

Même ne connaissant personne, la famille Lebeničnik s'adapte toujours très facilement. Ils entrent immédiatement en contact avec le mouvement ouvrier de Tuzla. Dans la maison ouvrière "Sloboda" (Liberté) Les frères Andrija, Albin et Max commencent à se montrer actifs. Leur frère aîné, Leopold, depuis les événements d'Allemagne ne s'intéresse plus à la politique.

Les Lebeničnik participent à toutes les actions et manifestations du mouvement ouvrier progressiste. Ils collaborent avec des dirigeants ouvriers éminents, tels qu'Ivan Marković — Irac, Pašaga Mandžić. Augustin Mota et autres.

Leur maison sert de lieu de réunion. Mitar Trifunović-Učo, communiste connu et défenseur des droits de la classe ouvrière y vient souvent.

Durant les années 1929—1931, années de lourde dictature, le travail devient de plus en plus difficile. Pourtant dans la maison d'Amalija Lebeničnik, il n'y a pas d'agitation. Quoiqu'elle ait en face d'elle des hommes faits, — typographe, serrurier, mineur — la mère continue à apprendre à ses fils comment vivre et travailler. Elle leur apprend à être prudents. Elle-même leur sert d'exemple. Elle porte des lettres, des livres, des tracts. Elle est partout. Elle saisit chaque occasion. Elle parle surtout de Lénine. Elle en est enthousiaste. Elle raconte la Révolution d'Octobre dans tous ses détails. Elle revit chaque victoire. Elle parle de Rose Luxembourg et Karl Liebknecht avec des larmes dans les yeux. Elle aime tout particulièrement commenter le personnage de la mère, du livre de Gorki "La Mère".

Se rappelant ces jours-là, Cvijetin Mijatović-Majo écrit:

En 1931 le vieil Andrija, Amalija et leur fils Andrija habitaient à Lopar, dans une maison qui a été démolie et se trouvait à l'endroit occupé actuellement par la maison de feu Dojčin Lukić (Héros national). Père et fils travaillaient à la mine "Montanika" à Majevisa, (tandis que les deux autres fils, Albin et Thomas, habitaient et travaillaient à Kreka). J'étais alors élève au lycée et j'eus l'occasion, pendant les vacances, de faire leur connaissance. Nous devînmes tout de suite amis, et je passais presque toutes mes soirées chez eux. J'étais fasciné par la force magique, la personnalité révolutionnaire de la vieille Amalija, déjà grise à cette époque. Je la comparais à "La mère" du roman de Gorki, en lui donnant toutefois ma préférence. Alors que la "mère" de Gorki était devenue révolutionnaire sous l'influence de son fils, dans le cas d'Amalija c'est elle qui insufflait un souffle révolutionnaire à toute la famille. Je ne me souviens pas avoir jamais rencontré quelqu'un possédant une telle force de persuasion! Le temps a fait son oeuvre et j'ai oublié une grande partie de nos entretiens. J'ai souvent regretté de ne pas en avoir pris note. Ce qu'elle me raconta au sujet des journées héroïques vécues par l'Allemagne pendant et après la 1ère guerre mondiale sur la personnalité, la lutte et le triste de Karl Liebknecht et de Rose Luxembourg m'a plus frappé et touché que tout ce que j'ai pu lire depuis à ce sujet. Je me souviens qu'elle me racontait ses nuits sans sommeil, en Ruhr, où elle s'occupait de la maison et préparait les repas pour sa famille nombreuse, afin de

pouvoir le lendemain, à la tête de la famille, participer aux grèves, démonstrations, réunions.

Je restais chez eux tard dans la nuit, ne rentrant souvent qu'à l'aube. Mon père me demandant où je passais mes nuits, je me confiais un jour à lui et lui parlais de cette famille. Il me dit alors: "Mais je connais Andrija (le fils), il travaille avec moi. (mon père aussi travaillait à ce moment là à la mine de "Montanika") C'est un homme intelligent. Il m'a promis de venir nous voir. "C'est ainsi qu'Andrija se mit à fréquenter notre maison. Je me souviens que j'étais particulièrement heureux de la forte influence qu'il exerçait sur mon père.

Un jour, un inconnu, mal habillé et au visage abattu se présenta chez eux. D'après sa façon de parler, je m'aperçus qu'il était slovène. Amalija me dit qu'il était communiste, qu'il sortait de prison et qu'il faudrait lui préparer des vêtements et de la nourriture pour son voyage. Je m'en fus à la maison, et mon père m'aida à préparer tout ce qu'il fallait. Je constatais qu'Amalija était très satisfaite de la façon dont je m'étais acquitté de cette tâche. Et moi, naturellement, j'étais tout heureux d'avoir sù lui faire plaisir.

L'été fini, je partis dans le monde et ne devais plus jamais revoir Amalija. Mais je ne l'ai jamais oubliée. Elle reste pour moi la première et la meilleure des institutrices révolutionnaires!"

Et en tant que mère, sans doute connut-elle sa plus grande joie lorsqu'en 1931 ses fils Albin et Max furent reçus au sein du parti communiste de Yougoslavie.

Au cours d'une grande rafle au sein de l'organisation du parti à Tuzla en 1932, les deux fils d'Amalija, parmi beaucoup d'autres communistes, furent arrêtés, jugés à Beograd et condamnés à trois et quatre ans de détention. Tous les communistes furent affreusement maltraités en prison, mais tous eurent une conduite éminemment courageuse, refusant de témoigner ou de s'accuser l'un l'autre. Il en fut de même durant la détention. Pour les jeunes communistes, ce fut une école vivante de fermeté, d'endurance et de non-soumission.

Leur emprisonnement constitua pour Amalija l'un d'une série de coups durs, Mais cette femme et mère merveilleuse ne fléchit jamais. Elle savait vivre la vie d'une révolutionnaire — elle savait y trouver sa fierté.

Après quelques années passées à Vinkovci, Andrija Lebencićnik, devenu pensionnaire, se transporte avec Amalija à Slavinović. Leurs fils sont restés à Vinkovci, où, après leurs années de détention ils se sont associés au travail du syndicat d'Ursovo, usant de toutes les formes légales d'action possibles parmi les travailleurs de ce lieu de concentration des chemins de fer. En tant que communistes, ils ne connurent pas de paix. Continuellement poursuivis et chassés, si bien qu'Albin se dirigea vers Sarajevo et Max vers Vrbanja, près de Majevica.

Lorsqu'Amelija revint à Tuzla, l'organisation du parti s'intéressa tout de suite à elle. Afin d'entrer en contact avec elle, ils lui envoyèrent Anto-

nia Henjel. Entrant dans la cuisine, Antonia y trouva une femme d'une soixantaine d'années, occupée à ranger quelques affaires dans une valise. Un peu troublée par l'apparition de cet hôte inattendu, Amalija recouvre rapidement la valise et la regarde d'un air interrogateur. Antonia se présente et explique l'objet de sa visite, lui transmettant les salutations du parti et son invitation à venir en ville pour un entretien. Ce n'est qu'alors qu'Amelija sembla revivre. Ses gestes rapides, la manière dont elle mena l'entretien et l'énergie que reflétait toute sa personnalité: tout dénotait à quel point elle était prête à accomplir toutes les tâches qui lui seraient assignées. Au cours d'un entretien amical, Amalija montra à Antonia ce qui l'occupait à son arrivée. La valise était pleine de photographies de la guerre d'Espagne. Amalija commentait avec feu chaque photographie et fit cadeau de trois d'entre elles à sa nouvelle amie. Les photos montraient des moines en soutane, d'énormes croix au cou, armés de mitraillettes dirigées contres des femmes et des enfants!

Les femmes progressistes de Tuzla célébrèrent le 8 Mars 1940 — Fête internationale de la femme — dans une petite maison bosniaque, aux environs de la ville. Quatorze femmes participèrent à cette célébration, parmi lesquelles et Amalija Lebeničnik. On y cita Clara Cetkin, Rose Luxembourg et Nadežda Krupskaja. On y recita le poème sur la jeune Anita — victime d'un bombardement fasciste en Espagne.

