

## Agneza BEZINOVIĆ

### MEMORIES 1941–1945

---

Photo

Agneza Bozinovic

---

*Agneza Bezinović was born on April 14, 1923, in Budapest (Hungary), to her father Petar Goldberger and mother Szerene, née Friedman.*

*In the Holocaust she lost her father and several members of her extended family.*

*She survived arrests and imprisonment, transport to one of the infamous camps and killing sites, from which she saved herself — together with her mother — by jumping from a train wagon, and later joining the partisans. With a transport of wounded she also reached the refugee camp at El Shatt in Egypt, where she remained until the liberation of the country.*

*She was educated in Zagreb, where she completed a school of art and commerce.*

*In her marriage to Zvonko Bezinović she has three children, seven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.*

*She lives in Rijeka, Croatia.*

---

Zagreb, 1941. The calm and comfortable family life of a middle-class Jewish family, filled with love and warmth, was abruptly shattered. The "resolution of the Jewish question" began, in accordance with the laws and regulations of the new state. A hell of fear and despair for all Zagreb's Jews. Exclusion from society, plunder, persecution at every turn.

I was seventeen years old, an only child, a beloved daughter.

I remember the scene. My father carrying our radio receiver to the collection point in the courtyard of the Jewish school on Palmotičeva Street. Because Jews are not allowed to listen to the radio. And I had loved listening to the radio.

I remember the day my father came home crushed, "decorated" with a repulsive yellow rag, the Star of David imprinted with the word "Jude," imported from Nazi Germany. Later we received yellow "Ž" badges, a domestic product. Mama, father, and I decided to wear these marks with pride. Despite the humiliation.

I remember the rucksacks in the hallway. Ready for movement, for a journey into the unknown. They announced that there was no longer any place for us in Zagreb. Warm clothes, medicines, sugar cubes, chocolate, documents, a bottle of water.

On the corner of Zvonimirova Street, I don't remember the number, a commission for the collection of gold and other valuables had set up in one apartment. We had to gather everything and hand it over. I, along with several peers, was forced to go around the city delivering orders to those who had not yet complied, telling them to immediately surrender their gold. I still recall with horror the fear on people's faces when they received the "notice," and the grief when they parted with their inheritance, their family keepsakes, their wedding rings — a part of themselves and their identity.

And then came the most painful day. Friday, September 19, 1941. That day they finally took my father. I never saw him again. My uncles and their sons were also taken that day. We learned — to Jasenovac. A few days before that they had been held in the Kristalum, a collection camp. We brought some clothing and food for them, which was taken by the Kulturbund members who sniffed through it and threw away whatever they didn't like. I still hope that some of what we brought reached our loved ones.

The end of 1941 was approaching. Repression, intimidation. Arrests, imprisonment, release, then arrest again, threats... In all of this, in the emotional chaos, love found me. I met a tall young man, a Dalmatian, who accepted me, tried to comfort me, to protect me.

But one day they came for us. My small, fragile mama with a rucksack on her back. Two uniformed Ustasha soldiers and one civilian, probably their agent, pushing her through the exit door of our apartment... "Lock up and hand over the keys immediately," and words of comfort: "Heaven is Jewish." We never returned.

The assembly center at Šubić High School. In those days, transports were departing into the unknown. We were separated out because my father's home municipality was in Hungary. They transferred us to the women's prison on Savska Street. Several days in that prison. I no longer remember a single date, the nightmare did its work. Early morning, fog, the railroad tracks, train to the Koprivnica prison. A few days after that, the gendarmerie barracks at Gola and Ždala.

They wanted to get rid of us. Every night, in groups, gendarmes drove us through the cornfields across the ditch to the Hungarian side. There, their border guards would meet us — some they beat badly and sent back to Croatia, because they were no longer theirs.



*"During the transfer to Jasenovac, where Agneza's father, his brothers, and several family members were killed, the Ustasha conducted searches of the prisoners and confiscated valuables."*

Mama and I were fortunate to have been born in Hungary, so we were spared the brutal reception. They even brought us into their barracks and gave us water to drink, but every night they would regularly send us back across the fields, along the Drava to Gola. One side handed us over, other didn't want us and persistently returned us. This absurd back-and-forth lasted several days. One day they finally rounded us up and took us to the Koprivnica railway station. That evening a freight train arrived from Zagreb, full of unwanted and "unnecessary" Jews and non-Jews, full of frightened and exhausted people. They loaded us into a freight wagon. Darkness, crammed together, pressed tight.

Just before dawn the train set off and not long after it stopped. Another camp. The wagon doors opened. The Ustasha guard ordered two or three strong men to throw out any corpses if there were any, and to rinse out the latrine buckets with water — but there was no drinking water.

