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WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

ראיבן

בלגראד

טינה

*This book is dedicated to the memory
of the Jews of Yugoslavia
who perished in the Holocaust*

WE SURVIVED...
Yugoslav Jews on the Holocaust

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A close-up of the monument to the vanquished Jewish communities,
at the “Yad Vashem” Memorial Museum, Jerusalem

WE SURVIVED...
Yugoslav Jews on the Holocaust

BELGRADE, 2005.

The publication of these testimonies of Jews, victims of persecution and survivors of World War Two, has been possible thanks to a generous donation from Haim "Mile" Pinkas, his wife Mia and their sons Miguel and Daniel.

In this way the Pinkas family has marked the eightieth birthday of Belgrade-born Haim Pinkas.

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Preface to How We Survived

These memoirs place special demands on the reader.

On the one hand the language we know was never constructed to bear the burden of describing events such as these. They happened outside that realm.

On the other hand the personal histories recounted here are for the most part told in a direct, matter of fact, even laconic manner. These spare stories stick to a strictly sequential account of the bare facts.

So how is one to read such a text? How can one resolve this contradiction between the nature of the events themselves and the way they are narrated?

In this respect what I found helpful was to pause after every sentence or two and let the words echo in my mind. To take what might otherwise be considered as a prosaic example, one survivor, after years of going through Hell, finds himself sitting on a chair with a glass of milk in front of him. No glass of milk we have ever seen resembles that glass of milk. Only by pausing and reflecting every step of the way can one begin to approach its real significance.

Another kind of effort I found useful: while reading each narrative, let the sequence of otherwise separate events build up. When each new event occurs, connect it to everything that has gone before in order to arrive at a cumulative picture of the incredible burden borne by one man.

In these ways one can try to draw closer to what ultimately cannot be told.

Yechiel Bar-Chaim

Country Director for the Former Yugoslavia
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of testimonies of the few surviving members of the Jewish community in the former Yugoslavia during World War Two. A number of these were taken from the archives of the Jewish History Museum in Belgrade, while others were written for this book. The number of testimonies was too great for all to be included in this volume and it is hoped that the remainder will be presented in a second collection.

The preparation of these manuscripts for publication has been done in sharp awareness of the long period of time which has elapsed since the events to which they testify. Only a handful of people remain who are able to write or speak about what happened to them almost sixty years ago. Many have left us long ago, taking their memories of the terrible time of the Holocaust with them. Although the publication of this book comes long after the events, we hope that its message will endure: that events like these must never be forgotten, nor ever happen again!

From the outset, the editorial committee believed it was worthwhile to publish the authentic testimonies of those who fought Fascism and survived, of camp inmates from across Europe, refugees, children whose parents were deported. In this way it has been possible to present the various ways in which people were saved from persecution. The editors had a large number of testimonies available and a selection of these was made so that, as far as possible, people from all the communities of the former Yugoslavia are represented. The circumstances which overtook all the people of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia are

reflected in the fact that, at the beginning of the war, the country was occupied by five foreign states: Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania and that Fascist satellite construction, the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia. Under these disparate circumstances, various ways of saving people evolved. Emphasis should also be given to the unique opportunity Yugoslav Jews had in being able to fight Nazism and Fascism in the National Liberation Army. About 4,600 Jews took up arms and more than 1,300 of them lost their lives. Ten were proclaimed national heroes, and fourteen rose to the rank of general.

It is for history to examine the facts and events of the persecution of Jews during World War Two. However there is no place in history for individual and personal experiences. The reason for publishing this book is the memories of individuals about that period, thus this is only a contribution to the historical material which already exists. The book has been prepared by a group comprising Eli Deleon, Branka Džidić, Aleksandar Gaon, Aleksandar Mošić, Eta Najfeld, Luci Petrović, Andreja Preger and Boža Rafajlović, working under the auspices of the Jewish History Museum of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, in Belgrade.

The period of the Holocaust has been dealt with by many Jewish communities and many memoirs have been published in their various regions. Until now, we have not managed to do this and it is for this reason that the fate of Jews from the former Yugoslavia is little known throughout the world. This book should go some way towards filling that gap. It is also a testament, albeit incomplete, for future generations, a vow never to forget those six million people who were guilty only of being Jews.

Editorial Committee



I

WITH THE PARTISANS



Mina KOVAČEVIĆ

WAITING FOR THE TORMENT TO END



*M*ina Kovačević was born in Kaunas, at the time the capital of Lithuania, to Rebecca (née Solski) and Solom Haim Brauda. She had one sister; Braina, who was three years younger. She was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust.

After the liberation she worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an interpreter. Later, in Skopje, she married Voja Kovačević, a commissar and general of the Fifth Army who had been decorated with the order of National Hero. In Skopje she worked for OZNA, the National Security

Service as an interpreter. She subsequently worked in the Belgrade Interpol office until her retirement.

Mina Kovačević has two children; her son Goran is an economist and her daughter Planinka, a painter. She also has two granddaughters, a grandson and two great-grandsons.

I am one of the more than 4,500 Yugoslav Jews who fought against both Fascism and Nazism.

I was born in 1920, in Kaunas which, at the time, was the capital of Lithuania. Kaunas was a city of about 180,000 people, of whom forty thousand were Jews. My mother, Rebecca Solski, and my father, Sholom Haim Brauda, came from wealthy intellectual families, noted for both their philanthropy and their success in industry. My family,

together with the families of my five uncles, lived in a block of buildings which had belonged to my grandfather, Abi Solski. My younger sister Braina and I were only two of the many children in this community. Our courtyard and orchard were the gathering place for Jewish children from all over the city. All these children were brought up in the spirit of Zionism, going to Hebrew kindergartens and Hebrew schools.

My life as a student in Paris, the Yugoslav friends I made and my registry-office marriage to Spasoje Spajić, a Serb preparing his doctoral thesis in law at the Sorbonne, were the turning points in my early life. The years and the events which followed bound me forever to the country I came to call home.



Teachers and matriculants of the Jewish High School in Kaunas, Lithuania, 1937.

I arrived here in September, 1940, in someone else's country, knowing neither the language nor the culture of the local people. I'd hardly settled in when the war began. I watched the demonstrations on March 27, 1941, with little idea of what would follow. My husband saw what lay ahead and especially the danger lying in wait for me and so he put me on a train for Hercegovina. I went to his birthplace, Zupce, near Trebinje, to the village of Grab. Having come from the lowland plains

of Lithuania, I had never seen anything like this bare, rocky land. Nor had I ever lived in a village. This, for me, was a completely new world.

Yugoslavia fell not long afterwards and this part of Hercegovina was claimed by the Ustashes¹ for the newly proclaimed Independent State of Croatia. My first shock came as I saw the crimes of the Ustashes against the Serbs. There were no Jews in the region.

My husband rallied a group of young men to prepare for an uprising. I threw myself zealously into this plan, knowing it was the only contribution I could make to the struggle against Fascism. However they insisted I was too delicate for physical work and for trekking over the mountains, so I gave lessons in first aid to the young village women. To this day I don't know how they understood me with my poor knowledge of their language as I spoke to them about everything I remembered from school, from hygiene classes. Nor do I know how I managed to walk, hungry and freezing, in my ragged peasant shoes through the snow and rain. I often became lost in the dark and fell behind the rest of the group.

The Italians took command of the region. The fighting began in December, 1941, when the Partisans liberated all seventeen of the Zupce villages. Next came the attack on the Italian garrison on the border with Boka. This was the first time I took part myself. It was icy cold, with heavy snow falling, and my job was to pass up ammunition to the soldiers from a hole in the ground. I caught cold there which led to a middle ear infection which causes me problems to this very day. The Partisans took thirty Italians prisoner and I gave first aid to one who was wounded in the arm.

Then came a seemingly insignificant incident, over which I almost lost my life. A Partisan woman with a baby came to the village. She was older than me and more experienced. She was complaining that there was no clock in the village house where she was staying, and she had no way of knowing when to feed her baby. Without thinking, I gave her my little gold watch, explaining that my mother had given it to me for my Bat Mitzvah. On the back of the watch my monogram was engraved in Hebrew letters.

An offensive began soon after this and we began getting out, in small groups. I'll never forget that retreat under cannon fire. There were shells falling all around us, but no one was hurt. This went on for sev-

¹ Ustasha: Croatian Fascist movement.

eral days until, finally we were surrounded and captured by the Chetniks. I was the only woman in the group.

By now, anarchy had set in. The Italians were in command of the area, but local power was in the hands of the Chetniks who were arresting and robbing people. That was how one of them came to catch sight of my watch, which the Partisan woman was wearing. He began to slap her, accusing her of being a Muslim. She denied this, telling them that the watch was mine. A few days later, when the Chetniks brought our captured group to the prison, my problems really began. For the first time in my life I was beaten and slapped, while they swore at me and said my name was Emina, not Mina. It was worse when they slapped me and pulled my hair than when they beat me with a cane. I told them I was not a Muslim, but a Jew. It went on and on and I finally fainted. Later they brought me back to the group I was arrested with. In torment, we lay in a school classroom the whole night and in the morning we were taken out to be shot. We sat tied up in a meadow beside the road and waited, while our friends dug graves for us. A crowd gathered, waiting to see what would happen. Our prison comrades were digging slowly in the hard ground, as though they were waiting for something to happen, while we called out to them to hurry, so that our torture would soon be over. I was silently praying: "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elochenu, Adonai Echad..." I thought that my family in Lithuania would never discover where I had disappeared, and how. I didn't know at that time that they had been ruined and driven from their homes into ghettos and camps.

And then, just as our friends finished their digging, a miracle happened: a car arrived with two Italian officers. They stopped the car and got out to see what was going on. They noticed me and my husband, saw that we looked different from the others and asked us in Italian what was happening. We answered, in French, that we had been brought there to be shot. The Chetniks were collaborating with the Italians, but they didn't have the authority to shoot people without permission. The officers gave orders for the other prisoners to be taken back to the prison and then took me and my husband by car to their own prison in Trebinje. We were quite a curiosity for them, a professor of law from this poor and isolated area and his young wife from far-off Lithuania. We spent ten days in the Trebinje prison and then we set off, escorted by two *carabinieri*. And then, on the train, another miracle happened. The non-commissioned officer who had been wounded in the arm and captured by our unit was there, the same one to whom I had

given first aid. When he recognised me, he came into our compartment and showed me the scar on his arm. At first I didn't know what was going on, because I didn't remember his face. Then this Italian, whose name I never learned, took it on himself to go to the headquarters and tell them that I had helped him when he was wounded and that I hadn't been armed at all. And so, in this way, I was again saved from execution.

They took us from the train to a prison called Kazbek, in the Lapad area of Dubrovnik where the *carabinieri* now had their command post. Before the war Kazbek had been a nightclub and the prison was in the dark, stone cellar under what had been the bar. As soon as I arrived, the women prisoners gathered around, asking me who I was and why I had been brought there, but I was tight-lipped. I was dressed like a village woman, but some of them noticed immediately: "You're different, you sound different. You're not from around here". I lay and sat on the bare and filthy stone floor. In one corner there was a beautiful middle-aged woman, a real lady. She was lying on a mattress, watching me, not asking anything. As darkness fell and the women began settling down to sleep, she beckoned me over to lie beside her. So I lay there, and she whispered to me:

"When I heard that you were from Zupce, I knew immediately that you were Dr Spajić's wife. I know all about you. I'm sorry that we're meeting for the first time under these circumstances. My name is Dada; my husband is Dr Novaković from Cavtat".

As soon as she told me this I remembered that a courier had brought drugs and mandarins for the wounded from Cavtat to our unit.



Mina in Paris, 1939.

We whispered to each other the whole night, without the other prisoners noticing that we knew each other. Because the Chetniks had whipped me, I couldn't lie on my back and spent the whole night lying on my stomach on the bare stone. For a long time, even after the liberation, I continued to lie this way.

Dada thought that she would soon be released because there was no evidence of her having helped the Partisans. She grasped my situation immediately and promised that she would not forget me and, later, she kept that promise. At this time, my husband was shot, together with all the other young people captured from my group. My sobbing could be heard so clearly out in the Kazbek yard that the Italians had to put on some loud music to drown it out, because people passing by were stopping at the gate. Later I discovered that the Chetniks had tried to make sure that I was executed with the rest of the group, because I knew so much about their crimes, but the Italians protected me. The commander of the *carabinieri* called me to his office and told me that he wouldn't let the Chetniks kill me because I'd saved the wounded Italian soldier. They would have been happy to transfer me to the island of Rab where there was a camp for Jews, but this wasn't really feasible for a single prisoner.

Soon after that they moved me from Kazbek to another Italian prison in the Lovrijenac fortress. Here, too, the walls and floor were of stone, but there was more light than in Kazbek. There was little to eat and the water was rationed. From Lovrijenac they transferred me to a camp on the Prevlaka peninsula. There we were free to move around in an area fenced with wire and we slept with just one blanket on wooden floors in wooden barracks. In this camp there were a lot of children and women of all ages, all of them being held hostage for their husbands, brothers and fathers. Many of the inmates of the camp, especially the children, died of hunger and thirst. We each received a litre of water a day, and the only thing that saved us was the rain, which we collected in all sorts of tin cans. Dada sent me parcels of food once a month, which was all that was allowed, and this kept me going. Through these parcels, in code, she let me know that she and her husband wanted to adopt me and had already taken the first steps towards this. I was on Prevlaka for nearly a year before the Italians moved the women's camp by ship to Italy and I was sent back to Lovrijenac. Soon after that Italy fell and all the prisoners and guards from Lovrijenac fled.

I reached Dubrovnik as night was falling. Everyone was afraid that the Germans would enter the town at any minute. I was alone, I didn't know the town and I had no place to go. I wandered around, with no idea where to hide for the night. The people were all locked in their houses and there wasn't a soul in the streets. And then, yet another miracle happened. I saw two female figures, dressed in black, slowly coming towards me in the darkness. They were not an apparition, but the mother and sister of my friend Dragica Pravica², who had been killed. These women and I had spent some time together on Prevlaka, where they were being held hostage. They hugged me and quickly took me home with them. I stayed there, without papers, never alone, and always with someone to arrange places to hide. I moved frequently from place to place. There was danger on every corner, but I quickly learned to be careful. For some time I hid in the contagious diseases ward of a Dubrovnik hospital. The Gestapo even began sticking their noses in there, and discovered a number of young men without documents.

After various difficulties, I eventually made contact with the Konavle Partisan unit in the winter of 1943. This was a small unit of about thirty fighters, huddling in an abandoned log cabin on a mountain called Dunavske Rupe. My friend Fanika³ and I stayed in a little cave about a hundred metres away, taking care of the wounded Ljuba Kosić⁴. We had a battery radio on which we listened to the news on *Slobodna Jugoslavija* (Free Yugoslavia) and anything else we could pick up in other languages during the night. I translated the news while Fanika typed and copied. A courier from the unit would bring us a little food, as much as they had themselves, and we would give him ten or twenty typed leaflets with the news. At night they distributed these around the surrounding areas. Despite the secrecy with which this was done, enemy spies discovered the source of the leaflets. But when the Germans, one night, climbed the mountain and found our cave, we were already down in the village, having learnt in time that they were coming. I spent that night hiding in a vineyard, dressed in the Konavle village clothes of a twelve-year-old girl, Nika Valjalo (later Lasić), who is still my close friend now after all the passing years.

² Dragica Pravica, National Hero. Killed by Chetniks in June, 1942.

³ Fanika Božanić, certified as a Partisan fighter in 1941. Died in 1980.

⁴ Colonel Ljuba Kosić, certified as a Partisan fighter. Died during the 1980s.

In the first days of May, 1944, my contact came to escort me to the liberated territory of Hercegovina. They had obtained forged documents and a decent dress for me. The activist Ljubo Filipović⁵, who had no documents himself, took me from Cavtat to Zaton on a motorcycle in broad daylight, right under the nose of ten German guards.

From Zaton, a new guide took me to the unit. The only way we could get there was to cross the Trebišnica River at night. At this time of the year the river was swollen and cold. We crossed it under a bridge where the Germans kept watch, their heavy military boots pounding above our heads. The slightest sound would have given us away. Of all the physical hardship I lived through during the war, I still think this was the worst. The water, black and filthy in the moonlight, came up to my mouth as we waded across. Finally, soaked to the skin, our clothes sodden and heavy, we ran four kilometres to the first village in the liberated zone.

There, on liberated territory, in the 29th Hercegovina Division, with my knowledge of the language already much better, I felt safer and more independent with the Partisans. I travelled through Hercegovina, Montenegro and crossed Bosnia, Croatia, Istria and Slovenia. When liberation came, I was in Bled.

I came back to Belgrade from the war with a certificate of Partisan service and the rank of captain, to begin the search for my closest relatives in Lithuania. Sometimes, when alone, I would sit and think about how I survived the Holocaust. I was sure my family would never believe me when I told them everything I had gone through. Little did I know that my entire family had perished, some in the Viampola Ghetto, some in Dachau and other concentration camps. All I have left is photographs.

At the end of 1945, I married General Voja Kovačević, who had been decorated with the order of National Hero. Together we had two children: our son, Goran, who works for Yugoslav Airlines, and our daughter, Planinka, a painter, who now lives permanently in Raanana, Israel. Grandchildren and then great-grandchildren were not long arriving. To my great sadness, my husband Voja, with whom I travelled frequently through Israel, died in 1997.

⁵ Ljubo Filipović, engineer and retired colonel. My brother by adoption.

Rahela ALTARAS

BY THE GRACE OF GOOD PEOPLE



Rahela-Seka Volah was born in Bijeljina on March 15, 1927, the daughter of Blanka (née Pinto) and Izidor Volah. She had a sister, Sarina-Lotika and brothers Jakov-Bata and Ašer. Of her large family, only her mother and her brother Ašer survived the Holocaust.

She was discharged from the Yugoslav Army in November, 1945, before working in the Executive Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia until 1951. For the next six years she worked in various capacities for Yugoslav Airlines. In 1957 she began work in the office of the president of the republic where she stayed until November, 1964. From then, until her retirement in July 1982, she worked for the Federal Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, serving in Stockholm, London and Gothenburg.

Rahela Altaras has a son, Goran, now married to Vladislava, and one granddaughter.

My parents settled in Bijeljina, Bosnia, in 1924, and we lived there until the war broke out. I was one of four children. My sister Lotika was killed during the war, as was my brother Jakov-Bata. My father was killed in Jasenovac, the Ustasha camp. Only my mother, my younger brother Ašer and I survived the war. My father was a machinist and had a workshop which catered not only for people from Bijeljina but also

for those from all the surrounding villages. In this way my father acquired many friends and was well known and respected, as was the entire family. We lived this way in Bijeljina until the war broke out in 1941, when Germany occupied this part of Yugoslavia and it became part of their Fascist creation, the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia.

Immediately after the German Army and the Ustashas arrived, my father, as a Jew, had his workshop seized. This had been well-equipped with modern tools and machinery. We were left without any means of support, so our friends secretly brought food to us. My father also repaired machines and tools in secret, and my mother took in sewing. Our movements were restricted and my older sister, my older brother and I were barred from continuing our schooling. My younger brother was still too young for school. Later we were thrown out of our house and all our belongings were confiscated. I'll never forget any of the ways in which we survived that terrible war, but two events still stand out in my memory: my father's arrest and internment in the Jasenovac concentration camp where he was tortured and killed, and the way in which my mother and we children were saved from the camp and certain death.

It was August, 1941. My older sister, Lotika, was extremely sick and we were all very worried. Our neighbours were trying to call the doctor for us and so we waited. Then there was a knock on the gate. My father opened it but, instead of the doctor, there were Ustashas there who immediately bound his hands and said they were taking him to prison. He begged them to at least allow him to say goodbye to his wife and children, especially to his sick daughter. When my father came into the room where my sister was lying, he kissed her. She began to scream "Where are you taking my Daddy?". These words ring in my ears, bringing tears to my eyes to this day. I don't even remember whether he kissed us all as the Ustashas hustled him out.

The next day we heard that all adult Jews in Bijeljina had been arrested and no one knew what was going to happen to them. My mother packed some clothes and sent me to the prison to deliver them to my father. I was thirteen years old at the time. When I arrived at the prison, they told me to go to the railway station because the Jews who had been arrested were being transported to the concentration camp. I ran to the station and saw them being herded into cattle wagons. I searched for my father and he must have seen me while he was being pushed into a

wagon. He somehow managed to appear behind a small, barred opening and, looking sadly at me, blew me a kiss. That is the last memory I have of my father.

Nor will I ever forget the night of August 2, 1942. I'd just fallen asleep when I felt someone shaking me briskly. Waking up I saw Rista Ristić. He was very agitated and shouting "Hurry, hurry up, get up and get out of here, the Ustashas are rounding up all the Jews left in town and taking them to the concentration camp!"

My terrified mother got my brothers dressed and then gave us rucksacks which were ready in the closet, already packed with the things we would need. We ran from the house with my aunt across the street to our neighbour, a Hungarian. He and his wife took us in and hid us. Within half an hour the Ustashas were in front of our house, banging hard on the door and windows, shouting, swearing and furious at not finding anyone. They searched a number of houses in the area but, luckily for us, they didn't come into the house of our Hungarian neighbour.



At Vitniki Kiseljak spa, near Zvornik, where Rahela (back row, fourth from left) spent time with her family, 1935-6.

As soon as the Ustashas went away, we also left the town, just as day was breaking. The place in which we'd been living was on the very edge of the town. Bent double, we crawled through the undergrowth and waded through a cold brook which ran through there. All the time

we prayed to God that no one had seen us as they would have informed the Ustashas immediately. After wandering for several hours, exhausted, we came to the houses on the outskirts of the village of Zagoni. The villagers invited us in and gave us something to eat. We told them what had happened, but didn't tell them straight away that we were Jews. In those days there were many refugees of other nationalities as well. It was only later that they found out who we were but, in the meantime, they had come to like us and none of them would ever have dreamt of betraying us.

We first stayed with the Lukić family, in a little room in a shed in the yard. There were other people who also helped us, especially the Travarić family. Later they put us in the ruined house of a priest, in the churchyard, again in a shed, and there we stayed until the end of December, 1942. I'll never forget what happened on December 19 that year, when a German reprisals squad arrived in the village and stationed itself right there in the churchyard. They put their horses in the half-demolished barn, right next to our little shed. They spent the whole day there, while we lay silent, expecting that any minute someone would burst through the door, find us and kill us. None of us even dared to cough; my mother and my aunt were shivering from shock. At sunset the Germans left the village and the villagers, who knew we were there, came running to see what had happened to us. They were delighted to see that we were still alive.

At about that time Partisan units, among which was the Eastern Bosnia Sixth Brigade, defeated the Chetniks on Mt Majevisa. Sixth Brigade fighters made it down to the foothills of Majevisa, where our village of Zagoni lay. This was our first encounter with the Partisans and it was an emotional moment to meet Jews from the brigade: Dr Roza Papo, the first and only woman general in the Yugoslav Army, Nisim Albahari, proclaimed a National Hero after the war, and a woman called Blanka whose surname I don't remember. The Partisans rapidly liberated Bijeljina as well and held it for two or three months. We went to Bijeljina with them. My sister Lotika remained with the brigade and I joined another unit. My mother and aunt, together with my two brothers, were sent to the rear command. My aunt later fell ill and was left to convalesce with a family in the village of Čadavica. My elder brother Bata (Jakov) was sent to a command post in Trnova where he was deployed as a courier, liaising with the surrounding villages. Sometime in the summer of 1944 he found himself close to Čadavica and took

advantage of the opportunity to visit our aunt. It was there that the Chetniks caught them both and killed them. I have never discovered where they were buried.

My sister spent some time with me in the 17th Majevisa Brigade before moving to the 16th Vojvodina Brigade in the spring of 1944. We met a number of times during the sixth enemy offensive. I heard later from her comrades that she fell ill with typhoid and was transferred to the base on Majevisa along with the worst cases among the wounded, from where they were to be evacuated to Italy. The first group was evacuated and planes were expected within a day or two to collect those who remained. However, before this could happen, the Ustasas discovered the base and killed everyone they found there. I have never managed to discover the location of my sister's grave.



Rahela (with grenade on belt) with her mother, brother and two friends from the unit in liberated Tuzla, 1944.

I continued fighting in the 17th Majevisa Brigade, in the 28th Division and then in the 38th Corps Headquarters. There my immediate superior was Moni Finci. Death awaited us at every turn as we fought without pause against the Ustasas, the Chetniks and even the Germans.

But despite this I felt free; I wasn't thinking about death but about the day when we would liberate our country. For me, that happened on April 6, 1945, when my unit entered Sarajevo.

In 1945 I married Ratko (Rafailo) Altaras. Our son, Goran, was born in Sarajevo in November 1947. He graduated in food technology from the Sarajevo University. He married a colleague, Vladislava, and they have a daughter, Ana, who graduated in psychology from the Faculty of Philosophy.

My mother lived with my younger brother Ašer in Banja Luka after the war. She died in 1964 and was buried, as all of us wanted to be, in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade. My brother Ašer stayed on in Banja Luka until 1996, surviving the horrors of the most recent war there, before emigrating to Israel. He now lives in Jerusalem.

After the war, at our request, the Yad Vashem awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations to Risto Ristić. In Bijeljina, in 1942, he saved my mother Blanka Volah, her sister Bukica-Sarina Montiljo, my sister Lotika-Sarina, my brothers Jakov-Bata and Ašer and myself. Risto then also saved all the members of the Jewish families of Haim and Bukica Levi, Mojsije Altarac and Merikado Levi.

Chaim MEJUHAS

VOYAGE INTO UNCERTAINTY*



Chaim Mejuhas was born in Vienna on June 21, 1920, to Nissim and Gisela (née Rosenblich). He had one sister, Lili. Eleven members of his immediate family were killed in the Holocaust: his father, mother, grandmother Anna Rosenblich, his uncle Avram with his wife Kamila, his uncle Joshka with his wife Matilda and their son Heinrich, and his uncle Benko with his wife Ela and their son Chaim.

After finishing secondary technical school in 1939, Chaim Mejuhas was employed in the Utva factory where he worked on construction of the Vrabac and Čavka gliders. After the war he worked in the research and development division of the Military Aviation and Air Defence Command. In 1947, as a young and talented professional, he was sent to the Mechanical Engineering Faculty of Belgrade University for further education. During this time he worked on building an aircraft with the engineer Bešlin. From 1954 until his retirement, he worked in the Aviation Technical Institute. Colonel Mejuhas was a member of the small team of designers which built the first Yugoslav jet aircraft, the Galeb. As project

* This text is an edited chapter from a long manuscript written for the author's grandchildren. Prior to this text, a chapter was published in *The Jewish Almanac* 1971–1996, pages 457–474. The events described, in part, occurred in western Macedonia, under the Albanian, i. e. Italian occupation and partially in areas under Bulgarian occupation.

coordinator he worked on the Kraguj, Jastreb, Orao and Super Galeh aircraft. Many of the projects on which he worked, including the Pčela, the Pelikan, the BAC 311 and the M 10 were never completed, despite his input as a talented designer.

He also lectured at the Mechanical Engineering Faculty of the Mostar University. His creative input was a significant contribution to the Aviation Technical Institute's winning of the AVNOJ Award, presented by the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia.

Chaim Mejuhas invested a great deal of his wealth of talent in invention and construction. From his youth he conceptualised, developed and completed many unusual projects. These included a mechanical ditch digger with a far greater capacity than those of the time, machinery for constructing dikes and a new kind of snow plough for highways and airport runways. To the day he died he nurtured an unrealised dream of producing electricity by harnessing the power of wind at great altitudes.

His first wife, Vera Mejuhas, died young after bearing him a son, Marsel, and a daughter, Vesna, both of whom are married and who bore him a total of four grandchildren. In his later work he had the support of his second wife, Zorica.

Chaim Mejuhas died in early 2001.

In this chapter of his reminiscences, first published in the *Jewish Almanac*, Chaim Mejuhas paints a vivid picture of his experiences in Belgrade under the German occupation: forced labour, arrests, internment in the special police prison, the behaviour of true and false friends. The pain of these days was alleviated only by his romantic and innocent love for his future wife, Verica. He was able to escape from Belgrade eventually only by the pure chance of finding in the street an Italian passport in the name of Miroljub Pančetović of Kičevo.

I had to decide where to go: to Kičevo, where I could certainly expect to find someone who knew Miroljub Pančetović, or to Skopje where, as well as the Bulgarians there were also Germans, or to Tetovo. I settled on Tetovo, arriving the next morning. I headed with my suitcase towards the centre of the town, with no idea of where I was going. In this way I came across a tavern where I spent the night. I had planned to find a job, any kind of job. But this was the domain of the Albanians. Here, as in Belgrade, they were station porters, even woodcutters, and

no one needed anyone else for physical labour. I began wandering the streets, looking into the stores and workshops. There was no industry which needed a technician and I knew no trade. While I was wandering around, two men passed me carrying grappling irons for climbing wooden poles. Suddenly I had an idea: the power station! I caught up with them and asked where I could find it. They were kind enough to take me to the headquarters, to the supervisor, a man called Boss Aleksa. "We don't have any jobs going, but I'd like to help you as much as I can, so that you don't have to wander around. I can employ you as an apprentice, with no salary. The director's away on a trip and when he returns he'll throw you out, but in the meantime we might find you something else." I was surprised at his saying "we might find." This meant that a man who had just met me for the first time in his life was going to help me. I couldn't understand why the director would throw me out if I was working for nothing.

The two young men who had brought me to Boss Aleksa were working on maintenance of the Tetovo power grid. The first couple of days I went with them, learning the job. Under their guidance I soon got the hang of it, but they wouldn't let me work by myself. After two weeks, Boss Aleksa called me in and told me that the director had returned and I couldn't stay. However, he added, I wasn't to worry because he'd found me a new job.

He took me to an electrical workshop, to Master Serafimović. It was only after the liberation that Master Sima, as he was known, confessed that Aleksa had been certain from the moment he met me that I was a Jew. But throughout the entire war they kept up the pretence that I was Miroljub Pančetočić from Kičevo. Had it not been for them and their unobtrusive help and protection, it is unlikely that I would have been here to write about all this. Master Sima explained to me that apprentices were unpaid but that when and if he made any money out of my work he would "fix me up". And so I began to learn, and ply, the electrical trade.

After a month I began to have problems with the Italian police, the *Questura*. The director of the power station, a Russian émigré from the first world war, denounced me as a Communist fugitive from Serbia. The Italians interrogated me, asking why I'd come here instead of to Kičevo, why I hadn't reported to them. This was all accompanied with slaps and blows from a club. They were surprised by my excellent Italian. Finally the inquisitor said: "There's a simple way to solve all

this. Is there anyone who can confirm that you are Miroljub Pančetović?"

An idea occurred to me and I said: "Yes, of course. I know a very important man, a man by the name of Konte M. He's one of the directors of a large factory. Would it be enough if he confirms who I am?"

"Certainly," replied the inquisitor, "then everything would be fine."

As I remember, I then immediately wrote a letter which went as follows. "Dear Mr Konte M., I trust you remember me. My father is the owner of Motor, the Belgrade company. I was an apprentice in your factory last year, under a plan you prepared personally for me. I'm now in Tetovo and would like to travel to Italy to be employed in your factory. Would you be so kind as to reply to me by registered mail, addressed to Miroljub Pančetović, Tetovo. Yours sincerely, Miro." In less than two weeks, to the surprise of the police investigator, a letter arrived by registered mail. They still regarded me as suspicious, but I got no further summonses for investigation.

Somehow the winter passed. When I had no work, I spoke to my neighbour, a photographer. One day he said to me "You're a technician, you must know something about radios." I confessed that I had never repaired a radio but, nonetheless I decided to try and I succeeded. A few days later he found me a new customer and I managed to repair this set as well. That was how I began to work. It took enormous patience, along with nerves of steel and a great deal of persistence, but there was hardly a radio device that I couldn't repair.

Then I met a young chap called Žika Marinković. He was a typesetter but, like me, there was no work for him in Tetovo. His father had died and his mother set about fortune-telling to support her son and daughter. She could also cure some illnesses with herbs. She didn't charge for her services, but she received gifts which enabled her to keep her family alive.

Žika wasn't used to not working and he was preparing to leave for Skopje to find a job. He was keen to have company for the trip. Skopje at the time was under Bulgarian occupation. It was not difficult to cross the border illegally. Žika was from Tetovo and knew how to slip out of the town unnoticed. We moved through the side roads, silently, listening and lying low whenever we needed to.

When we arrived in Skopje we wanted to find identity cards so that our documents were in order. It was customary to report to the Tetovo-

Gostivar brotherhood where, on the basis of our Albanian identity cards, we would be given a referral to the Bulgarian police. On the basis of this they would then issue Bulgarian identity cards. They received us warmly into the clan as young people “who had returned to their homeland,” and gave us referrals to the police station located across the road, walking us to the door. At the station the officer asked me for my name. In Tetovo I had been known as Miroljub Pančetović and this was the name in my Albanian identity card. Because of the Bulgarians in Skopje, I was advised to use the surname Pančetov. So now I told the officer “Miroljub Pančetov.”

The officer’s fist struck me like a bolt out of the blue. Suddenly he became an animal. The punches came thick and fast, as did the questions. “Who are you? Who are you staying with? Who is your connection here?” Then he stopped, saying “That’s enough for today, but you’ll soon start talking.”



From Chaim Mejuhas' identity card, 1941, and, (R) in 1945.

They took me to a large cell where the prisoners put compresses on the wounds I had received. The first night in prison was terrible: apart from the exhaustion from walking, the hunger, the beating and the fear of what was yet to come, there were bedbugs which bit mercilessly, so that I was unable to sleep. The next morning I was taken to be interrogated again. There were three men, they tied my hands together and put a plank of wood beneath my knees, which they then lifted onto the arms of the chair so that my head was hanging down and the soles of my feet

facing up. Then they took a club, a chain and a belt and began taking turns to strike me. It's unbelievable how much a man can endure, even when he thinks it is impossible. I screamed in pain. I fell, I crawled, I was punched, I walked along the bloody trail of my wounds, I crawled around in a circle, but everywhere the belt came after me. It lasted an eternity. I could not believe that this was happening. I was crushed, not just physically but psychologically. I told them my real name, that I was a Jew, where I was from and, finally, I asked the investigator what would happen next. He shrugged his shoulders and said: "Nothing. We'll return you both to Albania."

The other two investigators took me to my cell, carrying me on a chair. There Žika and the other prisoners took care of me and made compresses and bandages from the tails of their shirts. After ten days I began gingerly to stand on my feet and to calm down. Finally, after two and a half weeks, the investigators summoned me and Žika and said that we were not wanted in the new Bulgaria and that they would take us to the border and send us back to Albania. Returning meant illegally crossing the border along the same route by which we had arrived. We moved at night, under guard, through side roads towards the border crossing. The border guards showed us where we could cross the border without encountering an Albanian patrol.

The soldiers left us and we moved on through the dense wood until we came to a clearing. We walked for some time across the clearing and then heard the command: "Halt. Lie down!" We lay on our stomachs and then the beating started, until the border guard was tired and then he asked: "How much money do you have?" We replied that we had no money as we had been in prison and spent everything. He was furious at this and began to hit us again. Finally he told us "Get lost!" He didn't need to tell us twice: we jumped up and ran towards the edge of the forest, where we fell on the ground, exhausted and in pain.

We waited for the dawn so that we could find our orientation more easily. In the morning we saw the road to Tetovo not far below. We reached Žika's house at about noon, and that was the end of our arduous trip to Greater Bulgaria. Žika's wise and good-natured mother accepted me as she did her own Žika, without saying a word. She knew that I had nothing and said that I would help her when I earned some money and if not, then I would not go hungry anyway, but would share what they had. I resumed work with Sima, who started to work out what my work would be worth, and I accepted this new scheme. By some

miracle I had more than enough work and the pickings were good! Each repair was a challenge for me. Although no one had ever taught me how to repair radios, I became something of an expert.

After my return from Skopje, I forged a connection with followers of the National Liberation Struggle. Sima and I gave a monthly contribution to a member of the Youth League of Yugoslav Communists. By letting Sima find me work and collect the payment, I earned much more and lived so well that I was able to give much more to Žika's mother than she needed. I wanted to repay her kindness and, in return, she treated me like a second son. This good woman, sadly, was killed by a stray bullet in an exchange of rifle fire at the time of the Italian capitulation.

The Orthodox population was delighted at the fall of Italy, but in fact it made the Albanians more powerful. It would be a month before the Germans arrived in the region and, in the meantime, there was a wave of Albanian violence aimed at the Orthodox people. It was clear that I needed to get out of Tetovo, meaning that I needed to hook up with a Partisan unit.

Because I had been denounced by the Gestapo director of the power station, I had to go into hiding. I didn't even dare to go home, so Sima found me a place in the attic of a local family. There I stayed in fear and trepidation, because anyone hiding someone without papers was liable to be shot or, at least, taken to a camp. Not only my life was in danger, but also those of the people who were trying to help me.

Finally Sima contacted me: "You're to leave on Friday morning." I was to head towards Gostivar. Friday was market day and there would be a lot of people and carts. I was to leave Tetovo on foot and sit in a horse cart, following another in which would be Mirko, who I had already met. In Gostivar I was to follow Mirko and go into the same house as he did.

We stayed in that house until an Albanian came and told us he would be our guide. We would travel in single file, some distance apart, on a road along a mountain range leading to the Bulgarian border. On top of everything else, I became separated from both our guide and Mirko. I walked, hungry and tired, through a dense and tangled forest which was home to many wild animals. I suppose I walked for more than ten hours. Evening fell and there was the smell of snow in the air. I banged on the trees with a stick, whistling, thinking the forest must end somewhere. Suddenly I heard: "Who's there?"

"Miro."

“Miro, step forward, the rest of you stay where you are.”

“I moved towards the voice, not seeing anyone, and asked: “Who are you?”

“The Yugoslav Army, in the homeland,” came the reply.

Then I saw him, wearing a black beard and moustache and a soldier’s cap with the Yugoslav coat of arms and the eagle. He told me that Mirko had arrived and that they had been waiting a long time for me, then took me to the camp where I had something to eat. They slept in trenches, on beds made of dry branches and it was very cold. I had the uncomfortable feeling that something was crawling along my body and neck. I scratched and found a tiny white louse under my nail.

They took me to the commander’s trench to talk to me. I don’t remember what we talked about. What I remember is that there were about forty people in the unit, completely cut off from the world, always on the edge of starvation and frequently on the move.

One day they summoned me and said: “You say you’re a technician: try to fix our radio transmitter.” I told them that I was self-taught and that I had no tools or spare parts. They decided that I should make a list of the tools and instruments I needed and send this to Sima with a letter, then everything we needed could be here within a week. Once the equipment arrived I worked for three days and finally succeeded: we could pick up Radio London and heard that the Germans were losing on all fronts. The radio operator also managed to connect with the headquarters somewhere in Serbia and we received an order:

“Set off for Serbia with the entire unit.”

“How, in which direction?” we asked.

“Report to the German major at Skopje airport. He’ll provide you with a route map.” It was the last contact via radio.

The next day the commander called the whole unit together, told them what the orders were and said that he would not cooperate with the Germans. The men were seized with disappointment and uncertainty. But then, at the beginning of July, 1944, we learned that a Partisan reconnaissance patrol wanted to make contact with the unit, so a delegation was appointed to negotiate with them. They agreed that the brigade command would take in everyone from our unit and that we would be treated on an equal footing with the Partisans, both in terms of responsibility and in acquiring weapons. This deal was met with delight and we headed off to our rendezvous with the Third Macedonian Brigade.

I was assigned to the youth detachment. From hiding and fleeing along the mountaintops and forests, we were soon joining the battle. We attacked the Germans retreating from Greece, along with Bulgarian garrisons and scouts. We attacked Prilep and seized the German garrison with all its weapons, trucks, passenger vehicles and motorcycles. Among the trucks we found just what we needed: an auto workshop with tools and spare parts for all possible repairs.

The captain kept me with him and together we formed the First Macedonian Motor Brigade. Vlado, the captain, was commander and I his deputy. Anyone who could drive was enlisted in this brigade. I was in charge of organising the technical services, maintaining the vehicles and refuelling. There was plenty to do in the workshops, with the vehicles breaking down frequently as the convoy of people and equipment moved along village roads in order to avoid the larger and better-armed German columns.

In the meantime, I was wounded while out on patrol. They wanted to keep me in hospital, but I returned to the unit because there was a lot of work to be done. Unlike the other brigades, my people were always either on the road or in action. The Germans finally completed their withdrawal from Greece and the time had come for a decisive attack on Skopje. The brigade's main task was the transport of other units, so our convoy entered the Macedonian capital while the battle was still raging.

Life in liberated Skopje was a completely new experience, with beds to sleep in and enough food to go round. A new government was to be established, but my role was to organise a huge auto workshop in the city, with strict control of the use of materials, vehicles and fuel.

Around the beginning of November I was told to report urgently to Apostolski, the commander of the main Macedonian headquarters. I had seen him before, but I didn't think he would know my name, so I was surprised when he asked me "Miro, what is your real name?" I told him and then he didn't want to hear any more. He told me that he knew a lot about me and that he had chosen me for a very delicate assignment. There would be a food shortage in Skopje during the winter, the railway connecting Macedonia to Serbia had been destroyed and the roads were bad. We didn't have enough trucks to keep Skopje supplied with flour. Our only hope was assistance from Bulgaria. My mission was to take a sealed letter from him to a Bulgarian general in Sofia. In it the commander asked for Skopje to be supplied with a quantity of

flour, to be brought by the Bulgarians to Kriva Palanka and which I would then transport by trucks to Skopje.

After many difficulties, I eventually reached the general. He read the letter and told me to wait. The next morning he handed me a sealed letter for my commander and said "We can meet your request: Skopje will not go hungry." The next day I handed the letter to Apostolski.

There was a great deal of work ahead of us. I organised a convoy of thirty trucks and thirty drivers to transport the flour. It was hard going because of the general poverty, hunger and anarchy, not to mention the winter. As we made our way from Skopje to the Bulgarian border, I repeatedly checked on what was happening. Ahead lay a three-month struggle for our trucks and drivers against hunger, sub-zero temperatures, snow and exhaustion. That winter I slept no more than four hours a night. I was freezing and hungry, but it never occurred to anyone in the brigade that I too needed some rest and relief. Finally, by early March, 1945, we finished moving all the flour to Skopje.

Early that spring I received my first letter from my sister Lilika. She told me that only she, Stevo and their daughter had survived, that our mother and our grandmother had been taken to Banjica and then by truck to Jajinci, where they were gassed. Sometime before that our father had been held in the Banjica camp and from there was sent to Pančevo. However, when he was not able to move fast enough he was shot and pushed into a ditch beside the road. We learnt of this crime from a witness, a cyclist who had known my father.

I got through to Belgrade and found out that Verica had finished technical school and was on the Srem front with a Partisan unit. The war was still not over and my only wish was to return to Belgrade as soon as possible.

I managed, with enormous difficulty, to get a week's leave. My joy at seeing Lilika again was enormous. Stevo was acting strangely, because he had sold all the stock from the store and wasted the money on self-indulgence. When the funds ran out he found another woman.

Most of all I wanted to find Verica, but I did not succeed. I saw in Belgrade that my whole world from before the war had fallen apart; of my whole family only Lili had survived and all my property and my apartment had disappeared.

It was with a heavy heart that I returned to Skopje.

As the end of the war approached, I was surprised to be told at the barracks that there was a Partisan woman at the gates looking for me. It

was Verica. I cannot describe the joy of this reunion after four years of waiting, fear, hope, doubt and who knows what else.

She was beautiful, more beautiful than ever. She had grown from a girl into a young woman, for me the most beautiful woman in the world.

Immediately after the war she was discharged and returned to Belgrade before coming to Skopje where we took ten days of unofficial leave for our honeymoon. But ten days were not enough to tell each other everything that had happened, let alone to make arrangements for our future.

After the war I finished my studies. I shared the housework and the upbringing of the children with Verica until a terminal illness took her from me. She was only 33.

Judita KRIVOKUĆA

THE EVIL AWAKES



Judita Albahari-Krivokuća was born in 1925 in Sanski Most to Luna (née Levi) and David M. Albahari. She has an older sister, Rahela (Perišić) and a younger brother, Moric. Her older sister, Flora Simić, died in 1993. The family adopted Moric Š. Albahari after his parents died. The whole family was fortunate in surviving the Holocaust. After the war, Judita Albahari finished high school and graduated from the Faculty of Agriculture at Sarajevo

University. She worked on the electrification of agricultural production, carrying out research and publishing scientific papers. Later she was engaged in designing and constructing public parks. Despite officially retiring in 1984, she continued to work until 1990.

Her daughter, Tatjana Taylor, lives in London, where she works as an architect.

Before the second world war I lived with my parents in Drvar where my father was a merchant.

The war with the Germans came as no surprise to us. Until the war broke out we lived in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia where we had never been singled out because of our religion. We lived in harmony, respecting people of every religion. Among my peers there was very little awareness of national identity.

During the two years before the war began I completed the third and fourth grades of high school, living with the family of Rahela Laipnik in Podravska Slatina.

The day the Germans invaded, I was in hospital in Virovitica having my appendix removed. Doctor Kolibaš, a Serb surgeon in Virovitica, had told me three days before the invasion: "Stay in hospital; we'll operate on you because if the Germans arrive they won't let you have surgery because you're a Jew." I took his advice.

The town fell without a single shot being fired. I saw the Germans for the first time when they entered the hospital, two young soldiers, very neatly dressed. This first, pleasant impression was immediately dispelled when I saw their long, black rifles aimed at us, the patients. My heart filled with fear. That day, not yet recovered, I was thrown out of the hospital with a number of other patients. Fearing that someone might give me away to the Germans, a nun from my hospital ward helped me. At the last minute she destroyed my patient records.

I went out into the street, in terrible pain, holding my wound with my hand. In a nearby street I met some schoolmates in uniform, carrying rifles. I looked at them, in fear but they didn't acknowledge me. On their caps was a huge letter "U", standing for that terrible word "Ustasha". I was petrified. I had occasionally heard this word at school, but could not have dreamt how much evil it implied. I immediately wondered how it was possible that on March 27, just a few days earlier, all the teachers and pupils had marched through the town shouting "Better war than the pact" and "Better a grave than a slave". Was it possible that these demonstrations against the pact had been a ploy to conceal the existence of the illegal Ustasha organisation?

I continued on down the street. In my childish naivety It didn't occur to me go to a Jewish home. Instead I went to the house of my best friend at school, Greta Ambruster. She and I were the smallest in the class; we sat in the first row and we were worst at gymnastics. This had forged a bond between us. With no suspicion of evil, my feelings towards Greta unchanged, I faced her mother at the front door. "Judita, you can only sleep here for one night. We don't dare keep you here any longer."

I spent the night in confusion. Where should I go the next day, and how? As I left their house, frightened, I realised that I was no longer the same person I had been, that I was somehow marked. "What have I done wrong?" I asked myself. "Didn't they always say at school that I was well-behaved and a sweet child?"

I went to the Volf family, to the home of my Jewish schoolmates. They took me in as if I were their child. There, for the first time, I slept

under a light feather quilt, which was a great surprise to me. We didn't leave the house because we were all extremely frightened, expecting heavy footsteps on the stairs to the building at any minute. Through the window we watched the arrogant German soldiers destroying Yugoslav rifles and throwing them away while captured Yugoslav soldiers lay helplessly in the yards, awaiting their fate. I was waiting for Rahela, the only person who I was sure could take me back to my parents, but the road to Slatina was closed for several days. Rahela only came once the Germans had also invaded Slatina. On our way we met the Yugoslav Army and saw everywhere the signs of clashes. In that area the population was largely Orthodox. Most Croatian districts had fallen to the Germans, apparently without offering any resistance.

We set off, through Kapela Batrina and Slavonski Brod toward Prnjavor. Rahela planned to leave me with her father, Jakob Albahari, who lived in the local village of Hrvaćani. It was noisy and relaxed on the train, with people speaking excitedly about the Independent State of Croatia and brave Hitler had apparently brought them salvation. Only one or two passengers were silent, a numb gaze on their lowered faces as they watched the euphoria of these rural Slavonians. Rahela pretended she was sleeping and didn't speak to anyone. There were no document checks on the train.

We spent an entire night in the Slavonski Brod railway station, waiting for the boat which would ferry us across the Sava River to Bosnia, the bridge having already been demolished. The waiting room was full of German soldiers. One of them kept looking at us and finally approached, saying to my cousin: "I like your daughter. I'll take leave and take her to Germany to marry her." I understood their German conversation completely and threw myself feverishly into Rahela's arms, starting to cry. My quick-witted cousin didn't hesitate in that dangerous moment.

"Yes, but the child has tuberculosis, she's been in my town in hospital and she has open sores. I'm taking her home to her parents."

She whispered to me to start coughing harder. The young German soldier's intentions were probably good, but what would have happened if he had discovered my obviously Jewish name?

Crammed with passengers, the boat reached the opposite bank of the river, to our great relief. Not only were the eagle-eyed Ustashas watching every passenger, but we were also worried we might drown in the Sava.

Finally we arrived in Hrvaćani, travelling part of the way on foot and part by horse-drawn cart. There were still no Ustashas there and my uncle and aunt were still safe. They were overjoyed to see me. Soon after that I arrived, alone, in Drvar, although I hardly remember the trip. The Ustashas had been in control there for quite some time.

Drvar was a predominantly Serbian town and the Ustashas had been mercilessly arresting prominent Serbs and beating them, seizing whatever they wanted of their property. They had immediately confiscated our shop. One Croat, Franjo Bodnaruk, who was married to a local woman, came to our house along with another Ustasha. He took over my father's shop, taking the keys and selling whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He even came to our apartment and took everything valuable, even my sister's expensive clothes. He showed us the Ustasha badge on his lapel and told us "I've been a sworn Ustasha since 1934." Although he was the son-in-law of a prominent Serbian family, he did not refrain from committing the most loathsome crimes. As a clerk in the municipal government he could do whatever he liked.

We had only been in Drvar two months when the Ustasha police told us we were to be deported to a collection camp in Bosanski Petrovac. I didn't even know the meaning of the word camp. I remembered my father's stories about the first world war, stories of the Austro-Hungarian camps which hadn't seemed so bad. But one thing puzzled me: when we cleaned out the Ustasha police station with our brushes, when I scrubbed the clogged and filthy toilets, hadn't they seen that I worked hard and obeyed them all? Hadn't we given them everything from our house, did they now want our souls?

We were supposed to walk the 36 kilometres to Bosanski Petrovac with about ten kilos of luggage, but the head of the Kuhar district, at my father's request, allowed us to travel by horse-drawn cart and take a little more luggage.

We were to leave on July 16, 1941. That day, before setting out for the camp we were very downcast. Would they really take us to the camp, or would they execute us somewhere around the next bend? Everyone in Drvar was nervous as we prepared to leave, our friends coming to help us and give us money. A car with two young, harmless-looking Ustasha pulled up in front of the house. My school friend Vlado Kravić, pulled me aside and told me: "Don't go to the camp, we'll hide you and Moric in the woods." We later learnt that Vlado was a member of the Communist Youth League. His offer, which had probably not

been his own idea, seemed strange to a girl brought up in a middle-class household.

When I told my father about it he was furious: "Imagine a girl wandering around in the woods with boys! You're going where I go. So what if we're going to the camp? It won't be so bad there."

When we left, at about noon that day, my two older sisters were not in Drvar. Flora was with one aunt in Hrvacani and Rahela with another in Ključ. My mother had followed her maternal instinct and hidden them away from the evil eyes of the Ustasha. We had known for a long time that we would be deported and we were afraid now that the time had come.

Before we got into the cart, my mother pressed a package into my arms. Mrs Šiklić saw this and whispered to her: "Don't give it to the child, my Željko will take it to you later." My mother trusted this neighbour to whom she had been very close before the war and gave the gold to her. The sons of the Šiklić family had already committed some terrible atrocities but, despite this, my mother still had faith in them.

There was no sign of Željko during our first week in the camp and in the second week he was unable to come because a rebellion had broken out around Drvar. My sister Rahela took part in the rebellion. Going into the Šiklić home, she found our gold hidden in their wood stove. It was later sent to the command headquarters of the uprising.

We were accompanied on our way to the camp by two Ustashas who talked non-stop. They hinted that, after they'd dealt with the Serbs and the Jews, the Moslems, who were at that time their comrades-in-arms, would have "their turn under the knife".

It was afternoon when we arrived at the Petrovac camp below Mount Oštrej. The camp yard was full of people we didn't know, Jews from Bihać. They had been thrown out of their homes in April. Later, the Serb families were also all expelled and settled in the villages around Bosanski Petrovac while the Jews were transported to the camps. Bihać was one of the first towns in Bosnia to be treated so harshly in the very first days of the Ustasha regime. The mayor of the town at the time was a hardened Ustasha. There were about thirty Jewish families in the camp, a total of about 150 people.

The camp was full, so my family was put in a tiny space meant to be a toilet with a small corridor for the washbasin. The other camp prisoners lay on the floors of the huge hospital wards. We often heard screaming and fierce arguing from the wards and, most often, loud weeping.

Even in our tiny space, my mother managed to create some kind of harmony. When we left home, believing my father that it wasn't so bad in the camp, I had thought about what clothes I should take. I even took my photos and my scrapbook. But there were tears in my eyes as I looked for the last time at the corner of my room where my toys were neatly arranged: a miniature bedroom with doll babies and a tiny kitchen. My father and my brother had carved them all from wood for me.

Life in the camp became more and more difficult. The hospital building was new and still had no electricity or running water, so we had to cook on a fire in the yard. Because of this we were soon messy and dirty. The only thing we talked about was what lay in the future. News spread quickly through the camp. The prisoners stood along the barbed wire beside the road to Petrovac, hoping to be given something from the passers-by and to learn the latest news. Our group included a number of prominent families from Bihać: Levi, Kaveson and Atijas, well-known lawyers, judges and engineers. They still hoped they would be saved, believing their former standing in the community and the help they had given people would eventually count for something. They sent delegations to the authorities in Petrovac and wrote petitions to Gutić, the mayor of Banja Luka, who until then had been a friend of the important Jewish families in Bihać.

The rules in the camp became harsher, they even stopped giving us food. Whatever small hoards of cash or food people had managed to smuggle in when they arrived were long gone. Anything they managed to get from passers-by they hid. The bravest of the boys, driven by the constant hunger, would risk their lives to sneak under the wire. Under cover of night they would creep silently out to the surrounding villages and knock three times on the window of Serbian houses, in the signal agreed on. They would be taken in, fed and given as much food as they could carry back to the camp. Just before the Ustashas arrived at dawn, the boys would distribute this food, giving most of it to the elderly and the children. Moni Atijas used to bring me a piece of cheese and some corn gruel. He would knock on the door quietly and offer this precious gift to my mother. My brother, then aged ten, would laugh uproariously, saying, "Moni doesn't do it for nothing. I can see the way he follows you around all the time."

Every morning, and often in the afternoons, the Ustashas would come in for an inspection. Once they realised there were some beautiful young women in the camp, more and more of them would come.

They would point to the girls or women they liked, take them away and have their way with them. The most beautiful woman in the camp, the German wife of the lawyer Levi and the mother of two children disappeared this way. I was only sixteen at the time, but my mother used to smear soot on my face, messing up my hair and dressing me in torn and dirty clothes whenever the Ustashas were coming.

As time went by, we began noticing a few people getting together and whispering about something. They were David Atijas, who before the war had been a student and a member of the League of Communist Youth, the Kaveson brothers and the Levi brothers. They were planning an escape from the camp. They had established contact with the Partisans from the Army of National Liberation. These were the guerrillas who had already taken Oštrelj, and we often heard them firing their one cannon, a sound which encouraged us and made the Ustashas nervous. We hung a white sheet on the middle window of the hospital to let them know that we were still alive. During the night, the rebels used torches to send their own signals. My sister Rahela was with the rebels in Oštrelj, and my father joined the group planning the escape from the camp. Everything was done in strict secrecy. All I know was that we would sit on the lawn in the hospital grounds with David Atijas, learning about relations among people and classes and about the progressive workers movement. There, for the second time in my life, I heard the word "communism". David Atijas was eventually taken to the Jasenovac camp where he was killed during the mass escape of 1945.

A brave handful of rebels from Oštrelj set off across the Petrovac field early one morning to attack the hospital and liberate the camp. The Ustashas immediately hustled us into the cellar and locked us in as the rebels stormed into the hospital. They had no idea we were imprisoned in the cellar. We could hear gunfire, but we didn't try to make ourselves heard, because we weren't sure whether the guerrillas had taken the hospital. When they didn't find us, the rebels beat a hasty retreat towards Oštrelj, as a large number of Ustasha reinforcements approached the hospital. We climbed to the windows high on the cellar wall and saw the guerrillas withdrawing. They looked odd to us, some were in suits, some in farm clothes, with the traditional moccasins and caps with three small peaks.

As the Ustashas watched us, threatening us with their guns, we wandered around our cellar. The fear was palpable. The old people prayed aloud while the men organising the escape tried to calm us

down. Nobody knew what was going to happen, but in the end we resigned ourselves. Our fate was in God's hands.

Then we heard the doors being unlocked. The Ustashas forced all the inmates up the stairs, barking orders for the wounded and dead to be carried to the town. As we reached the top of the staircase we saw Oto Turnšek, our former neighbour from Drvar, the only Catholic in the area, now an Ustasha leader in Petrovac. He was heavily wounded and my mother tended to him, bandaging his wounds. The day before he had come to my mother with two chickens, asking her to make him soup, he could no longer tolerate Bosnian food. When he succumbed to his wounds and died, although we were desperate with hunger, we couldn't bring ourselves to eat this rich, delicious chicken soup.



*Judita in 1941, before
deportation to the camp.*

We never made our escape to the liberated territory. Soon two factions evolved. The first group didn't know what was going on. They were passionate in their belief that the young people shouldn't join the guerrillas because then the Ustashas would kill the elderly and the children. The other group, well acquainted with Fascist plans and methods, thought the young and healthy should flee into the woods to at least have a chance of being saved.

A few days later the Ustashas suddenly charged into the camp, armed to the teeth. They lined the men up on one side and the women on the other. In front of these lines, about ten metres away, they placed two automatic rifles. We children stood on the third side. We were told to dance the traditional folk dance, the *kolo*, while the Ustashas took photographs. These were to be published by the International Red Cross, showing our happy childhood in the camp. Just at that moment Colonel Adamec from the local civil defence rushed into the camp, shouting "While I'm here, there'll be no shooting!"

We believed Adamec and felt relieved. From then on, during the evenings, the old people sat around talking or praying. Down in one of the cellars we sang quietly and danced to a harmonica.

There was a man called Osman, from Petrovac, who came often to the camp in his Ustasha uniform. He marched around the camp like the rest of them, but without the usual cruel glare. We had the feeling that he may have felt sorry for us. In fact he was a Communist who had infiltrated the Ustasha army under cover, but we knew nothing about this at the time. It wasn't until 1947 that I discovered the truth about him. When I met him for the first time in Sarajevo I talked to him excitedly about our difficult days. He hugged me and said "We didn't let them kill you. I told Adamec and did as much as I could, under the circumstances."

Thanks to Colonel Adamec, the regime in the camp became less harsh. Some of the female inmates, hairdressers and dressmakers, would go into Petrovac, working for the ladies of the town and the men who were tradesmen worked for private companies. They would return in the evening full of stories. We were more relaxed now, feeling ourselves somehow in touch with the town.

We all longed for salvation, expected it would come. We asked our family and friends to get us forged travel permits and other things we needed, but there was little they could do to help us. The people who wanted to help us didn't dare, while those who could have helped had no love for us and wouldn't do anything. My cousin from Podravska Slatina wrote to the Ustasha authorities, asking them to release me from the camp for the beginning of school in autumn, 1941, telling them I was a good student and it would be a shame for me not to continue my education. The Ustashes only laughed at this request.

My mother's sister, Sarina, lived about twenty kilometres from Bosanski Petrovac, in the town of Ključ. Her husband was a prominent Muslim, well respected in the area and my father asked him to help us. He was well aware of the fate that lay before us and could easily have saved us, or at least visited us, but he didn't see fit to do so. The only help we received from Ključ was a small food parcel, which Aunt Sarina had certainly sent without his knowledge.

With no prospect of anyone helping us, we again fell into depression and despair. There were rumours that we were finally to be taken to Jasenovac. Somewhere, deep down, we were happy: we were desperate to go anywhere. We didn't have any idea whether it would be better

or worse. The educated people in the camp thought it would be an improvement, because of the European significance of the place.

Around the end of October we were told officially that the trucks were waiting to take us to Jasenovac. We were to be taken to Gornje Bravsko, in the heart of the Ustasha territory where we were to wait for a train from Drvar which would take us to Prijedor. We were happy and excited, lying awake at nights, making our plans. The young people wanted to make a do-or-die run across the Petrovac plain but, fortunately, common sense prevailed. Fleeing across the broad Petrovac plain, with heavy Ustasha troops around the camp, could only lead to slaughter. Again a delegation of prominent Bihać Jews was assembled to visit the mayor of Banja Luka, Viktor Gutić. Adamec, keen to see our problems solved, allowed the delegation to make this journey, but Gutić, contemptuous and arrogant, threw them out.

Everything was as it had been in the camp. The old men, shabbily dressed, crouched on their bundles with their prayer shawls, praying to God. The young people were disturbed, nervous in the camp. We looked out towards the great Iron Gate and the two Ustasha soldiers guarding it.

And then one day a convoy of green trucks lined up by the gate. We took a last glance at what may have been our last refuge and ran towards the trucks as the Ustasha jostled us along. The old and invalid had trouble climbing into the trucks and we helped them up. But then, suddenly, came the order: "Separate trucks for the old, the young and the children!" We were cold and numb as we silently kissed our parents goodbye. I was in one of the first trucks. My little brother, fortunately too young to realise what was happening, was in another. My parents were in one of the last trucks.

The road snaked and curved as we climbed Bravsko. In the distance, scattered shots rang out. Maybe the guerrillas would try again to save us. We were excited and cheerful at this thought, though filled with fear. As the convoy passed bends in the road my mother would look at us from her truck. My father, usually the optimist, had fallen into a depression. We were thrown from side to side of the truck on the sharp bends of the rough rural road. The Ustashes took hunks of salami from their rucksacks, cutting them into slices and offering some to us. I hesitated, looking at the older people, and then began to wolf it down. Why were they suddenly being so kind, were we approaching our

death? I was sorry my skinny little brother wasn't with me so that he could eat as well.

In Gornje Bravsko, where the road met the narrow railway, the trucks drew to a halt. Only then did we believe that the Ustashas had not been lying. We jumped out of the trucks and ran to hug our families as the sun set. The train had not yet arrived. The Ustashas began to be more friendly with us. They wanted our girls to sing them some famous French hit. At that moment gunshots rang out from the hill on the right side of the road. We screamed and panicked as bullets whistled overhead. I buried my head in my luggage as if nothing else mattered and my mother and father huddled over my brother. We didn't know who was firing at us, but the bullets didn't hit us, whistling high above our heads. Whispers began: "It's the guerrillas, they're trying to save us!" But our joy was short-lived.

We saw truckloads of Ustashas in their black uniforms coming down the white road from Donje Bravsko. Now it was clear to us that our lives were over and we calmly awaited our execution. The Ustashas jumped out of their trucks, formed up in a firing squad and headed for the village at the foot of the hill. We waited for almost two hours, our eyes fixed on the hill, watching the Ustashas advance, their steps heavy and arrogant. It appeared that the guerrillas had surrendered and would now be shot together with us. Our horror mounted as the guerrillas came closer and we saw their trophies: the ripped shirts with the tri-colour Serbian flag. We never knew whether the guerrillas had put up a fight, but whatever happened, in revenge, the Ustashas had slaughtered the entire village, slashing the stomachs and throats of innocent people with their bayonets.

Drenched in blood, the Ustashas passed us without stopping. Far in the distance we heard a sound. "Here comes the train! Here comes the train!" the children shouted, clambering onto the railway tracks. We didn't care: we only wanted to be free from the terrible threat of this blood-soaked ground. Soon the train appeared. We climbed into the rear wagons while those in the front ones watched us in amazement. The Ustashas and the train driver jostled us along into the long, dark wagons, fetid and filthy. Two tiny barred windows set just below the top of the wagon let in a feeble glimmer of light as we were packed in like sardines. Finally we heard the rasp of a bolt as we were closed in. My father tried to comfort us. "It's not far to Prijedor, we'll be alright." Soon people began to push towards the windows as we gasped for air.

Only a few of us, the tall ones, were able to gulp a few breaths of fresh air. One sweet little girl, the sister of Mento Levi who survived the war, was already choking for air. David Atijas, a tall and well-built young man, lifted her to the tiny windows. We began to smell fire and through the windows we could see the flames from the burning villages of Bravska and Sanice.



*Judita Albahari with her brother Moric,
meeting by chance in Sarajevo, 1945.*

It took ten hours on the narrow-gauge railway to reach Prijedor. At the station they opened the door and left it slightly ajar so we again had a little air and light. Instead of the neat and peaceful Prijedor station we knew, there was now chaos, the station full of armed Germans and Ustashas. The arrogant Ustashas were drinking, throwing their empty bottles around, singing and shouting Ustasha slogans. Despite all this, many people from Prijedor, some of whom we knew, came to the station. The Serbs had heard that a convoy of Jews had arrived and brought us food. The Ustashas were in a stubborn mood and keen to exercise their own importance and power. They let some of the Serbs approach us and talk while others they turned back, threatening them like enemies. It was torture to catch the smell of a fresh meat or vegetable pie and then have that intoxicating aroma depart along with our friends. Our old friends from Lušci-Palanka came to see us, the Brujić, Bateši, Krneta, Vještica, Majkić and Lapac families among many oth-

ers. Those Jews who had not yet been deported from Prijedor didn't dare appear.

Among this crush of people I suddenly recognised one sweet and boyish face, focused on me with a tender gaze. "Omilj!" I shouted. It was my schoolmate from Drvar, Omilj Kreco, whose mother was Jewish. The Ustashas and my parents allowed me to walk with him down one of the narrow Prijedor streets. I remembered the beautiful freedom I had once enjoyed, the pleasant walks with no looking over my shoulder. I began to cry and Omilj comforted me. "Trust me, it will all be over very soon. Our people around Drvar are getting stronger every day." He was mourning his eldest brother, the burly Boba, who had been thrown half dead into a pit, one of the first Serbs to die in Drvar. As we said our farewells, Omilj handed me a little parcel of food; his eyes filled with tears as he tenderly kissed my forehead.