Amalija, manifestement émue, chantait l'Internationale à travers ses larmes. Les autres femmes présentes l'accompagnaient en sourdine. Puis Amalija raconta un détail de sa vie riche et mouvementée.

"Sous l'influence de la Grande Révolution d'Octobre, le mouvement révolutionnaire s'étendit en Europe et gagna ainsi l'Allemagne. Des grèves massives s'organisèrent. Là où je vivais et travaillais, le gouvernement tenta, par tous les moyens possibles, d'étouffer l'instinct révolutionnaire chez les travailleurs allemands. Entre autres choses, le gouvernement se mit à confisquer la nourriture dans ces endroits, voulant ainsi obliger les masses à la soumission. Etant moi-même ouvrière, je m'adressais à mes camarades de la fabrique de la manière suivante:

"Allons-nous permettre à nos enfants et nos vieux parents de mourir de faim? Allons et agissons!"

Quelques centaines d'ouvrières se dirigèrent vers la gare. Nous nous mirent à parlementer avec le chef de gare. Ne reconstrant aucune compréhension et n'ayant obtenu aucune promesse, nous nous sommes étendues sur la voie ferrée où avait été formée la composition de wagons chargés de nourriture. Et nous nous sommes mises à crier:

"Vous n'emmenez cette nourriture que sur nos corps morts!"

Cette action solidaire des femmes, empêcha, du moins temporairement, l'exportation de la nourriture."

Ceci ne fut pas le dernier contact des femmes progressistes de Tuzla avec la vieille révolutionnaire. Elles trouvaient souvent l'occasion de la voir, de la rencontrer, de discuter avec elle et de lui demander conseil. Et chaque fois, Amalija leur insoufflait sa foi immense en la victoire finale de la classe ouvrière.

Dès le début de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, Amalija prédisait que la Yougoslavie sera attaquée. Elle connaissait l'ennemi — elle connaissait sa force et sa cruauté, et elle savait que les peuples vaincus d'Europe gémissaient sous sa captivité. Mais elle savait aussi que les masses devraient faire face à l'opresseur et conquérir leur liberté dans le sang.

"Si les travailleurs et les paysans se soulèvent à l'unisson, cette guerre peut amener la victoire de la classe ouvrière, mais c'est là un pas énorme qui coûtera beaucoup de victimes à la classe ouvrière. Après mon expérience de la révolution allemande — disait Amalija — je sais que la lutte sera dure. Nous devons être prêts à tout".

Et lorsque notre pays fut à son tour occupé au cours d'une attaque éclair — lorsque les premières voix s'élevèrent contre les violences et les crimes allemands, contre le transfert du peuple en Slovénie, le programme de germanisation, les arrestations, les tortures et les exécutions, Amalija, au cours d'une conversation avec Vera Radić⁵⁾ où elle lui exprimait toute son horreur et sa haine du fascisme, dit entre autres:

"J'ai désormais plus d'espoir. Plus le peuple sera opprimé et tyrannisé, plus tôt il prendra conscience. Et ce peuple se soulèvera!"

La nouvelle d'un soulèvement en masse du peuple en réponse à l'appel du Parti communiste de Yougoslavie se répandit avec la vitesse de l'éclair. La rapidité avec laquelle se développait le mouvement de libération ne pouvait plus être comptée par journées. Rien qu'en Bosnie et Herzégovine, du 27 Juillet⁶⁾ jusques vers la fin Août, les insurgés réussirent à libérer un grand nombre d'endroits et de villes de grande importance et constituèrent tout un ensemble de territoires libérés. Pour toute une partie de la province bosniaque, une vie nouvelle commença, dans la liberté. Les détachements d'insurgés d'Herzégovine suivaient le même tempo. La Bosnie du Nord et de l'Est de même. Les partisans, de Majevisa, Ozren, Birač, Trebava et la plaine de Semberija contrôlaient pour ainsi dire l'ensemble du territoire entre Zvornik, Bijeljina, Brčko et Tuzla.

Les communistes sont à la tête du mouvement. Dans la seule région de Tuzla, environ 40 communistes ont persuadé plus de 1.000 patriotes à se joindre à la lutte de libération.

Une liaison constante existe entre les détachements de partisans et les gens des villes et des villages. Cette fois encore le peuple a eu son mot à dire. C'est en lui que les combattants de l'armée de libération nationale trouvent leur meilleur et leur plus sûr appui.

Chaque quatrième ou cinquième nuit, le courrier, des partisans, le communiste Branko Radić, descend de Majevisa à Tuzla. Il apporte des

⁵⁾ Femme du communiste bien connu et l'un des plus sûrs courriers entre Tuzla et Majevisa, Branko Radić. Leur maison servait de lieu de rendez-vous aux camarades venant de Tuzla et se dirigeant vers le détachement de Majevisa. Vera fut arrêtée le 17 Octobre 1941 avec les Lebeničnik et les Lazarević. Elle fut souvent battue durant son séjour à la prison de Tuzla, mais ne parla jamais. Condamnée aux "travaux forcés", elle fut dirigée vers un camp de concentration.

⁶⁾ Le 27 Juillet est jour de fête en Bosnie et Herzégovine, en tant que premier jour de l'insurrection dans cette République.

rapports et remmène les ordres de l'instructeur du Comité régional du Parti communiste pour la Bosnie et Herzégovine, Mahmud Bušatlija. Les événements se précipitent — la lutte se mène à chaque pas; dans la ville la terreur régne.

Non loin de la ville, dans la vallée de Slavinovička, l'on trouve deux maisons isolées, peu éloignées l'une de l'autre. Leur aspect n'a rien d'extraordinaire. Durant la journée, comme toutes les autres, elles ont un usage normal. Pourtant, dès les premières ténèbres, une nouvelle vie y débute. C'est ici que se croisent les courriers venant des deux directions, que sont accueillis et escortés les groupes en route vers leurs détachements — ces maisons servent d'abri, de base, de dépôt pour le matériel sanitaire, les munitions, les armes — c'est un lieu de rencontres et de consultations. Dans ces deux maisonnettes isolées vivent les familles de Gosta Lazarević, Andrija Lebeničnik et de Branko Radić.

Octobre, venteux, froid et pluvieux. Dans la maison de Gosta, un nouveau groupe attend de partir pour Majevisa. Bušatlija est là également. Le courrier vient tout juste de partir. Il faut attendre. Un jour, deux jours, ou plus, et les jours d'attente sont interminables, durs à supporter. Bušatlija est impatient. Il voudrait que l'on parte le plus vite possible. Leurs hôtes expérimentés — Gosta et Amalija les mettent en garde: sans guide dans la montagne, le mauvais temps, ne connaissant pas la route, en proie aux embuscades — une foule de dangers guette les communistes à chaque pas. Malgré tout, le groupe décide de partir.

Une nuit noire, une pluie battante, un froid mordant, et à la tête du groupe un membre de l'Union de la Jeunesse communiste yougoslave qui ne connaît pas très bien le chemin lui-même. Tout d'un coup, l'éclat d'une bombe. Pas de cris. Bušatlija a tout fait pour sortir de cette situation sans issue, mais en vain, ils étaient encerclés. Il gisait dans son sang, presque complètement déchiqueté. Les autres furent arrêtés et transportés à la prison de Tuzla.

Quelle triste journée que celle de ce 16 Octobre.

A part le groupe de Bušatlija, beaucoup de communistes et de sympathisants furent arrêtés. Ils avaient été dénoncés. Les cellules se remplirent. Les prisonniers furent terriblement battus, à l'aide de matraques, sur les mains, sur les pieds. Tous se sont tûs. Aux moments où il reprenait conscience, Bušatlija murmurait:

"Oui, je suis Mahmud Bušatlija, le communiste. Mais vous n'apprendrez rien de moi, ordures!"

Et personne ne parla. Personne ne trahit.

Les Lebeničnik se retrouvèrent en prison, avec tous les autres.

