

Samuel-Leo Grinvald

RESCUE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN ĐAKOVO

Photo

Samuel Griinvald

He was born on May 22, 1920, in Babina Greda. From the age of ten, together with his parents, two brothers, and two sisters, he lived in Vinkovci. His entire family perished in the concentration camps of Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška. He himself was imprisoned in those camps and escaped from Jasenovac. He survived the end of the war fighting in partisan units.

At the time of writing this account, he lived in Belgrade as a retired military officer.

Samuel Grinvald died in 1995 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade.

Samuel Grinvald's contribution is taken from the book by Zoran Vasiljević, *The Collection Camp Đakovo*, Slavonski Brod, 1988, published by the Center for the History of Slavonia and Baranja, Slavonski Brod — Jasenovac Memorial Area.

"Sometime in December 1941, the Jewish Community in Vinkovci (president Dr. Ignjat Lang, attorney) was informed by the Jewish Community in Osijek that, by order of the Ustasha authorities, a women's camp would be established in Đakovo and that it would be housed in a neglected mill, property of the Đakovo Bishopric. Assistance was requested in material terms, since the Jewish Community in Osijek had been designated to assume full responsibility and organization of the camp, including food supply, accommodation, and other needs.

As the Jewish Community in Osijek had been informed about the transport of women and children from Stara Gradiška to Đakovo, including its exact departure time from the Okučani railway station, permission was requested from the Ustasha authorities to deliver some dry food to Okučani at the time of the transport's departure. After approval was granted, the Jewish Community in Osijek appointed its representative and asked the Jewish Community in Vinkovci to appoint one as well. A copy of the authorization for travel to Okučani was sent.

Since most of those invited—probably out of fear—refused to undertake the trip, as they were mostly older persons, I was summoned by the president of the community,

Dr. Lang, and Isidor Perera, and asked whether I would accept the task. I agreed without hesitation.

Three sacks of dry food were purchased. A pass was obtained from the Ustasha police in Vinkovci in my name. I was given a certain amount of money for travel expenses and other needs. I loaded the food onto the train, arrived early in the morning in Okučani, unloaded the sacks, and entered the waiting room to await the transport from Stara Gradiška.

From a railway worker I learned that a set of third-class passenger cars was already prepared to receive the transport, likely women and children, though he did not know their destination. In the waiting room I noticed a young man with a considerable amount of supplies (food). I made contact with him and learned that he had come from Osijek on the same assignment.

Around noon, about ten horse-drawn carts loaded with belongings appeared at the station, each carrying at least one woman who had been unable to walk during the journey and had been placed in the cart. Before their arrival, a truck loaded with women and small children had already reached Okučani. A separate smaller truck brought about ten Ustashes led by First Lieutenant Skočibušić (who had lost one eye), who were to guard the transport to Đakovo. The escort that had accompanied the transport by road from Stara Gradiška to Okučani returned to Stara Gradiška upon arrival. Thus, First Lieutenant Skočibušić and about ten Ustashes assumed control of the transport, ordered the women and children loaded into the wagons, which was done quickly.

It was time for me to act. I approached the transport commander, First Lieutenant Skočibušić, and told him that the two of us—one from Vinkovci and one from Osijek—had been sent with food for this transport, and I showed him my pass. He did not even look at it, merely saying, 'Gentlemen, proceed.'

We agreed that I would take the second part and he the first part of the train. We helped each other load the food, and about half an hour later the transport departed. The Ustashes were distributed among the wagons, one per wagon.

Among the prisoners was an assertive middle-aged woman named Sarinka, to whom I addressed myself. She undertook, together with several girls, to distribute the food to everyone in the section of the train for which I was responsible. I asked her to ensure that the food was distributed to all, and she told me not to worry, that everything would be in order. She asked where I was from and what my name was. At that moment an Ustasha warned her about something, which I noticed, and I refrained from further conversation, as I observed that I too was being watched.

Later, through cigarettes I had brought for myself, I established contact with that Ustasha, giving him cigarettes. He did not question me. I only asked him to allow me to pass through the wagons to see whether everyone had received the food. He agreed and accompanied me.

I walked through all the wagons. I saw the women and children; I did not know any of them personally, but I was concerned about their condition. Their state cannot be described in words. They were ill, starved, exhausted, deprived of any means of maintaining hygiene, infested with lice, and in very poor physical condition. They were forbidden to communicate with anyone, to open the windows, or to look out."

