
Ela IZRAEL-DELOVSKA

FROM CAMPS TO AMERICA



*E*la Izrael was born in Sarajevo on August 12, 1927, to Avran Izrael and Blanka, née Altarac. She had three sisters, Sonja, Nina and Vilma, and a brother, Jozef. Both of her parents, together with her elder sister, Sonja, and more than fifty members of her immediate and extended family perished in the Holocaust. Her sister Sonja was married to Salamon Atijas and they had a six-year-old son, Eli, who died together with his mother.

Ela and her sister Vilma survived the war, after which she worked in Belgrade for a number of foreign trade companies and other organisations and completed her education while working. From her marriage to Dr Dimitrije Delovski she has a son, Nenad, a graduate in economy, and a daughter, Silvana, a law graduate. She has four grandchildren.

At the beginning I would like to say that I owe eternal gratitude for staying alive to my dear, late sister Vilma and her husband, Nikola Market.

Up to the time I left Sarajevo in 1941, I had managed to complete three years of secondary school. Although I was still very young, I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair.

We lived well in my home town. We weren't very religious, but we celebrated all the Jewish holidays, especially Friday evenings and

Saturdays, when we always had candles on the table and the table would be nicely decorated. Of all the holidays I particularly remember Hamisha Asar and Purim. On these occasions the whole family would gather together and we children would dress up and recite and be given fruit and money as prizes.

This kind of life was abruptly interrupted in 1941. First came March 27 when, although I was still a child, I took part in the demonstrations. On the first day of Pesah as we were preparing to eat that wonderful soup with *matzah* dumplings, the Germans began bombing us and the sirens began wailing. We went down and stood in front of the gate, all the other tenants were already there. As soon as the bombing stopped, we went to our aunt who lived on the outskirts of the city, no longer thinking about soup and *matzah* dumplings.

Two days later the Ustashas and the Germans arrived and immediately introduced the curfew, confiscations, the wearing of yellow armbands (which I didn't wear because in Sarajevo they were only compulsory from the age of 16), forced labour and various kinds of harassment. We children were banned from school.

Opposite our house there was a Catholic theological college, a preparatory seminary where future priests were educated. They were very disciplined. Whenever a woman appeared at a window when they happened to be at the window of the seminary, they would immediately step away from it. However, as soon as the state of war began, they somehow let themselves go, they became more curious. Not only would they stay at the window whether there was a woman there or not, but they also began "talking" with girls, for instance with hand gestures. So one day they arranged a meeting with one of the girls from the building. She went out and we couldn't wait for her to return and hear the vital news. (Of course this girl was a Jew, a secondary school student, but the seminarian didn't know that). He told her that his parents had forced him to attend the divinity school in order to become a priest but that it wasn't what he wanted; now that the war had begun he would go and join the Ustashas like all his friends.

A few months later the first executions began. First well-known Communists, prominent Serbs, Jews, hostages and others, and then came the first cases of people being taken away to camps. In our family we'd already prepared rucksacks with the essentials in case this should happen to us. One night they took away all men over sixteen. They also took my father. I never saw him again. They took one of my

uncles, my mother's brother, who was very old and couldn't walk, in a carriage. They were assembled in the former King Aleksandar Barracks. From there they took them to Jasenovac. I think that this was in the late autumn. After this came a period of calm and then, not long afterwards, they began taking women and children.

Among the neighbours in our building was the Taubman family, whose daughter (a member of the Pravaš, the Croatian Right) worked for the Ustasha police, so we had privileged status because they stayed clear of our building for a while. Later this girl was also taken to Jasenovac with her family and killed there.