Jour et nuit les interrogatoires se poursuivent, et cela pendant près d'un mois. Une fois l'enquête terminée, presque tous les prisonniers sont remis à la justice et transportés de la prison de la police à un autre lieu de détention. Grâce à un heureux concours de circonstances et à l'étourderie des administrateurs de la prison, ceux qui étaient inculpés pour des faits identiques se retrouvèrent dans les mêmes cellules.

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On attend le jugement. Pourtant l'audience est remise. Nombreux sont ceux qui seront jugés par la cour martiale. Les "preuves" s'accumulent contre les accusés.

Dans la cellule sont groupées treize prisonnières — des jeunes filles, des femmes mûres et des femmes âgées — emprisonnées pour avoir trop aimé leur pays, leur peuple et la liberté⁷⁾. Parmi elles, une femme aux cheveux gris, d'environ soixante-cinq ans, au visage bon et fin. On l'appelle "mère". Et lorsqu'à la prison la journée tire à sa fin, et avec elle sa ration de gifles et de coups de matraque, une fois retirées dans un coin de la chambre, là où le geôlier ne pourra pas les voir à travers le guichet de la porte, Amalija parle en chuchotant jusqu'au milieu de la nuit: des mines lointaines de la Ruhr, de la vie pénible qui est celle des mineurs et de leurs familles, des souffrances de la classe ouvrière, de la lutte des prolétaires et de la liberté qui doit être assurée, à n'importe quel prix — aux générations à venir.

Tous les yeux sont tournés vers elle, toutes les oreilles tendues; il faut entendre le plus possible — apprendre le plus possible — la "mère", avec sa riche expérience révolutionnaire, son refus des compromis, sa fermeté, leur inculque sa foi et son espoir en la victoire.

Et Amalija parle jusqu'à épuisement, ou jusqu'à ce que dans les couloirs ne résonnent le son des chaînes — le cri des victimes: jusqu'à ce que le sang ne se glace d'horreur dans leurs veines!

Le jugement fut public et dura quatre jours. Durant quatre jours, une fois le matin, une fois le soir, le cortège de prisonniers traverse les rues de Tuzla. Tout comme en prison, où elle fut battue à coups de crosse,

⁷⁾ Au même moment, un grand nombre de communistes et de personnes qui aidaient ou sympathisaient avec le Mouvement de libération furent arrêtés. Arrêtés pour la plupart par groupes, ils furent battus, assommés et maltraités de diverses manières, sans que l'ennemi réussisse à faire d'aucun d'eux un traître. Ils furent jugés, envoyés en camps de concentration, tués. En prison se retrouvèrent, Pavica-Seka Popov et son mari, Ludmila Pandža, Arifa Pekarić, Rozalija Azapagić, et autres. Après eux furent arrêtés Darinka Mitrović, Borka Batalo, Marica Ramljak, Kata Kljakić, Nevenka Kljakić, Mira Koljević, Ivka Nešković et Lucija Herljević avec ses deux enfants. Ce deuxième groupe fut envoyé en camp de concentration, sauf J. Nešković et L. Herljević, temporairement libérées puis de nouveau arrêtées.

Il y avait également Zora Holovac, Raif Mujezinović et Ljubo Gušić, communistes arrêtés en même temps que Bušatlija. Avaient aussi été arrêtés, la vieille Tima Kurević, mère du Secrétaire du Comité régional de la SKOJ, Rachel Albahari, ože Hajor et bien d'autres encore.

Amalija conserve devant la cour martiale son attitude pleine de dignité. Dans ses réponses elle avertit ses juges qu'ils se retrouveront eux-mêmes bientôt au banc des accusés, attendant le jugement du peuple.

Lorsque la sentence fut rendue, les prisonniers se trouvaient tous ensemble dans la salle.

Onze étaient condamnés à mort, les autres seraient déportés.

Pas une parole ne fut prononcée. Tous demeuraient debouts, silencieux, dignes et paisibles. Le public commença à s'agiter. Les gens s'indignaient.

Amalija se tourna vers son fils et s'appuyant sur son épaule, dit en regardant Vera:

"Vous, mes enfants, soyez courageux!"

Tout le long du chemin menant de la cour de justice à la prison, les citoyens s'étaient groupés des deux côtés de la rue. Les uns jetaient au défilé des regards pleins de sympathie, pleins de larmes, d'autres, peu, avaient des regards pleins de rancœur.

A un certain moment, une voix émue s'éleva de la foule et cria:

"Voyez ces femmes, comme elles sont dignes et bien coiffées, comme si elles n'étaient pas condamnées à mort!"

Ce citoyen ne se doutait pas qu'à la veille du jugement, les femmes avaient décidé, d'un commun accord, d'apporter un soin spécial à leur toilette et d'avoir un maintien le plus digne possible.

A leur demande énergique, les prisonnières ne furent pas séparées de la condamnée à mort. Les jours passent. Qu'attend-on? On fait des hypothèses sur une grâce éventuelle. Malgré tout, la situation est tendue. Des nuits sans sommeil s'écoulent. Dans un silence de mort, s'élève parfois les sons de l'Internationale. Amalija lève le poing et chante. Et comme si avec les premiers accords un poids soulageait les poitrines, la souffrance s'atténue.

Bravant l'ennemi! Une lettre est venue des forêts. Elle dit: "Nous sommes fiers de vous!"

Quoiqu'attendant la mort à chaque instant, Amalija est pleine de courage:

"Lorsque je ne serai plus là, mes enfants, demeurez fermes, peut-être le même sort vous attend-il!"

Elle disait souvent qu'elle ne regrettait pas de mourir, mais qu'elle détestait tellement les gendarmes qu'elle avait peine à les regarder, et que le plus dur pour elle serait d'être fusillée par eux.

Un matin, alors que l'on attendait le résultat de l'appel en grâce présenté par les avocats, Amalija déclara:

"Je sais que je ne serai pas grâciée", puis elle se tût comme si elle réfléchissait, puis cria avec colère et mépris:

"Et je n'ai que faire de leur grâce!"

Puis elle leva la main et de nouveau chanta l'Internationale. Durant ces journées, elle chanta souvent l'Internationale et surtout en allemand.

Treize jours s'étaient écoulés. Sept des condamnations à mort furent changées en travaux forcés à Jasenovac.

Amalija et Andrija Lebencičnik, Gosta Lazarević et Džemal Mandžić seraient fusillés!

Amalija fut autorisée au cours de sa dernière nuit à voir son fils Andrija.

"Fils, quand ils t'emmèneront, serres les poings, on ne souffre pas longtemps. Une seconde — et tout est terminé! Souviens — toi de tout ce que je t'ai raconté sur les grands révolutionnaires. Souviens-toi qu'ils sont morts en héros! Nous resterons toujours vivants dans l'esprit de nos camarades, à cause de notre courage et de nos consciences propres! Lorsque les fusils s'élèveront, ne fais pas honte à ta mère!"

Dans la journée précédant son exécution, on proposa à Amalija de l'amener devant un prêtre. Elle interrogea ses camarades du regard.

"Mère, fais ce que tu estimes le mieux".

Amalija sourit et dit:

"Vous savez que je ne crois pas à tout cela. Mais j'irai, afin que vous n'ayez pas d'ennuis à cause de moi".

De la cellule où elle avait été enfermée avec le prêtre, le geôlier et Vera qui l'avait soutenue en chemin entendirent s'élever le son de sa voix indignée.

"Vous voulez m'accorder la dernière communion? Afin que Dieu me pardonne mes péchés? Non! Je n'ai pas péché! Comment aurais-je pu pécher? Ma vie s'est écoulée dans la souffrance"

"Croyez-vous que votre gouvernement puisse se maintenir, grâce à mon exécution, l'exécution d'une femme de plus de soixante ans?"

Le prêtre répondit:

"Je suis ici par devoir, si vous le désirez, vous pouvez"

"Non, je n'ai que faire de votre dernière communion! Mais je tenais à vous dire que vous tuez des innocents!"

Puis elle continua à parler d'une façon émouvante des souffrances et des injustices. Le prêtre se taisait. A la fin, il serra la main d'Amalija.