The Germans were urgently in need of transport, so we remained in the wagons at Prijedor station for several days. The Ustashas were so drunk they didn't notice who came and went from the wagons. Little Mento Levi got lost one day, coming back in the evening with food for his parents and younger sister. Until very recently my father had had a great many friends in Prijedor, among the merchants of all religions. He had thought he could rely on them, but this was not the case and he was bitterly disappointed when some of them pretended not to see him and others just shrugged their shoulders.

The uncertainty of our future began to eat away at us. We had nowhere to run, every step away from the wagons brought the risk of a bullet in the forehead. Undaunted, my father began to prepare a plan. Perhaps he told my mother, but we children knew nothing about it. One evening, just before sunset he told my mother: "Ask to go to the toilet, then don't come back to the wagon. Stay behind the toilet at Ljubija station.

My mother went first. I followed a little later, then my brother and, finally, father. My mother told me to wait for my brother when I came out and take him to Ljubija station. There weren't any problems until we reached the station, because camp inmates were coming and going from the wagons all the time. But the cold, desolate and frightening night in the bushes behind the Ljubija station toilet was terrible. It seemed to last forever. My little brother by now was accustomed to this hardship and didn't complain. Instead he huddled under my mother's skirt. We were worried that someone from the wagon would start

searching for us. Because of the regular attacks around Prijedor, Ljubija station was little used and this gave us some security.

At dawn we caught the train for Sanski Most, a journey of an hour or more. When we bought our tickets on the train we were lucky that we weren't asked to show our documents, because we had no passes. A few people from Sanski Most recognised my father in the train, without realising we were fleeing from the camp. They knew little about the Fascist regime and even suggested that my father become actively involved in politics because he had once been a member of the opposition.

When we arrived in Sanski Most we set off along the side streets, so as not to be recognised, for the house of Mazalta Atijas. She was a close friend, as had been her late husband, Avram. Words could not express our joy at having escaped that terrible camp. I felt I was on my way to freedom and my beloved relatives who had been in my soul from my earliest childhood. I remembered the holiday celebrations for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our whole family would travel from our home in Lušci-Palanka in our best clothes, going first to the temple and then to a wonderful Spanish feast at the house of Uncle Avram and Aunt Mazalta. Now, again, the Atijas family welcomed us warmly. Their relatives from Zagreb were also there. We stayed in the house, but were always on our guard: we spent a lot of time in the cellar. The Jews in Sanski Most were still in their homes, but they were depressed and nervous. The look of suffering never left their eyes.

Here, like everywhere else in their Independent State of Croatia, the Ustashas had committed atrocious brutalities and laid waste to law and order. When we arrived in Sana the town was enveloped in darkness. Because of the uprising, which had spread from Drvar throughout the Krajina, and because of the death of a German officer near Sana, all the men in the town and the surrounding areas had been arrested. They harassed and tortured them and then one day they took about seven thousand people, from the youngest children to the elderly, bound in tens with rope and wire, to the execution site. They shot them in groups, so that many of these martyrs were thrown into the pits wounded but alive. Their screams rang out as they piled earth over these trenches, which were so shallow that the blood ran down the hill for a long time afterwards. The people were struck dumb with grief, unable even to greet one another in the streets. The Croats in Sana, the distinguished gentlemen of the Cerjan, Šarić and Miniga families, made no attempt to save the town's Serbs from this massacre.

The atmosphere in Aunt Mazalta's house was warm but sad. Her two sons, Puba and Lola, had been killed by the Ustasha at the same time as the massacre of the Serbs. Only her youngest son, Mimi, was saved. One of the policemen, seeing this small boy being taken to be shot said to him: "Run, boy, save your life!"

My father and mother tried constantly to bring some cheer to this grief-stricken household. One Saturday night, my father wanted to remind Mazalta of her husband Avram, and sang:

*When the imam mounts the minaret
To call the people to prayer
Then Avram opens his box
Here, old lady, here's a warning.*

My mother and my cousin Švesta did the housework for the elderly and worn-out Mazalta. This beautiful home, vast and peaceful, its rooms furnished with antiques, looked like a shrine to me. I no longer had the stink of the camp on my hands, no longer did I use toilet pits in the fields. I slept in a clean room, lulled gently into dreams by the tolling of the big, old clock.

Within a month of our arrival, we began to hear rumours that the Ustashes were preparing to leave and that the Italians were coming. My father, familiar with the Italian army from the battle on the Pijava River during his first world war days, was delighted. We too began to relax, confident in his knowledge and experience. The town was restless, the Ustasha families and their followers rebelled, attacking Hitler and Pavelić for putting the entire territory of Dalmatia, Montenegro and a large part of Bosnia into Italian hands. They withdrew with the Ustashes. Soon there were convoys of trucks full of soldiers in green uniforms and broad-brimmed hats rolling into the town. The Italians arrived calmly, cheerfully, waving to the people.

One Italian officer made his home in the Atijas house, ignoring the fact that it was a Jewish household. They were only interested in clean and comfortable accommodation. Everyone in the house was on good terms with the Italian officer: we spoke in Spanish and he in Italian but we could understand each other. My father immediately asked him to use his truck to take us to Drvar, which he agreed to do in return for a consignment of wheat. We left Sanski Most in about the middle of December, excited to be returning home at last.

It was a rainy, gloomy day. An Italian soldier lifted the tarpaulin at the back of the truck for us but my brother refused to get in. Tense and whimpering oddly he threw himself down on the street. They had no time to comfort him or give him much thought, so they picked him up and put him in the truck. For a long time he shivered, finally pulling himself together with the help of my mother's patient care. An Italian officer offered him some minty drink but he was unable to drink it. We were all beside ourselves. Now, after all our suffering, were we going to lose this most precious creature in the family? We didn't see anything outside that military truck for the entire trip.

We made our way with relief over the rebel territory and began descending the familiar bends and curves of the road to Drvar. We couldn't lift the tarpaulin and the air was heavy with a dense fog so we waited for the truck to reach our house. My father had told them to stop at the Orthodox Church, which was next to our house. We jumped excitedly out of the truck, father warning us to slow down in case there were Ustashas in Drvar. The neighbours gathered around, hugging and kissing us. "We're glad you've come to us, Boss, whatever we have is yours!" We ran down the hall and banged on the door. The door slowly opened and Rahela's face appeared, her friend Mila beside her.

"Isn't she with the Partisans? What's she doing here? Why has she deserted the Partisans?" Everything delighted us and puzzled us. The house had been looted, the walls bare and the empty rooms wide open. We didn't care, at least we were no longer in the camp.

Rahela and Mila wouldn't come out of the house and were behaving very strangely. Probably Rahela was wondering what she could tell my father when we arrived. She didn't know how to lie, but she dared not tell him the truth. Mila Beoković, a gentle creature, had helped her to escape from the Ustasha prison in July. Before the rebellion itself they had both taken refuge in the woods.

Suddenly a group of young men and women in village clothes arrived at the house. I recognised only Duško Carić. They went into one of the rooms. After they left, a short time later, my father turned to Rahela. "What kind of company have you been keeping?"

"This is something which helps the resistance," Rahela replied.

My father's chin began to tremble as fear and joy overwhelmed him. His voice shook. "We have to come to an agreement."

The story Rahela told him was familiar enough from the camp where he had been involved with the radical young people and their

plans for escape. But it was painful for him that such a heavy burden had been put on the shoulders of inexperienced girls.

Soon, Flora too arrived from Hrvaćani and we were all together again.

As well as the Italians there were also Chetnik patrols in the town. These were all men we knew and we didn't see them as any kind of threat. They would visit my father to talk and drink coffee. Veljko Vođević, our next-door neighbour was among them. He had been in love with Flora forever and we couldn't imagine him doing us any harm.

Father helped Rahela to collect medical and hygiene supplies. He knew a Jewish pharmacist in the town and she would secretly provide him with these. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. The Italians were easy-going, always drinking, dancing and having fun. It seemed to us that any kind of underground activity would go unnoticed here. The Jewish writer, Ervin Šinko, was there with his doctor wife and they were both starving. My mother would often send me to them with food, although we too were hungry.

Joži Kabiljo from Prijedor and Mimo Atijas from Sana both arrived in Drvar to escape deportation and join the Partisans. They soon learnt that the fighters didn't have enough food to go round. Once they arrived at our house, the cheerful and witty Joži changed our life completely. We talked, painted, wrote, read, learned languages, made things and, in the evenings, softly sang Spanish songs.

Despite our apparently secure existence in these carefree days, dark clouds were hanging over our house. Rahela's underground cell was discovered. She and Mila fled into the forest early one morning, but we were uncertain what would happen to us. We were all nervous, the Italians would certainly take us as hostages. Before Rahela left the house she told my father that if we were taken to prison, she would return and surrender to the Italians in return for our freedom.

The next day my father went to the Italian headquarters and reported that his daughter and her friend were missing, that they had been kidnapped by guerrillas while buying milk in the village. He told them he was afraid that they might already be dead. From that day on we were forbidden to leave the house and deprived of the food rations which were being given to everyone in the town. The house would frequently be raided by Italian troops during the night. They would come in with powerful torches, suspecting that Rahela might come under cover of

night. Joži and Mimo were taken to an Italian prison but released soon afterwards.

In July 1942, the Italian army left Drvar. Partisan units had completely surrounded the town cutting it off from them. As soon as the last Italian tank left the town, the locals all rushed into the streets. We had survived to regain our freedom and our eyes filled with tears as we hugged the Partisan troops who flooded into the town.

From then until the end of the war our whole family, all four children, lived in the liberated territory. We children fought in the Partisan units, enduring hunger, cold, snow, bombing, planes, attacks and the rest all the more easily because we had lost forever our terror of the black uniforms and bayonets of the Ustashas.



II

SURVIVORS OF THE JASENOVAC BREAKOUT



Josip ERLIH

A BOY IN THE CAMP



Josip Erlih was born in the Našice district of Croatia, in the village of Koška. His mother Berta (née Polak) and father Vilim Erlih were killed in the Holocaust, together with about fifty of their relatives.

After the war he worked as a civil servant in the military until his retirement on January 1, 1973. He continued to work part time for another ten years as a clerk in the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.

Josip Erlih has two daughters, Ružica and Branka, and four grandchildren.

I was born in the village of Koška in the district of Našice on November 27, 1927 to Vilim and Berta Erlih (née Polak). I was only a small boy when the war broke out, but I remember our concern as Hitler attacked Czechoslovakia, Poland and other countries. I was at home in my village of Koška in April 1941, when Yugoslavia fell, because it was no longer possible to attend grammar school in Osijek, 33 kilometres to the east. In our village a military unit disintegrated when some of the officers responded to the call of the Nazis and the Ustashas while others stayed with the unit. Serbs and Jews were the first to bear the brunt in our neighbourhood. Early in the autumn of 1941 the Ustashas arrested a number of Našice Jews and brutally killed them, even going so far as to forbid them to be buried in public.

It was sometime in October when the full fury of the Ustasha rage was unleashed on us. One night we heard a car screech to a halt in front of our house and then everything happened in a flash. The Ustashes took my father and three other Jews: Teodor Flajšer, Bernard Kon, his son Oto and an elderly woman. None of them ever returned. We heard later that they had first been taken under guard to Našice, then to Gospić, then to Krapje and, finally, to Jasenovac. Not until I was in Jasenovac myself did I discover that my father's life had ended in the camp in late 1941 or early 1942. I learnt this from my uncle, my mother's brother, who was still in Jasenovac when I was taken there from Stara Gradiška in June, 1943.

But in that harsh and terrible winter of 1941-42 after my father's arrest, the rest of the family was still together with my mother. First the Ustashes moved our family and the Flajšers to the apartment of another Jewish family in the village, the Kons. We stayed there with them, waiting for our transfer to Našice. The Jewish community in Osijek had by now organised a flying squad and they transferred me and my schoolmate Milan, the son of the Flajšer family, to a family in Osijek. In this way, at least we children were temporarily saved from the camp. My mother, together with the Kons, the Flajšers and an elderly woman, Fanika Štajn, was taken from our village, first to Našice and then to Jasenovac. All of them were murdered on arrival.

My heart was heavy as I moved from Osijek to Slavonska Požega where I had relatives. My uncle, Armin Rehnicher, was very active in the Croatian Falcon organisation and they hoped they would be saved from persecution. This was not the case, of course, and all of us were arrested late in August 1942. A few days later we were in a convoy heading for the camp.

There were about eighty of us in two barred vans, most of them Croats, along with a fair number of Serbs, some Jews and even two Ruthenians. We left the train in Okučani and continued on foot towards Stara Gradiška. There they imprisoned us in the notorious Kula prison, on the west side of the top floor. I remember the body searches there: once I was beaten when they found some money hidden in my pocket in a piece of gauze. While we were there they separated the men from the women and I never saw the women again, despite them taking us out for exercise every day. All we could hear was the crying of infants. There was even a group of psychiatric patients from the Pakrac Institution for the Mentally Ill.

There were quite a number of Croats among the prisoners, so the farms nearby began seeking them for labour. I even applied once myself, because I wanted to be in the sun outside the prison walls. I came across two relatives, a father and son of the Kraus family who gave me some food and so I began applying regularly to work. One day, returning from the farm, I had a real shock: not one of the vast number of women who had been in the courtyard were there. All the Jewish and Serb women had been taken off by the Ustashas and nobody knew where they had gone. Among them were my Aunt Ružica, her son Vlada and her baby daughter, just a few months old, whose name I don't even know.

The pace of the arrests was steadily increasing. I remember an enormous number of people appearing one morning. The Ustashas had begun rounding up all the Serbs from the neighbouring villages of Pakrac and the Požega valley. They brought in the villagers of Kukunjevac, cramming the men into the empty solitary confinement cells, while the women and children were kept in the courtyard, in the open air. The numbers were swelling from day to day. They also brought in the Serb population from the Mount Kozara area.

One day they drove about fifty peasants from Srem to Kula, claiming that they were all Partisans. A few days later they bound them with wire, pushed them up against the wall of the Ustasha hospital and sprayed them with machine-gun fire in front of all the other prisoners. As they fell, some of them were still alive, begging not to be buried alive. A similar fate awaited the psychiatric patients: one day over lunch they were all given injections. Once they collapsed, the Ustashas dragged them out to the mass graves they had prepared.

I also remember meeting my relative, Ervin Šmelcer in Kula. He had escaped from Jasenovac in 1941 with a group of his friends from Našice. He managed to contact the Partisans and went to Kozara. However, after fighting there, he lost his contact and was again caught by the Ustashas. He was first locked up in the Black House in Banja Luka and then transferred to Stara Gradiška before ending up in Kula. One day he, too, was tied with wire and taken to Jasenovac where he was murdered in the most brutal way.

During 1942 we began to realise the gravity of our situation. More and more prisoners were killed in front of the whole camp, an ever clearer signal of the fate that awaited us all. I once saw a guard walk up to a woman and shoot her in cold blood. The evil Vrban killed a woman

at the gate of the Kula camp because he found her carrying a handful of corn. He also killed another woman he caught there.

The rainy autumn had set in when we were taken from Kula to a detention centre. I begged to be put in the shoemakers workshop, from which I was expelled, and later went to the tailors. I stayed there until June, 1943, when I was transferred to Jasenovac. The hardships in Stara Gradiška are too many to list here. They included epidemics, typhoid in particular, when a considerable number of people died every day. I was also infected and it was only sheer chance that I recovered. The work was arduous and excessive, we worked in three shifts until 10.00 p.m. The food was scant, mostly frozen potatoes. We were crawling with lice which were later joined by bedbugs. And then there were the roll calls. We would be lined up to wait for orders, or for our execution by firing squad. I had to watch one Ustasha called Majstorović shoot a group from Bistrica dead. I remember Sergeant Grubišić, the head of the tailoring workshop, shooting a number of people dead in front of us inmates, and the murderer Maričić did the same thing. Incidents like these followed one after another and I was dying of fear. Then came the typhoid. The doctors described it as “Gradiška flu”: If they had told the truth the Ustashes would have liquidated the whole camp. I too was sick with this, spending some time in the attic of the workshop and some in the camp infirmary under Doctor Polak from Vinkovci. I was lucky because my friends – one of them the room warden, Čičin – smuggled me out of the infirmary and hid me, sick as I was, in the workshop. This was in the spring of 1943 and in June that year I was signed out for transfer to Jasenovac.

In Jasenovac I was immediately put to work in the brickyard, where I shared a shack with Ilija Paripović, a notorious criminal with no legs but hands of steel. It was my job to take the hand-made bricks out of the moulds. We worked from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. with a break for lunch. The food was even worse than in Gradiška. I worked with David Pinto, who now lives in Israel, and Philip Grinvald, who was later killed. The work was exhausting, but worse still were the roll calls, as we waited for the arrival of the Ustasha officers and guards. There were now more and more shootings: again the executioner was Zrinjušić, or Šakić or other notorious murderers.

There in Jasenovac I found my uncle, Marko Polak from Zagreb, and learnt from him the fate of my parents. My poor father's life was terminated in late 1941 or early 1942 and my mother was slain on her

arrival at the camp. My other female relatives who had been in the same convoy were also killed.

Late in 1943, in the winter, the camp warden, Viner, known to the inmates as an extremely good man, transferred me from the brickyard to the indoor chain workshop. I was assigned to the tinsmiths, together with my friend David Pinto, but in the spring he was sent back to the brickyard while I was kept on at the tinsmiths, where life was a little easier.

Once in the brickyard, Major Pićili came and noticed that the wagons carrying new tiles had stopped and that the engine wasn't running. He punished the entire brickyard, having us put in chains and ordering that we were not to be fed for several days. They shackled us once again when a group of prisoners from the brickyard tried to escape. This happened after the fall of Italy when the Ustashas went completely berserk.

Once I had started work with the tinsmiths I stopped sleeping in the dormitory shacks where we were often beaten. I now slept in the attic of the tinsmiths building where I worked alongside many good and courageous men. The head of the tinsmiths workshop was Arpad Vajs. He had been born in Slavonski Brod, but had worked in Vienna for many years, right up to the annexation of Austria. There were also Ignjo Langfelder from Osijek, Marko Haham and his sons Izik and Abraham who were all tinsmiths from Osijek; then there was Altarac, the two brothers Bela and Filko Štajn from Zagreb and others. Among the younger ones, as well as me there were two other boys, one was called Gaon and the other one, Cikić, from Kozara.

They often took us outside to work, to the Ustasha hospital in Jasenovac, to the prison, to new Ustasha houses. I would go with the master tradesman, all of us under guard, but these outings were always welcome because we would sometimes come by some food, hiding it inside our trouser legs to bring it back to our friends in the workshop.

Gradually these outings became fewer and further between, while the roll calls, with their torture and shootings, became more frequent. They would usually happen in the morning or late afternoon. I shall remember the horror of one particular incident, at the end of May or early June, as long as I live.

There was a student from Zagreb who worked with the builders. His name was Ivan Volner and he played the accordion very well. He played in the camp orchestra and everyone knew him. One night a group of Ustashas came in, they may even have been local guards,

nobody knew, and took him, apparently with the knowledge of the camp administration, to play for him at a party in the nearby settlement of Dubica. They got drunk and simply slashed his throat. The camp administration was told that he had tried to escape and that he had been caught and executed. There was a new camp commander, Dinko Šakić, a very young Ustasha, and it appeared that he had been waiting for just such an opportunity to begin executing inmates and committing other murders.

They announced a roll call for all camp inmates in front of the shacks. The Ustashas put the word around that there would be a lot of shooting and we were all out of our minds with fear. Volner's body, his throat slashed, was brought out on a stretcher and placed in front of the rows of inmates. Šakić then arrived with his entourage. They began to question inmates who worked with the builders about who had been working with Volner, who slept next to him, who ate with him. Šakić kept looking at his watch the whole time, waving his hand in irritation. Then he ordered the builders to step back and all members of the camp orchestra to step forward. There were a number of really fine artists among them, including Arpad Vajs. There was also a barrister from Zagreb who was nicknamed Čele. They bound the musicians with wire in front of us. At that point one of the prisoners, either from fear or perhaps because of the diarrhoea raging in the camp, messed his pants. The prisoner standing next to him smirked and Captain Mihić, spotting this, turned to Šakić: "Look at them, they're laughing at you!" Šakić called the two to step forward and, as they approached, shot them dead with his revolver in front of us all. I knew one of them, a young tailor, Leon Perera. The other young man was Avram Montiljo.

Šakić now barked an order. "All Jews step forward in three rows! A Jew has tried to escape and the Jews are now going to pay for it." Many of the Jews lined up and Šakić ordered one of the Ustashas to fetch an Ascher rifle and told the chief clerk to bring the list of Jews in the camp. The two returned quickly, the Ustasha with a Schmeisser and the clerk with the full long list of Jews. I was still standing back with the brickyard workers, wondering what to do. If they called me and I wasn't standing in line with the other Jews they would shoot me on the spot. Slowly, cautiously, I moved closer to the three rows of Jews. A handful of others followed behind. The clerk proceeded to read the list out as ordered, assembling a large group. Šakić ordered them bound with wire and sent them together with the musicians towards the bell-

tower, a blood-soaked prison within the camp. One of the inmates tore himself loose and tried to flee. He was riddled with automatic rifle fire by the Ustashas.

These “roll calls” now became regular events. First they hanged a group of Serbs, alleging they were Chetniks, then there was the shooting of prisoners from the electricians group because of an attempted escape. In another event, on a grand scale, 21 prisoners lost their lives. The Ustashas apparently learned something about the activities of the underground Communist party and threw a large group of inmates – Serbs, Jews, Croats and Moslems – into the prison cells. Among these was Remzija Rebac, later proclaimed a National Hero, two named Bošković, one an architect the other a physician, a veterinary surgeon named Ladislav Matej and many others. In the bell tower, the Ustashas tortured a large number of inmates, burning them with oxy-acetylene torches and dragging them, bones broken, to the gallows and the stake. All of them were hanged there, except Dr Bošković, who begged to be shot. Šakić obliged personally. I was standing in the front row so I not only saw everything but heard every word that was said. There are no words which can describe that terrible day.

No sooner would one of these “roll calls” be over than, hot on its heels, another would begin, or perhaps something even more shattering. It became regular practice for all the working groups to supply men for labour to the forestry group or others working outside the camp. There were frequent outings to the woods to fell timber. One group would go out to work two or three times then the next time they wouldn't return, all of them executed in the forest. I was lucky never to have been selected to work in the forestry group.

In 1944 we had some rare moments of joy when squadrons of Allied aircraft began flying over the camp almost every day. They were flying out and returning from bombing missions. In the early days,



*Reborn: Erlih in uniform
after Jasenovac.*

there would be an occasional German aircraft trying to attack the squadron, but the supremacy of the Allies was obvious and the roar of aircraft engines above our heads brought us joy and hope. Despite our isolation, some news leaked through: we heard about the botched attempt to assassinate Hitler, about the bombing of Osijek, and we heard that Belgrade had been liberated.

The end was approaching, slowly but surely, for these evil creatures. But they made no secret of the fact that they were also preparing the end for us. After so much suffering and torture it seemed there were still more difficult days ahead. Death lurked around every corner. First the Stara Gradiška camp was liquidated, meaning that all the inmates were killed. We heard this from a handful of Jews and Croats who had been saved from the massacre by some miracle, probably because they were needed by the Ustashas to attend to other jobs. Certainly all the Serbs in the Stara Gradiška camp were killed. The Ustashas didn't dare take the Jews and Croats from the camp along the road for fear of Partisan attacks, so they took them from Gradiška to Jasenovac along the bank of the Sava River. They made them run, and anyone who couldn't run would get a bullet in the back or a sledgehammer in the head. The Sava carried their bodies away. My uncle was among the camp inmates from Gradiška who reached Jasenovac in this race for life. But my joy at seeing him was short lived. He was denounced by a group of criminals who claimed he was planning to escape and the Ustashas killed him on the spot.

In the meantime a large number of Chetniks suddenly appeared in the camp. There was a rumour that they had been lured by the Ustashas to join them in the fight against the Partisans. Many of them were well dressed and almost all were wearing brand new boots. Then one day, in front of the storehouse by the camp headquarters there was a large pile of uniforms and boots. The Chetniks had all been executed with axes. Other groups of inmates from Granik, on the bank of the Sava, met the same fate.

By late 1944 the numbers in Jasenovac had begun to thin out. There were fewer and fewer of us as people simply disappeared. In the winter of 1944-45 a small aircraft dropped a bomb on the camp. We never knew whether this was deliberate or an accident, but several prisoners sleeping in the brickyard were killed. The main bombing began on the Catholic Good Friday in 1945, signalling the approaching end. A small group of aircraft, we thought they were either Partisan or English

Spitfires, began to circle the camp. First they dropped just one bomb, on the wall and the wire surrounding the camp. Then a second hit the electric power generators and a third fell on the door of the brick kiln. Flames gushed out, setting fire to the brickyard and the chain workshop. We fled in all directions, not from the planes and the bombs, but from the Ustashas who had opened fire on us from the watchtowers. We were forced to put out the fire. We saw Lieutenant Zrinjušić shooting anyone who refused to climb on to the roof to remove the burning tiles or to use the fire hoses on the fires around the brickyard and the chain workshop. We were caught between the fire on the burning roof and the Ustasha bullets on the ground. Comrade Volf fell and died during this nightmarish frenzy, but I somehow managed to take shelter in the scrap iron store. Volf was a well-known trade union leader who had worked at Hlavka in Zagreb.

The air raids continued over the next few days. Anything that could be identified as industrial facilities was demolished, together with the administration building of the Ustasha headquarters, while the camp shacks remained untouched. "See, you're being killed by your allies, so we don't have to do it," the Ustashas yelled at us, but in fact very few prisoners were killed by the bombs. Almost all the deaths were from the Ustasha bullets which whistled all around us.

So began the days of dread and horror. I can't remember the exact date, but it was certainly April 1945, when the news spread that all prisoners were to be moved in three groups to a camp in Sisak because the Srem front had been broken. Orders had already been given for the railway tracks to be cut into shorter lengths and for the oil and petrol supplies to be taken to Gradina. Every day, large numbers of inmates were sent with spades, shovels and pickaxes to work in Gradina. None of them ever returned, but a tall, thick column of black smoke soared up from the area. It was clear to us that they were burning the bodies of the newly dead as well as those buried in mass graves long before in an attempt to obliterate every trace of the Ustashas' crimes.

On April 20, the first group was given orders to move to Sisak and set out the same day. The next day we saw the horrifying column of black smoke which told that they had gone not to Sisak but to their death. The second group was scheduled to be "moved" on April 21 and the third on April 22. I was in this last group. But late in the afternoon on April 21 the siren called us for dinner earlier than usual and we were told that both groups, a total of twelve or thirteen hundred

inmates, would leave at once to “new accommodation”. These were buildings within the camp but outside the wire, between the camp’s wire fences and the wall, near the side exit from which the road ran out of the camp downstream along the Sava towards Košutarica. All the camp inmates were taken under guard to two buildings, a very suitable place to assemble a large group of prisoners and execute them quickly.



Josip Erlih with his parents, 1939.

I can neither forget nor describe the night which followed. In havoc, horror, terror, rage, torment and hope we moved, more or less consciously through this nightmare of reality, among the hanged, among those who had succumbed to the depression of the camp and killed themselves. I remember the bodies of the Bek brothers, Miro and Raul from Bjelovar, and others, all in these new buildings to which they moved us. We men were in one and in the other, just across from us were about seven hundred women, possibly more.

The Ustashas took the women first. They threw away their belongings and we heard them singing defiantly as they proudly met their death. The men in our attic who could see what was happening told us that the Ustashas burned the women alive.

It was almost dawn when the Ustashas took away some of the leaders of the working groups and other important inmates such as Salamon the engineer, the Grinberger brothers from Pakrac and the leader of the brickyard group.

The day dawned, April 22, 1945, cold and chilly. The party organisations decided we should mutiny and the word spread from mouth to mouth. At about ten or eleven in the morning there was a loud crash and we all rushed for the door. At least one of the Ustashas was killed. We had a relatively short distance to run between the building and the gate, sprayed all the way with deadly Ustasha fire from the watchtowers and dodging the grenades they hurled at us. Our comrade Ante Bakotić, the man who had inspired the whole breakout, fell at the exit. Many men made it out, and many fell. Many stayed in the building, those who were too weak to even take a single step towards their own salvation. There were some who broke through the gate but were later felled by a bullet and some were too exhausted to run any further and sought salvation in the cold and muddy Sava.

I was with a group which managed to break through the wire beside the gate. Edo Šajer, who was with us, ran to the road to cut the telephone lines and stop the Ustashas from calling for reinforcements. Another hero was our comrade Milan Ristić, who seized an Ustasha machine gun and threw it away only when he ran out of ammunition.

We managed to make our way in small groups towards the Košutarica woods. Each group then struck out on its own. Our group, led by Comrades Marić and Delibašić, headed for the forest between the Sava, the railway and the road. We couldn't swim across the river, nor could we cross the road or the railway because there were armoured trains and German and Ustasha vehicles passing, so we continued in the same direction. We came across one off-duty Ustasha and forced him to take us across the little Struga River at its shallowest point and guide us to the outlying houses in a nearby village. However he managed to trick us and escape. Fearing that he would report us, we hurried all the more to save ourselves.

I threw almost all my clothes off, because everything was slowing me down. In any case, I was only wearing rags. My feet were pricked and torn by thorns and my arms bleeding in several places. I could hardly keep up with the others. Savo Delibašić, who was later an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army, was the only one who was familiar with the area and said he would go to the nearby village of Klenik, near Vrbovljani, to check for Ustashas. If it was clear he would come back to our hiding spot in the corn and cabbage fields. Some time before evening he returned. There were no Ustashas around and he led us on to the village.

The Serb peasants remaining in Klenik welcomed us with corn gruel and milk. We had barely shaken hands with our hosts before we were gorging ourselves with food. Then a shot rang out. A girl who was keeping watch about ten metres outside the settlement came running, shouting in horror that the Ustaschas were coming. We ran off quickly, hiding in fields and ditches. But soon we discovered it was a false alarm: an elderly farmer had fired his rifle into the air to celebrate us being saved. We returned and finished our meal then went to a nearby grove of trees. There we were joined by another group, so that there were about thirty of us altogether. And then, on April 25, word came from the village that the Partisans had arrived. It was an extremely moving moment when we finally met the fighters of the 21st Serb division. They photographed us and offered us transport to our homes, but most of us opted to set off with them for Trieste, where we saw the end of the war. It was also the end of our suffering. Some of us were admitted to the military hospital in Lipik with diarrhoea, following the unit a few days later to Zagreb where everyone was appropriately deployed.

Have I told the whole story? Nowhere near.



Eight barbed wire fences surrounded the Jasenovac camp

Among the Jews who escaped from the camp with me and whose names I remember were David Pinto, Julio Đusi-Bing, Edo Šajer, Adolf Fridrih, Marko Flajshaker, Ješua Abinun, Leo Klajn, Oto Langfelder, Karlo Vajs, Jakov Finci, Jerko Gaon, Rafo Levi, Jakica Atijas, Šimun Abinun, Joco Morgenštern, Šimon Montiljo, Ervin Miler and Leon Maestro.

Perhaps they can speak about the details I have missed, because Jasenovac was an extermination camp, worse than the concentration camps in Germany. The Germans killed efficiently, on an industrial scale, while in Jasenovac it was manual labour, with axes, sledgehammers, knives and other similar tools of the murderer's trade.

Eduard ŠAJER

THE STENCH OF THE CREMATORIUM¹



Eduard Edo Šajer was born on April 13, 1922, in Avtovac, near Gacko, to Adolf and Hermina, both of whom were killed in Jasenovac in 1942. He had five siblings: Moris (1914), who was in Jasenovac from November 16, 1941, until 1945 when he was killed; sisters Mancika (1909) and Regina (1915), both killed in Jasenovac in 1942, brother Albert (1924), killed in Jasenovac in 1942 and brother Viljim, who was imprisoned in Germany from 1941-1945 and died in 1953. Germans killed his aunt and her son in Čačak in 1941.

From the liberation of the country at the end of the second world war until his retirement, Eduard Šajer served as an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army. He now lives in Niš with his wife Mileva (née Radonjić). They have two daughters, Gordana (45) and Hermina (37) and four granddaughters.

This account is based on an interview conducted by the former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, Jaša Almuli, with Eduard Šajer for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

I was born in Avtovac near Gacko and lived in Sarajevo until 1941. There I completed my training as an electrician. My father died in 1932, leaving my mother with five children. Together with a group of

Communists and politically active young people I was arrested on August. 5, 1941, by the Ustasha police led by Jure Francetić who later commanded the notorious Black Legion. After an investigation, my elder brother and I were imprisoned in the infamous Theological College prison in Sarajevo. There I remained until the escape of Vasa Miskin, Isa Jovanović and Nisim Albahari, when we were transferred to the holding cells of the court while the well-known Zagreb police agent, Cividini, and Viktor Tomić continued the investigation of our case.

When Jure Francetić left to become commander of the Black Legion his position as head of the Ustasha police headquarters was taken over by a notorious criminal, Viktor Tolj. He gave the order that there were to be no further investigations and that all prisoners were to be dispatched to Jasenovac. We were bound with wire and escorted under guard to the military camp where we were loaded into livestock wagons.

We reached Jasenovac on November 16, 1941. Whenever the train stopped along the way, the Ustashes would rush into the wagons to steal whatever money, rings and watches they could. Our whole bodies were bruised from their beatings by the time we arrived at Jasenovac. There we were lined up and forced to run from the station to the Ustasha headquarters. Anyone who fell was executed on the spot. We were sorted by nationality, Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, Moslems, Croats, Serbs, women, all put into separate groups. The women were later taken to the camp and all the Serbs were killed. In front of the camp there was a barrier which was lifted for us by a Jew named Maestro who I knew from Sarajevo. We then came to a gate with the sign "Labour Camp No. 3 – Jasenovac" and they lined us up in front of the headquarters. The camp commander was an unfrocked priest called Brkljačić. Now we were divided up again: Croats and Muslims were to sleep above the brickyard, the Sephardic Jews were sent to 3A and the Ashkenazis to 3B. There were a number of Croats employed in the camp as clerks. Every hut had its own warden and these now took us to the shacks. On our way we saw inmates looking like skeletons smeared with mud, no longer human.

As soon as we arrived in the shacks, the other prisoners gathered around asking us for food, but we ourselves had not eaten for days. Some of them came closer, looking us over carefully in the hope that they might find someone they knew and get some news about their families. The shacks were built of wooden planks, the earth floors sodden

and muddy under the leaky roofs. There were no bedclothes. We spent our first night freezing with cold. Later we went from one inmate to another to see if anybody had frozen or died, so we could take their blanket. Later still, someone else would steal them from us in their turn. The work was onerous and gravediggers would drag away the corpses of those who fell during the day. We could see huge pits being dug within the camp itself where the many inmates who died were buried. Some of these succumbed to hunger or disease and others were killed by the Ustashas. Each Ustasha was a symbol of power: they strutted through the camp armed with leather whips, knotted wire cables and iron bars. If one of them saw something he didn't like, if a finger was pointed at someone, he would immediately kill the prisoner. Our work included building a barbed wire fence around the camp and driving piles into the ground for sheds to be built on. The place was called Lonjsko Polje and it was often flooded.



Edo's mother Hermina, killed with her father in Jasenovac, and his father, Adolf, who died in 1932.

We worked from early dawn until late in the evening. Food was a turnip broth with no salt or fat and sometimes we would get some runny polenta gruel. People fell ill and died in massive numbers. We contin-

ued this way until work begin on a dyke intended to protect the camp from flooding. We had only rudimentary tools: spades and pickaxes. Those too exhausted to work were simply killed and we survivors think that about twenty thousand bodies were buried in the dyke.

The grave digging detail usually consisted of about forty men. It was the only permanent working party. The rest of us would be assembled every day in front of the command post for the Ustashas to select their victims and decide what would happen. The wardens, the working group leaders and supervisors would then take the inmates off to work. There were convoys of Jews and Serbs constantly arriving from Bijeljina, Brčko and other places. When they arrived, the prisoners who had arrived earlier would be executed and the new ones would take their place. They set up a Serb block, 3C, headed by a man called Slobodan. They organised forestry groups, building groups and others, including groups to work in the sawmill, the brickyard and the chain foundry, which also produced Ustasha daggers and knives designed to rip stomachs open.

The older inmates were persuaded to apply for work in the apartment buildings of Đakovo, Sunja and Sisak, where the conditions were better. Those who applied would be executed the same night. They were taken out of the camp and packed into wagons for this illusory trip, their journey coming to an end at Broćica where they were murdered. There was an infamous Ustasha orgy at the end of 1941, at Catholic Christmas: selected prisoners were murdered and their bodies buried in pits which had been prepared for them.

On the Serbian Orthodox Christmas Eve² of 1942, a passing Partisan train opened fire on the camp. The following day, in front of the Serb block 3C, the Ustashas used sledgehammers to slaughter more than two hundred prisoners in retaliation. Later they cleared out the village of Gradina to dig mass graves there.

One day I was passing by the camp headquarters when I saw, among a group of prisoners, my younger brother of whom I had not had any news. When they were settled into the camp I managed to have him put with us.

The worst work was in the forestry and grave digging parties. After working for some time the gravediggers would be killed and a new

² The Serbian Orthodox Church observes the traditional Julian Calendar, thus Christmas Eve is celebrated on January 6 by the modern calendar.

group set up. I somehow managed to be transferred to the chain foundry because I was a tradesman and had worked as a locksmith. All the working parties had to send reinforcements to the grave-digging party in proportion with the number of those killed, so one day I too was sent out to dig graves. We went to Broćica, digging graves there and among the last inmates brought out to be killed I saw my younger brother: he was murdered with a sledgehammer before my eyes. We usually tied a belt around the leg of the bodies to drag them across the mud to the grave pits. I carefully picked up the body of my brother, now weighing barely thirty kilograms, carried him to the pits and buried him. When I walked into the shack after we returned to the camp my other brother looked at me; without a word we hugged each other. "I know," I said to him. He echoed my words. That was the first of my family whom I was to lose.

The dyke protecting the camp soon broke, the Strug River, a tributary of the Sava, overflowed, flooding Lonjske Polje and the camp, leaving Settlement Three under water. Only the high ground with the sawmill, the brickyard and the chain foundry, together with the watch-towers, remained above the water. There were just over a thousand prisoners still in the camp. At this time, the engineer Pićili, a first lieutenant who later became camp commander, designed a primitive crematorium. As they poured in poison from the brickyard and lit the fire, the stench of burning human bodies spread across the camp. Many Jews I recognised from Sarajevo were all burned alive this way, among them Cantor Vajs, Žiga Levinger, Professor Štajner, and the father of Ilija Goranin, a commander of the Romania Partisan unit, later proclaimed a National Hero.

When the water receded, the killings resumed in Gradina. In April, 1942, a rumour spread that a new farm was to be established in Ferićanci. There was already an agricultural estate in Bistrica and other villages in Gradiška. I didn't believe the story, but an inmate from Ogulin told me that one of the Ustashas, a compatriot of his, had told him that I should apply for a job as a coachman. I told him that I'd never even been near a horse in my life. However the situation was now so bad, with massive numbers dying of starvation and even cases of cannibalism, that it was better for me to try. I had heard of the Bistrica camp, so perhaps there was something in it. One day they lined thirty of us up and told us to collect our things. I took my mess bowl and a torn blanket to cover myself with. The head of the farm complex was a barrister from Zagreb, Rafo Gaon. He sent three people to fetch a loaf of bread each, three frozen potatoes and a slice of bacon and then the

Ustashas led us away. There was a wagon waiting for us at the Jasenovac station and we set off for Ferićanci. We passed through Vinkovci and reached Osijek where we had to change. As we left the wagon a mob of people from Osijek descended on us, hurling stones and insults. The Ustashas opened fire to disperse the mob and they responded by throwing broken bricks. An Ustasha unit arrived and escorted us to a factory in the city. We found out later that it was a *matsot* factory and there we spent the very night of Passover. The Ustashas had meals and drinks prepared for them and we were allowed a few morsels. They gave us some bread and everyone crammed their pockets, but the greatest surprise was yet to come when we were given some *matsot* balls and real food. Then we moved on, carrying three great sacks of food with us. When we arrived in Ferićanci there was no livestock or anything else, but within three days the Ustashas had plundered the neighbouring Serb villages, bringing horses and other animals and so we began to establish the farm. One group worked herding cows and sheep. One group of prisoners tended a herd of cows at the local priest's



*Brother Albert and sister Regina, killed in Jasenovac in 1942,
and brother Moric, killed during the breakout from Jasenovac*

farm and managed to establish connections with the local people who, in their turn, put them in touch with the Partisans. While we waited for the Partisans to mount an assault on the camp, seven prisoners managed to escape on their own. In Ferićanci we managed to contact some locals and we expected the attack to come. But someone within the group

betrayed us to First Lieutenant Susić, the camp commander, and within five hours we had been loaded into locked wagons and dispatched to Jasenovac.



Jasenovac. Prisoners doing forced labour in the wickerwork group

When we arrived at Jasenovac we were surprised to find the camp encircled with barbed wire. They didn't herd us in there, but into a wire-fenced yard behind the camp. We wondered why we were there, but our experience had taught us to expect that the night would swallow us. At about 5.30 a.m., an Ustasha soldier named Bonzo arrived with a big German Shepherd dog. He was Luburić's favourite, a notorious murderer and cutthroat. He recognised one of us, a man called Grinberg from Zagreb who had been in the camp in Gospić, then in Slano and Krapje. "What are you doing here?" he asked him.

"Mr Bonzo, we're waiting to be allocated to work," Grinberg replied.

Then Bonzo barked at the guard: "Open up! These are old camp inmates," and told us to join our working parties, saving our lives.

Before we had left for Ferićanci an international commission of Italian officers, Croatian home guards, Germans, Ustasas and priests had come to the camp for an inspection. The ground was still covered

with snow, but the shacks were tidied up and even the infirmary was working. Prisoners would be taken to the hospital by day then taken away and slaughtered at night. When the commission arrived, the Ustashas rounded up healthy people from the village and dressed them up as prisoners. The commission left, convinced that the inmates were being well taken care of. Before they had arrived the food improved, they cooked us beans with pieces of beef. Now that they had a good supply of stolen cattle, so the prisoners ate as much as they could. After the inspection there was a dreadful situation: diarrhoea, dysentery, death on a massive scale. The prisoners had been dying of starvation, even devouring the bodies of their dead fellows, but now it was the sudden overabundance of food which decimated the camp.

In the meantime, work began on building a new dyke. Prisoners from the wire-fenced 3C block were brought in chains and worked till they dropped. Once the dyke was completed, those 3C prisoners who remained were no longer fed. Notice boards were put up: "Typhoid, keep away". The last eighteen inmates remaining alive were transferred to Gradina and locked in a house which stands in the town to this day. When they opened the building they found only one corpse still intact: the others had been completely devoured.

In Gradina they ploughed, sowed and harvested while I worked as a coachman. Many of the prisoners who went there to work never returned but we coachmen were lucky because they needed us to bring the horses back to the village of Mlaka to work. Before we left we were shackled and chained because three of the prisoners had run away and so, in Mlaka, we worked in chains. Now came the beginning of what we later called the Kozara Saga: the massive internment in the camp of elderly men and women and children. For days on end long columns of people arrived from Srem. In 1942 Jews were brought from Slavonski Brod and Osijek, then the women arrested in 1941 and 1942 in Tuzla, Doboj and Sarajevo. Some of these were kept in the camp while others were killed straight away. They brought in massive numbers of Gypsies from Srem and finally, in 1942, the women from Đakovo were interned and executed.

Brkljačić, who had been camp commander when we arrived, was succeeded by Father Majstorović, a Catholic priest who committed hideous crimes in the villages surrounding Banja Luka. Ljubo Miloš liquidated the Đakovo camp.

After the Gypsies were liquidated, unknown to us they brought in Catholics from Perušić, settling them in Gradina as free men, wearing Ustasha caps. They helped with grave digging, sorting and even killing. Later they established what was known as the bell tower, cramming prisoners into this building which consisted of a packaging assembly and a prison. It took its name from the adjacent shed full of bells looted from the demolished Orthodox churches.

The well-known Sarajevo painter Danijel Ozmo made sketches of inmates working on the dyke and managed to get them out of the camp through Safet Filipović who, after the liberation, was the Bosnian minister for internal affairs. They were later published in the journal of the People's Liberation Struggle under the title "Working on the Dyke". Ozmo was imprisoned in the bell tower, interrogated, tortured and tied, barely alive, to the bells, where he died.

In 1942 another commission came and the whole performance was repeated. They reached the conclusions that this was just a labour camp. Some of the prisoners were even taken to the Zagreb Commercial Fair



Happier days. Sister Mancika, mother Hermina and brother Albert (all murdered in Jasenovac), brother Moric (who died in the camp breakout), uncle and aunt Roteštajn (also slain in Jasenovac).

to display the carpentry, locksmith and brickwork products manufactured in the Ustasha labour camp of Jasenovac. Some of the inmates wore the insignia of a corporal, roaming the camp with a cane in their hand, ostensibly to keep order. Among them were a large number of criminals. All of them were Ustasha informers and some of them were even Ustashes who were being punished. The time soon came when it was enough to merely point a finger at someone to have them killed.

The year of 1943 was a little easier. Two new buildings were constructed, one of them outside the camp itself but within the complex. This housed the tailors and shoemakers workshops. In the other building, opposite it, the women were housed. The warden of the women's camp was Nada Luburić-Šakić, the sister of Maks Luburić and wife of Dinko Šakić, the commander of the Jasenovac camp. She was notorious, an outright criminal, with her own special means of torturing the women prisoners, who lived in much more difficult conditions than did we men. I saw this for myself, when I went into the women's camp as an electrician. The starving women were kept in stinking rooms with no ventilation. Nada Šakić herself selected individual women for Ustasha orgies and abuse.

Until 1942, killings were carried out in Gradina, at Granik and on the bank of the Sava where they would cut the throats of prisoners or crush their heads with sledgehammers and quarter their bodies with axes. Masses of bodies would drift down the Sava. When they became snagged, grenades were thrown to dislodge them and the corpses would float on down to Belgrade and beyond.

In 1943, three inmates escaped: Zlatko Vajler, later to become a colonel, a well-known Zagreb sportsman named Levi and a Serb whose name I can't recall. The other inmates were greatly heartened by this but we were soon to suffer for it: all of us were put in chains. I continued working as a coachman in Mlaka and worked the land. We all had open sores from the rubbing of the fetters.

After Vajler escaped, the Croats and Moslems were taken to Gradiška and the remaining Jews and Serbs transferred from there to Jasenovac. There were tailoring and shoemaking workshops in Gradiška and the living conditions were much better than in Jasenovac. A calmer period now ensued as the convoys left for Gradina. Šakić became camp warden. For the first time religious services were organised in the camp. One of the buildings in the village was remodelled as a mosque for the Moslems. They now had their own Ustasha first lieutenant, who wore a fez with the Ustasha emblem. The Catholics were

given the carpentry workshop where Majstorović and Brkljačić occasionally celebrated Mass. This was accompanied with music as there were many well-known musicians among the inmates. These included the Samlajić brothers from Zemun, the Sarajevo violinist Jahijel Finci and Volner the accordionist. Sometimes the musician inmates would give concerts, creating a distraction to ease the fearful tension in the camp as everyone wondered who would be killed next and when it would happen. One day they brought Volner in dead. He'd been stabbed repeatedly, butchered in fact. We later discovered that he had been taken to a wedding party in Dubočica and, after he had played, the drunken Ustashas took to him with their knives, claiming he had attempted to escape.

The most harrowing punishment for the inmates were the roll calls, when the number of prisoners to be killed in retaliation for any particular infraction was determined in front of the headquarters.

The sanctions imposed after the Vajler escape included shackling the inmates who went out of the camp to work. The Jews and Serbs from the tailoring and shoemaking workshops in Gradiška were transferred back to Jasenovac which now became a liquidation camp. Of course that's what it had already been: there was less killing in Gradiška than in Jasenovac. I worked in fetters as a coachman in Mlaka. Once, when we were resting the horses, the Ustashas selected ten coachmen to take the horses to the Sava to drink. We heard gunfire and then the Ustashas appeared, driving the horses back, shouting "Chetnik mother fuckers! Think they can escape from us!" Four of us were ordered to dig holes on the bank of the Sava to bury the ten bodies. The Ustashas had some kind of quota of how many prisoners they should kill each month.

When it was time to spray the maize, the horses were led by women and girls who beat them, making the horses twitch. This caused our fetters to cut into our legs opening up painful gashes. This went on for three or four months before we returned to Jasenovac. In the meantime they had murdered Volner because of his alleged attempt to escape. In retaliation for this, they singled out sixty prisoners, including the Samlajić brothers and other musicians. The men they selected were intellectuals, I suppose because they gave them the most problems. After this the quiet days ended and the roll calls and slaughter began again.

During 1943 the forestry group was often sent out of the camp to work and many times these inmates would never come back. One group, which included a number of older men, managed to kill several Ustashas. Among them was a man from Zavidovići, called Musafija, who later told

me how they had killed four of them: they hauled the felled tree trunks with oxen and had agreed beforehand that they would take the Ustashas by surprise and kill them. Seven of them then ran away, including Musafija, whose son, Hajndrih Musafija worked as a tally clerk in the brickyard, keeping records of brick and roof tile deliveries.



Jasenovac, *Danijel Ozmo, watercolour*

There was another incident when a group of prisoners went to the forest to cut trees for power poles. Among them were six electricians, including Moric Romano, who later died in Israel. There was a cowherd tending cattle nearby and a cow got astray among the prisoners. The cowherd asked the Ustashas if he could come to drive it out. He got permission and, while among us, casually asked the prisoners if they would be working there again the next day and one of them said we would be. The following day, when they arrived by truck, they were suddenly surrounded by Partisans and there was an exchange of rifle fire. Several Ustashas were killed, some were taken prisoner and the Partisans set fourteen camp inmates free. I found it later that this was a Slovenian unit under the command of Geca Bogdanović. They were from a brigade commanded by Radojica Nenezić, who was later pro-

moted to general. This was a shocking blow to the Ustashas. They immediately sent units out to find out what was going on. Captain Knežević was killed and a large number of wounded were brought back to the Ustasha hospital in the village.

Four or five days later the leader of the farming complex, Rafo Gaon, summoned me and, when I entered the office, said to me: "This is Mr Markić, you're to go with him. Get your personal things." I told him I had no personal things. I knew that Markić was a high ranking cutthroat and that if he'd come for me I was finished. "Go and get them straight away," he yelled. I had a mess kit and a torn blanket under which I slept, these were my only possessions. As a coachman I slept in the stable because it was safer than the shack, from which they took people and killed them in massive numbers.

The prisoners who happened to be in front of the stables at the time lowered their heads, they were sure I was about to be executed. He took me towards the sentry box and as we approached he barked: "Turn right!" So I knew he wasn't taking me for execution. I headed towards the passage and then I heard: "Not there, into the tunnel!" I thought that they must have started the crematorium in the brickyard up again. He took me to the electrical workshop. The boss there was a real expert named Singer, a German émigré. "Singer, here's an electrician for you," said Markić.

Of course I was delighted to join the electricians, this was some kind of security, but I was amazed that Markić knew I was an electrician. There was a man there from Zenica, Remzija Rebac. "We managed to get you here," he told me.

The farm complex in the camp managed to provide food and medicines to Partisan prisoners who had been forced to work in the clay pits. These were a series of huge pits full of water from which earth was dug to make bricks. The men worked there in fetters. They looked wretched, but somehow we managed to keep them going by getting them extra food. Most of them were Partisans who had been taken prisoner during the battles on the Sutjeska River. They were brought to the camp, put in chains and thrown into the clay pits to die.

As an electrician I was able to get into the Ustasha hospital where most of the doctors were Jewish. They pilfered food and medicines and we managed to smuggle them into the camp. Luckily for us the camp had a train to carry bricks and lengths of timber from the sawmill. A forestry locomotive hauled the wagons to the standard gauge track. As we came back from work, a Jewish engine driver from the forestry rail-

way in Zavidovići would always meet us. He would pick up the things we were carrying, on the pretext that they were too heavy for us. It was a risky business for him.



*Šajer on April 22, 1945,
after successfully escaping
from the camp he had been
in since 1941.*

The camp inmates were always concerned that someone would try to do something forbidden, or try to help someone escape. Our organisation operated under extremely difficult circumstances. Before the electricians were liberated, the Partisans set fire to the power plant in Dubica and three prisoners were sent from the camp to repair it. Two of them were electricians and the third was an ordinary prisoner. When convoys of new prisoners arrived we would always approach them and if we recognised someone we would ask him his occupation and he would declare himself an electrician. So among us there were people who had never had anything to do with the trade but were allocated to the electrical workshop. They would dig holes for the power poles.

Čučo Papo from Visoko was a highly skilled tradesman who had worked as a foreman for my boss, David Finci, in Sarajevo. Finci was shot dead on August 3, 1941, along with the first Jewish hostages in Sarajevo, because the peasants in Ilijaš had mined the railway track. Čučo Papo was one of the three who went to repair the power plant and all three of them escaped.

In 1944 the camp commander was Dinko Šakić and the days of slaughter returned. The Ustashas forced the prisoners to find gold for them, which they did in the belief it would save their lives. The Ustashas also organised a group of people to search for gold among the prisoners.

There was a man called Kajmaković in the Serb shack, 3C. He was a farmer from Janja who made butter. Through our connections a fair quantity of the butter found its way to the women's camp until the Ustashas found out about it. Kajmaković was sentenced to fifty blows with a club. They ordered one of the blacksmiths to deliver this beating but he refused, saying: "I can't do that. You can kill me, but I won't do

it!” So one of the Ustashas beat Kajmaković with a bullwhip. He lived another three days and was then killed. Two days later they killed the blacksmith who had refused to carry out the beating.

In 1944 there was a burglary at the camp, the electrical workshop was broken into. We had a number of apprentices, these were boys of about fifteen, the sons of Ustashas, who were supposed to be learning the trade. In fact they did nothing except play cards and beat prisoners. From time to time they took part in the killings. There was one boy, Jukić, from Slavonski Brod, about fifteen years old. He slaughtered and slit throats along with the Ustashas. There were various spare parts in the workshop, where they made rifles and batteries, and among other things there was a high voltage box. The boys were bored so, out of curiosity, they opened the box and inside they found a plan of the minefield. It had been Remzija Rebac’s job to sketch a plan of the minefields in a hidden block leading towards Graplje, marking them out to be used in the event of a Partisan attack, because that was the easiest side to attack Jasenovac from. On one side there was the Sava, on the other the railway, elevated about two or three metres, while the third side facing Košutarica and the forest beyond, was occupied by bunkers. These boys had enough education to know what they had found: they took the draft to the commander.

There was a Jewish veterinary surgeon, Lev Matej, working on the camp farm. The Croatian artillery was based at Dubica and he used to go there with a corporal to treat the horses. In this way he kept in contact with the Communist Party committee in Dubica. As soon as the Ustashas discovered this, they sent orders by telephone for Matej to be arrested in Dubica. His companion, the Ustasha corporal, committed suicide. Among those they arrested were two Jews, Hajndrih Musafija and Druker. The rest were Serbs and Croats, 21 men altogether. To this day I don’t believe that Matej betrayed anyone, but that it was those boys who were responsible.

They took blow-torches and welding rods from our workshop, branding people with them until they confessed. Emerik Blum found out what was in store and managed to escape from Gradiška because if he had not he would have been killed. They set up a gallows behind the bell tower and hanged 21 prisoners in front of everyone. Among them was Mile Bošković, who was later proclaimed a National Hero. He begged Šakić not to have him hanged, because he was Montenegrin, but to be shot instead. Šakić obliged him personally: he ordered him to lie

down and fired two bullets into him. When Remzija Rebac was led to the gallows, a murderer from Lika by the name of First Lieutenant Frković came up to him and said "Come on Remzija, confess something." Remzija's confession was to spit at him, at which Frković sprang up and pulled him down, hanging him.

A few days later they invented some imaginary Chetnik organisation which was supposed to include the head of the kitchen, a Serb from near Rogatica, and some other people I knew. They hanged them all. They asked the kitchen man "So, what do you say, chief?" "I'll fuck your mother's mother when you come up here!" he replied. Later, as a deterrent, they executed a number of electricians and telephone operators on the pretext that they had been listening to news broadcasts.

Once the news came through that Belgrade had been liberated, the killings of Jews and Serbs became more frequent. On their bodies they hung placards reading "Greetings to liberated Belgrade".

At the beginning of 1945 work in the chain foundry was stepped up. Railway tracks were carted in vehicles and dragged to Gradina by a gang of more than two hundred men, the huge barrels of oil were taken away, graves were dug up and the bones burned in order to obliterate every trace. There were huge fires blazing all over the place, so that the whole neighbourhood stank. The camp itself was being liquidated. On April 13 a swarm of aircraft attacked the camp, destroying the workshops, the power plant, the command building, the clay pits, the brickyard and the chain foundry. As soon as the aircraft left, the Ustasha sentries secured the exit towards Novska, through which they feared the inmates could try to escape. On April 21 they lined us up in front of the command building, in front of a sentry box, in fact, because the building itself had been destroyed. They ordered us to bring our personal effects. Panic swept through the prisoners and a large number were subsequently hanged. There were shelves in the camp for tiles to dry on. Now they were stacked high with the bodies of the hanged prisoners. The two Bek brothers from Ludbreg, one 17 and the other 14, were hanged with their arms around each other.

There was a friend of mine, a mechanic from Knin who had been arrested in Zemun. I noticed he had something bulging under his shirt. "What's that?" I asked.

"I've got you some wire, so that you can hang yourself," he replied. I told him that I wouldn't hang myself. When I turned back he was no longer there. He hanged himself behind the workshop.

They forced us towards the shoemaking and tailoring building as hundreds of female prisoners walked towards us. When they reached us they began to sing "Farewell to you, Comrade," raising their hands and waving to us. The Ustashas were beside themselves with rage, all they could do was beat us. The women were taken away and slaughtered. We were pushed into the building, almost numb with fear.

After a little while someone came and told me that Ante Bakotić, the leader of the chemistry group, was looking for me. During Pićili's time they had brought large cauldrons to the camp. There were experiments in producing soap from human bodies, but they were a failure because we were just skin and bones. At the end, there was only water. Bakotić gave us a lot of help: he got some industrial tallow from the chemistry group, filtered it and used it to enrich the food of our comrades shackled in the clay pits. After a number of the Party comrades had been executed, he took over as leader. Now he told me "We've decided to break out. At the signal we'll kill the Ustashas. We'll head for Gate Five. Even if only a hundred of us make it, it will be worth it!" A little later the Ustashas arrived in pairs and escorted the group leaders out, probably hoping to discourage us from trying anything.

Some time after this there was a burst of mortar fire and the camp was soon ablaze. About ten shacks, the infirmary and the kitchen were all on fire. At about nine we heard the signal: "Let's go, comrades!" We surged forward. In the meantime we had armed ourselves with shoemaker's hammers, saws and other tools. We'd also executed about five criminals for fear they would betray us. We wrested a few weapons from the Ustashas and pushed through towards the four-post gate, which looked like an upturned table with a chest – the sentry bunker – sitting on it. From the gate itself two heavy machine guns rattled without pause. Some fell, others pushed on. It was my bad luck to run up against my older brother. He was gravely wounded and shouted "Leave me, I'm done for!" And then at one point, when the pile of bodies was in the way of the machine guns, our friend Gile Ristić snatched a machine gun. The Ustashas fled into the bunker and about 150 of us managed to run out of the camp. Once the Ustashas came to their senses they started throwing grenades and the way out was again blocked.

Bakotić had given me the job of cutting the telephone lines if I managed to get out, so that the Ustashas couldn't call for reinforcements from around the camps and the bunkers. I stopped at the first pole and wondered what to do. The rest were all running as hard as they

could. Did I have to climb that pole while the Ustashas were using all their weapons to fire on us from Gradina? Then I remembered that I was a member of the organisation. What would happen if I lived? Would I be called a coward for not doing my job? I climbed the pole and cut the line with shoemaker's shears. Now I didn't care whether I'd be shot or not, I'd accomplished my mission.

Beyond the camp wall there was a dyke with a bunker on it. The village of Košutarica was beyond the rim of the bunker, at the edge of the forest which faced the camp. I could see my comrades, well ahead of me in the distance. Many of them dived into the Sava, which was in flood. It was cold and raining and most of them drowned. I know of only one man who managed to swim across. His name was Čedo Huber. I met up with four others: Fridman from Zagreb, and the others were Jovica, Slavko and Arso. For three days we wandered, starving and chilled to the bone, but I felt neither tiredness nor pain, not even aware that I was treading on thorns. At long last we reached Jablanac after having swum seven times across the Strug River which meandered through the forest. At Jablanac we heard machine gun fire and headed in the opposite direction, arriving at a broad spread of pasture. There was a house there where we sheltered overnight. It was cold and we had nothing to make a fire with so we emerged stiff and sore in the morning. Then we caught sight of a farmer who had come to plough the field hanging his lunch bag on a tree. If we stole it he would raise an outcry and there were Ustashas nearby. He approached us and asked us if we were from the camp. "We're Montenegrins, we're running away from the hospital," we told him. He told us that we were close to Gradiška and then left us. We wanted to reach Papuk and hurried towards the railway line but it was swarming with Germans, Ustashas, civil defence guards and Chetniks. We returned and ran into the farmer again. This time we told him we were inmates from the camp and surrounded him, tree branches in our hands, just in case. We asked him why he had asked us if we were from the camp.

"I was sent from the Srbac command," he replied. "There are five of us field men, they sent us to shelter those of you who made it out." Then he showed us his identity papers and with relief we saw the five-pointed star on them. He took us to a dugout cabin, opened it and told us "This is where you'll hide. Our runners have used this place to rest during the day since 1941. It's never been discovered so, if you hear anything, just stay calm. I'll try to get you some food, but not before morning."

He was gone for three days. We ate leaves in the forest, we had already been half-dead with hunger when we escaped from the camp. We immediately decided who would keep watch in the bushes in case anybody approached so that we would have a chance to flee. During the night we heard someone walking around, an uneven gait, first a thump then a normal step. It was an old man. When he fell we picked him up and saw that he had only one leg and was walking with a crutch. When he asked us who we were we replied "You can see we're not enemies, because you've come to this shelter."

"I have two sons with the Partisans," he told us. "The Ustasha are preparing to flee, they're going to kill everyone in the village. I've already been hiding here for a couple of days. I'm a Partisan committee member."

The next morning we were brought some food by two women. About half an hour later we saw the old man walking across the field shouting "Freedom, comrades, freedom!" I saw some kind of an army, although they didn't look very military. They were wearing the kind of peasant shoes they wear in the Pirot area and their clothes were worn and patched, just like ours. This was the 21st Serb Division, formed in the Toplica area. We enlisted in the Fifth Serb Brigade. When we arrived and they saw us, half dead as we were, they brought us bread and bacon, but just then an officer with a pistol intervened.

"Don't touch that!" I thought Hitler had arrived. But then he explained: "Comrades, you mustn't eat this now, because of your stomach, your bowels, the diarrhoea. We're going to make you some tea."

Most of us who had escaped from the camp joined the 21st Serb Division. It was a warm welcome. Some of us were sent to hospitals, and the older ones were sent home. Although I was weak I wanted to fight and wouldn't accept anything else. When we arrived in Celje I recognised a lot of the Ustashas from Jasenovac and managed to save a number of home guardsmen who had been forced to wear the Ustasha insignia.

The war cost me my mother, two sisters, two brothers, both of whom died in Jasenovac, and many more distant relatives. From Celje I went to Niš where I completed my service. And there I was married. I have two daughters and four granddaughters. They are all I have. Everything else I lost in 1941. I had a house in Neum, but when Tudman came to power I lost even that. Now I'm back to where I started. I'm retired and now live on my pension.



III

SURVIVORS OF THE CAMPS: AUSCHWITZ, BERGEN-BELSEN, BIRKENAU, SAJMIŠTE, AND ĐAKOVO



Eva TIMAR

FROM ANNEXED HUNGARY TO A GERMAN CAMP



Eva Timar was the only child of Julijo and Julija Balog, née Soltesz. She was born in Sombor on March 30, 1926. She graduated from the Faculty of Engineering of Belgrade University and worked as a civil engineer until her retirement. Her mother died in the notorious Auschwitz camp.

She has a son, Aleksandar (Saša), a daughter, Lidija, and four grandchildren.

My parents were Hungarian Jews. My father, Julijo Balog, was born in 1896 and graduated as an engineer in Budapest before settling in Sombor in 1922. My mother, Julija Soltesz, was born in 1903 in Košice, which is now in Slovakia. They were married in 1924 and lived in Sombor until 1944. Our home had a warm, family atmosphere.

My family's pleasant life of harmony was suddenly disrupted when the war began, especially when the Hungarian army occupied Bačka in April, 1941. We Jews lived in constant fear under the Hungarian military administration until September 1941. They shot six Jews in the town, took hostages and extorted enormous sums of money which the Jews were forced to collect. The men were taken off for weeks at a time to forced labour camps where they were ruthlessly tortured and humiliated.

When the military administration was replaced by the Hungarian civilian administration, the tension eased a little and our lives returned to normal, at least to a certain extent. The other Jewish students and I returned to high school where most of the teachers and other students treated us with tolerance.

In the summer of 1942 a large number of Jewish men between the ages of 21 and 45 were taken to the Eastern front, to Ukraine, where almost all of them died under the cruellest conditions. I think that only six of them returned to Sombor. My family escaped this fate: my father was over 45, so we remained together at home. But our survival was in jeopardy because, under the rigorous anti-Jewish laws, my father had no permanent job. Nevertheless we managed to get by somehow.

In the spring of 1944, we believed that the worst was over and that we had avoided the tragic destiny of Jews from other parts of Yugoslavia. The Soviet Red Army had reached the northern border of Hungary. But on March 19, 1944, Hitler's army swarmed across Hungary. It was this which sealed our fate. Long lists of anti-Jewish decrees were issued, a new one every day, and all kinds of prohibitions and limitations were imposed, together with the obligation to wear the yellow star. The school stopped working, although the Jewish students were permitted to prepare for final exams with the others. I passed the written examination, but on the day I was to have taken the oral, I was on a train bound for Auschwitz.

My father had been taken in the early days of April with other Sombor Jews. First they were transferred to the camp at Bačka Topola. Our apartment was requisitioned for the Hungarians so my mother and I moved to another Jewish household, to our closest family friends. The tempo of events then quickly accelerated. By the end of April mass arrests began and all Jews were deported in an operation which lasted four days. My mother and I were among the first to be arrested and we were taken to Baja the next day. On the night of April 27, we were taken with a group of women to a camp in Bačka Topola. At dawn on April 19 we were loaded into wagons.

My father, together with a few other engineers and doctors, was kept in Bačka Topola until just before the liberation, when he was transferred to Budapest. At the end of October he fell into the clutches of the Nyilas, the Hungarian Fascists. He walked the tortuous path to Mauthausen and then on to Gunskirche, where he was liberated at the beginning of May, 1945.