Nonetheless they came for us one evening. There were four floors in our building and all the tenants were Jews (apart from the superintendent, who was an Ustasha, and his wife Verica, but they didn't treat us badly). First we were taken to the same barracks where they had rounded up the men earlier and, two days later, loaded us into cattle wagons which had only tiny barred windows. We travelled for eight days without being allowed out for fresh air. We were given no food or water and relieved ourselves in the wagons. Once we asked them politely for some water and they replied "Drop dead!" We didn't get the water, of course. On the eighth day they let us out into a meadow near a place called Zlatar in the vicinity of Zagreb. One Ustasha went to Loborgrad, an assembly camp which was to be our final destination to inform them that we had arrived. We waited for some time and were then told that there was no room in Loborgrad and that they were sending us back to Sarajevo where the keys to our apartments would be returned to us. At the time we were overjoyed with this information. Again we travelled for a week with no water or food. When we arrived in Sarajevo they put us up in a school. Almost all of us were on the ground floor of the building. I was completely exhausted but, as soon as I got an opportunity, I escaped through the window with some of the others. Many naive and gullible women believed they would get the keys to their apartments back so they stayed behind to wait for them. A few days later they were taken to Đakovo and then, in 1942 and 1943, those who had survived were moved to Jasenovac where they were killed. Many of these women could have escaped from the school, but...

When I escaped I hid with my sister and brother-in-law. My brother-in-law was Dalmatian and he had an Italian passport so my sister had some degree of protection. I had nowhere to hide so I went

to their place. All the same, I had to sleep with different friends every night. In the meantime, a woman we knew came from Mt Romanija (we had known her in the *ken* but had never been close. She lived at the other end of the city and we didn't ever ask her who recommended that she came to us and who knew about it). Her name was Mirjanica Abinum. She was with the Partisans on Mt Romanija and, after some time, she returned to them. Once the war had ended she moved to Israel with her two sons. I never saw her again.



*Smiling faces in the Sarajevo suburb of Ilidža in 1937, before there was any hint of the horrors of the pogrom awaiting the Jews.
(Sonja, Salomon, Eli, Nina, Giga and others)*

At that time life in Sarajevo was very dangerous, especially for Jews. There were raids every day. Nonetheless the Jewish Community was still functioning in the city. My best friend Gerda Druker-Kožemjakin sent me from Mostar a pass in the name of Ana Mihić, a seamstress travelling from Bijeljina to Mostar to find a job.

On the train I sat with a group of nuns and arrived safely. When I reached Mostar, my friend and her sister fell ill from typhus. I was lucky not to catch it. I was at their place during the day and at night I slept somewhere else. I moved on after two or three months so as not to overstay my welcome. One day I received a letter from my sister asking me to come to Dubrovnik. In the meantime my brother-in-law was having a lot of problems with the Ustasha because his wife was a

Jew so they, too, had to flee. I travelled to Dubrovnik without documents because I had had to return my false pass for some other unfortunate girl to use.

My brother-in-law met me in Dubrovnik and we boarded a boat for the island of Mljet. When we reached the shore my brother-in-law took his time looking for his documents and those of my sister and their son who was just a few months old. He was hoping for the boat to leave, because I was in danger of being sent back to Dubrovnik because I had no documents. As the boat was pulling away my brother-in-law admitted to the *Carabinieri* that I was a Jew and had no papers. They wanted to send me immediately to Rab where there was some kind of camp for Jews, but gave up on the idea because I was under age.

I was then told to report to their command, the *Questura* every day and was also obliged to go to the Catholic priest for religious instruction every day. I was also told that I was not to leave the place. I was practically in a ghetto. The priest was young and modern and didn't insist too much on the instruction. Later I heard that he had emigrated to Italy after the war with his brother and that he had left the priesthood.

For a while we lived with my brother-in-law's parents. However this was wartime and they didn't even have enough food for themselves, so we moved away into an abandoned little house. We

had to find food somehow. What kind of work could I, delicate and sickly as I was, do in the countryside? However I had to find something and I did. First I picked olives and helped with the crushing, tended sheep, collected firewood and did any other kind of work I



*Ela's mother, Blanka Altarac,
with her housekeeper*

could. At the time there was only one Jew living on Mljet, a German doctor. Because he lived in another village we never met. We heard later that he had left the island with the Partisans. We lived this way until Italy capitulated. The locals were good people and I believe they liked us. They didn't even know what anti-Semitism was.

