



MY HISTORY

Elza “They always called us by number, never by name: a survivor's story”

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INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of stories, documents, photos and videos published by people from all over Europe. This is "My History", a collaborative project from the European Parliament, where European history and the lives of citizens coincide.

NARRATOR CLIP 1

This is Elza.

Elza Mavric Kumar.

As a young woman, Elza Mavric Kumar had to face an adolescence marked by fear. Today she is 91 years old. She told us her story which cannot fail to touch us with its clarity, respect and its strong message calling for peace in Europe.

Here is her story.

NARRATOR CLIP 2

Let's go back to the year 1944 when Elza was still at school in Cormons, not far from her home village of Šlovrenc /Sh-low-rentz/. Normally, she stayed with her Aunt Adela and her Grandpa in Cormons during the week and only went back to Šlovrenc on Saturdays. Today, Cormons is in Italy and Šlovrenc in Slovenia, only 8 km apart. Both places are in the region called Goriška brda or Collio.

VOICE OVER CLIP 1

At the time, Collio or Brda was a partisan resistance area. The Germans didn't have an army post there, not in Dobrovo nor in Kojško. On my way from Cormons to Brazzano, I could see big signs saying Achtung: Banditen Gebiet or Area of bandits or partisans. Often, when I went home from Cormons on a Saturday afternoon, I didn't see a single soul. People didn't take to the road unless it was really necessary. But back home, yes, there was an active resistance and many meetings. There was a youth organisation too. My sister Milena and all the girls were organised and often they would put propaganda material into a bag that I would take with me to my Aunt Adela. When I was there, I often saw messengers pass by and take the material. But, our neighbours discovered what we were doing and they denounced us. On May 2nd, my Aunt and I were arrested.

NARRATOR CLIP 3

The week of the 2nd of May 1944 was the time of the first early cherries. The village children and teenagers climbed the cherry trees to pick this first delicious fruit. But the war was not yet over and the youth of Šlovrenc were active in the resistance. Elza's childhood came to an abrupt end at the age of 16.

VOICE OVER CLIP 2

The neighbours who denounced us knew everything and they told it all to the authorities. On May 2nd, we were taken to prison, first in Gorizia. I was kept there until June 13, almost one and a half months, without any kind of trial. My Mum visited many times, so did our family and friends from Gorizia. They all pleaded for my freedom and release. They even bribed the authorities, but nothing helped. The prisons in Gorizia were getting fuller and fuller. Many women from the region were imprisoned, from Vipava, Renče and the villages around Ajdovščina that had been burned down. The prisons were full so they told us we would be moved to Germany.

NARRATOR CLIP 4

Germany. For the women and girls of Gorizia prison, this meant working on German farms. That is what they thought and it felt like a relief compared to being locked up in prison. People knew about volunteers working on German farms and people had already gone there in 1940 and 1941. The women prisoners were sure this is what lay ahead for them and they were even reassured to think that they would go there to work.

On June 13th 1944 their journey to Germany began and they were convinced that they were heading for the farms.

VOICE OVER CLIP 3

My Mum brought in a new suitcase, a new coat and anything she could to ease the journey. My family did everything they could to make me feel comfortable. Then we were put on a truck to take us from the prison to the railway station. Not to the normal passenger platform but to the goods platform. Today there is a memorial plaque on that platform saying that people were transported to Germany from that place.

NARRATOR CLIP 5

The train departed and passed the villages the prisoners called home.

VOICE OVER CLIP 4

The train came from Trieste. A few carriages were already filled with the prisoners from Coroneo. When the train stopped in Gorizia, we were put in the cattle wagons. The train went by Mossa and Cormons and through the cracks I could see people picking cherries. I thought of my family. In Udine, the train stopped on a siding. The girls from Trieste asked the guard if they could see the commander and ask him where they were going. He said they could.

VOICE OVER CLIP 5

So the girls went to the commander's wagon, which was just behind the locomotive, and he said: "Yes, I'll tell you. We're going to Auschwitz." He even wrote it on a piece of paper: Auschwitz.