Lorsqu'elle revint dans sa cellule, elle se coucha et refusa toute nourriture.

Elle ne faisait que répéter:

"Mourir de la main des gendarmes! La pire canaille! Tout se brouille devant mes yeux".

La condamnation à mort d'Amalija Lebencičnik fut confirmée. Toute la cellule le savait. Toute la cellule se taisait.

La dernière nuit s'écoulait, dans la souffrance et l'angoisse.

Minuit approchait. La fatigue l'emportait sur l'émotion. La lumière du plafonnier, impitoyable et dure, transperçait les paupières abaissées — pénétrait jusqu'aux prunelles — brûlait — grillait. Malgré tout un sommeil agité avait fini par s'emparer des prisonnières.

Un bruit presque inaudible tire Vera de sa somnolence. Son regard parcourt les murs. Il lui semble que quelque chose pend de la fenêtre située au dessus du lit d'Amalija. Elle lève la tête et aperçoit Amalija accroupie auprès d'un tabouret, sous la fenêtre. Elle était occupée à

torde et tresser quelque chose. Que faire? Réveiller les autres? Son intention était évidente.

"Mère, pourquoi ne dors-tu pas?"

Amalija se tourne vers Vera.

"Dors toi-même, la-bas!"

Vera répond qu'elle n'arrive pas à dormir et se lève.

Amalija la rabroue de nouveau.

Vera vient pourtant s'asseoir à côté d'elle.

"Vera, sais-tu, ils vont me fusiller avec mon fils! C'est épouvantable! Ils veulent que mes propres yeux soient témoins de la mort de mon fils. Et qui? Les gendarmes! Les gendarmes! Ils veulent jouir de mes souffrances! Mais non. Jamais!"

Et elle sortit de sous son oreiller un gros morceau de verre, un bout de miroir, qu'elle avait, qui sait comment, réussi à cacher!

Sur les vieilles mains ridées, des entailles étaient visibles. Le verre était trop épais et les mains n'avaient été qu'écorchées, la gauche surtout.

"C'est impossible, Vera. Je n'ai pas pu réussir à les couper. Ma peau est trop dure. Sans cela, les gendarmes n'auraient pas eu le plaisir de me fusiller. Mais ainsi"

Leur chuchotement a réveillé les autres prisonnières. Plus personne n'a dormi.

Le lendemain, vers neuf heures, le geôlier apparut.

"Allez, vieille, lèves-toi! On va te fusiller."

Amalija se lève doucement. Le geôlier tenait à la main un foulard blanc afin de lui bander les yeux avant la fusillade. Se mettant en colère, elle le jete à terre et lève le poing.

Elle se retourne et demande:

"Où est mon fils?"

Andrija avait déjà été emmené.

"Il t'attend, il va te tenir compagnie!" répond l'oustachi en ricanant.

La vieille femme le regarde avec dédain et se tourne vers ses compagnes pour leur faire ses adieux. Le vieux visage ridé est mouillé de larmes, mêlés à leurs baisers d'adieux. Des vagues de souffrance transpercent leurs cœurs, une fureur incontrôlable envahit leurs corps.

Les dernières poignées de main, les dernières embrassades.

Amalija avant de franchir le seuil, se retourne et dit:

"Mes enfants, soyez courageuses. Demeurez résolues. Tous, nous mourons pour la liberté!"

Le geôlier la pousse durement. Amalija titube. Elle est affaiblie par les coups reçus et les nuits passées sur un rude grabat. Elle traverse la cour, appuyée sur l'épaule de son fils.

"Fils, lèves la tête, et si tu peux, chantes!"

La vieille voix chevrotante rompt le silence qui règne dans la prison. L'Internationale!

Emu, le geôlier le suit. Il avance d'un pas incertain, la tête détournée — comme s'il voulait demander quelque chose — que faire dans une telle situation?

Džema Mandžić vient d'être amené. Sa mère lui a envoyé un nouveau costume en prison, afin qu'il le porte le jour de son exécution. Que son

filis soit beau et fier — comme un vrai communiste! Qu'il soit digne et courageux!

Mais Džema a renvoyé le costume, avec le message suivant: — Même dans ses vieux habits il saura mourir comme un homme!

Les cellules sont silencieuses. Pas un souffle ne se fait entendre. Tous se sont couchés par terre. Seule la mort rôde!

Dans la cour, c'est la hâte.

Que ces communistes crèvent le plus vite possible!

Džema est fusillé le premier, puis Gosta. On amène Andrija.

Durant tout ce temps, à quelques pas de là se tenait Amalija, ses mains bleues enchainées. Andrija s'appuie sur les planches derrière lesquelles la terre a été creusée. Son regard cherche celui de sa mère. La vieille femme ravale ses larmes brûlantes. Les dents serrées, elle crie:

"Fils, souviens-toi des paroles de ta mère! Tête haute . . .!"

Fusillade!

Andrija tombe.

"Allez la vieille. On en a assez de tes paroles communistes!"

Amalija rassemble ses forces, et fermement, comme si elle ne ressentait aucune souffrance, elle avance. La voilà devant les planches. Elle se retourne. Lève sa vieille tête grise et crie:

"Tirez, renégats, nos camarades tireront un jour sur vous!"

Détonations fumée Amalija tressaille et tombe. Elle est prosternée

Le froid mordant de février transperce les os et refroidit doucement le sang pourpre fraîchement versé, le vent s'élève en gémissant des collines environnantes et amène avec lui la neige . . .

Les barreaux de fer de la prison laissent échapper des cris d'horreur.

AMALIJA LEBENIČNIK*

The life of Amalija Lebeničnik, without any doubt, might serve as an example, to all the generations to come, of how a person should live and fight.

Early in February, 1942. The martial court of Tuzla has just condemned to death a group of prisoners — among whom Amalija Lebeničnik, a woman who is leaving behind her several decades of hard life as a worker, a woman who has given all to the cause of the Revolution, who has given herself — her family.

February 16th, 1942. The sound of bullets was heard within the walls of the ill-reputed prison of Tuzla "Štoka". One.... two.... three.... Džemal Mandžić¹), Gosto Lazarević² and Andrija Lebeničnik³ are dead.

*) Written on the basis of existing documents and the reminiscences of Max Lebeničnik, Vera Radić-Perić, Ludmila Pandža, Antonija Henjel and others.

¹) According to the orders of the Provincial Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party, joined the "domobrans" together with other communists during the second half of 1941. They stole a great quantity of arms and munitions from the military arsenal and managed to send it to the members of the insurrection movement in Majeвица. Arrested in Tuzla, as false "domobran", was condemned to death and shot.

²) The Lazarevićs house was situated in an isolated place not far from Slavinović. In the immediate surroundings, lived two other communist families which were helping the liberation movement: the Lebeničniks and the Radićs. It was a meeting place for the couriers, for the communists who came from the town on their way to join the detachment in Majeвица, for the comrades who came from the detachment to receive arms, material, etc... A group of communists from Tuzla, with Mahmud Busatlija, left the Lazarevićs' house without having waited for the courier.

A traitor, who had been watching the comings and goings in the Lazarević household for the last few days, reported to the ustashi in Tuzla, in which at the time great terror and a big hunt for communists was on.

The group, reported on, was arrested and taken to Tuzla, after having wandered around in the cold, rainy and windy night. Bušatlija, while throwing a hand-bomb, wounded himself to death, but succeeded in destroying the documents he was carrying. In connection with the capture of this group many were arrested among which the Lazarevićs, the Lebeničniks and Vera Radić, wife of Branko Radić.

³) Two of the Lebeničnik sons, pre-war communists, had already joined the liberation movement. But it so happened that in these days of October 1941, Andrija was at home. He also left for Majeвица, but owing to the treason of a peasant and somewhat to his own imprudence, fell into the hands of the gendarmes. At the moment of the arrests, a great amount of munitions was found in the Lebeničniks' cave, which did nothing to ameliorate their position. Condemned to death together with his mother, Andrija was shot on February 16th, 1942.

