
Silvana MLADINOV

SPLIT: PORT OF SALVATION AND PORT OF DEATH



Silvana Morpurgo-Mladinov was born in Split in 1914, to father Viktor Morpurgo and mother Marija, née Gentilli. The Morpurgo family had lived in Split since the sixteenth century and was one of the most eminent Jewish families in the city. Vid Morpurgo founded the first Dalmatian newspaper and bank. Viktor Morpurgo, Silvana's father, who also figures in this testament, wrote a book about Daniel Rodrigo and the influence of Spanish Jews on the development of trade in the Adriatic. The book was published posthumously by the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb in the 1960s.

During the war he was president of the Jewish Community.

After finishing secondary school, Silvana graduated in law in Zagreb before returning to Split where she worked in the Primorska District administration. She spent the early war years with her husband Dušan in Drniš and Split then, after Italy's capitulation in 1943, joined the Partisans. She was seriously wounded in 1944 when the Germans bombed the Partisan hospital on Dugi Otok in the Kornati Islands where she had been working as a pharmacist. She was sent to the British military hospital in the liberated territory of southern Italy for treatment and remained there until the end of the war.

Silvana had a sister, Tina, a young graduate painter with a number of successful exhibitions to her credit, and a brother, Josip-Bepi, an engi-

neer. Her mother, her sister, Tina, and her father were taken from Split to the notorious Sajmište Camp in Belgrade on March 13, 1943, where her mother met her death. Tina was subsequently killed in Banjica and her father in Theresienstadt.

After the war Silvana returned to Split with her husband, Dušan. They had two children, Duško-David and Mirjana. She was very active in the Jewish Community in Split and, during the 1980s, became president. In 1991 she and her husband, together with their children, moved to Boston, where she died in 1997.

As soon as Dušan and I were married on October 21, 1940, we immediately went to Drniš, where Dušan had found a job as a mining engineer. The war in Europe had already begun, the Germans had overrun Poland in no time and France and England had immediately joined the war against them, but here we still hadn't grasped the seriousness of the situation. After March 27, 1941, we waited for the Nazis to react. Dušan thought he would be called up by the army, so I went to my parents in Split. The following week, on April 6, 1941, the Italians bombed Split and the Germans bombed Belgrade.

We were asleep in the cellar of our house at Špinut when we were awakened by a number of loud explosions. We thought these were just military exercises until my sister Tina ran in frightened and said that bombs were falling from foreign aircraft and that one had hit a house in Marasovića Street. A little later our neighbour, who had a radio, came to tell us that the German Army had entered Yugoslavia.

We were all very depressed. There were air raid warnings all throughout the day and we kept running into the cellar. My mother, who was not strong, found it difficult to cope with the stairs and in the end stayed in the kitchen.

My brother Bepi telephoned from the Majdan cement factory near Split where he worked as an engineer, but did not know what to suggest. Dušan was nervous as he had to return to Drniš because the general manager was away and he was responsible for production. The trains weren't running and we didn't know how to get back. Then, during the afternoon, we discovered that there would be one train to Zagreb leaving at midnight. We found it difficult to leave our loved ones and walk through the completely dark town to the station. Dušan's

Aunt Milena came with us, and was to travel on to Kosovska Mitrovica where her daughter was expecting a baby.

We waited a long time for the train to leave and finally arrived at Drniš in the morning. The station was full of soldiers and military trains. Aunt Milena continued alone and reached Kosovska Mitrovica three days after her granddaughter was born. I spent the day sitting next to the radio, but there was no news from Belgrade. They only played the march *Heroes of the Drina Corps*.



Silvana and her husband Dušan during the war years

The war didn't last long: the army collapsed and the Independent State of Croatia was established. On Easter Monday the Italians bombed Drniš. They occupied all of Dalmatia. This was a good thing for the Jews and the Serbs, both of whom were persecuted and killed in the Independent State of Croatia right from the early days. My parents remained in Split and my brother Bepi continued working in the nearby Majdan cement factory. The factory was owned by a man called Štok, to whom we were related. Racist regulations were also introduced in Split and in the whole of Dalmatia: all Jewish civil servants were dismissed from government jobs, Jewish children were expelled from schools, Jews were barred from public places, beaches and so on.

