

ROSARY IN HER POCKET

Local woman spent 18 months in concentration camp

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series

By Thalen Zimmerman
Alexandria Echo Press

Alexandria
At the age of 6, Mary Strasser spent 18 months as a prisoner in a Russian concentration camp with her mother after being forced out of their Yugoslavian home because of their German origin.

Mary was born in Vršac, Yugoslavia – now Serbia – in 1938, where she grew up on a farm with her older half-brother, Josef Milliker, of 15 years. His father died due to a gunshot to the spine during a robbery.

“He’s my half brother, but I don’t ever say that because to me, he is my brother,” said Mary.

In 1937, fourteen years after her first husband’s death, Mary’s mother, Helen (Kuhn) Fischer, married again to Mary’s father, Johann Fischer.

Life was good

A few years after Mary was born, her brother moved to Germany to live with his grandfather on his late dad’s side, as he was expected to inherit his land.

The town of Vršac was a farming community, but instead of wide-open fields on hundreds of acres, these farms shared common walls with their neighbors with crops and livestock raised on the back end of narrow properties.

Mary describes the farmsteads as similar to the businesses on Broadway in Alexandria. Little to no room separating each property.

Her parents raised grapes, grains and vegetables and livestock. In their cellar, her parents turned grapes into wine, which they sold to local hotels. To this day, Mary says she is reminded of her parent’s cellar every time she visits Carlos Creek Winery.

“The smell always stayed with me,” she said.

Mary said her early childhood memory is pretty vague, but she does remember life was good.

Unfortunately, that all changed in October of 1944 when Russian soldiers took her father from the family farm.

Never to be seen again

As Hitler’s invading army stormed across Europe, Allies began to push back on Eastern and Western fronts. From the Yugoslavia side, Russian forces pushed west towards Berlin, capturing German descendants along the way.

Many fled, but Johann, while in his 50s, did not

want to leave everything he had worked hard for throughout his life.

According to Mary, the Russians burned through the town looking for German soldiers.

“They started shooting churches, harassing and scaring people, going from house to house,” Mary remembers.

One day, two Russian soldiers came to Mary’s home. From the view of her bedroom window, Mary saw the soldiers speak with her father. They told him he had to go with them, and when he refused, they threatened to shoot him in front of his family.

Mary watched as her father disappeared in the distance with the soldiers.

“Then my mother and I were alone... They took 100 men that day,” said Mary.

The captured men were taken to a military prison set up in town.

For a short while, Mary and only Mary could visit her father in the prison camp. Spouses of the prisoners were not allowed to visit, only the children.

During Mary’s limited visits, she hugged and kissed her father and passed on messages from her mother.

On Mary’s third trip to the prison, it was vacant.

“I never saw my father again. I never heard anything from him,” said Mary.

Far from home

Three weeks later, in the early morning of November of 1944, Russians came to her neighborhood and told everyone to be in front of the house in five minutes, or they would be shot, leaving them little time to gather personal belongings.

Mary wanted to take a doll her brother gave her during one of his visits home. Her mother told her no as they didn’t know they were going and told Mary to bring her pillow instead.

“That was the last time I saw my home,” Mary said. “I was scared. We were both scared. Mother always said, as bad as things got, I never complained. And I never cried, which I can’t believe, but that’s what she always said.”

Mary, Helen, and the rest of the people in her town were forced to march through the night and by morning, they reached a town.

The Russian soldiers forced the residents of this new town to take in their recently captured prisoners.

They lived there until April of 1945 when they were rounded up into the town square and forced to give up their jewelry,

often yanking earrings out of people’s lobes.

“They would be that cruel,” Mary remarked. “They even dug out gold fillings from people’s teeth.”

Next, the soldiers separated the able-bodied women from the elderly women and children, including Mary and Helen.

Helen was sent back to Vršac to work, and Mary was sent to a different town to live in a shell of a house with nothing but piles of straw and corn husks for mattresses.

“They gave us two blankets, one to cover the straw and one to cover ourselves,” said Mary.

Fortunately, Helen’s elderly aunt was with her, so she was not completely alone.

The poor living conditions caused everyone to become lice-infested. When she brushed out her braids, Mary said, the lice scattered by the dozens.

Then, in October of 1945, Mary and Helen miraculously reunited.

“When she saw me, I was so lice-infested, she couldn’t believe it,” Mary recalled.

