

USHMM Archives, RG-50.468*0008

Mara Vejnovi} comes from a family of Serbs whose ancestors were known as "Uskoci", those who "jumped in" from the Croatian Littoral under Venetian rule into Bosnia to fight the Turks. They were later resettled to the region `umberak in western Croatia from where they did the same defending the border on account of Austria. Their church leaders and nobility recognized the authority of the Pope and the peasant folk had to follow suit but retained the Christian Orthodox liturgy and Serbian identity to modern times. The puppet Usta{a regime in Croatia considered them Croats but they offered resistance to extreme Croatian nationalism and after the first persecution started supporting the Liberation movement. Many among the young escaped to the hills and joined the partisans. This was the path chosen by the Vejnovi} family whose parents, one son and Mara were imprisoned in March 1942 while the older son was with the partisans.

In June of the same year Mara was deported to Stara Gradi{ka (Jasenovac 5) where she was put in the section of the prison reserved for the Croat leftist women. She got involved in the communist clandestine organization which had some leverage with the Internal Administration in Stara Gradi{ka. When in Summer 1942 Serb women and children from the area around the mountain Kozara in Bosnia were deported in mass, the clandestine organization made it possible for Mara to get the job of warden near the children. Mara first witnessed the separation of mothers from their children and said that many stormed against the Usta{a bayonets trying to retain their kids. After some time she witnessed, again as a warden moving around, the mass murder of a big group of children. She stated during our interview that the children were so cramped in five rooms that they could neither lay or sit and had to stay pressed one against the other. Four catholic nuns came one day with buckets in hands, brushed the lips of the children with the liquid in the buckets and after two or two and a half hours the children started screaming with pain. They all suffered from diarrhea. After a couple of days their intestines came out. The agony did not last long. Grave diggers came and took them away in blankets. Mara later observed how the Usta{as killed a group of children with poisonous gas in a barrack.

Mara described also the end of about 30 Jewish males from Novska, an important railway junction on the line from Zagreb to the West. where her family lived in the thirties. After the Usta{a reign was established and terror begun, she approached the heads of several Jewish families inviting them to leave the town and join the Liberation Movement and the partisans. This was in the Spring of 1942 when the deportation of the Jews in Novska did not start yet. All Jews whom she visited received her amicably but nobody followed her suggestions. They believed that somehow they will muddle through. Only a young Jew, Marko Levi, joined the partisans and survived. He lives now in Belgrade as a retired colonel. Also the entire family of the pharmacist De}e, originally from Novska and living in the capital Zagreb, survived in the same way joining the partisans.

The rest of Novska Jews were deported to Stara Gradi{ka in August of 1942 and Mara sew them at the entrance of the camp. Many of them were merchants, some doctors, lawyers, professionals, all stood near the gate well dressed and looking well. After only 3 to 4 days Mara had seen them again when the Usta{a called an "apelo" and selected every third from the lined up prisoners, both men and women.

USHMM Archives, RG-50.468*0008

The Jews were not counted at all. In groups they were ordered into the doomed column. Among them were all Jews from her town of Novska, Mara told that it was hard to recognize them. The same people who looked so good only some days ago were now reduced to skeletons. The clothes hang on their bones. They were completely destroyed, Mara believes that they were given "soda caustica" which burnt their intestines.

The column of the selected numbered 3000 to 3500 inmates. It was taken to the river Sava on whose banks several killing sites existed. The doomed were followed with empty carts driven by Ustaša guards. They departed in the morning and in the evening the carts were driven back full of travel bags and clothes accompanied by Ustašas whose uniforms were stained with blood and dirty, who were drunk and jubilantly screaming. Mara told that between June 1942 and March 1943 when she got out of the camp she participated in several similar selections and has seen about ten columns of people led to the slaughter sites.

Mara was released from Stara Gradiška in an exchange of leftist inmates for German and Ustaša officers captured by partisans. After the liberation in 1945 she graduated as a teacher. In the early sixties she worked in the apparatus of the communist Central Committee in Croatia and was appointed secretary of a Commission whose task was to organize the writing of the history of the Communist Party of Croatia. In her new job she met in 1962 the present president of Croatia Franjo Tuđman who at that time was Director of the Institute for the Research of the Workers Movement in Croatia.

The two of them were supposed to produce the project for the writing of the history of CP of Croatia but instead clashed bitterly. Mara said that Tuđman, who left the Army after being accused for a plagiarisme, exposed to her views which she identified as pro-Ustaša. Tuđman was retained on his job but soon had for the same reason clashed with the boss of the Croat Communist Dr. Vlado Bakarić and was dismissed. He started a new political career which in Tito's time landed him in prison accused of extreme nationalism but at the end led him to the top position of power in secessionist Croatia.

In her interview Mara described her and Tuđman's opposite positions during their aborted debate.

She most emphatically rejected all the allegations against Jews in Jasenovac which were made in the Declaration of 13, by Jovan Prnjatović and by Ciliga and which Tuđman all quoted in his book "Wilderness of Historic Realities" published in 1989. on the eve of his secessionist electoral campaign.

"I do not know of one single case where the Serbs suffered from the Jews" - Mara said. She added that she met only good Jews in Stara Gradiška, the leftist inmate Frida Goldman, a good and helpful medical doctor from Sarajevo whose first name was Buki, and the group of Jews from Novska who did not try to extract some benefit from

USHMM Archives, RG-50.468*0008

revealing to the Usta{as that she invited the to join the partisan. She condemned generalizations of possible bad behavior of some Jews in the camp saying that she personally knows Jews as honest and diligent people, who know how to work and earn money and "I respecte this".

Mara denied Tudjman's statement that Jasenovac was established as a working camp, She said work was organized in Stara Gradi{ka only to the extend of Usta{a's need for somebody to make shoes and uniforms and produce food locally for them.