My family lived in relative peace. My father, as president of the Jewish Community, was summoned to the *Questura*, the Italian police,

on a number of occasions, but managed to establish reasonable relations with them, and with their chief, Ungaretti. He frequently interceded on behalf of refugees. Children without parents were allowed to join their relatives in Italy and many were given extensions of their permits to stay in Dalmatia. Long-term residence camps were set up. The Italian administration was quite tolerant and it was also like this on the islands of Korčula and Rab and in other places. My father was a representative of the ITAK sardine cannery, my mother continued making liqueurs and syrups which she sold to the local cafes, and my sister Tina took care of the garden with help from Bepi. In this way they managed to survive somehow. They weren't much harassed apart from a few searches in which a number of old weapons were confiscated and handed over to the Ethnographic Museum in Split by the Italians. I should mention that, after the war, the Museum director returned these weapons to Bepi and me.

In June, 1942, we went to Drniš, where we felt danger threatening us, because Dušan was an opponent of the regime and I was a Jew. We discovered later that we had escaped at the last moment, because a warrant had already been issued for our arrest. Dušan got a job at the Majdan cement factory as a mining engineer.

Italy capitulated on September 8, 1945. The Partisans entered Split and the city was free for fifteen days. One night Dušan and I were unable to sleep, wondering what would happen if Dalmatia were to be annexed to the Independent State of Croatia and if the Germans came. In the morning we travelled down to Split from Majdan and tried to convince my parents that if this were to happen they should immediately go to Dušan's mother on the island of Šolta. My family was convinced that it would not happen, that Dalmatia would be occupied by the Allies. However the Germans and the Ustashas had already reached Klis, only about five kilometres from the city centre. The defence of Split was organised immediately. Dušan became commander of a battalion, Bepi was in charge of the factory and Bepi's wife Đulijana and I went to Mount Mosor, above Majdan. Two days later I returned to the town because I wanted to go to Split to persuade my family to take refuge on Šolta. There was no transport available. I was willing to walk: it was not such a great distance, but I was afraid because the area all around Split was full of refugees, soldiers and rural people coming down from the nearby villages in search of plunder. Bepi insisted that Đulijana come with me. In the end I didn't

go, and this change of heart has tormented me all my life. I may not have been able to persuade my parents to leave, but at least I should have tried.

In the meantime the Germans bombed the Italian military camp right opposite our house in Maksim Gorki Street, which is now called Matoševa Street. My parents wrote to me – the last letter they wrote – telling me that it was terrible, that many Italians had died, that the front door of the house had been blown in by the heavy blast, that Franco, an Italian officer who later joined the Partisans and married my cousin Gabriјela Morpurgo, had come to see if they were alive and to try to help them.

A group of about thirty Jews from Split decided to leave the city and go first to the islands, from where they managed to cross to southern Italy, which had already been liberated by the Italians. In this way they were saved. Among them were Robert and Meri Hartman, the parents of my sister-in-law Đulijana, and Robert's sister Margit Paškeš. They told me after the war that before they left they had spoken to my father and to Markus Finci, who was vice-president of the Jewish Community, and had tried to persuade them to join them. My father and Markus refused, saying that it was their duty to remain with the rest of the Jews. Apparently they had been planning to move the Jews who remained in Split to Korčula or Hvar, in the expectation that the Germans would not reach Split so soon. Unfortunately, they did not have enough time.

Then the Eugene of Savoy Motorised Division of the German Army arrived to back up the Ustashas. The Partisans were forced to withdraw from Split and the surrounding area. Dušan and his battalion retreated towards Imotsko, while Bepi, Đulijana and I, together with a group of Majdan workers, set out via Majdan in the direction of Baška Voda. Bepi volunteered to fight and went to Biokovo. Later he was transferred to Vis and Komiža, where he remained until the end of the war.