"Son, remember your mother's words! Raise your head and, if you can, sing!"

And an old, trembling, husky, voice began to sing the "International"!

Amalija was the last to be shot. She had to witness the death of her comrades — the death of her son. This was the enemy's last and most cruel vengeance on this fearless woman, whose courage and tremendous pride would have caused even fools to wonder.

The gray-haired, old woman went to her death, head up.

The white snow was being swept away by the wind, and with it the fresh blood of the dead.

"Shoot, traitors our comrades will soon be shooting you!"

Long live the revolution!"

Detonation . . . smoke . . . cries of horror coming from behind the prison's iron bars.

Amalija Lebeničnik's life was hard and long. Beginning somewhere in the heart of Slovenia, it led her to Judenburg, Dortmund, Hamburg, Essenborbek and Botrop, then Senja, Cuprija, Kreka, Lopar, Slavinović and finally to Tuzla where it was to end so tragically. A life made of suffering and misery, the lot of the proletariat, but also full of the pride which is that of those who take part in such tasks as the organisation of strikes, demonstrations, rallies and meetings.

I never knew Amalija, but I keep meeting her, everywhere, in all the places where people fight for justice, equality and liberty.

They say: she was a dark, tall and well-built woman. She was full of self-confidence, full of energy. She was always in good humour. She was never upset — always calm and secure. She was kind and patient with people. Everyone wondered at the strength she always showed. Her tenacity was never in any way importunate, and she was never to be discouraged by ill success. On the contrary, she seemed to find in it a new source of vigour for renewed struggle.

She was esteemed by the people — more, she was loved by the people.

The young people called her "Mother", out of love.

Amalija Lebeničnik was born in Škofija Loka before or after the year 1875 — no one knows exactly. One thing is sure: she was still a very young girl, of a poor family, when she became a worker and at an early age joined the socialist movement. Already then, she came into conflict with the clergy, because of which she had difficulties — then, courageously, she broke with religion.

Young, clever and combative, Amalija shared and spread the progressive ideas of the workers' movement; she appeared before the workers, talked, explained, worked. She was loved by all. As the wife of a miner, she experienced once more all the miseries which are the lot of the working class. Bitter is the bread earned in the mines of Trbovlje, but an even more bitter one awaited them in the foreign, far away places where they were to go to earn it.

The year 1900 found them in Germany. In Judenburg, Amalija became a mother, giving birth to her first child, Leopold. From this day

on, the Lebencičnik family grew constantly. At the same time, increased the number of hungry mouths to be fed. As if chased by the whip, Amalija and Andrija⁴⁾ went from place to place. The miner from Slovenija broke stone after stone in more than twenty mines mostly in the region of the Ruhr. He bartered his strength for mere bites of bread — often not even enough to keep his family alive.

These young workers, being strangers, liberal and full of hope for a better life, often came into conflict with those employing them. Notices, changes of residence — the spite and hate of certain people... and the evident sympathy of others, poor and miserable as they.

Discontent everywhere. Demonstrations, strikes. Amalija was everywhere. She was in the crowds of workers, in the streets of Osterfeld in 1912, when the troopers charged, swords drawn. A little girl, ten or eleven years old tightly held on to her mother.

Amalija taught her children to fight without compromise. And she had seven!

A little one died shortly after having learned to totter on this earth, in the heart of which his father had to spend ten dreadful hours for the scanty salary of the miner!

Francisca had just become a young girl when she died of meningitis, on the eve of the First World War. She was very like her mother, and very much influenced by her. She often had long conversations with her parents, commenting on the workers' hard conditions of life, the daily injustices which they met, the necessity for the working class to fight.

In those days, it was obligatory to attend church before classes. No more than her mother did Francisca like that! One day she said to her mother:

"The priest tells us that we should fast on Tuesdays and Fridays. But I have noticed that the butcher brings him meat every day of the week. The miners have to fast — every single day of the week, since they have nothing to eat. My father works hard in the mine, but all the reward he gets is a meagre piece of bread, when it is not only a turnip! Is not that a shame?"

Like her mother, young Francisca was very sensitive, unselfish and good.

They were then living not far from Essen, in Essenborbek. The young girl kept house and took care of the children of her aunt, who was working as a cook in the Russian prisoners' camp. The young girl's heart ached as she witnessed everyday the prisoners' return from a hard day's work in the mines, stumbling from weariness and hunger. And she always managed from the already small portion which she received from her parents, to share a few bites with the prisoners, which she gave to them

⁴⁾ Old miner who knew nothing, all his life but work and misery. He was never politically active, but agreed with all Amalija did, and did not oppose her activities, nor later, those of his sons. Already retired before the war, he was a nice old man, always quietly smoking his little pipe. When the whole family was arrested in October 1941, Andrija was released after a few days, for there was no proof against him. His Amalija and son Andrija were condemned to death and shot on February the 16th, 1942.

with a big smile of friendship. When she died, the funeral procession passed in front of the camp. Behind the fences, the prisoners stood, as if changed into stones. Their streaming eyes silently paid last homage to their dear little friend.

Amalija often visited her daughter's grave and cried. One day, the butcher's wife found her there and asked:

"Why cry so much? You surely have other children waiting at home!"

Amalija cried all the more. She remembered that her children were hungry and that she could not feed them.

The woman took pity and offered Amalija to take her ration card for bread. The weeping mother was restless but found enough energy to refuse. Charity? Never! Amalija was always very proud!

Once her small son asked Amalija:

"Mother, do you ever eat bread?"

Amalija would go several days without eating so as to be able to give one more bite to each of the hungry little tummies!

However, the children never knew. Their mother was ready to suffer the worst for their sake. She taught them never to be selfish. She taught them to have faith and to love people. She inspired them, and each good action of theirs was rewarded by her wonderful motherly love.

One day in 1913, a priest entered the Lebeničnik family's home. This was a big surprise, for both Amalija and Andrija were known for never having gone to church.

He greeted them from the threshold:

"Blessed be Jesus!"

"Good day", answered Amalija.

Then began a conventional conversation on health, the family, life in general. Finally, the priest came to the point:

"Madame", he said, "you have such a nice, clean home. Your children are good pupils and very well brought up. This is all very well, but, excuse me, why do you never come to church?"

Amalija mumbled something like — she was very busy, she had not the time. It did not sound very convincing. The priest looked at her inquiringly and said:

"Is that really the reason?"

"Well . . .", Amalija struggled her shoulders.

"Madame, promise that you and your husband will come to church, and we will give you all you need. We will equip you from head to toe. Including the cane and the umbrella. Everything for you and your children. All I want is a promise."

Amalija smiled contemptibly.

"Excuse me, but my convictions are too deep to be bought with your money!"

"Unfortunately, nothing can be done with you!"

"So it seems!" answered Amalija, making it plain that the conversation was closed.

It is almost impossible to find a time when Amalija was not, with all her might, and almost with fanaticism, working for the propagation of progressive ideas. At home, at work, in the streets. She particularly wished to arouse the women from their state of depression, and make them aware of the place that was theirs in the family and in society. The fight for the equality of man and woman, for the liberation of the working class, for equality of rights — became her life obsession.

She was very popular among the women workers. They loved and esteemed her. And if sometimes she encountered difficulties and incomprehension, she showed great patience and never the slightest irritation. In Botrop, in 1913, a young socialist professor was to give a lecture on the subject: "Is there a God?" Amalija did not spare pains to gather the greatest possible number of workers and assure their full attention and interest. The lecture was also attended by priests, gendarmes and members of the police.

"Is there a God?", asked the professor, and immediately answered:

"There is no God!" In the room, it was very quiet. All ears were strained. The professor talked for a long time, clearly and in an interesting manner on religion, life in general, explaining the aims and the purposes of the socialist movement. He was often interrupted by the priests but they were never able to refute his arguments. Among other things, the professor said:

"The priests bore the people with their faith and the gentlemen with their laws!" This was met with great approval. The lecture was a big success. It was long talked about. And Amalija, who had been the most active to have it organized was very happy. She often mentioned this lecture as a big event.