My mother and I were squeezed together in a dark wagon for the three days and three nights it took to reach Auschwitz. We could imagine nothing worse than this, but in subsequent trains they packed men, women and children all together with the sick and the elderly, as many as ninety of them in a single wagon. We were put into a group of those aged between sixteen and fifty who were able to work. This turned out to be a dreadful mistake. Of the three thousand people on the train, less than a quarter made it to the camp, and even fewer survived beyond that. We were allowed out beside the wagons only a few times during the journey. There, under the gaze of police and SS troops, we said goodbye to human dignity.

AUSCHWITZ – BIRKENAU

Eventually the train stopped. The scene at the railway gate has been described over and over: the shouting of the SS men, “*Wer kann laufen?*” “Who can run?” Thus they separated the young from the elderly.

We set off in single file, not looking back at those who couldn't walk, who would be taken in trucks. After all, we'd see each other later, wouldn't we? We passed camp inmates with their strange, empty stare. We were taken to a large barracks where we spent a whole day, being tattooed with numbers, giving our personal data. From time to time a camp inmate would appear with what passed for tea, a disgusting, foul-smelling black liquid. It was late in the afternoon when we entered the bathroom, where we shed our clothes and stood naked in the long corridor, where the Germans and an occasional male inmate walked by. Shame? That was not for us, that was for human beings. Then our hair was cut and we were sprayed with disinfectant by female Jewish inmates who were rude and cold to us. After this we were showered for several minutes before being allowed to fetch our clothes: mismatched shoes and what passed for dresses. We were a miserable sight: shivering, hungry and thirsty. We were assembled in front of the bathroom and led away by our *Blockelteste*, our block warden, a Slovak Jew named Fani who had been in Auschwitz for many years. We asked her where the others were and where the smoke was coming from, but she avoided answering us. We were put into boxy partitioned cubicles, six of us in each.

Twice a day they counted us, we would stand for hours in the cold mornings, hungry and freezing. They told us that we would stay in quarantine for six weeks, after which we would be allocated to labour groups.

The mornings were terrible. I would dream that I was at home and then the call to get up would wake me. It was here in Auschwitz that I first heard Yiddish and Polish spoken. We brought coffee from the kitchen in shifts. This was terrible: we would stagger in the dark with the heavy cans, spilling the hot liquid on our legs. I remember rushing to the toilet, then some kind of washing, before rushing back to the block to tidy our straw mattresses and cubicles then waiting for the roll call.

At the end of the second week I fell ill with scarlet fever and spent the next six weeks in the camp hospital. The doctors were mainly Polish women and occasionally one would be Jewish. In those horrifying conditions, of course, it was difficult for them to treat even themselves, let alone others. Mengele did rounds every day, accompanied by a tall, self-confident Jew from Prešov, Doctor Ena.

It was while I was in hospital, from May to June, 1944, that the largest and most efficient killing operation in the history of Birkenau began. The crematoriums and gas chambers worked to capacity as trainloads of Jews, most of them from Hungary, arrived day and night. Flames leapt from Birkenau's four chimneys and the air was heavy with the stench of burning flesh. We would hear the locomotives whistle, especially at night and the shouting of the SS men. By this time we had already been educated. We had learnt that the smoke did not come from the bakeries and the Germans reminded us every day that the chimneys were the only way out of Auschwitz for us. Day after day the trains arrived. I knew the day my grandmother, my sick aunt and my little niece arrived. I loved them endlessly but had no illusions about their destiny. My tears dried up, instead I felt only a deep, numbing pain which has never stopped. It will never stop.

My mother was 41 years old when we arrived together in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We were together there for six months until she was selected. I simply cannot write about her suffering, about her being taken away to Block 25, the death block, and her terrible end in the gas chamber.

After the obligatory six weeks hospitalisation for scarlet fever, they discharged me and took me to what we called the sauna, the bathroom, to be allocated to a barracks and a labour group. Everyone from my train who had survived to reach the camp had already been put into

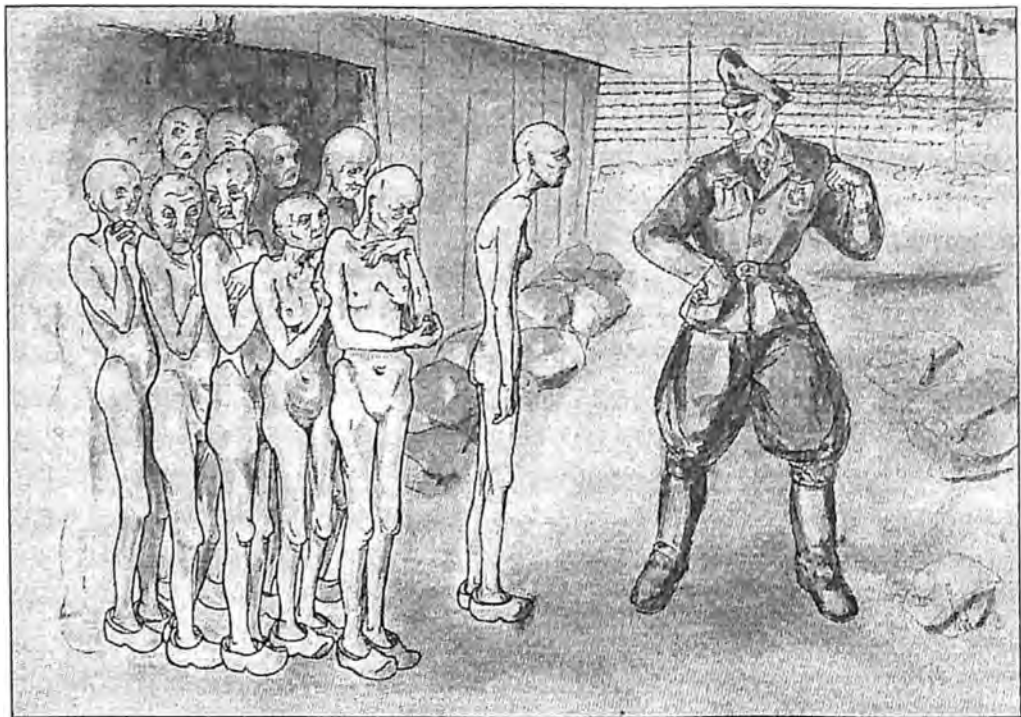
work groups while I had been in the hospital. The groups included the Union and Weberei which made military supplies while Canada and Brežinka were warehouses which stocked the belongings taken from new inmates arriving in the trains. Thanks to the block warden, a Czech Jew named Elena, I was allocated to the same block as my mother. It housed the Brežinka working group. We worked the night shift for weeks, when the Hungarian Jews arrived. The work itself was not physically difficult, but every morning we walked about five kilometres to work and returned the next morning to the camp, to B-Block. (A-Block was the quarantine area). The Brežinka warehouse was a large barracks piled high with various items. Nearby there was a sauna for the newly arrived and, behind the hedge, not far away, were the gas chambers and crematorium. We sorted clothes according to type throughout the entire night. Somehow these nights were bearable but the mornings were terrible. The trains nearly always arrived in the morning so, as we stood lined up across the bathroom, we were witnesses to the most moving scenes: grandmothers leading their grandchildren, mothers carrying babies in their arms, so many sights. We were forced to run without stopping as we passed the crematorium. From behind the hedge we would hear the murmur of those unhappy souls who could not even imagine the place they had arrived in, let alone where they were being taken and the fate that awaited them.

In the middle of July the trains stopped arriving from Hungary and so the Brežinka working group was disbanded. I was moved to a block with Polish and Ukrainian women who worked outdoors, the *Aussenkommand*. I don't know which were more terrible, the days or the nights. During the day the sun beat down ruthlessly and, already tortured by thirst, we were sworn at and beaten as we dug deep ditches and carted soil. We weren't used to physical labour so it was very obvious that we were less productive than the strong Polish and Ukrainian women, most of whom were from rural backgrounds. The consequence of this was beatings, beatings and more beatings! The group leaders, Polish and Ukrainian women, gave us no quarter as far as physical abuse was concerned, not to mention the swearing they directed at us constantly. We were alien to them, from another world.

At noon we had a break of half an hour for lunch, a bowl of turnip soup. We finished work late in the afternoon, but our return to the block brought no relief. After walking back to the camp we stood for hours to be counted. Dinner was a piece of bread with margarine and a slice of

sausage. We had to fight for a place by the tap, for a place in the toilet. We were in a mixed block whose warden was a Polish woman who wore the green triangle of a criminal, so it's not difficult to imagine our position. We Jews slept in dark holes under the cubicles with rats scurrying over us all night. During the hot summer nights the block swarmed with bedbugs.

Although the trains were no longer arriving from Hungary, there were still massive execution operations. The night the Gypsy camp was liquidated was terrible. Whole families were herded together into the gas chambers. The Czech camp followed; families brought in en masse from Terezin lived in Birkenau for several months before being given what they referred to as the special treatment, *Sonderbehandlung*, in the crematorium.



Selection, by the Czech Jewish painter Helga Weissova, herself a former inmate. The old, the weak and girls under fifteen are sent to the gas chamber.

Again I fell ill. My leg, burnt under the fierce sun, burst into a festering wound and I was again hospitalised. It was autumn, time for the regular selections for the gas chambers. On October 13, Mengele and

his escort appeared. We had been expecting him for several days, our fear mounting. "*Jüdinnen herunter! Ausziehen!*" "Jewesses! Strip" the order came. We walked past him naked while he decided who could live and who had no further need of life. They noted down the numbers on the arms of the unfit and then the waiting began until, one night, they were taken away.

During one of the last selections, I lost my mother.

BERGEN-BELSEN, OCTOBER 28, 1944

Dark red flames leapt from the chimneys as they belched smoke. *Block-sperre*, the shutting down of the block! The whole camp was on alert. Transport was arriving. *Entlaussung*, break-up! As I stood in the sauna as in a nightmare, mentally broken, Vera Rip approached me. "I know what has happened. I went through the same thing six months ago. We'll stay together." She pulled me back from the brink of despair. The journey to Bergen-Belsen took days. At the time we arrived the camp was not yet overcrowded, the typhus epidemic had not yet taken hold, there were no chimneys, no smoke and flame, no stench of burning corpses. For the first few days we were accommodated in tents, but these were soon torn down in a storm. Later we moved to the barracks, two to a bed. I was with Vera. I wanted to believe the well-meant lies of my friends that what had happened in Auschwitz towards the end had not been a selection, but a transport of prisoners. New trains arrived from Auschwitz which was now gradually being evacuated. The notorious Commander Kramer arrived with them. On the morning of December 18, there was a roll call and a selection for further transport. Vera and I hid. There was another roll call in the afternoon so we emerged from our hiding place. You never knew what would emerge as the right choice to make, which transport would lead to something better. We were unlucky: they took us to Braunschweig.

We arrived there on December 18, 1944. There was no barbed wire or high voltage electricity, no watch towers, only two buildings on the outskirts of the town and between them an area with taps which were difficult to get to. The town was beautiful, with mediaeval churches and picturesque architecture. The bustling streets ran between gardens and villas with windows draped in soft curtains. Through these windows we would see shocked glances, as though the residents were asking themselves "Who are these beggars?" It was so painful to pass through the

residential area of the town, with its scenes which could have been from my previous life, my real life, with our home and family, when we would walk along the footpaths.

They had brought us here to clear away the rubble because some neighbourhoods had been almost levelled to the ground. Every morning we would pass through the busy centre like a crowd of beggars. The bomb-damaged area was at the opposite end of the town from where we lived. It was bitterly cold as we carried stones from one place to another, but the guards, all of them war veterans, treated us like human beings. Returning to the stable at night was terrible. At the entrance we would be given some kind of disgusting soup and a piece of bread. A thin layer of straw was spread out in the stable, crawling with lice, like the whole building. We would spend half the night trying to clear away the lice because they kept us awake. For weeks we didn't wash.

There were frequent air raid alarms. They would herd us into a half-demolished church during these. In those difficult days there was one extraordinary woman, Mrs Hodosi, who should never be forgotten. We called her Manci-Neni, and she cheered us up, helping us not to despair. She would even wander around the cellars of the ruined houses and find us food.

Our accommodation was under the leadership of two Slovak Jew kapos, Edita and Magda. Incredibly, they were fat, clean and nicely dressed, but they were rough and ruthless. I don't know anything about what happened to them after the war but I wonder, if they survived, whether they could sleep at night.

Women were dying every day. There were no medicines.

One day the news spread that there was to be a selection. I was sick with a high temperature, but Vera dragged me with her to work. Didn't we know what would happen to anyone who was ill? I sat on a rock while Vera wandered among the rubble with a rusty can, looking for some water as I was burning up from my fever and tormented by thirst. Nothing happened, but the following day, February 21, they divided us into two groups: the sick and the sicker! I was among those who were more ill. They separated me from Vera¹ and I was convinced it was the

¹ I did not meet Vera Rip again until after the liberation of Sombor. She had gone through her own hell before finally returning to her home in Yugoslavia. During the war she lost her parents and her sister Ružica, a Partisan doctor, who was sentenced to death by the Chetniks and executed in Kolašin at the beginning of 1942. Vera Rip Obradović today lives in Belgrade.

end. The SS men threw us into trucks, shouting the whole time. I remember that the sun was shining and at least this did me some good. I was completely numb and apathetic. I had reconciled myself to the end.

Late in the evening of February 21, 1945, we arrived in trucks in front of the hospital barracks of the Wattenstatt camp. There we were met by a Polish doctor, a small woman, not a Jew. She showed no sign of the anti-Semitism which was very common among Poles, instead she was nobility and humanity personified, an attitude which also rubbed off on the nurses. They gave us what they could: a few warm, human words, relatively good hygiene and silence. There was nothing else they could offer under the circumstances. This respite came too late for the many who died during the first few days of our stay in Wattenstatt. By now there were Allied bombings nearly every day, the circle was closing as the Allies moved in from every side. At the beginning of April they put us in open railway wagons and we set off again. Nobody knew where we were going.

I remember it was a long train. We sat, crammed up against one another with nothing to eat or drink. We circled around, going from one camp to another. There was no room anywhere. From Oranienburg to Sachsenhausen. There was an alarm from time to time and the SS men would hide in trenches, well away from the wagons. Finally, on the night of April 12, we arrived in Ravensbrück. "*Raus, raus! Roosevelt wartet euch!*" the SS men shouted. "Run, run, Roosevelt is waiting for you!" It was the day that Roosevelt died.

They pushed us into the barracks. I climbed in the dark up to the top bunk. I collapsed and fell into a delirious dream. There in Ravensbrück we did no work. The camp was in complete chaos. There were rumours that the war was near an end, that there would be an evacuation. There was no food prepared in the camp, instead they gave us cans from parcels. These cans claimed their victims, those whose bodies were too weak to digest the stronger food. But the extortion, the theft! The hunger to which we had been exposed for a whole year was a ruthless destroyer.

For two miserable days we camped outside the barracks before we finally started walking on April 28. The march was led by SS men and women with German shepherd dogs. They threatened to shoot us if we fell behind.

The roads were blocked from every side and in all directions. The local Germans had loaded a few belongings onto horse-drawn carts and

were fleeing westward. We walked and walked or, rather, dragged ourselves with our last remaining strength, with no idea of where we were going. The front was all around us and aircraft buzzed overhead. The end was very close but we were still slaves. In the evening we reached Malchow where we fell on the floor and slept.

When the day dawned, we lined up in our usual five rows and waited. And waited. There were no Germans anywhere. And then the first Red Army soldier appeared, borne on the shoulders of the French from the neighbouring male camp. It was the end of the war, our liberation. Was this a joyful occasion for me? I don't know. I only know I felt an infinite loneliness. I had begun this journey with my mother and now I was alone.

There was chaos in the camp: it looked like an anthill as people scurried around searching for food. At that time I was with a girl from near Budapest. We were crawling around the camp in rags, like skeletons, each of us weighing only thirty kilograms. In the evening we were told that all camp prisoners would be transferred to the neighbouring SS settlement. This consisted of pretty one-storey villas which had been abandoned and completely ransacked. All that was left were beds. We moved into the attic of one of these houses.

That's how we spent our first day of freedom, numbed and in a nightmare. It would be many days before I began to feel alive again. After May 8, the Soviet military command organised food for us. We got our meals from the former SS kitchen where the liberated French prisoners now cooked. One day we heard that the ablutions block had started functioning: hot water, cubicles with bathtubs, everyone with a cubicle to themselves! When I heard someone singing in one of the neighbouring cubicles I began to cry.

In the middle of May we were told that there was a collection camp for Yugoslav repatriates in Neubrandenburg, so we headed for the town. One evening, before we left, Julika Ofner, a seventeen-year-old girl from Sombor appeared. She'd been sent out on a train from Auschwitz in the early days. Our joy at seeing each other was boundless. We belonged to the same world and had spent our childhood in the same town. We remained together.

The trip to Neubrandenburg was a real adventure for us. The railway lines were in ruins and there were only a few trains so we often had to walk.

We arrived in Neubrandenburg where the camp consisted of five collection centres on a hill. We met other former Yugoslavs prisoners. They greeted us warmly, moved by our appearance. We looked terrible. They took us to the commanding colonel whose name, I think, was Bošnjak. He was kind and gentle and arranged our accommodation. It was only then that we began to relax. It was the first stage of our journey home.

From Neubrandenburg, where I fell ill with a lung infection, we set off on Czech buses for Prague. We departed at the end of July, travelling through devastated Germany, Dresden and Berlin. We spent three days in quarantine in Prague before boarding a train with an endless number of carriages. It was a long journey to Yugoslavia. On August 9, we arrived in Petrograd, now known as Zrenjanin, where we were given our papers and headed towards our homes, although they no longer existed. On my arrival in Sombor I stayed with friends. I had returned without my mother, but my father arrived ten days later.

My father soon recovered and began work on the construction of a bridge in Baranja. This was the only cure for his tormented soul. I resumed my studies, away from school, studying privately for my matriculation. In the spring of 1946 I enrolled at the Engineering Faculty of Belgrade University, majoring in civil engineering. I lived in the Jewish students' hall of residence, along with most of those who had endured enormous losses and suffering. This gave me the strength to carry on and start living again.

But the wounds are very deep and will never heal.

I spent my working life in Belgrade as a civil engineer. My husband, Nikola Timar, an electrical engineer specialising in electronics, also survived the Holocaust, after losing his entire family. His brother Zoltan was hanged by the Hungarian occupiers in Novi Sad in 1941. We have a son, Aleksandar (Saša), a daughter Lidija and four grandchildren. These are our only consolation for the sufferings we faced in the past.

David PERLŠTAJN

AUSCHWITZ 62183

“The doctor didn’t actually examine the patients, he would only look at them and decide whether they should be sent to the right or the left. One side meant life and the other death.” This is how David Perlštajn survived the Holocaust.

He dictated his testimony to his sister, Ljerka Jagodić on his return to Osijek in 1945. Following her brother’s death, Ljerka submitted this testimony to the Jewish Historical Museum, where it was filed under the number KŽ-715, dated June 8, 1987.

In August, 1942, on the order of the notorious executioner Tolj, I was taken, along with other inmates of the Tenjski Road camp, in a closed wagon to the Loporgrad camp. The brutal torture began immediately, beatings with rifle butts and heavy clubs, so the camp inmates were already exhausted and despairing after the first part of their journey. From Loporgrad, beaten and mistreated, we were dispatched in closed wagons for the trip to Auschwitz. For the three days and nights of the journey we were allowed out of the wagons only once to relieve ourselves and only once were we given a little water to drink.

When we arrived at the camp the wagons were opened and the SS men rushed forward, wielding batons and clubs and shouting like wild animals. “*Los, raus aus dem Wagon!*” “*Move, out of the wagon, fast!*” The wagons emptied in an instant, although there were people in them whose strength was failing and who were near death. We were immediately separated, men from women, mothers from children. It is impos-

sible to forget the desperate sobbing of mothers for their children and children for their parents. The pleas of the mothers not to be separated from their children were met with insults and beatings. Many of them were beaten to death on the spot.

Of the group of four hundred, 45 men and 42 women were kept aside and the remainder, the children and the elderly, were taken to the Birkenau camp, two kilometres from Auschwitz and sent to the gas chambers. The men who remained were taken to the camp where they were stripped naked and shaved and their hair shorn. They waited 24 hours to be given their camp clothes and for their registration numbers to be tattooed on their left forearms. Only those camp inmates who might be expected to stay alive, at least for a short time, were given numbers. The others were executed, with no trace left behind. At this time I, David Perlštajn, became number 62183.



Some children were kept alive to be used in pseudo-medical experiments. Children show the numbers tattooed on their arms after the liberation of Auschwitz

Life in our barracks was supervised by the block and room wardens. These were also camp inmates whose main job was to ensure the new inmates were familiar with the house rules and to maintain discipline, which they did with violent beatings. The first night there no one was able to sleep. Tormented by hunger and thirst, left alone with our hearts breaking, overcome with sadness for the family members we had lost, we wept, without tears.

I was assigned to a group of fifty inmates who worked unloading supplies for the barracks in which we lived. This was done under the eye of the SS *Kommandoführer* and a supervisor known as a kapo. These were usually German inmates, criminals, who carried heavy clubs. They beat the other inmates regularly, first when they got out of the truck and again when they got back in. These beatings were handed out without reason, they shouldn't have happened, but this was how they maintained their privileged position. The food was terrible, black water passed for coffee and brown water for tea in the morning. At noon there was a tepid liquid with no salt or browning and few unwashed and undercooked potato skins swimming in it. This was called soup. Because of their hunger, people would try to get their soup as late as possible, so it came from the bottom of the pot where it was thicker with skins and mud. In the evenings we would be given 250 grams of something they called bread with something minimal spread on it.

Many camp inmates fell ill from the hunger and torture, the heavy work and the unbearable living conditions. Examinations by the SS doctor meant queuing with a group of 150 people in front of the hospital, stark naked in the snow. The doctor didn't actually examine the patients, he would only look at them and decide whether they should be sent to the right or the left. One side meant life and the other death. Nor was being admitted to the hospital any guarantee of life: the SS men would visit and choose victims for the gas chambers according to a quota set in advance.

When I was discharged from the hospital I weighed only 39 kilograms and could barely walk. Fortunately I met some compatriots and they took me to a former Spanish freedom fighter who got me into the carpentry workshop. I worked there until the evacuation of the camp began on January 18, 1945.

The Auschwitz camp was surrounded by a high concrete wall with an electric barbed-wire fence inside it. Many people put an end to their own torment on that wire. People were gassed in the gas chambers of the neighbouring Birkenau camp. When transports arrived, the camp orchestra would give concerts in front of a large building surrounded by parkland. This was where the inmates were released from the wagons. The small children were given sweets and the adults got fresh drinking water. They were all told that they should then line up in groups of two hundred to go to the showers. They would be given soap and a towel and moved on to the "shower block". When the last person crossed the

threshold the door would be hermetically sealed. After a few minutes, the door on the opposite side would be opened and there two hundred inmates from the *Sonderkommand* would be waiting with carts. The bodies would be loaded into these and pushed to the crematorium fifty metres away. There they would be burned to ash. The whole time the orchestra played in the park, cheering on the victims for the next tour.

In Birkenau there were three buildings used as gas chambers, four crematoriums and several large pits in which camp inmates were burned alive, especially those brought in from Hungary in June, 1944, because the crematoriums didn't have the capacity to "process" such a large influx of victims. In Auschwitz there was a scientific institute where the most insane experiments were carried out on living inmates who would soon die in agony.

In January, 1945, when the Red Army offensive began, about eight thousand inmates were evacuated from Auschwitz. They set off on foot towards the Mauthausen camp, a march of four days and nights through snow and bitter cold. There they were put into open wagons. Many of the inadequately dressed inmates died on this trip from exposure, exhaustion and hunger.

In Mauthausen the inmates worked twelve hours a day in shifts of three thousand people for the Messer Schmitt aircraft factory. Because of the overcrowding of the camp the conditions were shocking; there was less and less food while the work became harder and harder and people were tortured all the time. This situation lasted until May 5, 1945, when a small number of us, the survivors, were finally liberated.

Vera KON ALKALAJ

SCARS ON THE HEART AND SOUL



*V*era Alkalaj spent her early childhood in Zagreb as the daughter of Leopold and Sarina Kon (née Isaković). She attended high school in Belgrade where she enrolled in law school in 1939. She finally graduated after the war in 1949. From the autumn of 1945 she worked for a number of institutions and organisations including the Belgrade office of the United Nations Agency for Reconstruction and Development and the National Bank of Yugoslavia. Over the following decade she worked in the Central Council of the Trade Union

Association of Yugoslavia before joining the Yugoslav Consulate in New York in 1961. From 1965 until 1970 she worked in the Institute for Scientific and Technical Documentation in Belgrade.

After marrying Jozef Alkalaj in 1953 she bore two sons, Predrag (1955–1999) and Leon (born 1958). She now lives in Los Angeles with her husband and her son's family.

The entire Kon family was killed in the Croatian camps during the Holocaust except Vera's father, who lost his life in Bergen-Belsen. One of her mother's brothers and his family were killed in Auschwitz and the other was killed together with his family in Belgrade.

I was born in Zagreb on July 8, 1921. My father was Leopold Kon and my mother Sarina (Sara) Isaković. I had a younger sister Rene-Lela (1924–1987). We lived in Zagreb until 1927 when we moved to my

mother's home town, Belgrade. Her entire family still lived there. My father worked with my mother's father, Josif Isaković and my two uncles, Zaharije (Zare) and Jakov (Žak) Isaković. Their firm, Isaković Brothers, had several shops selling ready-made suits. By the standards of the day we were a well-to-do family.

My mother had another two brothers, the elder, Isak Isaković was a lawyer and the younger, Samuilo-Bata, a judge. By 1941 I had graduated from high school and enrolled to study law.

I grew up in a Sephardic Jewish family which preserved the Jewish traditions. We were members of the Jewish community and my mother was an active member of WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Association. We observed all the rituals of the great holidays and on Friday evenings, the Sabbath night, there was the traditional gathering of the entire family. Only the older family members would go to the temple on holy days.

We were not subject to any anti-Semitism. I was the only Jew in my class and I was always a good student. Once a week we went to the Jewish community centre for religious instruction and lessons in history and Hebrew. Our father laid down a solid moral foundation for us: as a Jew I was to be modest, quiet and honest in everything. I had the best conditions for acquiring a broad education, particularly in foreign languages, French, German and English.

We heard about the events in Germany, about the persecution of Jews, as soon as it began. We followed it closely of course, but always thought it couldn't happen to us.

The bombing of Belgrade on April 6, 1941, brought us to our senses and we realised we should flee. On April 12 we went to the railway station in winter coats with rucksacks on our backs. It was the same day that German troops entered Belgrade. We headed towards Priboj, on the River Lim, where my mother's younger brother Samuilo was working as a judge. This part of the now torn-apart Yugoslavia was occupied by the Italians, who did not persecute Jews. My mother's eldest brother Isak also arrived in Priboj as did her other brother Žak, with his wife Šelika and their five-year-old son Josif-Jola. Now our odyssey would begin.

My sister Rene, then sixteen, and I headed further south with my mother's brothers; our parents were to join us later. We reached Boka Kotorska and the village of Orahovac, planning to wait there for the war to end. However on July 13, 1941, there was an uprising by the

Montenegrins against the occupiers. The Italians immediately arrested us along with other Jews, refugees from Belgrade and Sarajevo who had taken refuge in Kotor, Herceg Novi and Dubrovnik. Our parents heard no news of us for the next three years.

We were put on board the King Alexander along with the other Jews and set sail for Albania. We arrived at the Kavaje camp, via Durres².

There were 187 of us in the camp, mostly from Belgrade and Sarajevo, together with some people from Vojvodina. The camp was improvised in a large barracks and lacked the basic necessities such as water and electricity. We were in Kavaje until October 1941. We were then taken by ship from Durres to Bari, then on to Cosenza in Calabria in the south of Italy, where we were put into the Ferramonti concentration camp.

Ferramonti was the first and the largest concentration camp in Italy, situated in a small valley among the hills, far from any populated areas. Its white wooden barracks, with no water or lighting, were built over a swamp, a breeding ground for malaria. Under these abnormal conditions we tried to live a normal life. An old missionary, Father Calliostro, tended to the salvation of our souls. He also tried to save the life of Oskar Davičo's brother Mirko when the Ustashas demanded his extradition, but the Italians handed him over and he was killed by the Ustashas in Jasenovac. Father Calliostro also tried to help us. My sister and I wrote an appeal to the Vatican asking for our parents to be allowed to travel to Italy to escape the whirlwind of war. We were permitted to leave the camp, together with my uncle Žak Isaković and his wife and child to travel to Mezzano Inferiore, a village near Parma in northern Italy. There we were put up in village homes where they took care of us as though we were their dearest relatives. They had no idea what the word *Ebreo* (Jew) meant, nor did they know why we had been brought there. We spent our time there in open confinement. In early spring, 1943, our reply came from the Papal Nuncio. We two sisters, "two poor girls without parents," were allowed to be with our parents, but we would have to travel to them. At that time, the war was raging in Sandžak. We were first taken to Trieste and then put on a warship bound for Kotor. On the ship, everyone wondered what was going on and who was sending us into "the inferno"! This had been the response of the Vatican when they were in a position to save our parents. In Kotor, they

² Italian *Durazzo*, Serbian *Drač*

handed us over to the police chief and he put us in prison, saying it was the safest place for two young girls. There we waited for military transport to Montenegro and Priboj.

Our parents were still in Priboj, in the apartment of our uncle, the judge, who was being held in a military prison. They were overjoyed to see the children of whom they had heard nothing for the past three years. There were a large number of Jews in Priboj, from Višegrad, Sjenica and Sarajevo. The frontline was getting closer and closer to Priboj, so we set off southwards. At the beginning of 1943 we arrived in Podgorica and were caught there at the end of the year when Italy capitulated.



Young and carefree on the streets of Belgrade. Left, Vera and her sister Rene Kon. Right, Vera on the right.

German troops from Albania immediately occupied all the territories formerly held by the Italians. Foreigners were required to register in order to obtain coupons for bread, so the Germans immediately began arresting Jews. The Gestapo arrested us and threw us into jail on the Morača river. There were already many hostages there and each day they were taken out to be shot.

We slept on boards, 33 centimetres wide for each prisoner. What passed for food was black water called coffee in the mornings and a soup of warm water with a few scraps in it at noon. There was constant physical and psychological harassment. The prison was run by a German, while the local police were responsible for internal administration. At this time the Allies, the Americans in fact, bombed Podgorica. The palace of the Ban, the local overlord, was heavily damaged and we prisoners had to clear the rubble, gathering up broken glass and bricks with our bare hands. Our hands were cut and bleeding all over. Once, someone tried to give us a piece of bread in the street, but he was roughly pushed away.

Finally one day they assembled us together. It was in the spring of 1944 but I don't remember the date. They forced us into trucks covered with tarpaulins and drove us down the dusty road to Pristina. When we stopped by the bakery someone again tried to give us some bread but again the Germans shoved him away. In Pristina we were loaded onto a train, in cattle wagons. There was not even enough room for us to sit on the floor and we had no food or water. A few times they opened the door somewhere out in the middle of nowhere so that we could get some air. When it rained we tried to push a dish through a small opening to collect drinking water but it was pushed back by German rifles. Finally we reached Belgrade and were immediately taken to the Sajmište camp. It was hot and we were exhausted from the long journey.

The first thing I saw there was a bucket of water from which a horse was drinking. I plunged my head into it. The horse made no objection! The vast halls where Jews from Belgrade and Serbia had been interned in 1941 and 1942 stood gapingly empty. The Germans had taken them to their death. Some kind of dishes for food still lay around the place here and there and at night the rats scurried across our heads. The camp was run by the Ustashas, and it was here, on their caps, that I saw the letter "U" on its checkerboard background for the first time. They had no food, not even bread, to give us. We lit fires and cooked grass just in order to put something into our stomachs. The Ustashas mistreated us, summoning the men in the evenings and beating them with wooden clubs. We looked across the river at Belgrade with its cathedral against the skyline and envied the birds for their freedom. It was now the end of May, 1944, and Belgrade would be liberated in October, 1944, but by then we would have been moved on.

One morning the Germans appeared again. They crammed us into trains, cattle wagons again, and took us further north, through Vienna and Prague into Germany, to a camp between Hanover and Hamburg. We arrived at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. This had originally been a holding camp for prisoners being held for exchange as when, for example, Germans who had been in Palestine were exchanged for Jews from Bergen-Belsen.

A group of Hungarian Jews passed through Belsen and were bartered for jeeps. There was a group of diamond cutters from the Netherlands and the *Doppelstaterei*, the people with dual Dutch and English citizenship. There were also Russian partisans captured in Russia, French from the resistance movement, French women whose husbands had fought with the partisans and others. From Germany there were camp inmates who were *Bibelforscherer* or Jehova's Witnesses, Communists, prostitutes and Gypsies. All wore different identification on their arms: red, white or yellow triangles. Our group wore a yellow Star of David with the word *Jude* in the centre. We didn't have to wear the grey striped uniform the other *Häftlinge* wore. We were all allocated to barracks surrounded by barbed wire and forbidden contact with people from other barracks.

The French from the resistance movement administered the barracks. When we arrived they took our details and one of them advised me to ask for work in the kitchen when we were being allocated to working groups. I took this advice and worked in *Küche* No. 1 together with my sister Lela from the day we arrived until our last day in Belsen. This was the main kitchen which kept most of the prisoners somehow alive. The head of the kitchen was the *Oberschaffführer*, Theo, a big elderly German with pale blue eyes whose family lived in Berlin. He could be very rough and would hit us without warning. We never spoke in German, although we understood everything he said very well. It was hard work and a long day, between fourteen and sixteen hours. We were kept in a barracks of our own so that it was easier for them to wake us. At four in the morning, escorted by guards, we would go to the kitchen, walking towards the crematorium whose chimney smoked around the clock, filling the air with the stench of burnt flesh and bones.

Once in the kitchen we had to fill huge cauldrons with water, light the fires and boil the water for the chicory coffee substitute. Then we had to take beets intended for cattle feed and slice them into cubes and boil more water to cook them, with one cube of margarine in each caul-

dron. Every ten days we had a “day off” when they would take us to the barracks where our parents were. This was the worst day for us, harder than the laborious drudgery of the kitchen. There we saw how our parents and friends lived. Among them was the late Kalmi Baruh, a renowned university professor and Judaist from Sarajevo. In the mornings they would have to stand for hours for roll call, despite the winter rain and freezing temperatures. The rest of the day they would spend on their three-tier bunks with a slice of bread and piece of margarine.



Bergen-Belsen, 1945. Life magazine writer and photographer George Roger described this as the final stage of human decline, saying that he would never again be able to photograph war.

Through the windows and open doors of the kitchen we could see everything that was happening outside. We watched the *Fleischwagen*, the wooden cart pulled by harnessed camp inmates in their striped uniforms. Because this load was too heavy for their tormented bodies,

another whole group of inmates would push from behind. The cart carried the corpses of the dead and some bodies which were still moving, all of them headed for the crematorium. I saw the brutality of the SS women who worked as camp guards. One day I saw one of them kill a girl who bent down to pick up a beet from a pile outside the kitchen. I saw a miserable line of men and women arrive, Poles who had survived the Warsaw ghetto uprising. They were already completely exhausted, they could hardly drag their feet, and almost all of them ended up in the crematorium.

Once there was a mutilated man kneeling outside our barracks. He had a sign hung around his neck and something between his teeth. The sign read "Spit on me, I cut the ears off my dead friend and wanted to eat them." In his teeth he held the ears.

There was typhus raging in the camp. At first the Germans tried to isolate those who were infected but later they gave up. One day someone came to the kitchen to tell me that my father's torment had ended. My sister and I didn't even know the date or what day it was but we decided it was April 5, 1945. They asked us whether we wanted his gold teeth. Of course we refused. At this time Theo took to sitting and drinking after he learnt that his family had been killed in the bombing of Berlin. This is why we thought it was the beginning of April. The Americans had begun bombing seriously and were getting closer to the camp. Soon the camp's water and fuel supply routes were cut. We carried water in cans from the reservoir. We used the wooden soles from the shoes of those burned in Auschwitz as fuel to boil water for cooking. There was a mountain of them. It made me feel that the dead were being burned for a second time.

One day, April 10 as I later discovered, a large group of us, about 2,500 Jews including those who were sick with typhus, were taken from Bergen-Belsen and loaded into a train. We heard we were to be transferred to another camp, the last in Germany with gas chambers. For two weeks we travelled on the train from place to place as the front drew ever closer.

We were by the Elba River when the Soviet troops advanced and, one morning, the train could go no further. The German guards fled and, together with the Soviet troops, we entered the German village of Tröbitzm near Frankfurt-on-Oder. It was April 23, 1945.

There in this deserted village we were liberated. The Germans, fearing the arrival of the Russians, had all fled. Our mother was still

very weak, having just recovered from typhus. Then the typhus struck my sister and after her it was my turn. Our repatriation was organised by the Russians and our journey home took three months.

We arrived in Belgrade by train from Budapest in August, 1945.



Smiles from Los Angeles: Vera Kon Alkalaj with her husband, sons, daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

After four years and four months of suffering in various concentration camps, we returned home without our father. We were also left without almost the entire family on my mother's side. More than thirty members of our extended family were killed in various camps. Many members of my father's family had also perished, most of them in Ustasha camps including Jasenovac. All of our property had been plundered. My uncle Žak, who had stayed on in Italy, had been taken away and killed in Mauthausen, his wife and son were burned in Auschwitz. My mother's other brother, Zare, was shot together with his wife and child in Jajinci, near Belgrade.

We needed to begin a new life, it was difficult to settle back into a normal life without my father and without my home. I found a job and

studied part-time, graduating from the Law Faculty of Belgrade University in 1949.

It was my good fortune to meet a kindred spirit, Jozef Alkalaj, originally from Travnik. I married him in 1953 and we had two sons, Predrag-Peda, born in 1955, and Leon-Loni, born in 1958.

Sadly, we lost our older son on April 26, 1999. He lost his struggle for life while waiting for a heart transplant.

My sister, Rene-Lela, also finished high school on her return to Belgrade. She then graduated from the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University and completed a master's degree before going on to a successful career in foreign trade. She died suddenly soon after retiring.

Our son Leon married Lea Glitmann, who was born in Israel and graduated as an architect in the United States. They have three sons, Daniel (10), Jonathan (7) and Adam (4).

More than half a century has passed since my wartime odyssey and the torment of surviving the Holocaust, but the scars in my heart and soul remain very fresh. My physical and psychological development was hampered by the conditions in the camps, especially in Germany. I am still haunted by terrible dreams, sometimes even shouting in my sleep until my husband wakes me. The smell of burnt meat and bones drives me into a fever, reminding me of the stench of the crematorium. I am completely unable to drink black coffee because it reminds me of the food in the camp. To this day I dislike getting up early and nor do I like anyone to wake me early.

I am unable to forget all the things which, as a Jew, I endured and survived. And nor should they be forgotten.

Piroška PERINOVIĆ

IN THE HANDS OF DR MENGELE



*P*iroška Perinović was born in Bački Petrovac to Laszlo and Emma Schonbrunn, née Kraus. She had two sisters, Rozsika and Malvina, and a brother, Imre. None of them survived the Holocaust.

After the war she worked in the tobacco industry in Niš. She has a son, Mirko, and a daughter, Branislava, and three granddaughters.

I was born on September 27, 1927, in the Slovak settlement of Bački Petrovac, thirty kilometres from Novi Sad. My mother was born in Pivnica, near Odžaci, and my father in Jaszbereny in Hungary. There were four of us children, my brother Imre, my sisters Rozsika and Malvina and me.

When Yugoslavia capitulated in 1941, all the Jews in Bački Petrovac, a total of 22 families, were arrested and their houses put under guard. The Fascists took a roll call of all family members. We were ordered to pack only necessities and sent to one of several collection points where army trucks were waiting for us. They took us to the Novi Sad airport where we stayed for a month in military barracks. We were then taken to Pustara, in Begeč, where they put us in stables, tool sheds and curing sheds. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the Hungarians took my father to a place called Bilke. He never returned. We stayed in the Begeč detention centre until September, 1941.

We were then taken to Sarvar in Hungary. This was a larger camp and we were packed into the storehouses, curing sheds and other auxiliary buildings. The storehouses were multi-storey buildings in which we slept on the straw-covered floor. There were also Serbs in the camp, most of them from Vojvodina. Later on they gave us three-tier bunks, but this was no better. It was particularly difficult when the winter came. The younger women all worked in the factories, digging ditches and building roads and doing whatever other kind of work, but I was a child and didn't have to work. We were there for two years.

In April 1944 we were taken to Baya, to a Hungarian collection camp for Jews. I was there for only two weeks before the Germans took us over in April, 1944.

One day they took us to the train, packing us into cattle wagons where we suffocated from the stench and the lack of air and water. They wouldn't let us out of the train for days and people were sick and often vomiting. When at last the train stopped and the wagons were opened we rushed outside. Once out we were stunned to find ourselves surrounded by SS men with rifles aimed at us as we staggered beside the rails. We were in Austria, at the most remote end of the railway station in Wiener Neustadt. They separated the men from the women, taking my uncle away. As dark fell we were again shoved into the wagons and the train set off.

It was a four-day journey to Auschwitz. Our train passed through Auschwitz, stopping at eleven o'clock at the main loading ramp in Birkenau, across from the broad road which separated the male and female sections of Collection Camp B and divided the Birkenau K1 complex. There on the platform Dr Mengele awaited us. He immediately divided the arrivals into three groups. As we climbed down from the wagon they lined us up in fives for Mengele to separate us according to his own criteria. Everyone from my family except me was sent to the group he deemed unfit for work. This included my stepmother, my two sisters and my brother. I tried to follow them, saying "I want to be with my brother and my mother." He seized me by the shoulder and slapped me hard.

"You have to work. You'll see them later."

Then he continued separating us. My two aunts, the elder, Giza (née Lisov), and the younger, Olga Kraus, whose married name was Mijajlović, were also classified as fit to work.

Once we were inside the camp they took everything from us, including our clothes. They marched us naked into the bathroom, shaved us and, after we were washed, gave us some ragged clothing. I was put into the female Collection Camp B, in barracks with three-tiered bunks. Running down the centre of the barracks were heating ducts with chimneys at each end. These gave us no warmth at all because the fires were never lit. On each side was concrete floor where we would lie. The area where the dilapidated beds were was wet and muddy because of the leaky roof. At the end of each barracks there was a room, closed off from us, where the block wardens and kapos were. They were extremely cruel and would often beat us. By the fourth day I knew that I would be beaten if I ever dared to ask about my family. They would hit me as they gave me my answer: "They're in the same place as everyone else: the crematorium." I didn't understand and would go to my aunts asking them to explain. But somehow I understood that I no longer had my stepmother, Ilonka, nor my sisters Rozsika and Malvina, nor my brother Imre. Malvina, the youngest, was only four years old.

It was a gruelling life in the camp. Not only was the accommodation terrible, the food was inadequate, doled out in rations meant for the dying, not the living. I experienced first hand the *in vivo* experiments of Dr Mengele which became notorious after the war. I was given an injection in the arm, below the shoulder. Soon my arm became swollen and a yellowish bloody liquid began to ooze from the injection site. My temperature rose and I became feverish. Thanks to the elder of my aunts and her determination, I managed to live through this crisis. Some time later my aunt was moved to the kitchen and, thanks to her courage and perseverance, I was moved there too. Both of us were in the kitchen duties group. We peeled potatoes: each of us had to peel a hundred kilograms of potatoes in twelve hours. For six and a half months we worked in the kitchen, until December 18, 1944. I remember being beaten many times and seeing many terrible scenes, all the time fearing that my aunts and I would have our turn soon.

From December, 1944, it seemed that the end was drawing ever nearer. We heard artillery, there were aircraft flying overhead, the towns and factories were bombed and pamphlets were dropped. My aunts and I were loaded into the last train and evacuated along with another hundred women. Three days later we were unloaded in Wansdorf, about 150 kilometres from Leipzig. From the railway station we were

marched under guard to a place called Georgetal where a new camp was established. Once again my two aunts and I were together in the kitchen with the rest of the kitchen crew from Birkenau. The other camp inmates worked in an aviation factory. Here life was easier, I was beaten only once, after I secretly gave a Romanian woman four onions for her sick sister. The Germans found the onions during one of their regular searches.



Children and the elderly were sent directly to the gas chambers on arrival in Auschwitz.

We stayed in Georgetal until May 1, 1945, when we escaped during the night. This was thanks to Maja, a local woman who worked in the camp, and a guard, a *Volksdeutscher*, who cut the wire fence and allowed us to escape. He also advised us to mingle in with the mass of civilians who were fleeing ahead of the Russians so as not to be recognised. We ran as fast and as far as we could. By dawn we were in among the fleeing mob.

After walking towards Leipzig for several days, we fell in with a group of more than twenty Yugoslav prisoners of war. Finally the Russian troops reached us. By now I could hardly walk after days of strenuous hiking in my shoddy shoes which had cut and bruised my feet. One of the Soviet soldiers gave me a pair of boots. The Russians were escorting German prisoners while fierce fighting raged in Leipzig, now about ten kilometres away.



Piroška in the warm atmosphere of her family.

We walked with the Soviet army from Leipzig to Dresden. This was the centre of the fighting which by now was coming to an end. From Dresden we were sent on to Czechoslovakia and then continued our journey through Hungary. We crossed the Yugoslav border at Subotica and, at the end of June, 1945, we finally reached Bački Petrovac.

Our house was deserted and ruined: only the bare walls remained, with neither doors nor windows. The roof was now a gaping hole and the house was surrounded with weeds and devastation. I stood looking at what was once my home, weeping.

When the mayor of Bački Petrovac heard that we had returned, he sent police to take us to the hospital. After convalescing there, we went to Senta where I had an aunt. I never returned to Bački Petrovac, there was nowhere to go. I now began a new life, no longer inmate number A-11799.

I have lived in Niš since my marriage in 1957. I worked there for sixteen years but retired early in 1981 because of my poor health.

Now I live with my daughter Branislava and my granddaughter Olga. My other child, my son Mirko, lives separately with his family, his wife Ljiljana and their daughters, Anita and Tijana. I have one great-granddaughter, little Milja, who is two years old.

This is my story and, now I have only one wish, that there will never again be such stories to be told.

Judita LEVI

RECALLING THE DAYS OF HORROR



*J*udita Levi, née Krishaber was born in Subotica in 1920. She has an older sister, Livija Fenyo, who lives in Hungary. In the terrible days of the Holocaust she lost her father Aleksandar and her mother Margita, née Hollander.

Immediately after the war she married Dr Geza Levi in Subotica and began working at the Central Tuberculosis Clinic in Novi Sad before moving to Belgrade. There, Judita first worked at the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Red Cross as an administrator in the social health division, then as a social worker and head of the rehabilitation division of the Institute for Pulmonary Disease until her retirement. She has been an active member of the Red Cross for many years.

By June, 1944, we had been in the ghetto in Subotica for two months, in part of the town evacuated for the purpose. There was a curfew for those who wore the yellow star and those who were not thus branded didn't dare approach us. There were women, children and older men in the ghetto; the rest of the adult males were either in forced labour camps or had been mobilised under duress. Each family had just one room to live in. It was a time of anxiety and despair. All of us expected the worst, because we knew this was only the beginning. I was 23 years of age and had been forced to abandon my studies three years

earlier, not being permitted to study or work in the same way as others, because I was Jewish. I lived with my parents in the one, small room allocated to us. They had aged ten years in those two months. My older sister was married and lived with her family in another town. We knew nothing of what had happened to them. Letters no longer reached us.

One sunny day, early in the morning, the police came for us. All the Jews in the ghetto were given half an hour to get ready and told they could take only what could be carried in a rucksack. No one asked any questions. They took us to the station where there were cattle wagons waiting for us. The police beat us mercilessly, breaking the ribs of one elderly woman. It was a short journey and we arrived later the same day at a temporary collection camp where we were to wait for Jews from other towns. We all know that this was only temporary and that they would take us further, but no one knew where. We expected to be taken to a concentration camp, but which one, what kind, where? Why us? We were people like anyone else and we had not done anyone any harm.

During the day we were kept in a fenced off area, watched by guards, Hungarian policemen and a number of SS men. During the night we were locked into a big old mill, stables and storehouses. New convoys kept arriving, and by now there were hundreds of us.

About ten days later we set off again, our belongings on our backs. We passed through a town where people turned their heads away or gazed at us with pity, some of them with curiosity, some hurling insults and epithets. All the time they beat us. Again we were in cattle wagons, each of us with a parcel of food for the trip: bread, margarine and jam. All of us had some canned food as well. The wagons were closed, with just a small, barred window high up in each corner, through which only the sky could be seen. It was hot, stifling in fact. There were a hundred or a hundred and twenty of us in each wagon. For days on end we could only sit, jammed one up against the other. Sometimes the train would stop for a few hours and the soldiers would open the door. We would take the rubbish out, fetch water, breathe deeply and then travel on. We left Hungary and began crossing Poland.

Poland! No, it can't be? I didn't say anything to anyone. I had heard about a terrible camp in Poland, but I remained silent. A few of us younger ones, perhaps ten of us, were trying to make that dreadful trip easier for the others. We were on a train to death, but no one knew that then. Many people had poison with them, but felt that the time had not yet come to use it. Perhaps they would take us to factories where we

could work and live. I was young and healthy, nothing would be too hard for me. But what would happen to my parents and the others, the weak, the sick, the elderly? I was furious in my helplessness. I told the other young people that we should try something. In fact I had been thinking about this for some time, but I didn't know what to do about my parents. They only laughed at me. What could we do, they asked, run away perhaps? The guards were armed to the teeth.

After about eight days of the most terrible travel we arrived at a crossroads. The train stopped and the wagons were opened. We thought it was just another short halt. I ran to the door and saw a vast space with barbed wire. Wire, everywhere wire. There were a lot of electric fences, a dense network of high voltage cables. But at this time we still didn't know that. There were guard towers all around, observation posts armed guards and searchlights. Suddenly I saw the sign on the railway station. "Auschwitz"! My worst fears were realised.

Fortunately only a few of us had heard about this place. Now I knew that we had reached our destination. They forced us out of the wagons, but made us leave our belongings behind. The others all thought they would get them later, because these were our only valuables, the few precious memories we still had. I could hear people behind me saying: "Look, there are the chimneys of the factory over there. That means we're here to work. As long as we're working there's nothing to be afraid of." Yes, they were chimneys. The chimneys of the crematorium!

The old hands in the camp tried to help us, whispering to us in various languages, but we didn't understand. When the SS men saw them doing this they were severely beaten. Three officers stood at the very entrance of the camp, surrounded by soldiers. A major on each side and, in the middle, as I later discovered, Dr Mengele himself, in uniform, with patent boots, white gloves and a whip in his hand. The sorting began, children, the elderly and those who seemed sick or weak were sent to "the other side", while we, the young and healthy, stayed on "this side". My father went to the other side. By sheer luck my mother stayed with me, she was 52 years of age but in very good shape. She wept for my father and I comforted her, at least she was with me. I didn't know at the time, nor did it even occur to me, that it would have been better for her to have gone immediately with my father.

Everything happened very quickly after that. They herded us into a large concrete building, separating men, women and children under

fourteen. Only the older girls and women without husbands and children remained. They took our shoes and our dresses and, with them, the poison sewn into the hems. We were completely naked as they shaved our heads. Suddenly I heard screaming as a door opened onto a vast space. I recognised the faces of those who were with us on the train and who were separated from us on arrival. They were pulling out their gold teeth and taking their spectacles from them, swearing and beating them the whole time. Later it turned out that they were being taken to the gas chambers. We could no longer recognise one another, naked and shaven, we called to one another, some of us sobbing, some laughing hysterically. The Germans were mocking us, beating us. We were all given a piece of soap and a towel and pushed into the showers. Unknown to us, the ones on the other side were also getting soap and a



Judita Levi in younger days

towel, but there they were drenched in poison gas instead of water. After washing we were given torn dresses and worn shoes, with no chance to try them on, no concern for whether they fitted. Some people got shoes which were too big or too small, some got two left shoes, so we swapped them around. Through all this we endured their beating us. The shoes were our greatest treasure. They were distributed by inmates working under the supervision of the SS. They tried to give us the best possible, but it was a poor choice and, in any case, they didn't dare. In this way I managed to get a headscarf. I tore it in two, giving half to my mother.

By the time this was over, darkness had fallen. We set off, a long line of us, exhausted, hungry and completely demoralised. We seemed to walk for a very long time before finally arriving inside the camp itself. Birkenau! Wooden barracks, all in darkness. Entering, we fell to

the floor, exhausted. There was nothing at all inside the barracks. There were too many of us and not enough space, we crushed together, lying like that. My mother and I held each other's hands.

The first night in camp. We tried to sleep. People were sobbing, but voices in the dark warned us that unless we were silent they would make us kneel outside the barracks. We begged for silence from those who were unable to keep a grip on themselves.

At three in the morning we were woken by a piercing whistle and rough voices and given five minutes to line up outside the barracks. We stood in rows of five for them to count us. The barracks were called blocks. Each block had its own supervisor, the kapo was a woman, the *Blockaltester*. They were assisted by four *Stubendiensterei*. These were all inmates who had been in the camp for years. Most of them, but not all, were Polish.

Some of them had been there since 1938 and some from even earlier. They were no longer people but savage beasts. They had put themselves in the service of the Fascists in order to stay alive. Most of them were criminals and there were prostitutes among them as well. Those who had been unwilling to supervise and monitor the other inmates were no longer alive.

The roll call took hours, usually lasting until seven or eight in the morning. Then what they called breakfast arrived. Everyone was given half a mug of coffee, which bore no resemblance to real coffee, a lump of margarine and a piece of dry, stale bread. That was our ration for the whole day.

The day usually began with us kneeling in front of the barracks for hours on the sharp stones. The paths weren't paved and the ground was covered with these stones. There we would kneel, supposedly as punishment for some infraction, but in fact the point was to torture us. We learnt from the older camp inmates that the gas chamber was the fate planned for all of us. These were the last transports, there was not enough room in the factories, they hadn't even recorded us. We were not given numbers and they didn't tattoo us. Many of us refused to believe this story, clinging to hope. I was among them. I tried to cheer people up, even when they beat us and when we were kneeling in tatters in the rain or under the scorching sun. We would stand in the mornings and wait until the SS man or the SS woman arrived. They would take a small number of inmates to the factories, but I was not so lucky. Perhaps I could have gone, but I didn't want to leave my mother. Lunch

and dinner was a soup, usually made from turnips meant for cattle, but by the time our turn came there would be almost nothing left.

The days passed. The cold weather of autumn set in. We had no warm clothes and many of us were barefoot because our shoes had fallen to bits. Every second week we went for a bath. When we returned from washing it was like being reborn, because we never knew whether they were really taking us to wash or to the gas chamber. We could see the furnace of the crematorium and every day would note whether there was smoke or not. The barracks roof leaked and we lay in mud. There was one barracks where they put those who could no longer stand or who had gone insane, There were more and more of these people every day. Once a week a truck would arrive and take these living skeletons to the gas chambers. One morning while we were kneeling on the stones, my mother fainted. I begged them to let me kneel longer instead of her. They allowed this: my mother returned to the barracks and I was kept kneeling until the evening.

The guards would cook potatoes for themselves. I would clean their barracks every day so that I could get some of these. Three times I managed to take a few cooked potatoes, running to the barracks for the sick and sharing the potatoes out among them. The third time I was caught in the act by a German guard: they beat me and shaved my head again and deprived me of food for three days as punishment. The others gave me a slice of bread from their portion.

My mother suffered a heart attack.

We saw terrible sights. Every day someone would be caught on the barbed wire, someone who didn't know about the high voltage current passing through it. There were also some who did this deliberately, unable to endure any more.

One afternoon in November there was a commotion throughout the camp. We were all taken out of the barracks, lined up and moved out. Where were we going? Nobody knew. The guards took us to another camp. Some people said we were being sent to work, others that we were being taken to the gas chambers. A lot of people just didn't care: it couldn't be worse! We arrived at the same place as we had on the first day, in front of the vast bathroom, the crematorium and storehouse. They let us sit on the ground, it was cold, but at least we could sit. Then the speculation began: what was going to happen to us? I insisted that we were going to somewhere better, saying over and over again that we should hang on, that it would soon be over. A few days earlier a camp

inmate who worked in the kitchen had told us about the situation on the front and this had given us hope. Every day there were more and more aircraft flying overhead. The Germans were in terrible fear but, for us, these were the only heartening moments. Everyone wanted to believe me as I assured them that the worst was over. Childishly, they asked me questions, as though I knew more than they did. And I just kept talking, trying to convince myself as well. The guards were running back and forwards, many of us could speak German and we would catch fragments of their conversation. They were saying that they didn't know what to do with us because they had run out of poison gas! We sat the entire night in the icy wind, stricken with panic. That night, many people lost their sanity. The guards were furious with us because they had to stay awake all night; they beat us and told us it would be best to burn us alive.

By the time the morning came, only about fifty of the hundreds of us retained any semblance of calm, if this word can be used at all. They asked me if I still believed we would be free. Obsessively I told them that we would be liberated by the spring at the latest. I thought it would come on March 11, my birthday, I had made my mind up that this would be the date. Most of them thought that I had lost my mind. The winter had only just begun and it would be impossible to endure any longer, even if they didn't kill us there and then. But still, we were taken to the bath, not the crematorium, and given clean, grey dresses of sackcloth, shoes, a blanket and food for the trip. Those blankets saved the lives of many people. It was time to say farewell to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This time we were in passenger wagons, sitting in compartments on wooden benches, travelling we knew not where. We clung for a long time to the memory of this trip. For a little while we were human beings again, we could look through the windows and see life. We passed villages and towns, one after another, and couldn't believe that the rest of the world had continued to live normally. Every time we were close to a village it crossed my mind that, when the train slowed down a little, I should jump out of the window, because the guards were watching the doors. But how could I leave my mother? What if I were to break my leg or arm when I jumped? We saw the Baltic Sea, we passed through beautiful areas of countryside, summer resorts and villas. Suddenly I realised that we were heading towards Danzig (Gdansk), where there were also camps. We didn't go into Danzig itself but to the nearby camp of Stutthof.

The first sight to meet our eyes was the huge furnace of the crematorium.

Life in Stutthof was much the same as in Auschwitz, but here we had to walk several kilometres a day, under the gaze of the guards and their dogs, to dig trenches. We dug in the rain, snow and freezing temperatures, always poorly dressed and hungry. Somehow I managed to get my mother into the kitchen to peel potatoes, which meant she didn't have to go out to work in the open. The food in Stutthof was similar to that in Auschwitz. The camp commandant's name was Max, at least that's what they called him. He was a sadist who would regularly beat inmates with an enormous whip, before we set off for work, while the food was being handed out, before we went to sleep. He would whip whoever was handy, for no reason at all, whenever it crossed his mind to do so. People became sicker and sicker with typhus, diphtheria and other diseases. Afterwards they would be taken to the crematorium. Here at least we were able to hold furtive conversations with the men, our fellow inmates, whose barracks were next to ours. They would go out to work in the fields and would talk to the local farm workers, sometimes getting some news. They told us which countries had been liberated and where the fighting was still going on. I thought about Yugoslavia, about our people who had won their liberty, but for us the darkest days were just beginning.

But we had to hold on. I kept telling myself, as I stood in a trench half full of water, lashed by the wind and snow of the harsh Polish winter, that I must hold on. Max kept on beating us and those no longer able to work were being taken to the crematorium.

By January, 1945, cannon fire could be heard: the front was moving closer and the camp had to be evacuated without delay. Only a small number of people still remained. We set off, but to where? We heard that the Red Army was advancing from every side! Whether we should wait for them or whether they would shoot us along the way was the only question. Before we left there was a selection. I tried to hide my mother, but they pushed her roughly out of the line. She was weak and old, they said, she could not come with us. I begged, I told them she was very tough, that she could come with us. My mother then weighed about 36 kilograms and could barely stand. All my entreaties were in vain. I knew the fate that awaited her. Then I begged them to let me stay with her. There was a moment's hesitation, but then an SS officer slapped me and pushed me back in the line. I could read the thought

behind his ironic smile: "Why should we let them die together?" I said farewell to my mother. I tried to smile, we told each other that we would be together again soon, knowing full well that we would never see each other again. Everyone had already set off: she stood there, immobile; the other women on whom the death sentence had been passed came to her and held her so that she would not fall. I could no longer watch. I set off, but then I heard my mother's shriek: "Take care! You must stay alive, because someone has to remember all of this!" I turned back again, but all I could see was the tall chimney, belching smoke.

How I managed to endure everything which had happened, and everything which was yet to come will remain my secret, secret even from me. With no supernatural force, a human body could certainly not endure all this. That supernatural force was a strong will and faith in the future. This real Golgotha lasted about six weeks.

For six weeks we walked on snow and ice, across frozen rivers and streams, in the harshest of Polish winters, in torn shoes, with no stockings, wrapped in a thin blanket, and with no food. We walked more than thirty kilometres a day. At night they would put us into deserted barns or stables. Every two or three days, if we were lucky, we would get a potato or a slice of bread from passing rural people who took pity on us. Our guards, the SS men and their dogs, were also short of food. Whenever we chanced upon a dead animal, a horse or anything else, both the people and the dogs would fall on the meat in a frenzy. I couldn't do it. Every day there were less and less of us. People would fall, and anyone who could go no further would be shot on the spot. By the end of the third week only half of us remained.

The SS men were beginning to panic. They realised there was no escape for them. Some of them fled after forcing local peasants to give them civilian clothes. They disguised themselves for fear of the Russians. The dogs became savage and had to be shot.

The peasants told us that March had arrived. Our strength had gone, but we dragged ourselves on. There were now very few of us left, only about sixty female inmates. Just seven fanatical SS men remained. Now we were also travelling by night. We heard cannons nearby, but we knew that they would not hand us over to the Russian army, that instead they would shoot us at the last possible moment. I was feverish, completely exhausted, feeling I couldn't walk even another few kilometres. We passed beside a forest in the night. I told the two girls beside me that I could not go any further, that I had a temperature, I couldn't

see anything, but that I wouldn't give up. I had decided I would try to hide in the forest, if they see me, let them shoot. They other two said they would join me.



Group of new female arrivals in Auschwitz after having their personal data recorded and their camp numbers tattooed on their left arms.

The forest was right beside us. It was dark, but the snow was white and the forest not so dense in the winter. I couldn't run, so I huddled behind the closest bush. The other two made a break for the wood. I heard a shot, and then another one. I turned to look: one of them had been hit. The other lay beside her, as though she too had been hit. The SS men didn't check and they didn't even notice me. In that way, two of us saved ourselves. I never saw her again and I know nothing about what happened to her. The column continued on. I crawled towards the road, hoping the Russians would find me when they arrived. But would they arrive on time? Or would I freeze in the snow, unable to stand up? The last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was cannon fire rocketing around me.

I awoke lying on pillows. I felt as though I was in a cart. Someone was rubbing my feet and hands, trying to pour something into my

mouth. I opened my eyes, but could see nothing. I could only hear someone speaking to me. I tried to make out what he was saying, and then realised he was speaking Russian. Peering harder I managed to recognise the silhouette of a soldier. A Russian soldier! I was saved! I wept, my tears flowing of their own accord. The soldier told me not to cry, that everything would be all right now. I tried to speak but didn't have the strength. I realised they must have found me half-frozen in the early dawn. They immediately saw that I was a camp inmate and thought I was dead, because they had found others shot by the Nazis on the road along their way. When they realised I was breathing, they put me into the cart. I managed to ask them what the date was. March 11, came the answer. My birthday! Again I lost consciousness. When I came around again I had already been in hospital for several days, in Katowice. The Polish Red Cross had taken care of me. I was in a critical condition and lay in the hospital for three months with typhoid fever, hovering between life and death.

I wasn't aware of Victory Day dawning. I didn't know where I was nor even who was lying beside me. I was delirious for a very long time. The utter suffering, the terrible tension, the months of stress, the hunger and especially this acute illness, all contributed to the complete collapse of my whole body. I was listless, unable to be happy about anything. Bit by bit, in my hospital room, I recovered. Every day around me someone would die of typhoid fever or other diseases. But those who recovered would go home.

Home! The word filled me with fear. Would it be possible to find peace after all this? But I had to live. My mother had told me as we parted that someone had to remember all of this. Would I lose heart now, after everything I had endured? Once again, for the final time, I gathered the strength for my recovery.

Silvio MAESTRO

BAREFOOT ON THE GRAVEL



Silvio Maestro was born in Sarajevo on March 20, 1920. His parents, Jakob and Blanka (née Perera) were killed in Auschwitz. They also had a daughter, Ester-Ernica Engel who survived the war, having left in 1941 for Israel, to the Ein Semer kibbutz.

Until 1950, Silvio Maestro worked in the army, then in the Zenica Mine and Metalworks. He also worked near Alipašin Most, near Sarajevo as the director of a wire and nail factory. He then became director of the representative office of RMK Zenica in Belgrade, where he now lives with his wife, Nada.

From 1941 until 1943 I lived in detention on the island of Korčula in Vela Luka. There had formerly been a *hachsharah* there, a Jewish training school for fishermen, where young people prepared for their departure to Palestine. The Tehelet Lavan youth association had had a house there before the war and this had served as the *hachsharah*. Not more than thirty of us young people arrived on Korčula and moved into the house. We immediately handed over everything we owned to the community treasurer, but after two or three months this proved to be unrealistic. Each of us had his own needs and this is why the venture failed at the outset. The Jewish community in Split gave each of us eight Italian lire and we rented a boat. When we got a chance, fifteen of

us fled our captivity on Korčula and joined the Partisans. The Italians took their revenge by shooting a number of villagers. Among them were several Jews, Romano Momak, at least that's what we called him, one of the Kabiljo brothers, Leon Roman and a man whose name I don't remember. Romano Momak, who was unmarried, volunteered to be killed in place of his brother, who had a wife.

It was later we found out that this revenge had been taken because of our escape. Our group included the Jakile brothers, Santo Kabiljo, Salomon Romano and others whose names I no longer remember.

In June, 1943, I was captured in the Fifth Offensive near Kalinovik. I was taken to Sarajevo and then to the Vogošća camp where they put us in the empty factory buildings instead of in a Sarajevo prison. From there I was taken to the Sajmište camp. I changed my surname to Majstor and then to Majstorović. At the time I was 22 years of age.

New groups arriving at Sajmište would be met by the man in charge of what they called internal supervision, Bane, the chief thug, and given twenty or thirty blows on their buttocks. The Germans selected camp inmates to act as their thugs, and they also had their own people. Our group was luckier than most and we were not beaten on arrival. I received a number of beatings, but only two or three blows each time. I remember once failing to respond to the name Majstorović and being beaten for that.