When the Germans entered Majdan they looked for Bepi and Dušan and then killed all the men they found in the shelter.

Everything I have discovered about my parents in those days I learned from my Aunt Lina, my father's sister who, together with my cousin Gabriјela, was rescued by Mrs Gazarević. First she hid them and then found them a connection through which she sent them to the free end of Kaštele, which held out for another few days.

As soon as the Germans entered Split at the end of September, they arrested many prominent people, including my father, and imprisoned them in the Gripe Fortress. Tina took him some essentials, including a mattress. Each day she took food to him. During all these days before she was deported, Tina went around leaving whatever was left of the silver with friends in the hope of saving it. After the war many good people sought me out and returned the silver, clothing and some of the other things which my sister Tina had hidden away.

The Germans and Ustashas issued a proclamation calling on all Jews to report to what was then the Ambassador Hotel, which later became the Army Club. Almost all the Split Jews reported, mainly elderly people, the helpless and mothers with small children. The younger and smarter men had already joined the Partisans and the elderly had taken refuge in the hills. Many refugees managed to stay hidden because they were not known in Split.

On October 12, 1943, all the Jews were rounded up in the courtyard of the Maritime Administration Building. A neighbour told me that my mother and Tina were led away early that morning. As they passed they knocked on her window to say goodbye. They were taken away by two armed German soldiers, one on each side of them. These two quiet, sweet women were marched off as if they were the worst criminals. This image still haunts me in my sleep.

They were taken to the courtyard of the Maritime Administration Building. They had rounded up all the Jews who had responded to the summons. They were kept there until October 13, with no food or water, and then all the men and a few women, including my mother and Tina, were put on board the Bakar, whose captain was a man named Žuljević. After the war this captain's wife told me that, at the last minute, Tina had removed a gold bracelet and given it to Mrs Mondolfo. She was an Orthodox Christian and her husband, a Jewish lawyer, was eighty years old when he was taken. After the war she returned this bracelet to me, and my daughter Mirjana now wears it.

The Jews from Split were shipped to Metković while those who were not able to board the ship were allowed to return home. These were wives and mothers with small children. All of them were later taken to Jasenovac, from which nobody returned.

In Metković they were loaded onto trucks and taken to a camp at Staro Sajmište in Belgrade. We have never learned anything about my

mother's fate. As she was very frail and weak, we presumed that she died along the route from distress and exhaustion.

There were two camps at Staro Sajmište: one each for males and females. After the war we were contacted by a former camp inmate (he died not long after). Bepi and Dušan went to see him and he told them that he had been in the same barracks as my father and was with him when Uncle Eugenio died. He told them that my father was often taken out into the fenced part of the camp and that he was able to exchange messages with Tina through the barbed wire. Unfortunately all the inmates of that camp were later taken away and ended in the mass killing places.

In the registry of war crimes we discovered that Tina was taken to the camp in Banjica in June 1944, to Command 1007. It is believed that this was the code name for the gas chamber.

A Mr Pauković of Split told us about an encounter with my father. He had seen him at the Vienna railway station, cleaning carriages. He had wanted to give him something but the guards would not allow him near. Later, through the Red Cross, we learned that a Vittorio Morpurgo had died at Theresienstadt. However we do not know whether this was my father or, possibly, an Italian Jew with the same name. One thing is certain, nevertheless: nobody returned from either the first or the second group of those who were taken away.

I have written this account on the recommendation of Jozica Di Nola¹, who felt that I would feel easier after writing it. I don't feel any easier, but it has been well worth the effort so that those who come after us know what these things were like, because from many stories only various details remain in the memory: details that perhaps many people will be unable to connect together.

¹ Jozica Di Nola wrote about Jews under the Italian occupation in Dalmatia. She worked for the Centre for Modern Jewish Documentation (CDEC) in Milan.