
Marta STANIČKOV

TO HELL AND BACK



Marta Staničkov, née Gal, was born on January 16, 1923, to Jelena, née Rozental, and Žigmond Gal. Her father was a private clerk, an expert in timber and a court expert, while her mother was a housewife. She had a sister, Vera, six years older, who moved with her family to Israel, where she died. Of her immediate family, her father perished in the war. Of her extended family, only her cousin, the writer Laslo Gal, survived. He died in 1975.

Before the war she completed commercial academy and worked after the war as the chief cashier in the head office of the Agricultural Cooperative in Sombor. However, on the recommendation of her doctors, because of her health problems, the whole family moved to Opatija in 1951. After fourteen years they returned to Vojvodina, to Novi Sad. There she worked at the Novi Sad Commercial Bank until her retirement. Her husband, Momir Staničkov, whom she married in 1946, died in 1996. She has two children, Dušanka, a foreign language correspondent, and Jovan, who works at the Novi Sad Public Enterprise for City Construction and Development. She has one grandson.

They came and took my father away at the end of April, 1944. At first they were arresting only men. Because we lived across the street, on the second day we saw trucks and an off-road vehicle carrying four

high-ranking officers in German uniforms. That's when they began rounding people up out of the buildings and loading them onto trucks. They were then taken to a camp in Bačka Topola and from there to Auschwitz.

The deportation of the remaining Jewish population, from infants to the elderly, began on April 26. On the last day, April 29, a civilian and two gendarmes came to get us, my grandmother, aged 76, my mother (50) and me. I was 21 years old at the time. They were very rough: we had to strip naked and jump up and down for them to check whether we had hidden something. They wouldn't let us take the suitcase we had packed, but just a few things wrapped in a cloth, saying "Where you're going, you won't need anything."

We were taken to a silk factory and then, at night, put into cattle wagons at the train station. That night they picked up all the patients from the hospital and the residents of the old people's home. We were taken to Baja, where they put us in a mill and then they placed us in Jewish homes. We were there for just a few days. They came again at night to pick us up and take us back to the mill. The next day, I remember it was May 27, several senior German officers arrived and took us from the Hungarians and loaded us, the same day, into cattle wagons with a lot of violence and beatings. There were eighty or ninety people in each wagon.

Our journey had begun. For most of us it was a journey of no return.

We travelled until June 2. In seven days we left the wagon only once, at Gensendorf in Austria where a selection was carried out. One group stayed in Austria, luckily for them because they all survived. Because we didn't want to leave our grandmother they put us back in the wagon. And then...

With no food or water, in dreadful heat and, above all, in uncertainty. A few people went insane, they trampled over us. People died. When we crossed the Czechoslovakian border and entered Poland the men began praying and singing *Kadish*. Perhaps they sensed what awaited us.

SELECTION

Late in the afternoon of June 2 (we still hadn't lost track of time), the train slowly drew to a halt. The locomotive kept releasing steam

until everything finally fell quiet. We had reached the Birkenau gate. The door of the wagon opened immediately and with shouts of "*Los, los, raus!*" and blows raining down on us, we were rushed outside. Through our cries and tears we tried to find our family and friends. We were soon lined up in ranks of five – men, women and children all separately. Little did we suspect that this was the last stop and, for most, the end of life. A group of people in uniforms stood in front of us, people with satanic smiles and eyes as cold as ice. The selection began. It was carried out by Dr Mengele, as we later found out, a handsome and elegant man. Families faced their most difficult moments as the separation began. Many young mothers had to turn their children over to women they had never met with the explanation that they would be reunited later on, because the children and adults would be transported in separate trucks. Of course they never saw their children again because the children were killed that same night.

My grandmother was immediately sent to the right-hand column, which meant death, while I was sent to the left. When my mother's turn came, Mengele first sent her to follow my grandmother and then suddenly changed his mind, tapped her on the shoulder with his whip and said "*No geh auch du links*" (No, go on, you go left too).

Fate!