"After some time, I asked the Ustasha responsible for security whether we would stop somewhere, and if so, where and for how long. He said he did not know. As I had money and saw that he was destitute and did not even have cigarettes, I thought it would be wise to give him some money under the pretext that, when we stopped somewhere, he could buy cigarettes and something to drink. I carried out what I had planned. He accepted the money eagerly. From that moment I felt freer and managed to have more contact with Sarinka, moving more freely through the wagon and speaking with the women.

I first met Dina and Sarinka Brodski and their mother. They were able to tell me something that immediately concerned me, so I asked about my brother and a friend from Vinkovci. I was told they had no contact with the men's camp and knew nothing about them.

Somewhere on the railway between Slavonski Brod and Vrpolje we stood for quite a long time. The Ustashas positioned themselves on both sides of the train, as it was already quite dark. Later we continued the journey and around 10 p.m. arrived directly, via an industrial track, in front of the mill that was to become the future camp where this transport would be housed.

Upon arrival we found representatives of the Jewish Community in Osijek, including two or three doctors, several young men, and in the kitchen several Jewish women from Osijek who had prepared tea and some dry food for the initial reception of the women and children.

Photo

Samuel (first on the right); his brother Jakob, sisters Elza and Vera, and brother Filip perished in Jasenovac.

(As far as I remember, among the doctors was Dr. Miškolci from Vinkovci; representatives of the Jewish Community from Osijek included Grinbaum and Rip, as well as Glassner from Donji Miholjac. I do not recall the other names.)

As soon as the transport arrived, First Lieutenant Skočibušić and the Ustashas who had escorted it left, and security was taken over by the police from Đakovo. At the entrance on the outer side of the mill facing the railway station, a police guard was posted.

After the women and children were unloaded from the wagons, they were placed on bunks previously constructed from boards in the form of compartments. They were served warm tea and light food. Disinfection was carried out, and doctors were immediately assigned to provide assistance as best they could. Several young men were assigned to remain on duty to provide help. All of us who were present assisted where needed.

I personally wished to return to Vinkovci as soon as possible, but Grinbaum asked me to stay a few more days to help. All of us who assisted with the organization, accommodation, and aid in the camp were housed across from the railway station in an inn owned by Brod, where we also took our meals. I managed to go to Vinkovci for one day and return in order to report on the entire situation regarding this transport and its accommodation in Đakovo.

The Jewish Community in Osijek appealed to the Jewish Community in Vinkovci to collect food and clothing for Đakovo, since Osijek alone could not manage fully. After I returned to Đakovo, two or three days later Dr. Lang and Isidor Perera told me to return to Vinkovci to organize the collection of food from households. I thus found myself again in Vinkovci on a new assignment.

Collection of food and clothing began in Vinkovci. Particularly active, besides myself, was Eugen Fleš, whose inn had been confiscated but who still had a small horse and delivery cart, which greatly facilitated the work. We rented a room for storing the collected goods. Irena Rot, Vera Engl, and Aleksandar–Saša Štajn distinguished themselves in the collection efforts, as did the majority of Vinkovci's Jews. According to their means, all contributed food, clothing, and money, which the Jewish Community collected for purchasing provisions for the camp in Đakovo.

At Eugen Fleš's initiative, smaller packages with essential food for children and the elderly were prepared, while the remaining food was transported in bulk to the camp. Food was delivered weekly by the transporter Mihaljević, who was paid for the service. If more food was collected during the week, Leo Klopfer, who owned a horse-drawn cart, transported it free of charge. With each shipment I went along with someone else from

Vinkovci. We handed over the food to the camp warehouse, where it was distributed according to need. The small packages prepared for children and the elderly were given to Sarinka in the camp, who distributed them with the help of young women.

On our return from Đakovo we took letters written by the detainees to relatives and friends and mailed them along the way, so as not to attract the attention of the authorities. Most of this mail was sent from Vinkovci, but on different days.

At the request of the Jewish Community in Osijek to the Ustasha Directorate in Osijek to approve the transfer of a number of children from Đakovo to Osijek and Vinkovci, where they would be placed with Jewish families, the Directorate approved a certain number of children for placement in Osijek and its surroundings, and 37 children up to 12 years of age for Vinkovci and its surroundings.

The Jewish Community in Osijek informed the Jewish Community in Vinkovci of the exact date for taking over the children in Đakovo. I no longer remember the exact date, but it was in January 1942. I was summoned by Dr. Lang, the president of the Community, and Isidor Perera, along with Armin Borovic, and it was decided that Isidor Perera and I would go to collect the children. It was decided that Perera would engage a covered truck from Bačuka, a mill owner in Vinkovci whom he knew. Bačuka rented the truck with a driver.