When the Partisans arrived on the island I joined in with the social work, mainly with young people. Despite everything we felt comfortable during this period, safe to some degree, but this didn't last long. As the Germans were advancing strongly, the Partisans withdrew one night, taking all men of military age with them. My brother-in-law also joined them. This was the beginning of a period of hiding and starvation for me and my sister with her little son,. As I have already mentioned, the people were good to us, no one betrayed us and we had a different place to sleep every night. One night, I remember, I slept in a pigsty with another girl. We lived from day to day in uncertainty. Two days before the Germans left and the Partisans came we called into our little house – no one locked their doors on the island – and found on the floor a small gold *Magen David*, with dark blue in the centre and *Zion* in gold Hebrew letters on the blue. We were really surprised and looked at each other in puzzlement. I picket it up but, unfortunately, lost it many years later. I'm not superstitious, but this did seem to have some significance.

Life was very difficult in those days. I remember we once ate meat from a horse which had died. Fortunately we had no ill effects. Because of the poor hygiene conditions we were infested with lice which we couldn't get rid of.

Because of the state of war we could do nothing but fight for our very survival, while the Germans were pouring in from the other side of the island. They were arriving as a proper SS penal expedition. They began bombing the island. We were there on the beach at the time. There were some people wounded but luckily the three of us were not hurt. People on Mljet were not very involved: they didn't support the Partisans and they weren't interested in politics. They Italians killed two of the locals.

As soon as night fell, we boarded small fishing boats and, in the morning, arrived on Lastovo. I remember this was a beautiful island. Compared to Mljet it looked like a metropolis. The streets were paved, while what few roads there were on Mljet were all rutted. I simply didn't know how to walk on such even terrain. I had a great deal of

difficulty with footwear, my feet had grown a lot and I couldn't find suitable shoes anywhere.

Most of the people with us were the women and children of Partisan fighters. These were refugees from the whole of Dalmatia. On Lastovo we were given food and a place to sleep. I had a wonderful door, which was, for me a "French four-poster"! After so long I was finally sleeping comfortably and peacefully. A few days after our arrival we were transported to the island of Vis. There was an assembly camp there for all refugees from Dalmatia. There was also an army base which was why we couldn't stay long. I wanted to stay on Vis and apply to do a nursing course, but I was so weak that they turned me down. Our friend, Lala Altarac, who worked on Vis as a translator, was also against this. Soon after this they again put us in small boats and took us towards the liberated part of Italy, then in Bari they told us we were to go to El Shat in northern Africa where there was a camp for all the women and children of Partisan fighters. Just as we were getting into the train at Bari station, we ran into Moric Kabiljo, my sister's friend from Sarajevo, who now lives in Sao Paulo. When he heard we were going to El Shat he wouldn't let us go and took us to the Jewish colony in Santa Croce.

The whole town, which was not very large, had small houses, villas with gardens and greenery. It had once been a summer resort for Fascist officers. Not far from Santa Croce was the summer resort of Santa Maria del Bagno. Jews were also accommodated there. This was an even nicer place because there was a beach near the town. It was there that my sister and I finally got new dresses from the Red Cross, mine was pink with white spots and my sister's blue with white spots. We also got shoes. They had low heels, but still they were new shoes, made from some kind of fabric. Finally, after so many years, something new! Our happiness knew no bounds.

They immediately took us to the house they had arranged for us. It had two small rooms and a garden. There was no water so we had to carry it all the way from Santa Maria Del Bagno. We soon made ourselves at home in this environment, and met many acquaintances and friends. This part of Italy had been liberated earlier by the English, but now in 1944 Italy still wasn't completely liberated. We were given food by the English. Among other things we used to get wonderful white bread, macaroni, rice, meat and other food. We even got chocolate. We traded rice for eggs with locals. When we offered

chocolate to my little nephew he threw it away because he'd never tasted chocolate before, but he did take the bread. There were also English and Italian language courses held there. They were taught by Fredi Baum, who later went to America. I jumped at these because I was hungry for learning. In the afternoons we went to the beach, swam, sunbathed and enjoyed ourselves. We quickly forgot about the evil we had recently encountered, or at least I did.



