

ALENKA GERLOVIČ (Slovenia)

CLIP 1

For many years I also taught drawing at various schools, but now in my old age I have dedicated myself entirely to my primary vocation – painting.

I'm 87 years old.

My generation experienced WWII.

Experienced massive changes during the war and then after the war as well.

I must say that we imagined a different world after WWII.

A different world would arise than the one we live in now.

But one just has to adjust one's expectations to what is going on in society.

At the time I was very active in Ljubljana and a lot was going on in Ljubljana.

The walls were plastered with lists of hostages and practically every day you would be informed of something horrible.

It is difficult to say whether one could even feel in the mood to create some great piece of art.

Nonetheless, I would, just to remain a painter – usually doing things similar to that in the program at the Zagreb Academy – just enough to stay in condition.

It was later, when I joined the partisans that I could finally make use of my painting skills.

CLIP 2

I was terribly upset then that Ljubljana was occupied.

I think the majority of Ljubljana residents were.

Ljubljana was actually on the border of the occupation zone.

The north of Ljubljana was occupied by the Germans, and from the northern border of the city and southwards were the Italians ... not to mention the border of present-day Hungary.

The Hungarians had entered into the Rome-Berlin Axis and occupied Prekmurje.

Well, of course I knew what lay ahead of us.

I knew that Italian fascism just like German Nazism had it in their programs to basically liquidate the Slovenes.

For a while I knew nothing of any Liberation Front (LF), or maybe I only sensed that something was going on.

One day in early autumn I went up to the Ljubljana Castle and looked towards the German border of Ljubljana.

I saw huge amounts of smoke billowing up above the village of Rašica.

That village was situated on the German side.

I don't know how the news came in to Ljubljana.

But everyone around me already knew that Rašica was burning.

That the Germans were burning it.

That they had rounded up and taken all the male population away.

That moment I said to myself I can't just do nothing.

I didn't want to overestimate my own powers, after all I was young and I wasn't expecting that I'd be able to do much.

But considering what I'd read by Tolstoy, I knew that basically every historical action is the result of the actions of many perhaps completely insignificant people, who together can achieve something historically significant.

So I decided that I can't let myself just stand aside.

So I went straight to the telephone – there weren't many at the time, but we had one in our home – and called my friends, who I'd heard whispering stuff.

I had sensed it had something to do with the occupier.

I said I wanted to get 'in', that I also wanted to do whatever they knew about.

The very next day I was called to my first meeting.

CLIP 3

He was an important man and, in terms of his political orientation in former Yugoslavia, he was conservative, belonging to the Catholic party.

As most conservatives were oriented during WWII, they began to cooperate with the occupier. But my father did not.

He was a nationally conscious Slovene and also a combatant for general Maister during WWI. He didn't appreciate my joining though.

There were two people in 1941, coming to see him.

I found out later they were important organizers in the partisans.

But I didn't know why they came to see him.

Then he just seemed to become a pacifist.

He helped everyone in trouble and who came to him.

But he didn't much exert himself.

Not to the extent that I could say he was a member of the activists of the LF.

At home they didn't let me work for the LF.

But I decided that I just had to proceed independently and according to my own set of ethics.

CLIP 4

Ljubljana was divided into individual regions.

The lowest level was the field committee of the LF.

I was a field member for a while.

The next level was the district committee of the LF, which united several fields.

I was a member of the district committee.

The regional committee of the LF was the final level.

Ultimately I was a member of the regional committee of the LF.

Just before the warrant for my arrest came out, the Home Guard political police arrested my father.

At the time the Germans were in Ljubljana, a lot of the competency was left to the Home Guard.

They were also a part of the SS, meaning the German police.

So they, too, swore allegiance to Hitler and the German Reich.

They carried out many arrests towards the end of the war.

It was like that when the Home Guard political police came to take my father away.

Only many years later we found out why.

Warrants for arrests were found in the archives.

They were addressed to the chief of the Home Guard political police, Lovro Hacin.

Later I found out, also from my students, of whom some were on the opposite side, with the Home Guard...

One of my students gave me lots of information because his family was and still is in contact with the Home Guard immigration.

Through this student I found out where my father was killed.