NARRATOR CLIP 6

When they heard the name Auschwitz, it meant nothing to the girls. They were not at all concerned. At the time, they didn't know anything about the concentration camps. They were still convinced that this was a place, a village or a town in Germany where they would be sent to work. The train was full, mainly of people from the region of Primorska or the North Adriatic coast and not only women and girls, but also families and men, all in separate wagons. After this stop in Udine, the train continued its journey through Austria.

VOICE OVER CLIP 6

In the evening, we had a pit stop somewhere in the middle of nowhere. We were even allowed to get out of the wagons, under the strict eyes of the guards, to do our business. Of course we didn't get any food, we had what we got from our families when we left Gorizia. The next day we travelled through Czechia and we were wondering where we were and where we were going. I think that on day three we were already in Poland. Just next to the rail tracks we could see army guards and some of the girls immediately said, "Look, there'll be partisans here. They'll save us!"

VOICE OVER CLIP 8

When we were travelling through Czechia, I saw farms and I was thinking how happy the people were and I thought of my family. I longed for home. Soon though, we crossed the border with Poland and in the afternoon we arrived at Auschwitz.

NARRATOR CLIP 7

By the summer of 1944, people were starting to talk of the end of the war. But there, the war was still very much a reality and its atrocities were visible at the entrance to the concentration camp. People however always have hope.

VOICE OVER CLIP 7

Just to describe what was going on at the time - when we left Gorizia, the Americans had already liberated Rome and we thought they would be here in Gorizia in a few days. Also, in Normandy, we had heard of the Allied landings, so we thought the war would be over in a month at the latest. All the news we heard was exaggerated in the camp. For example, if the troops were 400 km away, the news was that the liberators were 100 km away. That raised our morale and our hopes.

NARRATOR CLIP 8

The arrival in the camp was a horrifying experience.

VOICE OVER CLIP 9

The first thing we saw was the barracks, everywhere rows and rows of barracks. Then many roads and groups of people with soldiers behind them marching them forward. We climbed out of the wagon and were lined up in front the assembly barracks where the Kapos and SS guards started to yell at us.

Why were they yelling at us?

At the entrance, today there is still a wagon in memory of this. From there, our barracks were not far away. The assembly barracks still stands today.

NARRATOR CLIP 9

Every camp prisoner has their own description for this place. Elza describes it this way.

VOICE OVER CLIP 11

When I first walked into the camp it felt unreal, as if I was in some kind of film where the world is different. I remembered that at home we were reading Dante's Inferno. In that book I remembered a picture of the different circles of Hell and I found myself wondering whether that's where we were - we had arrived in Hell.

NARRATOR CLIP 10

The first contacts were with the camp prisoners, who prepared the newcomers for life in the camp. Elza describes her first contact with this unknown camp.

VOICE OVER CLIP 10

First, we put down all the bags and suitcases we had brought with us. Then, all our jewellery was taken from us. I had a gold chain on me which I wanted to leave with my Mum when I saw her in Gorizia, but she told me to keep it and take it with me. I also had the watch which I got at my confirmation, as was the tradition. Then I had my prisoner number tattooed on my arm. After that we went to another room where we all had to take off all our clothes. They also cut our hair. I had plaits so they just cut off my plaits. But some women had their hair completely shaved off. Then we were disinfected with some white stuff, like lime. All this was done by the other prisoners, men and women. Then we had to shower and we had to wait on the benches, all naked, until they brought us clothes which were not ready for us yet. It was late in the evening when we finally got clogs and some sort of clothes. During the night we were transferred from the assembly barracks to the barracks where we would live.

NARRATOR CLIP 11

Elza has faith and believes that only God can save them.

VOICE OVER CLIP 12

On my way to the barracks, I thought for a moment that heaven opened. I don't know how to describe it - I felt there was a different heaven. When we got to the barracks, we prayed and begged to go back home.

NARRATOR CLIP 12

Many years have passed since those days. Elza remembers vividly what a typical day was like. It is good to listen to these testimonies, as not many are still alive to tell their stories.

