

Emil KLAIN

HOW I SURVIVED THE HOLOCAUST



E*mil Klajn was born in Šid in 1919 to Etel, née Furst, and Leopold Klajn. He had two older brothers, Josip-Jožika and Ladislav-Lacika. Jožika was killed in Sremska Mitrovica in September 1942.*

After the war he graduated from the Belgrade University Faculty of Economics. He worked as a clerk from 1950 until 1981 when he retired having spent the longest period with JAT.

He has a daughter, Vesna, whose married name is Beličajević, and a son Ljubomir who lives with his family in Canada. He has one grandson.

I finished primary and junior secondary school in Šid in 1933. I then attended trade academy in Osijek from 1933 to 1937. Immediately after I arrived in Osijek I joined the Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair. This was an important turning point in my life and the seed of future events, especially when it came to making a decision on whether to go to the *hasharah* after I matriculated to prepare for departure to Erez Israel, in what was then Palestine. I was in the city trade *hasharah* in Novi Sad from May 1938 to March 1939 and in the agricultural *hasharah* at Golenić, near Podravska Slatina from April 1939 to March 1940. The *hasharah* readied me for many

kinds of hard physical labour, which came in handy in a later period of my life, in captivity.

In March 1940 I went home to Šid, to prepare for my *Alija*, my departure to Erez and to wait for the call. I received the call to come to Belgrade on March 30, 1940. There were about ten of us from the *hasharah* travelling by ship to Kladovo where we joined emigrants from Austria, about a thousand of them, who had spent the winter there on three passenger ships (the Czar Dušan, the Czar Nikola and the Queen Marija). We were soon to continue our journey towards Palestine. We lived in hope and expectation. However it didn't eventuate. And when, after four and a half months, our hope that we would depart had evaporated, those of us from Yugoslavia returned to our homes.

I mention our stay in Kladovo because living conditions were also rather difficult, even in this period. Apart from that, I had a chance there to brush up my German because I socialised quite a lot with the Austrian émigrés. This knowledge of German, the basics of which I had acquired at home from my father and mother, was to help me a great deal later on, in German captivity.

On my return to Kladovo at the end of October, 1940, I left for regular military service. I served the Army in Sarajevo, at the School for Reserve Infantry Officers. At the very beginning, as a member of an ethnic minority – a Jew, I had to take a written test in Serbo-Croatian, despite having matriculated. In any case, I wasn't the only Jew in the company, there was also Josip Polak-Pepo from Pakrac. (There is a great deal of information about him in Jaša Romano's book *Jews of Yugoslavia, 1941–1945*. He was killed in battle with Italian Fascists and Ustashas near Potrvlje on March 9, 1942. He was the commissar of the Svilajnac Partisan Detachment).

The army days passed quickly. March 27 soon arrived. I remember how we cadets goose-stepped through Sarajevo while the people stood in the streets cheering "long live the cadets".

Then came April 6 and a rapid end to the war. I was captured by the Germans on April 18, 1941, in Sarajevo. I spent a few days as a prisoner within the compound of the King Aleksandar barracks. During this time I met two friends, *haverim*, from Hashomer Hatzair and from the *hasharah*: Hajim Rotšild from Zagreb and Jicak "Ervin" Klajn from Varaždin. Their fates were quite different. Hajim Rotšild escaped from a prison camp in Germany and joined the Slovakian

Partisans where he was killed, while Jicak Klajn lived to see the liberation and returned to Varaždin. I saw him in Varaždin in 1972. He was married and had two daughters. He died soon after this meeting.

After a few days in the camp in Sarajevo, one convoy of prisoners set off to Germany via Slavonski Brod, Osijek, Pécs and beyond, towards the destination. The first reception camp was Mosburg, near Munich. There we were registered and given our prisoner numbers and were assigned to a Stalag, a prison camp for other-rank soldiers. When I was being registered, the German sergeant asked me my nationality and I said that I was *Jude*, a Jew. He commented with just one word, *Schade* (pity). Perhaps he was thinking about my ill fate as a Jew.



Klajn on one of the farms on which he worked

After a week in this Baden-Baden Stalag, during a roll call, at which we were lined up like soldiers, prisoners were assigned to labour commands according to need and the requests of the villages. In due order they simply set aside five, ten, fifteen, twenty or more if needed. I fell into a group of 25. We were assigned to the village of Hohenhaslach in the district of Vaingen, about forty kilometres from Stuttgart.

After a few days in Mosburg we were moved to Stalag V-B in Baden-Baden. My prisoner number was 64546. This was on May 1, 1941. I remember there were flags flying from many buildings. The National Socialists were celebrating May Day.

It was a camp like many others. In it were wooden barracks with bunk beds and straw mattresses. Wire fences with warnings not to approach the wire. The usual guard posts. Together with us in the camp were French prisoners who greeted us pleasantly and warmly. I had school French so I was able to communicate with them.

In our group there were three Serbs, one Slovene, one Bosnian Muslim, nineteen Croats and I was the only Jew. The farmers who placed the requests were allotted one prisoner each, two at the very most as an exception. I was assigned to Christian Stalder, a man over sixty who had a small farm. I immediately told him that I was a student and Jewish by nationality. This householder had a wife of about the same age and a daughter a little over thirty.