There were other kinds of torture as well. It was particularly bad to be forced to run barefoot on the gravel for three or four hours and then roll in it, left and right. We would run in single file and if anyone fell the thugs would beat them. This always finished with people dying.

They had begun building a Russian pavilion in the camp but this had never been finished and there were only the concrete foundations. The camp inmates were ordered to demolish these and carry the concrete first to one side and then the other.

For the first month we were in quarantine, just walking back and forwards and not doing anything. When the month was up, I managed to be allocated to the hospital. As a nurse I had the privilege of getting a ladle and a half of food instead of one. This privileged status was enjoyed by a group of tradesmen who lived in the circular pavilion which housed the hospital.

The camp administration was German and the headquarters were located right by the entrance. Outside the wire there were Ustashas

everywhere, but they had no influence on what happened inside the camp, it was not within their jurisdiction.

We lived in pavilions, sleeping on planks of wood. The winter was terrible. Working in the hospital I saw more and more people coming every day with frozen fingers and gangrene. We could talk in the pavilions but had no contact with anyone else, it was forbidden to even mention them. One person in each group was made responsible for the group.

I arrived before the Jews from Split who were brought to Sajmište after the capitulation of Italy in 1943. Among them I remember the Morpurgo family. There were also some people from Sarajevo brought in at that time, including Moric Levi and his wife. These inmates remained in the camp for more than a month. The men were separated from the women and they were not allowed to talk to one another. Eventually they were taken to Auschwitz.

At that time, Sajmište was mainly a transit camp. But in 1943 it became different from the way it had been in 1941 and '42. Once I went into a room in the pavilion and saw a huge pile of clothes which had been taken from former inmates.

We weren't allowed outside the wire fence of the camp. I don't know whether the bodies were taken across the ice to the Sava River, but I know that every day a cart arrived and the corpses were loaded into it and taken somewhere. I also had to load the bodies. There were twenty or thirty people dying every day. A large number of people were brought in from the villages around Srem, they would round up half the village and they also brought hostages in. These died in the epidemics of typhus and scarlet fever which raged through the camp. I fell ill with typhoid fever, but recovered after five or six days with a temperature of 41 degrees. I was treated by a doctor, a fellow inmate who was not Jewish, because I worked as a nurse. There were other captured doctors in the camp at the time: Dr Stojanović, Dr Stefanović, and an Italian ophthalmologist. When I arrived there were two Jewish doctors, a married couple with a ten-year-old son. They didn't work in the hospital, instead they were tortured and humiliated terribly, even being put to work cleaning toilets. It was thanks to one of these that I was recommended to Dr Stojanović to work as a nurse. Unfortunately I don't know their names. They were in the camp for more than a month before being taken away somewhere.

There were some other people from Sarajevo I remember. They were Buki Albahari and his beautiful wife Bukica who was taken out of the women's pavilion and brought to the hospital as a patient by one of the doctors. There she fell pregnant to him. I knew this because I worked with this doctor. He was some kind of inventor. He made a treatment called florapin for erysipelas out of bee stings. I'm not sure whether it worked. He tried to abort the woman's pregnancy, but she became infected and died. In the meantime she had recognised me and told the doctor and other people that I was from Sarajevo and that I was Jewish. This was terrible for me: I was afraid that the others would say something but, fortunately, they didn't.

Sajmište was bombed twice in 1944 and a total of about thirty people were killed. I remember the camp commandant being so scared he was shaking. When the bombing began I wanted to take cover in the big boiler in the laundry, but the commandant arrived. What could I do? I opened the boiler door for him and found somewhere else for myself. I couldn't understand this terrible fear. The commandant, Sulzer, was a thug himself but he was terrified.

I remember one Jew from Sarajevo, his name was Mačoro, but he arrived under the name of Duško Kačavenda. He survived the camp and was among those who returned from the Kalinovac unit. When we reached the liberated territory in 1944, everyone in the unit knew him. I was saved when I left the camp with Kačavenda and Vasa Kovačević to go the recruiting board in Zagreb. We were supposed to be sent to the army because, like Kačavenda, I was officially a Catholic. But they released us from duty, saying we were unfit for military service because of physical defects. This was what was written on the discharge forms which determined the direction in which we would be sent.

Each of us was given a slip of paper which we used to reach Mostar. From there our friends sent us on to the Partisan unit in Hercegovina. Vlado Šegrt had just been promoted to general and welcomed us on the first day with a table full of food. There I met Petar Komljenović, a teacher from my high school, who had been a member of the Communist Party from its foundation in 1920.

I never returned to Sajmište after the war ended, although I lived in Belgrade until 1950 and again from 1960. I was also reluctant to visit Jasenovac, where more than thirty members of my family had been killed, although I did go there once.

My parents, Jakob and Blanka, née Perera, were killed in Auschwitz. They had fled Sarajevo, but my mother was captured and taken to Jasenovac. Because the camp was so overcrowded that day, they sent the train back to Sarajevo, where my father paid someone and took my mother out of town. They then moved to Mostar, then to Kupare and then to Rab. In 1943 they fled to the liberated territory in Otočac where they both worked in the headquarters. Leon Albahari's mother, Leonora, was there with my parents. He was with the Partisans at that time and they all escaped to the hills. However my parents and my aunt, who was with them, had left some cases in the town with gold jewellery. They returned to fetch them and were caught by the Germans. They were sent to Auschwitz and never returned.

Nada and Vlado SALZBERGER

THE OSIJEK FLYING SQUAD



Nada Salzberger was born in Našička Breznica on January 14, 1923, to Milka (née Klingenberg) and Josip Grinvald. Her mother Milka and sister Aleksandra (Sanda) were killed in the Holocaust. After the war she worked as a clerk, first in the Karlovac post office and then in Zagreb's First District.

During the time of her husband's career in Lučani and Belgrade she was a housewife.

Vlado Salzberger was born in Zagreb on January 25, 1922, to Hermina (née Asher) and Herman Salzberger. His mother, father and sister Mirjam (Mirica) died in the Holocaust. After the war he worked as an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army, before studying in Zagreb. He then worked as an engineer in the Milan Blagojević company in Lučani. He was subsequently assistant director of Milan Blagojević and Hemko in Belgrade.

They have two sons, Fedor (Feda) and Branko, four grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

There was a flying squad operating within the Jewish religious community in Osijek between October or November, 1941, and May, 1942. After that there were no longer enough permanent team members

in Osijek and the work of the community itself had changed. It was no longer possible to work in the Đakovo camp and the flying squad no longer existed. The building site at the Tenje settlement then became extremely important, as did the job of moving the Osijek Jews there. Soon after that, the Jews were deported from the settlement to German concentration camps in occupied Poland.

While the flying squad was in operation, the Jews in Osijek and the surrounding areas were living in extraordinary circumstances. Several groups of men from Osijek and the majority of those from the surrounding areas had been dispatched to the camps, although nobody knew then that they were death camps. Most of Osijek's Jewish residents, and especially the women from the surrounding area, stayed there for about nine months after the first groups were dispatched with no new deportations. Of course their circumstances had completely changed. Each apartment now housed several families and Ustasha agents had installed themselves in every shop and every company. Independent professionals and tradesmen were mostly barred from working and Jews were forbidden from moving around without wearing identifying symbols. Then a curfew was imposed. There was an ever-present feeling of some impending catastrophe, although this was never actually formulated. Together with all the new day-to-day problems, we thought constantly about those who had been abducted: family members, cousins, people we knew and Jews in general. We stayed in touch with some of them through the permitted forms of mail, postcards and parcels. There was constant harassment in the streets, especially by Germans. Then the rumours began to spread about the killing of Serbs and about the victories and operations of the Partisans. Although these events were happening far away, we heard about them from the announcements of courts martial and in some areas from the illegal Partisan, Communist Youth and Party news sources, all of which could be gleaned from the Ustasha's own newspapers.

The long gap between those first convoys and the mass deportations of the Osijek Jews may be explained by the ethnic make-up of Osijek. Apart from a certain proportion of Serbs and Jews, the town was largely a German-Croat mix. Osijek was the centre of Croatia's German ethnic community. Although Croats were in the majority, they regarded the activities of the Germans gathered in the *Kulturbund* as a serious provocation. The Croats wanted to decide when the mass transfer of the Jews to camps would begin. However this would have been seen by the

Germans as an expression of independence by the Croats in resisting the German plan to deport them as soon as possible. In the event, a new and decisive factor emerged, probably by the end of 1941, when the Jewish community in Osijek and Jews from the surrounding area agreed to take responsibility for financing the Đakovo camp. It should be noted here that the Đakovo camp, because of this, was treated much less harshly and that this continued until the Usthas took over the camp in April, 1942.



Vlado and Nada Salzberger in Osijek, 1941-42.

The leaders of the Jewish religious community were completely different from those in peacetime. Earlier there had been a more or less Zionist management, but now the people had changed completely. We didn't have any kind of list of community members, but in our day-to-day contacts we saw who was there. Nor did we know anything about the Croatian Ustasha authorities' criteria for approving the make-up of the Municipal Council. No one in the council was under any illusion that their position would make their fate any easier, although at this time we were not aware of the kind of catastrophe that lay ahead. We remember that some of the people involved were the chairman, Dr Miroslav Friedman, who was a lawyer, another lawyer, Dr Slavko Klajn, timber expert Vlado Grinbaum, industrialist Andrija Rip, mill proprietor Julio Sternberg, cinema owner Hari Vajngruber, the pharmacist Hecht, the mill boss Mautner and Viktor Bek. There was no one in

the community who wasn't active, or at least we don't remember anyone. Together with the community members, the husband of a teacher from the former Jewish primary school, Albin Levi, was always there, acting as a kind of caretaker for the community premises.

Except for Vlado Grinbaum, whose wife was Catholic, and Albin Levi who escaped death with his wife and now lives in Jerusalem, all of these community members were sent to Tenje and then on to death camps. Some of them, like Andrija Bandi Rip, as far as can be seen from his letters from Tenje, had already been dreadfully mistreated during their short stay there.

At first the flying squad was not as highly organised as it became later on. In the beginning, we would go to the community centre and do whatever jobs, mainly outdoor physical work, were needed. As problems evolved and the workload grew, there were a number of disagreements between some members of the Community Council and the young people who felt that their elders were not giving them enough respect. So about the middle of November 1941, there was an open discussion between the young people and the council members. This resulted in the team being formalised as an organisation and from then on relations with all the members of the community were very solid and efficient.

The first permanent make-up of the flying squad was small, consisting of high school graduates Ivo Šoten, Vlado Salzberger and Riko Frei, locksmith Zvonko (Levi) Šmit, carpentry apprentice Zvonko Dražiger, Franjo Weiss and Muki Haberfield. Herman Haberfield joined a little later. There wasn't any kind of pre-war plan in this lineup. They were young people who met more or less frequently, brought together by their day-to-day assignments. I don't remember any conflicts. Even when more members joined the team because there was so much work to do there were no problems, although some of them were older than the others. It should be mentioned that the flying squad was given its assignments and then would distribute them among the members to carry them out. We helped with the increasingly frequent moving of Jews into shared apartments, with setting up a Jewish soup kitchen, providing supplies for the camps, collecting assistance to be sent to the inmates of the Jasenovac camp and many other tasks.

In the middle of December, 1941, we began preparing to speed up the reception of female inmates into the Đakovo camp. When this began, one of the flying squad's most important jobs was to renovate

the mill of the Đakovo diocese which had been earmarked for accommodating Jewish women and children from Bosnia. It was our job to make it suitable for accommodation. The female inmates arrived while we were still working and we finished the renovation with the help of the younger ones. This was a big job which involved building beds on every floor of the mill, fencing in one part of the ground floor, building separate premises for the administration and an office, as well as hygiene facilities and outdoor latrines.



Members of the flying squad which operated in the Jewish Community in Osijek from November, 1941, to May, 1942.

The flying squad paid special attention to welcoming that first group of women and children, and others after them. While the cooks prepared hot drinks and food, the team members would wait for the women as they arrived by train and take them to their accommodation. Many of them were elderly and literally had to be carried to their beds.

Most of the team members were young people of about nineteen or twenty. They treated the women arriving from Sarajevo, Olovo, Travnik, Žepče and other places as though they were their own mothers, sisters and grandmothers. The behaviour of the small children who, although they were tired and hungry were innocently playful and naughty, made a huge impression on us. All of this seemed to give us renewed strength.

Then followed a period of heavy work both at Đakovo and in the community centre in Osijek. At the camp we worked on improving the living conditions and organising accommodation, on helping with setting up for a basic medical service, on establishing a kindergarten and such things. In Osijek we were now also working on collecting assistance for Đakovo. A large number of children were transferred from the camp to Jewish families in Osijek and the surrounding districts, including Našice, Vinkovci and Donji Miholjac. Juliška Kraus was particularly involved in this because the children often needed to be taken to the place they would live.

It was soon obvious that the flying squad, now also known as the Đakovo team, would have to be expanded. Dragutin (Hajim) Kon, Eli Goldštajn, Švarc (Rojbek), Zdenko Volf, Janoš Kon and Nada (Rahel) Grinvald joined the team. A large number of girls, working independently of the flying squad, helped out with collecting clothing. These included Ljerka Adler, Mina Fišer, Melanka Inzelt, Bek, and a girl from the Đakovo camp called Lola Atijas. From the work at Đakovo we also remember Zlatko Vamošer, Vlada Kraus, Branko Polak and Branko Mautner, who helped out when it was most needed.

The Đakovo camp deserves a separate story for itself, but we would like to emphasise the commitment of Lev Kister to a number of activities. Within the Jewish camp administration, together with the manager, Vlada Grinbaum, special mention should be given to Ladislav (Eli) Grinbaum, Dr Ladislav Lederer and Dragutin Glasner, who ran the camp administration. There were also a number of people we didn't know from the surrounding Jewish communities who helped with supplies for the camp: Samuel Grinvald from Vinkovci, and another man from Vinkovci by the name of Špiler who, whether or not he deserved it, was rumoured to be a police informer.

As noted above, the arrival of the female camp inmates, those helpless, elderly and middle-aged women bowed with concern for their missing sons and husbands, the young mothers with children and young

girls, provided an emotional spur for the team to commit themselves fully. Because of this, a strong mutual respect sprang up between the women and the young members of the team. There was a group of girls who played a significant role among the inmates. They had previously been in the progressive Sarajevo Matatja group and became the soul of some of the camp activities. This mutual respect was perhaps best expressed in the celebrations prepared jointly in the camp itself for the anniversary of the March 27 demonstration.

The question arises of how it was, given this highly aware group of young women in the camp, the strong connections with the outside and the activities of the flying squad, that nobody fled the camp. From our personal experience we know that the people from our circle who worked with the underground resistance were not actively recruited for the Partisans. The special treatment received by this camp and the extraordinary ignorance about the real nature of other camps, together with the fact that all the younger women were together with older ones in the camp also contributed to them not wanting to jeopardise the whole camp, which an escape would have done.

The typhus epidemic caused by the rapid spread of lice through the camp came as a serious blow and a challenge for both inmates and those who worked with the camp. Such things were almost inevitable in a camp overcrowded with inmates from various places in Bosnia, along with the arrival of women from the Stara Gradiška camp who were probably already infected. We well remember Dr Laci Lederer's valiant leadership of the hygiene team, but even he finally had to confront the inevitable epidemic. The nucleus of the flying squad took part in the disinfection operation, together with a number of older people from the camp administration, the municipality and some hygiene professionals from Đakovo. Those taking part risked catching typhus from their unavoidable exposure to lice during their contacts with the patients. All of our work was voluntary, but particular emphasis was laid on this for this operation, although not one of us young people refused this duty when asked.

The vast ground floor space was set up to accommodate the infected and those who had developed symptoms. There was no time to build bunks; instead, beds were set up with mattresses on the floor. The patients had to be moved from everywhere in the mill, from all the floors. The majority of the women were very elderly and most were not capable of taking even a single step from their beds in remote parts of

the building. Ivo Šoten, who was in charge of the transfers was a real sight, carrying them in his arms and on his back down the stairs to their new accommodation. The lice crawled onto him but, tirelessly, without halting, he continued. He had a kind word for each of the elderly women. He was full of energy when it was needed and could always coax a smile from the distressed and frightened women. An older pharmacist, Heht, was given the job of scalding clothing and other articles to disinfect them. This middle-aged man devoted himself to running for each new pile of louse-ridden clothes, always being careful to keep the fire burning under his cauldron, battling to put as much of this clothing as possible through the disinfection process. He was certainly aware of the danger these clothes presented to him but, zealously, he kept going, not letting this threat hinder his selfless work.

At the beginning of April, 1942, the idea came up among the flying squad people of somehow recording events in the camp. The plan was to keep the documentation, or perhaps to send it to the International Red Cross, or make it available when the Ustashas were put on trial, as no one doubted they eventually would be. The idea of taking photographs was also agreed on, so Vlado Salzberger took his camera back from the person who was looking after it for him. Everyone knew that Jews were not permitted to have cameras. The camera was smuggled into the camp with the knowledge of Vlado Grinbaum, and Salzberger spent several days busily taking photographs. Secrecy dictated that only a small number of the inmates should know about this, most of them young women from the Matatja group. They frequently formed a human screen in order to shield the photographer so that the most typical features of the camp could be captured: the overcrowded accommodation, the unhygienic conditions, the inadequate number of latrines (no permission had been given for extra latrines) and so on. In the evening, the camera was kept in the camp office, accessible only to the volunteers and inmates who worked for the administration. It remained in the camp until the team's last day there, the day before the Ustasha suddenly invaded.

We learnt later about the fate of the camera. When the Ustashas made one of their first inspections of the camp, they took Dr Čeleda, a physician from Đakovo. When they visited the camp office, one of the younger inmates surreptitiously pushed the camera into his hands, because she trusted him, and he took it out of the camp. An attempt to

find the film from the camera after the war came to nothing after it was reported that Dr Čeleda had been killed.

The flying squad's last day in Đakovo was April 16, 1942. The team set off for the camp as usual, taking the usual precaution of sending two members ahead to check the situation. They found Ustasha guards and machine guns positioned at the camp entrance instead of police. This was the end of the flying squad's activities in the Đakovo camp, but they continued operating in the Jewish community in Osijek. The team was deeply disturbed, not only by the disastrous arrival of the Ustashas at the Đakovo camp (and the consequences of this were still not known with any certainty), but by the frequent deportations and summonses to forced labour, especially in the Tenje settlement.

Nada and I had to leave Osijek suddenly on May 11, 1942. We had managed, with my father's help, to buy travel passes illegally from a local government clerk in Našice. However, because we became involved in the activities of the flying squad, and given that we both had large families who had no possibility of fleeing, the passes lay unused until May 10.

That day we were returning together from forced labour in the Tenje settlement. We were in a group with Kalman Kon (who after the war was known as Kalman Vajs) and another three or four young people. In the ensuing incident, which has been described elsewhere, in front of a crowd of people in the street and others watching through their windows, Kalman physically fended off a group of German *Hitlerjugend* and was subsequently arrested. He attempted to escape but was captured again, then tortured and beaten in the command building of the Volksdeutscher Einsatzstaffel. That same evening I learnt that the Ustashas had been at the Jewish soup kitchen investigating the incident and had threatened to use their weapons, insisting that there had been a girl in the group with Kalman. They got Nada's name, so later in the evening I went to fetch her and took her to some people we knew well. The next day, thanks to the skilful driving of the taxi driver Bolvari, we managed to reach Našice where my parents and sister lived and where our travel passes were valid. Ten days later we left Našice and, after a dramatic journey, reached Mostar.

We stayed in Mostar for about a month, looking in vain for work and living on assistance given by the Jewish community. While we were there we heard that my parents and my sister, together with everyone else from Našice, had been sent to Jasenovac. At the end of June we

began hearing more and more alarming news about the arrival of Jure Francetić's Black Legion of Ustasas, so we left Mostar. Our travel passes were valid for Crikvenica, and we arrived at Omiš by ship from Metković. In Mostar, the Italian military headquarters had added a rider in our passes forbidding us to go to Split because it had been annexed by Italy. Omiš was the last port before Split.

We stayed in Omiš from the beginning of July to the beginning of December 1942. Until the beginning of October we were free, under the protection of the Italian authorities. But in October, together with the other Jews in Omiš (there were only six of us), we were imprisoned in a building under an Italian army guard. It was there in Omiš that we received our last letters from Nada's mother and sister who told us about the deportation of the Osijek Jews to the camps. This was the last we heard of Nada's mother and sister and the rest of her large family.

At the beginning of December we were transferred to Sumartin, on the island of Brač, where a camp for about 150 people had been set up in an unfinished hotel. We were accommodated in rooms with furniture made of boxes and dressed in clothes taken from locals. There we spent about six months of our life in the camps. The kapo there was Franjo Špicer who, in reality, was the writer Erwin Schinko. He had been selected by the camp inmates and was very popular, especially among the younger inmates, for his optimism.

In about the middle of May, 1943, we were moved from Sumartin to the island of Rab, along with the inmates of other camps in places held by the Italians. A large camp for Jews was established there in which Franjo Špicer was again chosen as kapo.

When Italy capitulated, a Jewish Rab Battalion was founded, as the logical outcome of the lively underground activity in this camp.



IV

UNDER ITALIAN OCCUPATION



Josef ITAI-INDIG

THE FLIGHT OF THE CHILDREN*

*From the history of Jewish refugee children
during World War II*

Josef Indig lived in Zagreb until 1941. He was an active member of the left wing youth Zionist organisation Hashomer Hatzair. The transfer of orphaned children from occupied Europe through Yugoslavia to Palestine is an accomplishment that should never be forgotten. Josef changed his surname to Itai after emigrating to Israel. There he joined the Gat Kibbutz where he lived until the end of his life.

More than twenty years have passed since then. Dozens of Jewish children would come to us because we offered peace and tranquillity. They sought salvation and freedom with us, little knowing that our peace and tranquillity heaved with unrest and anxiety. So much time has passed since that autumn of 1940 when Recha Freier, the founder of the Youth Aliya and the force behind the rescue of Jewish children from Germany, entrusted me with caring for these children until they managed to set off for Palestine. I spent time with the children for almost five years, taking them across three borders, taking as much care as was possible in the years between 1941 and 1945. All the terrible scenes which could have happened and which did happen around us still live within us.

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*

I waited in a Zagreb suburb for the first group of children, having been informed of their arrival. The police were not supposed to notice them, because they were without papers. They crossed the Yugoslav border illegally, they were going to live in Zagreb illegally and our Jewish people were waiting with all the warmth of solidarity to accommodate them. I peered into the darkness, seeing nothing, only a vague mass drawn in strange colours, neither man nor tree. Could this perhaps be the beloved children, the rescued Jewish children we were waiting for?

I had an idea. "Shalom!" I said. Immediately the mass broke apart, flying in various directions as though struck by the spark of life: younger and older children gathered around me with great confidence, firing questions at us. Two of them remain in my memory:

"Haver, is there a Minyan in Zagreb, so that I can say Kaddish for my father?"

"Haver, is it true that they play football in Zagreb? Are we allowed to play too?"

*

And so they began arriving.

They came both in organised groups and individually, as the fate of the Jews brought them to us under the boots of Fascist Europe.

One day we had been told to expect the arrival of a group of sixteen girls from Berlin. These were the daughters of Polish Jews and there was no one to take care of them, so Recha Freier took them under her wing. We'd not been given any information by telephone and Rosa Hacker's office was heavy with concern. After we had waited the whole day an ominous message arrived: the Yugoslav police had caught the children as they trudged through the snow across the border north of Maribor. Our prisoners were sitting in Maribor and the authorities were planning to return them to Hitler's Austria.

In Maribor an odd situation awaited me. Everyone in the town knew about these strange small prisoners who were cooped up in a little Maribor hotel, drying out their clothes and awaiting their fate. The Ban headquarters gave orders for them to be returned, but Maribor wouldn't allow it. The people of Maribor gave their oath that these children would be saved and the newspapers in Ljubljana did their part.

They were accepted by a camp in Krško.

*

March 27, 1941, arrived. After difficult negotiations and pleading, this final group received permits from the British government to enter Palestine. I escorted them from Zagreb, uncertain whether I would be able to get them to Belgrade, because the authorities in Zagreb were silent that day.

Several dozen Jewish children got off the train in Belgrade. Nobody was waiting for us. I set off with my little mob through the night of March 27, through Belgrade, the calm after the storm. After we had been walking through the streets for several minutes, we came across a tank with an officer standing in front of it.

“What’s this?” he asked in astonishment.

“They’re Jewish orphans from Germany. I’m taking them to the Association of Jewish Communities.”

The young officer was outraged. He began to spit out disconnected questions:

“Well, what can I do... They’re really from Germany... Damn Hitler... Shall I escort you... You want a tank... Cannons?”

We found peace again in front of the Association’s office. There was no one to open the door for us. The caretaker didn’t dare. And then a general came along and banged on the door with his sword, cursing all the saints in heaven. “Open the door or I’ll...”

The next day the children set off from the crowded Belgrade railway station accompanied by Šime Špicer, a good and devoted man who happily watched as they finally managed to scramble into the wagon.

*

When I returned to Zagreb a day or two later, I found the remaining sixty children staring blankly at me.

“Why didn’t you go with them?” they asked in surprise: “We’re used to being left behind.”

I was to hear the same question again and again. These dear, tormented faces, used to not trusting people because so many of them were beasts, because they had taken away their fathers and mothers. Their view of the world was wearied by their ongoing struggle for mere survival. It would be a long time before they would be able to trust anyone, to believe in hope and confidence and people helping one another.

There were sixty children without papers in Zagreb when the Nazi army overran the city. The streets were full of Ustasha scum. Berta was already screaming:

“We’ll never escape from them!”

After a few days we managed to put them up in the homes of two scientists, houses which were owned by the Jewish Community. And so we began to search for an escape route.

“Don’t give us the yellow arm band,” said Arje, “You know that I’m proud to be Jewish, but we’ve already had some nasty experiences with these Nazi scum. The point of all that is to make an accurate list then, when everything is properly organised, they’ll grab you. Don’t give us the yellow band.” We took his advice, it was the right thing to do. It allowed us to save them more quickly and easily than would otherwise have been possible.

I was soon on my way to Ljubljana to look for a solution. A month later I returned with a photograph of the old Habsburg castle of Lesno Brdo, above the Horjul valley.

Again the children looked at me in wonder.

“You’ve come back? We were sure that you must have saved yourself and forgotten about us.”

A few days later we crossed the Italian border.

I was sure the children would feel relieved. We were saved now, a new chapter was beginning and our hope was growing. We could build our own strange and random community, a community of Jewish children who have fled one country after another, never knowing when they will ever return to their own.

I was happy that these tormented children would now see the beauty of Slovenia. We climbed towards Lesno Brdo, up the winding mountain paths surrounded by beautiful pine forests. On one side was the lovely Horjul valley, framed by the magnificent black hills, while beside us, below Lesno Brdo, lay a small, blue lake. I felt sure the children would recover in the beauty of this region.

“What’s beautiful about this!”

“So what if it’s beautiful!”

“Hitler will come and find us here, as well!”

*

After several months, when we had our lives well organised, when Boris, a professor at the Berlin Music Academy who had been a student

of Glazunov, played to the children in the gloomy evenings of the mountain twilight, the first news about the Partisans from the Vrhnika area reached us. We had a great celebration when they finally came to us to rest and dress their wounds. Someone from the Palestine Syndicate would send us huge quantities of medicines from Switzerland, which would usually be marked for "Our Partisans". It was enough for me to send him a postcard:

"You should send me a large amount of medicine because my child (the red-headed one) is sick".

He would understand that the Partisans needed medicines.

It was at about this time that our beloved Dr Licht came to us. We received information that Licht would be released from Graz and would come to Ljubljana. We were excited, of course, because we wanted Dr Licht to rest with us, among the beauties of nature. I collected him when he arrived and was shocked to see the state of our Dr Licht who had taught several generations of Jewish workers in Yugoslavia. We thought that he would soon go somewhere inland, where he could wait in peace for the end, the inevitable victory. But Dr Licht preferred to stay with the children and he gave them many lectures, filling their souls with the spiritual treasure of the civilised belief in humanism and heroic progress, the values we so much treasured in him. At that time his progressive spirit was drawing closer and closer to the most progressive forces, so our meetings with him by our little lake were very moving.

*

We moved freely along the hills of the Vrhnika area. The rural folk would help us find food for the children because they were starving. There were times when we would cook stinging nettles, raspberries, anything we could find in the forest. It was hard listening to the sighs of the sixteen-year-olds in the evening.

"If only I could have something tasty to chew on, a nice piece of meat, or..."

"Stop it, or I'll..."

When the great offensive began in July, 1942, the Italians became extremely nervous and suddenly ordered us to evacuate immediately. We were hesitant that night about where to go. All the forest roads were barricaded by the Partisans, with great tree trunks blocking the way for all vehicles. The Partisan commander, Josip Černi, ordered the locals to

drive the children and their belongings at midnight to Drenova Griča, our railway station. I don't know how we could have got all our things to the station had it not been for him.

*

We arrived in Modena. The Jews there knew nothing about us and were not prepared. We waited in the old Modena church, where the celebrated Leon de Modena used to study and work. Friedmann, the kind and elderly president of the Modena municipality, did all he could to accommodate us. After a long wait the children, numb to their fate, went to the village of Nonantola.

There was an empty summer villa waiting for us. Its festive renaissance style was obviously at odds with the gloomy days of Fascist rule we were living through, but the cordial welcome from the local people immediately heartened us. Dr Moreali, the village physician, immediately came to see us. He was an old fighter against the Fascists and had for years rejected all their attempts to break him, to force him to join Mussolini's party of disintegration. Throughout our entire stay, Moreali was our comfort, he was our moral support as were huge numbers of the workers and peasants of Nonantola who showed us solidarity at every step.

It was with great difficulty that Dr Licht parted from the children. He stayed to rest in this ancient village which dated from the time of the Roman legions, which took care of the bones of the first popes, relics from the Frankish epoch. Its Roman church and city walls made the village a museum of history. The people of Nonantola even claim that Dante once lived there.

Our Nonantola people! The first day they heard we were cooking rice in milk and adding sugar, the townspeople gathered, making the sign of the cross, watching us in wonder and pity before, slowly, beginning to produce bottles of oil from their aprons.

They thought this was the least they could do, given their deep conviction that life was miserable indeed when there was nothing left to cook but rice. "That's no life at all," they would say.

Nonantola was largely anti-Fascist, a position it demonstrated a thousand times.

Life began to be organised once more. One kind young Italian Jew came to help us with our daily work. Soon our older youngsters began to dream about doing productive work. They began helping the peasants.

Siegfried worked constantly with one of the farmers and there became fond of agriculture. Our life was somewhat restricted by various government limitations, such as a ban on travelling without permission. The local Jews were very rigorous about these, fearing the consequences if they were breached. During the first days our Italian “boss” even asked us to get his permission each time we left the house. This obviously didn’t do anything for the already problematic psychological state of the children, which was further exacerbated by the curious request that they offer prayers to God. Whatever small streak of religious devotion some of them had rapidly evaporated after these demands.

Our group of children, fleeing from their fate, were struggling for life itself. They dreamed of one day arriving in Eretz. The group was a symbol of Italian Jews. Because of this a wonderful, idyllic link was forged with the Jewish youth of Florence who would come to visit us, cementing personal friendships and, through us, nourishing themselves with the solidarity of the Jewish destiny.

*

There was a sudden increase in the size of our group with an influx of Yugoslav Jewish children from Split. About thirty children from Sarajevo and Osijek who found themselves in Split in 1942 joined the group. Our Villa Ema now housed about a hundred children and adults. A special office of Delasem, the Italian group which assisted immigrants, was organised in the house to provide material assistance to Jewish refugees. There the older boys did productive and useful work for the Jewish community. Through Delasem I would find the addresses of our people, our comrades from the movement and older public workers to whom I could send the assistance from Palestine which was arriving through Istanbul and Geneva.

*

Mussolini fell! The people of Nonantola poured into the streets in celebration, finally venting their many years of pent-up rage at the local Fascists. Dr Moreali rushed to us with the good news he had been awaiting eagerly for many years. This opened new horizons for us, making our plans for Aliya suddenly realistic. Our dreams were about to come true; my vow to Recha Freier to deliver the children to Palestine became achievable; even the sky was more beautiful.

And then, on September 8, 1943, the Nazis invaded Italy. A unit of SS troops set themselves up in the school across from the villa.

Poor Berta! She could not endure all of this. In Lesno Brdo the ancient walls had echoed with the sobbing of the children when mail was returned from Poland with address unknown written on it. The children knew these returned letters were death notices and their cries rang from the peak of Lesno Brdo along the beautiful Horjul valley. Even back then Berta had watched the valley with excitement: she would spend hours there and nobody could rouse her. They were black days when the post office, that punctual German post office, would day after day bring the news of their parents' death to our tormented children. Berta fell into a state of distress, her mind no longer able to comprehend the reality of this diseased world.

Now I became frightened. Would Berta and the other children give up? Many of these dear little ones would come to me in the morning, grimly boasting: "You see, we were right, they're chasing us wherever we go, they're at our heels!"

That night we told the older children to stay with our good farm folk. I went to see my friends from the ancient and peaceful monastery of Nonantola to ask them to take our children in so that they could be saved. Old Monsignor Pelati stood on the doorstep solemnly making the sign of the cross: "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit".

We would get ammunition shells from the Italian police, who were opposed to the Fascists, and carry them to the monastery. Don Beccari would take them, put them in a basket and carry them on his bicycle to the Italian Partisans in the mountains.

Within the monastery walls, during the gloomy nights, Don Beccari, Don Rossi and I would discuss Marxism, Zionism, Hitler's imminent defeat and our hopes and perils. In the meantime, together with Dr Moreali and our friends from Modena, Don Beccari made a plan to save us. A tradesman made a new seal for the town of Larina in southern Italy and Moreali was appointed mayor of the town. In this way we all acquired genuine Italian identity cards.

We had heard that the annihilation of the Jewish population was to begin in Italy as well in a day or two. Don Beccari's plan was for me to take the children, dressed in priest's robes, to the south and past the allied front line with the assistance of his friends. This plan did not succeed so I went to the Swiss border in an attempt to get 120,000 lire from

our friends in Switzerland, the amount we needed to get into Swiss territory. Salvation had a cash price: they wanted a thousand lire for the life of each child.

It was the hardest day of my life. I waited for a day in Como. I had turned to a stranger for help and now I was waiting for him to return from Switzerland with a message for me. What if he was a German? And what if he doesn't come back?

The next day he returned with the money, excitedly trying to convince me that everything would be all right. He also gave me a few small pieces of Swiss cheese for the children.

*

Back in Nonantola the children again asked me "You've really come back? We thought you'd run away by yourself." Children, children why can't you believe that there are still some people in this world, even in this cursed year of 1943, who love you and care about you!

We set off on our trip. Somewhere before Milan there was an SS checkpoint. This was terrible because we were also hiding an Italian Partisan under the seat, but we got through! We slept in the public toilet in front of the Milan railway station. We walked for hours heading towards the border and the children were already exhausted. By the time we reached the fast-flowing Trezina, even the older ones had begun to tire. Berta wanted to let the water take her away and our cook was begging for death to come.

It was the tragic night of Yom Hakippurim, 1943. The Swiss acted as if they knew nothing. They asked why we had escaped, had we killed someone or stolen something? They wanted to send us back to live nice and peacefully, because the Germans certainly wouldn't do us any harm. After three days of torment as we waited for a decision, the camp captain gave us a long speech about the difficult position Switzerland was in. By now our strength was exhausted. When he finally told us that the federal government had decided to let us stay, my strength failed altogether and I fell into Laci's arms.

*

Switzerland, 1943-45. The Aliya youth hostel Beaux les Bains near Montreux. A normal life with clear objectives. We were waiting for the end of the war to finally achieve our goals. New children arrived and

we prepared for the next step towards our goal. And finally it came, that day at the end of June, 1945, when we set off through France and Spain, to board a boat for Palestine, where we arrived as the first group of new immigrants after the war.

Recha Freier was waiting for us. And Shalom Finci, a Palestinian and British Army paratrooper, was waiting for me.

Our relatives and friends were waiting for us, a new life was waiting for us.

Berta's brother was waiting for her, but there was no longer any joy for her, only a slight and distant smile, one which held the pain of lost parents, lost years, wounds that can not be healed.

We made our farewells to one another, each going his own way.

In 1955 we met again in Gat, as close to one another as we had always been, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of our arrival in Israel.

Dr Jakob "Jakica" ALTARAS

CROSSING THE ADRIATIC WITH THE CHILDREN



Jakob "Jakica" Altaras was born in Split on October 12, 1918, to Regina (née Altaras) and Leon Altaras. He had five brothers: Izrael-Buki, Menta, Avram, Viktor-Haim and Silvije. His father, Leon, perished in Auschwitz and his physician brother Silvije was killed serving with the Partisans in 1945.

He began working as a resident in radiology at Zagreb University in 1953. From 1967 until the present he has been a professor at the University of Giessen in Germany. He was a member of the presidency of the Zagreb Jewish community and also worked in the Yugoslav Aliya organisation during the post-war years.

In 1978 he founded the Giessen Jewish Community, of which he has been president ever since. In 1955 he initiated and organised the building of a synagogue and a Jewish Centre in Giessen, together with his architect wife, Dr Thea Altaras (née Furman), who designed both.

He is the recipient of many Yugoslav decorations and a grove has been planted in the Herzl Wood in Israel in his honour. He is also a recipient of the German Federal Medal of Merit, First Class.

He has two daughters, Professor Silvija Altaras, who lives in Zagreb, and Berlin actress Adriana Altaras, and three grandchildren.

The beginning of the war, in April 1941, heralded the arrival of Jewish refugees in Split. After passing my final exams in Zagreb I fled

to my hometown, without waiting for my diploma to be presented. Dalmatia and Split were immediately occupied by the Italians, so we Split natives automatically became *cittadini italiani per anessione*, and thus were not singled out as Jews. This worked to our advantage and was crucial to the work of our small community in saving Jews fleeing Bosnia, Croatia and even Serbia and other parts of Yugoslavia, to seek refuge in Split. I think that about three thousand Jews passed through Split during the war, found refuge there and, from Split, many went further abroad in the world via Italy. Unfortunately, however, a great number were recognised in trains on their way to Split and taken away to death camps, never to return.

With the refugees came information about the crimes committed by the Ustasas in Bosnia and Croatia which we passed on throughout the world. The Split Jewish Community, on December 12, 1941, appealed for help in a plea to the Bishop of Split, Dr Klement Bonifacije, giving details of the sufferings of Jews in various places in Croatia and Bosnia. As far as I know, no reply was ever received to this appeal.

When the Italians arrived in Split, I managed to travel to Bologna, the city where I studied, planning to stay there until the end of the war. However I returned in less than three weeks at the invitation of the engineer, Morpurgo, the president of the Jewish Community, to help them with their work. My knowledge of Italian was of great importance in contact with the Italians; almost every day I would go to the police station to intervene and secure the release of imprisoned newcomers who very often arrived under false names with fake permits. We usually sought residence permits in Split for them. As the number of these people increased, our ability to help them was more and more modest. The Jewish Community in Split set up an Emigration Committee. As well as the people from Split, a number of refugees also worked with this,



Dr Thea Altaras, wife of Dr Jakica.

including Iso Herman, Jozef Levi, Mavro Sesler, David Alkalaj and Dr Braco Poljokan.

The Emigration Committee had a vast mandate: it successfully resolved many social issues and supported refugees, taking into consideration their economic status. We appealed for financial assistance to Delasem, the Italian humanitarian organisation which was connected to JOINT in the West. There were three prominent people in this organisation, the lawyers Valobra, Lucati and Bernardo Groser. I travelled to the headquarters in Geneva at least once a month to collect money.

I also remember the president of the Jewish Communities in Rome, and Sorani, the secretary. They were always ready to see me and listen to my reports on the situation of Jews in Croatia and Split and on many occasions they intervened on behalf of individuals. Anyone among the Jewish refugees in Split who had a Yugoslav passport could get a visa for any foreign country in the Vatican. They only needed to send their passport to the Vatican. This “only” was a matter of illegally smuggling their passports from Split to the Vatican, which was one of my regular tasks. I used to courier bags full of passports to the Vatican and hand them over. Later, on the basis of the visas in their passports, the Questura in Split would issue them permits for the trip to Rome, which was their salvation. The Emigration Committee raised money from the wealthy members of the community for these services and used it to support the poorer emigrants.

One of the most spectacular achievements was the rescue of about forty children who we managed to move from Split to Italy. Here is what the late Dača Alkalaj, a former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, wrote in a column entitled “With Us and Around Us” in the Bulletin of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in Israel, no. 5/7 1972.

“In January this year our friend Dr Jakica Altaras, a native of Split and a professor at the University of Giessen in Germany, was in Israel. He told me how he took about forty of our children to Italy in March, 1943, when it was feared that the situation in Split might deteriorate.

“As a representative of the Jewish Community in Split, he was in touch with Delasem. He discovered that in Nonantola there was a group of about fifty children from Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic who had arrived through Yugoslavia. It was agreed that a number of the children were to be moved to Nonantola from Split.

“When he returned to Split, Jakica asked the Jewish Community to organise the registration of the children. It was not easy to convince the parents to be separated from their children for the children’s sake. Nevertheless, forty of them applied. It proved difficult to obtain permission from the Italian occupation authorities to transfer such a large number of children to Italy as Jakica was the only one who had a passport. But luck was on his side and, for a bar of fine soap, he managed to acquire the necessary piece of paper from the police sergeant who held the Questura seal. There it was written that Jakica was authorised to escort the forty children to Italy, without giving any of their names. Jakica and the children arrived safely in Nonantola, where Dr Aleksandar Licht and his wife Erna were waiting, as were Joško Itai-Indig and Ruben Štajn with his wife, Dr Helena. They had been looking after the children who had been brought from Yugoslavia. The group from Split brought the total number of children to about a hundred.

“New concerns arose for the children and their guardians after the capitulation in 1943. All the children were saved, thanks to a priest and a doctor from Nonantola. While I was preparing material for these two righteous Italians in Yad Vashem, I had no idea that our own Jakica Altaras had earned such great merit in getting the children from Split to Italy.”

There is an anecdote about the spectacular transfer of the children from Split to Nonantola on April 14, 1943, which I am happy to retell.

The group arrived safely in Nonantola by ship, via Zadar, Rijeka and Trieste. I kept the children close to me as I didn’t want them to strike up a conversation with other passengers on the ship, because there were a large number of Black Shirts on board. So all the way from Split to Trieste we sang, over and over again “Ćiribilibela, Mare moja, odoh u marine.” (Chiri-billi bella, O my Mare, I’m off to join the sailors.)

When the Germans arrived in Nonantola and our children began to flee (their salvation partly thanks to them being hidden in the monastery), they tried on a number of occasions to reach Switzerland by swimming over the small river which marked the border. They took with them on their backs a four-year-old boy named Moric, whom a peasant woman had brought in one morning to the Split Community. The Ustashas had taken his parents off the train the woman was travelling in but she had managed to save little Moric by hiding him beneath her skirt.

A Swiss customs officer was watching their attempt to cross the little river. He suggested to Joško Indig and Ruben Štajn that they leave Moric in his care before he drowned in one of their attempts. Joško and Ruben accepted the offer. Two months later, after they had been to Geneva and obtained the papers necessary to travel to Palestine, they remembered Moric and went back to the customs officer to collect him.



In Split, before setting off across the Atlantic. (left to right) First row: Moric Atijas, Ela and Lezo Altarac, Sida Izrael, Aron Švarc, Albi Izrael, (unknown), Rikica Altarac; Second row: Sida Levi, Lotika Izrael, Lezo Kaveson, Flora Kabiljo, Relica, Zlatica and Tina Gaon, Neli Šlezinger, Sarina Brodski, Jahiel Kamhi, Markus Finci. Third row: (unknown), Albert Albahari, Danko Šternberg, Rabbi Romano, Lezo, Bunika and Sarina Altarac, (unknown), Velko Halpern. Back row: (unknown), Leon Kabiljo, Marsel Hofman, Zdenko Šmit, Bela Grof, Josif Papo, Jakov Maestro, (unknown), Dr Jakob Altaras, Rabbi Albert Altaras, Engineer Vitorio Morpurgo, Iso Herman, Josif Levi.

“Don’t take Moric away from me, he’s brought great happiness to my family. We’ll take good care of him, because we have no children. You can rest assured that I’ll do my best to make a good Jew out of him.

We're already educating him in the Jewish spirit. Moric, come here and sing that Jewish song."

Moric began to sing out loud "Ćiribilibela, Mare moja...!"

After this demonstration, Joško Indig and Ruben Štajn gave in and for many years later they received information about Moric from the customs officer.

Even before my trip to Nonantola, some time in the summer of 1942, the Italian authorities had collected our refugees and internees from the islands of Brač, Hvar and Korčula and escorted them overnight to Rab. In the Questura they tried to persuade me that it was for their own good. We were suspicious of course, and little wonder, we were frightened whenever anyone was rounding up Jews. Our emigrants could take nothing with them except their clothes. Letters would arrive from Rab asking us to send them some of their remaining belongings. I spent several days on the islands, gathering their things, and loading them onto the ship and then, on my return from Nonantola in August, 1943, I sent them on to Rab.

I managed to get into the camp surreptitiously and distribute everyone's belongings to them, spending several days and nights there. I remember that one night I stayed with Apa Han, one with Dr Gotlib, then with Paul Goldštajn, a friend from the Makabi in Zagreb. I remember passing on written and verbal messages my brother Silviije had given me from the Party organisation in Split for the Levi brothers from Banja Luka. Through me they sent an answer to the Party in Split. Photographs shot by the youngsters in the Rab camp, showing the areas where both Jews and Slovenes were housed were the only documentation about the camps which reached the War Crimes Committee after the war. I had managed to get them out of the Rab camp and courier them to Split.

The situation was extremely tense: I had the feeling that Italy would capitulate and it was feared that the Germans would bomb Rab if the Italians didn't hand the islands over to the Ustashas. When I managed to get out of the camp and off Rab, I alerted my friends, Armadi in Trieste and Sorana in Rome, asking, among other things, that they remove the wire fence around the camp so that the inmates could seek shelter in the event of bombs.

From historical documents we now know that, at the time, Hitler's envoy in Rome, Ribbentrop, was insisting on the handover of Jews from the camps, as well as those living on the islands, with no excep-

tions, to the Germans and the Ustashas. He was given approval for this from Mussolini. However the fate of the inmates from Rab is well known: the Partisans liberated the island and all the young Jews joined the liberation struggle. A number of the older camp inmates managed to reach refugee shelters via the island of Vis, some of these went on to Palestine. However the sick and weak, who remained in hiding on Rab, were later found by the Germans and killed.

Of all the terrible events we lived through under the Italian occupation of Split, perhaps the most tragic occurred on June 12, 1942, when the Black Shirts and their leaders, the majority of whom were from elsewhere, and no locals were involved, stormed the temple before the service began. They forced us outside, beating us mercilessly with rifle butts and fists, wounding many of us. They took all the valuables, including the Sefer Torah, candlesticks, prayer books and pews, out into the square and burned them. We managed to save some sacred items from the flames and hid them in nearby shops belonging to non-Jewish friends, Split merchants, who returned them to us after the war. They are now back in the Split temple. The next day the Black Shirts continued their looting and vandalism of Jewish shops. First in line was the Morpurgo bookstore, then the Luksor perfume shop, whose manager was Jakov Kabiljo. They took particular care with the destruction of Markus Finci's shop, full of crystal and porcelain. My uncle Viktor Altaras' shoe shop was also plundered and the door of Rafael Eškenazi's menswear store was smashed. They stormed my brother Mento Altaras' shop by breaking through the floor of the temple office. Mento's shop was immediately below. Mr Morpurgo intervened and the plunder stopped the same day and further evil was prevented.

Jews from Split took part in the National Liberation Struggle after the capitulation of Italy. Earlier they had been involved in underground activities and all of this contributed to the defeat of the occupier and the liberation of the country. Many institutions established by community members and refugees coordinated their activities with those of the illegal National Liberation Struggle. I would like to mention just a few examples. In the first-aid station for refugees, Jewish refugee doctors trained Partisan medical assistants; one of those who attended these classes, Dušan Jelovac, later became the chief commander of Zagreb and was well known as a fighter in the National Liberation Struggle. One of the doctors from the first-aid station, Dr Silvije

Altaras, dressed like a Split peasant, took one of the leading rebels, Maks Baće, in a peasant cart from Mostar to Split after he had been shot through the lung.

Towards the end, fate was not so kind to the Jewish community. The deportation of Jews from Split began on October 12, 1943. They were taken to the Sajmište camp in Belgrade and then on to Auschwitz. On March 11, 1944, the remaining members of the Split Jewish Community, mostly women and children who had been in hiding with local Split householders, were deported to Jasenovac. This was a tragic end to the life of the pre-war Jewish community in Split. Only a small number of us survived by fleeing from occupied Split to the liberated territory, to the Partisans.

Bojana JAKOVLJEVIĆ

THROUGH KAVAJE AND FERRAMONTI



Bojana, Bojka to her friends, was born in Belgrade in 1922, the first of three daughters and one son, to Samuilo, a mechanical engineer and Rebeka Jakovljević (née Amodaj), the owner of a highly regarded dressmaking business in Palmotićevea Street. She also had a younger brother.

Despite the war, she completed the senior level of secondary school in June, 1941, in Belgrade and Kotor. From July, 1941, until the autumn of 1943 she was held in a refugee camp in Ferramonti in southern Italy. In June, 1944, she joined the National Liberation Army on Vis and, in October, returned to Belgrade as a correspondent for the state news agency, Tanjug.

Over the next four years, Bojana studied Yugoslav literature and French at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade University. As a teacher of French at Belgrade's Second Grammar School she won the respect of philologists, educators and students. She finished her career as a senior education inspector. She had an excellent command of four foreign languages and published a large number of literary and professional translations from these.

Bojana sat on the boards of the Jewish Community of Belgrade and the International Council of Jewish Women. From 1993, she lived in Tel Aviv, where she worked as editor-in-chief of the Bulletin of the Association of Yugoslav Jews. She died in December, 1999, leaving two sons, Mića and Nenad, and four grandsons.

The ship, with its cargo of Jews from all over Boka Kotorska, set sail from the Tivat shipyard for the open sea on July 25, 1941. There were about two hundred of us, men women and children of all ages on the deck of the once luxurious Kumanovo.



Bojana (right) with her mother Rebeka, her brother, and her sisters, Nina and Olga. Herceg Novi, July 11, 1941

We had been arrested over the past few days and nights by the Italians, who now occupied Montenegro and Boka. We had fled to the coast from the German and Ustasha persecution of Jews in Belgrade, Vojvodina, Bosnia and Croatia and now there was nowhere left to run. All the roads and paths on the mountains of Orjen and Lovćen above Boka were blocked and had been under fire since the Partisan uprising which had erupted in Montenegro on July 13, 1941. The Italians took us

in groups by trucks and motor launches to the Kumanovo in Boka Kotorska. Dozens of locals had already been arrested and were now held under the deck. There we stayed, on board in the shipyard, for three days while the boat was repaired and painted in dark green camouflage colours. The repairs weren't entirely successful however and the boat listed heavily.

As we sailed towards the mouth of the bay, we watched anxiously, all overwhelmed by the same chilling suspense: when we leave the bay will we turn right or left, or will we sail straight out across the Adriatic Sea? At the many gatherings and meetings of camp survivors over the fifty years since the war, we each learnt that all the others had been racked with the same anxiety: if the ship sails left, towards the north we will be sailing towards disaster, into the hands of the Germans or the Ustashas, if it heads south they will throw us into prison in Bar or Ulcin. We had already heard the rumours about the prisons in Montenegro while we were in Boka. The least of all evils would perhaps be straight out towards Italy, but this was probably an empty hope.

The ship sailed south from the bay. We were all relieved, but our fear of the worst was replaced by the anxiety of uncertainty. Where were they taking us? What lay in waiting for us?

I don't remember how long it took us to sail to Durres in Albania. I remember only that we were counted as we left the boat and the humiliating feeling of being loaded into trucks as though we were numbers. I have an indelible memory of the high barbed-wire fence with guard towers on both sides of the gate through which we entered the concentration camp. As we entered the fenced area it was as though our bodies felt the pricks of the barbed wire. Our disgust and humiliation when we saw the huge, dilapidated and dirty shed with no doors or windows was even more painful. It had probably been some kind of warehouse or storage building. We stood horrified and bewildered in front of the demountable shelves of wooden slats, not comprehending that these were our beds and that we were to settle ourselves and our luggage into them – women and children to the right, men to the left, with no partition between them. The appalling lack of hygiene remains my worst memory. For drinking and washing, each person stood in a queue each day to be given one mess pan full of water doled out from a tank. We would sit on the dusty floor beside the shed wall eating a meal of gruel from our mess kits and every night cleaned out bedbugs and various other pests in a feverish struggle to reach the level of hygiene we need-

ed to stay healthy. Despite all this, our feet were soon covered in boils, leaving many of us with permanent scars. The other abominations, the stench, the worst of the unhygienic horrors have been suppressed in our memories. None of us mentioned them at any of our post-war reunions, wanting only to forget such things.

There were exactly 192 of us Jews accommodated in our shed. The other five or six buildings were already full of Montenegrins, most of them women with children and the elderly. We calculated that there were more than a thousand male and female inmates altogether in the Kavaje camp. We soon managed to learn through various channels, mainly the people who were sent from each shack on kitchen duty, that the Montenegrins had been rounded up from villages which the occupiers believed to have harboured Partisans during the July uprising. During August, trucks would arrive almost every day with new inmates, those suspected of collaborating or sympathising with the uprising, together with whole clans, most of them women and children.

Some of the male and female students from our Jewish group somehow managed to find out the first details about the uprising and the first, sad news about the victims who had been shot in Montenegro. This information came across the barbed wire between our shed and the Montenegrin sheds from Montenegrin women who had been studying in Belgrade and taken part in the March demonstrations in 1941.

Among our group there were three doctors who had brought small amounts of medicine with them. We managed to smuggle some medicines across to the Montenegrin women, some of whom were seriously ill. Two of these later became ambassadors for the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and one of them told me a quarter of a century later in Belgrade that she would never forget the Jews who saved her life in the camp in 1941.

The most striking event I remember was the arrival of a prominent Jew, a Belgrade merchant, in front of the camp gate. Together with his wife and son he had managed to escape the Germans and crossed through Macedonia to reach the Italian-occupied zone and Albania. To our surprise, the guards allowed some of us, on the pretence of being cousins, to go and talk to him at the gate. They returned, with horror on their faces and tears in their eyes, and passed on the terrible news of the first hundred Belgrade Jews who had been taken from the "assembly point" in Tašmajdan Park and shot. We learnt about the ever more harsh measures being taken against Jews and Gypsies in Belgrade. We heard

about the terrible explosion in Smederevo, where no one knew the fate of a Jewish working party who had been there on forced labour. They also told us that Belgrade had been stunned by the news that we had been deported from Boka Kotorska by the Italians, thus cutting the rescue channel for Belgrade Jews. They had no idea at that time where we had been taken. I don't know how this man from Belgrade found out where we were in Albania or how he found us. A few more families and individuals from Belgrade followed in his footsteps and made it to Albania. The majority of them managed to survive the war and the German occupation after Italy capitulated in September, 1943, by hiding in Albanian villages.

October 1941 heralded a severe winter. We froze in our doorless and windowless shed; we would wrap ourselves in layers of clothes and trudge through the puddles of dirty water and mud around the shed. We stopped making the weekly trips to the shower tent which we had enjoyed in August and September, despite having to return afterwards to the pigsty of the camp. At that time we had no idea of the kind of showers to which the Germans took the Jews in their death camps.

Finally, on October 23, the camp commandant called an assembly, took a roll call and told us we were heading off "across the Adriatic" to his wonderful country where we would experience the "centuries-old Italian humanity." We took these words with a grain of salt, but we were happy to be leaving the disgusting camp, despite not knowing where we were going. The Montenegrins were returned to their homes in October so, by the time we left, the camp was almost empty.

After three months of "camping" in Kavaje we were loaded onto an Italian ship in a convoy in the same port of Durres where we had disembarked at the end of July. I remember a girl who didn't want to clean the mud from her shoes when we left because she wanted to take some Balkan soil with her into her uncertain future. Once again we were loaded as numbers, with no names or tickets.

Throughout the voyage we were filled with the icy horror of our conflicting feelings: one the one hand we wished that the Allied forces would sink this Fascist convoy, on the other we feared this might actually happen to us. We knew that there was no possible way of letting the Allied pilots know that we were *internati civili di guerra* (civilian prisoners of war) while our ears were pierced by the wailing of alarm sirens. We had no life jackets.

We were unloaded in Bari and passed through columns of Mussolini's Black Shirts who shouted at us and ran their fingers across their throats. I suppose they were telling us we deserved to be slaughtered. They calmed down a little when the men and boys had passed and they saw there were an even greater number of women and children in line.

We were immediately packed onto a train. I don't know how, but some of us managed to get our bearings and realise that the train was headed south, towards the heel or toe of the Italian boot.

Our first impression, our sighs of relief when we saw the better conditions in the Ferramonti camp after our three months of deprivation and discomfort in Kavaje soon gave way to tedium as the days stretched on and on. The image of the Ferramonti camp which remains in my memory is of regular rows of white-painted sheds, with each two sharing a communal toilet. This was a blessing after the unhygienic horrors of Kavaje. We stood in queues for water at the taps in some of the barracks, we stood in queues outside the kitchens for our food to be doled out of cauldrons, or for our rations in front of the storehouse in the case of those families who could prepare food on a brazier in their miniature "apartments". In the mornings, there would be a crowd waiting for the Red Cross to distribute mail censored by the Italians. The memories of the large recreation area are more pleasant than those of the few square metres we had around the shed in Kavaje. We started to learn Italian, and other languages, individually or in small groups. This was voluntary, but we did it out of necessity, just in case. The boys from the various barracks also played football.

Families were accommodated in barracks with partitioned rooms, no larger than ten square metres, where there was room for several folding beds, a small table and a small brazier. Men and women without families were in separate barracks, dormitories with forty camp beds in each. There was a curfew (*coprifuoco*) and we were forbidden to walk around from the evenings until the morning, but many made visits in secret, especially young couples, risking being thrown into a camp prison cell (*camera di sicurezza*) for a few days if the supervisors on duty caught them. We soon discovered a few kindly supervisors who would close their eyes to this kind of infraction. As for the real Fascists, the Black Shirts, we stayed away from them as much as possible.

The camp authorities were often unpredictable, full of strange Italian contradictions: the camp was built on a swampy, mosquito-rid-

den field but they would give us quinine to protect us against malaria. They had a policy of reuniting families and relatives, releasing individuals and families from the camps and confining them in villages throughout Italy (*libero confino*) for this purpose. In this way many people managed to reach their “uncles” or “aunts” although they had no relatives anywhere in the country. The authorities believed the sham relationships, even though the people had different surnames. At the same time, for reasons known only to themselves, they would intern families living in open confinement and imprisoned individuals for illegally crossing the Croatian border (into Pavelić’s “independent” Ustasha state from which the Jews were fleeing, in fear of deportation to the death camps). Along with Jews they would also intern citizens of other countries and territories then occupied by Italy, such as Greece, Dalmatia, Slovenia and the south of France. The two largest groups were brought in 1942. The first was a hundred Orthodox Greeks from Tripoli, which was an Italian colony in Libya before the conflict with Allied troops in north Africa, and the second was about three hundred Jews from Austria and Czechoslovakia, transferred from internment on Rhodes. The odyssey of this group was a story fit for a novel. In Ferramonti they were known as “the people from Rhodes”. After the *Anschluss* and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1938, they set off on boats and a barge down the Danube, finally reaching Kladovo. Only one or two groups managed to pass through the Bulgarian and Rumanian border controls on the Danube after Kladovo. They were on a boat flying the Bulgarian flag and bearing the Bulgarian name “Penčo”. The Italian name, “Stefano”, had been painted out and the Italian flag lowered. This happened towards the end of October, 1940. All the other groups that followed later on ships and barges, about eight hundred Jews, most of them from Austria and Slovakia were sent back up the Danube and the Sava to Šabac, because the Romanian authorities would not permit them to sail any further. They managed to live there, by various means, until the war began in Yugoslavia in 1941. After the war we learned their tragic fate: the men were shot in Zasavica together with the Šabac Jews in 1941. The women and children and the elderly were taken from the Šabac camp in the freezing winter to the old Sajmište camp in Belgrade and none of them left it alive. The Vienna Jewish Community built a memorial to them in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade.

The first group from Kladovo on the Penčo, the majority of whom were Jews from Czechoslovakia, were allowed to pass by the Romanians. After a long and arduous voyage down the Danube to the Black Sea, then through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, they reached the Aegean Sea. There they were shipwrecked, but the majority were saved and transferred to Rhodes. After the wartime break-up of Greece, the Italian occupying authorities moved them to Ferramonti.

There were just over two thousand permanent inmates in the camp, but between 1940 and 1943 perhaps two or three times that number passed through. Most of these were Jews, but there were also citizens from other countries and occupied territories, even a small group of Chinese civilians who had been captured on board ships.

An old monk took care of the Christians in his chapel and tried to convert some of the Jews to Christianity. I don't know whether he succeeded in this, although I have heard that some used this as a ploy to win themselves a brief respite from the unhappy Jewish fate and take refuge in Catholic monasteries.

When a group of Greeks from Tripoli arrived together with an Orthodox priest (I think he was a bishop, in fact), we Jews suffered an extremely humiliating incident, something the Italians did not usually indulge in, unlike the Germans and the Ustashas. The Greeks were assigned to an unfinished barracks, but refused to enter, spending the whole night and the next day in the open. The camp commandant, Paolo Salvatore, was a Calabrese nobleman who always wore civilian clothes and behaved with tolerance. He was senior in rank to the commander of the Fascist militia in the camp, a hardened Fascist and Black Shirt. But this Fascist now ordered us Jews to move from our barracks into the unfinished ones, saying "They can finish them by themselves if it's so urgent". When the Jews invoked the unwritten rule of first come first served, which had applied in all previous cases, he said "The Greeks have rights because they are Greeks, but you Jews have no rights because you're Jews!"

We have contradictory memories about the outcome of this unpleasant affair. Whenever we've talked about it at our gatherings since the war, many say the Jews were forced to give up the barracks, while many of us remember the Greeks as displaying extraordinary solidarity and refusing to take new barracks in such a way. If my memory serves me correctly, we worked together to finish the new barracks very quickly and the Greeks joined us in the camp as fellow sufferers.

There were various ways of finding out what was happening with the war. The main news source was camp newcomers, then the word of mouth which spread when anyone received news in a letter. I remember us reading Italian newspapers, although I don't know how we managed to get them. We were stunned by the tragic events throughout Yugoslavia, the mass shootings in Kragujevac, Šabac and other places of execution, the suffering and probable killing of Jewish men deported from Belgrade in October, the women, children, elderly and sick taken from all over Serbia to the Sajmište camp in the harsh winter of 1941–42. We heard about the rebellions in the forests and the deportation of Jews from Croatia and Bosnia to Ustasha camps. But we heard no more precise details about all the terrible events of the Holocaust until the war ended, nor were we certain of whether we in Italy would be saved, because there was no rapid end to the war or the Nazi terror in sight at the time.



Bojana Jakovljević (far left) with her sisters, Olgica (fourth from left) and Nina (fifth from left) and a group of friends after the liberation of Rome in the summer of 1944.

There were Jews from almost every European country in the camp and the great majority were not religious. Among those of us from Yugoslavia, almost no one was. There were some religious and even

strictly orthodox Jews in the Rosh Hashanah group from Slovakia. They turned one of their small rooms into a synagogue and the devout would come for prayers, wearing the talithot. The authorities didn't forbid this, after all, they allowed Christian priests to hold services for their faithful. In both Kavaje and Ferramonti we fasted for Yom Kippur as a sign of our devotion to Judaism, which now faced a deadly peril. One of the contradictions of the Italians was that although they practised religious tolerance – in other words they accepted the Jewish identity – they demanded the Fascist salute during roll calls (*appello*). We avoided this as much as we could, although disobedient young people would earn a few days or nights in the prison cell for it. Once, the Fascist commandant decided it was a good idea to teach us a lesson with the Fascist salute, saying this should be an honour for us because when we faced the Germans we would have to fall to our knees. We were anxious about our fate when we heard that the Germans had asked Mussolini to hand over “his” Italian Jews as well as all those who had escaped under German occupation.

This anxiety about being handed over to the Germans became real fear when, in the summer of 1942, in the middle of the camp, Mirko Davičo, a Jew from Belgrade who had been a Communist before the war, was caught and led off. We learned later that the Ustashas had demanded that he be handed over to them. After the war we learnt that he had been killed in Jasenovac. Not until several decades later did we discover from the confiscated archives that Mussolini's Fascist Italy, just a day before the capitulation, had agreed to hand the Jews over to the Germans. It was in this way that many people were rescued, because the deportation was only carried out in the north.

As for the food it must be said that, while we were never full, we never starved. We grew so sick of lentils and pearl barley that none of us ever had them on our menu after the war. The Italian national dish of pasta although served without sauce, was among the occasional better meals, while bean soup and frozen potatoes in various forms were seen as festive lunches. Sometimes we would even find a piece of meat in our meal.

The camp administration must be praised for allowing a school to be opened in our language for about fifty children. It was organised by several students and high school graduates. With the help of two teachers among the inmates we passed on as much as we knew ourselves of history, geography, mathematics and natural sciences without the bene-

fit of textbooks. We would read the children chapters from books which individuals in the camp happened to have and there was singing and drawing as well. The children would write their homework in both the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets. Those who returned to Yugoslavia after the war managed to catch up with their generation through post-war courses for students whose education had been suspended by the war. Whenever we met them later as university graduates, they would tell us how grateful they were for the camp school.



Bojana in Belgrade, 1956.

Ferramonti was the first concentration camp liberated by the Allies during the war and many of the camp inmates survived. Because of this a great deal of documentary material has been collected about the camp, which officially was “a concentration camp for civil war internees and Jewish hostages”. Two books have been written about Ferramonti by Italian researchers and there are about ten memoirs by Jewish authors.

The facts show that not until July, 1943, did Mussolini’s Italy formally accept the German demand to deport all Jews to Germany. This included Italian and foreign Jews, those who were free and those were in camps and, above all, those from Ferramonti.

The Italian authorities had no time for a more organised mass deportation. Even before Italy capitulated, at the end of July 1943, the camp commandant had tried to reach Rome along the crowded roads together with a representative of the Jewish inmates in an attempt to obtain permission for the release and liberation of the camp inmates. They did not succeed in this. While waiting for news from the north, from Rome, and news about the arrival of Allied troops from Sicily, large numbers of camp inmates managed to flee in great numbers to the neighbouring villages and hamlets, hiding in olive groves and fields.

