

ROMANA VERDEL (Austria)

CLIP 1

I was born in Remschenig near Eisenkappel into a Slovenian family; at my aunt's, really, where my mother was a farm maid.

In this house lived: my sister, Zofija Rotter, my mother, Ana Rotter and I. There was another aunt, Marija Rotter, with her daughter, Marija Rotter, and then there were Jurij Sluga, Katarina's husband, and his brother Hanzi Sluga and Katarina's sons Michael Sluga, Karl Sluga and Franz Rotter. Well, Franz Rotter was a member of the German 'Wehrmacht'; so was Karl Sluga, who crossed over to the partisans. Michael Sluga joined the partisans straight away instead of enlisting. In 1943 it became dangerous and that was when Katarina Sluga escaped to the partisans.

This aunt (where we were living) was very much interested in culture and politics. She soon started to organise meetings against Hitler and to attend other meetings and so on. Therefore she was politically suspicious so we all were in danger. But she was aware that something could happen, as she had people who sent her a message to withdraw. For her it was dangerous now. So she backed away to the partisans and thought that everything would be okay, there would not be any danger for the others, if she went. But she was wrong. When the Gestapo came it was dangerous for all of them. They arrested them all.

CLIP 2

I was not at home. I was at the neighbour's. When the neighbour saw that the Gestapo went to our house, she hid us in an outhouse and warned us: "Please, don't look out of the window and stay quiet." But us as children, we didn't understand that and didn't keep quiet. We kept looking out of the window to see what was going on until we saw that they were marching our family and relatives off. Only then did we realize that there was danger. We did get frightened then. They came to the neighbour's house after that and there was an argument in the yard, and we were frightened that they would take the neighbour, as well, and deport her. That went on for a long time, at least an hour until it went quiet again. That was when the neighbour came with the baby and said we could come out now. It was such a relief that she came to us. I don't know what would have happened, if we – little children – would have stayed on our own. The oldest one was six, then three years, four years and I was five years old.

A cousin of mine had stayed at home. She was suffering with a contagious infection, scabies.

The Gestapo saw that and did not take her, because they were frightened of being infected.

She also stayed behind. So, she came to the neighbour's and we were also there. The neighbour said that we could not stay with her, because she had five children of her own and she was alone with them, as well. They had taken the oldest daughter, the farmer girl and the farmer away.

On that day, when they arrested our family, they arrested so many people that a horse stable near Eisenkappel was full. From there they took them away in lorries to Klagenfurt and from there to various concentration camps. Even my godfather, the neighbour, did not come back. He died in Dachau, but his daughter and the farmer girl did come back. They were the only ones who came back from the concentration camp.

CLIP 3

We were quite desperate. Then we remembered that we still had another aunt nearby. We would go there; it was aunty Amalija. She had three children of her own, and her husband (her partner, really) was still at home. We stayed there. But the aunt had such a small flat. So she went to our house, where she looked after the small animals and us children because we had enough to eat at home; plus the small animals to live on. But it was an area for partisans and there was always fighting, so it was dangerous at the house. So we could stay around the house during the day and at night she locked us into the cellar and went home. She left two of her children there, because they were bigger - and took the youngest one with her. Then there were the two of us still, and the cousin. We slept in the cellar. It was an earth cellar, really, a cellar in the rock and it was very damp, cold and totally dark, because everything was padded with hay and covers so nobody would hear us, if we would whisper. But we weren't allowed to cough or to go out to the loo and that was really bad. We could always hear

people walk around outside, but we didn't know whether they were Gestapo or partisans. It was very exiting but very dangerous.

