

## Vera Erak



This picture was taken in 1942. I am pictured as a student in the 6th grade of the Pozarevac gymnasium. My family had lived normally until the outbreak of World War One. The Hungarians issued a declaration that all residents of Novi Sad who had moved there after 1918 had to immediately return to their birthplace. On April 30, 1941, my father, with two suitcases, my mother and I went on a ferryboat to Petrovaradin and there we embarked in a wagon. On May 1, we arrived in Zemun. My father's cousin, Pavle Todorovic, who had a pastry shop on Main Street, took us in. After some time we became subtenants. Every day my mother and I had to go to register at the Kulturbund. The Kulturbund was the German Cultural Federation and was backed by the SS.

They were very strict. We had to go regardless of the weather conditions, and we waited if necessary through the hardest of rain storms so that we could sign in. I remember that Rudikka Teibl and Albrecht controlled us. Rudikka Teibl, whose father was the owner of a big hotel in Zemun, and Albrecht, whose father had a well-known furniture store, were members of the Kulturbund. They were both only about 20 years old, but they were famous for their brutality. They greatly mistreated the Jews of Zemun, who had to come to register at the Kulturbund everyday. Rudikka and Albrecht wore red suits and armbands with swastikas. We wore a yellow arm band with a star of David on our arm. We stayed in Zemun until August 1941, until the moment that we heard that the border with Croatia would be closed. We knew that they intended to collect all the Jews, and that is why we moved to Serbia. In Belgrade we registered in the Commissariat for Refugees. To hide my mother's Jewish name Edith, my father registered her under the name Zorka Erak. After two days we went by convoy to Pozarevac. The Commissariat for Refugees lodged in the Hotel Balkan, and then with Mrs. Agica Jankovic. We lived with Mrs. Jankovic free for some months and she treated us very correctly. She was not a Jew, but she treated us as if we were her family. Not wanting to be too much of a burden on her, we rented a small room. In Pozarevac, I continued the fifth grade of gymnasium. Since I spoke German fluently, I signed up at the Red Cross so that I could work on correspondence between the citizens of Pozarevac and the surroundings, including their relatives who were prisoners in different German camps. At the time I was a member of the SKOJ (Federation of Communist Youth). Working at the Red Cross provided me with a cover, because I received a document which stated that as a Red Cross activist I could freely walk around the city from 8 to 12 and from 14 to 18. This gave me the opportunity to do work for SKOJ. However, the organization was uncovered and I and some other members were locked up in a Chetnik prison. The head of the Pozarevac district was the famous Chetnik, Kalabic. (Chetniks formed a non-regular army in Serbia under the control of Draza Mihajlovic, a general of the Royal Yugoslav Army. At the beginning of the war they were important as fighters for the liberation of Serbia from occupiers, but they very quickly turned against their nation and joined the Germans. Most frequently they went around Serbia in groups of three, and slaughtered followers of the partisans and innocent residents. General Draza Mihajlovic was captured, but he committed suicide before being sentenced.) There they seriously mistreated me. I constantly screamed that I was innocent, that I did not know anything, that I only went to school and that I did not know anyone. Because of lack of evidence they released me. I finished the 6th grade of gymnasium. In September 1943, I joined the Partisans in the Second Southern Moravian Unit, which on February 4, 1944 became the famous 7th Serbian Fighting Brigade. (The Seventh Serbian Fighting Brigade was famous because its fighters participated in battles from Djerdap to Belgrade. The brigade was among the first to reach Belgrade and its fighters devotedly fought for liberation.) On the 15th of October, 1945, my brigade liberated Pozarevac. We remained there five days, then merged with the 23rd division and went to liberate Belgrade. After almost four years, on October 23 1945 at 5:00 PM I set foot in my liberated Zemun. I did not have any contact with my parents until the liberation of Pozarevac. All the war, my mother hid herself in a rented room there, almost never leaving the house. Even though the neighboring villagers knew she was Jewish, they helped her and my father, sometimes giving them a kilogram of flour or a bit of meat. After the liberation of Zemun, I rented a small truck and went to get my parents. We took the few things we had and moved to Zemun to the small apartment we were given. After demobilization I finished my schooling.