

Zdenka Siegler Kořak

## **MY LIFE FROM 1941 TO 1945**

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Photo

Zdenka

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*Zdenka Siegler was born on July 9, 1926, in Dubrava near Āazma, to father řandor and mother Olga, née Kraus. She has a sister three years older, Mira, married Gumhalter.*

*She spent the Second World War performing various duties in units of the National Liberation Army in the Moslavina region. Her entire immediate family survived the war horrors thanks to their joining the Partisans.*

*In Bajmok she completed the fourth grade of the Real high school as part of the refugee group from Croatia.*

The year 1941. Difficult and frightening days. I was fifteen years old, and my sister three years older. We attended school in Zagreb. She went to the Commercial Academy, and I to the high school. We lived in a boarding school.

We were born in the small town of Dubrava near Āazma. We traveled to Zagreb by train from the Gradec railway station, 18 kilometers from Dubrava.

During those terrible days of 1941, Mother immediately came for us. We traveled home partly by cart, partly on foot, and partly by train to the Gradec railway station (60 kilometers from Zagreb).

My father, řandor, owned a general store where four employees worked. He was from Đakovo. He left home at the age of eleven to begin an apprenticeship and never returned. There were nine children in the family. They were poor. In Yugoslavia, three brothers remained; the others went to America. My father came to Dubrava very young, before the First World War. His youngest sister lived with him but later also went to America. Another sister, Aunt Katica, remained in Đakovo with their father. Grandmother died young. Father used to say he fought in Galicia. After the war he returned to Dubrava. He took over the store from people who had moved away. At that time, he married. My mother was born in Vukovar but grew up in Osijek.

With the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), the store was confiscated. A commissioner was appointed over us. He ate at our table and spoke

about being a member of the Party of Rights. We were very afraid and kept silent. Our store was purchased by a family friend from Križevci, so my father worked there again. I do not remember what happened to the commissioner; I only know that his sons were in the National Liberation Struggle. One of them was killed.

My native Dubrava immediately showed itself to be sympathetic to the National Liberation Movement. My father helped the Partisans with various goods, as they were already active in that area in 1942. Contact with the fighters was established by "our boys," as we called the shop assistants. One of them went to Đakovo in 1942 and learned that my grandfather Moric and Aunt Katica had been taken to Auschwitz and had lost their lives there.

There were three Jewish families in Dubrava. One left immediately for Skrad and ended up in the camp on Rab, Kampor. Two elderly people converted. Their children were already married.

We remained at home until the beginning of May 1943. Everyone supported and protected us. Our assistants organized our departure to the Partisans. They took us at night, first to a village near Dubrava. The people hid us for a day, then transferred us to the Partisans. We left everything in the house, taking only the essentials. The following day all movable property was transported by cart to the Partisans in Kopčić, on Moslavačka Gora. The small amount of gold we possessed had already been handed over in 1941 in Čazma to the district authorities. A woman stored our furniture with people who returned it to us in 1945.

My father had helped many poor people in the region. He was greatly loved and respected. All of this protected us until early 1943, when we joined the National Liberation Struggle.

We arrived in Kopčić (or Andigola, I do not remember exactly). There we separated. My sister went to Kalnik, and my parents and I to Slavonia. Grandmother, who had come to us from Osijek in 1941 or 1942 "for safety," remained in a village near Dubrava.

In Slavonia we first arrived in Voćin. We were assigned there. Mother went to the village of Cikote and then to the Partisan hospital on Psunj, where she conducted literacy courses. Father worked in supply services in the same area, and I was assigned to a tailoring workshop. Much work was done there; underwear was sewn for Partisan units. We slept in barracks, on wooden bunks, on fern bedding. I even visited, with a friend, her parents in Šumetlica near Nova Gradiška, spending a weekend there. Sometimes I went down to the supply unit to see Father, and he would prepare something for me to eat that I liked very much. They provided food for brigades, hospitals, officer schools,

and many workshops. In 1943 I experienced an enemy attack. We took shelter in dugouts. On Psunj I was admitted to the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ), and in 1944, in Čazma, to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

I stayed in the Psunj area until the end of 1943, and then my mother and I set off back to Moslavina. A large part of that area had been liberated. We traveled at night, on foot. It was dangerous, difficult, and exhausting, but our goal was to reach our region as soon as possible. We crossed the Ilova River by boat. I remember that at one point they carried us on their backs. That is how we arrived near Garešnica. We slept in a house where the grandmother of the household had died. In the neighboring room she was lying in state.