VOICE OVER CLIP 13

The day started at 3 o'clock in the morning when we got up. At 4 o'clock we had the assembly and roll-call, when we often stood for two hours. There we were brought some black coloured liquid to drink.

VOICE OVER CLIP 20

In the camp itself, we worked on building the roads, especially leading to the new barracks when the camp was extended. The ground was flat and swampy so the roads had to be higher than the rest of land. That is why they brought big rocks which we had to break and split into smaller pieces. Then we moved these small pieces in wheelbarrows to the road sites, and then we finished the works with a roller. The works were controlled and lead by the prisoners who were engineers before coming to the camp. We basically always worked inside the camp itself.

VOICE OVER CLIP 22

Always, every single day and evening, we had to stand in front of our barracks in the appellplatz for roll-call so that they could count us. Until everyone was counted and accounted for, we were not allowed to go to our barracks. For example, when somebody didn't return from work outside in the fields or when somebody escaped, we would have

to stand in the appellplatz the whole night. I don't know how we survived, we stood there in the cold and we supported each other.

VOICE OVER CLIP 27

Even in the summer it was cold. During the day, when the sun was high, we burned, but when the sun went down it got cold. When we arrived, the camp was running out of camp uniforms - they were like pyjamas. So we wore civilian clothes, which they took from other prisoners. If someone had civilian clothes they got a big sign on the back. A big X was painted on the back using oil paint. We were marked.

NARRATOR CLIP 13

Elza only ever left the camp in Auschwitz for one day. It was only when she left the camp that she saw how big it really was. First they crossed the men's camp, then the camp where the Roma were held, and then the Jews. Every group was separated and electrical wire surrounded each section. No one could visit anyone.

VOICE OVER CLIP 14

I left the camp only for one day. It's interesting that we had no idea at the time what the towers we saw were for. People talked and there was a rumour that they were burning corpses. But we all encouraged and supported each other. We believed that it would end soon, that we'd survive and then we would all go home.

And then there was another interesting thing, and I believe this happened only in Auschwitz. Every morning thousands of people went to work in the fields and they didn't leave the camp through the main entrance gate. They were in lines, five by five, with guards on each side, and when they left the camp musicians played music as they passed through the gates. It was mostly Jewish musicians, violinists who played music while people were passing by. In the evening as well, there was the same ritual with the music.

The most difficult part was in the evening when people had died during the day. Musicians or workers in the fields were exhausted and couldn't go on, some of them were shot. There were also sadistic guards in the fields who literally toyed with the camp prisoners. They would take away a prisoner's beret and throw it into an area where they were forbidden to go. The prisoner was then told to go pick it up and when they did, they were shot. They said it was because they were trying to escape.

NARRATOR CLIP 14

The camp changed everyone, including the strongest.

VOICE OVER CLIP 15

Many a time we saw the dead being brought in from the fields, and all the while the music was playing. They were testing our strength and will with everything they could and they pushed us to the limits. There were some people there in the camp from Gorizia. They had arrived at the camp a week before we did. We knew each other well. And when we stood in the appellplatz that first day, they were there. In just a week they had become so dirty, neglected, with no hair that we simply didn't recognise them at all. In just one week, they were unrecognisable, so much thinner. Simply unrecognisable.

NARRATOR CLIP 15

Life in the camp had its daily routine, and beatings were a regular part of that.

VOICE OVER CLIP 24

In the camp I mostly spoke Polish. The Kapos who were Polish had been there since 1941. They were allowed to speak to us in Polish. The others were either Germans or SS guards, but there were also former German prisoners. These women were in prison for crimes like stealing or prostitution but when the war broke they were employed as Kapos in the camps. They had sticks and would beat any of us women without any reason. God forbid if

it was your turn to be beaten. You would be bruised and wounded and would become a target for others to continue beating you. They smelled blood. You were a target for death. They kicked you and beat you until you were dead.