One Yugoslav inmate, Miša Baum from Sarajevo, took command of a small group of young people who were guarding access to the camp, where about a hundred women and children were still interned.

They survived two great trials. An American aircraft strafed the camp with machine-gun fire before the Italian capitulation, probably suspecting it was some kind of military installation. There were heavy casualties: four killed and fifteen seriously wounded. The other trial could have had more tragic consequences. On the day the Italians capitulated, a German army headquarters truck pulled up in front of the camp's main entrance. A German general stepped out, followed by his batman. He demanded a report on the situation in the camp from the Jewish guards, who were holding a white and yellow flag. They told the German general that there were a small number of inmates remaining, that the arms were for defence against local bandits (who didn't in fact exist) and that there were five cases of cholera in the camp, a result of poor hygiene and starvation. Whether this bluff succeeded or the general was really in a great hurry to continue northwards, we will never know, but in any case he ordered his convoy of vehicles not to stop there. For five days this motorised cavalry roared along State Road 19, which led from Messina to Naples, skirting Ferramonti. On the sixth morning, some time after eight o'clock, the first transport from a reconnaissance unit of the British Eighth Army Corps arrived in front of the camp. Those inmates who had been in hiding returned from the surrounding villages and immediately proclaimed the "Republic of Ferramonti". Jan Herman, a Czech Jew, was elected its first president. He had travelled with the Yugoslav Jews from Kotor through Kavaje on the road to liberation.

Most of us Yugoslav Jews from the Kavaje group were released from Ferramonti during 1942 in the name of "family reunion" and dispersed around various Italian provinces in what they called free confinement. From there our paths were different. A number of families managed to acquire entry visas for Spain and eventually reached Canada via Portugal and Venezuela. On September 9, 1943, the day Italy capitulated, there was a simultaneous exodus of Jews from more than fifty villages where they had been living in pseudo-confinement.

We fled, many of us with false documents in Italian names, mostly south towards the Allies, but some north via the Alps to Switzerland or through Trieste to Yugoslavia.

Some managed to reach the Allies, crossing the Naples-Fodia frontline, before joining the Partisans in Bari or sitting out the rest of the war.

Most of those from the north headed south to Rome, which was invaded by the Germans before the Allies arrived. Hoping that the Allies, whose artillery could be heard from Garigliano, would arrive soon, they spent ten months illegally in the “open city of Rome” under the German occupation until the Allies entered the city on June 5, 1944. More than half of them joined the Partisans in July and August 1944 at the National Liberation Struggle base in Bari. The families returned to Yugoslavia when the war finished in 1945. Some stayed in Italy, eventually moving further abroad. A number of families and individuals succeeding in reaching Switzerland across the Alps from northern Italy and there they remained in some form of internment until the end of the war. Unfortunately, Switzerland didn’t accept everyone. Among those who were returned to Italy and handed over to the Germans, via the Fascists, was Rudolf Marton, a student from Sarajevo and one of the Kavaje men. Three members of the Isaković family who were also from the Kavaje group suffered the same fate. They were captured under German occupation in November 1943, as they tried to flee together with other Yugoslav Jews from Dalmatia who had not been in confinement in Ferramonti but in a village in the German-occupied province of Parma. They were taken to Auschwitz and never returned.

Almost half the Jews who returned to Yugoslavia emigrated in the first Aliya after the state of Israel was founded. There they met others who had tried their luck in Italy and France, or even in Chile, but had finally reached Israel in spite of everything. Sadly, some of our Kavaje group did not survive the war.

Rudolf Miler, in his forties and the father of a Belgrade family, died in the camp in 1942 and was buried nearby in the cemetery of the village of Tarsija. From our group, Isak Albahari, a high school student from Belgrade, died at the end of 1942 in confinement in the province of Parma. A boy and girl from Sarajevo who had been in the Kavaje group were killed fighting with the Partisans.

Haim "Mile" PINKAS

FULL SPEED AHEAD ACROSS THE ATLANTIC



Haim "Mile" Pinkas was born in Belgrade on November 20, 1919, to Matilda (née Behaim) and Majer Pinkas. While serving in the Army at the Cavalry School in Zemun he studied at the Belgrade University Faculty of Law. During this period he was also an active athlete and tennis player.

In 1941, during the occupation, he fled Belgrade via Albania, Italy and Spain to Venezuela and Caracas where he lives to this day. He is married to Mia (née Bauer) from Zagreb. They have two sons, Miguel (1948) and Daniel (1951) and five grandchildren.

Haim Pinkas began his career in precision mechanics in Caracas in 1943 and in 1947 founded his own company, Micron C.A., with his wife and father-in-law, Dr Hugo Bauer. His company initially dealt with the repair of optical instruments and gradually developed into an importer and distributor as well as a repair service for cameras and topography, meteorology, hydrology, medical, graphic and other instruments.

His elder son, Miguel, was educated at a university in the USA before joining the business in 1971. From 1985 Haim Pinkas gradually handed over the management of the company to him although he continues to play an active role even today as a technical and financial advisor.

After completing high school, his younger son, Daniel, graduated from two universities in Geneva where he now lives with his family, teaching philosophy in two prestigious Geneva University Institutes.

Haim "Mile" Pinkas is active in several international Jewish organisations and institutions. Since 1965 he has headed the ORT Union in Venezuela and, in 2000, he was appointed an honorary vice-president of the world ORT Union. He has been a member of the Tel Aviv University Council since 1981.

I was born in Belgrade on November 20, 1919, after the first world war, when my father Majer Pinkas (1881) and my mother Matilda (née Behaim, 1891) were reunited. My father spent the war in captivity in Austria and my mother as a refugee in Aleksinac. I was named Haim after my grandfather, which was customary. I didn't know my grandfather, as he had died in 1914 at the beginning of the war, just as the first Austrian cannon was fired on Belgrade from Zemun. My parents were married in 1911. My real name was rarely used, except on official documents, instead, from affection as was often the case, I was known as Mile.

My father had a women's clothing store called Toga on the corner of Knez Mihailova Street, diagonally opposite the famous Ruski Car restaurant. He had inherited the business from his tailor father who had opened it in 1876. Also on the same corner were the Vasić & Jocić stationery store, a representative office of the famous pen manufacturer Penkalo and, in the place where the department store Tata was later opened, was the Braća Radojlović hardware store where I used to play with nuts and bolts as a child. This was the first appearance of my penchant for things mechanical.

My mother was the youngest daughter of Bulisa Behaim (née Mevorah), whose father was the famous Moša Mevorah. He was known for his saying "Mr Moša doesn't give a damn about the past", and this can be read on his grave to this day. He was the moneychanger for the court of Miloš Obrenović. My mother was a beautiful woman and popular among her cousins, many of whom lived with my grandmother Bulisa while they studied. Among these were Dr Isak Eskenazi, Isak Levi and Liko Eskenazi.

My mother managed to enrol me in the Kralj Petar Primary School next to the Cathedral before I was seven years old, allegedly because I was very naughty at home. Before beginning school I attended the French kindergarten. I completed my schooling at the Second Boys' Secondary School in 1937 and still recall the wonderful teachers I had there. I enrolled in the Faculty of Law at Belgrade University, largely because we did not have to attend lectures and so I was able to serve in the army while studying.



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I was immediately accepted into the Obilić Choir. I didn't have a strong voice, but I could read music, having had piano lessons from the time I was eight until I was seventeen. This helped secure my place in the baritone section of the choir. My time as a student was largely about my activities with the choir which, in 1938, sang excerpts from Wagner's *Parsifal* in a concert performance. In the summer of the same year we toured France, under the patronage of Les Poilus d'Orient, the organisation of French veterans from the first world war, most of whom had served on the Thessalonica front. They had never heard *La Marseillaise* sung as our choir sang it under the baton of Lovro Matačić and many older people were moved to tears. In June, 1939, the entire choir was in Pristina and, there on the Field of Kosovo, we sang a requiem for those who fell in the 1389 Battle of Kosovo.

Just as World War Two broke out in September, 1939, I entered the Cavalry School for reserve officers in Zemun. It was a severe winter, with howling winds, and all the water pipes in the school were frozen. The spring of 1940 threw us into a deep depression when the Germans occupied France, despite all our illusions about the impregnable Maginot Line.

In June, 1940, we graduated from the school as second lieutenants in the cavalry, with our swords buckled proudly at our waists and our shiny patent boots. I tried to make up what I'd missed at the Law Faculty, because I planned to graduate in the summer of 1941. As secretary of the Obilić choir I found time to assist with the organisation of a tour to Budapest, because Yugoslavia had just signed a pact of eternal friendship with Hungary and so we went to celebrate this with two very successful concerts. Just two months later our eternal friends marched into Yugoslavia together with the Germans slaughtering Serbs, and especially Jews and Serbs in Vojvodina.

And this is where we begin our journey, with the coup of March 27, 1941, which put an end to Yugoslavia's membership of the Axis. "Better war than the pact", Belgraders were shouting, especially we students who were demonstrating in the streets. I narrowly avoided becoming a victim of this enthusiasm when a typewriter crashed to the ground at my feet as I stood by the Prince Miloš monument. It had been hurled from the first floor of the German Traffic Bureau, which was suspected of being the German intelligence centre. The enraged demonstrators destroyed the entire office.

Many people have already described the events of April 6, 1941. The drone of aircraft at a great height was heard, immediately followed by bombs. The explosions brought us to our senses. I dressed in my uniform and set off on foot to the Military Command to find out where I had been posted. Next to the National Theatre I saw the first signs of the bombing. I seized an abandoned two-wheeled milk cart and drove it towards Aleksandrova Street, the direction of the headquarters. On Terazije I saw the full horror. I found some of my army colleagues there, they had a car and we decided to cross the river to Zemun to report to the Cavalry School. When we arrived we were turned away, no one would see us, they had no orders to mobilise reserve officers.

I no longer remember the details, but I know that we travelled to Kraljevo at Easter on a tanker full of frozen water because there had been an unexpected fall of snow in April. Every military unit we turned

to refused to accept us and we were surrounded by chaos. The capitulation came when several of us from the cavalry were in Rogatica near Višegrad. A sergeant had billeted us overnight there in a private house. I was with a distant relative, Joža Medina, and we had not realised it was Passover. The Jewish family with whom we were staying had planned a Seder dinner. So there we were, in the middle of this disaster and anxiety, celebrating Passover. After the war we discovered that the Moslems and Ustashas had slaughtered all the Jewish families in Rogatica. We stayed there for several days. The division's cashier was there and paid us our salaries in banknotes. We were sure that these banknotes were no longer worth anything, so we played high-stakes poker, as though the notes were Monopoly money. Then we heard about the capitulation.



A gathering at the home of Lenka Levi, cousin of Matilda Pinkas, Mile's mother (front row, fourth from left). All but two of these people were killed in the Holocaust.

German tanks passed through Rogatica the same day, on their way to Sarajevo. I decided I should take the train back to Belgrade because I thought my parents were still there. It was a gruelling trip, changing frequently from one indescribably crowded train to another. Finally, almost standing on one foot, I arrived at Belgrade railway station. I was

still in uniform. The first thing I saw, pasted on a wall, was the order from the German command for all Jews to register.

My childhood friend Avram Koen was with me and we went together to his apartment on Terazije. I had no idea that they were arresting everyone in military uniform and sending them to Germany as prisoners of war. We discovered that his apartment had already been taken over by a *Volksdeutscher*. The man was in fact the accountant in his textile shop in Kralja Petra Street. After moving into this apartment which didn't belong to him he had confiscated everything he'd found there. I dressed in one of Avram's suits and left my beautiful boots to the *Volksdeutscher*.

My parents, in the meantime, had moved to Sarajevo to escape the bombing. But having no news about me they had already returned to Belgrade and were staying with my uncle, Avram Isaković, in Kapetan Mišina Street. Our apartment in Dositejeva Street had been damaged but I think that one of the reasons for the move was to have the whole family together.

Several days later, in May, the Germans rounded up all the city's Jews in Kalemegdan and ordered us to assemble in Tašmajdan every day. From there they sent us out in groups to clear up the debris. One morning a policeman came to Tašmajdan, looking for workers to clear out the building which housed the traffic police, near the Parliament. It was the same policeman who had been on duty for many years outside the Ruski Car. He had often called into my father's shop to use the telephone and he remembered me. He took me to work with him and from that day on I no longer had to report to Tašmajdan. Instead I went directly to the traffic police where they gave me various jobs, from peeling potatoes to cleaning offices. The police building had been quite badly damaged and many of the telephone lines weren't working. I offered to repair the telephone network if they could get me the wire. This was a talent I had inherited from my father. Since childhood I had liked repairing all sorts of things. Within a few days I had managed to get all the telephones working. A week later, when a demand came from the City Administration, which was now the Gestapo headquarters, for someone to help repair the telephone system, they sent me. Although I was required to wear a yellow arm band, I was given some kind of document by the Gestapo which gave me freedom of movement and permission to go in and out of their notorious headquarters.

When German troops invaded Russia on June 22, 1941, I decided it was time to leave Belgrade so I spoke about this with my parents. We knew that my cousin, Sofija Tišler, was in Herceg Novi with her husband and her daughter, Karolina, so I suggested that the three of us, my father, my mother and myself, join them there. Someone, I no longer remember who, offered to get us documents for the trip from Zemun for a few thousand dinars. My father was against this, probably because of his ill health. He and all of his forefathers had been born in Belgrade and he saw no reason to flee. "If they force me to work, I'll dig, but I won't run away!" But in September, when life in Belgrade became quite unbearable, he decided to go south with my mother in a large group. They got as far as Pristina, where the Italians turned them over to the Germans. From there they were taken back to Belgrade, to the Sajmište camp where they lost their lives. I never learnt how they died, I didn't know about the gas chambers or the firing squads in Jajinci. In the meantime I had obtained travel permits for myself and my cousin, Joža Medina. We were to head by boat to Zemun and from there by train through Bosanski Brod, Sarajevo and Mostar to Herceg Novi. The permit was for a *Volksdeutscher*. I wanted to take my passport with me in the hope that we would manage to board an Allied ship on the Adriatic and didn't want to carry documents in more than one name, so my permit was in the name of Haim Pinkas, *Volksdeutscher*! I had no idea how dangerous this was. The morning of our departure, Joža telephoned and told me that his parents were so upset at the idea of him leaving that he had decided to stay in Belgrade. Poor Joža was among the first hostages taken by the Germans from Tašmajdan to be shot. I put my coat on over my armband and set off on foot from Kapetan Mišina Street to the Sava docks. To this day I can see my mother waving to me and watching me from the window as I left the house. I never saw her again.

A friend of mine from the university had agreed to go with me to Herceg Novi so that she could return and tell my parents that I had arrived safely. She also carried my suitcase because I didn't want anyone to see me on my way to the port and realise that I was travelling. We caught the train in Zemun. While it was waiting in Ruma, I got out to drink some water. Leaning over the tap, drinking from the palm of my hand, I saw, from the corner of my eye, an SS man approaching me in his black uniform. In astonishment I recognised a *Volksdeutscher* colleague from university and the choir. I froze, thinking this was the end

of the road for me. He stopped and looked at me, obviously recognising me, but moved on without a word.

The trip from Bosanski Brod to Sarajevo was marred by the presence in the same compartment of two Croatian officers: Ustashes or quisling home guards, at that time it was hard to tell the difference. So repugnant was their discussion about Serbs and Jews and what should be done to them that I had to pretend to be asleep. My companion was young and pretty, so they flirted from time to time with her and left me alone. In Sarajevo we waited for a long time for a train to the Adriatic coast. I don't remember much about it except the anxiety.

Early in the morning on June 28, St Vitus' Day, we stopped in Mostar. The train was surrounded by Ustashes who began dragging people outside, mainly Serbs. We heard shooting so we assumed they were killing them at the very doors of the train. They were blocking all movement between compartments of the train. Now I became aware of the fatal contradiction between my name and my *Volksdeutscher* status on my travel permit. When I handed it over, the Ustasha asked me "What are you?"

"I'm from Zemun," I replied.

"I didn't ask you where you're from, I asked whether you're a Croat or a Serb!" he barked.

At that time no one knew who would win Zemun so I explained "We still don't know, but we hope it will be Croatian."

"That's not what I asked you," he insisted. "Tell me, are you Catholic or Orthodox?"

I thought this was the end, if the man knew anything about religion. The significance of the name Haim Pinkas had to be obvious to him. I didn't see any other way out, so I braced myself to be taken off the train and told him "I am of Moses' faith."

My friend went white. But in the eternity of a moment like this, a man has no choice but to resign himself. Unbelievably the Ustasha returned my permit without a word. He obviously had no idea what the word Moses meant. This had to be the worst moment of my life: I was convinced that I was looking death in the face.

I also had problems at the Italian checkpoint before Herceg Novi when the officer asked for my Italian visa. I shouted at him in German that we *Volksdeutscher* did not require visas and that he should stop harassing "us Germans"! And that was how we got through.

My friend returned to Belgrade a few days later. I met my cousin Sofija and her family and found accommodation with a group of young friends, including Rudi Marton from Sarajevo, who had been with me in the Obilić Choir, the Deleon brothers, Ašer-Bata and Eli, and Pavle Furht, who was also from Sarajevo. We got along well, taking turns cooking. It was nearly always the same meal: beans cooked in unrefined olive oil, a taste I could not stand for years afterwards.

Every afternoon we would go to the patisserie opposite the Boka Hotel. This became a pilgrimage for me as it was there I first met Mia Bauer who was later to become my wife. In the middle of July the shooting began in Montenegro and the Italians decided to move all the refugees out. I suppose they were afraid of them joining the rebels in the mountains. On July 22, in the patisserie, we met a group of girls from neighbouring Igalo. Mia and her cousin Anica were there with their parents. The same day the Italians rounded up all the refugees, saying that they would be released immediately after giving statements. They were taken in trucks to the local school but were not released. Instead their friends had to pack their belongings in suitcases and bring them to them. Our little group was rounded up the next day. The previous evening, when we heard what was in store, I went to the neighbours' chicken coop and hid all Bata Deleon's Marxist literature.

Two days later we all found ourselves in Kotor, on board the Kumanovo, a wretched old ship which sailed with a list. We Jews from all over Yugoslavia didn't know what to think, we had no idea where they were taking us. After two days we disembarked in the Albanian port of Durres and were loaded into trucks to be taken to the military camp in Kavaje, about ten kilometres from Durres. This was an improvised concentration camp with military barracks and three-tier bunks of wooden planks. The army blankets we were given were crawling with fleas. Men were put into one barracks with women and children in another so that we could see one another only at a distance. It was a struggle for the older people to climb into the upper bunks. Here the differences between the Serbian and Croatian dialects led to some misunderstandings and amusement. One night an elderly Belgrade woman had an urgent need to get down from her top-tier bed. In desperation she called to her neighbour for a ladder. "*Merdevine! Merdevine!*" But the Zagreb woman had no idea what she meant and a minor accident was only narrowly avoided.

We younger inmates set to work digging a very primitive system of latrines which somehow did the job. After a few days the Jewish women suggested to the camp authorities that they give us all the supplies intended for us and that they would take over the cooking because the military cooks were serving up swill. There were barracks housing Montenegrins close by us. The Italians were keeping them there so that the Montenegrins wouldn't shoot at them, but we had no opportunity to establish any kind of contact with them.

Life went on and we younger people behaved as though we were on a summer vacation. We organised sports days and chess tournaments. The older inmates would play cards and each week we would put on an entertainment with performances of comic sketches. Under these circumstances it was only natural that a number of young couples forged bonds. Among them were Mia and I, although I considered her, at just 17, to be too young for a 22-year-old like me. But the camp by moonlight could be romantic. I won her by treating her to one of the local aniseed drinks from the canteen run by an Albanian at the entrance to the camp. I had managed to buy it from my small savings hidden in my shoe. The military controls were not strict: the Italian soldiers didn't bother us, they were more interested in spying on the Jewish girls in our group as they showered.

When the autumn rain began the camp area was awash with mud, making trips to the latrine at night a very unpleasant experience.

Two members of our group, Miša Aladem and Rafo Konforti, who spoke Italian, managed to get in touch with a tailor in Kavaje who claimed to have some connection with the Fascists. Through his intervention we were supposed to be transferred to Italy. Whether this connection really worked, or whether the Italians had planned it anyway, we were loaded back on ships in Durres on October 22, 1941, and sailed off in convoy to Italy. There was a rumour that we were to be accommodated in hotels at various Italian spas. A group of young organising types sat up all night on the ship, making a plan of who should be accommodated with whom: the poor, especially those who were alone, would be grouped with those who had better resources; close relatives would be kept together, and no one would be forced into the company of someone they couldn't stand. This list was no easy job to draw up so we were most disappointed when we disembarked in Bari and, after being showered and disinfected, were immediately taken by

train to the Ferramonti concentration camp near the village of Tarsia, in the province of Cosenza in Calabria. So much effort down the drain!

We were in for a surprise when the train stopped in the middle of a field. On one side we could see the low barracks of our camp. At the entrance there was a crowd of long-term inmates and Mia's family, the Bauers, were delighted to recognise among them Feliks Šternberg, the brother of Mia's mother who the family had thought was still in prison in the town of Sušak.

They put the single inmates into barracks no. 11, which had 22 beds. The families were in a kind of two-roomed house with a small kitchen by the entrance. The inmates were mostly Jews from various parts of Europe, along with a number of political internees. Oddly enough there was also a group of Chinese sailors from ships captured by the Italians in their waters, because China was already at war with the Axis and these Chinese were kept in Ferramonti as enemy aliens. The Chinese were hard workers and immediately organised a laundry for the inmates. Every afternoon when they finished work they would sit in the shade and play Mahjong, slamming the dice on the table like dominoes.

There were about two thousand inmates in the camp, which was surrounded by barbed wire. The Italian soldiers strolled calmly about outside, obviously unconcerned that anyone would try to escape. Some people even struck up friendships with the camp authorities and would occasionally be given leave to go for a day to the nearby town of Cosenza on various pretexts: visits to the doctor or dentist or urgent purchases. This was a great practical help in providing a lot of food in the camp, preserves, live chickens and even turkeys, along with wine and other drinks. The soldiers would sometimes sell eggs through the wire: there were no shortages for anyone who had some cash. I think that at that time the state was contributing eight lire per inmate per day which was used by the camp management to provide us with food, mainly pasta.

Life in the camp was neither unpleasant nor difficult. There was plenty of free time to play cards and chess and for flirting and visiting. There was even a choir formed, led by a Jewish composer from Osijek, Lav Mirski, who was a professional conductor. They mainly sang the Italian repertoire.

But there were some interesting developments about our emigration. Mia's uncle, Manfred Šternberg, known as Fredo, was in New

York at the time with his wife, Lilika, his daughter Lucika and his son Mario (who lost his life during the American landing at Normandy as an American soldier fighting the Germans). Fredo was lucky enough to arrive in Switzerland with his family on a train from Zagreb on the very morning Belgrade was bombed, April 6, 1941. He continued on to the USA from the Croatian capital. He had already obtained a Cuban visa for his brother Feliks, who was with us in Ferramonti. When he found out that the families of the two Bauer brothers had also arrived in Ferramonti at the end of October, 1941, he managed to obtain Cuban visas for them as well. There was an exchange of telegrams which, fortunately, managed to reach the camp and Mia's father asked Fredo to get visas for Mile Pinkas and Rihard Tišler. "So, who are they to you?" came the memorable reply.

The Bauers were happy when they heard the news about their visas, but their happiness was short-lived. On December 7, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and Cuba declared war on the Axis together with America, they immediately realised that the visas would not be valid for leaving Italy. But the decision allowing the Bauers to leave the camp for Rome in order to do whatever was needed for their immigration to Cuba still stood. So Mia and Anica, who was in love with Đole Mošić, left very reluctantly and set off with their families for Rome, where Feliks was already waiting for them. They quickly obtained permission to go into free confinement (*libero confino*) in Aprica in the province of Sondrio, not far from the Swiss border. Feliks went on to Spain. In the camp we were impressed at how skillfully they had managed to get themselves close to the border and speculated about their chances of reaching neutral Switzerland if the circumstances were right.

Mia and I exchanged letters in Italian every day. If we had written in our own language there was no knowing how long the censorship would delay them. It was excellent practice in the language as we described our adventures and our romantic feelings. We still have this correspondence.

At the end of February, 1942, a permit arrived for all the Bauers to return to Rome in order to travel abroad. Mia's uncle, Rihard Bauer, decided that he and his family should take advantage of this but Mia categorically refused to leave without me. I take my hat off to Mia and her parents, to her for taking this risk which could have put their whole plan in danger, and to her parents for agreeing to the resolute demand of

a seventeen-year-old girl. And so, Mia stayed in Aprica with her parents to wait for her “beloved fiancé”.

In the meantime, the Cuban visas for me and the Tišlers arrived at Ferramonti and, in a fine example of bureaucratic inefficiency, the authorities failed to recognise that they were no longer valid. In March we were given permission to leave the camp and set off for Aprica via Rome. Perhaps it was merely out of humanity that the Italians accepted the request of the Roman lawyer D’Ambrosio to let the engaged couple Mia and Mile meet in Aprica. Or perhaps there were some other legal interventions. In any case, we were lucky to be able to leave Ferramonti at the end of March, 1942.

We were escorted by two agents who allowed us to stay in Rome for a day because they wanted to see their families there. We had enough time to meet Anica and her parents, who reproached us for Mia having been irresponsible enough to put her parents in danger with her stubborn insistence on waiting for me in Aprica.

We also interrupted our journey in Milan. I visited people from a company for which my Uncle Avram distributed cellophane in Belgrade. They owed him money for commission and the director generously handed me several thousand lire, an enormous amount of money for me. I didn’t want to meet my fiancée looking like a tramp, so I went immediately to a clothing store to dress myself decently. I even bought a Borsalino hat. I also remember that Rihard found us a good hotel in Milan to sleep in. He had also collected a large amount of money from an instrument factory in the city which owed commission to his Belgrade company Mikron. The clean sheets and soft mattresses were wonderful and a reminder of how pleasant normal life was.

The Bauers were waiting for us when our bus arrived in Aprica. Mia hardly recognised me in my hat and the dark winter coat, two sizes too big, that I had borrowed in Ferramonti. In the first moment, she simply didn’t understand that it was me.

Aprica was an idyllic spot in the mountains with one main street and village houses stretching away on both sides. We had to report to the police every day but were on friendly terms with the locals who helped us with everything except bread, which was rationed to 250 grams each per day. There was, however, plenty of butter and meat. We spent our days on pleasant walks and picnics with the other young people interned there. We didn’t give a thought to our Cuban visas, as Cuba was formally at war with the Axis. But then, one day, they summoned

me and Mia's father to the Questura in Sondrio: the application we had submitted a year earlier had finally been approved, despite the fact that Cuba had become an enemy country in the meantime. In the Questura we received permission to go to Rome in order to arrange our emigration. Mia's father and I decided that we would go ahead and that Mia, her mother and the Tišlers would join us later.

Now we were faced with the problem of getting the documents and visas we needed to continue our trip, as we obviously couldn't use the Cuban visas. We found out about a Catholic organisation which had helped some people we knew to reach Spain. This was the San Raffaele order of German monks whose headquarters had been in Hamburg until recently. Their mission, since the nineteenth century, had been helping Germans emigrate to America regardless of their religious, political or economic status. When Hitler rose to power they turned to helping German Jews find freedom abroad. When there was no one left to help in Hamburg, they moved to Rome where, from their new premises on the Via dei Pettinari, they began giving assistance to refugees, again regardless of their religious, national or political affiliations. The order's head was Father Weber and his closest associate was a handsome young priest called Father Melchert.

Purchasing immigration documents was a complicated and dangerous business. Father Melchert would smuggle fifteen or twenty passports to Zagreb concealed under his habit, mainly for Yugoslav Jews. There was no doubt he was risking his life, because if the Ustashas had discovered his scheme, neither his priest's habit nor his German citizenship would have kept his head on his shoulders. There was an elderly clerk of the former Uruguayan honorary consul, Adika Weissman, living in Zagreb. He had all the visa seals. Once these visas were stamped in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia passports, Father Melchert would return to Rome, only to repeat the whole exploit the following week.

After that it was easy for Father Weber to have the Red Cross extend the validity of these passports and get transit visas for Spain. Everyone knew that the Uruguayan visas were not valid, but as this scheme had been indirectly sanctioned by the Vatican, through the Order of San Raffaele, the Spanish authorities made no difficulties for us in travelling to their country.

Another small example of either Italian humanity or administrative negligence, was that any immigrant with a foreign visa could buy a

thousand dollars from the Banco d'Italia at the official rate of 17 lire to the dollar. This was at a time when a dollar was worth seventy or eighty lire on the black market. Unfortunately, no one in our group except Rihard Tišler had anything like enough lire to take advantage of this.

We used the warm weather in Rome to visit the most famous churches and other tourist attractions. We would often stroll in the parks and once went to the beach at Ostia on the Tyrrhenian coast. I remember renting a tandem and riding with Mia through the streets of the Eternal City.

At the end of July, 1942, we managed to get reservations on a sea-plane flight from Ostia to Barcelona. Air travel wasn't an everyday thing in those days and Mia's mother was particularly nervous about it. We had heard that the airspace between Italy and Spain was controlled by English aircraft and that they could easily shoot down enemy aircraft. We flew via Alger on Sardinia and Pollensa on Mallorca. When we took off from Alghero, the cabin of the plane suddenly filled with smoke and the plane had to turn back. We thought it was the end. Despite our panic, we were brimming with excitement when we finally managed to reach Barcelona.

Although we were concerned about the next stages of our emigration, we were ecstatic to suddenly find ourselves in a country outside the war zone. We had come from compulsory blackouts to brightly lit streets and shop windows full of groceries, and wonderful fruit in particular. I was astonished when I found all our favourite Sephardic dishes in restaurants, made the same way, with the same familiar taste and the same familiar name. They had been carried around the world by the generations of refugees before us for four and a half centuries: albondigas, quisadicas, pastelitos and all the rest of it. What a strange people we are!

In Barcelona we managed to sell some of Mia's mother's gold jewellery. She had some beautiful antique pieces of enormous sentimental value, but here everything was thrown on scales and valued according to weight. With the proceeds from this we managed to reach Madrid by train. As I remember, we travelled the whole day, arriving dirty and blackened with soot from the locomotive. Anica and her parents met us and immediately warned us that it would be difficult to continue our trip as no other South American visas could be obtained without baptism certificates. They had been in touch with the Yugoslav government in London and discovered it was possible to get permission to enter

England from Lisbon, which they later did. We settled into the modest Mirentxu guest house, run by a couple named Vasca. There were already a number of other Yugoslav refugees living there, including Edi Buli and his wife Mirta and Dr Benau.

We all went on the hunt for visas. The Royal Yugoslav Mission in Madrid was headed by a diplomat named Visacki, whose wife was Greek. At the mission we often met other refugees and exchanged our experiences with them. Mia's father, Hugo, stubbornly insisted that we should resist the pressure from Argentina, Paraguay and other countries to present them with false baptism certificates, although some of the people we knew had done so. "If we've saved ourselves as Jews so far, we shouldn't give up now," he would say. However we began hearing that emigrants in transit who had overstayed their visas in Spain were being moved to the Miranda camp. This was not a particularly appealing prospect.

There were also some memorable adventures. Heči and Hugo found a prominent Hungarian Jew from Zagreb named Zala. He had moved to Spain several years before the war and now had a sardine cannery in the Canary Islands. This wealthy émigré was on friendly terms with General Franco, the Spanish dictator, who had done his military service in the Canaries. One evening Zala invited us to a very good restaurant which was noted for its fine roast suckling pig.

In the meantime, Uncle Fredo had managed to find a practical solution for getting to Latin America. Ecuador was issuing immigration visas for two hundred dollars a head. Thanks to Fredo our entire group, Mia's family, the Tišlers and I, managed to get these visas and then on the basis of them we obtained transit visas for Venezuela and Columbia, through which we needed to pass in order to reach Ecuador.

At that time there were only two passenger ships sailing between Spain and South America: the Cabo de Buena Esperanza and the Cabo de Hornos. In our circumstances the ticket price was beyond belief. Fortunately Mia's mother had an astrakhan coat with her and we found a buyer, a Bosnian Jew named Perec who imported coffee to Madrid and had a pretty friend for whom he wanted the fur. He decided immediately to buy it and we set about our preparations to sail. But Perec had just bought a shipment of coffee and was short of cash. So Hugo scurried all over Madrid finding customers for the coffee and somehow put the whole deal together.

Mia and I meanwhile went to the British Council for classes in English, took walks through the great Retiro Park and worked our way through the Prado Museum. Sometimes we would sit with her parents in the famous cafes of Madrid's broad boulevards, shelling delicious prawns and drinking beer. The streets were full of blind lottery-ticket sellers. The shoeshine boys would work the cafes, convincing their victims that their soles were unglued and immediately attaching new ones. There was a petrol shortage and the taxi drivers relied on charcoal to power their vehicles. They looked peculiar with the gas producer bolted on behind, but at least they moved. There was a joke from that period in which a passenger asks a taxi driver "Can't you go any faster?"

"Of course I can," replies the cabbie, "But what will I do with the car?"

Sometimes we would go to the famous circus in Madrid to be entertained by their excellent program. It was strange to us that the Spaniards would go to these evening shows with small children and babies who would scream the whole time.

On Sunday afternoons we would go to concerts. At one of these we were approached by our English teacher from the British Council who told us discreetly about the latest news: the Allies had landed in North Africa that morning. We didn't know whether this was good news or not. It would be logical for Franco to allow the Germans passage to Africa, but this would mean them occupying Spain. There were already a lot of Germans in Madrid in any case. On the ground floor of our guest house there was a famous brewery restaurant called Gambrinus and every night we would hear the German soldiers and officers singing their German songs. This came as a real shock to us at first. But history would give Franco credit for never giving in to the threat of German occupation because of North Africa.

Before we could depart, we needed a certificate from the British Consulate in the port of Vigo. No one could embark in the port without this and in fact it was an English secret service check for Axis agents. We knew of a number of cases where passengers had failed to get the certificate and been forced to remain in Spain. We planned to embark in Cadiz at the beginning of December, 1942, heading for Puerto Cabello on the central coast of Venezuela. Mia's father had put before the war some of Hecika's jewellery in a safe deposit box in a bank in Geneva. His friend from Zagreb, Viktor Selinger, who had lived in Geneva since war broke out was authorised to open the box. When we were about to

leave Europe, he asked for the jewellery to be sent to Cadiz by courier. Now the date of our departure on the Cabo de Hornos was approaching and the courier had still not arrived, so we were growing anxious. Mia's father and I waited at the railway station the night before we left but there was still no sign of a courier. As we prepared for our departure the next day we had lost hope: perhaps Selinger had no intention of handing over the jewellery. At the very last moment, to our joy, the courier appeared with his parcel.

I don't remember much about our sea voyage. We travelled for almost two weeks to Trinidad, the first port on the other side of the Atlantic. There the English authorities again checked all foreign ships, with police interrogating all passengers and checking documents in order to identify anyone suspicious. We knew of two passengers being taken off the ship. One of them was a Frenchman whom the English suspected of being a Vichy collaborator. One man we knew, Branko Beck, had his stamp collection confiscated. They suspected it could be valuable enough to be a possible reward for German spies hiding in the Americas. It was returned to him several months later in Caracas.

None of us was allowed to disembark in Port-of-Spain, so we spent three days on the ship in Trinidad before setting sail for Venezuela. We watched the blue Caribbean from the deck, seeing enormous sharks on a number of occasions.

Finally, one morning, we awoke to find ourselves already at anchor. Tall palm trees stretched along the coast, our first sight of a tropical landscape. It was December 22, 1942, when we finally set foot on the American continent and realised we had been saved.

Many years have passed since then. The Venezuelans made no problems about us staying, although we had only transit visas. This was the time of the Battle for Stalingrad, when the whole world had finally realised that the Germans were losing the war. We had no way to travel on to Ecuador immediately and in any case we thought it was better to remain on the Atlantic coast from which it would simpler to return home to Yugoslavia after the Allies won. At first we were nostalgic for our homeland, but Mia's father would say, wisely, "Once anyone leaves the Balkans, they shouldn't go back."

It was not until after the war that we found out about the terrible massacre of Jews in the German camps. It was then, too, that I discovered that I had lost my parents and many members of my close and more distant family.

We travelled by bus to Caracas, a trip that lasted the entire night. Early in the morning we saw this town in a country we had known only from postage stamps. Little did we think at the time that we would spend our entire life in this sleepy town which, at that time, had a population of only 250,000. Caracas is now a large city of more than five million people, but it was more lovely when it was smaller.



*Mia and Mile Pinkas at their granddaughter
Ana's Bat Mitzvah.*

We had hardly settled in when, on February 17, 1943, Mia and I were married, first in the registry office with Oskar Bek from Zagreb and Rihard Tišler as our witnesses, then, at her father's insistence, in the Sephardic synagogue of El Conde. Thus we sealed our romance with happiness. Thanks to God we have kept this warmth and the blessing of love and harmony.

Beginning a new life wasn't easy, of course, but we soon established some financial security. Mia's parents opened a pastry shop and Mia, after rapidly completing a course in English stenography, began work as a secretary. There was nothing I could do with my law studies, so I was apprenticed to Rihard Tišler. He had opened a workshop in partnership with Rene Delmont, a French expert in micromechanics. I was happy to do this because I'd always enjoyed working with my hands. I had an aptitude for it and soon learned to repair cameras, microscopes, theodolites and other optical instruments. A year later the Tišlers got visas for the United States and moved to California and I became Rene Delmont's new partner.

In 1946, after the war was over, Mia and I went to the United States to see if we would like to live there. We visited family in Pasadena and Chicago and, of course, Uncle Fredo in New York, but decided that "for the time being," we would stay in Caracas. In 1948, on June 11, our son, Miguel was born and three years later, by odd coincidence on the same date, our second son, Danko. The same year we built a modest house on Mount Junco outside Caracas at an altitude of 1,550 metres, overlooking the Caribbean horizon.

Delmont and I agreed to go our separate ways and, in 1947, I founded Micron, named after Rihard's company in Belgrade. Our first big contract was as representatives of Gevaert photographic paper from Belgium and I then became involved in a string of other business relating to the import of cameras, topographic instruments, drawing equipment and similar items.

When we look back at the war, the camps, the dangers we were not quite aware of, emigration, the loss of human lives, the lost families and our early struggle for survival we are keenly aware of how fortunate we were, not only in saving our lives, but also in managing to create a wonderful and complete path in life.

Aleksandar MOŠIĆ

JEWS ON KORČULA



Aleksandar Mošić was born in May, 1919, in Zurich, Switzerland, the only son of Max and Elza Mošić (née Neuwelt). His mother was killed in the Holocaust in Belgrade in May 1942. His father died in Israel in 1978. Mošić fought in the National War of Liberation and later graduated from the Technical Faculty of Belgrade University in June, 1947. He began his working life in the Military-Technical Laboratory in Belgrade. His first technical papers were published while he was head of the laboratory of a caustic factory in Lukavac, near

Tuzla. From May, 1952, until May, 1964, he was involved in the modernisation of the Sisak Oil Refinery and from then until 1973 worked on the construction and commissioning of the Pančevo Oil Refinery. From 1960 until 1973 he was an honorary lecturer on industrial oil processing at the Technological Faculties of the universities of Zagreb and Sisak. He was engaged by the UN as a consultant on personnel training in the Indian petrochemical industry in Vadodara (Baroda), Gudzarat, between 1973 and 1976. He is the author of three textbooks on oil processing and petrochemistry and a large number of papers published in specialist and scientific periodicals and presented at conferences. He is a member with merit of the Serbian Chemistry Society and the Yugoslav Oil and Gas Association.

Aleksandar Mošić is a member of the main board of the World Federation of Jewish Fighters, Partisans and Camp Inmates and a

former member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. His name is entered in the Keren Kayemet Golden Book.

He is married to Jugica (née Križanac) from Split. His son Andro (born 1946) is an electrical engineer and his daughter Elza (born 1948) a linguist and interpreter in French and Spanish. He has two grandchildren.

I am the only child of a mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazi family and all my life I have been proud of the self-reliance I derived from this. I feel that in the home of my parents and my family circles I acquired a sunny Sephardic optimism and the Ashkenazi respect for hard work and order as the unconditional rules of behaviour. My studies were interrupted by the war which, at the same time, broadened my knowledge of foreign languages. I even wrote part of my graduation examination in Italian.

I left Belgrade after the April bombing, and never saw my mother again. She was killed on May 9, 1942, as a prisoner in the Banjica concentration camp in Belgrade.

My father left Belgrade for the first time in the summer of 1941, hiding for some time in Banja Koviljača. He left the city permanently in December, 1941, with a false identity card. He travelled through southern Serbia and arrived on the island of Korčula on January 16, 1942. From then until the capitulation of Italy, my father and I lived in the home of the Sesa family in the Korčula township near the beginning of the road to Žrnovo.

I arrived on Korčula in the months after the April war, after encountering many problems.

As a fourth year student, my obligation to serve in the army was deferred. All the same, on April 6, 1941, I reported to the Belgrade military call-up centre to enlist. The chaos prevalent at the time rendered this attempt useless. Together with my schoolmate, Moša Koen, known as Titkus, I set off for Sarajevo on military orders. In Sarajevo we met another four friends Rafajlo Talvi (Rafce) and Josif Alkalaj (Bubi) from Belgrade together with Pavle Furht and Rudi Marton from Sarajevo. All six of us registered at the military barracks on the evening of Thursday, April 10. About midnight we were approached by the duty sergeant who, after a brief but friendly conversation told us "Get out of here

before dawn! In this army you'll only end up in captivity and a concentration camp."

Friday afternoon found us at the railway station. Titkus took us to his uncle in Mostar. At the station we met Colonel Gašić, two of whose daughters were our fellow students. He commanded a large unit of the Royal Guards. He knew us because his daughters had invited us to the family home in Vojvode Milenka Street a number of times and now he took us with him. We were unable to leave the train in Mostar because the Ustashas were shooting at the station from the surrounding hills. Colonel Gašić unloaded us at noon on Saturday in Herceg Novi and wished us luck before leaving with his unit for Cetinje. We stayed in the *Hotel na Plaži*, the Hotel on the Beach. There we found a friend, Bojana Jakovljević and her family. There were already a lot of Jewish refugees there and our group wandered around the Boka Kotorska villages looking for somewhere to stay.

On Tuesday, April 15, we heard about the truce and the following morning about the capitulation of Yugoslavia. At noon we headed off for Risan and then overnight for Perast, hoping we would find a ship bound for Alexandria. Our hopes were in vain. We returned to Risan and drove the abandoned car of the Ljubljana British Consulate to Herceg Novi. The Italians arrived in Herceg Novi at noon on April 17 and later in the afternoon so did the driver from the British Consulate. We gave him back the car keys without much chit-chat.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, April 22, my cousin Andra, the son of David and Klara Mošić (née Tajtacak) appeared at the hotel. He was in his final year at the Mathematics and Natural Sciences High School. Two days later we left by bus for Dubrovnik. We found a furnished room at 45 Frana Supila Road, near the Ekselzior Hotel and the Villa Argentina. On the last day of April I received a telegram from my father warning me not to return to Belgrade under any circumstances. Immediately after this, in the first week of May, I came down with malaria.

In Dubrovnik I met a childhood friend, Albert Koen, with his sister Helena Puci and their parents. Helena was a young bride who had already had her share of misfortune. She had married Gavra Zunan, from Kralja Petra Street, in the last wedding celebrated at the Bet Jisrael Synagogue. Gavra was already in a detention camp. A few days later Titkus went to his uncle in Mostar and Andra returned to Belgrade via Zemun. After being warned that the Ustashas would begin arresting

Jews, I returned to Herceg Novi. There I found my father's cousins, Avramče and Solomon Buki with their families.

Solomon Mošić was a well-known figure and also an amateur conductor and leader of the Serbian Jewish Choir. He managed to enter Switzerland via Italy in 1943. After returning to Belgrade in 1945, he emigrated to Israel in 1949 with his daughter and two sons and their spouses.

At the end of May I finally set off from Herceg Novi for Split. Andra was there as well: his parents had sent him back to Dalmatia from Zemun. Together we rented a furnished room in Plinarska Street, behind the theatre. Andra was restless however and on June 11 he set off again by train to Zemun. When he reached Belgrade he completed his matriculation exams, but lost his life as one of the first hundred Jews rounded up at Tašmajdan on July 28, 1941, a victim of revenge and the Holocaust. I discovered later that his stubborn determination to return to Belgrade against my advice and that of his parents grew out of his feelings for Elica Štumes, who lived in Strahinjića Bana Street. He had been silent about this, instead insisting that it was immoral for a man to desert his friends when times were hard and I have no doubt that this was his sincere belief.

At the beginning of July I was naive enough to send a registered letter to the Swiss Consulate in Milan applying for an entry visa for Switzerland on the grounds that I had been born in Zurich. The letter of refusal arrived two weeks later, with typical Swiss efficiency. July, August and September passed more or less peacefully in Split. My mother and I wrote to each other via Zemun. I also received two letters in the same way, this time via Petrovaradin, from Mira, the elder daughter of Ljudevit Lev Korodi from Ustavaska Street. He was the president of the Novi Sad Zionists and his family remained in their house until the Fascist Nyilas, or Arrow Cross, seized power in Hungary in March, 1944. The family was deported to a concentration camp but survived as part of a group of Jewish prisoners exchanged for English trucks in a deal struck in Istanbul in the summer of 1944.

There were now a large number of Jewish refugees from all over the Kingdom of Yugoslavia gathered in Split. We tried to stay calm, doing our best to create the illusion of a normal life. When a touring Italian opera company arrived in Split, I saw *Turandot* and *Rigoletto* on the Botičeva field. When the local Black Shirts put up anti-Semitic posters in restaurants all over town and at the Bačvice beach, we began

swimming instead at the Jadranska Straža beach in the neighbouring Firula Inlet, where I met the Križanec sisters. Four years later I was to marry Jugica who, at my age, was the younger of the two. In Firula I also came across Aca and Nada Vinterštajn, two rather younger friends of mine from Belgrade. They were the children of my parents' friends, Elza and Pavle Vinterštajn. He was a respected lawyer and a member of the board of B'nai B'rith. They would often invite me for lunch in Firule at the house of the Pavlović family where they lived. I continued seeing the Pavlović family in Split even after the war. The Vinterštajns managed to reach New York via Switzerland and I met them there in 1960 and again later.

In the meantime, Titkus had returned from Mostar. In the last days of August, he, Žak Pinto and Josif Alkalaj were ordered into confinement on the island of Korčula by the Split Questura. Isak "Kučo" Alkalaj, together with his wife Zafira and daughter Bianka were also sent to Korčula. Kučo Alkalaj was a member of the Belgrade Stock Exchange and lived in the same building on King's Square, now Students' Square, which housed the exchange. The building is now the Ethnographic Museum.

On September 4, it was my turn to be informed by the Questura that I would also be confined on Korčula. I sailed on the morning of September 9 on the former Dedinje, now renamed the Dubrovnik. Jugica threw a red rose to me over the railing as the ship slowly sailed away from the coast.

The beautiful white passenger ships of the Jadranska Plovidba line were now painted in the miserable dull grey of wartime. I too was miserable as I sat on the upper deck and tried to comprehend the unknown future into which I was sailing.

Altogether the Split Questura dispatched about seven hundred Jewish refugees to Korčula during August and September of 1941. All of us had the status of "free confinees" which meant that we were responsible for finding our own accommodation and enjoyed freedom of movement. The Jewish community was determined to take care of its own and support those members who were without assets, together with a number of Austrian and German anti-Fascist émigrés.

It was a Korčula hotel proprietor named Andreis who had the idea of making the island a place of confinement. He proposed to the Split Questura that they send to Korčula some of the three thousand or so Jews from German-occupied parts of Yugoslavia who had taken refuge in Split

and elsewhere in Dalmatia. Andreis secured the cooperation of the occupying force's municipal administration and included in his proposal provision for the payment of the residence tax which was customary in tourist destinations. So well was Andreis' proposal received by the Questura that the large fishing village of Vela Luka was also designated to receive involuntary residents. There was already a *hachsharah*, a Jewish school for fishermen in Vela Luka whose trainees were still there in April when the Yugoslav Royal Army was defeated and the Italian occupation began. By November, the four-hundred-odd Jews on Korčula had still not properly organised themselves either socially or economically. The only form of organisation was selection of representatives to deal with the Italian government's local representative, Lieutenant Roncoroni. The Jewish delegate was a linguist, Anđelko Farhi, whose excellent Italian, personal integrity, good intentions and conscientiousness made him an excellent choice. He would meet each ship from Split at the Korčula coast, greeting each new detainee and telling them where to go. This welcome for new members of the Jewish community brought an encouraging, if momentary, relief from the insecurity they felt.

The first economic initiative was finally created in mid-November, a kind of cooperative in the Bon Repos Hotel in Luka Bay, east of the Old Town. It was established and managed by cousins Isak Kučo from Belgrade and Jozef Alkalaj from Sarajevo. About ten of us younger people with little or no money were accommodated there, working for our board in the hotel kitchen and restaurant. About a hundred detainees were staying in the Bon Repos Hotel and about another three hundred in smaller hotels and private apartments.

After the first raids by the Split patriots on the Italian occupiers, *copri fuoco*, a curfew, was also introduced on Korčula. This applied from sunset to sunrise for the locals and the whole day for detainees, in other words we were under house arrest. In these circumstances, the only Jew who had freedom of movement during the day was Aleks Joelić from Zagreb. He had lived on Korčula since 1941, convalescing after having the fingers amputated on one hand, and enjoyed the same rights as the local residents. He would bring bread to the Jewish families, especially those with children. This went on for about ten days until Roncoroni informed Farhi that the Jews were to be moved to northern Italy.

The first hundred detainees left by boat in December, 1941, heading for Modena via Trieste. Among them were Farhi and the majority of the people involved in the Bon Repos cooperative.

Now things changed for the Jews remaining on Korčula. The cooperative was disbanded and there were no more ships to Italy. A Sarajevo Jew, Hajnrih Levi, who had been a merchant before the Vienna *Anschluss*, was appointed as the community's new representative. Levi was a good organiser and spoke Italian so, in addition to being our representative, he acted as president of the Jewish community on the island although this temporary organisation had not yet been formally established.

Visiting Split, he set up permanent links between the Split Jewish Community and the Jews on Korčula. The Split Jews were already connected with Delasem, the *Delegazione per l'assistenza agli emigranti* in Genoa. From then on they sent regular financial assistance. In January, 1942, Levi organised a youth canteen in the house of Ivelj, where he lived with his wife and daughter, at the far end of the St Nikola coast. Not long afterwards, following the example of Professor Šteg and Professor Kalderon at the Jewish School in Split, he established a school for the children of detainees in two rooms on the first floor of a house in Borak, across the road from the home of Ante Jeričević's family.

Jewish students, myself included, worked as teachers. We instructed the children in the Yugoslav syllabus for the junior high schools of the day.

Life in Vela Luka during the autumn of 1941 was much the same as the general situation in the town of Korčula itself, although, through a combination of circumstances, it was rather more difficult financially. Jozef Maestro, a former director of the Melaha Bank in Sarajevo was now detained in Vela Luka and, together with two associates, he represented the three hundred Jews in the town in dealings with the Italian government, liaising with a Carabinieri sergeant who was under the command of Lieutenant Roncoroni in Korčula. In September about twenty young people without money, most of them from Sarajevo, were given accommodation on the premises of the Jewish fishing school where there were already another five or six students. The hachsharah was no longer functioning either as a school or a fishing cooperative, serving only as a shelter for young Jews being cared for by the Split Jewish Community. Before leaving Split for Vela Luka they were given a health examination

by Dr Silvio Altaras. In the hachsharah they set up a canteen which was managed by Avram Papo. In late autumn, 1941, when the Italians ordered that all fishing boats be moved off the island to prevent the Partisans on the island making connection with those on the mainland, the hachsharah's boat was exempted, on condition that it didn't leave the Vela Luka bay. This allowed the young people to earn a little extra money by taking passengers from one side of the bay to the other. They also took on manual labour in the village until the Partisans destroyed the road between Blato and Vela Luka and were unwilling to repair it.

There were other detainees billeted in private homes in Vela Luka. The restrictions on their freedom were alleviated by the friendly relations between the locals and the refugees. This mood was strong enough to survive even occasional regrettable behaviour by some individuals.

The Njemirovski brothers, Fedor and Boris, from Zagreb lived with a family whose conceited son had left home to become a military pilot for the Independent State of Croatia. While at home on leave in autumn, 1942, he planted five rubber stamps with the five-pointed star on them in the Njemirovski's room, without the knowledge of his parents, and then falsely denounced Fedor and Boris. After he left, the Carabinieri searched the house and arrested the brothers. They were taken to Šibenik where they remained in prison until the capitulation of Italy. Fedor later died as a result of the abuse he suffered in prison.

Together with the development of the National Liberation Movement during 1942, there was a group of activists organised with the Vela Luka hachsharah, which was supposed to be taken over by the Korčula Partisan unit in October. Because of the Italian blockade and the armed seizure of the Sitnica camp, our release from confinement was delayed until the end of January, 1943.

When fifteen men from the hachsharah and a number of the other young people finally left "for the woods" as we used to say at the time, not without truth because Korčula was covered with pine trees, the Vela Luka group had to secretly return to their homes because there was little chance of moving Jews to the island of Hvar and then on to Biokovo via Podgora.

Before they left, the fifteen young Jews were given certificates of candidacy for Communist Party membership by the local committee. The group included Santo Kabiljo, Jakov "Jakile" Kabiljo, Jozef "Jusule" Romano, Salamon Romano, David "Česi" Altarac, David

“Dado” Danon, David Katan, Jozef “Čiči” Papo, Miša Štajner, Silvio Maestro, Jakov Sekelji and another three, Ašer, Karli and Moša, whose surnames I don’t know. There were another fifteen whose names I don’t know at all. Ašer, Karli and Moša were students from the fishing school while the other twelve were detainees. Of the entire group only three survived the National Liberation War, Santo Kabiljo and Miša Štajner, who are now in Israel, and Silvio Maestro who lives in Belgrade.

When the Italians discovered in March that these young people had joined the Partisans, the Fascists arrested a group of young men and sometime later, probably in June, they shot thirteen, the majority of them from Vela Luka. Among those shot were three Jews, Leon Romano, Isak Kabiljo and Avram Roman, known as Momak. The Italian occupiers declared all of them collaborators with the National Liberation Movement when, in fact, they were hostages and were shot as revenge.

Đuro Enđl Pavlović, a Jewish clerk from Zagreb and a captain first class in the reserve, was actively collaborating with the National Liberation Struggle on the island. Because of the danger that the Italians might discover his activities, he joined the Korčula unit that summer. Pavlović was later recognised as a fighter from 1941, although he was not awarded the Commemorative Medal of the Partisan forces.

The other unmarried detainees under thirty years of age were chained by the Carabinieri and put on a ship which sailed for Korčula late in the evening. The ship was fired on by the Partisans and then later a fire broke out on board which the crew managed to extinguish. The arrested men remained in chains the whole time. They arrived at the port of Korčula at dawn and were immediately thrown into prison.

Before the group from Vela Luka arrived, the canteen had outgrown its original premises in the Ivelj house and had moved to another empty house inside the western wall of the old town, near the home of the Arnerić family. The canteen members chose Majer Altarac as their member of the committee, which also included Hajnrih Levi as canteen officer and Edo Piliš from Zagreb. While the Vela Luka hachsharists were still in the Carabinieri prison, Roncoroni, who was now a captain, asked Hajnrih Levi to nominate three of the canteen members as hostages, in an effort to prevent any more defections to the Partisans. The members refused resolutely, saying that Roncoroni would have to choose his own hostages. Levi made several trips back and forward between the canteen, where the members were assembled, and Roncoroni, delivering messages accurately and without putting any

pressure on the canteen members. This dispelled the unvoiced suspicion that he was being supported by Roncoroni in his activities. This suspicion had arisen because of his authoritative management of the day-to-day affairs of the small Jewish community in Korčula. The hostage problem was solved by Roncoroni declaring all the canteen members hostages, about twenty of us. This we saw as political affirmation and for Levi it lifted a burden from him as the others regained full confidence in his integrity.

The young prisoners were released a few days later, but were not returned to Vela Luka. Instead they remained in Korčula and were obliged to report to the Carabinieri station every morning. Most of them joined the canteen.

With its increased strength, both in numbers and ideologically after the successful confrontation with Roncoroni, the canteen now became the headquarters of a small Party organisation headed by Aleks Joelić from Zagreb. The members I can remember were Leon and Albert Alkalaj, Eli Altarac, Majer Altarac and Moca Altarac. There was probably someone else. Joelić was connected with the local organisation in which the main movers were a teacher, Zoran Palčok and young Zvonko Letica, a dentist's son who became a journalist in Zagreb after the war. It was typical of this early period of organised underground anti-Fascist activity that leaflets were printed on a duplicator in the school supervisor's office, immediately adjacent to Roncoroni's room. The young Jews took an active part in this, teaching the inexperienced Korčula activists to make leaflets.

The spring of 1942 saw the beginning of collecting financial contributions for the National Liberation Movement. This continued until September 1943. There was not a lot of money raised, but this activity was mainly important because through it the detainees identified with the National Liberation Movement.

Cultural life was also revived in parallel with the political developments. Every week or two there would be concerts where collections would be taken to help the canteen and families in severe need. Music would be played from records for the introductory presentations, or accordionist Samuel Čaček from Mostar or bass baritone Maks Savin and tenor Zvonko Glika, both from Croatia would perform. Dr Bruno Bjelinski, a composer from Zagreb, also contributed to these.

A number of the detainees attended lectures in art history by writer Teodor Csokor from Vienna. These were rather public events. But after

Csokor's lectures, which he gave in German, the majority of the audience would stay and discreetly discuss the news from the Italian radio or other information whose sources could only be hinted at.

Many of the younger people learned English and Italian. I still have my Italian textbook as a keepsake, but I no longer remember my English textbook or how I obtained it. I didn't manage to learn English pronunciation, only spelling, grammar and some vocabulary.

At that time the secretary of the District Committee for Southern Dalmatia was Marin Cetinić, part of whose role was to remind the local organisation of its failure to take any action against the eight hundred soldiers of the occupation, the Carabinieri and the Black Shirts. Thanks to accurate information collected by Leon Alkalaj when he was buying bread illegally from Italian soldiers to supplement the Jewish families' meagre daily ration of three hundred grams, the Korčula organisation was able to prepare an attack on the navy patrol station above the town.

The station was housed in a round tower, a small local fortress from the Venetian era or the Napoleonic wars. It had a crew of ten and a vast armoury of light weapons and ammunition. A group from the Korčula branch of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia attacked the station late one afternoon. Eli Altarac was among them. The other young members of the canteen were assigned to lolling around the coast as we usually did in the early evenings, monitoring the movements of the Fascist port militia. The Communist Youth members disarmed the signals crew and the sailors at the station without firing a single shot. There was no gunfire heard down in the town. As they started carrying out the weapons and ammunition towards the Partisan camp near Čara, a steamship appeared in the western entrance of the Pelješac channel. When it didn't receive the usual signal from the patrol station, the alarm was raised in the port captain's office, sending the Carabinieri and Black Shirts out to the port immediately. This meant the raiders had to get out fast and, in the rush, Eli Altarac left his leather jacket behind. Realising that he had left a trail leading to the town's League of Communist Youth, he returned in the face of the approaching Italians and grabbed the jacket. Thanks to his bravery the Italians attributed the attack to the Korčula Partisan unit.

But when anti-Fascist slogans appeared on the walls of houses in the town soon after this, the Carabinieri arrested a lot of young men, including two who had been involved in the raid on the navy patrol station. In prison they met Zoran Palčok who impressed on them the need

to remain silent and both endured being beaten without confessing to anything. During the investigation the men were paraded before the sailors from the patrol station. Apparently one of them recognised Zvonko Letica, probably by his unusually long face whose basic features were recognisable even under the soot it had been daubed with for the attack. The sailor, however, remained silent but, despite this, Eli was now in danger, so Zoran's brother, Dr Vedran Palčok issued a medical certificate for him saying that he had an inflamed appendix. He also taught him how to fake the symptoms. On the basis of this, Eli was given a permit to go to Split for surgery. The Carabinieri showed his photograph to the arrested Communist Youth and the patrol station crew, asking whether he had taken part in the attack. Some of them hadn't seen him and the others didn't recognise him. Eli remained in Split until Italy capitulated.



Group of Jews detained on Korčula. (right to left) Front row: Salaman Altarac, Erna Altarac, Klara Altarac, Majer Altarac, Alegreta Albahari, Ema Kamhi and her son Mojse, Maks Mošić. Middle row: Rahamim Baruh, Ladislav Bruner, Eli Altarac, Albert Alkalaj, Branko Šlezinger, Grgur Dojč, (two unknown men), David Gaon, (unknown), Dr Mirko Bruner, (two unknown men), Samuel Čačkes, Menahem Elazar, Moric Danon. Third row (standing): Miroslav Šiler, two unknown men, Alfred Mošić and an unknown expatriate.

No one was taken by surprise by the events of the beginning of September, 1943. Immediately after the Italian army and Carabinieri departed, the National Liberation Committees emerged from the underground. On Korčula and Pelješac, the Thirteenth Brigade of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia was formed within the 26th Division. Aleks Joelić was a member of the Korčula committee and also a member of the Kotar National Liberation Committee. Eli Altarac returned from Split and took on the duties of secretary for the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia.

At the request of Dr Jozef Tirhofer, the deputy head of the Community in Vela Luka, the Šterfeld brothers, who were born in Koprivnica, travelled to Korčula. They first met Joelić and then, together with him, requested approval from the national authority for the evacuation of the Vela Luka detainees to southern Italy. The approval was signed by Vid Mihičić, the president of the Kotar National Liberation Committee. Thus the Jews from Vela Luka were the first to depart on hired two-masters. Vid came in for criticism from the Partisan military chiefs, concerned that the departure of the Jews would have a bad effect on the morale of the locals. The events that followed clearly proved them wrong. The criticism had been based on ignorance of the real nature of the Holocaust on one hand and, on the other, on the premature belief that the mid-Dalmatian islands had been liberated once and for all.

The departure of the Vela Luka detainees could be seen as part of something implemented rather later throughout the central Dalmatian coast. The civilian population was taken as "Partisan refugees" via the island of Vis and southern Italy to El-Shat on the Sinai Peninsula. There had been no people of fighting age in Vela Luka for more than a year and a half.

Meanwhile, in Korčula itself, there had been a decision that the younger men should join the Thirteenth Brigade, while the women, children and men over thirty would be evacuated. They decided that each person could bring only one piece of hand baggage or one rucksack in order to make the maximum use of space on the only available motor-driven ship. All surplus clothing and food was given to the Korčula hospital.

The ship sailed out in the afternoon but, as it passed Ražnjić, the last eastern cape, near the village of Lumbarda, it received a signal to return to the port of Korčula. The order to return was given by Franko

Telenta, a political commissioner from the Thirteenth Brigade, who had not been told about the evacuation decision and who had the firm opinion that this was a sign of capitulation.

The returnees, now with no independent means of support, were accommodated in the De la Ville hotel on the coast at the expense of the people's authority. In Korčula there was also a small group of Austrians and about a hundred Jewish civilians for whom there had been no room on the ship. Joelić informed Marin Cetinić about the situation when he arrived in Korčula ten days later. Marin knew more about the general situation in Dalmatia and the probable course of events and, after reaching agreement with senior officials, approved a second departure. Eighty-four Jewish civilians and four Austrians remained in Korčula. The younger men were already in the military brigades. They joined various units of the Thirteenth Dalmatian Brigade and later some of them transferred to other parts of the Eighth Corps and the naval force of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army.

I went to Pelješac with the Korčula troop, to a position above Ston. After just a few days I was given command of a battalion with two 80 mm mortars and a pair of mules. I was the only one among the younger fighters with no military training in the newly formed Eighth Brigade who could use protractor sights and charts. Later, I moved to the coastal artillery on Cape Ražnjić on Korčula and from there, at the beginning of 1944, to the technical service of the Partisan naval force.

Zdravko Has was killed in the Knin operation in late 1944. Lieutenant Moco Altarac from Sarajevo committed suicide in a fit of depression in liberated Split towards the end of 1944.

Other former detainees and fighters in the National Liberation War were on Korčula for the liberation of the country. Majer Altarac, Eli Altarac and Iso Levi remained in the Yugoslav Army until they retired.

On October 23, 1943, just two weeks after the civilians departed, the Germans began a local offensive on Pelješac as part of their operation to seize the Adriatic coast. On December 23 they landed on Korčula and occupied the island.

The remaining detainees retreated to Vela Luka with units of the Eighth Dalmatian and First Overseas Brigades and parts of the First Dalmatian Elite Brigade. The group was evacuated from there via Vis to southern Italy together with Dalmatian refugees. Only one of the former detainees was lost during the retreat from Korčula to Vela Luka but, unfortunately, his name has passed into oblivion.

The departure of this last group of Jews on December 28 or 29, 1943, brought the collective sojourn of Jews on Korčula to an end. However the two and a half years which the detainees spent with the people of Korčula left its mark. The sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, the friendships, memories of warmth and hospitality and gatherings of families from Vela Luka and Korčula with Jewish families remain, along with the memory of the cooperation between Korčula and Jewish doctors and of the friendship among units of the National Liberation Army.

Albert ALKALAJ*

A PAINTER GROWS UP IN THE CAMP

Albert Alkalaj is the son of Samuilo and Lepa Alkalaj (née Afar). His father was a clerk in the Franco-Serbian Bank. When the Austrians entered Belgrade during the first world war, his family moved to Paris, where Albert was born in 1917. After the war the family returned to Belgrade, where Albert completed secondary school and enrolled to study architecture and was involved in the Zionist movement Hashomer Hatzair.

He taught himself to paint with the help of Bora Baruh. While he was interned in the Ferramonti camp during the second world war he met the Austrian painter Michael Fingenstein who gave him lessons. After the liberation he went to Rome, remaining there to paint. In Rome he met Oskar Kokoschka and Karl Levi, who wrote the introduction to the catalogue for his first major exhibition in Rome. From Italy he moved to Boston in the United States where he now lives as an independent painter and academic.

I was an officer in the war and was captured in Macedonia. While imprisoned in Bulgaria I managed to convince the camp commandant to release me before all the camp inmates were transported to Germany. I returned to Belgrade but was unable to find my parents who had left after the first bombing on April 6, 1941.

* This testimony is based on a letter from Albert Alkalaj to Vera Kon Alkalaj and a telephone discussion with Eta Najfeld.

