

Dear Mayor Frank Dehmer, dear Rosemarie Schneider, dear attendees.

My name is Saša Šavel Burkart. I am currently the director of the Slovenian Cultural Center in Berlin, which is part of the Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia. I am also the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor—Šarika, Charlotte Hahn, married name Horvat, born in 1928 in Murska Sobota, Slovenia, then part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

On April 26, 1944, the deportations of Jews living in northeastern Slovenia began in the region called Prekmurje and the city of Murska Sobota, which had been under Hungarian occupation from 1941 until then. The deportations took place so late because they were not carried out during the Horthy regime in Hungary. The largest Jewish community in Slovenia lived in this region on the Mur River – about 500 people. Only 25 returned.

My grandmother spoke only fragmentarily about this dark year of her life. Like many others, she remained silent. Silence and amnesia were symptoms of this wound. The unimaginable pain – both intimate and collective – was largely repressed. When I was a child, she sometimes allowed me to enter her subconscious.

Mostly, however, it is documents that help us piece together the missing parts of the intimate stories of families that have disappeared.

I reconstructed their story from three documents:

From a Czech police report from 1945, which I found by chance ten years ago in the Auschwitz archives. It revealed that my great-grandfather Izidor, Šarika's father, died on a death march in the Czech Republic and was buried there. We identified him by the tattooed number mentioned in the report.

A few years ago, my uncle happened to see a photo in Yad Vashem in which he recognized his mother Šarika. She is standing in front of a train full of corpses at the Seeshaupt train station. Today we know that it is a film shot in Seeshaupt after the American liberation. This photo was shown two years ago at the Museum of Photography in Berlin as part of the exhibition "Flashes of Memory - Photography in the Holocaust."

The third document is an interview with Šarika, recorded in 1996 by the Shoah Foundation for the project "Survivors of the Shoah." I have decided to share her words with you—about her terrible journey, which began on April 26, 1944, at the train station in Murska Sobota and ended in Seeshaupt, with a stopover here in Geislingen.

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*„We held hands—my mother, my brother, and I. Josef Mengele separated us. I wanted to run to her, but he pulled me back. Four or five girls were left alone in the barracks. We wondered what had happened to our mothers. Some said: They ended up in the crematorium. At the time, I wasn't sure if that was true. Smoke was constantly coming out of the crematorium, it stank. It burned day and night. When the Hungarian Jews arrived, it burned continuously. We were among the first transports from Hungarian territory. The later transports were not even selected anymore. There was no more room in the camp. We knew that.*

*We were in quarantine for six weeks. We were told not to drink water, otherwise we would get cholera. The toilets were horrible. An SS man walked among us while we were doing our business. The older women were beaten more than the children, especially the older ones.*

*Mengele came again when workers were needed for a factory. A factory in Germany needed a certain number of people, and he came to select them. We were naked, and he looked to see who was fit for work. He sorted me out. He pushed me out, but I ran back. I don't know what would have happened to me otherwise.*

*Then we got our clothes back, marked with red paint on the back so we couldn't escape. Then we were transported again—the train journey took two or three days.*

*It was hard, it was terrible. A human being can endure more than an animal. When I arrived at the small camp in Germany, I felt better than I had in Auschwitz. We worked in the factory. In winter we had no socks, only wooden clogs and striped clothing. It was bitterly cold. But we were allowed to eat in the factory canteen, and the food was quite good for a camp.*

*There were SS female guards there. One of them saw that I wasn't doing my job well—I was filing something. She called me over and gave me a new task: I had to distribute food and clean the toilets. This woman, this SS woman, liked me. Imagine that. She was otherwise terrible. One of the worst. But when she saw me, her expression changed. She always brought me something—food, medicine.*

*A fellow prisoner, older than me, wanted to commit suicide and threw herself against the electric fence. Our women saved her.*

*That was Geislingen, near Stuttgart. A small town. There weren't many of us, not many barracks. We worked in two shifts—during the day and at night. I think it was a small camp. Once I met someone from Geislingen by the sea in Croatia. I asked him if the camp still existed. He replied curtly that he knew of no camp, no factory there. But it was a large factory that had been converted for munitions production. We only produced munitions.*

*I shared a room with a girl from Slovakia. She too had lost her mother. I don't remember her story, maybe she told me.*

*We were given a lot of bromide in our food—a sedative to make us less sensitive. The older ones said that was the reason we were so indifferent. We only talked about food with the other women. In our minds, we were constantly cooking—because we were hungry.*

*I wasn't looking for someone to replace my mother. Just this older woman from Murska Sobota who worked in the factory office because she spoke German well. I told the SS woman she was my cousin. After that, I was allowed to visit her in the office more often.*

*This woman, the SS woman, helped me. She even took me to her home and cooked for me. She didn't live alone; she had a husband who also worked at the factory. She was very coarse, and I learned to swear from her. They called her "Bomml." I don't know her real name. To this day, I find it strange that she took such good care of me. She had older children and was quite old. Before we were taken on to Dachau-Allach, she said goodbye to me. Maybe she felt sorry for me. She was terrible to the others. She screamed and hit them. She had a whip. To this day, I still don't understand why she helped me.*

*Then we arrived in Allach. It was terrible there. We thought they were going to kill us all. We didn't work, didn't get any food, collected nettles and cooked them. Then we were crammed into wagons again – an endless train – and transported for days. Then the Americans came and liberated us. I didn't get out of the wagon – I was too afraid. I held on to a friend from the Czech Republic."*

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But the horror did not end there for Šarika. In many places across Europe, survivors returned to their looted homes – often robbed by neighbors and fellow citizens. Their houses had been occupied or nationalized. My great-grandfather, who did not return, was initially sentenced to ten years of forced labor by the new communist Yugoslav authorities after the war – for alleged membership in the Cultural Association. The sentence was later overturned.

My grandmother got two tables, two chairs, and two cupboards back. Friends kept the family albums. Once she saw a woman wearing her mother's gold watch on her wrist. Until her death, she encountered people on the street who insulted her and laughed at her when they were deported. Without the strength to preserve their identity, many suppressed their origins. The Jews from Prekmurje were pushed out of historical memory. This was further confirmed by the demolition of the synagogue in Murska Sobota in the 1950s and the deliberate destruction of the Jewish cemetery in the 1980s.

My grandmother, whom I called “Mama,” died relatively young—at the age of 72—in what was then already independent Slovenia. Her heart, which had been causing her pain since she was 16, gave out. She lived modestly in her hometown of Murska Sobota. She had a husband, Štefan, a son, Andrej, and a daughter, Irena – my mother – as well as three granddaughters and one grandson.

Thank you very much for this opportunity and the invitation. Thank you, Ms. Rosemarie Schneider, for allowing me to speak here today about my grandmother's story – in her name, with her words.

Every family has its own special story.

Let us preserve it.

Let us pass it on – to our children, to our grandchildren. Especially in these turbulent times – in the midst of crises and wars – we wish for one thing:

May there be fewer such dark stories in the future. Let us stand together for peace and love.

It is not so difficult.