Not just through him, I also found out directly at Hacin's procession.

There was a huge procession in Ljubljana against Rösener, the chief of the SS in the Ljubljana province.

Against Rupnik, who was the president of this Ljubljana province as well as the military head of the Home Guard.

And against Hacin, who was the chief of the Home Guard political police.

I was informed already during the war, from the intelligence service of the LF that Hacin was my father's enemy.

I should tell my father that the LF can help him get to safety.

I went to my father and I told him this.

He said that he'd done nothing and wasn't going anywhere.

It was a matter of life or death.

There were malicious false reports, and they were coming from the very hospital where he was the head.

It came from the lower level of employees, the cleaners and the male nurses, the non-qualified workers.

But neither he nor I knew it was a matter of life or death.

The same night of his arrest they took him away to Rudnik.

There was an outpost like the one at Sveti Urh.

They killed him there at Rudnik.

CLIP 5

My role in the LF varied.

It wasn't just a secret network limited to Ljubljana.

It went through all of Slovenia, developing gradually.

Around Ljubljana it developed earlier, because here the leadership was and the founding meeting took place on Večna pot in Ljubljana.

Then it spread inwards to Koroška and to the Primorje region as well.

So Slovenia was completely covered, but not all at once.

I had a variety of roles.

First I was just a girl incorporated into the LF group with students.

I joined the students from the Faculty of Law for a while.

Later I was connected with the field committee, because then the LF developed into an organizational network, covering all of Ljubljana.

Don't forget that Ljubljana was closed in by a wire fence to that time.

The Italians enclosed the entire city with barbed wire.

There were only a few exits from the city.

They were strictly guarded, and sometimes we could even go out.

We expressed it in many ways.

Firstly, just by helping.

This wasn't manifested publicly.

We collected food, clothes, for packages, for internees ...

Italy had immediately begun to send people whom they considered suspicious of working for the LF to the internment camp.

The internment camp was a horrible place.

It wasn't like Berlusconi said - that it was like going on a great holiday.

Once in internment it was necessary to take care of the families of the internees and of people who joined the partisans.

And also of the illegal, which didn't get coupons for rations.

So we had to collect necessities for everyday life.

Places had to be arranged for meetings, in houses, where people were willing to risk letting people in to LF meetings.

We, the participants at these meetings, didn't know each other, but we had codes.

You'd arrive with a code, introduce yourself to the owner of the apartment.

Then he would respond with a code.

That way we knew we could trust each other.

We even had code names among each other.

We expressed ourselves publicly with writing actions to instill courage in the population of the city and Slovenia.

We would write codes on walls advocating the LF.

We would litter the city.

Sometimes it was completely strewn with papers advocating the LF.

Once, two of us, both members of the district committee of the LF in Šiška –

it was Vida Janežič, who today is proclaimed a national hero –

we both used a bucket and poured axle grease along the length of Celovška Street and stuck it with LF inscriptions.

Another time we wrote all over Celovška Street, opposite the Union brewery.

But it snowed the next morning and nothing of our writings remained.

Another very important thing: demonstrations.

I don't know if any other country in occupied Europe arranged demonstrations, or as many as were in Ljubljana.

First they were women's demonstrations, demanding that the men be released from the internment camps.

These demonstrations were held in front of the train station, and then before the military leadership and the administrative leadership of the occupier.

Finally also in front of the Ljubljana diocese.

I was at all of these demonstrations.

More were here on the cemetery by the graves of the hostages.

It was the Italian occupiers who gunned down every LF movement.

They shot so many innocent hostages.

Today it still is a small graveyard of those who fell as hostages.

The largest movement was at the capitulation, at the fall of fascism, not yet being the capitulation of Italy.

To that time Italy, as the occupier, felt weaker and we could afford a huge demonstration on Miklošičeva Street.

Men and women alike participated.

Miklošičeva Street was swarmed with demonstrators.

I noticed how the occupiers' military vehicles rode up and down the road and how the soldiers sat on them and how some of them seemed in favor of us.

Some even smiled or waved.

Soon after, Italy capitulated.

CLIP 6

It felt truly horrible to me that Ljubljana was enclosed with a barbed wire, because I'm extremely attached to nature.