1916—1917. Hunger reigned among the miners of the Ruhr region. In Amalija and Andrija Lebencičnik's house everyone would have liked to eat at least a few potatoes. But for one or two kilogrammes one had to go all the way to the neighbouring villages, which was forbidden by law, which did not allow any food whatsoever to be brought from the villages. Thus, such "excursions" were full of danger. Not only did the more well-to-do peasants refuse to sell anything to the workers, but they even sent their dogs after them. But, however, it sometimes happened that someone took pity!

Coming back one night from a village, with a load of potatoes on her back and holding a child by the hand, Amalija having in vain avoided the station, was stopped by gendarmes.

"What have you there?"

"Potatoes!"

These words were enough to arouse the fury of these monsters. Amalija was desperate. She tried to explain how terrible it was to see one's children suffering from hunger, and not be able to help them — to suffer oneself of hunger. She cried, begged, pleaded. All in vain. They took everything. They yelled at her, pushed her, saying that they would take her to prison.

"Then you would be forced to feed me, me and my children!" The gendarmes were furious.

"We will throw you into the river!" "I would not let anyone do this to me!", answered Amalija, then sadly looking at the hungry young child standing beside her, she cried: "You with your bellies full, you cannot know what misery and hunger mean!"

Her whole life was nothing but misery and suffering. Poverty, endless work, pain, exhaustion and grief were her constant companions. She tasted her first piece of cake when she was fifteen! Then followed a long stretch of years when she did not even taste bread — for all was to go to her husband, who needed strength to work, to her children who needed food to grow. And Amalija's love was greater than anything.

This woman possessed inexhaustible energy, tenacity and optimism. She never gave up. Even in the most difficult times. She knew, and she felt — she was always saying that "the working class must win. It will be a long and difficult battle, for victory is not easy to win."

After the conclusion of the armistice, trouble began in Germany. The masses were restless. The leaders of the social-democratic party were following a policy of compromise, a policy of betrayal. The lack of leadership was evident.

Through the streets of the cities and villages of the mining area, passed the procession of armed soldiers and sailors, coming back from the front. Red carnations and red ribbons! Red ties on the sailors! A wave of enthusiasm swept over the whole region!

The procession of soldiers and people had been going by the Essen station for more than an hour. Rose Luxembourg, Karl Liebknecht, Lenin, the Revolution were cheered.

Amalija had taken her children to see the procession. Her face was shining with joy. She was very excited. All during these days, she was hardly at home.

When the revolution was defeated and the death of Rose Luxembourg learned, Amalija cried bitterly. She pulled at her hair and seemed out of her mind. The children, seeing her, cried as if one of them had just died. Later, their mother told them:

"It was different in Russia. There they have Lenin and a strong party who is leading them the right way."

Then followed a period of terrorism, murder and violence. The revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries came into armed conflict. The people suffered, the people were hungry. Even then, Amalija did not lose her head. She was always in action. She never rested. Every new action brought her new joy.

In 1919 there was a big drive for the reform of the school and the separation of the church and the state.

"We demand the liberty of the school". This slogan demanded that religion should no longer be taught in school. The pupils went on strike. Meetings, demonstrations took place. The protests grew louder and louder. One of the organizers of the strike was Amalija Lebničnik. Once more

she explained to her children the reason for this struggle, prepared them and with them participated in this new action. The strike was successful!

A few years have passed since the end of the First World War, but the economic, then the political situation was getting worse and worse, so that in 1922 and 1923, life seemed almost impossible. Money was becoming more and more worthless. Food more and more expensive. Nothing was to be found at the market. Money soon became just a heap of worthless paper. Discontent rose like a tide. The miners of the Ruhr expressed louder and louder their revolt smothered for so long. An internal agitation could be felt throughout Germany.

All this made Andrija Lebeničnik decide to return to Yugoslavia. Perhaps somewhere in him lay the hope that in his homeland, life would not be so cruel, or at least more bearable.

From 1923 onwards they moved from one place in Yugoslavia to another. Lebeničnik and two of his sons worked in the pits of the Senjska mine. But not for long. The conditions were unbearable. They went to Cuprija. There, they worked for six months in the sugar factory. But neither Leopold, nor Andrija, and especially not their father, an old miner, could stand it any longer.

In December 1924 they arrived at the mine of Kreka.

The Lebeničnik family, even without knowing anyone, always adapted itself very rapidly. They made contact with the workers' movement in Tuzla. Andrija, Albin and Maks begin to take an active part in the activities of the Workers' Centre "Sloboda" (Liberty). The eldest brother, Leopold, since the events in Germany, took no interest in politics.

The Lebeničniks took part in all the actions and demonstrations of the Workers' movement. They collaborated with eminent leaders, such as: Ivan Marković-Irac, Pašaga Mandžić, Augustin Moto and others.

Meetings took place in their home. They often received the visit of the great communist and fighter for workers' rights — Mitar Trifunović-Učo.

From 1929 to 1931, a period of intense dictatorship, work was made difficult. However, the Lebeničnik household remained calm. The mother kept reminding her sons — grown-up men with a trade (printer, locksmith, miner) how to live and fight. She warned them to be cautious. She herself was an example to them. She carried letters, books, leaflets. She was everywhere. Alert. She made the most of every opportunity. She spoke mostly of Lenin. She had great admiration for him. She knew every detail of the October Revolution, each victory. She talked about Rose Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht with tears in her eyes. She particularly liked to comment on the character of the mother in Maxim Gorki's "The Mother".

Remembering these days Cvijetin Mijatović-Majo writes:

— In 1931 the old Andrija, Amalija and their son Andrija were living in Lopar, in a house which no longer exists and was located on the very place where now stands the house of the Late Dojčin Lukić. (National Hero). Father and son were then working in the "Montanika" mine, in Majeveca, while the two other sons, Albin and Thomas worked and lived in Kreka. I was then a student but I happened to meet them during my holidays. We immediately got on very well. I was soon spending all my evenings at their place. It was the revolutionary personality, the strong magic radiating from the already gray-haired Amalija which most fascinated me. I compared her to the "Mother" of Gorki, but found her even superior. For Gorki's "Mother" became a revolutionary under the influence of her son, while Amalija was the one who inspired all her family. I don't remember having ever met anyone with such power of persuasion. Time has gone by and I cannot remember all that she related. I often regretted not to have taken notes. Her exciting days in Germany during and after the First World War, the personality, struggle and ill-fate of Karl Liebknecht and Rose Luxembourg: she made all this very clear to me, much clearer than from all what I later read. I remember how she told me about the nights in the Ruhr when she stayed awake, taking care of her house and preparing meals so as to be able the following day to take her family to strikes, demonstrations, meetings.

I stayed at their place till late at night, often coming home only at daybreak. When my father asked me where I spend my nights, I confided in him and told him about this family. Then he said to me: "But I know young Andrija, he works with me (my father then worked at the "Montanika" mine). He promised to drop by. He seems a most intelligent man. Thus it was that Andrija began to come to our house. I remember that what made me most happy was the strong influence he had on my father.

Once I found at their place an unknown, badly dressed man, with a tired looking face. I noticed from the way he spoke that he must be Slovene. Amalija told me he was a communist and had been in prison; clothes and food should be provided for him before he followed his way home. I went to my house and my father helped me to prepare all that was necessary. Amalija seemed very happy by the way I had accomplished this task. And I remember how proud I was to have satisfied her.

After that summer, I went into the world and was never to see Amalija again. But I have never forgotten her. She was my first and best revolutionary teacher.

Cvijetin Mijatović

And as a mother she knew her greatest joy when her sons Albin and Maks were accepted as members of the Yugoslav Communist Party in 1931.

During a raid on the Party in Tuzla, in 1932, Amalija's two sons, together with other communists were arrested and taken to Beograd for trial, where they were sentenced to three and four years of prison. All the communists were severely beaten while in prison, but they all refused to betray one another. During their imprisonment, it was the same thing.

This was, for the young communists, a great school of endurance, strength and obstinacy.