Very soon, everyone in the village knew that I was a Jew. However I must say that I had no kind of unpleasantness or problem because of this. I spent six months with Mr Stalder and after that two months with another farmer, Helena Meier.

The Croat, Slovenian and Muslim prisoners were called back to the Stalag in December 1941 and then released to return to their homes. The three Serbs and I were the only ones left in the labour command. Because there were too few of us for such a large village, we were moved, in February 1942, to the labour command of the experimental and training farm Versuchsgut und Lehrgut Rastatt. There were seven of us Yugoslav prisoners and also a large group of Polish civilians there. We got on well with them. I still have a keepsake, the gift of a German-Polish dictionary from one of them. From that time on I stopped saying that I was a Jew. Instead I said that I was a Serb from Vojvodina, where there was a mixed population, which explained my first name and surname. Anyway, they called me by my first name, Emil, everywhere. In Hohenhaslach we were given a barracks to live in which had earlier been used as a temporary store for the village tavern. We had bunk beds. The farm people gave us straw mattresses and bed sheets. There we slept and spent Sunday afternoons. There was a guard, a soldier, who took us to the farmers in the morning and then collected us and took us back to sleep in the evening. He regularly locked us in and unlocked us in the morning. Here in Rastatt we worked feeding cows and clearing barns, and sometimes in buildings where seed potatoes were being prepared. Our prison food was tolerable.

We stayed there until the beginning of March 1942, a little over a month. Then they began a large-scale transfer of prisoners from Stalag V-B Baden-Baden to Stalag V-C Villingen-Schwartzwald. We stayed in the Villingen camp for just a few days. There, for the first time, I saw captured Soviet Russian soldiers. They were in a separate area in special barracks.

Again in Villingen the prisoners were separated during the morning roll-call according to command. I was put into a group with five Serbs from the Dalmatian hinterland. They all knew one another while I was the outsider. We were assigned to a village called Indlekofen Kreis Waldshut. They put us in part of the local fire station. Guard duty was performed by a fireman. I was sent to work for the miller, Baumgartner. The mill was about three or four kilometres from the village so I slept at the miller's place in a separate little room. It was the miller's obligation to lock me in in the evening and let me out in the morning. The guard would call in from time to time to check that I was locked in. This family was anti-Hitler, so I could sometimes even listen to Radio London. My boss and his wife also had three children, two daughters and a son. All three were old enough to work. The daughters were over twenty and the son was sixteen. I did mainly farm work. Everyone treated me as though I were a member of the family. I was there with the Baumgartner family at the Aispel mill until December 1, 1942. This was when prisoners from a number of labour commands in the area were recalled to be sent to work at the quarry near Lorach. I think it was called Wolfenschlucht. About thirty of us assembled there. This was very hard work. The German foremen mined the stone and we, the prisoners, had to break up the large rocks with heavy hammers. Then, when it was broken into pieces, we had to load them into small wagons with special pitchforks. We then pushed these little wagons to large transport wagons and loaded the stones into them. The food was poor. There were several non-commissioned officers working on this job, as well as one military academy cadet and I, a student, a future reserve officer. According to the Geneva Convention we could only be given lighter work such as on village labour commands. After fifteen days, six of us refused to work any longer. The army commander in charge sent us, escorted by guards, to Stalag Villingen. We were turned over to the German military investigative officer for investigation. Our camp leader, Pera Davidović, really stood up for us and, after a few interrogations, the sabotage charges were dismissed. I had been afraid that I would be convicted because it was noted in my camp personal information that I was a Jew.

We were again assigned to work in village labour commands. A few days later, on January 7, 1943, I was assigned to the labour command in the village of Altheim, in the Uberlingen district. I arrived in

Altheim escorted by guards. There were twelve of us. The dormitory for the prisoners was a converted carpentry workshop with bunk beds.

First they sent me to work for the miller, where I replaced a prisoner who had fallen ill. He soon recovered, so I was then assigned to work for a farmer who had not had a prisoner working for him before. His name was Jakob Zintzmeier. He had an important party function, he was an *ortsbauernfuhrer* (the leader of the local rural workers). He had a wife and three children aged from ten to fifteen. There was also a girl working for them, a student from their organisation Arbeitsdienst. This was an organisation for young girls who worked in village households. At the time, January and February 1943, the battle for Stalingrad was warming up, so I often talked to her. I don't remember her name. She was obviously a supporter of the Third Reich. Jakob didn't interfere in our conversations.

February 1943 came, the time for spraying the fruit. It was a windy day. The boss didn't give me any cream for my face, either before or after the spraying, and so my face burnt. The next day, when the guard came to take us to work, I sent a message saying I was sick. That day I stayed in the camp and the next day the guard took me to the army doctor in the neighbouring village of Salem. The doctor gave me cream for my face and put me on the sick list for three days so I didn't have to work. During this time the farmer didn't bring me any food, but my friends did, a little something every evening. When the three days were up, I told the guard that they should send me to another farmer, and that I didn't want to work at Zintzmeier place because he didn't take care of his prisoner-worker. I was soon allocated to another farm and then another, with a woman called Sulger. Her husband had been killed at the eastern front. I worked on her farm from March 1943 to July 1944.