When I turned back I saw that my mother was following me. We walked on and stopped in front of a building. They left us there to wait for hours until it was our turn to go in. We had to strip naked, then they shaved our heads and bodies, while all the time they shouted and beat us. Then we were washed under a cold shower and were given rags for clothing, with no underwear, then sent out into the night to stand again for hours. After that we were taken to Camp C, to a barracks, where we stumbled over other people in the dark as we looked for a little space. We remained awake all night, standing. The stench was suffocating and we felt nauseated. At that point we still didn't know that they were burning people in the crematorium.

LIFE IN HELL BEGINS

Camp C was not a labour camp. We weren't tattooed, but almost every day they came to make selections for the crematorium, for staying in the camp or for transport to some other camp. These selections were attended by a supervisor (*Aufseherin*), Irma Grese with her whip

and a dog, *Aufseherin* Mandel and Borman. Of the men, I remember the names Schultze, Tauber and Fritz (who was always laughing). I also remember a doctor, a Slovakian woman named Erna. From Weiswasser I remember *Aufseherin* Ilsa and Greta. I have forgotten the name of the woman who was the camp commandant (*Lagerkommandant*), but I think that the camp supervisor, was called Martha.

Next to us was a Czech family camp with both elderly people and young, children of both sexes. They wore their own clothes and their hair hadn't been cut. Then, one night at the end of July, 1944, if I remember rightly, came the *Blocksperr*e, the block liquidation. We suddenly heard the roar of truck engines, screaming and shouting, crying and the words "*Los, los, die Schuhe ausziehen!*" (Let's go, let's go, take your shoes off). After a while the trucks left and there was silence. We were frozen in horror. In the morning the Czech family camp was empty. One inmate asked where they had taken them. The *kapo* just pointed to the sky.

While I was in Block 11, a woman from my block was in labour. She had passed the selection without anyone noticing she was pregnant. I remember it was deadly quiet in the block, but this woman giving birth didn't utter a sound. The block supervisor and another woman in white, probably a doctor, were by her side. We heard the child cry, then silence. We wept. Devastated mothers who had been separated from their children took this even harder. We saw the block supervisor pass by carrying something wrapped in a blanket. Of course the child had been suffocated at birth! One evening after the roll call, when we came into the block, the supervisor came and with her a forewoman, together with a woman in a white coat, perhaps a doctor. We had to stand beside our beds and the doctor picked out a couple of us younger ones, I don't remember how many. We had to get undressed. They were looking for those who had a clean body with no sores, boils or mange. There were very few such women among us. Of course we were frightened to death. They ordered us to open our mouths and then put some liquid in our throats which burnt terribly. Then they injected something into the vein on the left hand. That night I was taken ill. I vomited a number of times, and the next day I was burning with fever. Because we hadn't been tattooed, they noted down our names, but even today I am amazed and puzzled as to why they didn't move us out of the barracks.

Within days another selection followed, in front of the block after the roll call. They were looking for people with small hands and thin fingers. We had to hold our hands out in front of us. They chose me, but not my mother. Those chosen were immediately locked up in a barracks. I looked out through a hole in the door, trying to see my mother who was walking in circles around the barracks, looking completely lost. The *kapo* pulled at me, frantically slapping my face and beating me so that I fell on my back on the tiled stove which ran the length of the block. In the barracks in which we were separated for transport there was also a Hungarian girl called Magda, who had an aunt in the camp. Her aunt worked in the kitchen so she made an arrangement with the block supervisor (bribing her well, of course) to let her out of the block and to arrange for my mother to take her place. The exchange was made at roll call. There were no beds in this block, only straw on the floors. We waited for the transport. The days went by and we began believing we would stay. Then one evening, a new move! We were moved to Camp B, but only for one night and a day: that evening they moved us again to a large building with unglazed windows and concrete floors. It was draughty and cold. This was October and we were in thin, summer dresses with no underwear. A small group from Camp C also came here. They told us that Camp C had been closed down and that the others had been taken away in trucks. No one knew where.