Especially now that I understand who I am as a painter.

Above all I'm a landscape painter, because it's my world.

Before the war, I'd cycle out of Ljubljana to find some motif to draw and paint.

All of a sudden I wasn't permitted to leave Ljubljana.

At first we received a sort of '*lascia passare*', some sort of legitimation paper, if you weren't poorly thought of by the occupying police.

Later they abolished it.

So as long as I still had the *lascia passare*, I'd still cycle to the outskirts of Ljubljana.

Then they prohibited bicycles and I couldn't go anywhere anymore.

To find a way back out into the nature, I turned my 'bicycle' into a 'tricycle'.

I took a wheel from my sister's bicycle and had a colleague attach it to my bicycle.

So I could go out again on my tricycle.

I rode to the Ljubljana Marsh and such like.

Returning to the city, the guards stopped me and inspected me and discovered that all I had were flowers and let me pass on through.

But when I reached today's Prešernova Street and passed by the Italian police, somebody started shrieking that I should be stopped.

Then the so-called 'quaestors' arrested me and confiscated my tricycle and took me to the police.

What I was doing with this?

I told them that I went out into the nature.

Then they put me in a police car, a policeman on each side of me.

I felt so ashamed to be taken home in such company.

They drove me home because I admitted where I lived.

My father opened the door and asked if I really was his daughter.

He confirmed.

"Does she live here?"

"She lives here."

They then left and the next day I got my tricycle back. But I wasn't permitted to ride it anymore because after my little adventure, tricycles were also banned.

CLIP 7

As soon as my father was taken away, I began to sleep elsewhere.

As long as my family was around, they wouldn't let me go underground because it might evoke my family having to pay for it,

They could be taken away to the internment camp etc.

But when they took my father away, and then 14 days later evicted my mother from the apartment, I knew that I couldn't stay in a legal apartment anymore.

I immediately moved out and over to the house of a colleague, Erni Korijari.

She was a member of the LF and worked the props at the Ljubljana Drama house.

She took me into hiding in her place.

A few days after I moved, the Gestapo visited my mother, she didn't have her own apartment anymore and stayed at her sister's place.

They wanted to know where I was.

My mother didn't know.

But she got the message to me that the Gestapo had come looking for me.

I passed that message to my own superiors in the LF network.

From then onwards I was taken care of.

That was how it was done in Ljubljana:

Every building had a listing of all the people staying there.

Every so often there would be raids.

If anyone not on the list was found during these raids, they were taken away; also all those who were hiding them.

People would take the risk, they would consciously accept this person into their home and partly also share their food.

The counterfeit ration coupons – everyone had ration coupons – made for the illegal would always come with great delay, often when you weren't allowed to be there anymore.

As illegal we would have to stay with people who didn't even know who we were.

They just trusted us in needing help on the basis of the code word.

I could get in anywhere with the code word, and the owner would respond with a code word and then I could stay there.

I had to change homes several times because I'd sneeze in the room I was hiding in.

Someone outside would happen to hear it and comment that someone must be home.

Then I'd have to leave already the next day or night.

It was with strangers that I was staying when finally, after four months of hiding from house to house, that one afternoon my friend Neda Gržinič came to see me.

She told me that a LF courier would bring me a fake passport that evening and I'd be leaving to join the partisans in the morning.

CLIP 8

I was lucky to be given passage to the partisans.

That evening a courier indeed brought me my passport, a fake one with a fabricated name.

I headed to the train station and took a train down to the Primorje.

The last call was in a place called Košana; that's where all the illegal from Ljubljana went.

Again we had to know the code.

The landlord was the innkeeper at the Dolgan Inn.

I turned to him to say the code – *Matija sends me from Ljubljana*.

He responded – *Vremščica*.

At the time I didn't know what Vremščica was.

After WWII I became a mountaineer and hiked up Vremščica many times.

It's a beautiful mountain with a gorgeous view.

I came to the partisans relatively late.

I'd been in hiding in Ljubljana for four months.

I left in July 1944.

A very long journey ensued of course.

Ultimately our goal was the village of Občice pod Kolevskim Rogom.

You know what?

It was all unforgettable beautiful, already with my leaving Ljubljana and going to liberated territory.