I held my mother's hand tightly the entire time. I was afraid. Right beside me I heard a man's voice whispering to someone: "Let's jump — whatever happens." Two silhouettes passed by us. Without thinking about anything, I grabbed my mother's hand and we rolled into the ditch beside the tracks. Some dead people from the other wagons were already lying there. We huddled in the darkness, pretending to be dead. After some time we crawled out of that "grave." An untilled cornfield offered us shelter. We wandered, not knowing where we were, what was actually happening, what we should do. Completely lost. And then my fragile mama suffered a nervous breakdown. She threw herself on the ground, cried, screamed. When she calmed down a little she shouted at me that it was my fault we had jumped from that train, which would have taken us to father who was surely waiting for us. I watched that agony helplessly, not understanding anything myself.

Finally she calmed down. And the two of us set off dirty, muddy, wretched into the unknown.

The sun was already high when a cart loaded with corn stalks came by. Seeing us in whatever terrible state we must have looked, an older man on the cart asked where we were headed. Not knowing what to say, I boldly answered that we were looking for a place where we could work as servants. The man laughed and pointed with his whip behind us, asking whether we hadn't come from exactly there. And there, just a few hundred meters away, was the camp "Danica." He loaded us onto the cart, covered us with corn stalks, and drove the cart into the field. He warned us not to make a single sound until we heard someone nearby whistling and beginning to pray the "Our Father..."

Darkness was falling when his wife came, brought us polenta and milk, and fed us. At dawn, partisans from the Kalnik Detachment arrived and took us with them. They housed us in the village of Domaji at the foot of Kalnik, where a partisan hospital was located. And so, unexpectedly, the two of us became "real partisans."

My mama, who had always had domestic help at home, at first tended two cows that supplied milk to the partisan hospital in the village of Domaji. Later she was promoted — she became an assistant in the pharmacy of the Tenth Zagreb Corps, where she remained until the end of the war.

Shortly after we had found safety, I wrote a letter to Jakov, a cousin of my young man Zvonko. I informed them that I was alive and where I was. I remember that a merchant named Rončević took the letter to Koprivnica and sent it on to Zagreb.

My Zvonko was at that time in prison in Zagreb, sentenced to death by firing squad because he had refused mobilization and deployment to the Russian front (the notification to the family about the date of the execution and the collection of the body is preserved in the

NOB Museum in Makarska). But with the help of friends and prison doctors (Dr. Franulović, Dr. Grospić), he was placed in the prison hospital from which, with the help of good people, he managed to escape.

After some time in the village of Domaji, Srećko, Zvonko's brother, suddenly appeared and brought joy! He had managed in Zagreb to produce false travel and identity documents for me, in the name of Katica Jerković from Zastrazišće on the island of Hvar. With false documents I joined Zvonko who, as a Croat and Dalmatian, was also fleeing from Ustasha terror. We met in Dugo Selo and set off toward Dalmatia, toward the freedom we hoped for.

We traveled by train through Bosnia. I remember the journey was dramatic, full of fear. The train was full of Ustasha soldiers heading to Dalmatia to relieve the Italians. In Metković, the Italian army allowed only men to continue traveling, while women were detained to serve in the barracks for the Italian army. Since I got along well in foreign languages, I went to the Italian command with the story that I was a student in Zagreb and wanted to go home to the countryside for Christmas. The older Italian officer looked at me, as if he had truly recognized a "real Hvar village girl" and without a word issued me a pass: "lascia passare."

In Makarska the Italian army was leaving the city and the Ustasha were taking over. Zvonko's parents hid us for a few days, but this was too risky. A relative from Hvar took us across in his boat to their cove of Pokrvenik, where we found temporary shelter.

After some time we crossed back to the mainland and joined the partisan units on Biokovo. Zvonko worked as a radio telegraphist carrying out important duties, while I in another unit worked as a nurse. Sometimes we would see each other briefly.

Perhaps at the wrong time, but love had its way. I was expecting a baby. They transferred me to a "hospital" in Jelsa on Hvar, and later I cared for the blind in Vela Luka on Korčula.

With a transport of the wounded they sent me to the refugee camp at El Shatt. Already on the ship "Bathory" I began carrying out administrative work, registering passengers and listing the wounded. I continued this work at the main command of the First Camp at El Shatt.

Of course, I immediately joined our small Jewish community, especially after the birth of my little daughter, with whom I moved to Camp No. 2. There was a small colony of Jews there. Some had come from Rab, some from other hiding places. In the Sinai desert, on the land of our forefathers, we found our refuge.

The return to the homeland was sorrowful. Destroyed and devastated. My mother, still relatively young, completely broken and worn out, soon died. No one else was left alive.

Nothing remained of the former family and social life of the Jewish community of pre-war Zagreb. It was necessary to begin an entirely new life, in a different culture, with different customs, new people, and different values.

It was necessary to heal from all of it. After 66 years, I have still not managed to do so.