When I arrived the Jews were already wearing yellow arm bands and I now had to do the same. I worked in Belgrade with other young people, mostly on the forging of documents for refugees, Jews from countries already invaded by the Germans who were passing through Belgrade with the plan of going to Palestine. After an act of sabotage, all male Jews were summoned to Tašmajdan and every fifth one was shot. I was fourth. This made it clear to me that I had to flee. I forged passports for a friend and myself and we fled Belgrade towards the south, hoping to come across the Italians.



The Refugees, *Albert Alkalaj, India ink, pen.*

Passing through Niš, Uroševac, Pristina and Prizren, we managed to reach Albania where we travelled from the capital, Tirana, to the port of Durres. There we caught a ship for Split after waiting for fifteen days. Walking around Durres I saw some Jewish shops and went into one of them. The Jews there, speaking in Ladino, told me that there was a concentration camp in Kavaje. I went there the next day by bus and saw, from the bus, my sister and Jaša behind the wire. This was how I discovered that my entire family was there. I visited Kavaje several times, as my father's "nephew", bringing them news about events in Belgrade. Jaša and I had attended school together, lived in the same house and been friends from our early childhood.

I left Kavaje reluctantly and went to Split. I didn't like the way the Fascists treated the Jewish refugees there. I knew there was going to be trouble, so my friend and I obtained new false documents and moved to Ancona in Italy. We were both keen mountain climbers, so we planned to cross the Alps, then go to Zurich and fly from there to Lisbon. From there we would take a ship right around Africa to Lorenzo Marquez in Mozambique, travel to Cairo by train and then make our way from Cairo to Palestine.

In the event, none of this happened as we got stuck in Padua where I had met some friends. But I came under suspicion because of my documents and fled to Milan, where the situation was very difficult. I had no documents for the city so I had to sleep in waiting rooms at the station or in the cinema. Both the Carabinieri and the Germans were looking for me. I didn't sleep, ate little and froze in the Milan winter. I thought that the best possible place for me would be prison, where I would be able to sleep and no one would look for me. So, on December 9, I managed to get myself arrested in Vicenza and, after three months in prison, in isolation, they moved me to Ferramonti.



The Last Day of the War, *Albert Alkalaj, oil pastels on card, 1945.*

I was in Ferramonti for ten months before my family succeeded in being released to “free confinement” in Pergola in the province of Pessaro. There we lived peacefully, waiting for the war to end. However, once Badoglio arrived on the scene and Mussolini was arrested and then released by the Germans, a telegram arrived with orders to arrest us. The girl who received the telegram came and warned me. That same evening we fled into the hills and hid there until the liberation. During those two years we went through everything: hiding with farmers, with the Partisans, with priests and so on. Finally, following the liberation, we returned, exhausted and hungry, to Pergola.

Much later, after I managed to sell some paintings and saved money to buy a truck, we went to Rome where we were accepted. We didn't want to return to Belgrade. We had lost everything we owned including all the members of our extended family. We remained in Rome until 1951, when the Truman Directive allowed a hundred thousand refugees to be admitted to the United States. In this way we arrived in Boston. While we were in Rome I met Vera Eškenazi whom I had known in Belgrade. We were married in Campidoglio under the Michelangelo monument. It was in Rome that I matured as an artist and Vera studied medicine.

We arrived in Boston as refugees, and were assisted by the Jewish Community Appeal. My parents subsequently died and my sister Bojana lives in the United States with her family.



V

UNDER HUNGARIAN RULE



Dr Teodor KOVAČ

SAVED BY A GUARD



Teodor Kovač was born in 1923 in the northern Banat town of Novi Kneževac, where his father, Arpad, had moved after the first world war to work as a barrister. His mother, Olga Berger, was born in Dalj. Both perished in the war; his father in the Topovske Šupe camp in Belgrade and his mother in the Sajmište camp. Many of his relatives were killed in a raid in Novi Sad. Only Teodor, his brother Karlo and his father's sister, together with her family, survived the war.

After the war Teodor Kovač graduated from the Belgrade Faculty of Medicine and specialised in internal medicine. He retired as head of endocrinology at the Novi Sad clinic for internal medicine, at the same time resigning as president of the Yugoslav Association of Endocrinologists. As well as being a member of many international medical associations, he is also an honorary member of the Hungarian Diabetes Society. In May, 2000, he became president of the Jewish Community of Novi Sad.

His wife, Ana, is also retired. He has one daughter from his first marriage, Olga, a physician specialising in biochemistry.

There was no high school in my home town of Novi Kneževac so, after finishing primary school there in 1933, I began high school in Novi Sad. My mother's parents lived there so I stayed with them. I wasn't

familiar with the city and didn't even know where the high school was. My grandmother introduced me to Đura Polak, who was to be at the same school. By chance, we were in the same class and remained good friends until the war. Unfortunately he was seriously ill with tuberculosis and spent more time in sanatoriums than he did at home. He did not survive Auschwitz.

I was an average student, completing every year with a grade of "very good", apart from the second year when I scored "excellent".

As far as I remember, Đura first took me to Hashomer Hatzair when I was in the third or fourth grade. If I have any positive qualities, I can attribute most of them to this organisation. Today I look back on my five or six years of active involvement with nostalgia and pride.

When the war broke out in April, 1941, I was in the eighth grade. After the coup of March 27, 1941, school was abandoned. My brother Karlo, my only sibling, had graduated from law school in Subotica and I spent most of my time with him during the most difficult period of the war. At that time he was finishing his articles in our father's office in Novi Kneževac. He was a reserve officer but had no standby orders for wartime deployment. Nevertheless, as soon as he heard that war had broken out he saw it as his duty to report. He was sent from one command post to another, finally ending up in Novi Sad.

Our parents stayed at home in German-occupied Banat. Novi Sad was under Hungarian administration. Life was more bearable there for Jews than in Banat, as Jewish life in Hungary was not under any great threat at that time. There was talk of the Hungarian army being about to arrive in Banat, so our parents told us to stay where we were, with our grandmother. All the Banat Jews were deported on August 14, 1941. Those from the north were imprisoned for a month in Novi Bečej before being transported to Belgrade. The women and children were allowed to find their own accommodation as best they could, but were banned from leaving the capital. All the men were incarcerated in the Topovske Šupe camp. I think that they killed my father on October 12. My mother, and the wives of other prisoners in the camp brought lunch for their husbands as usual that day but were told not to bring food to the camp any more because the prisoners had been taken elsewhere. The executions were mainly carried out between Pančevo and the village of Jabuka.

My brother and I, still in Novi Sad, tried to rescue my mother. At that time, in the second half of September, a large-scale operation began

to smuggle Jewish women and the occasional well-hidden Jewish man from Belgrade to Hungary. This business was mainly handled by the sailors and railway workers whose jobs gave them the opportunities needed. German soldiers were also engaged in smuggling, of course, for large amounts of money. We soon discovered our mother's address in Belgrade and my brother found a sailor who agreed to smuggle her to Novi Sad. My grandmother didn't have the amount of money demanded by the smuggler and it took us a long time to collect the sum required. Sadly, our plan failed.

After I matriculated from high school in late September, I found a job in a zincographer's shop and began an apprenticeship there. Most of my work was couriering material to and from newspaper offices. There was a doorman at the *Deutsches Volksblatt* daily with whom I always spoke German and who, thinking I was his compatriot, always greeted me with "Heil Hitler". About ten days after I started work he began leaving me on my own in his booth while he went to deliver the material and fetch me a new package. I always took advantage of this to pilfer a few valid permits to pass out around the city. He never caught me. I gave the permits to people I knew who were in contact with members of the underground resistance, but I don't know whether they ever used them or not.

We were in touch with members of the Communist Youth for several months. We helped them in our capacity as Hashomer Hatzair members, painting slogans on the walls of houses, giving them Hungarian pass forms and strewing nails in the streets to damage military vehicles. In our dealings with them we always insisted that they should accept us not as individuals but as Hashomer Hatzair.

I was arrested on October 28, 1941, as I returned by bicycle from the printers. I left my bicycle in the courtyard and went into the workshop. Then I heard the owner say to a man I'd never seen before "That's him!" Suddenly another man arrived and I was told I was being arrested. I handed over the material I had brought, said goodbye to the boss and the older apprentices and left with them. They didn't tie me, but frogmarched me straight across the street from the workshop to the police. I was in no position to escape: the area was teeming with policemen and, had I tried, they would have killed me. I didn't know why I was being arrested but I presumed it was because of my Communist connections. They only once asked me if I had any weapons. The officer handling my case asked me when I had left Banat for Novi Sad but

didn't ask anything about my activities with the Communists. Quite offhandedly he told me that I had been arrested because I had fled Banat to escape the deportation of the Jews. I replied that this was an absurd charge because they only had to telephone the high school to confirm that I had been in Novi Sad since the beginning of the occupation. I had just matriculated that summer – I had my certificate at home – I worked in the city and hadn't left it, even for a minute. He wasn't interested.

I had only just been thrown into prison when my brother, who had been arrested at the same time, arrived. He told me that while he was being interrogated he had seen a demand from the District Administration of Kanjiža (which had also been annexed by Hungary) to the Novi Sad Police for us to be arrested for having escaped deportation and advising them that we were wanted by the German authorities in Novi Kneževac. We had probably been denounced by Ida Valai, a non-Jew who worked as a law clerk in my father's office. I don't know what favours she did for the Germans but, as our parents had already been deported, she probably thought it would be easier for her to grab the property of her former employer if she got us out of the way.

At that time, Dr Jozsef Konyoki, a career policeman from Hungary, was appointed chief of the Department for Foreigners in the Novi Sad police. We heard later that on his arrival in Novi Sad he had said "Now it's time to make some big money." Only Hungarian citizens, or those who had residence permits, were allowed to stay in Hungary and he was responsible for the issue of these permits. It wasn't easy for Jews to acquire all the documents necessary to prove their citizenship. Pending the legal procurement of the documents, the only alternative was to apply for a residence permit. Approval of these requests was at Konyoki's discretion. In practical terms this meant that, when an applicant was asked to say on what basis he was living in Novi Sad, he should leave a hefty envelope full of money on Konyoki's desk. The extent of the fortune he made in this way became obvious when he left the city on the eve of the liberation with three full truckloads. We were just what he needed and anyone who didn't play the game by his rules would meet the same fate as us, which was to be turned over to the Germans or the Ustashas. It was through no fault of our own that we served as an example to others, we were scapegoats. It didn't bother him in the least that there was not a grain of truth in the alleged reason for handing us over to the Germans. The fact that all our ancestors had lived on both the past and the present territory of Hungary was worth

nothing. He sent many people to their death. After the war he was captured in Hungary and sentenced to death by hanging in Novi Sad.

After spending three days in the Novi Sad prison we were handed over to the Germans in Novi Kneževac and taken along the banks of the Tisa River to prison. Along the way we unexpectedly met an acquaintance, a local merchant. I remember he was absolutely petrified to see us being taken away by German police. We heard later about the fatal consequences of this chance meeting. The merchant went to Belgrade on business that night and met our mother there. I don't know whether this was coincidental or whether he had sought her out, but he told her about seeing us being taken to prison in Novi Kneževac. Within a day or two of this the smuggler my brother had hired to bring our mother to Novi Sad came to collect her. To his surprise, because this had never happened before, our mother refused to leave. She told him that her children were about to arrive in Belgrade and that if she left there would be no one to bring them food. The smuggler gave up, and was honest enough to return the payment he had received in advance.

I could perhaps forgive Ida Valai for having denounced us, but I can never forgive her for the loss of our mother. During the occupation she became rather intimate with the then authorities and before the liberation she fled to her sister's farm near Bečej. We were not the only ones to whom she had caused great harm and she was soon discovered hiding there, but it was not until 1946 that she was arrested. The courts were no longer so harsh and she was sentenced to only a few years' imprisonment. Because she was by now advanced in years and in poor health, she didn't remain in prison long. About twenty years later, while working as a hospital doctor, I returned from my annual holiday and examined the list of patients in my ward only to see her name on it. During my rounds I made no gesture to show that I recognised her. Soon after the rounds, a nurse came to tell me that a certain patient had suddenly demanded to be discharged, although there had been no discussion of this because her condition did not indicate it was appropriate. I told the nurse that we could not keep anyone in the hospital by force. If she signed a waiver that she was leaving of her own free will she had to be discharged. I heard that she died several years later after having suffered a great deal of pain.

Our mother stayed on in Belgrade. We presume she was in an apartment with our uncle's daughter. Six weeks after we had been taken to Banat she was interned in the Sajmište camp near Belgrade together

with the other women and children who were still “free”. We don’t know how she died – whether from the cold of that winter, one of the harshest of the century, or of disease or starvation, or whether she suffocated in a gas chamber.

In Novi Kneževac we had our share of beatings. The seat of my trousers was falling apart so that my underwear could be seen. After three days they took us to Petrovgrad, which is now Zrenjanin. We were surprised to find about twenty Jewish men in the court cells and even more Jewish women. All of them had either fled Belgrade or had been caught trying to reach Hungary after hiding in Banat. The prison regime was tolerable and only occasionally harsh. We were hardly well nourished, but there was no real starvation. Still we suffered a great deal from the cold. In the Novi Kneževac prison I had mislaid one of my shoes. As a replacement I wore some kind of slipper and the frostbite I suffered plagued me for years, long after the war was over.

Imprisoned with us was Alexander Herzfeld, a German invalid, a veteran of the first world war who now worked as a pharmacist in Zrenjanin. After the war he had married the widow of a fallen German officer and adopted their daughter. He returned to Zrenjanin with his family after the Nazis rose to power. When the persecution of Jews began, his wife went to Belgrade. The German general who now commanded Serbia had been a classmate of her first husband. She obtained a guarantee in writing from him that her husband was to be exempted from all anti-Jewish measures. Herzfeld later told us that before we arrived an officer (or perhaps a non-commissioned officer, I no longer remember) whose name was Harry Zeller had called him in and taken this permit from him. Then a new commander of Serbia was appointed and Herzfeld was arrested. However he was spared the most extreme humiliations. His wife was allowed to visit him every day, bringing him food and underwear and talking to him as long as she liked. He didn’t go out to work with us, instead he spent the whole day in a closed room and so he wasn’t as cold as we were. In the middle of January, 1942, he told us that his wife had heard that we were to be interrogated soon and that we should insist that we were Hungarian citizens so that they would transfer us to Hungary.

About ten days later we were indeed called for a hearing. They made a hasty record of our claim to have arrived in Banat by mistake. Suddenly, on February 10, they sent us back from work to pack our belongings, telling us that we were to leave that evening by train for

Novi Bečej, also in Banat, where they would hand us over to the Hungarian authorities. There were eight of us altogether, seven men and one woman. They told us that we were the first group and the others would follow. Unfortunately we were not only the first group but also the last: the others were all killed. A month later some were shot in retaliation for the assassination of an agent. This was proclaimed on posters. We never found out where the others were killed, nor why we eight had been chosen, as we had all maintained that we were Hungarian citizens.

We spent a day and a half in Novi Bečej before being escorted under guard across the frozen Tisa to Bečej on the Bačka bank of the river. We stayed there overnight and on the following evening were taken to Budapest, to the transit camp of Tolonchaz.

We remained in Budapest for a month before being transferred to the Garany camp, about three hundred kilometres away. The majority of prisoners in Garany were “foreigners” like us. At the time we were classified as “politically unreliable elements” of undefined citizenship. The prisoners also included a group of Hashomer Hatzair members, most of them from Budapest, with whom I made contact. The prison regime was tolerable enough: there was no harassment and we were allowed to receive parcels from home. Some time in September they transferred us to the newly opened camp of Csorgo nearby. There were only “foreigners” in the camp and the regime was similar to that of Garany.

For a long time there were rumours that prisoners in a certain age group would be drafted into working parties, known as *musoši* to build fortifications on the Russian front. In the middle of December they announced the age bracket for the working groups, whose members were to be drafted into the military. My brother was taken but I was too young for the age selection. We were given permits allowing us to have visitors and we were also allowed to send telegrams. We cabled our grandmother in Novi Sad, telling her that my brother had been drafted as a *musoš* and was about to leave. She arrived the very next evening, having travelled, at the age of 67, more than six hundred kilometres in a day to see her grandchildren. It was the first time we had seen her since we had been arrested.

My brother left the following day together with the whole group. He wrote from a town not far away that they were being kept there for a day or two, waiting for the rest of the draft to arrive from Budapest to

complete the work group. Their guard on the trip from Budapest was Sergeant-Major Matyasovsky an anti-Semitic thug. He knew one of the newly arrived Jews, a man by the name of Strauss whose father was one of the directors of Weiss-Manfred, an enormous metal works in Csepel, near Budapest. It was the largest firm of its kind in Hungary and was heavily involved in military production. The anti-Semite Matyasovsky singled Strauss out, saying something along these lines: "We're off to the front in a couple of days. I couldn't care less if you die there, you don't deserve any better. But I could get killed there too, and I don't feel like dying. So I'm going to give you a soldier to escort you to Budapest. Get money from your daddy and our doctor will declare a typhus epidemic and we'll be quarantined here for six weeks." I can't remember how much money he actually wanted but it was a sizeable sum.

This actually happened, and the whole procedure was repeated again late in January, 1943. It was March by the time the second six weeks had expired and Stalingrad was already over. The Hungarian front had completely fallen apart so there was no longer anywhere to send work groups and the men who had originally been taken from the camps were sent back to them. They didn't send my brother back to Csorgo but to Garany.

In the middle of June I was released from the camp on the condition that I report to the police in Pecs. This meant I was under a kind of house arrest there. I was free, but wasn't permitted to leave the city and had to report regularly to the police. When I arrived I went to the local Jewish Community and they found me accommodation. I took care of the grounds and the flowers at the Jewish cemetery.

The Germans occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, and my brother arrived in Pecs the same evening. Both he and my grandmother thought it was safer for him there. In the chaos at the beginning of the occupation he had no difficulty in surviving and reported to the police, although not as a "foreigner" because nobody asked for documents. We wondered what to do. My brother and I returned to Novi Sad to look for a way to reach Srem and join the Partisans. He was told that it was possible but that we needed to wait for a connection to leave. But where could we wait?

Deportations had begun and Novi Sad was one of the first cities where this happened. After the war we discovered that our grandmother had reached Auschwitz alive but had never made it out of there. In the raid in Novi Sad we lost many relatives, we had already lost our par-

ents in Belgrade and, of all our many relatives, only my father's sister and her family survived, hiding in various parts of Hungary.

After my brother returned from Novi Sad we thought about hiding somewhere and waiting for the Russians to arrive. In the end, we didn't succeed. Suddenly, on May 10, I was arrested, having been found on a list of "foreigners". I spent three days in prison before I was brought before the investigator only to find my brother already there. He presented an urgent call-up notice to join the *musoši*. The investigators asked me if I accepted this and I did. Even before my arrest we had thought it less dangerous to be with the military in a working group than in prison. We learned later that shortly after my release the "foreigners" had been dispatched from prison to concentration camps outside Hungary. It was obvious that the military disapproved of the action the civil authorities were taking against Jews. They saw the state's main priority as the speedy deportation of Hungarian Jews in accordance with Eichmann's orders, but these authorities had no influence on the military.

Our call-up notice gave Mohacs as our destination and we set off the following day. At the Municipal Command we were directed to the yard of an unfinished factory where a few dozen *musoši* had already gathered. We learnt that an entire *musoši* work group had been redeployed shortly before and that this one was now waiting for its full complement of workers. Scores of new men arrived daily. We worked on stripping the houses of Jewish families who had been taken to the ghettos as well as on the dozens of tugboats anchored along the riverbank in Mohacs because of the mines in the Danube. Our number included *musoši* from Mohacs itself and it was not uncommon for them to find themselves stripping their own houses. I will never forget them calling us over one evening and handing us some money, I don't remember how much but I know it was a considerable sum. While emptying out their own apartments, some of them had managed to retrieve valuables hidden before their families had been taken to the ghetto. While the others diverted the guards, they unearthed the concealed items. Having succeeded in getting their hands on their money they thought it only natural they should share it with us. The money itself didn't mean so much to us, because we all had a little in any case, but their kindness touched us deeply.

In the middle of July about a quarter of our working group, my brother and I included, were transferred to Kaposvar. There too we

stripped the houses of Jews who had been deported from the ghetto while about ten of us were ordered to bale straw. But the straw was never brought in because in those days every morning, as regular as clockwork, Allied aircraft would fly over and every kind of traffic was forbidden.

In mid-September our work group was moved to Budapest. I no longer remember where we met up with the Mohacs men. In Budapest they put us up in the industrial zone of the city, again in an unfinished factory. My brother and I were put to work in a nearby brewery. It was hard work, carrying hundred-litre barrels of beer and washing barrels, but there was no harassment and we worked side by side with the locals. The brewery was in cellars cut into rock and food supplies for Budapest were also stored there. There were trucks coming and going all the time, bringing food for the city or distributing it to the population. The loading and unloading was done by the non-Jewish *musoši*. They wore the Hungarian tricolour on their armbands instead of the yellow star like us. Nobody was able to control this mass of people: drivers, guards, workers and *musoši*. In the chaos it was even possible to steal food but we mostly bought margarine from the *musoši* who were loading food onto the trucks.

On Sunday, October 15, 1944, Hungary officially sought a truce with the Allies and by that evening the Germans had seized complete control of the whole country.

The commander of our work group was a lieutenant in the reserves, a sickly country schoolteacher. His deputy was an undergraduate mining student in Budapest who came from somewhere in northern Hungary. His name was Gyula Wagner. He was a German who could hardly speak a word of the language, having been thoroughly assimilated as a Hungarian. These two were ordered to transport all Jewish working groups to the then border between Hungary and Germany. The Russians had already moved onto Hungarian territory and the orders to move west were intended to get us as far away as possible from the Russians. This meant we would soon find ourselves in German hands.

That evening Wagner called about ten of the older *musoši* from our group together and told them that we were to leave on October 28. Anyone who wanted to escape and go into hiding in Budapest was free to do so and he swore on his own life that the others would not be handed over to the Germans. We had no idea how he planned to do this and

we were at a loss about what to do. We got an address in Budapest where we could hide and went there, narrowly escaping a raid on the way. There we found an empty timber yard and a woman who told us that we could stay in the cellar of one of the sheds. We hesitated for a moment, uncertain whether we should put our lives into the hands of this woman we had never met in a place we had never been to before. We decided to return to the group and did so without any problems.

The next day we set off westwards as ordered and had covered more than forty kilometres in the autumn rain by the evening. We arrived in the village of Manyi and, in pitch dark settled ourselves in the attic of a school. I simply took my shoes off, poured the water out of them and fell asleep. I woke to find that an SS unit had arrived the same night and was staying below us. In the morning, while it was still dark, the Germans found out about the Jews in the attic. They climbed up and started kicking us down from the attic. Luckily we all more or less made it and my brother even managed to save his spectacles. Suddenly Wagner arrived, I don't know where he had been until then. He shouted at the SS men, roaring in a mixture of Hungarian and German. In the half-dark they couldn't see and probably couldn't discern the rank of the man who was treating them in this way, so they let us go. Wagner even managed to retrieve our belongings and then found another place for us.

Then we realised what his plan was. As a connoisseur of Budapest night life he knew the managers of a number of large farming estates around Budapest. They were all fond of dropping in to a certain tavern on their business trips to the Hungarian capital. Wagner had tracked them down and told them that, if they saved the Jews now, the Jews would save them when the Russians came and they agreed to this scheme. Wagner then divided us into several groups, "discharged" the sickly commander with a fake document and sent him home with a car-load of food along with a soldier who he had also "discharged". This made it easier for him to make all the decisions. He took the initiative of hiding us in the surrounding forests. We had a little food we had been given for the journey and the estate managers gave us more. Wagner made a trip to Budapest to see if anyone had noticed that we were missing, and returned with the happy news that nobody seemed to be interested in us. Someone denounced him for hiding Jews, but he managed to get out of this with no consequences. Every twenty days or so he would move us to a new hiding place.

In December, we moved to an estate about a kilometre, as the crow flies, from the highway connecting Budapest and Vienna. The road leading to the estate meandered through the hills, but there was a short-cut through the forest. Endless convoys of civilians and various armies roared along from Budapest towards Vienna.

On December 24 we woke to utter silence, with not a whisper to be heard from the highway. For two days nothing moved on the highway and then, one morning, a tank appeared before us with a large, red, five-pointed star on its turret. Soviet soldiers! They told us they were just an advance patrol and the whole unit would arrive shortly. The meeting with the Soviet troops, however, was not so pleasant: they immediately confiscated the wristwatches of everyone who was wearing one and also took my new boots, which I had acquired by barter at the farm a short time earlier. But what mattered most was that we were no longer in danger from the Germans and their collaborators. At long last we were free! Ten days later we arrived in Novi Sad and my brother and I were finally no longer in danger of annihilation.

Gyula Wagner had kept his word, he had saved us all, with no exceptions. After the war he was proclaimed Righteous Among the Nations in Yad Vashem and his name is inscribed on a memorial plaque there.

We had been saved. Could we have saved any of our relatives, at least our parents and grandmother? I simply don't know. Today, more than half a century later, this question still haunts my sleepless nights.

Darko FIŠER

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Osijek 1941–1943; Hungary 1943–1945



Darko Fišer was born on January 2, 1938, in Osijek, to Margita (née Szoke) and Alfred Fišer. He has an older sister Lelja Jakić. Their father was killed by the Nyilas in Budapest at the very end of the war. On his return to Osijek he completed secondary school and later graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at Zagreb University. He worked at the same faculty and then at the Saponja chemical plant in Osijek. He is still working today as an Associate Professor in the Electrical

Engineering Faculty of Osijek University.

He was president of the Osijek Jewish Community for a number of years.

The first memories of every human being come from their early childhood and are usually associated with important or pleasant experiences. My earliest memories are of the gravest times in the spring and summer of 1941. Until that time, everyone in my family – my father, mother, sister and myself – had lived the peaceful life of a typical urban family. My father, Alfred Fišer, was a barrister and had been able to secure a fairly comfortable life for his family until the war began in 1941. We lived in our own house in a pleasant part of Osijek. My mother Margita, née Seke, was a secondary school teacher, but devoted herself to the household after the birth of my sister. My parents had never

nurtured any particular Jewish sentiment, but the events which were to come made them very conscious of their origins.

It was a capricious spring in 1941. It even snowed on my sister's seventh birthday, March 26. This trivial detail has been recounted over and over again in my family because this was also the day that dramatic events overtook our lives. My sister, Lelja, had been given a swing for her birthday but to her regret, and probably mine as well, our father was unable to hang it in the garden because of the snow. Instead, he promised to do so the following day. That following day was March 27, 1941. The demonstrations in Belgrade and Yugoslavia's breach of the Tripartite Pact were a signal for my parents that we would soon be engulfed in the war and that as Jews we were in great danger. Lelja's swing was never to hang in our garden.

The next event in my memory was in the summer of the same year. I remember that we had to move from our house to the outskirts of the city because Jews were no longer permitted to live in the better areas. However my parents managed to find quite decent accommodation with the help of acquaintances and relatives with whom we exchanged our house for an apartment. Both of my grandmothers took refuge with us on the edge of the town in order to have a safe haven, at least for a short time.

My father didn't stay long with us. The arrests of Jews and their detention in camps was not long beginning, but he found out in good time that he was on the list of those to be arrested first. He hastily arranged to hide by posing as a patient in the Osijek hospital where his brother, Oto Fišer, worked as a physician.

When Yugoslavia capitulated, Osijek became a border city. Baranja, across the Drava River became part of Hungary. Some Osijek residents had permits to cross the border because they had land or family on the Baranja bank of the Drava. It was also relatively easy to cross illegally, which my father took advantage of and so by 1941 was in Hungary, in a reasonably safe place.

We lived on the outskirts of the town for only a short time and my recollection of it is hazy. We certainly lived in poor conditions, one lingering memory is of us childishly wanting to have the lights turned on in the twilight while the adults, in an effort to save power, would allow this only once darkness had completely fallen. My uncle and aunt, both physicians, also had to leave Osijek in a hurry. In the beginning, the Ustasha authorities were very "generous" to Jewish doctors, not arresting

them immediately nor sending them to camps. Instead they interned them in Bosnia where they could be put to work in an attempt to control the syphilis which was endemic there. These doctors and their families enjoyed the protection of the Ustasha authorities, although at best this meant that their arrest and deportation was delayed for some time. Thus my Uncle Oto and Aunt Klara found themselves in northern Bosnia, in the village of Odžaci, near Šamac. In early 1942, when our future in Osijek became even less secure, my mother found a way for us to move to our relatives in Bosnia. All I remember of this is crossing the Sava by raft at Šamac into Bosnia. It has stayed in my memory because, although it was late March or early April, there was still ice floating on the surface of the river.

In this way we found ourselves in the comparative safety of Bosnia, among generally illiterate but well-meaning people who later helped us to escape with our lives. But conditions were also becoming more difficult there. As the Partisan units in the surrounding hills and woods became stronger, the Ustahas stepped up their terror and were less and less inclined to “protect” the Jewish doctors as they had promised. I remember the adults in the family discussing all the possible solutions. My uncle, whose opinion was respected by everyone, would say that we should join the Partisans and, indeed, in the middle of 1943, he and his wife did just that.

With two children to care for, my mother found another solution. The “Hungarian connection” had begun functioning again and there was a possibility of us reaching Hungary illegally and joining our father. But first we needed to get from Odžaci to Osijek. In those days, travelling for no particular reason would certainly have aroused suspicion, so my resourceful uncle came up with the idea that I should feign appendicitis and have to be taken to Osijek for urgent surgery. My mother had to take me to the hospital of course, and also brought my sister along because she couldn’t be left alone. My role involved a lot of weeping and wailing, particularly when there were people around whom we didn’t know, and I learned it well. I remember I was already giving a convincing performance before we left Odžaci while Hasan, our janitor, carried me from the building to a farmer’s cart to take us to Šamac. So seriously did I take my role that at one point, to my great surprise, my mother said to me “You don’t have to groan like that all the time.”

I don't remember how we reached Osijek, or when this role of a lifetime was over, but I do remember well how we crossed the border illegally. From later accounts of the event I learned that we had crossed the Drava, which marked the border, with the help of an Osijek lawyer, Dr Kamilo Firinger. He and his family had border passes so we went with him to the crossing as members of his family. My sister and I were told to keep our mouths shut and not to answer any questions. Our guide obviously knew how to bribe the guards. While we were walking past the sentry box on the bridge, Dr Firinger approached the guards and had a friendly chat with them. I remember that when we were about half way across the bridge my mother said softly to me: "Take a good look at the Drava, Darko, you may never see it again."

It was a journey into the unknown and the security it offered was only short-lived. Not until years later when I again saw the Drava did I realise how difficult those moments had been.

We spent our first day in Baranja, at that time part of Hungary, in a cottage on the bank of the Drava, in a settlement the people of Osijek called Kiš-Darda or Little Darda, after the nearby village of the same name. We waited in Dr Firinger's cottage for night to fall and then some people we didn't know took us under cover of darkness to the Darda railway station. There, some time before dawn, we boarded a train for Pecs.

I remember staying with my mother's relatives in Pecs and we played with their children who were the same age as us. I was five at the time and my sister was nine. Our little cousins spoke Hungarian and we had problems in communicating. I remember one boy being stubbornly angry with me because I couldn't grasp the rules of a ball game. There was an elderly woman, probably his grandmother, who was the only one in the house who spoke Croatian. She tried to interpret and explain the rules of the game to me but without success.

Taking further precautions and heeding our mother's warning not to speak in case we attracted attention with our foreign language, we journeyed on to Budapest. I don't remember our stay in the Hungarian capital, which was probably brief, nor do I remember our meeting with my father who had already been there for two years. I remember our next destination: it was a region near Szolnok with the rather exotic Hungarian name of Kodmonos. My father's friend Count Kohanovski had property there and we settled ourselves in a small but quite tidy cottage. Who Count Kohanovski was and how my father came to be

friends with him is a story in itself. Count Kohanovski's wife was born in Našice, the youngest daughter of the great Našice landed baron and one-time Croatian governor, Teodor Pejačević. Pejačević didn't have much luck with his daughters. The elder, Dora, who was later discovered as a talented composer and became very popular in Croatia after 1990, committed suicide over an unhappy love affair. The younger, Gabriela, besmirched her father's baronial honour by marrying the penniless Count Kohanovski in defiance of him. The angry father disinherited his wilful daughter who would have remained in penury had she not hired a talented young solicitor who contested the will and won, putting the family fortune into the hands of her and her husband. That talented young solicitor was my father.



*Darko, barely three years old,
January 1941.*

My sister and I both learned Hungarian quickly, but it was not easy at the beginning. I remember the first words I could use were *igen* (yes) and *nem* (no). I soon made contact with the local children who lived in poor peasant shacks with a single room and an earth floor. In our first days there I somehow found myself in the home of one new friend. His mother began speaking to me, in Hungarian of course, and I pretended to understand her questions by answering *igen* or *nem*. I remember I tried to do this without simply alternating the words, sometimes using one or other word of my rich Hungarian vocabulary two or three times in succession.

Nevertheless it was only a couple of months before my sister and I could speak Hungarian quite fluently and almost forgot our Croatian. Our mother warned us repeatedly to be careful what we say, drumming into us that we should not for any reason reveal that we were Jews or we would end up in a camp. If anyone asked who we were, we were to say only that we were from Croatia, and in any case we should speak as little as possible, both to people we knew and those we didn't, because

any of this could be dangerous. It took me half a century to understand how deeply I was traumatised by this. It was even worse for my sister who took what was happening to us much more seriously than I and felt it more deeply.

My father visited only occasionally. He was living in Budapest and had some kind of agreement with his influential friend, who also gave him money. I found out later that this agreement was to do with the sale of land. My father hoped to inherit land from his aunt in Vojvodina and had agreed to sell it to the count at a good price after the war. The money on which we survived the difficult years of the war was the count's advance payments on this. In the end the agreement came to nothing. The count survived the war but my father, unhappily, did not. There was nothing left of his inheritance because the Communist authorities in Yugoslavia confiscated the land, while the count was left in dire poverty in Communist Hungary and died in one of the shabby huts in which his landless peasants had lived in Kodmonos. I remember that my father's Hungarian was poor and that he spoke to us in Croatian, which was by then difficult for me. It amazed me that he had not been able to learn Hungarian more quickly and better than us children.

We were also visited from time to time by Countess Kohanovski, whom we knew as Aunt Gabika. This was always a special event for me because she travelled the considerable distance from the railway station in a grand carriage. I had the privilege of being allowed to climb up onto the vehicle and to pat the horses. Once during this undertaking I fell and broke my arm which caused my mother great anxiety as she tried to conceal our origins during my visit to a doctor in the nearest town.

In the autumn of 1943, six months after we arrived in Hungary, we moved to a somewhat larger estate nearby, which also had an odd name: Cserepes. The reason for this move was probably not only to improve our security but also to provide us with rather better accommodation. There were another two families living on the estate and we became friends with them. I remember one of these had the family name Rot and that they were also Jews who were in hiding. Many years later I learned of the strange coincidence that Mr Rot's half-sister lived in Osijek and his half-brother, Professor Nikola Rot, still lives in Belgrade. In Cserepes we lived in several rooms of a former palace, a neglected mansion now used as a storehouse for farm produce. The

rooms were filled with piles of dried peas and beans. These were cleared from some of them in order for us to make a kitchen and two rooms. I could not understand how it was that we outcasts, living in the constant danger of being taken to a camp, were suddenly living in a palace! There was an abundance of food, beans and peas, most of which was eaten by the mice which kept the adults awake at night. We children, unconcerned by this, slept the sleep of the just, despite the mice gnawing all around us.

Our romantic sojourn in the palace came to an abrupt end in the spring of 1944, when our mother told us we had been discovered, denounced by an evil man. We stuffed our few things into our trunks and headed for Budapest. How my parents managed to find an apartment right in the city centre, near Vaci Street in Feher Hajo Street, or where the money for the rent came from remains a mystery to me. I do remember, however, that it was during our first days there that we heard our first air-raid siren. We were in a park near the apartment with our grandmother when the siren sounded the alarm. We tried to rush home, but some men in uniform made us go to the nearest bomb shelter. I couldn't make sense for myself of why we had to be frightened and take shelter from bombs being dropped by our allies on our enemies, nor why these men in uniform, who were our enemies, were taking care to protect our lives and herding us into the shelter.

We children were frequently moved out of our home for a day or two. Our father would come furtively, whisper something and take us to some strange place. We later learned that he would receive information from reliable sources that a raid was planned and that we should all hide in different places. On a number of occasions my sister and I stayed in rooms where there were a lot of children who had been brought there in the same way. There was a Red Cross sign drawn on the entrance doors of the premises, together with some strange writing. The talk among the children was that we were there under Swiss protection. At the time the name Raoul Wallenberg meant nothing to us but it is probably he whom we have to thank for our survival.

The winter dragged on and our parents were becoming increasingly concerned. They spoke of a *putsch*, of a *coup d'etat*, of Horthy being overthrown. We heard that the Nyilas, who were like the Ustasas in Croatia, had seized power and that our situation was now even worse. The Soviet Army was already in the eastern outskirts of the Hungarian capital and had begun its attack. The Russians sent their Christmas

greetings in the form of a powerful and unceasing artillery and air offensive. There was no longer room for us in the cellar so, together with another ten or so tenants, we set ourselves up in a carpenter's workshop facing the central courtyard of the ground floor of our building. There were days when a number of bombs fell right on our building, but we all escaped injury. January 8, 1945, turned out to be the most tragic day for us when my father was killed, not by Russian grenades or bombs, but by a Nazi bullet. In the eastern part of the city, close by Pest, the avenging Nazi gangs were roaming through the chaos, killing anyone suspicious. My father, with his typical "non-Aryan" looks was unlucky enough to catch their eye. He was shot dead together with a group of other victims. According to the account of an eyewitness who survived by chance, their bodies were thrown into the Danube.

Ten days later, on January 18, 1945, Soviet troops entered Pest, the eastern part of the city on the Danube. For us, this was the end of the Holocaust, our liberation had arrived.

Agnesa EREMIJA

ORADEA, NOVI SAD, BUDAPEST



Agnesa Eremija was born on January 26, 1919, in Oradea, Romania, to Melanija (née Levinger) and Andor Valdman. Her mother died in the Holocaust, as did Agnesa's first husband, Dr Imre Gal.

After the war she worked as a translator for the export-import division of Jugoslovenska Knjiga and then in the Yugoslav delegation to the Allied Control Commission. She worked in the same capacity in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia diplomatic mission in Budapest and also for a time at the Budapest bureau of the Yugoslav state news agency, Tanjug. In January, 1949, she moved to Belgrade to work for Radio Yugoslavia and Radio Belgrade. While working, she completed a degree as a part-time student and was then employed as a secondary school French teacher, retiring in 1979.

She is an active member of the Belgrade Jewish Community, particularly in the women's section. She is married to Boško Eremija.

I only lived in Oradea for the first six months after I was born, before moving to Novi Sad, my mother's birthplace, where my father worked as a private clerk and my mother was a housewife. At home I spoke only Hungarian with my parents, German and Hungarian with my maternal grandmother and occasionally Serbian with my grandfa-

ther. My family was not strictly religious, but we observed the Jewish customs. Candles were lit in the house on Friday evenings and we celebrated the holidays. However my father's family in Oradea was strictly orthodox.

I remember that my grandmother, who read a lot and recommended literature to me, used to say that Zionism was a magnificent idea and that in the synagogue at Yom Kippur my grandfather always gave the most money for Palestine.

My other grandmother raised eight children and lived in humble surroundings, but she was a great optimist, a role model for modest Jewish housewives. She never despaired or complained and our grandfather held her in such high esteem that he would tell the children that they should kiss the ground she walked on.

The environment in which I lived was multinational and tolerant. I never experienced any discrimination directed at me or other Jews. I went to a Jewish primary school and then completed eight years at a public secondary school for girls. In the Jewish Community we had religious lessons from the senior rabbi, Dr Henrick Kisz, who conducted these classes for eight years. This was very useful for my general education and I also acquired some important ideas from Judaism. We were given special lectures on Maimonides, Spinoza, Yehuda Halevi and other important Jewish thinkers and writers. At the recommendation of the senior rabbi, I also attended Hebrew classes with the younger rabbi, Mordehai Silberer.

At fourteen, I joined Hashomer Hatzair and was an active member for three years. My father was a very conservative man and he was afraid that something unpleasant might happen to me, because I was by then a fairly well-developed girl. So I left Hashomer Hatzair and its basic idea of preparing us to go to Palestine and build a free, independent Jewish state. Some of the others succeeded in doing so: Cvi Loker, Avram Štark, Rahela and Mirjam Vajs, Šragaj Vajskopf, Vera Nađ (whose name is now Zipporah Ben Michael), Imre Levinger, known as Bimbača (who assumed the surname Ben Michael in Israel) and many others.

I finished secondary school but my father, for the same reasons he gave for me leaving Hashomer Hatzair, didn't want me to enrol at the university, so I completed a course in shorthand and typing. Blanka Gins-Epštajn, who later died in the Holocaust, ran her own private school in Novi Sad. She taught typing, shorthand and correspondence in four languages and I finished a one-year course in those four lan-

guages. I was offered a job but didn't accept it because the salary was so low. Instead I gave lessons in mathematics and languages to secondary school students and knitted pullovers.

When the war broke out in Europe in 1939, we began to feel insecure. However it was not particularly dangerous for Jews in Novi Sad until the terrible raid of 1942. My family escaped this thanks to the superintendent of our building on Dunavska Street. She protected us by declaring that we were Hungarians and respectable people. Unfortunately many of our friends and relatives were killed at this time. Fearing another raid, my parents sent me to my father's family in Budapest.

In the Hungarian capital I had to hide, because my relatives were afraid that the police might discover that I had once associated with people like Oto Blam, Lilika Bem and Sonja Marinković who later committed acts of sabotage under the occupation. I went from one cousin to another, never daring to say that I was from Novi Sad, but telling people I was from Oradea. Then, in 1943, at the house of some acquaintances, I met my first husband, Dr Imre Gal, a Jew who had just returned from a period of forced labour near Minsk. We moved from apartment to apartment on the edge of Budapest and managed as best we could. Both of us worked at the Goldberger textile factory as manual workers, despite my husband having a doctorate in law. The factory soon became part of the war drive, producing textiles for the army and, because of this, an army unit was stationed on the premises.

When Szalasi and his Arrow Cross came to power in 1944, all Jewish workers were interned. My husband had already been called up again for forced labour and was working in a suburb of Budapest until the end of October, 1944. He was then taken to the Austrian border and I received a postcard from him dated November 7 of that year. It was the last I ever heard of him. He had left convinced that we would have a child and that he would leave someone after him, even if he were to be killed.

The Jewish women were housed on the premises of the factory. In the morning we had to work in the kitchen, preparing food for the army unit, while in the afternoon we stood at the machines for eight hours. We ourselves had to worry about where to find food. We slept on straw in an empty store house like cattle and were forbidden to leave the factory grounds without a special permit, which was granted only in exceptional cases. We cooked on hotplates which we could buy in a small store within the factory. The wages we received for our work in

the factory were extremely modest and we received neither wages nor food for our work in the mornings. It was slave labour: the whole morning we worked hard in the kitchen suffering insults and humiliation then, already exhausted, we had to work standing up for eight hours with very poor materials. The yarn was so weak it kept breaking. For eight hours each day without let-up I would be tying knots.

I remember that while the women from the suburbs of Budapest were working in the factory, their loved ones were taken away to internment. It is impossible to forget their despair when they learned that their children and parents had been deported. Their husbands had already been taken to forced labour camps far away, which is why there were many more Jewish women than men in the factory.

We also had some rare moments of rest and relaxation. On Sundays, when the weather permitted, we would sit on the grass and reminisce about the happier days not long before. The handful of middle-aged Jewish men imprisoned in the factory would join us. Crushed with concern for their loved ones, they mostly listened to us in silence. But one of them, whose identity I never discovered, distinguished himself by his singing, which echoes in my ears to this day. When our conversation died down, we would hear his sonorous voice singing the songs of his native land with a sensitivity which came from the depths of his heart.



Agnesa, January 1944.

Life continued in this way for about four months and then, apparently, Szalasi's Nyilasi became fed up with having Jewish women "holidaying" in the war factories. They dreamed up new and more painful tortures. In the second half of 1944 they issued an order for all Jewish women between the ages of 16 and 45 to report at a particular place on

a particular day to leave for a forced labour camp. They took us on foot, through the cold, wind and rain, across muddy, sodden fields all the way to Ferihegy, where Budapest's airport now stands. They put us in new buildings, with gaping openings where no windows or doors had been installed. There was no straw so we slept on the bare concrete. I was torn by the dilemma of whether to lie on the blanket I had brought with me or cover myself with it. It's not difficult to imagine the draughts and the cold of that autumn weather when, exhausted from a day of digging trenches, we would fall down onto the ice-cold concrete. The trenches we were digging on the outskirts of Budapest were allegedly designed to foil enemy attacks, but in reality they were intended only to humiliate and exhaust us. As well as the digging, they harassed us in other ways, humiliating and mocking us to the extreme by ordering us to jump across ditches for no reason at all. I was in the early stages of pregnancy and on the very first night I miscarried. I was forced back to work the next day. The consequences of this have stayed with my whole life as I was never able to become pregnant again.

Some time in early November, 1944, when the Allies were already so close at hand that the roar of their heavy artillery could be heard, an order came for us to be taken closer to the Austrian border, in the direction of the Nazi camps. Many of the women trench-diggers completed this next journey only to end their lives in the gas chambers, some perished along the way and a few luckier ones returned from the hell of the camps. I managed to escape by taking advantage of an air-raid alarm. I hid in Budapest and managed to get fake documents. Some friends from Novi Sad who were also hiding there gave me a blank birth certificate form. Following their suggestions I was able to complete the form to suit myself. I gave myself the name of Veres Agnes, naming my father Veres Adras and my mother Maria, née Svoboda.

At first I roamed from one relative to another, all those who were married to non-Jews. At best I could spend a night with each of them. They gave me food if they had any. I was employed as an aide at the International Red Cross shelter for abandoned children, which was run by Evangelist deaconesses. Together with my other duties I carried food from the adjacent courtyard during the bombing and washed the staircase in mid-winter. We slept in the Evangelical high school building on makeshift stretchers in a cold room. I felt safer than before, but it was hard physical work and the bombs were falling all around.

We spent the last days and nights of the war with the children in the basement of the building. Soldiers from the Red Army liberated us in mid-January, 1945. These were elite units and their behaviour was most decent and humane. Because of the dangerous conditions we had to leave the building and everyone scattered wherever they could. I headed, under the shelling, with a woman and her two children for the suburb of Pestszenterzsebet. There were aircraft flying overhead and firing on the city and we could hear the roar of rocket launchers nearby, belching flame everywhere. All around us were the corpses of horses, with dead Hungarians, Germans and Russians on a thick layer of red brick dust. This was Heroes Square. We stayed in the suburbs as long as the fighting in the streets continued. Later I went to my uncle, who had returned from the ghetto with his family and my father.

My parents' destinies were different. After the situation in Novi Sad deteriorated, my mother had managed to talk my father into escaping to his relatives in Budapest, thinking that only the men would be taken into forced labour. My father made it to the Budapest ghetto and survived the war, but died in an accident in 1947. In April, 1944, my mother and her entire family were taken to Auschwitz, where all of them met their death. My mother wrote her last postcard to me from the Novi Sad synagogue on April 26, 1944, to tell me that they were about to be taken to an unknown destination. I have presented this correspondence to the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade.

My father never returned to Novi Sad, having neither anywhere to go nor anyone to go to. I met him in secret several times during the war and, after the war, we lived together in Budapest in part of a rented apartment.

I myself never returned to Novi Sad to live. I no longer had any relatives in the city, they had all been exterminated.

I was employed by the Yugoslav diplomatic mission in Budapest as a translator and later worked in the same capacity in the Budapest bureau of Tanjug. In January, 1949, I moved to Belgrade and was employed at Radio Belgrade where I worked for five years as a proof reader, translator and Hungarian language presenter. At the same time I completed my university degree part time, majoring in French and German. From 1954 until my retirement in 1979, I worked as a teacher in Belgrade secondary schools. Soon after my arrival in Belgrade I met my present husband, Boško Eremija, who is a publicist. He had survived a similar fate to mine, having lost his whole family in Jasenovac.



VI

IN THE BOR MINE



Pavle ŠOSBERGER

SENTENCED TO SLAVE LABOUR



P*avle Šosberger was born in Budapest on September 21, 1920. His family had been traders in groceries and timber in Novi Sad since the eighteenth century. His mother, Paula, was head of the Cultural Commission in the Jewish Volunteers Society and also founded the city's Jewish kindergarten. They lived in the family home in Novi Sad until the war began.*

From July, 1943, until October, 1944, Pavle was part of a forced labour gang in the Bor Mine camp. In October, 1944, he joined the Partisans and after the liberation spent ten years in active service in the Yugoslav Army. On his return to Novi Sad he became active in the Jewish Community. He has been president of the Community and a member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. He has written a number of books on the Jews of Vojvodina.

He is married to Agneza (née Neuberger) and has a son, Josip, and two grandchildren.

On the eve of the second world war we were still living in our family home in Novi Sad, at 63 Miletićeva Street. The family had sent me to central Serbia in 1940, to choose a town and rent an apartment and prepare it for us to move to in case war broke out. I chose Arandelovac and moved a large quantity of canned food there in case we needed it.

At home, everyone in the family had rucksacks into which they had packed the most essential items, clothes and so on. Everyone had their passport, personal documents and a few gold coins which we stitched into the hems of our canvas bags. Each male in the family also had a revolver. My father Josip, known as Joka, who was an experienced fighter from World War I, was the head of the family group. We planned to head off and join the Yugoslav Army as soon as we saw it retreating. However, that was not how things worked out. When the army began to retreat from Bačka, the bridges over the Danube were blown up and the Germans and Ustashes appeared in Petrovaradin. We remained in Novi Sad, in our apartments with the blinds down, aware that whatever lay in store for us would not be good.

The Hungarian army occupied Novi Sad on April 13, 1941, and the streets erupted in fighting with heavy casualties. This was a hunt for Serb volunteers and anyone who, according to the criteria of the occupiers, was not a desirable citizen. The casualties included many Jews.

On May 24, the occupiers summoned all Jewish men from 18 to 60 years of age to forced labour. We continued to sleep and eat in our own homes, but during the day we would work on the demolished river fleet base known as The Navy, at the airport and at the Danube docks. This went on until June 28, when we were released and replaced by another group who had not so far worked.

As they had begun to harass me in Novi Sad, I managed, using false documents, to move to my relatives in Budapest. There I worked on a building site with my uncle, who was an architect.

On October 13, the Hungarian authorities summoned everyone of my age to the Fifth Royal Hungarian Labour Battalion at Hodmezé-vasarhelyi. There we were divided into a number of labour gangs and sent to various places under Hungarian control, mainly cutting wood and building barracks and roads. We were later moved to a military exercise area as labourers. There we built bunkers, dug ditches and constructed other military facilities.

While we were working in Baja, there was a raid in Novi Sad. It was in the afternoon of Friday, January 23, 1942. We were washing in the bathroom when someone from Novi Sad told us that something terrible was happening in the city. We rushed to the post office to call our parents, but the telephone operator in the Novi Sad post office replied: "The number's not ringing and it won't ring again." No one knew what had happened but we suspected the worst and this was later confirmed.

A large number of Jews and Serbs were killed in the raid, among whom were 27 people from our building, including my father, my mother and my brother.

There were a lot of labour gangs based in Szeged, where they formed gangs for the Bor mine in 1943. From there we were taken to Prahovo by ship and barge and then on by train to Bor.

After the Hungarian and German authorities agreed to send ten thousand Jews from Hungary to work as labour gangs in the Bor mine, the German Ministry of Justice committed itself to delivering 100 tons of copper ore concentrate followed by six tons of chromium as payment for their slave labour.

By decree of the Royal Hungarian Ministry of Homeland Defence, the first Jewish labour gang was sent to Bor in July, 1943. They went in four convoys, some on board the *Kraljica Marija* and the *Karadorde*, some by barge through Szeged, Titel and Belgrade to Prahovo and from there by train to Zaječar and Metovnica to Bor, and some by train through Niš, Zaječar and Metovnica.

While people were being rounded up for the first convoy, an engineer and colonel in the German Todt organisation addressed the people lined up for forced labour in Hungarian. His name was Wilhelm Neier and he wore the medal of a German chivalric order around his neck. He told us that the labour gang would do useful work and that the Hungarian government would be paid in copper ore for it.

The first convoy, five Jewish labour gangs, set off from Szeged on July 11, 1943.

When the German army invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, a new forced labour group of about three thousand Jews was prepared. On May 26 they were sent by train through Niš and Zaječar to Bor. In May, 1944, there were between six and seven thousand Jews doing forced labour in the Bor mine. Most of them were from Hungary, but there were also people from occupied parts of Romania and Czechoslovakia as well as several hundred Jews from Bačka and Prekomurje.

When they arrived at the mine the workers were all taken to the Berlin camp above the Bor river, close to the Orthodox cemetery. This was the central camp in which all the Jews from the first two convoys were housed, along with a group of Hungarian Jehova's Witnesses. The others were accommodated in camps around Bor, all the way to Žagubica. These camps included Munich, Innsbruck, Bregenz, Heidenau, Vorarlberg, Laznica and Westphalia.

On our arrival in Bor we were all struck by the engulfing wave of sulphurous fumes which choked us. This was a frequent occurrence in Bor, especially in overcast weather. We were given numbers such as 13262. The "1" stood for the Berlin camp, the "3" for group number three and the "262" was the inmate's personal number.

The accommodation in the Berlin camp was standard wooden barracks, just as in the others. There were two labour gangs, a total of five hundred or more people, in each barracks. Only the Jehova's Witnesses, two hundred of them, were in a barracks by themselves. There was a total of seven barracks serving as accommodation for camp inmates. The soldiers and non-commissioned officers of the Hungarian guard had separate living and mess barracks, and there was a kitchen with a mess barracks, known as the "margarine bar" for inmates. There were separate barracks for washrooms, workshops and storage areas. The officers of the Hungarian command in the camp had their own barracks and mess hall in the centre of Bor where they enjoyed the same comforts as German officers. There were even rooms for officers' mistresses in the barracks. There was also a Hungarian Military Court in a private building near the Berlin camp, just above Sava Miraš's tavern.

Later an infirmary and a surgical post for the seriously ill were built. The head of the infirmary was a warrant officer, Dr Istvan Bedo, and Dr Ladislav Kohn from Subotica took care of the Jewish inmates.

The camp command fell under the Hungarian Bor headquarters, which until the end of 1943 was headed by Andras Balog, a lieutenant-colonel from Szeged. He was a very strict commander who was not in favour with the senior Hungarian military authorities. When he left he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Ede Maranyi, a callous Fascist and sadist, a shocking anti-Semite who implemented harsh measures against the Jews. With no respect for any of his country's laws and regulations, he gave orders for the Jewish camp inmates to be tortured, mistreated and even killed.

At that time there were also free workers of various nationalities in Bor. The labour gang bosses, foremen and supervisors were Germans, *Volksdeutscher* and Russian White Guards. They lived in barracks in a separate settlement. The camps were divided into a number of categories, each with their own rules and their own food.

Some camps had stricter rules. Inmates from these camps could, like the Jews, only leave their workplaces when escorted by guards. Jews were escorted by Hungarian guards while German or Serbian state

guards escorted the others. There were only a handful of Jewish inmates who had German passes and were exempt from the ban on movement outside the camp without an armed escort. These were Stevan “Đurika” Adam from Bačka Topola who was the coachman for the mine directors Gabela and Krebs, Đorđe Kaldor from Novi Sad who was a draughtsman on the building site, Đorđe Fišer from Titel who ran the administration of the open cut mine, Tibor Cserhat, a teacher from Budapest who was an orderly in the German officers’ barracks, and I, Pavle Šosberger from Novi Sad as head of construction on the Bor river regulation works, together with some couriers and warehouse workers. Some camp inmates would leave the camp and building sites to go into Bor illegally, but they were putting themselves at risk of being arrested.

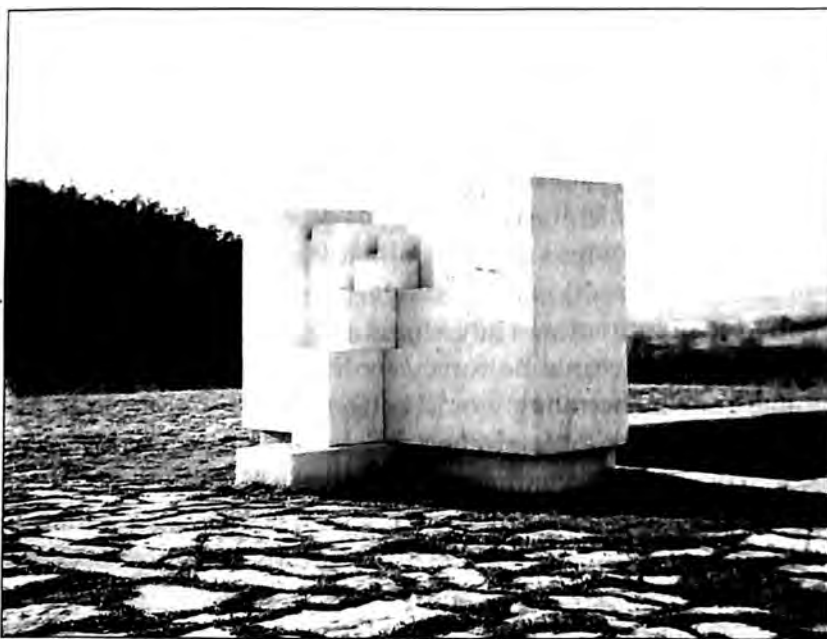
Decree number 1340/30.3.1944 of the Bor Police Commissariat forbade civilians having any contact with Jewish inmates, including the sale or purchase of food and other items.

The attitude to the inmates in the camps under Hungarian command was much worse than it was on the building sites. The Germans were interested only in the work and inmates rarely had any problem with this. The Hungarian soldiers, however, egged on by their officers, tried to make life miserable with various punishments and by torturing the Jewish camp inmates who were already in torment. For the smallest trifle or alleged infraction, the Hungarian soldiers would punish and physically torture inmates. They would summon them to their barracks where the offender would be forced to drink five litres of water “so as not to be afraid”. Then they would be forced to crawl through mud, to jump like frogs, slap one another and so on. The officers were even worse: they would order inmates to be suspended with their hands tied behind their backs for two hours, hanging on a post with their feet barely touching the ground. This mediaeval torture probably survived only in the Hungarian army. Sometimes inmates would be tied in a ball for six hours, or shut in potato pits. There were also killings and shootings. In an effort to protect themselves, the camp inmates would try to spend as long as possible at work, often staying longer than the compulsory ten hours.

There was a kind of slang created in the camp, drawn from the Yiddish, Hebrew and Serbian words used in the Budapest underground. There were words like *šmaser* for guard, *tre* for danger, *sojre* for goods or material, *hekuš* for soldier or policeman, *nije košer* (it’s not kosher)

for don't touch or not good, *cores* for misery or evil, *cices* for money, *ganef* for thief, *termometar* for shovel and many other expressions.

On several occasions during our early days in the Berlin camp, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Balog, we were allowed to present some kind of show on the field in front of the infirmary. These would open with an address by Balog, known as "the speech from the hill". After the speech, there would be a variety program presented by the camp inmates, who included a number of well-known musicians and performing artists. These included the cellist Horvat from the Belgrade and Zagreb operas and a pianist and trumpeter called Barta from the Budapest Vaudeville. There were short sketches in the program with titles like "This is Radio Bor, Futog and Kecskemet" or "In Five Years". They were written and directed by Klein the shoemaker, who was a student of philosophy. These shows were soon forbidden.



*Monument to Jewish forced labourers who died in the Bor mine,
by sculptor Moma Krković.*

The German Todt organisation arranged work in and around Bor. Jewish labour gangs began work there on Wednesday, July 19, 1943, regulating the Bor river, working on a tunnel beneath the hills of Tilva Mika and Tilva Roš, at the open cut mine of Tilva Mika and on laying

the railway line between Bor and Žagubica over Crni Vrh. A number of camp inmates were engaged in skilled work. I led a group of self-taught surveyors regulating the Bor river. Đorđe Fišer worked on the open cut mine with a group of engineers. We worked ten hours a day except on Sundays. Every day the building site management would issue certificates for the number of hours worked and the inmates had to give these to a Hungarian officer in the camp.

The work was arduous: we loaded and unloaded wagons, drilled holes with compressed air drills, laid and relaid tracks, carried out the earthmoving operations and laid the sleepers for the lines. Some of the workers were later trained as assistant miners, stokers on the locomotives and dredge operators, and some worked on geodetic projects and drafting.

The food was poor: black water called coffee for breakfast, a litre of soup for lunch and for dinner a cube of something with sawdust which passed for bread and sometimes a little jam or something similar. The Germans would give the inmates who worked the night shift in the tunnel an extra litre of soup. The Hungarian soldiers were driven by the bad meals to steal food and cook extra meals for themselves, or they would barter lard, jam and bread with the inmates in return for watches, jewellery and other valuable items. Often the soldiers and non-commissioned officers would accept IOUs for large sums of money and while on leave in Hungary would extract payment of these from the inmates' families who were still in their homes awaiting deportation.

When Lieutenant Colonel Maranyi arrived as commander of the Hungarians, the situation deteriorated. On his explicit command, the Jewish inmates were more frequently mistreated and terrorised. A military court would hand down sentences for the most trivial infractions and torture was a daily occurrence. The worst perpetrators of this evil were first sergeants Csaszar, Vagvari and Macsai, Junior Sergeant Fischer and the murderous Corporal Horvat.

There was some contact with relatives through the occasional sending and receiving of postcards using the German military mail service. In March, 1944, there was approval from Hungary for inmates at Bor to receive one parcel of clothes each. There was an illegal postal connection through the Hungarian soldiers and non-commissioned officers who would courier letters, small parcels and even money back and forth for a large fee. A woman from Novi Sad would occasionally come

to Bor bringing letters and money for some individuals. There were also other channels used by some people.

There was a market established in the field in front of the Berlin camp where inmates would sell their watches and jewellery, and any clothes they had which were in good condition, to buy food. Through the camp inmates, the Hungarian soldiers and non-commissioned officers would sell thread, leather for shoe soles, bedding, soldiers' boots, lard and bacon. The other form of trade was via Dr Bedo, who went from Bor to Budapest several times to fetch gold, supposedly to be used for dental repairs.

The well-known Budapest painter Ciiag was caught attempting to send an illegal letter with a caricature of Maranyi. The unfortunate artist was hanged by his hands for eight hours a day until, after several days, he was completely broken. One morning Corporal Horvat took him out of the camp and shot him.

Immediately after arriving in Bor on August 14, 1943, a number of prisoners fled from the camp. These were Bernard Fišer from Subotica, Vajda and Kunc, then Mandi Iric, Oto Levenberg, Gavra Bokor and Đorđe Atlas. As the situation in the camp deteriorated, the number of escapes increased. On July 14, 1944, Ljudevit Rajić-Ronai fled, as did Ipoly Feri, Miklos Semze, Mihalj Izrael, Karolj Presburger and Janoš Strauss. They were followed by a group of eleven inmates, including Istvan Engler, Gabor Gal, Imre Orova, and a man called Grunberger who was also known as Grinšpan. This group was captured outside Bor by a White Guard Cavalry patrol and returned to the Hungarian authorities.

On Lieutenant Colonel Maranyi's orders, a drumhead court martial in Bor sentenced nine camp inmates to twenty years each in prison. Every night they were chained in the potato pit of the Berlin camp. Another two inmates were sentenced to death and publicly executed in the camp yard. All the inmates were brought from Bor to witness the execution. The Germans and their families were also invited. The escapes continued, nonetheless.

The Jewish cemetery was at the right hand side of the Berlin camp, near the Orthodox burial ground. There were about forty Jewish inmates buried there and two others were buried in the local cemetery at Laznica. There were several Jewish women living illegally in Bor at that time. I knew about Vera Demajo from Belgrade and the wife of the engineer Kostić who later became commander of Bor. There was also a woman called Estera. All of them survived the war.

Both the refugees and workers of Bor accepted the Jewish inmates with a great deal of understanding and friendship. As well as the Hungarian Army battalion, there were various armies in Bor which were collaborating with the occupier: a unit of the Serbian Home Guard, a Russian White Guard Cavalry troop, a Bulgarian battalion and in 1944 a guard unit arrived from Bukovina, wearing Italian uniforms and carrying Italian weapons. All of these soldiers showed the utmost hostility towards the Jews. During their retreat in August 1944, the Bulgarians secretly took two Jewish inmates to Bulgaria. After the capitulation of Italy, there were Italians brought to Bor as prisoners of war.



The remains of those killed in Crvenka were exhumed after the war and moved to a common vault in the Jewish cemetery in Sombor.

At the end of August, 1944, the situation in Bor changed completely. Romania had also capitulated and the Partisans became active around Zaječar. All the prisoners from the surrounding camps were brought to the Berlin camp and many of them escaped at this time. Mining work came to a halt in Bor in September, 1944, and bunkers and ditches were dug to fortify the camp. The regular supply of bread dried up and any inmates who were bakers were put to work in bakeries. One of them was a man called Bandel who managed to smuggle a loaf of bread into the camp on a few occasions. We no longer went

out for work apart from a few necessary exceptions. On one such occasion I was arrested and, with my forged identity card, handed over to the military court.



Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti with his wife before internment.

Bor was now in chaos and the military court was no longer working. I managed to escape from prison. On Maranyi's orders, 23 inmates from the potato pit were handed over to the Germans. These included Stevan Engler from Subotica and Imre Orova from Bačka Palanka. They were shot the same day near the brick factory, four kilometres

from the town. Dr Ištvan Szikar, a lawyer from Budapest, was also handed over to the Gestapo and shot.

On September 17, 1944, Maranyi flew out by plane and the first group of inmates, 3,600 Jews and Jehova's Witnesses and about sixty Hungarian soldiers and officers left Bor. Everything went smoothly until they reached Smederevo, and then the first victim fell. According to the documentation, *Volksdeutscher* killed eight near Pančevo, 146 near Jabuka and 250 Jewish inmates in Perlez. Once on the territory of Bačka, a number of prisoners ran away: twenty of them hid in the cellar of the Novi Sad hospital. Twenty were killed in Srbobran, ten in Vrbas and 680 camp inmates were killed in Crvenka in October, 1944. Two inmates, Wilhelm Poteman from Subotica and Đerd Laufer, managed to drag themselves alive from the mass grave. The killings continued with forty in Sombor, 26 in Bački Monoštor, another 10 in Bezdan then fifty more followed by seven in Baja. All of these were killed by German and Hungarian soldiers. Another 21, including the famous Hungarian poet Dr Miklos Radnoti, were killed in the village of Abda. Only about 1,500 of the camp inmates remained and were escorted to camps in Germany. About twenty of these former camp inmates lived in Yugoslavia after the war.