*Ela's sisters, Vilma (left) and Sonja, in Sarajevo
wearing yellow armbands, 1941*

At that time President Roosevelt issued a proclamation saying that he would accept a thousand refugees, people from camps or in refuge in Europe. The priority was women, children and the elderly. My sister, her little son and I applied to go, although the war was still raging. Personally I was sorry that we signed up for America because we were having a wonderful time in Santa Croce. We were living a true peacetime life.

After a couple of painful vaccination shots, we set off by train for Naples where there was a large ship waiting for us. We boarded the ship, which was full of military pilots and the wounded returning home. We were all on the same deck, but kept separate. During the day we were outdoors and sunbathed, at night we slept in the bowels of the boat. We had double bunks. There were several ships sailing

along with us to America, one of them was carrying German prisoners of war. We were very unhappy to be travelling together with German prisoners, but on the other hand they gave us a feeling of security because the Germans certainly wouldn't torpedo their own soldiers.

We were at sea for fifteen days. At the beginning of our voyage almost all of us were seasick. The American pilots didn't like us much. When we were off Gibraltar, we were twice attacked by German submarines. Our engines were shut down, as were the ventilators and we all had to go inside. They asked us to stay dead silent. All of this happened at night. Since then I have never liked the sea. When I remember this it still makes my skin crawl; the darkness, the silence. The Germans must certainly have discovered that their soldiers were also with us in the fleet, so they didn't touch us. Once we even heard aircraft but, fortunately, they were from the Allied forces.

After our fifteen-day voyage we arrived in the New York harbour and the first thing we saw was the Statue of Liberty. I remember being fascinated by seeing cars of various colours because, up to then, I had seen only black ones. Not to mention the skyscrapers! As soon as we docked we were again washed and disinfected. Then we boarded a smaller boat and sailed up the Hudson River to a small place called Oswego on Lake Ontario. Canada lay on the other side of the lake. There was an army camp there where we spent a year. The camp was surrounded by a wire fence. We had come to free America to live in a camp with a wire fence! We complained, but to no avail. They put us in military barracks. This was the New World? In barracks inside a wire fence! We were all given rooms in which there was an iron bed, an iron cupboard and a wash basin. Despite the fact that Lake Ontario was right beside the camp, we never swam in it.

By the second day we were there, people began to gather around the fence, most of them women. They asked where we were from and we told them we were from Yugoslavia. They'd probably never heard of the country and thought it was somewhere in Africa. They asked us if we'd ever seen cars before, where we came from, whether there was radio, electricity and so on. When they realised that some of the newcomers spoke several languages and that they had university educations, they calmed down. Then they started bringing us old and new clothes, irons and other things. Many of them looked at us in astonishment and were hostile to us, especially those whose sons had gone to war in Europe. In time they grew used to us and we to them.

There were about a thousand of us in the camp of whom 343 were Yugoslavs, according to the statistics of Ruth Gruber, who had organised the operation. Of these, 322 were Jews and 21 of other nationalities. They wouldn't let us go out into the town. We had arrived in the summer, and in the autumn, all children were permitted to attend schools in the town, depending on their age and knowledge of English. We could choose our subjects. I chose English as a compulsory subject, typing and shorthand, because I wanted to be qualified for something professional and practical, something that would be useful in life, and also history and geography. The teachers behaved decently towards us and the American students gradually became used to us. We had passes and went to school every morning. There were classes from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon, with a lunch break. After five we would return to the camp. Sometimes we went for a walk through the town, but we didn't find it interesting. We did our homework at school and when we returned to the camp we would go to our youth club where we entertained ourselves and then we'd go to dinner.

There were also various activities around the camp. There were a lot of workshops set up in which the immigrants had the opportunity to train themselves for life in both the Old and the New world. Hair-dressing, carpentry, photography and other clubs were formed. Later all the residents in the camp were given passes and could spend a few hours at a time outside the camp. Everyone was given eight dollars a month for spending money and some who worked in the camp, driving garbage trucks, cooking in the canteen and doing similar jobs were paid more. We had an improvised hospital-infirmery in which our doctors worked.