The next morning Mengele arrived with his entourage, ordered us to take our clothes off and to walk around him in a circle with our arms in the air. Now many more were selected and immediately taken away. That same day we were given new clothes and bread for the journey. In the evening, shouting "*Los, los, dreck Jude!*" (Let's go, let's go, dirty Jew!) and beating us, they loaded us into wagons. We travelled for about three days, in freezing cold.

Then, early one morning, the train slowed down and stopped. The doors opened and the shouting started: "*Los, los, schnell, raus raus!*" (Let's go, let's go, fast, get out, get out!). We were so frozen we could barely move. People at the station stared at us as if we were ghosts. We had arrived at the station of Maehrisch-Weisswasser. We walked to the camp, high up in the hills. We saw a pair of two-story brick buildings with a wire fence around them. Escorted by new guards, we entered the building. After Auschwitz, this was heaven!

Bunk beds, a warm room, each of us had a straw mattress and a blanket, hot showers, a plate and mug. What luxury! When they took our personal details they assigned us to jobs. The day after the roll call we went down to the Friesserwerk factory. There was a man from the factory called Hasse, I don't know what he did there, but he made a speech saying that we had to work and that we must not sabotage anything because then we would go to the same place our parents were. He pointed to the sky. I was assigned to work on the lathes, on night shift, while my mother remained in the camp kitchen.

After a few days I fell ill with a high temperature. I was then assigned to work in the main fitting workshop. Although the conditions were better we had a very difficult time because we had to go twice a day from the camp to the factory and back, in the snow and that dreadful cold with no socks or coats.

About a month later I again fell ill, with suppurating sores in my mouth and throat. I couldn't swallow and had a high fever. I was lucky because the camp commandant put me into a small room away from the others. She thought I had diphtheria and my faeces were sent for analysis. The results were negative so they returned me to the hospital ward. Because the Gross Rosen camp was nearby and it had a crematorium she could have sent me there never to return. Soon after this, I don't remember when exactly, I again had suppurating sores in my throat and my mouth and gums became inflamed, and this time worse than the first. Because there was no medicine I was given some liquid as a mouthwash, but they didn't actually know what was wrong with me. I lost weight because I couldn't eat anything. And even if I'd been able too, there was less and less food, in the end only beets boiled in water with no salt. I had this illness once again, but this time also had tiny sores on my body.

The situation was becoming more and more difficult. We had hardly any food and many people were fainting from hunger. There was a strong feeling of uncertainty about what would happen to us, because the French workers kept us up to date with the situation. They were in touch with the Czech Partisans. The Germans were looking for wagons so they could transport us further on, but they were already in chaos. Because the munitions dump was nearby, we were afraid they would blow up our building.

RETURN

One of us was always on guard and, on May 4, 1945, we learnt that the Germans had left and the French had taken over the camp. They guarded us until we were liberated by the Russians on May 6. We remained there for some time after this and then, after seventeen days of travel and a few more in quarantine in Subotica, my mother and I arrived home in Sombor at the beginning of June, 1945. Home.

Weak as I was, with sores on my face and body, I began work. I immediately went to a skin specialist and to a specialist physician. They treated me from April 1945 to April 1947. In the meantime I was married and became pregnant, but the sores would disappear on one part of my body and reappear elsewhere. Because the doctors were unable to cure me, we agreed that I should go to a clinic in Belgrade as soon as the baby was born and both of us were strong enough.

In the end I was cured by accident! A man who visited us saw the sores and went to the pharmacist Antić, with whom he had been in the medical corps in World War One. They made some kind of cream which I applied and, after about three weeks, the sores disappeared.

I mentioned at the beginning that, when they deported my father from Sombor, four officers had arrived in an off-road vehicle. One day in 1952, when we were walking down a street in Opatija, I saw a man walking towards me – tall, with a stiff left leg. I followed him! I recognised him! He was one of those same four officers. His name was Furlan, he lived in Opatija, in Volosko. My husband went to the Internal Affairs Department and reported this. He was told that they would look into it and that they knew he had been in the German Army in Bačka and that he was married to a German woman from Bačka. We thought something would be done about this, but apparently someone tipped him off. He fled to Italy with his family.