A second group of inmates left Bor on September 29, 1944, and were liberated the same day by the Ninth Brigade of the 23rd Division of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia. They held a court martial on the spot and sentenced First Lieutenant Rožnjaj and Sergeant Fišer to death by hanging. The liberated camp inmates headed towards Romania and home. Some of them joined the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia. Another group of about two hundred liberated inmates who were retreating towards the Romanian border, were cut off by the Second German Motorised Division near Klokočevac. There is no record of anyone surviving the slaughter that ensued.

Bor was liberated on October 3, 1944, by units of the 23rd Serbian Division of the National Liberation Army. The same day about two hundred camp inmates who had been too sick and exhausted to flee with the second group were liberated. The former inmates were given food and accommodation and the officers and soldiers of the Hungarian Guard were imprisoned. Among the officers from this group were several with Captain Bela Nagy and the notorious Casar. A number of the liberated camp inmates joined the National Liberation Army.

Chetniks near Bor killed camp escapee Oton Levenberg from Novi Sad. His remains were later exhumed by his relatives and reburied in the Jewish cemetery in Novi Sad. Franja Krishaber from Novi Sad disappeared in fighting near Nikolićevo.

After the war, the remains of 23 inmates who were shot four kilometres from Bor were exhumed and reburied in the Jewish cemetery in Subotica where a monument to them was erected.

The remains of 680 former Bor mine inmates were also exhumed in Crvenka after the war and transferred to the Jewish cemetery in Sombor.

At the end of 1964, the remains of Jewish inmates buried in the old Jewish camp cemetery near the Berlin camp were exhumed and transferred to a common vault in the New Cemetery in Bor.

On the site of the former Berlin camp in 1982 a monument to the camp inmates was unveiled, the work of Lidija and Miroslav Kovačević.

A monument to the slain Hungarian poet, Dr Mikloš Radnoti, was unveiled at the Bor Lake in May, 1984.

Zoltan BIRO

JEWISH DOCTORS IN THE BOR CAMP



Zoltan Biro was born in Budapest on March 30, 1912, the only child of Ilona (née Mendelson) and Mirko Imre Biro.

His father and mother were taken to Auschwitz in 1944 and, like the majority of inmates, did not survive.

He worked in the Military Court of Subotica from the end of 1944 until autumn, 1945, then in the Ministry of Finance and Justice in Belgrade. Until his retirement in 1975, he worked in the Supreme Commercial Court. He continued in the post of arbitrator in the Foreign Trade Arbitration Commission in Belgrade until his death on April 2, 1998. He wrote legal commentaries in a number of fields, particularly in construction legislation. He was married to Eva (née Rosenfeld), and had two daughters, Eva Blumenberg and Judita Jovanović, and four grandchildren.

This account is part of a testimony based on an interview with Zoltan Biro by Jaša Almuli, former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

After the occupation in 1941, like other young Jews in Bačka, I was mobilised into Hungarian military labour gangs and, in 1943, sent with one of them to forced labour in the Bor mine. Jews, like other members of “inferior races” in Hungary and Vojvodina and other areas under occupation, were not sent to the Hungarian Army. Instead, from

the first half of 1942, they were deployed in work such as clearing mines on the Eastern front and hauling cannons.

Part of my unit was dispatched to the Bor mine. I was one of rather more than six thousand Jews handed over by Hungary to the Germans and sent to the mine. Of these, about a hundred were from Vojvodina.

In the beginning I worked with the military sappers and lived in the Feralberg camp. There was a base of the Poreč Chetnik Corps in the nearby village of Gornjani. The commanding officer was named Piletić and he was either a major or a lieutenant colonel.

There were a number of active officers in Piletić's headquarters who brought their families to the neighbouring villages. The villages were primitive and contagious diseases abounded, and when members of the officers' families fell ill, there were no doctors either in the headquarters or anywhere in the vicinity. However there were three Jewish doctors doing forced labour in the camp: Nikola Szemzo from Vojvodina, who was near the end of his medical studies, Dr Kadar from Budapest and a doctor from the Carpathian area of Russia. Piletić sent a courier to the German commander asking him to send the interned Jewish doctors to treat the families of the officers. They were duly sent, escorted by a German soldier. In this way we came in contact with the Chetniks who began trying to persuade us to join them. We agreed and, in order to cover our escape attempt, a Chetnik attack on the camp was staged. A platoon of Chetniks came to the work site with automatic rifles, they disarmed the guards and took the Jewish doctors away. Another five or six Jews went with them, three from Subotica and the others from the Carpathian Mountains in Russia. Before the breakout, Dr Szemzo asked me to join them, but I declined. The Chetniks also invited me to join them after they found out that I was a reserve officer in the army but I refused this as well. In the thirties, at Belgrade University, I had been a leading member of the Association of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia.

Szemzo had only one more exam in forensic medicine to take before being awarded his degree. He worked as a doctor for the Chetniks until they were defeated by the Partisans near Rtanj in the middle of 1944. Some of the Chetniks then went home while the others joined the National Liberation Army. All the Jews who had fled with Szemzo to the Chetniks were among them. Szemzo himself became a Partisan doctor. After the war he worked in the army, completed his degree and became a specialist.

I managed to flee the Bor camp when the Hungarians began deporting Jews to prevent them being liberated by the National Liberation Army and the Red Army, both of which were advancing. The situation of Jews, both in the camp and in Hungary, had deteriorated rapidly by then, after the far right Nazi collaborators seized power in Hungary. In the spring of 1944 they began handing Jews over to the German Nazis, who sent them to death camps. In autumn they began taking Jewish prisoners working in Bor to Hungary in order to deliver them to the Germans. A number of us felt that it was dangerous to wait and that we should flee while we could. When the camp was moved closer to Bor, seven of us used the confusion which followed an explosion to leave the column and head for the forest. We were in the Homolje forest for fourteen days, staying in cottages with Wallachians and working for our food, before we came across a Partisan road maintenance worker from 1941. He was from Brestovačka Banja and put us in touch with the nearest Partisan unit. I joined the Seventh Serbian Brigade and arrived with them in Belgrade, two days after the liberation. Not long after that I joined the military justice service in Vojvodina.

Those taken by force from Bor by the Hungarians had a sad destiny. The first column of Jewish workers, about 3,600 of them, left Bor on foot on September 17, 1944. They set out via Petrovac and Smederevo for Belgrade. On this death march they were given only a kilogram of bread each for seven days. Many individuals and groups among them were killed by the Hungarians along the way. In Crvenka the Germans took the prisoners over and immediately shot seven hundred of them in a brick factory. About 1,500 inmates remained and these were now taken by SS men towards Baja in Hungary with more killing along the way. Only about 1,300 reached Baja, from where the Germans took them to concentration camps. The second group taken from Bor fared no better. Of the more than a hundred Jews from Vojvodina who were sent to forced labour in Bor, only ten survived: those who managed to flee and just three who survived the concentration camps.



VII

THROUGH KOSOVO AND ALBANIA



Rebeka "Beka" HARA

FROM PRISTINA TO BERGEN-BELSEN



Rebeka "Beka" Hara (*née* Baruh, and known at school as Baruhović) was born in Jerusalem on April 4, 1927, to Isak and Tamara (*née* Rubin). She married David Hara in 1948. They have two sons, Isidor and Leonard, and two grandsons.

After the war she worked briefly in Smederevo as a seamstress for the Milan Blagojević company, later moving to Belgrade where she devoted herself to her family.

My parents were born in Pristina and moved to Palestine in about 1925. They lived in Jaffa where they had a small grocery store. The house has been demolished since then, but my older brother showed me the site where it once stood. I was the sixth of seven children, the last of whom died soon after birth. My parents, being very religious and superstitious, then adopted a child, the daughter of my aunt.

Rašela, the eldest of us, was born in 1915 and was killed in the Bergen-Belsen camp, together with her husband and one of their children. The other child died after the war. My adopted sister Klara (whose married name was Kamhi), was born in about 1915. She had seven children and was carrying an eighth when she and her entire family were killed in Treblinka, together with the Skopje Jews. Emanuel, born in 1919, was in Bergen-Belsen, then in Mauthausen and Dachau. When he

came to collect us, he found only me left. Baruh, my eldest brother, was born in 1917 and had been in high school before the war. He was killed with the Partisans near Danilovgrad during the Allied bombing. Jošua, known as Ješa, was born in 1921. He was in Albania in hiding during the war. Later he was captured and imprisoned but managed to escape and save himself by hiding in the woods. He is a dentist by profession. After the war he travelled to Belgrade and was immediately sent to the army, but was released from service in order to take care of his sister. He moved to Israel in the first Aliya and continued working as a dentist. He now lives in Mexico where I have visited him a number of times. He has three children and three grandchildren. His daughter (married as Frenkl) has two children. Jakov died when he was two years old and was buried in Jerusalem where my brother took me to visit his grave.

Estera, born in about 1929, died in Pristina from typhoid fever. It was because of her death that my parents adopted my aunt's child.

My parents returned from Israel, where they made a good living, because their elderly parents and my father's unmarried sister were still in Pristina and, they said, because they couldn't stand living with their other son.

They were comfortably off and had two houses with a large garden. My grandfather owned a textile store which my father and uncle took over when we returned to Pristina. I was about one year old at the time. My father, a very religious man, went to the temple every morning and, when he had time, would also go at noon and in the evening. At home we spoke Spanish and this was the first language I learnt to speak. I remember my grandmother telling me the story of Ali Baba in Spanish, because my mother had no time for stories. I remember various Sephardic pies and pastelas and other dishes. My favourite



Beka Hara, Belgrade, 1947.

was *kačamak*, polenta with cream and cheese baked in the oven in a special pot.

We all completed high school and my brother Manojlo graduated as a pharmacist. Before the war began we had a Jewish refugee from Poland living in our house for about a year. Once the war started refugees began arriving from Belgrade as well.

Under the occupation, the Jews in Pristina were forced to wear armbands and all our property was confiscated. The young men were interned in Kavaje and Berat in Albania. Then the Italians arrived and life was much easier under them. They kept saying that they didn't want war. At this time, in 1942, my mother, father, sister and I went to Berat and stayed there until the following year. My grandfather died before the war began and my grandmother went to live with their daughter. In Berat we lived in private houses, paying rent. I remember Berat as a town with many windows. We lived there with the Orthodox priest, a very kind man, and had to report to the Carabinieri every day.

When Italy capitulated the bombing began and the Germans arrived. My father found a truck and we fled to Skutari where we hid with some Christians. Later the Albanians began blackmailing us for gold so we decided to return to Pristina. A month later we were all caught, all of us in Pristina. They came at ten in the evening in trucks to our house at 60 Kralja Aleksandra Street. We weren't allowed to dress ourselves properly or take anything with us and they forced us onto the truck, hitting us all the time. My mother was in a housecoat and I was barefoot in the snow, which in Pristina in that year of 1944 was still falling in April. There were my father and mother, my brother Manojlo and I from our family and about another three hundred Jews from Pristina in the group. We were immediately confined in the barracks, which were close by. All through the night they were collecting all the Jews in Pristina and bringing them to the barracks until eight in the morning. An Albanian in an SS uniform threatened to slaughter us and with this threat collected everyone's jewellery. There were others there who were also stealing things. Some of them took only rings, some took bracelets. I threw my watch out of the window, deliberately, not wanting them to take it from me. We were strip searched and everything was taken from us. There was a bizarre episode when they brought in a woman to search all the females, stripping them naked. One Jewish woman put her jewellery in her sanitary napkin so as not to be exam-

ined, but the woman doing the searches removed her napkin and found the jewellery.

It was the night of May 14, 1944, when they rounded us up and the next morning they loaded us into cattle wagons to begin our month-long journey. Our first stop was the Sajmište camp in Zemun where we spent several days. We were so hungry while we were in Sajmište that my brother took my earrings and tried to trade them for some bread. I had worn these earrings since I was four years old and no one had noticed them because they were covered by my hair. No one was willing to give us bread for them. I finally removed them only a few years ago when I was being examined by a doctor in Toronto. During our journey there was a barrel with some kind of swill of corn flour and we were each given two spoonfuls. Our next stop was in Hungary to pick up more Jews. When the train finally stopped at our destination, we had no idea where we were. We heard someone speaking in German. When we emerged from the train the Germans were astonished at our wretched and ragged appearance, not knowing who we were. They thought at first that we were Gypsies, and were confused by the light colour of our skin. They were used to the Jews arriving from the Netherlands and other countries, nicely dressed and carrying suitcases. We had arrived in Bergen-Belsen.

They put us into quarantine for three weeks and then into separate wooden barracks for men and women. I was with my mother, sister and cousin. The older people and mothers with children were not put to work. My first job was in the kitchen, chopping carrots.

Worst was the roll call. We would assemble at five in the morning and stand in snow up to our knees for hours, waiting to be counted. Then we would go to work. I stayed in the kitchen for about two or three months and then the Polish women arrived, large and stout.

The hunger was terrible. We ate animal fodder, beets and kohlrabi. A piece of potato would delight us. Once they gave us boiled sour beetroots and I said I would eat this every day, but now, to this day, I can't stand the sight of it. The women who arrived with suitcases would sell their clothes for a piece of bread. I once bought a sweat suit and was even hungrier.

I worked in the shoemakers workshop of the military command until the end. We picked overcoats apart, separating the whole pieces of cloth from the torn and burnt parts. We didn't dare damage the material, they would have killed us. I was painfully thin and had to unpick

eleven overcoats a day. Sometimes someone would give me a razor blade, a real stroke of luck, but if I had been caught I would have been thrashed unconscious.

One day I collapsed and was taken to the hospital with an acute infection from all the dirty fabrics I had been handling. I had a temperature of 41.8 degrees and because of this was released from work for three days. I survived all the severe complications but, after the liberation, I was diagnosed as having cancer. But then Dr Papo operated on me in the military hospital and discovered that I didn't have cancer after all.



Bergen-Belsen. "Dead bodies cover the ground under the pine trees. Children turn their heads away from the dead. They no longer even had the strength to cry." George Roger, Life Magazine photojournalist.

I was in Bergen-Belsen for almost a year, from May 15, 1944, when we left Pristina, to April 15, 1945, when we were liberated. The Yugoslavs were kept until August 29; they refused to release us before that because of the crisis around Trieste.

My mother didn't have to work in the camp, but she had to attend roll call. This would last longer and longer because they would count us

repeatedly when the numbers didn't add up. They kept killing people, and others died of exhaustion and then they would claim that someone had escaped and that that was why the numbers didn't correspond to those on the rolls. There was no possibility of escaping, as we saw for ourselves on many occasions when we went to the forest to fetch wood, guarded by five or six dogs.

A month before the capitulation the Germans began to behave as if they were insane. No one knew if it was day or night. They had realised that it was the end of the war and they wanted to evacuate the camp, burn the barracks and leave no traces. We were just waiting to die. Allied aircraft would fly overhead and we were confined to our barracks. We would pray for a bomb to fall and end our suffering once and for all as we could no longer bear the hunger, the illness and the torture.

As the end of the war approached, the Germans organised a train with an endless number of wagons. It stood on the tracks nearby as they loaded all the Yugoslavs into the wagons. Only those who were unable to walk, my mother and I included, remained in the barracks. We slept together in a bed sixty centimetres long.

The worst day was the day my mother died. She was only 54 years old and was nothing but skin and bone. I myself weighed only 24 kilograms at the time. I saw her lying with open eyes. "Mummy, mummy!" I called, but there was no sound from her. We had some kind of bed sheet in which we wrapped her. I was so ill I couldn't even walk, I couldn't even farewell her properly. When everyone was leaving a friend of mine came and saw I was the only one left in the barracks, that I had no strength to reach the train. She took me in her arms and carried me out to the road. She couldn't stay with me as she had to attend to her sick father, but she thought that someone would see me there and carry me to the train. But everyone just stepped over me, no one even turned around. When everyone had gone, my friend came back to see what had happened and found me still in the same place. I begged her to carry me back to the barracks, but she was afraid the Germans would burn the buildings before they left and didn't want to take me back. I stubbornly demanded that she carry me back into the barracks, even if it was going to be burnt down, and she did so. Two days later the Germans came with a truck into which they loaded everyone, the living and the dead. They took us to the train, which was still standing there, but it was already overloaded so we stayed in the truck. I was so sick I don't know

how much time passed. From the truck I saw a pile of guns and the Germans fleeing.

I crawled with another woman to a house where we wailed "*brot, brot!*" The people in the house asked who we were and we hesitated, not knowing what to say. "Hungarians," we said eventually, thinking this would be the safest. They let their dogs loose on us.

Later we traded the belongings of those who had died for bread.

It took the British Army twenty days to cover the ten kilometres to the camp. We were left alone with the SS women who were in the watch towers. The English arrived on April 15 and forced the Germans to carry out the dead, but there were only a few of them left to do this as the officers had already fled. They put us into the accommodation where the Germans used to live.

The British then gave each of us a whole loaf of bread and a piece of bacon, which caused the death of many people. By this time I already had typhus and dysentery and was unable to eat, which saved me. Nobody could reach the toilet, there was just a great puddle.

They took me to the hospital. Until then I had not had a camp number, because we were among the last convoys to arrive, but now in the hospital they registered us according to numbers given to us by the Americans. I still have the travel document from the camp under which we were transported back to Yugoslavia. I arrived in Belgrade on August 29, 1945.

Luci PETROVIĆ

REFUGEES



Luci Petrović (*née Mevorah*) was born in Belgrade on October 12, 1925, the younger daughter of Moša Mevorah and Vida (*née Kapon*). By 1941 she had completed five of the then standard eight grades of high school. After the war she completed secondary school and subsequently graduated from the Faculty of Law at Belgrade University. In 1946 she married Slobodan Petrović, with whom she has a daughter; Radmila, a chemist and conservation consultant to the Serbian Archives.

Her parents emigrated to Israel in 1949 with her older sister Ester, an architectural engineer.

After working for two years in the Social Insurance Bureau, from 1952 she worked in the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia until her retirement on January 1, 1993.

Luci Petrović had a strong emotional and professional connection to the Jewish community throughout these forty years in which she performed a large number of assignments and served in a wide variety of functions. She was an employee of the Commission for Museum-Historical Activity, later the Jewish Historical Museum, and then an officer of the Cultural Activities Commission. From 1965 she was secretary of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia and a member of the organisation's executive. She was a member of the editorial committee of the Jewish Chronicle from 1958 and took over the role of editor-in-chief after the death of David "Dale" Levi

in 1978, retaining it until the final edition in 1990. She has been an editor, contributor and member of the editorial committee of a number of the Federation's publications. Throughout this entire period until the present she has been a member of the Commission for Museum-Historical Activity. As a token of recognition of her long service to the Jewish community, the Federation planted a grove in her name in Israel in September, 1991.

FEAR

The memory of my six months in Belgrade under German occupation is a nightmare of never-ending fear and misery. Belgrade is my home town, but now I don't recognise it. There is destruction all around and fierce enemy soldiers with helmets and guns and short, broad military boots. I am afraid of them. I wear a yellow band on my arm and walk along the street with head bowed, not wanting to glance at the walls with their posters insulting Jews in words and pictures. On some of them I recognise the work of my favourite painter, Stojanović, whose illustrations I used to enjoy in my children's books. The trams all carry a large sign "No Jews, Gypsies or dogs" in both Serbian and German. The fear and the misery never leave me, even in my own house, the



One of the posters which was stuck all over the walls of Jewish houses in Belgrade in 1941. It reads: "JEWS have been through this forest"

home which used to be so warm. My father is now a German prisoner of war. Will Moša Mevorah, that gentle Jew, survive behind barbed wire in the heart of Germany? Every day is filled with the fear of wondering whether my sister and my uncle will come home in the evening from their forced labour. My mother is 45 and I am 15, so the decree about working doesn't apply to us. The German army has used our carpets and other belongings to furnish their officers' apartments in Dedinje. People with yellow armbands come and carry them out on their backs. One of them whispers to my mother that he'll tell her where it is all taken to. My mother waves him away: we no longer need anything. She is sorry for these people, our companions in misery. Nedić's Serbian State Guards forage through the house looking for anything left: men's shirts, bed linen and the precious stocks of sugar and oil, plunging their bayonets into mattresses and pillows as they pass. We suspect that the shooting of the first hundred hostages – our cousins and friends among them – is the beginning of the end. The keening and wailing of their bereaved families as they stumble together down Dušanova Street turns the blood in my veins to ice. We are joined by convoys of Jews from Banat. The men are taken to the Topovske Šupe camp, the women and children are billeted in Jewish households. There are a mother and daughter from Petrovgrad with us. The community in our house expands, but our hopes for survival shrivel. Our only remaining privilege is to sleep in our own beds. And in the dark of our dreamless nights it is exactly that miserable remnant of our former life which spurs our feverish urge to run, run, run away.

FRIENDS

They don't look the other way. Marija Đorđević, my class mistress and German teacher, comes to see if she can be of any help and whether we need anything. Our friends visit us, laden with groceries, knowing that Jews are allowed to shop only after 10.00 a.m. when nothing can be found in the markets of starving Belgrade. Luka from Hercegovina, a porter at the Jovanova market arrives uninvited. "You're going to tell me now what to bring you from the market tomorrow and we're going to do this every day," he tells my mother brusquely. And then "Now listen, woman, get out of here! Keep those two children safe for that slave in Germany!" Luka can't imagine how he has touched our hearts in this moment. His only reward is the gratitude in my mother's face. The eld-

est of the Žujović brothers, the only one still in the country, arrives from the village of Nemenikuće under Mt Kosmaj in his village clothes. He wants to take us out of the city immediately to live in his house until the war is over. Can we put these people in danger like this, dragging them with us into misfortune? Milutinović, whose Lamiko pharmacy is known to everyone in Belgrade for its advertising slogan “Lamiko – Death to Corns”, offers to register my mother as his refugee sister from Bosnia and legally adopt my sister and me. It is brave and humane of him, but impossible in Belgrade, where there are still people who might recognise us.

Nor do our neighbours, the people in our building and our street, look the other way. But our landlord, Gruber, who owns a patisserie, is a *Volksdeutscher*. He was immediately appointed commissioner of the Jewish-owned Katarivas confectionery factory. His Hungarian wife showers us with foul language and threats every time we run into her.

We need courage if we want to escape from Belgrade, and we need money for false documents, money we don't have. The cheapest solution is to get permits for Pristina which state that we are returning to our home town. We have no choice. With great difficulty we somehow manage to get the money and buy the permits. The only one to whom we dare reveal our plan is Luka. We owe him that much. He approves heartily: “Great is God,” he tells us. Then, unexpectedly, he takes the initiative. “I'll go to the station to buy the train tickets, then I'll come the night before you leave to take your luggage. I've got friends who are porters at the station, everything will be all right.”

On November 3, before dawn, as soon as the curfew is over, Luka leads us through the deserted streets of Belgrade to the open tracks, far away from the main entrance of the railway station. There is a lone wagon standing on the track and we get inside. Our three bags are placed in the rack above the seats. Our wagon is shunted back and forwards and then joins the rest of the carriages. I can see the station and the people getting onto the train, but I dare not peer out of the window because we knew there is usually a police agent, a Jew called Benjaminović, on duty at the station, hunting Jews fleeing Belgrade. Finally, slowly, we depart. The train stops in Ripanj and Luka gets off. He stands outside our window, waving and softly repeating “God is with you, God is with you”. We open the window to press his hand in farewell and he suddenly throws a large parcel wrapped in newspaper through the window, it has been under his arm the whole time. As the

train gathers speed and Luka vanishes from our sight, we unwrap the newspaper. Inside is a loaf of fresh white bread and a roast chicken. We haven't even remembered to pack any food.

KOSOVO

We travelled to Kosovo through Niš and Skopje, with two border crossings and thorough checks of our documents and luggage. Each time we were in a panic about being discovered and about whether our documents would protect us. The railway line finished at Kosovo Polje and from there to Pristina we had to travel by horse-drawn carriage. This attracted attention and as soon as we reached Pristina we were approached by a street patrol and asked to show our documents. They immediately arrested us, assigned an armed policeman to us and returned us to Kosovo Polje. We had to spend the night there in a small room behind a tavern, waiting to be returned to Serbia in the morning. The policeman was with us the whole time. The next day we left by train. The other people in our compartment eyed us with suspicion. A few minutes after the train set off, the policeman went to the toilet. A railway employee in our compartment enquired "What have you done? Why are you being escorted by the police?" There was no alternative: my mother told him that we were being returned to Serbia because we were Jews. The railway man began trying to convince us that we should flee the train in Lipljan. We were about to arrive there and the train would stop only for a minute. "Hide behind the station building and wait for the train to leave. I'll throw your luggage through the window," he told us. We weren't used to this kind of adventure, but in desperation, knowing what was waiting for us, we agreed.

The train stopped in Lipljan and we hid behind the station building. We heard our luggage land on the deserted platform and returned to collect it. Then we saw a slim young man walking down the platform, wheeling a bicycle, watching the departing train. As soon as he saw us, the mother and two daughters he was supposed to find, he rushed up to us, saying "Don't be afraid. I'm Jewish. Solomonović. The Jewish community in Pristina sent me here by bicycle to meet the train and shout along the wagons in Judaeo-Spanish "Anyone who is Jewish should get out" (*Quen es Giudio que salga*). The Jews in Pristina are very upset about you being sent back to Serbia. This is the plan to help you. Unfortunately I didn't get here on time, so it's lucky you're here."

There were two Jewish families living in Lipljan, the wealthy merchant family of Haim and Sara Solomon, and the Baruh family, who were modest farmers. Obviously we couldn't return to Pristina. The plan was for us to stay for a few days in Lipljan with one of these families. Solomonović took us to the Solomons' shop. The family had a spacious house and could easily have hidden us there, but they refused. The Baruh family, however, welcomed us with open arms. It was the Sabbath eve and the house was lit with candles. The grandmother and grandfather spoke only Judaeo-Spanish. The younger ones bustled about, putting out hot beans on the nicely decorated table. Their baby was fast asleep in a cradle, while the older girl, four years old, played with a small boy, arguing with him in Spanish. The little boy was the son of a Serb neighbour and had learned Ladino playing with their daughter. After so many days we again felt the warmth of a home, this home to which they had welcomed us despite the danger we brought with us. After the war we searched for the Baruhs from Lipljan but, to our sorrow, learnt that they had all been killed. We met young Solomonović again in Israel, in Moshav Kidron, where he had become a wealthy man.

The bubble of our optimistic illusion that we would find salvation under Italian rule soon burst. We spent several feverish days in Lipljan searching for a way to get to Prizren. Any kind of travel was fraught with traps and dangers. The Italians, calling their occupation an annexation, gave local power to the Albanians. The main groups wielding this power were the Balists, the Vulnetars, various pro-Fascist groups and agents of Abver and the Gestapo. Our bitter experience in Pristina had shown us that our only hope was to stay hidden and avoid the random checks. Our kind hosts found us a man who took us to Prizren in his truck, hidden in his load. He dropped us off at the house of a family who had agreed in advance to rent us a room to hide in. This was the Serbian part of Prizren, the house of a widow named Lepa Petrović, her son, daughter and elderly mother. Days with no tomorrow began to pass, one after another. My sister and I never left the house. We had no idea what Prizren looked like, not even the street in which we lived. My mother went out to buy food once a week, usually on market day when the streets were full of people from the surrounding villages. She would tie a scarf on her head, disguising herself as an old woman, before she left. But apparently there was still some kind of connection with the Jewish community in Pristina. Once a member of the community visited

to tell us that Agent Benjaminović had been in Pristina. The whole winter we were filled with an evil foreboding and anxiety. On March 14, 1942, the Carabinieri came for us. Obviously our whereabouts were no longer a secret. After being held for a full day at the police station, we were taken to prison, together with another five or six Jewish families who had also been hiding in Prizren. They were brought to the station one by one during the day. We learnt from them that about fifty refugees from Serbia had also been arrested in Pristina and handed over to the Gestapo, who had deported them to Serbia. The news that our cousins, Majer and Matilda Pinkas, were among them shook us deeply. Benjaminović had done his job well. We could only expect more of this in the Prizren prison.



"Smile for the camera!" in Prizren prison.

The men were separated from the women, but during their daily hour of exercise in the prison yard they would come over to our windows and talk to us. We agreed with them that we would send three people as a delegation to ask for a meeting with the local Italian commander. They would explain to the Italian authorities that it would be an act of mercy to shoot us in Prizren if there is an order to hand our group

over to the Germans. In this way we would at least be spared the cruelty of the Gestapo and a painful trip to Serbia where the same end would be waiting for us. The Italian commander accepted this argument and promised that he would not allow us to be sent back to Serbia. He even added that the prison was the best place of concealment for us, but we were reluctant to accept this. After two months we were released from prison as civilian prisoners of war and told we were to be transferred to Albania.

For four long months we had to report every day to the Italian police. We were anxious all this time because we were so close to the border with occupied Serbia. The executive secretary of the Prizren Municipality at the time was Elhami Nimani, whom we had met in prison. He had been arrested because some Fascist bigwig was due in Prizren and they wanted to get everyone suspicious off the streets. He was released before our group. Because he understood the danger we were in, and because he had access to the municipal seals, he made documents for the entire group which certified that we were residents of Prizren. Some of the group wanted false Albanian names with their photographs on the documents and he was even willing to do this. My mother thought this was too great a risk, so we became residents of Prizren under our own names. After the war, Elhami Nimani was an ambassador in the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, and I had a number of friendly encounters with him. He died in Belgrade several years ago.

In September, 1942, all of us were taken in a military convoy to Kavaje.

ALBANIA

At that time, Kavaje was a small township with about fifteen thousand inhabitants, six kilometres inland from Durres. We suddenly found ourselves in a totally foreign country, a country whose culture and civilisation lagged centuries behind our own. We were surrounded by people speaking a language which not only did we not understand but which bore no resemblance to any language we were familiar with. The streets were full of women with veils and men whom we dared not look in the eye, even when we were asking them the price of onions. Even our clothing singled us out from the local population. Women dressed in the European style, without veils, were a rare sight and the men wore white caps on their heads. Little was known about Jews there, because

there were only a handful of Jewish families living in Albania: two families in Durres, a family from Skutari in Tirana and perhaps a few families in Elbasan. But in that spring of 1943, rumours spread through the town that Jews slaughtered children to use their blood for *matsot*, their ritual bread, and that we detainees were those same Jews! The Muslim women hurried their children away from playing in the street with us. This didn't last long, however, and was of no consequence apart from our wounded feelings.

Mbrotni i Shqiptare
 Bazili i Prizrenit
 Zyra e Gjendjes Civile
 Nr. 2519 Prizren, më 20-11-1942

BUKUR I SHQIPTARI

Shi i Fotografimit:

EMRI I MBRENTI	<u>Barije Xhavit Gabaja</u>
ATËSIA	<u>Asan</u>
AMËSIA	<u>Sanije</u>
DATA LINDJE	<u>9.11.1898</u>
VEND LINDJE	<u>Pjeçina</u>
VEND BASHKË	<u>Prizren</u>
SHËRIMET CIVILE e. maturore	
PROFESIONI	<u>Shkrimtar</u>
RELIGJON	<u>Musliman</u>
KOMBESIA	<u>Shq.</u>

Tortetohet se i makt personi i kakt pakt konvict se i kakt lytett.

Nepunetues Gjendjes Civile
Prizren

Llogaritja e kakt pakt
Prizren, më Nr. 2519

Nepunetues Gjendjes Civile
Prizren

Mbrotni i Shqiptare
 Bazili i Prizrenit
 Zyra e Gjendjes Civile
 Prizren

M p a
 11-2-1944
 1944
 1944

False document certifying that Barije Xhavit Gabaja (Berta Gabaj), daughter of Asan (Avram) and Sanija (Sara), is a Muslim and a citizen of Prizren.

There was a certain sense of relief for us refugees from occupied Yugoslavia in being further away from the German zone of occupation. As civilian detainees, our residence was now legal and our constant panic, the feeling that our very lives depended on what we did next, was eased. The daily reporting to the Italian police and the restrictions on our movement soon became our way of life. At this time there were about twenty Jewish families from various parts of Yugoslavia in Kavaje. We were all responsible for our own food and accommodation. My uncle had lived in Geneva since the first world war and he managed to send money through an Italian friend from time to time, but this was neither regular nor enough. Our day-to-day existence was miserable because of our constant shortage of everything. We lived this way until the capitulation of Italy, which we had heard many rumours about during the early autumn of 1943. Nevertheless, we continued to report to the Italian police every day and sign in. One day we found the duty officer and a military doctor in a state of extreme agitation. "You hear the cannons?" they asked, "You can hear the Germans entering Durres. We'll destroy all the lists of detainees. We won't give them to the Germans. You should hide wherever you can! We'll head for the woods, to join the Partisans."

The Germans occupied Albania in September, 1943, and the German police put up posters ordering all non-Albanians to report to them. Anyone failing to report, and any Albanians harbouring such people, would be executed. This regulation, which stayed in force until the end of the war, was the determining factor in our lives for that period. The people of Kavaje knew about us former detainees so we had no choice but to disappear overnight. Up until then we had shared an unfinished house with two other families, one to each room. The owner of the house was the local teacher and head of the village of Preza. Delighted that our rent gave him the opportunity to finish building his house, he had promised us all sorts of things, and told us we could count on him if we had any kind of trouble. So with nowhere else to go, we now fled to our landlord. Preza was an isolated village in the hills above the Skutari-Tirana road. Our teacher convinced us that the German army moved only along the main roads, not daring to enter the hill country in which there were a lot of armed fighters, as indeed there were in Preza. He put us in a deserted house and would occasionally bring us a little flour and oil and some beans from the village. We were overjoyed to find Dr Moša Đerasi and his family in Preza. He was there

thanks to a friend and university colleague from Vienna, a Greek doctor who had worked in Tirana and had good contacts in the Health Ministry. In order to secure his escape from Tirana, he had had him appointed as the village doctor, concealing the fact that he was Jewish, of course. As the winter closed in, the first snows covered the access roads to the village. We had neither fuel nor a stove. There was no electricity in the village so we used candles or a gas lamp for light. The house was full of mice which we would hear scurrying and squeaking all night. I came down with acute tonsillitis and had a high temperature. We felt helpless. My mother was afraid that the winter would imprison us in these hills and leave us extremely vulnerable.

We left Preza after less than three months. Our protector found a man with a horse and cart who took us to Tirana along the back roads in order to avoid the German guards at the entrance to the town. We were alone in the street and needed a new hole to hide in. Without giving it much thought, we went to our former neighbour from Kavaje, an Italian technician who had sent his family back to Rome after the German occupation. He himself had moved to Tirana, because of his business commitments. He took us in, saying that no one would look for us in his house. At that time the streets of Tirana were terrorised by gangs run by the minister for internal affairs, Xhafer Deva, who had earlier been a Nazi agent in Kosovska Mitrovica. He organised raids in the streets and houses and looted whatever he could get his hands on.

Before long we were arrested in one of these raids and taken to his army barracks. There were already several hundred prisoners there but we three were the only women. Because there were so many of us, we all stood in the yard. Occasionally German soldiers would come and lead prisoners away. Muslim customs forbade we three women being alone among so many men, so each evening they would send us home with an armed guard and return us to the prison in the morning. These were days and nights of panic and madness. On the third night we summoned up our courage and fled through the back door of the house. We had nowhere to go, so we returned to Preza, to our protector, the teacher and head of the village. We were met with the threat that he would personally report us to the German police if we didn't leave Preza and turn ourselves in. Things had changed, he said. We had no idea where to go or what to do.

In despair we decided to take a gamble and seek the help of the resistance fighters who had gathered in the village. These were support-

ers of King Zog and were under the command of Zog's officer, Nu Pali. My mother went to talk to him and confessed who we were, where we came from and what we were running from. He replied that his honour commanded him to help women in need and that he would get us secretly to his native village of Miloti that night and hide us with his brother's family. He set us the strict conditions that we not leave the house and that we not meet anyone. Each of us had to promise him we would obey. The Đerasi family were still in Preza but were prepared to leave. Seeing the noose tightening around the Jews, Dr Đerasi's Greek colleague arranged for him to be transferred to Ljesh, where no one would know him. The route to both villages was in the same direction, along the main road north towards Skutari. We all left together at midnight that night in a truck with about ten of Pali's fighters and his cousin, who would take us to the house. As we came down the hill to the road, we had to pass the strategic intersection at Worre, which was guarded by the German army. Suddenly we stopped, surrounded by armed German soldiers. They asked my mother for her documents. She sat petrified, as though she didn't understand. They began pulling her out of the truck by the arm, shouting "*Los, los!*" We thought it was the end. Suddenly we heard the calm voice of Dr Moša Đerasi explaining in German that he was a doctor, that he had studied in Vienna and was travelling with his family to Ljesh to take up his new post, and that my mother was his sister and we her two daughters. The soldier released my mother and saluted and we continued on our way. I don't know how many people in the world would put their family in jeopardy in order to help someone else. For me, Dr Moša Đerasi will always be the bravest and noblest of men.

The village of Miloti was on a hill dotted with peasant houses. The last house on the top of the hill was the house of the Pali family. Behind the house, slightly uphill, was the small, neglected and dilapidated house which was to be our new refuge. As we entered we had to brush aside thick cobwebs. The building was intended to house both cattle and people. There was no glass in the windows, only wooden shutters, so that when it was raining and cold the house was dark. We prepared our meagre food by lighting dry branches in the middle of the house, where the smoke escaped through the roof. A woman from the Pali family fetched drinking water from a spring seven kilometres away, carrying it on her back in a wooden barrel. Each day she would give us a jug of water. We had no way of protecting our food from the mice and rats.

At night we lay with our heads covered because they would also run across our beds.

In the autumn of 1944, the skirmishes with the German army as it retreated from Greece came closer and closer to Miloti. Explosions and artillery fire could be heard nearby. The village families began evacuating to the valley of the Mat River where they would be safer. The Pali family was prepared to take us with them, but we didn't dare accept this offer because it would break the promise we had given Nu Pali. His cousins in Miloti never found out why they were hiding us. Again we were faced with the dangerous trip to Tirana and uncertainty. The roads were overrun with the retreating German army and bandits taking advantage of the chaos. To this day I don't know how we managed to get through. It was the end of November, 1944.



*View from the Window, Luci Mevorah-Petrović, watercolour.
Kavaja, Albania, July 1943.*

The battle for the liberation of Tirana lasted nineteen days as Albanian soldiers seized the town, street by street. Freedom was within our grasp. In the part of the town where we were, people were still losing their lives, houses were being burnt and there was the deafening roar of mortars and other weapons everywhere. We made a desperate bid for freedom. Running and crawling under fire we made it across the

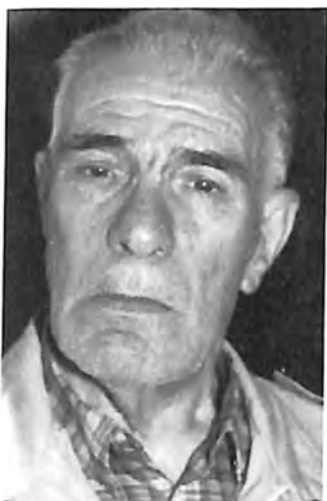
front line and reached the liberated zone of Tirana. Nu Pali was shot by the Albanian Partisans.

Our wonderful relief at having survived the Nazi threat was mixed with complete exhaustion. My brave mother, who had managed to save my sister and me "for that slave in Germany", finally collapsed and fell ill. We had no money, not even to buy the most miserable food. We knew that we were surrounded by everything we could want, but we had no money to buy anything. A piece of cornbread was our only meal for days. We had to reach Belgrade as soon as possible. Fortunately we saw some Yugoslav soldiers in the street. They were heading for Belgrade under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Vidović from Dalmatia, travelling via Durres, Tirana, Elbasan, Struga and Ohrid and from there by the Niš railway. We asked them to take us with them and, for the next week, we were their guests on the trip.

We arrived in Belgrade on January 4, 1945. We had no idea where to go, nor even whether our apartment was still standing. Our first thought was to go to the Jewish Community. Luckily, our people were already there. We were met by the secretary, Moric Abinun, and Bukica Spasić, both of whom were on duty that night. We spent the night in the community shelter, the three of us sleeping in one bed on a straw mattress. The next day we were back in our apartment. We had no news about our father, nor did he know anything about us. In March, 1945, he returned with the first group of prisoners. Our happiness knew no bounds. We were one of the rare families who were united after all the suffering.

Nisim NAVONOVIC

FROM CAPTIVITY TO CAPTIVITY



Nisim Navonovic was born in Pristina on September 3, 1921, to Gavrijel and Estera (née Baruh). He has a sister, Rukula Bencion. His immediate family survived the Holocaust.

He began studying in 1939 in the Faculty of Economics at Belgrade University. He enrolled again in 1945 and, after graduating in 1949, worked in the Material Reserves Administration of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in the Regional People's Committee for Kosovo. He lived in Pristina until 1963 and was in charge of disbursing state investment funds. In 1963 the Federal Executive Council transferred him to the federal government where he worked as an advisor to the minister for foreign trade and as an assistant to the federal secretary for foreign trade in the presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Until 1963 he held the office of president of the Jewish Community in Pristina and received a great deal of recognition for his work.

Jewish families began arriving in Pristina from countries already under Nazi control in late 1939. There were women and children, along with the sick and the elderly, most of them from Austria, Poland and Germany. They were fleeing south in the hope of eventually reaching Palestine. About a hundred families reached Pristina, but the authorities

of the day could neither accommodate nor support them. So the families of the refugee Jews began finding places for them with members of the Pristina community who took them in and completely shared whatever they had with them. At that time the Pristina Jewish community numbered about eight hundred. Rabbi Josif Levi and the president of the Jewish Community, Haim David, gave a number of young people the job of greeting the refugees and finding accommodation for them. I was second in charge of a group for those Jews who wanted to reach Peć and Prizren and the Albanian border as I spoke excellent Albanian. I was a student at the time but had to interrupt my economics degree and return to Pristina after the *numerus clausus* legislation was implemented.

After the Germans entered the town in 1941, they rounded up all the Jews who had come from other countries, threw them into prison and then, several days later, took them away in trucks to an unknown destination. This was in mid-April. At the same time, perhaps a day or two later, Gestapo agents captured and imprisoned four Jews: Mušon Ašer and his son, Salomon, my merchant grandfather, Jakov Buhor Navon, and a grocer, David Mandil. Three of them were shot at the town's shooting range, but my grandfather Jakov was kept in prison because they wanted to get their hands on the family jewellery and money which they had heard about from some Balists from Pristina who knew about his assets.

Before these measures began, Jews from Belgrade had begun arriving in large numbers in Pristina, planning to continue southwards seeking refuge in the Italian occupied zone. Most of them were travelling with either fake documents or none at all.

It was in these circumstances that the general looting of Jewish property in Pristina began. With the help of the Gestapo, the Albanian Fascists broke into Jewish shops, harassing and beating Jews in order to humiliate those who remained and get rid of them. With the yellow stars on their chests, Jews became a target for anyone and could be killed without anyone having to answer for it.

Soon after the Germans entered Pristina in April 1941, we formed, under the guidance of Rabbi Josif Levi, an underground Jewish squad as resistance to the enemy. The aim of our activities was to help the elderly and sick members of the community and supply them with food and drugs. It wasn't long before our squad began distributing pamphlets urging resistance to the occupier. We did this on the orders of the town's resistance movement which controlled all the anti-Nazi and patriotic forces.

The original members of the squad were Rabbi Josif Levi, who led the group, David Ašerović, a student who was killed near Trieste in 1945, carpenter Baruh Baruh and schoolboy Žaki Rubenović, both of whom were killed in Berat in 1943 fighting the Germans, student Albert Ašerović, labourer Jakov Bahar, David Navon who was later captured and deported to Bergen-Belsen where he died, Salamon Salamon who today lives in Venezuela, the merchant Josif Salamon who survived the war and emigrated to Israel, student Gedalja Gidić and merchant Baruh Gidić, both of whom survived Bergen-Belsen and died in Israel, and myself, also a student. There were also three girls, Ruti, Meti and Luča who I think are no longer alive. Meti was a 1941 Partisan Award winner.

Independently of what we were doing, the Gestapo formed a labour gang of about 150 or 200 Jews who were sent to forced labour. We worked crushing and grinding stone near the old electric power station in one of the Pristina suburbs along the road to the cemetery. We worked twelve hours a day under the supervision of guards. We would assemble at six every morning outside the district headquarters. From there the guards would escort us to work. There were no breaks and each of us was obliged to provide his own food, mainly cold meals. Only the seriously ill or those over seventy years of age were exempted from work. The forced labour continued even after the Germans left at the end of May, 1941, when the territory fell under Italian occupation. Albanian pro-Fascist groups, the Balists and others, then took over the local government.

One day, it was the autumn of 1941 as far as I remember, I was taken from the building site with my hands tied, escorted by two policemen. They told me they were taking me to the Gestapo in the village of Miloševo for interrogation and execution. However, after I had waited for about two hours, the police chief interrogated me, enquired whether I was a Communist and then ordered the two policemen to return me to the building site. A few days later they led me away again, this time to the Questura, the Albanian police under the supervision of the German police, and then to prison. They put me in a cell with forty prisoners, most of them Serbs. There was barely room to sit and no toilet. After several days in this place with no water or sewerage, I was crawling with lice like the other prisoners. The Italian medical officer sprinkled us with some kind of powder every day until we got rid of this menace. We relieved ourselves in buckets in the cell and the unbearable stench settled everywhere. We were allowed into the prison yard only for an

hour's walking in the morning and were forbidden to speak to one another during this. The food was very poor: two pieces of bread with some kind of flavourless beans on a filthy metal plate. The whole time I was imprisoned I had no news about what was happening to my family and friends. Kemal-beg had gone out of his way to order all our property confiscated. The Balists came to our house with three trucks and Gestapo security. Although I was beaten and exhausted from my time in prison, I helped my father load our property from the cellar into the trucks. They left us with only four bundles of our belongings, telling us that we should take these with us when we were summoned.

From time to time the Balists and other pro-Nazi Albanian groups would come into the prison and, for no particular reason, beat the prisoners with a bullwhip. To this day I have the scars from this on my left arm and my head. My grandfather was kept in prison and asked for the gold with which the Navon family had conducted its business for four generations. Kemal-beg knew the extent of my grandfather's property and my grandfather was killed in prison after being stripped of his gold!

Even those Jews who were not in prison were living in difficult circumstances. A forced labour gang had been set up with our mothers and sisters, about forty of them. They had to clean the residences of the occupational authorities and some women were assigned to cleaning the streets and public toilets and were subjected to various forms of humiliation in the course of this. In general, there was nowhere for Jews in Kosovo to hide. They were persecuted by the Gestapo, the Balists and Mussolini's Black Shirts. The German command headquarters was in the village of Miloševo, about five or six kilometres from Pristina. Formally, the Italians were in power, but German guards and motorised police would circle the town incessantly.

At about the end of December, 1941, I was transferred to a prison in Tirana. I don't know who gave the order for this. I had no documents and was put in a cell with a Serb named Jezda. We were completely isolated and didn't know what was going on outside. No one asked me anything and no one talked about anything. I slept on a wooden bed with a blanket. The people working in the prison were mostly Italians and Balists.

Not long afterwards, in February, 1942, I was transferred to Elbasan, to the *casa dei prigioneri*, the prison house, under the supervision of the Italians and the Balists. We lived in uncertainty and fear, with no food and no medicines. There were a number of interned fami-

lies from Pristina there, including those of Gavriel Navon, Nisim Lazar, Mušon Navon, Ješua Navon, Salamon Lazar, Avram Baruh and Mordehaj Lazar.

At the end of August, 1943, after spending more than a year and a half in Elbasan, we fled to Mount Daiti, to the village of Shen Gjergj (St George). The capitulation of Italy was now in sight. All six families from Elbasan were living in strict isolation in barns in the village, with no possibility of making any sort of contact with the world outside. We were living without clothes, food or medicine, sleeping surrounded by cattle on planks and ferns or sheepskins. We collected snow overnight to melt for drinking water. There were two people helping us. The first was a local teacher named Elmaz Mema who knew who we were but pretended not to know anything. He would bring us food, cornbread and corn during the night and leave it at a place we agreed on. Sometimes we would also find a handful of beans. The other man who helped us was Gjafer the shepherd. The head of the household would also occasionally bring us some whey and cornbread. His name was Kaplan Bala.

While we were staying in the village we were aware that the Germans were constantly travelling along the road just a kilometre or two away. Fortunately they never came into the village, fearing they would run into Partisans on these hills where even mules could hardly keep their footing.

As time went by there were more and more aircraft flying overhead. These were the sign that the course of the war had changed. We guessed where the aircraft were flying to and lived in complete isolation and fear until April, 1945. Then Kaplan Bala gave us mules and, accompanied by his son, Destan, we rode down into Tirana. I remember that the snow had just begun to melt.

We reached our homes with the help of the Yugoslav military representative in Tirana, who gave us passes, and our friend Sheab Topuli who took us to Struga. We then travelled by train to Uroševac and on to Pristina by horse and cart.

There were people living in our house, but these unknown tenants quickly moved out and we moved back in. The house was empty, but we were home nonetheless. Everyone was in a poor state: my mother and sister had Graves' disease, my father had a spinal injury and I had a pulmonary abscess, typhus and rheumatism. And thus began our lives in the liberated country.



VIII

HIDING IN OCCUPIED SERBIA



Kosta TIMOTIJEVIĆ¹

HIDING OUT THE WAR²

The story of Dr Fridrih Pops, his wife Ružica
and the people who helped them

Dr Fridrih Pops, a founder and former president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, died on May 25, 1948. He became president after the death of Dr Hugo Špicer, the creator of the federation and its first president.

Dr Pops is a major figure in the history of Yugoslavia's Jewish community. He spent the second world war in and around Belgrade with his wife, Ruža. This in itself was so unusual and brave that many stories emerged, blending truth and imagination. Belgrade journalist Kosta Timotijević was the son of Dr Pops' daughter Olga and it was he who finally recorded the true story of the Jewish community leader's life in occupied Belgrade. Each line of this story shines with the writer's love and respect for his grandfather. The publication of this story is the community's gesture of respect to the memory of Dr Pops.

The main factor in the survival of my grandfather and grandmother, Fridrih and Ruža Pops was no doubt sheer luck. But they themselves also did a great deal to ensure their own salvation. Despite his usually irascible temperament, my grandfather was exceptionally cool in dan-

¹ Kosta Timotijević, a Belgrade journalist, died on May 31, 1998.

² First published in the Jewish Review, no. 5-8, 1988, pp. 7-15, to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the death of Dr Fridrih Pops.

gerous situations (probably because of his brachycardia which doesn't let the heart climb up the throat). My grandmother was a very rational woman and not given to panic. As far as I know my grandfather lost his nerve only once during the war, when he learnt that my mother and I had been arrested. He began packing a bag, planning to go to the Gestapo to have us released. My grandmother talked him out of this, insisting it would only make things worse for us because then it would be clear to the Gestapo that we had known he was hiding; he would only be sacrificing himself and aggravating our situation. But this combination – his courage and her sound logic – would not have been enough had it not been for the people who helped them to hide and survive, often putting themselves in danger in order to do so.

Stories like the one about them hiding in an empty tomb are not true. During the occupation they lived an almost normal life, with certain deprivations, remaining in a kind of voluntary house arrest.

After the bombing in April, 1941, they headed for the coast, getting as far as Ostrošac on the Neretva river. Then my grandfather decided to return to Belgrade because "I have to be with my people, the ones who need me." This was one of the ill-considered decisions which diluted the advantages of his coolness. In Belgrade the Gestapo met him with open arms and escorted him to a camp in Graz. He was released at the end of June, 1941. As soon as he arrived back in Belgrade my mother immediately sheltered him and my grandmother, thus avoiding another arrest, one from which he would not return.

At the beginning of the summer they spent a month or so at 11 Cara Lazara Street with Milovan Pulanić and his wife, a Viennese Jew whose name I have forgotten. This was more ducking than hiding. A man named Boskowitz was arrested towards the end of the summer, and so Pulanić suggested that they move to Dr Živković's sanatorium under Mt Avala. I think Pulanić also made the arrangements. At this point they were still using their real names, as were some other people who were hiding in Kraljica Natalija Street (now Narodnog Fronta Street), where the Maternity Hospital now stands. They stayed there only a few days because someone (we never discovered who) recognised and reported them. A complete stranger came to my mother one day and said "Hide your parents, they are to be arrested today." She dashed to the sanatorium and took them out to a waiting carriage through a side exit as the Gestapo troops were entering the main gate.

From then on they lived under the names of Jovan and Ruža Zečević, with false documents which showed they were refugees from Trebinje, living at 20 Lomina Street, at 13 Trstenjakova Street in Rakovica with Alojz Čeper and his wife, or at 21 Bulevar Oslobođenja (now Bulevar JNA) with Ruža Baršonj. They stayed at each of these addresses two or three times in rotation. No one wanted them to stay too long at a time because of the danger of blackmail (of which more later) or of them being recognised. From the late autumn of 1943 until the Easter bombing of April 16 and 17, 1944, they lived on the top floor of the Izvozna Bank in Terazije. It was this which gave rise to the legend that they hid right in the middle of the Gestapo headquarters. From then until the liberation they lived as refugees on the outskirts of the city, first with my mother and me and a lot of other people at the house of Stela Petrović (née Nahmijas) at 2 Svetoandrejska Street in the area known today as Šumice, and later in a specially built hut nearby, in what is now Konjarnik.



Dr Fridrih Pops, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia until May, 1948.

There is no doubt that most credit for them being successfully hidden must go to Dr Alojz Čeper. He was a Slovenian refugee and a clerk in the Ministry of Transport, which, after the Muslims left, was full of Slovenes. He and his wife, who was also a Slovene, were given a small house in the railway colony at Rakovica where he would occasionally hide other people as well, people from the underground and people being persecuted. I'm not familiar with his revolutionary history in the pre-war days, but he was obviously a capable, highly skilled and ruthless conspirator. Through his frequent business trips to Hungary, he maintained the connection between the Hungarian Jews and the Belgrade Jews who

were refugees there, and their relatives and friends in Belgrade. He would bring gold and dinar payment orders from Ginka Munk (before

the war her married name had been Edenburg, later she remarried as Kazes). These were the main finance for my mother's activities in sending parcels to prisoners and helping a number of people without means to survive.

As well as all his public and clandestine business, Čeper always had time to organise my grandfather and grandmother's move from one base to another. He proved especially cool during the first attempt at blackmail, at the beginning of 1941. Thanks to an indiscretion, someone whose name I don't want to mention discovered that the Pops (alias Zečević) family was in hiding and sought a reward by reporting them to the Gestapo.

Apparently the Gestapo handed the matter over to the special police (the Nedić police), who "found Jovan and Ruža Zečević, respectable refugees from Hercegovina," and probably reported that the denunciation was untrue. The long grey beard my father had grown as part of his new identity, and the fact that they were calm, proved convincing on a number of occasions.

Roza Barsony, with whom they were staying at the time, discovered who the informer was. Čeper easily found the man's address in the Central Registry in Obilićev Crescent where you could get any address for five dinars. He paid the wretch a visit and scared him to death. He told him that falsely denouncing people was a serious crime, punishable by being sent to a camp or even death and that if he was to utter the name Zečević again he would be taken care of "the way we do it – and you know what that means." He didn't exactly say that he was from the special police or the Gestapo, but he dropped dark hints to that effect. The man didn't say a word and after the war he vanished from Belgrade. To this day it's not clear to me why Čeper was so involved with the old people. It certainly wasn't because of any Party directive and he as a person seemed utterly unsentimental. He stayed in Belgrade for a short time after the war before going to Ljubljana where he became a minister or an assistant to a minister in the government of the republic. I don't know whether he's still alive, but if he is he must be extremely elderly.

Roza Barsony, a Hungarian from Horgos, was married to a man named Jovanović who died in prison. When Čeper brought the Zečević family to her the first time she had no idea who they were but it was clear to her that they were in hiding because they never went out into the street and would wear dark sunglasses to go into the yard, even

when there was no sun. She must have begun putting two and two together when my mother used to go to the Barsony's apartment to visit, but she asked no questions. In time she herself became involved in the conspiracy, serving as a courier and performing many invaluable practical services for purely unselfish reasons. This illiterate woman had a natural nobility and dignity. After the war we maintained a close and everlasting friendship. She never sought any kind of repayment for the services she had rendered and spoke about the events of the occupation with an easy humour, as though they had been something amusing in which she had personally played a rather comic role. She died about ten years ago.

Milovan Pulanić, who had headed the Zagreb bureau of the Avala agency before the war, moved to Belgrade after the declaration of the independent Banovina of Croatia, because the ultra-nationalist True Right Party had begun openly threatening him. His wife was a Jew and he had studied in Vienna and had a broad network of connections through the Freemasons. At the beginning of the occupation he devoted himself to helping Belgrade Jews flee to Italy, Hungary or Turkey, persuading the hesitant to go and hiding the ones who stayed. He first sheltered my grandfather and grandmother in his apartment at 11 Cara Lazara Street, in a building which Haim Melamed had owned until the war. Later he was involved in their change of identity, visited them in their shelters, cheered them up with Jewish jokes from Vienna, couriered messages, money and food and encouraged and supported them when my mother and I were in prison in January and February of 1943. He deserves respect not only for the obvious practical services he performed, but for helping my grandfather and grandmother maintain their morale and their positive attitude. After the war he was editor of the economic service of Tanjug, the Yugoslav state news agency. He died in about 1970 in a sanatorium in Istria. His wife died soon after the war.

Anastasia Styepanovna Buhbinder was Russian, the wife of the watchmaker Ignjat Buhbinder from Balkanska Street. Her husband had been taken away in the early summer of 1941 (and was probably already dead), so she was put in the care of her late husband's apprentice, Šišić. By then he was an independent watchmaker and jeweller (his shop stands today in Moše Pijade Street next to Centroprom). Through this connection she sold jewellery and ducats, first ours then, later, what Čeper brought from Budapest. I think she found the apartment in Lomina Street for my grandparents, because she lived nearby.

She herself wasn't actively involved in their affairs but always knew where they were living and visited them from time to time. She was always loyal and friendly. She died three or four years ago at a very great age.

Dr Vandel Tasić, then married to the writer Frida Filipović, née Grajf, from Sarajevo, the sister of Dr Mario Grajf, had not been one of our friends before the war, although we knew each other from Vrnjačka Banja. We became friends when we were submitting applications to the Jewish Commissariat, or whatever it was called, at Tašmajdan, for the release of Jewish women married to "Aryans", so that they were not sent to the Sajmište camp. Tasić became involved in the conspiracy some time during 1942 when my grandfather, who had chronic high blood pressure, had one of his occasional attacks of bleeding. After that he would pay them regular visits, giving medical assistance and warm human attention, as though they were his closest friends. He knew who they were, although he never acknowledged this either by word or gesture and strictly observed the convention of their Zečević identity. His prompt interventions helped my grandfather to survive. Even after the war he continued to take care of my grandfather until he died. Vandel Tasić died during the 1970s.

One of the most useful mediators for acquiring false identity papers, *Ausweise* for travelling and so on, was Nikola Kolarević. He had been a police officer before the war and now held some kind of honorary post in the city council, where he had good connections, as he did in the police department, including the special police. His fee was nominal: the amount he had to pay the inside contact from whom he would get the documents. My grandfather and grandmother got the papers they needed from him, as did many other Belgrade Jews including the wife of Ruben Rubenović, Mica Demajo (née Baruh) and some others who never used the papers. Kolarević put himself in a great deal of danger for very little money, if indeed he made any profit at all. His motives were obviously more noble than pure greed. After the war my mother, Tina Aladžem and probably a few other people he helped made statements which ensured that he was not pursued as an enemy collaborator, but neither were his good deeds ever properly acknowledged. He died in an old people's home in Kovin in the early 1970s.

Tina Aladžem (née Parenzan) was an Italian and the wife of Miša Aladžem who had been a merchant before the war and spent the war years in Spain. She was the connection through whom we met

Kolarević. She was personally involved in hiding a number of Jews and later, after the capitulation of Italy, assisted Italian officers who wanted neither to cooperate with the Germans nor to be imprisoned. She was one of the sources of funding for Operation Survival. I don't know where she got the money, I suppose she had gold. Her husband died while he was abroad, so she moved to Trieste after the war. The last news from her, in about 1970, was a letter which helped Kolarević get some kind of small pension just before he died. In her letter she described his good deeds, almost declaring him the organiser of the resistance movement in occupied Belgrade.

Another man, about whose motives there was a degree of suspicion, but who I think should be acknowledged as selfless, was the Slovenian businessman Viktor Jamnik. There is no doubt he was a business associate of the occupiers, because he was logging the woods on the Danube river islands for the Germans, but he was also the main source of finance for survival from 1943 on. He gave my mother unlimited access to a bank account, never asking who the money was for and with no concern about whether it would be repaid after the war, simply saying "Easy come, easy go." He didn't ask about my grandfather and grandmother, although we came to the conclusion later that he must have know about us, or at least suspected, because after the bombing of May 18, 1944, when Neimar and Pašino Brdo were destroyed, he suddenly appeared in our refuge bringing building materials and builders who built a cosy two-room hut in two days in Generala Milutinovića Street in the area now known as Konjarnik. He often visited my grandfather and grandmother, addressing them as the Zečević family (there was a tacit convention that everyone addressed them by that surname; even my mother and I called them Uncle Jova and Aunt Ruža). All the time he continued to support them lavishly. By the end of the war we owed him millions of Nedić dinars. He disappeared suddenly on the eve of the liberation, contacting us after the war from Johannesburg. He thought, rather realistically, that he would not have been forgiven for his business dealings with the Germans, despite all the good he had done.

One other man who was a collaborator, active in both political and police matters, and yet who deserves mention here because of assistance he gave although he need not have done so, is Ilija "Ika" Paranos. He was a special police chief who thwarted a blackmail attempt. A drug addict who had been admitted to the Živković sanatorium below

Mt Avala met my grandfather and grandmother and learned that they were hiding in Belgrade, then demanded money from my mother in exchange for his silence.

My mother had no experience in dealing with blackmailers. Obviously frightened and unable to contact Čeper, who was away on one of his frequent trips, she paid up (I think it was 100,000 Nedić dinars) and was promised that that would be the last of it. This was sometime in the late autumn of 1942. In the spring of 1943, the same blackmailer appeared again, asking for 250,000 dinars. Čeper was again away and my mother said she had to borrow the money from somewhere. She turned to a man whom she hadn't wanted to involve in the conspiracy, Dr Milutin Ivković, the husband of my younger aunt Ela who had died in 1938. He was shocked to learn that my grandparents were in Belgrade, but his reaction was calm and rational: he told my mother to pay the money and that he would stake everything on a single card. He went to Ilija Paranos and told him everything. They had played sport together before the war and I think that they had known each other since their school days. I don't know to what degree it was from friendship or to what degree he wanted to protect himself after Stalingrad by doing favours, but Paranos immediately ordered the files of Jovan and Ruža Zečević to be brought to him from the Central Registry and burned them in front of Milutin. He then sent agents to wait for the blackmailer as he left our house. It turned out there was a whole gang, so arrested them all, had them beaten and threatened that they would be killed the next time they uttered a word about the Zečević family to anyone. At Milutin's suggestion my mother went to Paranos to thank him and took her mink coat, which fortunately had not yet been sold, as a gift for his wife. Thanking her, he replied: "You know, Madam, we have to help each other. We all get hurt, some of us for being Jews, some of us for being Chetniks, some of us for being Partisans..."

A short time later, on May 25, 1943, Milutin was arrested and executed. After the war there was a story put about from certain malicious sources that he had been executed because of his parents-in-law. Paranos had probably mentioned our case as a mitigating circumstance while he was being interrogated, but the whole issue was later turned upside down. My mother wrote a detailed statement to Tito's State Security Department, then still known as OZNA, proposing that

Paranos be given credit for his behaviour in this case. It didn't help. The denunciations prevailed and he was executed.

While on the subject of people like this, I should mention a man named Franja Galijan. He was a follower of Ljotić, a university colleague of my Uncle Vladimir and, for some time, a legal clerk in my grandfather's office. I mentioned previously that my grandfather and grandmother were in the Izvozna Bank when the Easter bombing began. My grandmother had some difficulty in persuading my grandfather to go down to the cellar, but when they returned to the room after the air raid siren stopped, they found it cut in half by a bomb. They gathered whatever they could reach from the door and went down to Čumićevo Alley with a little suitcase and a bundle and waited to see if someone would appear. We found them there and took them to Terazije where, in front of the deep bomb crater stood Galijan, in his uniform and helmet, directing traffic. Forgetting where he was, my grandfather shouted "Galijan, shame on you! What are you doing in that uniform?"

My mother explained to the astonished man: "Franja, these are Jovan and Ruža Zečević, they're refugees, friends of my parents."

"I see, Madam. Take good care of them!" replied Galijan. I have no idea what happened to him later.

At the beginning of the occupation only two or three people, Pulanić, Čeper and Milan Vladarski, knew that my grandparents were in hiding. But as time went on, the circle inevitably widened to include cousins, friends and even mere acquaintances, all of them good and honourable people. But some of them were walking time bombs, not because of any ill intention but simply because they were talkative. However, this couldn't be helped. All in all it was more a matter of luck than anything else. My grandfather himself became a danger as the first signs of senility began to emerge. In their refuges in Konjarnik and Šumice he began to go out freely for short walks at dusk.

We had begun to relax a little by then, so we let him go to the Cvetko market with a bag so that he could feel useful. Once, while waiting in a line for green beans, he quarrelled with some man and began shouting at him: "Listen, you pipsqueak, I used to be the vice-president of the Belgrade Municipality!" By chance, Tasa Kumanudi was there and recognised my grandfather's voice, although not his appearance.

"Listen old man, if you're president of the municipality, I'm King Petar!" he said to him, grabbing him by the arm, pulling him out of the

queue. He then literally escorted him back to the hut. My grandfather told us the entire story with great indignation and kept asking the whole day: "Why was Tasa so rude to me?"

Koča Kumanudi wasn't involved in hiding my grandfather and grandmother and probably didn't even know they were in Belgrade until the summer of 1944. He could have learned about it from Tasa or perhaps even through some other channel. After the Ravna Gora congress in the village of Ba, a man appeared at my grandfather's place, saying he'd been sent by Koča Kumanudi, who had been at the congress himself, to tell him that he was seen as being minister for justice after the war. My grandfather replied, quite lucidly, "Not even a rat boards the ship when it's sinking."