CLIP 4

At the end of January 1944 the aunt got us ready and dressed and we asked: "Where are we going?" The older ones already knew, but the little ones didn't. And she said: "Well, we are going to church." So we asked: "At night? Why are we going to church at night? Why is there a church service at night tonight?" The aunt answered: "Well, because there is. Let's go." So out we went. We had put a lot of clothes on – whatever we owned and she took a blanket. Everything seemed so adventurous, but for some reason we were not frightened. We were just glad to get out of this cellar. Then we went, but the wrong way; not the way to where the church was, but up the mountains, a totally different direction. The oldest cousin was 14 years old and he should carry a rifle. He was really pleased about that. By then we knew: now we are going into war. But we weren't really frightened. There were men with us and because there were adults with us, the fear went. We walked very, very far. There was so much snow, and the snow was so hard that nothing sank in. It was very glittery, as well, so it was a beautiful but cold night. During the first night we walked for at least three or four hours until we reached a bunker high up in the mountain. It was very cold in this bunker, but we were so tired that we were still glad when we could lie down. Although there was only fern to lie on and a horse blanket to cover us up and we were really cold. I don't know how long we lived in this bunker. It was very cold and dark. There was not a lot to eat and we had to be quiet. We were not allowed to talk and anyway that was very hard for me. I was such a lively and inquisitive child. And for me it was the hardest to stay quiet all day and there was nothing to play with either, nothing. There was nothing to talk about not even with the adults. Even they did not talk much. I cannot remember what we had to eat, either. Only one time, I can remember, a partisan brought a loaf of bread and a can of milk. We were so happy that we could at least eat properly. But we only got a little piece and one or two mouths full of milk to drink. I was so disappointed. I thought: 'Why does she give us so little all the time?' We did not understand that she had to economize. Well, after a while she gave us some more and explained that she had to ration. Then the bunker got dangerous because it was always dangerous to stay in one bunker for too long; far away from the farmers, so the provisions were bad. So we went over a mountain into Yugoslavia. That time we walked the whole night, I think. So long that I fell asleep – fell asleep walking. When we were outside at night I always used to watch the stars. That was a sort of amusement; the only one we had. Here and there we were in a stable, that was nice. It was warm in the stable and we were used to the smell. The main thing was that it was warm and safe there, but most of the time we stayed in bunkers. There was fighting, as well. Once, we were hiding in the forest when there was some fighting. Then a partisan pushed me down behind a tree and held me down so I could not get up. They were shooting, we saw flashes the whole night ... I do not know how we got out of that. But, thank God, we did get out of it in one piece. And then, until April, there was fighting in Slovenia, in Solčava it was called, Logarska Dolina and it was so dangerous that they decided the aunt should go back to Carinthia.

CLIP 5

So, we went back over the mountain to Carinthia, when the snow was gone. Before it was near enough impossible. We got to a farmer's where the cousin's grandmother was. The aunt asked the grandmother whether she could leave the youngest daughter there, because she was very ill. This woman said she could, because the girl would die otherwise. So I thought: 'Oh, she can stay and I have to go again; and it is so nice and warm here.' We were so full and it was wonderful. So I lay down on the bench and thought: 'what could I do to be allowed to stay?' Then I made myself unconscious, played unconscious. Whenever they picked me up I fell down again straight away until the woman said: "This one is so exhausted, you cannot take her either. Just let her stay here." That possibly saved my life. When the aunt left she went to a bunker in Ojstra, in Carinthia, near Eisenkappel. But this bunker was betrayed and there she died. She was shot. The others got away, but she didn't. If I would have been there I don't know what would have happened to me. And at the farmer's it was really nice. But it was still war and it was the last farmer before the border. There was some bad fighting there.