I was quite lucky, I never really got beaten up badly. Maybe a slap here and there. But for us it was sometimes even worse as we were considered to be Italians since we came from Gorizia. We had to wear a symbol in the form of a triangle with the letter I for Italy. Everyone had their national sign on their clothes. At the time, the Germans were angry with the Italians and considered them traitors. So we got additional beatings and abuse because we were Italian. I really don't know how we survived.

NARRATOR CLIP 16

But Christmas had a special meaning.

VOICE OVER CLIP 26

We had one pot and one spoon. We can still see these utensils in the museum. We had no other possessions. In the morning, we got some watery coffee, then we washed up and for lunch we got some soup made of kohlrabi, maybe a potato or some beets. Once we worked close to the kitchen and we saw that the soldiers got real cooked and peeled potatoes. We searched through the rubbish and found the potato peelings. They were so precious for us.

Christmas was the only day when we felt full, yes, Christmas was a day that everyone respected. Some Istrian women from our barracks were helping in the kitchen and when they returned in the evening they said, "You'll see, for Christmas, we'll have a good lunch!" People started guessing and talking what we would get. I remember we got peeled cooked potato and some meat and that day I was full. We didn't need much to feel full of course as our stomachs had shrunk. Yes, I remember that Christmas lunch vividly and we hoped we would get the same for New Year. But we didn't.

NARRATOR CLIP 17

On any other day they were just the number tattooed on their arms.

VOICE OVER CLIP 18

81996. That was my number. I got it right at the beginning, immediately after we left our luggage and took off our clothes. They called us by number, never by name.

NARRATOR CLIP 18

It is difficult to keep up hope.

And yet, hope springs eternal. Elza does remember a few happy moments amongst the darkness of her life in the camp.

VOICE OVER CLIP 16

I left the camp only once. I think it might have been a Saturday. In the morning they came to look for people to help with some work. Among those who came, there was this young Kapo who I liked because she was a good person. She told us that she fell ill with typhus at the beginning of her stay here, but she got better and she became a Kapo. She was really human and I decided to volunteer because of her, even though I didn't know where we are going. We went to where the latrines were and found a tank of liquid manure. Our task was to take it to the fields. This was the first time I left the camp and it seemed like a real outing to me. I saw trees again, I heard birds singing, I saw houses - though of course it was not normal people living in the houses but just those who worked at the camp - but still I liked it very much. It felt like a special day. It always happens that in the darkest of moments there is some light. I remember when we were coming back, it started to rain and the guards and the Kapos told us to stop and wait under the porch of a church until the rain stopped. I remember us being happy there, singing German songs. That was the first and only day I left the camp.

NARRATOR CLIP 19

Elza was still strong enough to be chosen for work and not death. She left this miserable place and was transferred to a factory near Berlin. But even there, she was still a camp prisoner.

VOICE OVER CLIP 21

The Russian Army was nearing and the rumours had started to spread that we would be evacuated. People said they would release us soon and I still remember the day when the women started to say that in the afternoon people would be selected to leave the camp. But I didn't believe them as it was not the first time I'd heard that.

But that Sunday, it really happened. After lunch we were called to the appellplatz and a selection was made.

NARRATOR CLIP 20

It's easy to forget just how young Elza was when she was arrested. On May 2nd 1944 she was only 16 years old.

VOICE OVER CLIP 25

We lived hour by hour, we only were thinking about what we were doing there and then and what would happen to us.

NARRATOR CLIP 21

Turning 17 in the factory was a sign of survival for Elza. It gave her hope and strength for the long journey home she was finally able to undertake when the war ended. Months later, she arrived at her home in Slovrenc in the summer of 1945. The first person she saw standing in front of her house was her grandmother Amalija. Elza had lost so much weight that Amalija didn't recognise her.



This is still Elza's home today, even though the Europe she lives in now is a very different place from the one torn apart by war. She ends her story with a message to us - look after peace in Europe.

CONCLUSION

This was "My History", a project from the European Parliament in collaboration with people from all over Europe. If you're interested in more podcasts from the European Parliament, look online for "Europarl Audio" or go to the portal of My House of European History.