary and we began wearing the yellow star. Then the arrests and abductions began. I used to go to town wearing the yellow star with no fear. I was naturally defiant, but my father was very afraid when I went out at night. I had a boyfriend, my first love, and I used to go out with him. I never noticed the attitude of the non-Jewish population to us because we lived in a rural area where there had never been any problems. Our neighbours continued to treat us exactly as they had always done but, being deprived of school and

other things, it was no longer the same. As soon as my father was released from prison, he was taken to a labour brigade, somewhere in the area, but our entire family was again together in 1944 when they took us to the camp.

In April 1944, we were told that we had to be ready early in the morning, with just a few personal belongings, for the whole family to leave. Our rucksacks were enough for our few things. My rucksack was heavy as we walked so my brother helped me to carry it.

They first took us to Bačka Topola, to a camp with a very large number of people. We spent a night there and this is where something happened which was to make me stronger and able to overcome my infantile streak. As a girl, when I had heard people talking about somebody's death at the table, I used to put down my knife and fork, unable to eat. This night, in the camp, I heard a noise behind my back, a strange gurgling, just as my mother was serving us food. Asked what it was she replied that two women had poisoned themselves, deliberately, nobody knew who they were. When I heard this something in me revolted, and I went on eating.

Suzana (second from right) with her parents, twin brother and sister. Of the whole family, she alone survived

From there they loaded us into cattle wagons and we left. My grandfather and grandmother were not with us. They had gone to

Budapest in 1942 and, in this way, saved their lives. We didn't go with them because we believed we must remain together. My brother even made boots and clothes and wanted to go and join the Partisans. He even had a connection through which he could do this. I begged and beseeched him, insisting that the three of us must stay together. If I had let him go, if he had joined the Partisans and been killed, I would have known why he had given his life. As it is, I don't know why he died, or even where or when!

We travelled for four days without the wagon being opened, with no water, no food, nothing. It was terrible. I hope no one ever has to live through such a thing again! Before we set out on this road with no return we had heard stories about suffocation with poison gas. One night, I remember, we stopped at a station where we heard a terrible hissing noise and I thought that the cruel guards who were escorting us had released the gas. I almost had a nervous breakdown. People were also dying in the wagons and the stench spread everywhere. I would like to forget these things and I have tried to forget them and because of that, to this day, I'm not sure exactly how everything happened.

We arrived at the loading ramp at Auschwitz. As soon as the wagon doors opened they started shouting "*Los, los!* Get out! Throw everything down in a pile. This all suddenly reminded me of the things which were happening before we left on this horrific journey, things from Erich Maria Remarque's book *Nothing New in the West*, which I had read. All these white scarves and wires reminded me of it. And at this moment I was passionately determined to survive all this. Of course we threw all our belongings out of the wagon and began marching in a column.

At the point where we stopped, Dr Mengele came and did his usual selection, separating us to the left and right sides. One side meant the possibility of somehow surviving while the other led directly to death. My mother went to one side, my father to the other, Mirko to a third. Vera and I were together. We had the impression that this was not so terrible, the older people go to one kind of job, the young people on the other side to another job. I don't remember thinking anything in particular about it. First they took us for showers, then to have our hair cut and after that we were tattooed. I was given No. 81257 and my sister 81256. I don't know what number my brother had. However, as a twin, I was separated out. Doctors, engineers, carpenters and boot-

makers were also kept aside, giving the impression that people were really going to be put to work.

From this distance I see it all through a haze up to the point where they threw us into a barracks which had probably once been a stable for horses. The barracks was enormous and I think we all fitted into one. There were beds on which we lay, nine to a bed. We were packed like sardines, head to foot. The beds were filthy and full of bedbugs. It was true horror. We were given one mug of liquid food daily, and this mug was passed from mouth to mouth. We were in quarantine. I remember once while we were still there I was ordered to fetch the food and we brought in enormous vats which needed four people to carry them, two in front and two behind. I was wearing wooden clogs. I'd wrapped my feet in an old woollen sweater and just at this moment it came unwrapped. I stumbled and spilled the whole vat. I should thank my fate for having kept me alive at that time because it was a terrible thing for a vat of food to be thrown away. I was lucky this time, I wasn't beaten. Beatings were a daily occurrence.