My mother and grandmother, who had been staying the whole time with kind people, were immediately settled in the village of Grabovnica, near Čazma. I first stayed with a doctor, Dr. Chytil, in Dubrava. I helped him because he was the only doctor in that area. I felt very good there, since the doctor's wife had been my and my sister's teacher in elementary school.

Later I went to the local command in Dubrava. I did whatever needed to be done. I remember those days well. For a while, almost ten days, we stayed in Dubrava during the day and in the forest near Čazma at night. The distance between Dubrava and Čazma was about thirteen kilometers. The reason for this withdrawal was that the brigades were far away, we were poorly armed, and near Dubrava, in Vrbovec, there was an enemy stronghold. The Cossacks often attacked. Dubrava was bombed in 1944. Our house was destroyed then, because an infirmary had been set up in it.

After that, I joined the Pontoon Company of the 33rd Division, which later became the Pontoon Battalion stationed in Draganci, not far from Čazma. There I was an administrator and a nurse. I did not participate directly in a combat unit or in fighting.

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Photo

Zdenka in a Partisan uniform

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At the beginning of December 1944, partisan gymnasiums (secondary schools) were established in Croatia. Many young people from combat units resumed their schooling, which had been interrupted by the war. I too was sent to school in Čazma. We lived in a boarding facility. The teachers also came from the units.

Serious work began according to the program prepared by ZAVNOH (the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (Croatian: *Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*). All subjects were represented.

However, as I recall, we soon had to join the Children Refuge from Croatia, which included children from Zagreb and Slavonia regions. It was the end of December. The journey was very difficult and long. The winter was severe. We were also poorly dressed. We suffered. Many were sick, with colds and hungry. We traveled by horse-drawn carts and on foot to the Drava River. On that journey I remember a frozen baby, still wrapped in its pillow, in Velika Pisanica or Veliki Zdenci. It was a pitch-dark, freezing night. We crossed the Drava by ferry, in great silence. We arrived in Hungary, in the town of Barcs. With great effort we reached the Danube as well. We crossed the frozen Danube in Baja. Children from kindergartens and nurseries were being evacuated. The stronger youths, members of SKOJ, each carried one small child from the nursery across the river. It was cold, we were poorly clothed, and we did not have enough food. When I crossed that frozen stretch, the baby I was carrying died. I brought her across to the other side, dead. A small, frozen baby. I was sad and frightened.

We found ourselves in Baja, Hungary. We paused briefly. A group of youth, including myself, moved toward the Red Army. They fed us. We were given peas and beef. Finally, something good, warm, and filling. We then continued by train.

In Hungary we spent the night in an empty, abandoned castle in Drávafok. A large hall, straw on the floor, and sleep. I do not remember precisely whether this halt occurred before or after Baja. On that journey we were led by Mića Ostojić, Horvat Valent, Marica Zastavniković, known as "Baroness," and others whose names I no longer recall. We continued by train toward Subotica. There we visited wounded fighters in the hospital, who were very glad to see us.

Our final destination was Bajmok, a large village or small town. At first we lived in the homes of kind and generous people, until we arranged abandoned houses whose owners had fled with the Germans. We organized our boarding facilities there. Classes were held in the local school. All children from the refugee column attended, including local children who did not know Croatian but only Hungarian. In the spring of that year I was a delegate at the Youth Congress of Yugoslavia in Novi Sad. In the school and boarding facility we established a Pioneer organization, a cell of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and a drama group. We organized many performances, including *Pinocchio*. Professor Ljubica Lipa oversaw these activities. We remained there until liberation. The people of Vojvodina received us as their own children. When we departed, they accompanied us to the train with music and many tears. Via the city of Pécs in Hungary we reached Osijek, and from there each of us returned to our home region.

The war ended. I returned to my Dubrava, as did my mother. My sister remained in Osijek; she was a journalist for *Glas Slavonije*. Father returned home somewhat later, as he had duties in supply services somewhere in Slavonia. We now lived in a rented apartment. After our return, many people helped us.

We endured and experienced much, but we were fortunate to be reunited alive. We survived a difficult period of the Holocaust for our people.