Taking the advice from a friend, Mary’s mother doused her head in petroleum and wrapped her hair in cloth to kill off the lice. But over the night, the petroleum leaked onto Mary’s neck and gave her blistering burns.

“But I haven’t had any lice since!” Mary chuckled.

Skin and bones

In November of 1945, two months after WWII ended, Mary and her mother and the other captives were placed in cattle cars. They trekked for three days and three nights until they arrived at a Russian concentration camp.

For the next 18 months, Mary and her mother were held as captives in living quarters shared by 14 others.

During this time, illness and starvation ran rampant through the prisoners. They lived off of bug-infested pea soup and one loaf of cornbread a day rationed between the others in their room. To this day, Mary refuses to eat pea soup.

If there were five, six crumbs on the floor, then there were five, six children after those crumbs,” said Mary.

Mary herself was close to death three times. She remembers a candle burning next to her bed, which was customary when someone was close to death. She asked her mother if she was going to die. All she could respond with was, “only the Lord knows.”



Photos by Thalen Zimmerman / Alexandria Echo Press

Mary Strasser, left, and her mother Helen (Kuhn) Fischer

“I was skin and bones,” Mary said.

A few times, a boy in the camp provided Mary’s mother with dead pigeons he shot with his slingshot. Her mother cooked the pigeons in boiling water and fed them to Mary to help her regain health.

Rosary in her pocket

“One day in April of 1947, a man came and said to my mother, ‘You’re needed in front of the church.’ My mother said, ‘I can’t go to the front of the church. They are all locked shut,’” Mary remembered. “You could not be visibly praying and get caught because they would kill you.”

When a second person came and insisted Mary’s mother come to the church, she went. She found a group of people looking at wedding photos and a letter to accompany them.

“They were looking at wedding pictures of my brother,” Mary said.

After the war, he moved to Salzburg, Austria, where he met a woman and married. Not knowing where his family was, he wrote to their home address in Vršac.

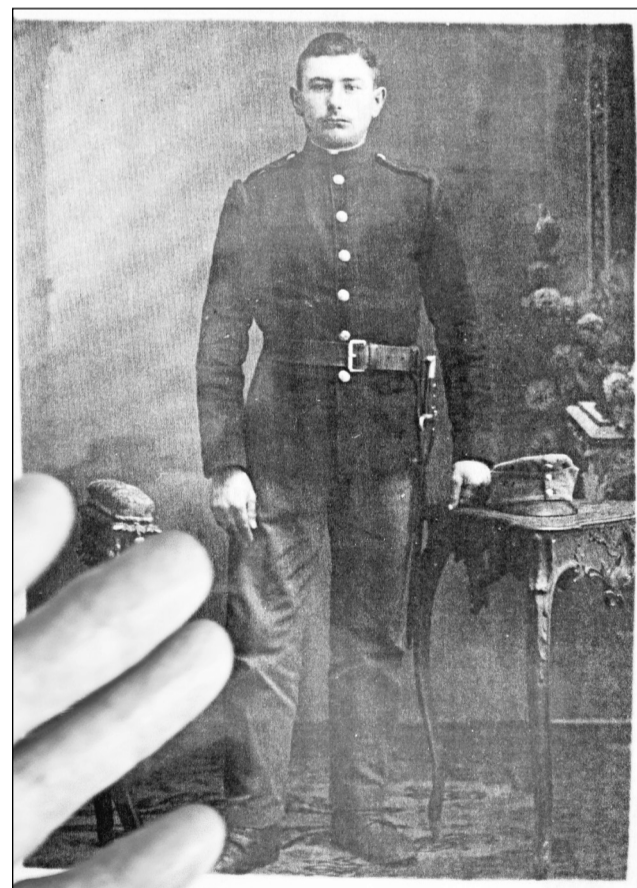
“How that letter got to us in the concentration camp. I don’t have an answer,” Mary admitted. “I’ve always said it was a miracle; it was supposed to find us. I found out years later that my mother carried a Rosary in her pocket, and she prayed secretly.”

“She said, ‘Didn’t you know that I had this Rosary in my hand? And when things really got bleak, I would pray, and it gave me strength,’” Mary said, referring to her mother.

To be continued
Email reporter Thalen Zimmerman at tzimmerman@echopress.com



Helen (Kuhn) Fischer, Mary's mother.



Mary's father, Johann Fischer.

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