We were also witness to some tragic events. One young woman, a mother of two, committed suicide. This was probably because she felt guilty about having divorced her husband and abandoned her children to marry her husband's assistant.

We also had actors in the camp, both amateur and professional, and opera singers. Once a week we had performances. Leo Mirković, a famous Zagreb singer, would often treat us with arias from various operas. Violinist Zlatko Baloković, famous both at home and in America, once gave us a concert. We also had movies and once we even had a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt. In the meantime the war ended, and the Americans expressed their happiness by sitting in their cars and blowing their horns. Although things were going smoothly, it

was out of the question for us to stay permanently in America. They wanted to send us back to Europe after the war at any cost. Residence in the country wasn't guaranteed even for those who had sons, daughters, even parents in America. Many of us were thinking about going home, hoping that we might perhaps find some of our nearest and dearest alive. My sister wanted to return because her husband was calling her all the time and I didn't want to stay there by myself.



Daughter Silva with her mother and father at the end of 1998

About twenty of us Yugoslavs opted to return to Europe. And so, one sunny day, we went to New York and spent the whole day there. We visited Radio City, the Empire State Building, the Astoria Hotel and went sight-seeing. In the evening we boarded the Swedish ship Gripsholm and, after eight days, arrived in Bari and from there went to the shelter in Trogir. Once we were in Trogir we cooled off. But there was no going back. We envied those who had stayed in America because they had finally got permanent residence permits. We were all disappointed. A few people went to Belgrade, the lawyer Dr Grin with his family, the Margulis brothers, who were medical students, and us.

A number of people went to Zagreb and Sarajevo. A short time later Dr Grin managed to emigrate to Canada. The Margulis brothers asked the late Moša Pijade to allow them to return to America because their elderly parents, Dr Margulis and his wife, had stayed there and also to complete the studies they had begun. They were also lucky, so they travelled first to Canada and then to the United States. Mr Frajdenfeld also went to Canada. Only my sister, her son and I remained in Yugoslavia. We soon met up with my brother-in-law and, in the meantime, my brother also returned from German captivity. No one else came back.

We had to start again from scratch. When we arrived in Belgrade they called me to come to the UNRRA mission and offered me a job because, at the time, there weren't many people who spoke English. Of course I accepted. As far as I can remember, among the Jews who worked there were Dr Hendel, the son-in-law of the late Chief Rabbi Dr Alkalaj, Enriko Josif's mother Mrs Soka Josif and engineer Andrija Alpar. My superior was Mr Benson Aschenbach, an American Jew. I also worked on organising a number of international congresses, such as the War Veterans Congress.

After I left UNRRA, I worked for foreign trade companies. At that time people were assigned to jobs according to plan and you would have to work wherever you were assigned.

In the meantime I met my husband, Dr Dimitrije Delovski, who was specialising in cardiology at the time. Despite having had two children, I resumed my education, at my husband's urging, although I had come to the conclusion myself that I had to do this. In a large company in the business of foreign and domestic trade and representation, business was going really well, but very few people spoke foreign languages. Practically no one spoke German. The company encouraged me to take a course in English and Italian correspondence. I had been taught German as a small girl by my Aunt Ela from Vienna, after whom I had been named, and my parents also spoke German to her, so I simply always had the language in my ears. When the company discovered that I also spoke German, I did a course in German correspondence as well. Much later I also completed a technical school for foreign trade. For a short time I also worked for the Alliance of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, where I received a *Megillah*, a scroll of appreciation. I also sang in the Jewish Baruh Brothers choir. In the

meantime, the children finished their studies, my son Nenad graduating in economics and my daughter Silvana in law.

My husband and I have been retired now for quite some time. We have four grandchildren. I remained optimistic during the most difficult days, and that's what kept me alive. However now, when I think about what I went through, it makes my hair stand on end. And although so many years have passed since the second world war, I still sometimes dream about Ustahas. They are chasing me! The scars in my soul remain. I feel as though there is part of me missing, as though I am not a complete person, a spiritual invalid. And I often ask myself why I should have been the one to survive.