Their arrest came to Amalija as one of many blows. But this wonderful woman and wonderful mother never gave up. She knew how to live the life of a revolutionary — she knew how to take pride in it.

After a few years spent in Vinkovci, Andrija Lebničnik, now retired, went with Amalija to live in Slavinović. Their sons stayed in Vinkovci, where after their years of prison, they joined a trade union (one of the United Workers' Trade Unions), taking advantage of every legal form of activity among the workers of this important railway junction.

But as communists they were never left in peace. Persecuted and turned out, they left, Albin went to Sarajevo and Maks to Vrbanja, Mount Majevica and Slavinović.

When Amalija Lebničnik returned to Tuzla, the Party organisation was immediately interested in her. They sent Antonija Henjel to see her, so as to re-establish contact with her. Entering the kitchen, Antonija found a woman, about sixty years old, putting something away in an old suitcase. Surprised by the arrival of this unexpected guest, Amalija quickly hid the suitcase and looked inquiringly. Only when Antonija told her why she had come and that the Party was inviting her to come to the city for a meeting, did she become herself again. Her quick movements, the way she talked and the vigour reflected by her whole face showed how ready she was to fulfill all the tasks which might be set before her. In the course of a friendly conversation, she showed Antonija what she had been doing at the moment of her arrival. The suitcase was filled with photographs of the Spanish war. Amalija commented vehemently each one of them. Finally she chose three of these photos and gave them to her new friend. The photos showed priests in robes, with big crosses hanging from their necks, machine guns in hand aimed at a group of women and children.

On the occasion of International Woman's Day — the 8th of March, 1940, the progressive women of Tuzla met in a small house on the limits of the city. Fourteen women took part in this celebration, among whom was Amalija. They talked about Rose Luxembourg, Clara Cetkin, Nadežda Krupskaja. They read the poem on the young Anita — victim of fascist bombardment in Spain.

Amalija greatly moved, sang the "International" with tears in her eyes. The other women accompanied her softly. Then, she related a detail of her long, rich life.

"Under the impulse of the Great October Revolution, the movement spread to Europe and thus, to Germany. Big strikes began. In the place where I lived and worked, the Government was doing all it could to crush the revolutionary mood of the workers. Among other things, they began to carry away all the foodstuffs, hoping thus to force the masses to give up. A worker myself, I gathered my comrades from the factory and said:

"Are we going to allow our children and old parents to starve? Let us go and prevent this!"

I few hundred of us women-workers moved in the direction of the station. We began to discuss the matter with the station master. When we saw that we could hope for no comprehension, when no promise was made, we lay down on the tracks in front of the train which was to take the goods away, and cried:

"You will take the food away, only over our dead bodies!"

This action and the solidarity of the women kept the food from being taken away, at least for a time."

This was not the last contact of the progressive women of Tuzla with the old revolutionary. They often seized the occasion to visit her, to talk with her and ask her advice. And each time she inspired them with her tremendous faith in the final victory of the working class.

When the Second World War began, Amalija, predicted that it would spread to Yugoslavia. She knew the enemy well, she knew its force and its cruelty, and that the peoples of Europe would have to suffer from its tyranny. But she also knew that the masses must resist the usurper, and win their liberty at the cost of their lives.

"If the workers and peasants unite and fight, this war may see the victory of the working class; but this will be an enormous step forward which will require many victims. From my experience, from the German revolution", said Amalija "I know that the fight will be hard. We must be ready for the worse!"

When after an offensive as quick as lightning, Yugoslavia was finally occupied, when the first voices rose against the German violence and crimes, against the expatriation of the people in Slovenija, against the germanisation plan, against the arrests, the tortures and the killings, Amalija, in the course of a conversation with Vera (Radić⁵), expressing her horror and her hate of fascism, said:

"I now have more hope. The more the people are oppressed and tyrannized, the sooner they will become conscious of what must be done. And the people will rise in arms."

News of the response of the people to the call of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to rise up in arms spread as quickly as lightning. The rapid development of the liberation movement could not be counted by days. In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, the partisans, from July 27th⁶) to the end of August liberated a large number of places and towns and created large liberated territories. A large part of the Bosnian region began a new life, of liberty. The partisans of Herzegovina were not far behind. Nor Eastern and Northern Bosnia. Partisans from Majevica, Ozren, Birča, Trebava and from the plain of Semberija dominated the whole of the territory between Zvornik, Bijeljina, Brčko and Tuzla.

⁵) Wife of the well-known communist and one of the best messengers between Tuzla and Majevica, Branko Radić. Their house served as a meeting place for the comrades coming from the city on their way to join the Majevica detachment. Vera was arrested together with the Lebeničniks and Lazarevićs on October the 17th, 1941. While in the Tuzla prison, she was often beaten but never talked. Condemned to "hard labour", she was sent to a concentration camp.

⁶) The 27th of July is holiday in Bosnia and Herzegovina the first day of the Uprising in this Republic.

The communists were at the head of the movement. In the region of Tuzla alone about 40 communists induced more than 1,000 patriots to serve the cause of their country.

Strong were the ties between the partisans and the people in the towns and the villages. Once again the people had their say. The fighters of the liberation army found in them their greatest and soundest support.

Each Thursday or Friday night, the partisan courier Branko Radić came down to Tuzla. He brought the reports and took back the orders to the regional committee of the Communist Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mahmut Bušatlija. The situation was getting tense — house-to-house fighting, acts of terrorism every where.

Not far from the city, in the Slavinovačka valley, stood two isolated houses. They did not seem in any way out of the ordinary. During day time, life went on normally. But as soon as it grew dark, a new life began. It became the meeting place of couriers coming from opposite directions. Groups on their way to join the partisans met and departed from there; it was the hiding place for medical material, arms and ammunitions, a meeting place. In these two isolated houses lived the families of Gosto Lazarević, Andrija Lebničnik and Branko Radić.

October, windy, cold and rainy. In Gosto's house, a new group awaited departure for Majević. Bušatlija was there too. A courier had just left. That meant they would have to wait. A day, two, or more. And days of waiting are long, almost unbearably so. Bušatlija was very impatient. He would have liked to leave as soon as possible. Their hosts, Gosto and Amalija warned them, out of their own experience. They had the weather against them, they had no guide, they did not know the way, they might fall into an ambush — there was danger at every pace. Nevertheless, the group left.

The rain was pouring down, the night was cold and dark: leading them was youth, member of the Yugoslav Communist Party, who did not know the way very well. All of a sudden, an hand grenade exploded. No shrieks. Bušatlija did all in his power to save the situation, in vain. They were surrounded. Bušatlija lay in his own blood, literally torn to pieces. They were all arrested and taken to the prison of Tuzla.

What a sad October 16th!

Many communists and their friends were arrested, in connection with the Bušatlija group. They had been denounced. The cells filled up. The prisoners were beaten terribly, everywhere. But all kept silent. At the moments when he came to himself, Bušatlija cried:

"Yes, I am Mahmut Bušatlija, the communist. But you will get nothing out of me, rascals!"

No one talked. No one betrayed.

The Lebničniks found themselves in prison with all the others.

Inquests went on night and day, and this for almost a month. After the inquest, almost all the prisoners were sent to court and transferred to another prison. Owing to coincidence and carelessness on the part of the prison warden, those who were arrested for the same deeds found themselves together in the same cells. Thus, they had the time and the

opportunity to agree on the declarations they would make in court. The prison committee had a great deal of work at hand.

The trial was set. Then it was cancelled. Many were to be tried by the martial court.

They were heaping up "evidence" against the prisoners.

In the room, there were thirteen women — young girls, middle-aged and old women — all imprisoned for having loved their country too much, their people, for having wanted liberty⁷). Among them was a gray-haired woman, about sixty-five years old, with a wonderful and luminous face. They called her "Mother". And when night ended the prisoners' day of slappings and beatings and when they retired to a corner of the room, where the guard would not be able to see them, the old woman began to talk: she talked about the far-away mines of the Ruhr, about the hard life which is that of the miners and their families, about the miseries of the working class, about the struggle of the proletariat and about the liberty which must be ensured — at any price — for the generations to come.