Photo

The pole in Đakovo on which prisoners were hanged in 1944.

The following morning, Isidor Perera and I set off with passes issued by the Ustasha police in Vinkovci. In the village of Stari Mikanovci there was a Jewish family, Maks Fišman, who owned a general store. Whenever we transported food from Vinkovci to Đakovo, we would stop there for refreshment and rest. On this occasion we asked Maks and his wife to prepare hot tea and some food for the children we were bringing to Vinkovci. They readily agreed.

When we arrived in Đakovo, a Jewish woman doctor from the Jewish Community in Osijek was present. With her assistance, the children who were to go to Vinkovci had already been selected. While Isidor Perera spoke with his relatives in the camp, the women who knew me from my previous visits pleaded with me to take their children to save them. As the truck was quite large and covered with tarpaulin, I took advantage of the situation. Without considering possible consequences, instead of the approved quota of 37 children, I took 57. Only the final digit remained the same.

The fifty-seventh child was Sarina Brodski, who was over 12, in fact 14 years old. At her mother's desperate pleas, I could not refuse her. After placing the children in the truck, we lowered the tarpaulin. There was straw and blankets inside to keep them warm, as it was January. In the cabin, besides the driver, sat Isidor Perera and myself. I held on my lap a three-year-old child named Norica (her mother was named Blanka, I believe her surname was Montiljo, from Sarajevo).

When we reached Stari Mikanovci, the Fišman family had prepared refreshments for 37 children. When they saw the larger number—of which even Isidor Perera had been unaware until that moment—he began shouting at me, fearing the consequences, since preparations and accommodation had not been arranged for so many children. I calmed him, saying that if any unpleasant consequences arose, I would bear responsibility and would take care of arranging accommodation.

In Stari Mikanovci, the Fišman family took in two children—a brother and sister—and we continued toward Vinkovci.

Upon arrival in Vinkovci, we went to the house of Eugen Fleš, where it had been arranged that members of the Community would receive the children. The location had been chosen deliberately because it was away from the center and had a large yard where the children could wait before being taken to families. Despite limited space in my parents' two-room apartment, already housing three families forcibly placed there, I took Sarina Brodski and little Norica, whom I had held on my lap during the journey, to my parents' home. The other children, given the increased number and thanks to the engagement of Eugen Fleš and the other women, were accommodated by enlarging households or by additional families taking them in. All 57 children were secured for the time being."

"It would be impossible not to mention the courage and resourcefulness of the late Sarinka, who, sacrificing herself, managed in those difficult times—when typhus and other diseases were raging in the camp and both young and old were dying daily—to organize the recording of all deceased persons. When the dead were taken from the camp to the Jewish cemetery, she ensured that each person had identifying data placed with the body (name, surname, year of birth, and place of origin). In agreement with the gravedigger, who had been the paid caretaker of the Jewish cemetery even before the war, these details were recorded and the graves marked. Today this cemetery represents the only camp cemetery in Europe where the names and burial places of those interred are known. The cemetery was preserved with the help of the caretaker Stjepan Kolb and his family.

It cannot be said that the gravedigger derived no material benefit from this, as Sarinka cooperated with him very effectively. Since some women in the camp still possessed a little money, she regularly provided him with funds and asked him to purchase alcohol mainly for disinfecting wounds and other necessities, allowing him to keep the rest.

I must also mention a group of young women, among whose names I recall Dina Brodski from Sarajevo, Spicer from Slavonski Brod, a young woman Papo from Sarajevo, and others, who assisted Sarinka in all tasks and never became demoralized. They often sang a song: 'The camp is now our home, straw is our hard bed, and freedom is already near...' The rest of the lyrics I have forgotten.

Photo

A card issued in Samuel's name, which allowed him to receive parcels while he was imprisoned in the collection camp at Stara Gradiška.

In the second half of March 1942, a larger quantity of food and some blankets had been collected, so we engaged a larger horse-drawn transporter to Đakovo. The shipment was accompanied by Eugen Fleš, Vera Engl, myself, and Klopfer, who drove the wagon. Fleš and Vera had never before been to Đakovo. I clearly remember that it was quite difficult to obtain the required passes for the four of us. We departed Vinkovci at dawn.

In Stari Mikanovci we stopped at the Fišman family's home to rest. The two children placed with them wrote a letter, and we took a package for their mother, likely prepared together with Fišman. Upon approaching the camp in Đakovo, from a distance we noticed Ustashas. We immediately turned the wagon and headed to an inn that rented out stable space during market days. From the person managing the stables we learned that the camp housing the women and children had been taken over by the Ustashas two or three days earlier and that pedestrians were no longer allowed to pass along the right side near the camp.