CLIP 6

We were always in danger of something happening and it did. One day three partisans came (friends of the farmer and one relative) and came in for a snack. The farmer said: "You did not put up any guards." So they answered: "We will be gone in a minute, anyway." They really got up and went outside but they stayed in the hallway and kept talking for a little while. And the children did what they always do when somebody comes round. I was standing right next to a partisan when the police or the Gestapo (or whatever you can call them) came to the house and they just shot wildly into the house, just wildly. Two partisans died straight away and the third one followed me, when I ran away through the door, left, into the kitchen. There he wanted to get out of the door. He was wounded. A bullet went through my apron but it didn't hit me. I hid myself in the kitchen, in a hole under the cooker. The Gestapo, or policeman, came in and stuck his machinegun into the hole. But he looked in, as well, and saw that there was only a child and pulled me out. I was not frightened any more. I don't think I felt anything. I was in shock, or something. Then I had to step over these partisans. He made me step over the dead people! One of them was not dead, yet. He really begged to be shot again and he was pleadingly looking at us. I had to step right over their heads. I still remember these eyes the way I saw them back then. That will probably stay. Whenever I see blue eyes like these somewhere, I remember this man. I do have a problem with that; I cannot forget that. Then they took me inside to the two old farmers and my cousin. One of them just wanted to shoot us and burn the house down after. Another one came in and said: "You shouldn't do that. The partisans have to be buried, everything cleaned, and in two hours time a patrol will come and there mustn't be anything showing; not a sign that anything happened." And they really did that. The farmer buried the partisans and the farmer's wife cleaned up, wiped the blood up. It was very hard for her to mop all that and she cried so hard, when she was kneeling in the blood, so hard. The two of us (the cousin and I) we were totally shattered. The farmer's wife said: "You stay indoors and don't go outside. Don't you tell anybody what happened." And we didn't. If somebody told us to keep something to ourselves, we did. It was as if we would have put it in a box and locked it away. Anyway, we protected the partisans so much when we were kids; they were our friends and the Germans were our enemies.

CLIP 7

Well, towards the end of the war the message came that mother was dead. I don't know how they got to know about it; they just did. But I was so cold; I did not cry when they told me my mother had died. Mother would not come back. I had no tears; not for the aunt, for nobody. I did not cry one single tear for anybody, although I was really suffering about not being able to see these people and the aunt and all of them. Father had already died in August 1943, so I had forgotten all about him. But whenever someone asked me: "Are you sad that your mother won't come any more?" or similar, I always answered: "No, I'm not sad." I just said that out of defiance and out of furiousness. I got so furious when someone asked me about that, I either didn't answer at all or I just coldly said: "No, I'm not sad at all." Although I was very sad, really, that nobody would come back to the house of my birth. Two aunts got killed with the partisans, my mother and one aunt died in the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. Then two uncles died in Dachau and one cousin fell with the partisans, one uncle fell in Russia. Altogether it added up to 12 people that died. They were my closest relatives, who I grew up with, who were near and dear to me. The mother was in the concentration camp. Father went to the partisans. He had fought for Hitler in Finland or somewhere, before. There he saw that it was wrong and when he came home on holiday, he went to the partisans. But he was with them for only for ten minutes and died, because somebody betrayed him.

CLIP 8

There were conflicts as well, because I was a Slovenian. I even had conflicts with other Slovenians. They could not understand why I had so much political interest and why I am for the Slovenes and so on. Well, the disappointment was quite big when the English came and treated us like enemies again, and we weren't even allowed to go to church without ID and so on. Even the English were quite discriminating. When the English came to the farmer's the first time, armed and strict, I (being a child) thought: 'Why does the war keep on, although it is over?' We did not understand that there were still

armed men coming to the house when the war was over. Although we originally knew the English to be our confederates and helpers, it was a big disappointment later on. I still can't understand now, why the English let themselves be so influenced by the Nazis and we – the partisans and the Slovenes - were the enemies again.

CLIP 9

Yes, I did have problems because of that. As long as I was healthy, there was nothing; but when I was ill, I started having delusions, bad feelings and fears about people, and when I saw somebody in uniform coming, I used to hide. The Germans were my deadly enemies for a long, long time. It took many years before I had worked out for myself that it weren't the Germans as such – it were just the fascists. But not all are German; they can be from anywhere, in other countries.

www.resistance-archive.org