That was something incredible to me, to have found myself suddenly surrounded by nature after four months of hiding in basements.

The journey through the Kolpa valley was extremely beautiful:

first Čebranke and the Kolpa, which is when we left the liberated territory and headed into the Loška valley towards Bela krajina.

And there was the fact that I finally got to work on art work.

I was also perfectly willing to join the brigade.

Although I don't know how that might have worked out – considering my sensitivity to the thundering of explosions.

Probably not well at all.

But at that point they weren't taking females into the brigade anymore.

First, I was to make the stage setting in the theater.

But there wasn't enough to do, because there weren't that many premieres.

So I suggested that they call me on demand.

They did, when they were preparing the first showing of *Raztrganci* by Matej Bor.

I went to Bela krajina then for about two weeks to prepare the stage scenery.

I used old stage scenery from the Sokolski dom in Črnomelj.

A house painter from Črnomelj helped me and with joined forces we managed to paint over all of it and get everything ready.

CLIP 9

There were very many cultural workers with the partisans.

And my humble self was among them.

The theater was relatively well represented and many premieres were held.

For one premiere, for Bor's *Raztrganci*, I contributed the stage scenery.

One of the most important components of the 'Central Technique' (the Central Technique of the Slovene Communist Party Workshop) was the partisan printing press.

Partisan printing presses were hidden all over the hills of Kočevski Rog and also Goteniški Snežnik.

They printed partisan newspapers, brochures and even poetry collections and song-books.

CLIP 10

Later, Vito, a partisan not yet 26 years old, came to the Central Technique.

Vito was an extremely talented painter, despite not being schooled.

His wish was to become a vocational painter after the war.

Vito came to the Central Technique after me.

Before though, he spent a long time in an Italian internment camp.

Due to the long and harsh conditions, he suffered from a very bad case of articular rheumatism.

He didn't go home when Italy capitulated, because that would still have been too dangerous.

Rather, he went straight to the partisans and in the dead of winter, joined the march of the Ljubljana brigade and the 18th division to Gorski Kotar.

It was a terribly cold winter and his rheumatism went worse.

There were no antibiotics at the time or any such medicine.

He slept with high temperature directly upon some branches lying on the snow.

His high temperature from the infection then affected his cardiac valves.

Although he and we were unaware, he was dead sick when he came to the Central Technique. When we withdrew from Bela krajina, he was suffering from anginal infections.

Once we had withdrawn from Bela krajina and gone to Gorski Kotar, (the entire active militia was heading towards Trieste),

we, the reserve units, followed along behind.
He had his first heart attack in the Gorski Kotar, but recovered from that.
We then arrived to Ljubljana believing the war to be coming to its end, and the end of sicknesses, the end of all things bad.
It was only a year and three months later that he died because of a cardiac valve infection, being a death sentence to that time.

CLIP 11

So on the very day that Ljubljana was liberated, to the same time being the end of WWII, on 9th May 1945 we returned to Ljubljana.
That was the most wonderful day of my life.
It still is.
There were many things I didn't know.
We were riding in a small truck.
I didn't know that we passed the killing grounds where my good friend Neda Gržinič lay buried.
I didn't know that we passed the fire station in Lavrica where my father was buried in February 1944.
I knew nothing of these horrible facts.
I didn't know my husband was on his deathbed.
So, I was immensely happy.
With time I came to learn all of this and had to find some way to survive.
I was terribly poor and everything of my mother's had burned down, the entire apartment.
She barely saved her life from the burning building.
It was the first night that she was staying in the apartment that she attained from the housing administration.
It was near the train station.
One night, or morning really, a wagon filled with arms exploded.
My mother was left with nothing of what had before been the quite comfortable lifestyle of an intellectual Ljubljana family.
I also had nothing.
When my husband and I were demobilized, there was nothing left.
We were used to living modestly already during the war.
But this wasn't the main problem.
The main problem was that my father was gone, my husband was gone, and many of my friends were gone.
One had to survive.
So I've survived for most of my life.
I've supported myself as a professor of art, initially at high schools and then, following the reorganization of the schooling system, in elementary schools.
All up to my retirement in 1969, when I finally found my true calling.

www.resistance-archive.org