We were shocked and frightened. Fleš suggested that we turn back entirely to Vinkovci. I proposed that we go on foot to the camp to see what was happening. Fleš and Vera Engl accompanied me.

Across from the camp there was a buffet where loud singing and shouting could be heard. I looked through the door and saw it was full. I entered alone, while Vera and Fleš remained outside. I ordered a small pear brandy for myself and asked the owner what the 'gentlemen' were drinking, referring to the group of Ustashas. He replied, 'Wine.' I ordered five liters of wine and the same number of soda bottles to be taken to their section.

One Ustasha, later identified to me as Jozo Matijević, an Ustasha lieutenant and camp commander, called out, 'Black one, come here,' after the owner told him I had ordered the wine. I sat beside him. He immediately asked where I was from. I told him I was from Vinkovci and had brought some food for certain women and children but did not know where to unload it. He responded with vulgar and brutal language, calling them 'Jewish whores' and using other obscenities.

He then told a sergeant named Vuković, originally from Slavonski Brod, to issue me a pass to bring the wagon into the camp. He added something quietly to Vuković, which I did not hear. Vuković nodded.

I went with Vuković toward the camp. Fleš and Vera watched from a distance, terrified, thinking I might be arrested. They prepared to leave for Vinkovci. Vuković led me into the Ustasha command office at the entrance of the former mill. These offices had not previously been part of the camp.

Inside was a female prisoner, a very beautiful young woman whose name I no longer remember, working there by order of the Ustashas. When she saw me, she was visibly shaken. I signaled to her with my eyes. Vuković ordered her to write a pass for my entry. I quickly gave the name Rinald Simeon instead of Leo, as I was known in the camp by that name. I received the pass. Vuković asked where the shipment was. I told him it was in a stable so that I could feed the horses and that I would bring it immediately. I heard him instruct the guard to summon him once I arrived with the wagon, as he would be in the buffet.

I hurried to the stable. When I arrived, the horses were already harnessed, as Fleš and the others intended to return, believing I had been detained. I told them I had obtained permission.

They paid for the stable, while I drove the wagon toward the camp. At the gate the guard stopped me. An Ustasha fetched Vuković. Another Ustasha, a corporal, came as well. The gates were opened, and we entered. At the main entrance where the women and children were housed, Sarinka was ordered to unload the wagon immediately.

With the help of several young women, she began unloading. She managed to whisper that conditions were desperate: they were not receiving food; the Ustashas beat and abused them at night. Among the supplies were two crates of sugar. The Ustashas set them aside, likely for themselves. I told her only that all the children were alive and well.

I saw that the young women were exhausted and demoralized; the vitality they once showed was gone. From various parts of the camp prisoners called out about their

children, but I could not respond. I managed only to nod to Dina Brodski to signal that her sister Sarinka, then living at my parents' home, was safe.

Vuković told me that I had a pass and should bring more food if available and to report to him personally upon arrival.

I left as quickly as possible and rejoined Fleš, Klopfer, and Vera. Night had fallen. Traveling at night was dangerous, and Klopfer feared losing his only means of livelihood—the wagon and horses. We returned to the stable, tipped the servant who brought us clean straw, and left at dawn.

Photo

Life continued after the war: Samuel with his wife Olga and their children—Dragoslav, the eldest son; Zdenko, the youngest; and Miroslav, the middle child (on the right).

Before noon we reached Stari Mikanovci and informed the Fišman family of the situation. The children asked about their mother; we said she was well and that we had delivered the package and letter. Around 1 p.m. we arrived in Vinkovci. Klopfer and Vera went home. Fleš and I went to Isidor Perera and reported that the Ustashas had taken over the camp. I showed him the pass issued in my real name. He did not approve and told me to destroy it. I refused. He proposed that we cease collecting food and close the rented storage room.

I note that at the beginning of 1942 a transport of women and children from Sarajevo was also brought to the Đakovo camp.”

“To speak about the Đakovo camp without describing the tactic of Ustasha rule would be incomplete. They gathered women and children from Bosnia and Herzegovina and parts of Croatia and concentrated them in the camp at Đakovo, while misleading the public by claiming that the camp was administered by Jews under Ustasha police supervision. In this way they exploited the remaining material resources of the Jewish communities of Osijek and Vinkovci and of individuals who had not yet been deported. This, I assume, was a temporary deception, as in 1941 and early 1942 they did not yet have a fully developed plan for the final destruction of the Jews in Croatia.