One day they came from an improvised clinic to fetch me. Dr Mengele was there. This was the first time I had seen my brother since we arrived. I was very happy to discover my brother was in the male camp but, at the same time, sad because I didn't know what had happened to my mother and father. I was very hungry. They gave me a piece of bread spread with marmalade which calmed my stomach a little. I asked my brother if he knew where our parents were and he told me he didn't know. Little by little, however, I learnt the truth. And why there was smoke gushing from the chimney of a nearby barracks day after day. In my early days there I had no idea what the smoke was. It was only later that we found out that it came from a crematorium, a building where the dead were burned. The smell of the bodies being cremated was unbearable. It surrounded us day in day out for months, because the crematorium operated around the clock. But people can get used to anything. The camp was surrounded by high voltage wires: there was no escape.

When they took me to the hospital barracks I was separated from my sister. In the hospital I met a little Slovak girl who was the only Jew in this barrack. There were also a few Yugoslav girls and I was assigned as a messenger and given my own room, like a nurse. I remember one day, because I had a cold or something, I couldn't get out of bed. Mengele kept coming to this barracks for inspection and he would select

those who were no longer able to work for cremation. He found me lying in bed. I didn't know what to say to him. Silence. At the moment he passed my bed I raised my head. "Why are you in bed?" he asked. He ordered the block orderly who was walking at his side to pull me out of bed, get me dressed and keep me from lying in bed. This meant that he wanted to keep me, as a twin, to the end of his research. One day I was standing outside my room when Mengele and his team came through again. As he passed me he dug his hand in his pocket, took out a sweet and gave it to me. I was dumbfounded. Micika, the Jewish doctor who was standing opposite me signalled me with her eyes that I should accept it and so I did. Everything I was given I took to my sister, Vera: a clove of garlic, even this sweet.

It was my job as a messenger to take blood and urine samples for testing. Mirko was in the other camp but we managed to see each other often. I even arranged to help carry a patient to somewhere else in the camp so that I could see him. I was already finding my way around. In the clinic I was given what was supposed to be diet food which was delivered regularly and in fairly decent quantities, quite enough for me, so that I weighed 63 kilograms. The day we arrived, all the women in our transport had their hair cut up to their ears, but were not shaved to the skull. We didn't declare ourselves as Hungarians but as Yugoslavs, this was important to us because we were there as a nation of our own. We were set apart from the Poles, the Hungarians and all the others. The third month after we arrived in the camp I acquired a Serbian-Polish dictionary and learned quite a lot of Polish. When the Polish girls asked me where I came from I said that I was from Yugoslavia.

"How come you can speak Polish?" they asked.

"Well, I learned it," I replied. This showed how much it means when you know a language. With Mengele I spoke German, because we spoke German at home and I knew the language very well. I could also speak some Hungarian and English, for which I had had private classes from 1939. Also, my mother and grandfather were in America for a number of years and when they wanted to discuss something secretly in our presence they would speak English. The melody of the language was already in my ears. It seems to me that I was able to learn languages very quickly. I didn't speak Yiddish, although we are Ashkenazi. I think my grandfather spoke it but my grandmother didn't.

Mengele conducted his experiments and tested his results by examining blood, head and eyes. The main thing for me was that he

allowed me to live. The moment he no longer needed a patient he would inject them with air and kill them. I have no physical deformities as a result of these tortures, probably because this cruel scientist didn't send me for any treatment. There were far too many of these treatments: he injected people with various bacteria, almost anything that crossed his mind. I remember that we even had an intelligence test and that I achieved an above average score.

One day Mengele asked me my name and I told him "Vitenberg".

"And who did you get this surname from?"

"From my father."

"And where did he get it from?"

"From his own father."

I never suffered from the fear which other people had of him. I was brave and I behaved accordingly. My knowledge of languages helped me a lot.

"Did you have a boyfriend," he asked.

"Yes, I did."

He was at that point preparing to take blood from my vein. He was wearing an enormous rubber apron and in his hand he held a syringe and a rubber tube. I looked at him and asked if it was going to hurt me.