All eyes were upon her, all ears strained, to hear and learn as much as possible from "Mother" who with her rich experience as a revolutionary, her refusal to compromise, her firmness, inspired them with her faith and hope in final victory.

This went on until fatigue prevailed, or the sound of chains and the cries of victims began to be heard in the prison corridors till from horror, blood turned cold in the veins!

The trial was public and lasted four days. Four days during which, morning and afternoon, the procession of prisoners went through the streets of Tuzla. In front of the martial court, Amalija kept the same dignified attitude she had in prison when beaten, spit at, cursed. By her answers she made it clear to her judges that they would soon find themselves in the place of the accused, awaiting the judgement of the people.

When the sentence was read, they were all together in the room.

Eleven were condemned to death, the others would be deported.

Not a sound as to be heard. All remained calm, silent. But the public was restless. People began to protest.

Amalija turned to her son, and taking hold of his shoulders, said, looking at Vera:

"Be brave, my children!"

⁷) During this period a great number of communists, helpers and sympathisers of the liberation movement were arrested, generally in groups. They were beaten, battered all over and generally ill-treated but the enemy never succeeded in making anyone of them a traitor. They were sentenced, sent to concentration camps, killed. Found themselves in prison: Pavica-Seka Popov and her husband, Ludmila Pandža, Arifa Pekarić, Rozalija Azapagić, and others. After them, were arrested: Darinka Mitrović, Borka Batalo, Marica Ramljak, Kata Kljakić, Nevenka Kljakić, Mira Koljević, Ivka Nešković and Lucija Herljević with her two children. This second group was sent to a concentration camp, (all but J. Nešković and L. Herljević, temporarily released then again arrested). Were also in prison Zora Holovac, Raif Mujezinović and Ljubo Gušić, communists arrested together with Bušatlija. Among the people arrested were also the old Tima Kurević, mother of the secretary of the Regional Committee of the SKOJ, Rahela Albahari, Jože Hajor and many others.

On the way from the courthouse to the prison, the streets were filled with people on both sides. Most were looking at the procession with sadness and sympathy, a few called out insults.

At one moment, a voice was heard saying:

"Look at these women, how proud and nice they look, as if they had not been condemned to death!"

Little did he know, that at the eve of the trial, the women, had decided to take special care of their appearance and to be as dignified as possible all during the trial.

At their request the prisoners were not separated from those condemned to death. Days passed. What were they waiting for? Some said there was to be clemency. The situation was tense. Nights without sleep. In the dead silence a voice was heard. Amalija raised her fist and sang the "International". A weight seemed to be lifted from each breast — pain faded away!

Spite the enemy! Word came from the forest! It said: "We are proud of you!"

Expecting the execution of the sentence any time, Amalija remained full of courage:

"Children, when I am gone, be firm, the same fate might be awaiting you!"

She often said that she did not mind death, but that she hated gendarmes so much the worst for her was to be shot by them.

One morning, as they were expecting an answer to the appeal presented by her lawyer, Amalija said:

"I know that there will be no grace for me!" she then seemed to think for a while and shouted angrily:

"And I do not wish their grace!"

Then she raised her hand and once more began to sing the "International". During those days she sang the "International" many times, mostly in German.

Thirteen days went by. Seven of the death sentences have been replaced by hard labour in Jasenovac.

Amalija and Andrija Lebencić, Gosto Lazarević and Džemal Mandžić were to be shot!

During her last night Amalija was allowed to see her son Andrija.

"Son, when they take you away, clench your fists, the pain is short. A second — and everything is finished! Remember what I told you about the great revolutionaries. Remember that they died like heroes! Because of our courage and our clear consciences we will always be remembered by our comrades! Son, when they pull the trigger, do not shame your mother ...!"

On the day before the execution, they proposed to take Amalija before a priest. She looked inquiringly at her companions.

"Mother, do what you think is right".

Amalija smiled and said:

"Well, you know that I do not believe in all this, but I will go, that you may not be troubled because of me".

Vera, who had accompanied her, and the guard, could hear her revolted voice coming from the cell where she had been placed with the priest.

"You want me to take the last communion? So that God may forgive me my sins? No, I am not a sinner. I had no opportunity to sin, all my life I have suffered . . .".

"What will your government gain by my death? The death of an old woman?"

The priest said:

"I came because it was my duty, so that you may . . . if you wish . . ."

"No, I have no need of your last communion. But I wanted you to know that you are killing innocents!"

She then went on, telling him all about her sufferings, about the injustices. The priest remained silent. At the end, he held Amalija's hand for a while.

When she returned to her own cell, she lay down and from then on refused all food. She kept saying:

"To be killed by gendarmes! The rascals! I hate them!"

The sentence passed on Amalija was confirmed. All in the cell knew it. All remained silent.

The last night had come. A night of anguish and anxiety.

Midnight was near. Weariness was stronger than emotion. Lids although closed, the cruel ceiling light penetrated to the pupils and burned, glowed. However, the prisoners fell into a restless sleep.

Vera was awakened by an almost inaudible noise. She glanced quickly around the walls! It seems that something was hanging from the window under which was Amalija's bed. She raised her head and saw Amalija, hiding behind a little chair under the window. She was holding something, twisting and winding. Her intentions were clear. What should Vera do? Awake the others?

"Mother, why aren't you asleep?"

Amalija turns to Vera:

"Sleep yourself!"

Vera answered that she could not sleep and got up.

She was snubbed once more.

However, Vera came and sat near her.

"You know, Vera, I am to be shot with my son. This is horrible! They want me to witness his death. And who? The gendarmes! the gendarmes! They want to delight in my suffering. But no. Never!"

She took a piece of hard thick glass from under her pillow. A piece of mirror which she had somehow managed to hide.

Cuts could be seen on the wrists of the old, wrinkled hands. The glass being too thick, the wrists, especially the left one, had only been scratched.

"I couldn't, Vera. I didn't succeed, my skin is too thick. Otherwise the gendarmes would not have had the satisfaction of shooting me. Being as it is . . .".

Their whispering awoke the other prisoners. There was no more sleeping that night.

Next morning, about nine o'clock, the guard came.

"Come on, old woman, you are going to be shot".

Amalija rose slowly. The guard was holding a white scarf so as to cover her eyes at the moment of the execution. She angrily seized it and threw it to the floor, raised her fists.

She turned and said:

"Where is my son?"

Andrija had already been taken away.

"He is waiting for you. He will keep you company!", laughed the ustashi.

The old woman looked at him with contempt and went to her friends to say a last goodbye. Her wrinkled, old face was soon covered with their tears. All hearts ached, all were filled with bitter anger.

Last handshakes, last embraces.

Amalija stood at the doorway, turned and said:

"My children, be brave. Be firm. We all die for liberty!"

The guard pushed her roughly. Amalija staggered. She had been weakened by beatings and the hard bed which had been hers for days. She crossed the courtyard, leaning on her son's shoulders.

"Son, raise your head, and, if you can, sing!"

And the old shaking voice once more broke the prison's silence. The "International"!

Moved, the guard followed them. He kept his head turned away, as if to ask — what should one do in such an awkward situation!

Džemal Mandžić, had been brought. His mother had sent him a new suit in prison, that he should wear it on the day of his execution — Let her son be handsome! and proud — like a true communist! Let him be bold and brave!

But Džemal had sent the suit back — he could die like a man in his old clothes!

In the cells all was quite. Not a sound was to be heard. All were lying down on the floor. Death was present!

In the courtyard there was haste.

May these communists die as soon as possible!

Džemal was the first to be shot. Then, Gosto. Andrija was brought forward. During all this time, Amalija had been watching, a few feet away. Andrija leaned against the boards, behind which fresh earth had been packed. He was looking at his mother. The old woman kept back her burning tears and teeth clenched said:

"Son, remember your mother's words! Raise your head..."

Shots!

Andrija fell.

"Come on, old woman. We have had enough of your communist slogans!"