This is best illustrated by the takeover of the camp by the Ustashas under the notorious Ustasha lieutenant Jozo Matijević, who arrived directly from the Jasenovac camp with Ustashas already experienced in torture and abuse. They held command of the camp for slightly more than three months, during which they carried out psychological and physical preparations in order to liquidate the remaining women and children quickly

and without resistance. After their arrival, the number of deaths in Đakovo increased significantly.

In July 1942 all remaining female prisoners and children were transported in sealed cattle wagons to Jasenovac for liquidation. While I myself was later imprisoned in Stara Gradiška, I learned from Vilim Fišer, originally from Otok near Vinkovci, who had been transferred from Jasenovac to Stara Gradiška as a coachman, that the transport from Đakovo arrived in Jasenovac and stood for three full days on the industrial track in front of the camp without the wagons being opened or any food or water provided. Many were already dead or incapacitated inside the wagons. Fišer learned this from conversations among the Ustashas and told me because he knew I had participated in supplying the Đakovo camp.

Thus, the Đakovo camp ceased to exist in July 1942. Approximately 800 women and children were buried in the Jewish camp cemetery there. A list of their names exists today in the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade. The list was preserved thanks to the cemetery caretaker, who meticulously recorded all burials and marked the graves after the war.

To write about the Đakovo camp without mentioning the brave young women who sang and raised morale among the prisoners, led by Sarinka Papo, would be wrong. Tragically, ten of these young women were brutally murdered—slaughtered after being raped and abused by the Ustashas—and thrown into a pit within the camp grounds used for refuse and excrement. Sarinka was tortured and killed in the same manner and thrown into the same pit.

Photo

From left to right: Ado Kabiljo, colonel of the JNA; Miša Danon, general; and Samuel Grinvald, all three former prisoners of Ustasha camps, in front of one of the monuments to the victims of fascism, in the 1970s.

I learned this after the war from the daughter of Stjepan Kolb, who is still alive and works as caretaker of the Jewish camp cemetery in Đakovo. She told me that her father, who continued removing the dead even after the Ustashas took over, noticed that Sarinka had disappeared and concluded she had been killed along with the young women. After the war, a Commission for War Crimes investigated and confirmed that eleven bodies had been thrown into the pit. The remains were exhumed and reburied in a single grave at the Jewish camp cemetery in Đakovo, and a modest monument was erected by a surviving man from Sarajevo.

After the war I also learned that Ustasha sergeant Kosta Sovilj kept a trained German shepherd with which he abused women and especially children, setting the dog upon them to bite and scratch. One day the dog turned on Sovilj himself, biting off part of his left cheek. The dog was then killed. After the arrest of women, girls, and children, and the remaining Jewish men at the beginning of May 1942 in the Workers' Chamber—where children previously placed in Vinkovci from the Đakovo camp had been gathered together with the families who sheltered them—it was possible to transfer them under police supervision to Osijek, as at that time the Đakovo camp had not yet been liquidated.

Photo

At the Jewish cemetery in Đakovo, records of the deceased were carefully kept and the graves marked; today it stands as the only camp cemetery in Europe where the names and burial places of those interred are known. The cemetery was preserved with the help of its caretaker, Stjepan Kolb, and his family.

In addition to the account of rescuing children and women from the camp in Đakovo, we include an excerpt from the book *Jews in Vinkovci and Its Surroundings* by Toma Šalić (published by the Jewish Community of Osijek and the Cultural Society 'Miroslav Šalom Freiburger' – Zagreb, 2002), which relates to the escape of prisoners from the Jasenovac camp, among whom was Samuel-Leo Grinvald:

"An escape from the Jasenovac camp was organized by five prisoners: Samuel Grinvald, Šandor Musafija, a Serb from Šabac, and two Croats. Before the escape, they cut through the wire at one location and prepared to flee in the evening hours.

'My father was a coachman in the camp and took care of the horses, often transporting goods and anything he was ordered to move,' says his son Miroslav. 'Thus he had the opportunity to observe where the most favorable place for escape would be. Unfortunately, before the escape they noticed that the two Croats had not appeared at the agreed location. After a few minutes, they proceeded with the plan and escaped through the wire into the nearby forest, where they remained until late at night, and then made their way to Kozara, where they were received by the Partisans. Naturally, that is another story—under what conditions and how long they were held before being accepted, fed, and clothed.' The Croats who betrayed them were killed in the camp."