"Did it hurt when your boyfriend kissed you?" he replied.

At that point I stretched my arm out for him myself and thought "Let him cut me: I 'm not going to say a word!"

The preparations he performed in front of me to finish me off psychologically didn't yield the desired result because, even if he had cut me I really wouldn't have said a word.

Mengele was a handsome man in his forties. He was a doctor and, because they were obsessed with the sick idea of multiplying and advancing their nation, it is likely that the experiments to which we were subjected were connected to this obsession. He sent the results of his experiments to Berlin but I have no idea what happened to them after that. He worked with twins, triplets and quadruplets. He had an assistant, a Jewish doctor called Ena, a very beautiful woman. He was always accompanied by the SS men, the block commanders. I don't know how many people were around him. I've already forgotten all of it. Once we had a visit from Swedish Red Cross activists; they took a few people away with them and saved their lives. The day before they arrived there was cleaning and painting going on all over the camp, but there wasn't a single blade of grass or a tree. Once we were taken

somewhere far from Auschwitz and came upon grass and meadow flowers. This made us very happy and reminded us that everywhere in nature, all around us, there was something beautiful and alive.

After the hospital I was moved to the knitting plant. There were a lot of us here but the job was much easier. From sweaters and various materials we made gloves, socks and similar articles. I managed to get my sister moved there, so that we were together. I tried to help our prisoners and camp inmates as much as possible, pretending not to see if they took something out with them. It seemed that the SS woman in charge of us noticed that I was skilled and hard-working: several times she asked me to repair her silk stockings, because I could do this rather well. I should say here that, even in the most brutal circumstances some human inclinations can't be hidden. I think that, for my age, I had a great deal of knowledge about life and human behaviour because I had read a lot of books and learned from other sources, so it wasn't difficult for me to conclude from the behaviour of this SS woman that she was sending, at least to me, lesbian messages. She used to give me white bread, chocolate and so on, but after she noted my resistance she stopped. I remember she gave me a beautiful Thuringian sweater from Austria. I also remember asking my brother Mirko across the fence to get me some boots. "What, in here?" he asked, outraged. But youth has its own ways and the next day I got the boots I wanted from her. When I think about it today I realise it was really very unusual.

Meanwhile the English were bombing us hard and sometimes during an attack we had nowhere to go so we hid under the tables with stools over our heads. In the middle of one of these bombing raids a new transport arrived. I happened to be outside with a woman who recognised her sister with a child in the column of new arrivals. They recognised each other. It was terrible, because the woman with me knew where her sister was headed, while the sister had no idea she was going to be poisoned by gas. There were many such moments. Time dragged during the head counts. We would wait for the first star to appear so that we could eat our piece of bread. Suddenly we heard the roar of trucks. Gypsy children and adults were being collected and taken to the crematorium. The children began screaming and calling for their mothers in all the languages of the world. It was terrible. This happened on Rosh Hashanah.

It was the late autumn of 1944 and they were bombing us mercilessly. The Germans were afraid of the bombs and hid themselves

away. Once they took us to another part of Auschwitz. I was in Birkenau and there were brick buildings in the other part and everyone was in a state of alarm. I was at the head of the column, right behind one of the SS men and I heard him ask "Where are they taking us?"

"Into the crematorium," said another, and opened the armour-plated door. We saw large demijohns of cyanide, but this place had already been abandoned, they had probably been using it at a time when they had no other gas chambers. When he opened that door I thought it was the end for us. However, our fear lasted only as long as the air raid alarm. When the bombing stopped, we were led out of the gas chamber alive.

My brother worked in the *Bekleidungskammer*, the clothing warehouse. I spoke to him across the wire just before we left, on the evening of January 17, and he told me that he had collected about 700 grams of gold for us to escape. Nobody knew that the following morning we would be sent on the Death March. Those who were able to stand it remained alive, but many fell by the way or were shot by the Germans.