In July 1944 they began moving prisoners from the Villingen camp to Stalag V-C Offenburg. From the Altheim labour command we were sent to Villengen and Offenburg. It was at this time that the second front opened in the west so the mood of the prisoners was also improving. At the Offenburg camp we waited about twenty days to be assigned to labour commands. I should mention here that there were quite a few French and English (Indian) prisoners in this camp. I was assigned to the Hugsweir labour command, east of Offenburg. The farmer wasn't happy with my work, so he no longer wanted to have any prisoners. I was sent back to the Offenburg camp. After about ten days

I was assigned to a new labour command to supplement the existing one in the village of Hugelheim, east of Freiburg. There I worked for two different farmers. After two months, work began on digging trenches near the river Rhine. All prisoners had to do this work. In order to avoid digging trenches, I pretended to fall ill. After an examination by the army doctor in Freiburg I was sent to Offenburg, to our prison doctor who sent me to the prisoner hospital in Rastatt. After a thorough examination I was found to be in good health. I then asked Dr Medenica, one of our prisoners, to keep me in the hospital as a nursing assistant and I got a written confirmation of this job from a German doctor. I saved this certificate in my records. It was October. My duty was to dispense medicine to the prisoner patients and, for a while, I also worked at writing up case histories for the Russian prisoner patients.



One of the groups of prisoners with whom Klajn did hard labour

Because the Allied forces were advancing in France, our hospital was preparing for evacuation and on about December 20, 1944, the patients and the hospital staff were evacuated, in cargo wagons, to the Weingarten hospital. There were a number of air raid alerts during the trip, but we reached our destination. Because there was no need for my work in the hospital in Weingarten, I was made redundant at the end of December 1944 and returned to the Villengen camp. There I

was assigned to various jobs, unloading coal in factories, clearing snow on the Villingen-Freiburg railway line and, after the railway station in Villingen was bombed, filling the huge craters in at night. This was in February 1945. In March 1945 I was sent to do various kinds of work, depending on the people who were asking for prison labour.

The poor food in the camp was supplemented with Red Cross parcels. We received these parcels from 1942 until just before the end of the war, when the transport network broke down with the bombing of trains and railway tracks.

On April 3, 1945, I was assigned by the Germans to go to the village labour command in Frickingen. I was called in by the Bosniac commissioner, who had the rank of sergeant. Father Lukić was also there. They told me that they knew I was a Jew but that they wouldn't do anything to stop me going to the labour command. And so, on April 4, I was sent under escort to the labour command in Frickingen, about ten kilometres north of Uberlingen and Lake Constance.

It was a large village and there were more than twenty of us prisoners. The dormitory was set up in the basement of the primary school, with wooden bunk beds. At that time the rural workers had built barriers on the road to prevent French tanks from entering the village. However when the French arrived on April 25, they issued an ultimatum warning that unless the road was cleared for traffic they would bomb the village. The road was cleared and the prisoners were free.

After Germany's final capitulation on May 9, 1945, a large number of prisoners came to Villingen to prepare for their return home. I think it was the second half of May when I arrived there. An anti-Fascist committee was set up and I was a member of it. Various lectures were organised together with lessons in motorbike riding. A choir was also formed and this went to give concerts in all the larger labour commands. There was a special struggle to counteract the influence of a certain number of officers (Yugoslav prisoners of war), who were advocating the idea that prisoners should not return to Yugoslavia.

We waited for some time for the French to make it possible to return to Yugoslavia, to our homes. This finally happened at the end of August 1945. In Villingen we lived in German barracks but we ordered and received food from the French Army command. The cooks were our own people. A company of soldiers was formed to provide us with security. They escorted us on our return trip to Yugoslavia.

We travelled in freight wagons, but with far more comfort and far more relaxation than when we had travelled to Germany. We passed through Salzburg, Jesenice, Ljubljana, Zagreb and Osijek (Josipovac-Kravice). In Josipovac-Kravice we were given individual documents for the remainder of the journey. My final destination was Šid. My family house was there, as were my parents and my elder brother, who had returned from Switzerland. Finally, early in the morning on September 4, 1945, I arrived in Šid. During my captivity it had been extremely important for my mental condition that I had been able to correspond with those closest to me, my parents, my brother Lacika and his wife, my brother Jožika and my uncle in Osijek. My brother Laci had emigrated with his wife, his mother-in-law and our parents to Ljubljana in January 1942 and from there they had been interned in northern Italy, in Bellagio. After Italy capitulated they fled to Switzerland from where they had returned home to Šid. Our eldest brother, Josip-Jožika, remained in Šid. He was killed by the Ustashas in Sremska Mitrovica at the beginning of September 1942. My Uncle Branko remained in Osijek. As the husband of a Catholic Hungarian he was protected from the deportations.

I have managed to save all the correspondence I received while in captivity. Some letters were censored, but I still managed to learn how they were living and where they were moving to, and this was very important to me.