At dawn on January 17 or 18, 1945, when the Russians were invading, those of us from the knitting works were taken deeper into the heart of Germany. They dragged us as far as Bergen-Belsen. Behind us we saw the *Katyushas*, the Russian Little Katie rockets. I don't know how many days we trudged through the snow and ice. One night when we stopped somewhere, we climbed up into an attic. I took my shoes off, one pointed man's shoe and one ankle boot, both different. Sometimes we would hear the Russians pushing forward and expected the end to come very soon. The end came, unfortunately, in Bergen-Belsen only after three months, we were not liberated until April. In the meantime I had recovered from both typhus and typhoid fever. My sister was the first to come down with the illness and then me. I think the British liberated us on April 15. They wanted to take my sister to a hospital to convalesce, but she begged me not to let her go.

"We've been together up to now, let's stay together to the end!" When I realised that she was really in a very bad condition I let her go to the hospital. At the time it was the only correct decision. Today, unfortunately I still regret this because the way everything turned out I still don't know what happened to her. Later I was taken to the cemetery where they buried those who died from illness or exhaustion, enormous long tombs with stones, numbers and names, but I never found

where she was buried. It was only a few years ago, when we were working on a monograph on Auschwitz, that I discovered a card in the Yugoslav Red Cross saying that she had died on April 29. For the first time I learned the date of her death. I don't know whether it is correct or not. I expected to meet my brother Mirko. He told me that if anything happened on that April 17, we should meet again at home. In Zagreb something did happen to me, but this was later.

When the English liberated us they took us to another camp. There we were deloused and, as I stood under the shower, I had the feeling that there were millions of lice crawling all over me. As you picked one out, the others would keep coming back, millions of lice in the hair and all over the body, black lice in the hair and white on the body.

In this camp, because of a chance encounter, I ran a convalescent hospital. When I was moved from Bergen-Belsen to Bergen, I was sitting on some kind of straw mat in an enormous hall. From 63 kilograms my weight had now fallen to 28. I wondered why they were bringing these straw mats. An officer came in and came to me, asking what I was doing there. I told him I was sitting and waiting to see what was going to happen here. He told me that it was going to be a hospital and I asked him if I could work in it. He was a Jew and understood from our conversation that I was also Jewish. The hospital was being set up by the Yugoslavs. I was given a job working with the local German women who had been mobilised to help, and with doctors. I played the big boss. I used to go with the English to the English mess hall to eat. We were taken over by a Yugoslav committee of former officer prisoners. They were very well organised, in fact the Yugoslavs were the best organised nation. I was proud of this. Because I was very thin they gave me all the best food to help me recover. Two months later, after the Yugoslavs were taken to the sanatorium at Bad Rehburg, between Hanover and Hamburg, they took me to visit our former Yugoslav patients. All of them recognised me while I didn't recognise any of them. They were gaining two or three kilograms a day, eating six meals daily. I was coming along gradually.

Four months later I arrived in Zagreb. The Yugoslavs ordered the return after establishing communications. We first thought we would be going via Paris and I was very happy about this. We were taken to Celle in wagons and again I was wearing the Red Cross sign. With me was my friend Cecilija, a medical graduate from Osijek who was work-

ing as a doctor and met her husband when she returned. One day in Zagreb I was sitting, thinking about God knows what, when a woman who was also wearing the Red Cross sign walked up to me and asked whether I knew if there was anyone from Sombor with us. I replied that I was from Sombor and she asked me if there were any Perlštajns in the group. I told her that my mother was a Perlštajn. It turned out that she was my mother's first cousin. She took me with her, fed me and took care of me. Then a friend of mine from Sombor arrived. I knew that his sister had died a day or two before the liberation. When he asked me what had happened to her I told him I didn't know. I couldn't bear to tell him that she was dead. Later he said to me "You know, I didn't want to tell you but now I'm going to. Your father was killed in the transport." They had been together. He told me that there had been a fight inside the wagon, my father's arm was broken, then his eye was gouged out and he was thrown out of the wagon. Then I also told him that his sister had died.

People from the Jewish Community came to the Zagreb fair-ground to see who had returned. They had accurate figures. I was also given the list and saw that none of my family were on it. This was a terrible blow to me. The International Red Cross also had no information about my brother. I knew that Vera had died, I knew that my mother had been cremated and I now knew that my father had been killed, but I still knew nothing about my brother. And I still know nothing today. Of the whole family, I alone remained.