After the war my grandfather agreed when the Kumanudi family pleaded with him to defend Draža Mihailović at his trial. He did this not only out of personal friendship (they had been friends since primary school) but also out of his deep conviction that the indictment was politically and legally unsustainable. However he became so disturbed during the trial that Dr Vandel Tasić was concerned that he was in danger of suffering a stroke. Thus he was forced to withdraw.

Zora Vladarski, née Milenković, a cousin of the Kumanudi family, was a school friend of my mother. Together with her husband, Milan Vladarski, a Shell Oil representative, she was actively involved in the first phase of transforming the Pops family into the Zečević family. She put us in touch with Tina Aladžem who introduced us to Nikola Kolarević. Milan oversaw the disguises (growing the beard, changes of hair style) and then took the photographs for the false identity documents. The Vladarski family also helped financially as much as they could throughout the war. Financial help was also given by Merima and Branko Dragutinović and Stana Košanin, who visited Matilda Deleon in the Jewish hospital because Matilda was the aunt of David Anaf, to whom she was sending parcels in prison. They were married after the war. Other financial contributors were Stana Đurić-Klajn (who was also looking after her own husband, Hugo Klajn, alias Uroš Klajić), Rada Banuševac and her husband Milan Dedinac who had been released from detention in 1943 because of his ill health, and several other people who either knew or suspected the truth. All of them, as much as they could, whether with money or with food, helped with sending parcels to imprisoned Jews. The depot for preparing, packing and dispatching these parcels to the railway station was in our kitchen at 40 Jevrejska

Street and everyone brought whatever they had there. In the beginning we were only sending parcels to my father, Dušan, my Uncle Vladimir and two or three cousins. As time went on, friends and acquaintances began sending help for packages. These included Dr Albert Vajs, Ruben Rubenović (whose wife, before she was deported to a camp, left us a significant quantity of linen and other fabrics, as much as she managed to get out of her shop before a commissar was appointed), Rafajlo Blam, Liko Ruso, Đorđe Berger and a number of other people whose names I no longer remember. The cost of this operation kept growing and it's clear that it would not have been possible without the collaboration and help of many honourable people. As I have already mentioned, the main financial support came from Ginka Munk (via Čeper) and Viktor Jamnik, who gave almost unlimited financial assistance.

It must have been clear to most of these good and honourable people that this was their duty. It appears there was consensus about a principle which my mother formulated as follows: "Everyone has the right to survive, and it is everyone's duty to help others to do so. Money exists to be used and it must be obtained by selling belongings, asking for contributions, borrowing from wherever possible. It doesn't matter what is sold or how much is borrowed from whom because, after the war, this will somehow be settled among people of good faith. Survival is crucial and everything else is secondary."

After the war, most of the contributors simply wrote off the loans, some asked for restitution of their property (gold or other property which had been left somewhere to be taken care of), some were satisfied with partial repayments until people were on their feet again, while in some cases, Jamnik for example, all contact was lost so repayment of the loans was not an issue. My grandfather supported my mother's principle during the war, convinced that he would personally be able to repay the loans to everyone. He regretted this later and set aside as much as he could from his pension for loan repayments. I think that the situation in which he found himself after the war did him more damage than everything he went through under the occupation. He had two minor strokes before a third took his life on May 25, 1948. My grandmother survived him, dying in 1961.

Silva USKOKOVIĆ

IN A DESERTED VILLAGE STABLE



Silva Avramović was born in Belgrade on September 15, 1923, to Šemaja and Matilda (née Stefanović). Her brother Josif was killed on August 24, 1944.

After returning to Belgrade in October, 1944, she continued her education studying at the Faculty of Economics at Belgrade University. She married pharmacy student Milutin Uskoković. Their happy marriage resulted in two daughters, Sonja a pharmacist and Dragana, a clerk. She has three grandchildren.

I remember my father, Šemaja, my mother Matilda, my brother Josif and I enjoying a happy life with a standard of living above the average. We had a house in a pleasant part of Belgrade at 26 Kajmakčalanska Street. My father was a merchant and had a shop at 2 Nikole Spasića Street. My mother stopped working when they married and devoted herself to the household and raising me and my brother Josif. He was a little older than me and we both went to the same school. When the war began we were startled and confused. My father went out to a military drill and came back dressed in peasant costume. He immediately got identity documents for us with false Serbian names. Like other Jews, we gradually began preparing to flee. Early one morning once everything was arranged, we left the house, locked the door, kissed the mezuzah and our suffering began.

We went by train to Kuršumlja. All of us were carrying a toilet bag and our new identity documents in false names, some money, a sweater and a change of underwear. My father gave each of us a slip of paper with an address.

We got onto the train, each of us in a different compartment. Whoever of us remained alive were to go to the address our father had given us. I got off the train in Kuršumlja, trembling with fear as I wondered whether all of us had arrived. Thank God, all four of us were there and I thought we were saved. We went to the house of Stanoje Stefanović, my father's friend. When he saw us, he threw his arms around my father. "Šemaja, my brother," he greeted him.

"Forget that name," my father replied. "I'm no longer Šemaja, I'm Nikola Petrović now." We spent a week there, among good people, happy and free from fear. But then Kosta Pećanac, the Chetnik leader, announced that Jews were to be expelled, so we left Kuršumlja, unhappy and downcast and set off for Pristina. We had the misfortune to be arrested when we reached Podujevo. However some deal was done, which I didn't know about and a guard let us escape later. We fled in the middle of the night and travelled to Prokuplje, where there were no Germans. Instead there were Bulgarians. One day, half an hour before the beginning of the curfew, our landlady came into our room.

"There's a Bulgarian man looking for Vera." That was my new name on my false papers. Frightened to hear a Bulgarian was looking for me and even more frightened by the look my father gave me, I followed the landlady out. The Bulgarian soldier told me that the Germans would arrive the next day, a penal expedition which would take all Jews off to camps. We didn't know what to do. There were eight Jewish families altogether in Prokuplje. Our landlady tried to comfort us and one of our new friends, Ilija Joksimović, advised us to flee. Ilija's sister offered to take us to the nearby village of Jugovac.

The village was ten kilometres away. There was no road, so we walked along gorges through the ravines under Mt Jastrebac. We stayed in Jugovac in a deserted stable, with bare earth beneath our feet and a view of the sky through the roof. We were all dressed in old and shabby peasant clothes and lived by doing odd jobs, tilling the soil in exchange for food. We were lucky in that at least we had bread. The peasants prepared good meals for us, their hired help. I was sorry for my mother who had only corn bread while my father and brother and I had a decent meal as part of our working day. Once we went out to dig

up corn. This was something we knew only in its boiled or grilled form. Now we saw some short, spindly stalks with green leaves. My father had always advised us to be at the end of the line, watch what the others were doing and then copy them. We usually went out to the field as soon as it was light in the morning. One day there were twelve of us workers. I was at the end of the line, with my brother in front of me and my father in front of him. It was the first time I had ever held a shovel and my hands were covered in calluses. I straightened up to wipe my hands and glanced at my brother and father. Then I saw the other workers behind my father, looking at us and smiling. I signalled my father and he raised his head as all the workers burst out laughing. "What are you doing, Nikola, you're digging up weeds!"

"Well, I thought it was time everyone had a laugh," said my father quickly.

That evening he told me had been terrified because if they saw that we were no good at this hard farm work we would have no bread. There was a great deal we didn't know about village life, but we were fast learners.

Soldiers would often come before dawn, surrounding the village. Everyone would be up straight away, as every household had a dog and they would bark as soon as someone came into the village. One day Nedić's troops came and surrounded the stable where we lived. A man in uniform came in and barked at us "We know you're Jews. You've been in hiding for a long time and you've lived long enough. We're going to take you to the Germans now." Then he left the house.

We were all in tears, kissing one another as my mother divided up the corn bread left over from the previous day. Another officer came in and, with a broad grin, asked why we were weeping. "If you're taking us to hand us over to the Germans so they can kill us because we're Jews, isn't that reason enough for us to be crying?" my mother answered.

The officer then embraced my mother, telling her "Listen to me. I have secret orders to keep you hidden. Not even my colleague out there knows about this."

The soldiers formed up together again and left. In the meantime the whole village had gathered around, everyone shouting "Keep your hands off our refugees: they're good people!"

The young officer embraced my father and addressed the peasants. "I'm from the same place as these refugees. Take good care of them, because it's not easy being away from your home."

For the time being, at least, we were still alive, thank God. We kissed one another and my father read a prayer. But the same night a Partisan commissar from a detachment which had been in the area for a long time took my father away and interrogated him. He suspected my father was a spy and wanted to know why one of Nedić's officers had hugged him. They held a meeting at which my father was accused. After a long discussion they sentenced him to death. There was a Partisan, a woman who had been a Communist since before the war, who took our side. She spent the whole night trying to prove to them that Nikola Petrović was a Jew, that he was an honest man and not guilty of anything. She reminded them that my father had told them who we were as soon as we arrived. If he had always been honest and sincere, why shouldn't we believe him now? Thanks to her intercession the Partisans finally released him and once again we all remained alive.



Silva with her mother, father and brother.

We were still in the village when 1943 arrived. One day in the spring of that year I went into Prokuplje with the village women to go to the market. We bought eggs, potatoes and onions. I also had to go to the pharmacy because my mother was ill and, as I came out, a man in uniform approached me and asked to see my identification. I was always delighted to show my papers, knowing they would find Vera

Petrović there. However this soldier tore my identification up without explanation and threw the pieces to the ground. I felt as though he had torn my heart apart. "You're under arrest," he said. When I asked him why, he replied that I'd find out at the station. At the station they read me the indictment.

"You were fighting near the village of Blace and wounded this officer. He has identified you."

They took me to prison and, after endless interrogation and much humiliation they handed me over to the Germans. I spent several days with the Germans in Prokuplje before they sent me to the Gestapo in Leskovac. I arrived about noon, escorted by four German soldiers. People in the street stopped and stared at me, my eyes were full of tears. They took me to a solitary confinement cell, but took me out repeatedly for interrogation. Once they put the barrel of a revolver in my mouth: I thought I was going to die. By now I had no more tears: my eyes were dry and my heart was bitter as I said over and over again "My name is Vera Petrović, I have nothing to do with Jews and I'm not a Partisan."

I had to scrub out the cell every day and then do the German soldiers' laundry. They were looking for healthy and strong young people to carry corn bread from the bakery every day. It came in a huge baking pan, so there were usually two of us to carry it. The Serb baker would always look at us with pity in his eyes.

One day my mother, who was ill, arrived in Leskovac. By this time I had been with the Gestapo for eight months. My mother knew no one in Leskovac and had no money. When night fell she huddled on the pavement, waiting for the next day when she planned to visit the prison. People passing by looked her over, thinking she was a beggar. Then a middle-aged woman stopped and asked her if she was all right. My mother begged her to go away, not to draw a crowd. The good woman insisted and took my mother into her house, the house in front of which she had been sitting. She made her some tea. "Madam, you're obviously ill, but I can see that you're also under a great deal of strain," she said.

"Yes," my mother admitted, "my daughter has been in the Gestapo prison for eight months."

"I'll try to help you," the woman replied. "The camp commandant lives here and he is courting me." My mother became very alarmed at this and wanted to leave, but the good woman calmed her down. "Please stay, it's Easter tomorrow and they'll allow visitors into the camp."

The next day, as we were taking our daily half-hour walk in the prison yard, the command came over the loudspeaker: "Partisan Vera, leave the circle!"

When I left the yard I saw my mother and with her the woman, who hugged me and gave me some cakes. This was incredible for me. I thought I must have been dreaming or that I had lost my mind, gone completely crazy. The woman hugged and kissed me, whispering to me that everything was going to be all right. Finally the woman began speaking to one of the Germans and my mother came to me. I whispered to her quickly that we could see each other near the bakery. I told her where it was and what time I would be there. With the Germans everything was as regular as clockwork.

A little later a Serb doctor came and examined me, asking me if I was healthy and whether I had any pain. I told him that I was in good health and had no ailments. I don't know how he translated this to the Germans, but two days later I was released from the camp prison.

I had no identification and no money. I knew no one in Leskovac. Then I remembered our baker and went to him in the hope that he would help me. When I came into the bakery without the German guards he was frightened, thinking that I must have escaped, but I explained that they had let me go. To my joy, he told me that my mother had been there a few minutes before. I thought I was going to scream from happiness. He pointed me in the direction she had gone and I started running, saying over and over again "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elochenu!"

My mother was then only 44, but in the distance I now saw an old woman. "Mother!" I shouted. She turned and we ran to each other, sobbing and kissing without speaking.

We decided to leave for Jugovac and, thank God, reached Prokuplje with no problems. We set off from there, but my mother could walk no further along the rough ground. Again we were reminded that there is a God: a peasant with an oxcart came by and took us to Jugovac. Everyone gathered around to welcome us, my father and brother were both weeping. Happiness settled over our refuge, our stable.

But the happiness proved short-lived and new problems began. The Partisans came and mobilised my brother. They knew he had been in secondary school so they made him a mobilisation officer, which meant he had to go from village to village, recruiting young peasants. It was now August, 1944. My brother came first to the stable and asked

me to wash his military uniform, saying "I'll be out in the field for two or three days."

The nearest village to Jugovac was Pašince. In the village everyone got up at dawn and went to bed when darkness fell, as there was neither gas nor candles. We lay in bed and talked quietly in the dark. All of us prayed we would remain alive and healthy and that the war would end. Suddenly someone called to my father to come outside and people began shouting "Joca's been killed!"

"No," said my father, "he was here, he's just left," thinking they meant another Joca who lived in the village. He pointed them to his house.

"No, Nikola, your Joca's been killed. Joca the refugee. He's here in the cart."

My mother and father were out of their minds. The peasants took him into some house. I was there alone, beside my Joška. There was a crowd of peasants around our stable. Suddenly I heard a sound from his body. I was at once frightened and excited, and began screaming "He's alive! He's alive!"

"No, he's not alive," the older peasants explained to me as they took me away, "It's the sound of the blood draining from his heart."

We buried my brother in the village cemetery, with full honours. Apparently there had been some misunderstanding and shooting among the Partisans in Pašince, the neighbouring village. My brother was the only one who was killed. My father said Kaddish quietly to himself. It was August 24, 1944, and the war was coming to an end.

As soon as Belgrade was liberated in October, 1944, my father managed to find a metal coffin and we returned to Belgrade by train. There we buried my brother again, in the Jewish cemetery.

Here in liberated Belgrade I realised that we had survived the war, that the persecution was over, but more and more often I found myself wondering why we Jews had to suffer so much. Until yesterday we had been forced to conceal the fact that we were Jews, and now I wanted to tell everyone:

*Know, all of you
You who spent the war in your homes,
Know, all of you
You who had it hard during the war
Know, all of you*

*We Jews were guilty without guilt
Guilty of living
And sentenced to death.*

*Know, all of you
We had no rights,
Less rights than dogs.*

*Know, all of you
We who survived
Savour each day
Each moment, each instant*

*For
We walk with our heads held high*

*And
Freely say
That we are Jews!*

When we arrived home, we discovered that our house had been sold, and that the buyer was a Serb. As soon as he found out that we'd returned, he came to us and apologised, saying "The Germans were selling the house; if I hadn't bought it someone else would have." Then he tore up the sale contract in front of us and said to my mother: "Think of it as me taking care of your house for you."

Because our home was very large, the Partisan authorities assigned half of it to some fighter. I resumed my education at the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University. I met Milutin Uskoković, a pharmacy student, and we were registered, as getting married was called in those days. In this very happy marriage we had two daughters: Sonja, who is a pharmacist like her father, and Dragana, who works in a bank. I have a grandson, named Milutin after my husband. He lives in the Netherlands and is married to a Dutch woman. I also have a granddaughter, Zorana, who is a fourth-year pharmacy student, and my youngest grandson, Rade. My husband died in 1993. He was a good husband, a caring father and a tender grandfather. He respected my religion and I respected his. Out of respect for my Jewish origins, all my grandchildren attended school in Israel.

Dragutin BRANDAJŠ

ACROSS THE BARBED WIRE



Dragutin Brandajs was born in 1912, in the Sremska Mitrovica village of Čalma, to Sigmund and Berta (née Bencl). His brothers, Julijus and Rajko, and sisters, Evgenija, Rozsika and Laura, all perished in the Holocaust, as did his parents.

After the war he was first a clerk and then a manager in various Yugoslav banks, then a director first of Genex and then of Combik Ges. m.b.H in Vienna until his retirement in 1978. He has one son, Branko, from his marriage to Bosiljka Cvetić.

This account is based on an interview conducted by the former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, Jaša Almuli, with Dragutin Brandajs for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

In Podgorica people were arriving from Belgrade and it was from them I heard that Jews were wearing yellow armbands and working on clearing rubble. All the same, for some reason I wanted to go to my family in Zemun, because I didn't want to desert them, I wanted whatever happened to them to happen to me as well. My friends found me a travel permit and on May 9, 1941, I arrived in Zemun.

My parents and my wife were angry with me for returning but I calmed them down. "I'll work like the others, it won't do me any harm." Two days later I registered with the German police and they put

me to work immediately. I was with a group of Jews cleaning clogged toilets in the German barracks. Things improved later and I was sent to work in the former Cavalry School where I cleaned out the stables and groomed the horses. I consoled myself with the thought that it would all be over soon and that I had the pleasure of seeing my family every day.

At the end of December, 1941, the Ustasha police in Zemun gave me a temporary exemption from wearing a yellow armband because my wife, Nina, was not a Jew. Nina's father was from Lika and her mother Russian. But then on the night of July 28, 1942, the Ustashas deported the Zemun Jews to Jasenovac. Among them were my elderly parents who were the reason I had returned to Zemun. I didn't feel safe and spent the night with friends. A few days later they began arresting Jews who were married to members of the Orthodox Church, while those married to Catholics remained free.

Things were getting too hot for me. I felt like a trapped mouse, running from one corner of the room to another. The people who were sheltering me were gripped with fear when a mobile Ustasha court arrived in Zemun, so I couldn't stay with them any longer. There was a plan to flee to the Croatian interior with forged identity papers, but this fell through and then I learned that the police were looking for me. The only open road led to Serbia.

At this time a lot of the young people in Zemun were registering for work in the Bor mine with the German Todt organisation as a way of escaping the army or other problems. Nina, my wife, registered me for work with the help of Mara Bulić, our fellow tenant, and managed to get a pass for me to transfer to Belgrade and in Belgrade another one for Bor. This wasn't at all simple, because I didn't want to travel in a convoy with the other workers because I might be recognised by people from Zemun. I needed to get a permit to travel alone.

I didn't want to stay long in Belgrade, because I was heading towards Zaječar to Veljko Perović, who used to visit my sister and brother-in-law. But there was no train until the next morning so I began looking for a place to spend the night. I could have stayed with my wife's parents, if they hadn't been arrested. I went to Drago Grahovac, my nephew's brother in law. They were very frightened when they saw me. I asked them if I could stay there overnight, but they told me there was no room. I completely understood them, it was extremely dangerous and harbouring Jews was punishable by death. My situation was worse and worse as darkness fell and I still had no place to spend the

night. Then I ran into someone in the street who I knew well from Zemun. He was extremely delighted to see me alive but was amazed that I had dared to cross into Serbia. I asked him if he could put me up for the night. "You know, there are a lot of us, and every night the Germans seal off part of the city and conduct searches. You have to understand me," he replied.

By now it was 7.30 in the evening and the curfew would begin at eight. So I went to the nearest person I knew, Duško Stefanović. He's now a retired professor from the Faculty of Economics at Belgrade University, but before the war he was a clerk in the inspectorate of the Hipotekarna Bank. We had been friends' from our early years, we had rowed together in the Zemun Galeb club and skied together on Tara, Kopaonik, Avala and Košutnjak. We were among the first to take up skiing in Serbia in 1932. "Duško, I have nowhere else to go. I have to spend the night with you," I told him. I spent the night there and left the next morning.

I arrived in Zaječar in the evening and the next morning I found Veljko Perović, my sister and brother-in-law's friend. However he was not at all happy to see me and left me standing in the street. I didn't know anyone in Zaječar. I went to see Perović again and told him that I couldn't go to work in Bor because there were a lot of Germans from Zemun there who might recognise me. I also told him that there were others who might not denounce me but who might tell somebody they had seen me and then the ones who could hardly wait to catch me would hear about it and everything would be finished. I visited Perović on a number of occasions, and on one of these there was a clerk from the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives there. He told me they needed a clerk for a cooperative in Negotin, but that I would need to get refugee identity papers in Belgrade. I was claiming to be a Serb refugee from Srem. The job was just right for me but it would be a problem returning to Belgrade because the only documents I had were a permit to travel to Bor, and a false identity card in the name of Danilo Krsnik which was issued in the Zemun municipality and only valid in Croatia. But there was no other solution, so I returned to Belgrade. I couldn't get refugee documents as they required two witnesses. I again spent a night with Duško Stefanović and met Nina who was desperate at not being able to find a solution for these problems.

I travelled again to Zaječar, this time with Nina because she had heard there was a Russian who could find us jobs, but this came to noth-

ing. Again I went to see Veljko Perović and he sent me to someone called Majcen from Maribor who worked as a cashier in the German company Karl Kutsch. He gave me a job in the village of Metovnica, halfway between Bor and Zaječar. I worked as a tally clerk for the loading of sand into wagons. In the middle of November, 1942, Nina arrived in the village. She had also obtained false identity documents in Zemun in the name of Nina Krsnik, and so the Metovnica municipality now gave her documents in the same name. We rarely left the village and might have led a relatively peaceful life there until the liberation, had I not been transferred by the German company on May 1, 1943, to their warehouse, four kilometres from Bor. I had to accept this transfer, but continued to spend my nights in Metovnica. I didn't want to move to Bor, so instead I travelled to work every day.

There were about twenty people from various parts of Serbia working in the warehouse. When I got to know them I told them they shouldn't give the Hitler salute to the Germans, as some of them did. I translated various articles from newspapers for them and two young people I worked with would tell me the news from the radio. These were Stojanović, a secondary school graduate from Zaječar who was executed in Niš in October, 1943, and Šaljić from Negotin, originally from Montenegro, who later joined the Partisans and became a journalist after the war.

Apparently the Gestapo had been following my activities because, on October 1, 1943, at 6.00 p.m. as I was preparing to leave work, a German officer and a soldier came into the warehouse and told me, at gunpoint, that I was under arrest. The officer took my documents and began shouting. "How dare you get your hands on documents belonging to a Croatian soldier!" The documents actually belonged to a colleague of mine from the Jugoslovenska Udružena Bank in Belgrade, a Croat named Dominik Krsnik who had been drafted into the army of the home guard. I'd changed Dominik to Danilo, as I wanted it to look like a Serbian name. I even had his birth certificate. When the German officer told me that I would "get a bullet" for having the false papers, I was sure it was all over. At times like this thoughts fly like lightning and the brain works like a finely-tuned machine. They were going to interrogate me, which meant there was no salvation because I knew that all male Jews in Serbia had already been killed. They would torture me but if I tried to make a break for it immediately they would shoot me dead and there would be no torture. They made me walk two steps in front of

them. Bor was four kilometres away. When we reached the first buildings of the New Colony, there were heavy trucks all around. By now the two Germans had probably relaxed a little, so I ran to the right towards the new buildings. I expected them to start firing and that that would be the end of everything, but instead they ran after me shouting "Halt! Halt!" However I was widening the gap between myself and my pursuers and I began to think I might be able to get away from them and mingle in with other people so that they would be unable to find me.

I came out onto a meadow. On my left there was a football field with a match in progress, so there were a lot of people. I was now well ahead, my pursuers were now firing, but the bullets were passing right and left of me. This caused a panic and the people on the football field began running in all directions. On my left, a few metres away, there was a trench with Russian soldiers, Vlasov's men, and they also began shooting. I made it to some barracks, not knowing my way around Bor, and found German soldiers coming out. Some of them asked me what the gunfire was about and I replied in German that we were pursuing someone. They began running with me, thinking I was a police agent. Behind me the officer was shouting in German "Seize him! Seize him!" The astonished soldiers around me again asked me what was going on and again I told them that someone had escaped so we were chasing him. Nevertheless, one of the German soldiers now grabbed me by the sleeve. The whole time my pursuers were shouting at them to seize me. Eventually they did and we waited for the first two Germans to arrive. I broke out into a sweat, but the officer was sweating even more heavily. His face red as a crab, he howled *Das ist ein Jude* (He's a Jew) and told them I was trying to escape. When they began punching me I thought they would beat me to death right there and then, but they didn't.

They took me to a Gestapo cell and put me on the edge of a board so that my feet didn't touch the floor. My arms were tied behind my back and my feet were tied to my arms. Then I received a severe beating from the officer who had chased me, and the others joined in. They put a guard in my cell and another one outside. The officer beat me on four separate occasions that night. The next day two soldiers had to hold me to go to the toilet because I was unable to stand.

It was a Friday when I was arrested and on Sunday I was tied and taken to Zaječar. It would be my last trip, they told me. They took me to a camp for hostages and put me in solitary confinement in a cell with no mattress. On Tuesday, October 5, 1943, the interrogation began.

According to them I was neither Danilo Krsnik nor Dragutin Brandajs, but Arish Taorescu, a Romanian Jew whom the Gestapo had been after for a long time on charges of espionage. The police officer, who in civilian life traded in colonial goods in Hamburg, would not let his assistant, a German from Romanian Banat, beat me. I confessed that I was a Jew and told him my true identity. He took me back to the cell where the air was heavy with an unspoken death sentence. People were taken from this hostage camp for execution whenever the German command wanted retribution for some incident in the area. There was no mistreatment in the camp because all the inmates were going to be executed at some point anyway. There were lice and mice and very little food, some kind of soup and piece of corn bread once a day. I put the corn bread in my mouth, then threw it over the wire to the German Shepherd guard dogs so that they'd get to know me. It seemed to me that there were only two ways out of the camp: execution or escape. During my time there, two groups were taken for execution. Whenever we heard the Germans in the corridor everyone would begin making the sign of the cross, as though preparing to depart this life.

I escaped on December 21, 1943, the shortest day of the year, when sunset came early. The entire German Banat SS unit was out in the field and there were only three SS soldiers in the camp. One of them was at one end of the corridor, the other at the other end, together with the turnkey guard. The two in the corridor had opened a cell and were talking to a camp inmate, a blacklisted German. The turnkey guard was alone with the group from my cell, first he escorted us to the toilet which was at the back of the building, then around the building to the tap which was located at the front of the prison. I went with the group to the toilet, but remained there when they left and didn't come out until the guard had led the group to the tap, from where my escape would not be seen. I ran straight towards the barbed wire fence, five metres high. I managed to reach the other side, my arms torn and bleeding, and lay in the trench which surrounded the camp. The searchlights on all four sides were trained on the building. I crawled along the trench, heading for the outer barbed wire which was standing open at one spot where a bunker was being built. Then I stood up, crossed the road, and found myself just outside the town. The camp was in a former artillery barracks in a suburb of Zaječar. I was already a long way from the camp when they discovered my escape while counting the inmates. Then they began firing rockets.

I had been in the hostage camp for 82 days, and now I headed for Zvezdan, four kilometres from Zaječar. I had met a farmer from this village, Čedomir Marković, while I was working as a tally clerk for the Todt organisation. He had been loading gravel onto trucks. Zvezdan was a village inhabited by Serbs from Kosovo. During the time I worked there I met many of the villagers and became friendly with them, they would often invite me for celebrations and I would visit them. I often saw Čedomir, his wife Stana, their two sons and his parents, who still wore the traditional Kosovo peasant clothes. Čeda had served in the Yugoslav Royal Army, he was devoted to the king and was on the side of the Chetniks, who had mobilised him. When I arrived at his house in the dark he told me "It's lucky you arrived before the village guards." Early in the morning we sent two of the villagers to Metovnica to fetch my wife. She had escaped from the apartment before the Gestapo had come to get her.

At that time the followers of Draža Mihailović held eastern Serbia, so Čedomir had to report me to the Chetnik commander in the village. The commander told me apologetically that he had to take me and my wife to the brigade command, because no one from outside the area was permitted to be in the village without the knowledge of the high command. We were escorted by two guards through the village of Lubnice to Gornja Bela Reka and there the Chetniks searched us. They made a number of remarks, observing that my shoes were of good quality, and saying that I hadn't escaped from the camp but was from a Partisan unit which had fallen apart. We spent the night under guard and then in the morning four guards escorted us to the Chetnik brigade in the village of Zagrade.

I was interrogated by the brigade commander, Captain Leonid Petrović. I tried to explain everything and then had the good luck to be recognised by one of the deputy commanders, Sergeant Boža, a former policeman whom I had met while skiing on Kopaonik. The captain allowed me to take my belongings to the village, escorted by guards, but my wife had to remain in the brigade headquarters. I returned to Zagrade on December 31, 1943. I had wanted to remain with the peasants, but the commander told me that he still had to verify who I was and whether I was patriotic. My wife was sent to the village of Leskovac and I was enlisted into the unit.

I spent the next month armed with a rifle, patrolling the Zaječar area with the unit. We walked a lot, day and night, especially at night,

visiting villages on the outskirts of Zaječar. We also commandeered the hospital pharmacy and all its stock, so that the people had to come to the unit to ask for medicines, which were in short supply at the hospital. There were about sixty or eighty people in the unit.

We had no conflicts with the Germans. I think that the Germans were tolerating the Chetniks at that time whereas earlier, during the time I was in the camp, they were executing Mihailović's followers. In the camp, the Germans called them "DM". The peasants didn't talk about politics. They sang patriotic songs, as though we were serving in the army. There were also some new songs we sang. I believe our mission was to save Serbia from the Partisans and the left-wing movement. I don't know whether there were any Partisans in the area at the time, but if there were they were only individuals or small groups which could have no real effect.

While I was with the Chetnik unit four people disappeared: a policeman who was said to be "a Gestapo man", one of Vlasov's men from Russia and two former prisoners, escapees from Bor, who had been captured a few days before I arrived. One of them was a Croat and had come to the Chetniks by mistake, instead of to the Partisans he was looking for. The other was one of the six thousand Hungarian Jews who had been brought to do forced labour in the Bor mine. When the Chetniks reached the village of Marinovac, below Mt Tupižnica, they called the villagers together and the two captured men were brought out and ordered to make the sign of the cross. The Croat did so, crossing himself from left to right in the Catholic way, while the Jew didn't cross himself at all. He obviously didn't speak Serbian and had no idea what was going on.

"You see, they're Partisans; they either don't cross themselves or they do it differently from us," said the leader. They slaughtered them that night.

The next day I went straight to Commander Petrović and asked why he wanted to kill me as well when I had done no harm to anyone.

"Who says we want to kill you? You're safer with us," he replied.

"And those two men yesterday?" I asked.

"They were sentenced by a military court, they wanted to join the Partisans."

I spent Orthodox Christmas in the village of Leskovac with my wife. A few days later my joints became inflamed, probably because of

the same flat-footedness which had limited me to being a military clerk in the former Yugoslav Army.

I began treatment but, on February 14, I had to leave the village again. Then I met Moma Bogičević, a cavalry captain whom I had known in Zemun. I asked him to put in a good word for me with the commander. Back in the unit I was limping all the time because the constant marches were bad for my feet. Because of this, Commander Leonid told the medical sergeant to examine me. He didn't find anything wrong, so the commander decided I was a malingerer and that my limping was a disgrace to the entire unit. I think it was at the beginning of March when the captain again summoned me. "I've had a bad report about you," he told me, "but because you escaped from the Germans, I'm not going to do anything to you." He discharged me from the unit and gave me a written recommendation for employment in the coal mine. I don't know whether it was his idea to discharge me or if someone else made that decision. The captain was very careful not to let undesirable types infiltrate his unit. After the war I heard from two peasants, one from Zgrade and the other from Leskovac, that they had been told to report everything I said to the captain and to listen carefully for any kind of propaganda. He was suspicious of me, probably assuming that I was a leftist. He had no reason for this as I had not been inclined towards the Communists before the war. I kept the reference he gave me. It read as follows:

"Dear Mr Mile, the bearer of this letter, Mr Brandajs, is a Jew by descent. Until now he has been under the protection of our organisation, but was not accepted into the army because of his race. Nevertheless, he still enjoys a degree of protection from us. He has no further means of support, and so should be offered the chance to earn a living. I would kindly ask you to employ him in your mine. He is accompanied by his wife, who is of Russian descent. With thanks in advance and best wishes. Yours, Captain L.M. Petrović. 8/IV."

I didn't use this reference because, in the meantime, the coal mine was closed down. I was sent with my wife to Leskovac where I worked for a farmer in exchange for food and corn flour. I said I was a refugee named Danilo Branković, but the village commander, Old Mita, knew I was Jewish and probably told the others. The peasants accepted me without a problem: the neighbours would always give me some food, a chicken or some eggs, for example, and I also raised a sucking pig. It was a poor village with about a hundred houses. Only three of the

young people had run away to join the Partisans, the Chetniks had killed about ten of the peasants because of their connections with the Partisans. Neither Nina nor I ever left the village because we had no documents and there were Chetniks and Chetnik police in every village. We didn't feel safe because there were patrols constantly circling. Whenever we heard that the Germans were in the area we would sleep in the stables outside the village. However when they retreated from Greece, the Germans travelled only along the main Knjaževac-Zaječar road.

An American paratrooper once landed near our village. His plane had been hit while he was bombing the Ploesti oil refineries in Romania. The parachutist was hysterical and asking "Where are the Nazis? I'm a Jew!"

"So am I," I said, which calmed him down. The Chetniks rounded all the rescued paratroopers up in the north.

So Nina and I lived our lives, barely managing to exist, in the village until the Partisans arrived in the area. On September 11, 1944, we volunteered for enlistment in the Seventh Brigade of the 23rd Serbian Division. After a medical examination revealed I was flat-footed, they didn't send me to the unit, instead I was assigned to be a scout. At the end of October, 1944, I asked to be transferred to Belgrade, where I worked as a financial clerk in the city administration.

One day an OZNA official called me in for interrogation and asked how I had survived as a Jew and whether I had collaborated with the Germans. I felt like crying. Now, after the liberation, was I going to have to make excuses for surviving?

Not long after the liberation I began working in the business sector. When I retired I was a foreign representative for General Export.

After the war was over I had the opportunity to repay some of the people who had helped me to survive. One day I received a letter from Ljubiša, the son of Čedomir Marković, who had hidden me in the village of Zvezdan after I escaped from the Zaječar camp. He told me that Čedomir had been imprisoned as a Chetnik. My second wife, Bosa Cvetić, who had been a Communist since before the war, interceded with the national delegate for the Zaječar district and Čedomir was released. Twenty years later, while I was on a business trip, I called in to Zvezdan and visited the Marković family in a reunion which brought great joy to both sides.

Samuilo KALDERON

MY DARKEST DAYS IN OCCUPIED BELGRADE



Samuilo Kalderon was born in Belgrade in 1905 and was one of the few Belgrade residents who spent the entire occupation, from 1941 to 1945, in the city under someone else's name. From the end of the war to the day he died he worked for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. He died in January, 1986. Left without family or relatives, apart from a nephew in Slovenia, the Federation became his home and the people working there his family. Together with his other great love, opera, they peopled his solitary life. His name was recorded in the Golden Book of Keren Kayemet for his extraordinary diligence, conscientiousness and devotion to the Jewish community. He gave this written account of his life in hiding during the German occupation to the Jewish Historical Museum in the 1980s.

As soon as the Germans arrived, they gave orders for all Jews to report to the police in Tašmajdan. Entire families reported and had to give their exact residential address. At that time my family consisted of my mother Bukas, my sister Debora Pardo (née Kalderon), my sister-in-law Ermoza Kalderon (née Kario), my brothers Aron, Moša and Leon, their children Nela, Paula and Isak and several cousins. I managed to avoid reporting with the rest of the family who were extremely

concerned and kept berating me, saying they would all be executed because of me. I told them I didn't want to be in anyone's records while I was alive and, if I was caught, they could do whatever they wanted to me.

When my family was taken away to a camp, I left home and fled. Nobody dared take me in because I was a Jew, so I hid in a half-built building next to the Cvetko tavern. I came up with an idea of how to obtain documents in the name of a Serb, my best friend and schoolmate who had died in 1938. I knew where he was buried so I went to the cemetery and copied the information I needed from his headstone: name and surname, date of birth and the names of his mother and father. Then I went to the City Administration and told them that I was Đorđe Marković and that I needed new documents because they had been burnt in the bombing. They gave me an application form and then I had to go to some building near Kalemegdan where there was a library after the war. I asked for an identity card in the name of Đorđe Marković and managed to get it. I immediately started looking for a roof over my head. I was lucky enough to find a room at 84 Gospodara Vučića Street in the apartment of an old lady with two other tenants, refugees from Croatia. One was a butcher and the other a horse trader.

I didn't get a job and avoided public places, fearing someone might recognise me. Mostly I went from one tobacconist to another buying cigarettes, although I didn't smoke, and selling them to peasants at the market for 1,500 Nedić dinars a pack. Out of that money I paid my rent and bought food.

One time I decided to go to my apartment at the Cvetko tavern by tram. The tram was full and among the crowd of people there was a man who recognised me and said "Hello, Moša!" All the passengers turned and stared. I replied that I didn't know him and told him he must have been mistaken, that I was not the person he knew. I managed to save my neck by getting off at the next stop, but he also got out of the tram, insisting that I was Moša. I barely managed to get away from, telling him to leave me alone because I didn't know him.

One very nice day in September, 1943, I went to Kralja Aleksandra Street, saying that I was looking for a job, as I did every day. But this time there was a major raid there and the agents caught me as well, confiscated my identity card and my registration and ordered me to report to the Eighth police precinct at noon. There were about ten of us there, the clerk of the court called everyone in one by one and eventually it

was my turn. I didn't know he was the clerk of the court, which seriously offended him and was enough for him to sentence me to thirty days in prison. At about midnight I was transferred to the police station with the others and put into a hall full of prisoners. I was afraid I would meet some prisoner who would recognise me but, fortunately, I remained Đorđe Marković. Because I was ill, I was not sent to work, but I had to clean the building, emptying the buckets and washing them out. The rest of the time I would lie, hungry and ill, curled up on the floor. After thirty days they released me and I returned to my rented apartment. Unfortunately my landlady, fearing the authorities, had cancelled my registration. Again the problems began. I had to return to the police station to re-register and provide documentation for my absence in the form of my prison release papers. I continued buying and selling cigarettes to earn a living. I even went all the way to Ripanj to buy corn flour and bring a couple of pieces of firewood. Seeing that I was an honest man, unlike the other tenants who were drunks and people with problems, my landlady was very pleased to have me, and so I shared every mouthful with her.

One of my worst experiences while I was hiding under someone else's name in occupied Belgrade was when I was drafted. I went to the office near Tašmajdan where everyone had to register. Because I was afraid I would have to have a medical examination, I first went to seek the advice of someone I knew, a cousin of Moni Lazar, who worked in the police station. He told me that if they asked me why I was circumcised, I should say that I had had syphilis and the surgical intervention for that made it appear that I'd been circumcised. At the medical commission there was a German officer present and the physician was required to consult him on the condition of each recruit. When I was asked by the physician I replied as Ninković had advised me and was given a certificate saying in Serbian on one side and German on the other that I was ill, and so I was exempted from military service.

The next day I had to report again to the City Administration where the Military Department was located. When it was my turn, the clerk who took my identity card recognised me because he was from Dorćol and went to his boss. Then I was called in and the chief asked me "Is it true that this colleague of mine knows you and that you are a Jew?"

"If I was a Jew, do you think I would come here and report?" I replied. "This clerk of yours has mistaken me for someone he knows." The chief then called the clerk back and asked him if I had documents

in the name of Marković and a registration form in the same name. I added that I also had a certificate confirming that I was ill. The chief then turned to the clerk:

“He has all the documents and also a certificate saying he is ill. Put him on the list in the column of people who are ill,” he told him. With that I was released, but I was now very worried because the clerk had my address and could have reported me to the Gestapo. He would receive a reward and I would be arrested. Luckily, and probably because his boss advised him not to, he didn’t do it.

The difficult days of occupation, hunger and hiding took their toll and I fell seriously ill after the liberation. My landlady, with whom I had lived all through the occupation didn’t know about my religion, but her neighbour on the other side was a Jewess married to a Serb and immediately after the liberation she told my landlady I was a Jew.

Immediately after the liberation I began work for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. No one in my family survived the war except one nephew, the son of my late brother Leon, who had left with his Slovenian mother for Maribor where they both saw the liberation.

I visited my former landlady a number of times, bringing her presents and helping her. She died less than two years after the liberation.



IX

CHILDREN
IN GENTLE HANDS



*Iris ZONENŠAJN-FRAJLIH**

CHILDHOOD INTERRUPTED



Iris Zonenšajn was born in Slavonski Brod on December 2, 1929, the only child of Mirta (nee Fuks) and Filip Zonenšajn. Her closest family were killed in the Holocaust.

After the war she finished high school in Belgrade before graduating from the Faculty of Agriculture in Zemun. She worked in the Institute for Corn in Zemun Polje and, in 1956, emigrated to Israel, working in Beer Sheva as a mathematics teacher until her retirement. She married

Emil Frajljeh, originally from Sarajevo, and has two children and six grandchildren. She lives in Beer Sheva.

I was born in Slavonski Brod in December, 1929, to my mother Mirta Fuks and my father Filip "Tiki" Zonenšajn, a timber expert in the forestry industry in Našice.

I had a carefree childhood, secure in the comfort and devotion of my parents, my grandmother and my grandfather. The atmosphere had a strong feeling of belonging to the Jewish people, my grandfather, Rudi Fuks, being very active in the Zionist movement. But in my twelfth year my childhood was interrupted when deportations to the Ustasha camps began after the occupation in 1941. I was taken with my

* As dictated to Dr Eta Najfeld.

mother, my grandmother and other women and children from Slavonski Brod in February, 1942, to the Stara Gradiška camp. After some time we were taken from there to the Đakovo camp.

Thanks to the work of the Jewish Community in Osijek, some of the children were saved from the camp by being put into the care of particular families. In this way I managed to get out of the camp after being allocated to a Croat family, the Srdars, in Slavonski Brod, who took me in by agreement with my mother. My parents left various valuables with the Srdar family for safe keeping. I lived with them under the name Mira Seljan, as the daughter of their cousin. They lived on the edge of the town and I was not able to go into the town itself where someone might recognise me. They often used to take me to their cousins in the neighbouring village of Pleternica, but most of the time I stayed inside the house, out of sight.



*Iris Zonenšajn has lived in Israel since 1956, in the town of Beer Sheva.
Here she visits the nearby Bedouin market.*

I was fifteen years old when the war ended and I realised that I had to fend for myself because my entire family had been killed. I graduated from the Faculty of Agriculture in Zemun and, in 1956, emigrated to Israel where I live today in Beer Sheva.

Rea ŽIVKOVIĆ

MEMORIES OF WAR



Rea Živković Reiss was born in Sarajevo on November 23, 1932. Her father, architect and engineer Isidor Reiss, was born in Sarajevo and her mother, Dr Kete (née Podebrat) in Prague. Her father was killed in Jasenovac on the eve of the breakout in April, 1945. Her mother is believed to have been killed after the Đakovo camp was evacuated. Her paternal grandmother died of typhus in Đakovo on June 10, 1942, and her paternal grandfather died in Jasenovac in 1941. Her mother's entire family from Czechoslovakia was

killed in various European camps.

She worked for Jugometal and then for the Central Committee of the Union of Communist Youth while studying part time. After graduating she worked as a primary school teacher of English and then in the Serbian Ministry of Information from 1961 until her retirement.

She married Duško Živković in 1959 and has two sons, Marko (born 1961) and Bora (born 1966), both of whom are postgraduate students in the United States. She also has two grandchildren.

I was nine years old when the war began. I remember many events and various people and situations. The memories are fragmented of course, and merged with stories and knowledge learned subsequently, but they reach far back into the past.

I remember very clearly our apartment in Sokolska Street in Sarajevo and I know that this apartment was in a building designed by my father. Our apartment was furnished in a completely different way from those I remember my grandmother and cousins living in at the time. It had three rooms and my father had his office in the apartment. The furniture in the sitting room wasn't finished in wood veneer, instead it was painted red. The floor was covered with a thin, woven wool carpet. There weren't many ornaments and I don't remember any paintings on the walls. The bedroom was large with three day-beds, not the traditional bedroom with double beds. Each bed was covered with three large cushions which at night were turned over to make a mattress. The bed linen was stored in trunks below the mattresses. There was a smallish cupboard in the room but most of the clothes were kept in tall wardrobes which stretched the entire length of the long hall.

My mother was Czech and moved from Prague to Sarajevo after she married my father. She had beautiful black hair, black eyes and carried herself with dignity. I remember her as a calm and steady person. She had graduated in philosophy from the Karlov University in Prague and in Sarajevo she learned our language quickly and was soon working in a company. I always remember her with a book in her hands; she would bring books home from the library behind the Minerva bookstore. I remember her taking lessons in Spanish. She also went to classes in glove-making because before the war it was considered useful for everyone to learn a trade. She chose to learn to make leather gloves! I would often break off from playing to take my mother a piece of paper or a short thread to mark the page in her book where she had left off her reading. I would sit on her lap and ask her to play with me. I remember she taught me English and French.

Sarajevo was a completely new atmosphere for my mother, but I think she very quickly became accustomed to it, fitting in and adjusting. My father's family accepted her warmly and this Sarajevo family also accepted her family from Prague. They especially loved my grandmother from Prague and would call her "Goldige", the golden woman.

My mother met my father when he went to Prague for further studies after finishing his architectural degree in Zagreb. They decided to marry within weeks of meeting. They became engaged in Prague and my grandfather attended with one of his daughters. This was when my mother was given her engagement ring which, by sheer luck, has survived until today and which I treasure.

I remember my mother sitting reading a letter one evening and weeping as my father held and comforted her. It was bad news from Prague: my mother's family was in danger from the Germans or had already been taken to a camp. Her large family spent some time in Terezin before all finishing in Auschwitz.

Before Hitler's troops arrived in Prague we had visited my mother's family there several times. I have hazy memories of scenes and events, but I remember visiting my great grandmother. She would lie in bed and every day there would be a bar of Nestle chocolate in its shiny red wrapping waiting for me on her dressing table. I remember very clearly one morning we found our great grandmother was not in bed and we were all excited. I didn't understand then, but she had died that day.

My father worked long hours but would take us for outings in his car. I remember the hot sand of the Boračko lake. I remember the wild strawberries we would gather behind the sanatorium in Pale (which was designed by my father). My clearest memories are of our frequent visits to my grandmother and grandfather and the gatherings of the whole family on Friday evenings and on holidays. There were a lot of children and it was always fun and cheerful. I know that my grandmother ate a strict kosher diet, but I used to like ham so I was not allowed to eat from a plate at the table, but instead ate from paper on a chair. During the day we children would play on the large terrace of my grandmother's house. My grandfather's big cleaning and dyeing business, Reiss, was also in the house, and he also had several branches around the town. As well as cleaning and dyeing, the business also pleated fabrics and covered buttons.

My mother was working, so I had a German woman to take care of me. I don't remember, but they say that I learned German well with her and spoke it excellently. My mother spoke German to me and I remember that I would reply to her in Serbian.

When I grew up a little and began going to school, I also started learning ballet in my Aunt Anika's private school. She was also a Czech and she and my mother were great friends. They both had the same problems adjusting to their new environment, learning new ways and fitting into a new society. I learned to play the piano and the accordion. I adored Anika and loved dancing. I remember the ballet classes clearly and our preparations for public appearances, together with the first and only performance of *Collegium Artisticum* in Sokol House. I

remember the costumes and even some steps from the two parts in which I had a role. These were noticed and noted in a book on the history of ballet in Sarajevo! I was barely eight years old at the time.

Everyone was very well aware of what was going on in Europe and we had a lot of information about what had happened to our family in Czechoslovakia. One of our cousins who had escaped from Czechoslovakia before the Nazis entered the country was living with us. We knew everything, but still we waited. Fortunately, part of the family managed to flee from Sarajevo to Split in time and thus they saved themselves. Only my grandmother, grandfather, father, mother and I stayed in Sarajevo. My father had a written certificate guaranteeing his safety, and once he woke me during the night and showed me the paper to convince me we were safe now and nothing could happen to us. His friends and colleagues also assured him they would protect him.

In the autumn of 1941, I was in the third grade of primary school. One day, in the middle of a class, a tall, heavy man with a fez on his head appeared in the classroom. He approached the teacher and said something to her. She looked at me and said "Rahel, you have to go home at once." I was surprised and frightened because I had no idea why the man was taking me home. I knew him, he was the doorman or lift attendant in the building we lived in.

There was a large truck covered with a tarpaulin in front of the house. In front of the truck were men, women and children standing in silence. Then they began getting into the truck, each carrying a bundle, a sack or a suitcase. Inside the apartment I found my mother and a friend of hers who was living with us packing food and other items. There were some people I didn't know standing in the hall hurrying us along. They took us to a camp. My father was at work and they didn't find him: he stayed in hiding at a friend's house. The truck took us to the barracks near our house. There we found my grandmother and grandfather and many relatives and friends. I don't remember many details of our ten-day stay in the barracks. I only remember that it was nice weather and that we children played in the yard. Ten days later they sent us all home, so we returned to Sarajevo. Our apartment had been sealed up, so we went to stay with my grandmother and grandfather. A few days later, my father emerged from hiding, convinced that the danger had passed and that nobody would bother us any more.

One Sunday after lunch, while we were still sitting at the table chatting, an Ustasha wearing a fez appeared. My father produced his

letters and certificate, but the Ustasha wouldn't even look at them or discuss it and only insisted that we move immediately. Again there was a truck waiting in the street, full with the same people with whom we'd been confined in the barracks for ten days. Everyone had believed that the danger had passed when they let us go home. Again we were taken to the same barracks. We children were already asleep on our bags when my father and grandfather came that evening to say goodbye. They took all the men out and put them on a train for an unknown destination. Later we discovered that they had been taken to Jasenovac. I was still sleepy, having been awakened from my first dream, so I didn't even say goodbye to my father when he kissed and hugged me. I just half-opened my eyes and went back to sleep. I only remember hearing the adults through my dream, agitated and weeping.

I know that my grandfather was among a group of elderly people who were forced to stand in the Sava River until they were exhausted and fell into the water. My father, as an architect, had a different destiny. He worked in the drawing room of the architecture office, which meant that he didn't freeze like the others, or have to work in the marshes or on the dikes, and that he was probably spared the physical mistreatment and hunger. I have several postcards which he wrote to me during 1944 in which he asked for tobacco, saccharin and fruit. I heard a lot about the way my father lived in Jasenovac from the stories of the camp survivors. Right up to the last moment, until the end of the war and the liberation of Jasenovac, he believed that a fellow-architect who was his boss and a commander would save him. However he was killed on April 21, 1945, the day before the mass breakout from the camp.

There were dirty railway wagons waiting for us. We set off in them to our unknown destination, travelling for a very long time. We spent a lot of time stationary on the railway line in open country. Time passed and we had no idea how many days and nights we had spent jostling up against one another in the suffocating wagons. There was no space to lie down and barely enough to sit, as the wagons were packed with children and women, young and old. There was no food of course and the air was heavy. We weren't even allowed to get out to relieve ourselves when the train stopped. On only a handful of occasions, the doors were suddenly opened and strangers brought us some food and refreshments. I think this was organised by the Jewish community, or perhaps the Red Cross. They let us out only once. "You can't get through me! Go around!" the women would yell, shoving one another to get back into

the wagons as if it was some kind of good luck to get back inside. These were the older women who spoke Ladino and didn't know our language very well, which made us laugh. It's difficult for me to work out how many days we spent on this train. We finally found out that the Ustashas were taking us to Loborgrad, but there was no room there so they returned us to Sarajevo.

We travelled in third-class wagons, sitting on wooden benches, hoping they would let us go again. Nobody could grasp what was happening to us and nor did they want to believe that there was no hope. It was my birthday, November 23, just before we reached Sarajevo. Because of this I can work out when all this happened, although my dates don't correspond to those of other inmates, and it's not important in any case. Everyone from our convoy was accommodated in the primary school in Marijin Dvor, just a few metres away from the building in which we had originally lived and from which we were taken to the camp. The accommodation was decent, friends brought quilts for us and the Germans would bring us food in large pots. We children would play in the schoolyard and were free to visit the families living within the school yard.

A few days later we were on the move again. We packed up and again set off by train for an unknown destination, again not knowing how long the journey would take. We finally reached Đakovo and were taken into a large, one-storey building. It was empty, with straw spread on the floor. We set about making ourselves comfortable. Someone collected some stale bread to make bread mash for dinner. Next morning there were long trestles with washbowls full of water waiting for us in the mill yard in front of the building. There were even enough toilets. This is how we were welcomed by the Jewish Community in Osijek whose members had converted this flour mill for our new accommodation.

The Osijek Municipality, like that in Vinkovci, had managed strike a deal with the Ustashas allowing a certain number of children to be released from the camp. My mother decided to send me to Osijek. I later discovered that Juliška Kraus had been the leader in organising assistance for the camp and also took the initiative in getting as many children as possible out of the camp. She and my mother knew each other from a vacation on Mt Trebević before the war and she persuaded my mother to let me go, promising that she would place me with a family who would take good care of me and save me.

It was an early winter morning, December 7, 1941, as far as I remember. There were about thirty children lined up in the yard saying goodbye to their mothers, grandmothers and aunts. Everyone was hugging one another and assuring one other that we would be back together soon and that we would be allowed to visit. My mother and I kissed each other quickly, optimistic that we would see each other soon. As we left the yard I looked back and saw my mother crying. They hurried us along to the railway station.

Today I understand how brave those mothers were. It needed a strong character to take the decision to send their children into the unknown, with little or no hope of ever seeing them again. On top of their own suffering, the sorrow of these women at the departure of their children must have been impossible to express.

We arrived in Osijek on Sunday afternoon. I didn't know the city. There were people we didn't know waiting for us and they took us to the Jewish Community and offered us tea and sandwiches. As far as I can remember, not one of us ate anything.

More people arrived, coming to choose either a boy or a girl. They all chose children according to age and gender, so that they would fit in more easily with their own children. I was the only one who knew where I was going, and that was to the Schmuckler family. Their younger daughter, Rut, came for me, Mrs Kraus having already made the arrangements. When we arrived at the house, Julija Schmuckler was waiting for me with her husband, Dr Vili and their elder daughter, Belica. Rut was 14 and Belica 18. They first took me to the bathroom and completely undressed me to wash me properly. This was my first shock. I shyly whispered: "I don't want to have a bath here, the water is dirty!" And in fact the water in Osijek was yellow, as though it had mud in it. They used well water for drinking while the water from the pipes was dark yellow. Anyway, they managed to persuade me, gave me a bath and then took me to the children's room to sleep. My new hosts went to another room, leaving me to sleep alone. Once I was alone, what had happened to me began to sink in. I had been separated from my mother and brought to this strange city, to strangers. I began to cry, silently at first, then louder and louder until I was shouting: "I'll go crazy in this house, I'll go crazy without my mother." They somehow calmed me down, promising that I could go to see my mother the next day, and I fell asleep. The same thing happened the next night and for several nights after that. It was easier during the day, but the nights were

so hard: as soon as they left me alone I would be in crisis again. Because I wouldn't eat and I was suffering from dysentery, they began to wonder seriously what they should do. I had brought the dysentery from the camp but didn't want to admit that I was sick for fear they would take me to a doctor. But in the end, everything gradually worked itself out.

Dr Schmuckler was a well-known and highly-regarded ophthalmologist who had graduated in Vienna. He was an extraordinary man, educated, intelligent and very disciplined, with both himself and other people. He demanded absolute and strict hygiene, sometimes bordering on the excessive. He demanded that we constantly wash our hands and would not allow us to touch anything he considered dirty. He followed everyone around, wiping the doorknobs with cotton and alcohol if anyone else touched them. He would follow us to the bathroom and turn the tap on for us, so that we didn't touch the "clean" tap with our "dirty" hands. We had to take notice of this and finally became accustomed to it as though it was completely normal. Had he not been so stubborn, we would probably have fallen ill during the war from the various diseases to which we were exposed.

Julija Schmuckler, whom we called Auntie, was Russian. She was a strong personality, capable and hard-working. Because they had no housemaid and there were already a lot of us, she took on all the housework herself. She cooked, did the laundry and the cleaning and during the war learnt various manual skills with no difficulty and without complaining.

Rutika, the younger daughter, was mature for her age, very independent and communicative, while Belica, the elder, was calm, silent, serious and reserved. Within a few weeks of arriving in Osijek, after overcoming my crisis, I began to get used to my new family. I would cuddle up to my new auntie, because I really needed a lot of warmth and understanding and she knew how to give me that. I became very close to her, and started to feel secure as I helped her with the household chores.

The Jewish Community in Osijek arranged schooling for all of us. They enrolled me in the third grade of primary school.

When the second transport arrived, a little dark-haired girl named Betika came from the camp to my new family. She didn't know how old she was and still wet her bed. The Schmuckler family accepted Betika in the same way they had accepted me. With the third convoy, a boy arrived, but unfortunately for him his aunt took him away a little later.

We heard that he was taken to a camp with the rest of his family and they were all killed.

One day Mr Maestro appeared at the Schmucklers. I knew him from Sarajevo where he was a kindergarten teacher. He had brought a permit for me to travel to Split to my Aunt Anika and Uncle Nedo (Ani and Nathan Reiss). Although I really loved Anika and Nedo, I wasn't sure that I wanted to go to them. I had just got over the first shock of being separated from my mother and settled in with the Schmucklers and now I was supposed to leave them. Aunt Julija and Uncle Vili were confused and asked Mr Maestro to come back in the afternoon for my answer, as they expected me to decide for myself. That afternoon, my answer was no. The Schmucklers hadn't wanted to persuade me to go, because they didn't want to feel responsible later if anything had happened to me on the way. There was war raging throughout the entire country and it was extremely dangerous to travel.

I stayed in touch with my mother through postcards from the camp. These were double cards, my mother would write on one half, then I would tear off the other half and write my reply on it. I received lots of postcards from her, but had to destroy them all before I left Osijek. We wanted to hide the fact that Betika and I were children from the camp so keeping the postcards could have been dangerous. We were always introduced as the Schmucklers' children. Aunt Julija didn't ever want us to call her "mother", but we learned to address her using familiar forms and we didn't ever address her at all in front of other people.

They took a photograph of me and sent copies to my mother in the camp and to Aunt Anika and Uncle Nedo in Split. It was a good photograph and it certainly meant a lot to both my mother and my other relatives because they could see from it that I was being taken good care of. Much later, this same photograph was to play an interesting role in eastern Bosnia.

When people in Osijek heard that they had begun deporting Jews from the city we packed only our essentials, sat on our bundles, sacks and suitcases and waited for the trucks to pull up in front of the house and the Ustashas to climb out of them. I knew the whole scenario well. But then a colleague of my father found out about this and, knowing that I was with the Schmucklers, came to pick up Uncle Vili and they went into the town together. They returned before the Ustashas arrived and Dr Schmuckler had in his hand an order for his transfer to eastern Bosnia. He was being sent with his family to a village to begin treating

syphilis. So instead of going to a camp we caught the train to Gračanica, taking all the furniture and other belongings, even the piano. We set up house in an empty school in the village of Doborovci, not far from Gračanica. There was plenty of space although, of course, there was no running water or sewerage and there were a lot of mice. Dr Schmuckler set up an office in the village with the help of his daughter, Belica, acquired a stock of drugs and syringes and began a serious campaign to treat the syphilis endemic in the area. All the inhabitants of this Muslim village were infected congenitally.

The villagers immediately presented themselves for treatment, so there was a lot of work, not only for Uncle Vili, but also for the rest of us. Whenever patients would come for an injection or to have blood taken, they would bring gifts for the doctor. The women would bring a couple of apples, or a few peppers, perhaps a bunch of grapes or a little bundle of beans. It took a great deal of skill and effort to forge closer relationships with the villagers. They accepted us, appreciated us and, I think, liked us; they would invite us to their houses and cook meals for us.

The Muslim houses were very clean and tidy. Their custom was to take their shoes off at the door and enter the house only in clean socks or stockings, and they would wash several times a day. When the muezzin called from the minaret, everyone would wash their feet and their faces. The women and girls would put veils on before going out, but at home they remained uncovered. There wasn't a single family which wasn't infected with syphilis, so it was important to know how to avoid infection when being in contact with them.

I remember once we went to have lunch at the house of one important man in the village where we were greeted very warmly. We washed our hands and entered a large room where there were only men and we guests, the women came in only to serve us. We sat on the floor around a low table. Everyone had a spoon and the meal was served in a dish from which we all ate. It was put in the middle of the table and all of us had to use our own spoon. The first course was soup. We had agreed that we would serve ourselves with our spoons before anyone else put their spoon into the dish. Aunt Julija and Uncle Vili watched us children to see that we behaved the way we had been taught. With the pies which were served, alternatively sweet and savoury, it was easier. We would take a piece at a time and didn't have to touch pieces which other people's spoons had touched. At the end, they served halva. I couldn't eat

any more and so I put my spoon down beside me. I was sitting next to our host and he, in a very kind gesture, took a little halva on his spoon and put it into mine, beckoning me to eat it. All eyes were on me. What should I do? How should I react? How could I refuse our host's gesture without offending him? I succeeded, but it was a rather tense moment.

No matter how much we tried to keep our distance and be careful, there were still some invitations we could not avoid. It was important to win the trust and respect of the villagers: our lives depended on them. Both Aunt Julija and Uncle Vili showed great skill and courage in this.



Left: Rea in Osijek, in 1941 or 1942. After she left Đakovo, this photograph was sent to her mother in the camp and her relatives in Split. Right: April, 1945.

There were battles raging in the immediate vicinity and the Germans and the Ustashas were getting closer and closer. We began to think about leaving the village, to get as far away as possible from Gračanica. I remember Ibrahim, an Ustasha captain who was a frequent visitor. Rutika had caught his eye; she was cheerful, likeable and always good at striking up friendships. One day, knowing that we were in danger, Ibrahim offered to help us escape from the village. He got hold of some horse-drawn carts and that night we loaded almost all the furniture and set off for Trebava. Ibrahim had secured us safe passage across what was supposed to be the Chetnik territory. This was apparently safer, because the Germans and the Ustashas stayed away from it. We were a long way from any road or railway and no kind of regular army ever went there.

The people of Skipovac and Zelinje didn't have their own Chetnik army but they were afraid of the Partisans. They didn't ask us who we were or why we had come, but they did need a doctor. There was no syphilis here, instead there was tuberculosis and typhus.

I remember a number of events from that period. My Uncle Nedo visited us in Skipovac. He knew that we were in eastern Bosnia and when his Partisan unit arrived in our village he asked one of the locals whether he knew a Dr Schmuckler. The man he asked worked as a scout in Skipovac, sending information to the Partisans about military positions and the situation in the field. Uncle Nedo took my photograph from his pocket, the one we had sent from Osijek to Split in 1942. He was given precise information about where we were and, as soon as he got an opportunity, he sent us a message to come and meet him.

It was a warm summer afternoon. We all set off for the house, which was quite a distance away. We were excited and curious about this reunion after such a long time, especially after everything that had happened.

It was an exciting meeting. I remember Nedo and I standing facing each other for a moment before exclaiming at the same time "Look at you, with your hair cut like that!" Nedo had had wonderful, thick, black hair and I had had nice, thick curly hair. Now we both stood with our heads shaved and, after looking at each other for a moment, we quickly hugged. We met again not long afterwards. I remember we had just sat down to lunch one day when Nedo appeared on a white horse wearing a Partisan cap and a red star. We were surprised and pleased, but also rather frightened, because it was rather foolhardy to ride into a Chetnik village wearing a Partisan cap.

In Skipovac we lived in our own house, with plenty of space. We would collect water from the well and the toilet was in the yard. Summer was easier and we could find food more easily. There were a lot of orchards and plenty of wild fruit. If there was nothing for lunch we could always go to a plum orchard and stuff ourselves with plums. Every day we would go into the broad forest and collect wood, crushing dry branches and tying them into bundles to drag them home in preparation for winter.

The winters were long and harsh. We didn't have decent shoes and for days we couldn't go out into the snow and mud. At one time I was the only one who had proper winter shoes, which Nedo had given me. The others could only go out when the ground was frozen because they

only had peasant-style shoes. I didn't mind doing all the housework, I was strong and capable and knew how to cook and do the laundry. I could carry buckets of water from the well. I remember one winter when we had neither wheat nor corn flour. Instead of bread we cooked dry corn and ate it.

So as not to use our precious gas for lighting, we would go to bed early, especially during the winter. Sometimes all six of us would sleep in one room. On those winter nights Aunt and Uncle Schmuckler would talk about their lives and tell us stories from their younger days. Uncle Vili often sang operatic arias and I gradually began to like them. I could say that this was my first contact with opera!

I don't remember any of us ever being seriously ill. Uncle Vili would treat any minor aches and pains in the simplest of ways. If we caught a cold he would make us stay in bed and would put us on a diet if we had stomach problems, because there were no drugs. Not long before the end of the war, Aunt Julija fell seriously ill with what Uncle Vili diagnosed as a kidney problem. Again he prescribed a strict diet and plenty of bed rest. She was in bed for a long time so the household chores were divided up among us children.

We moved several times from house to house and from village to village. The last winter, 1944–45, we lived in the village of Zelinje. We stayed in the house of the local priest who gave us two of his rooms. By this time Uncle Vili had joined the Partisans. We remained in the village because of Aunt Julija being sick, which made our position rather difficult because someone could always point a finger at us, saying the doctor had joined the Partisans and we were a Partisan family. It was even worse when Chetnik units began arriving in the village. The war was nearing its end and the Chetniks were fleeing Montenegro as the Partisan attacks grew ever fiercer. For months on end we were in the crossfire day and night. The Partisans would be firing from one hill and the Chetniks from the other. Various people would arrive at our house, threatening us, wanting us to put them up and demanding food. There were drunken and crude men, bragging and boasting about their battle conquests, their slaughter and the torching of houses. We felt very unsafe and realised we had to get out of there. Luckily Dr Schmuckler was in Majevisa and Nedo was also nearby and they organised for the Partisans to move us to the liberated territory. Next morning I woke up lying on the floor of a room with Dr Schmuckler there beside us. We

were all together again and it seemed we had been saved at the very last moment.

This could have been in about March, 1945. We eventually arrived in Belgrade on April 1 of that year, through Tuzla, Šabac and Loznica, travelling part of the way by car and the rest by various forms of transport. On the day of our arrival all six of us assembled on Cvetni Square, in front of the Složna Braća tavern, where we heartily enjoyed the stew for breakfast. We had arrived in the early dawn in the city where we were to start a new life.

Dr Schmuckler and Belica went to look for Uncle Nedo and found him about to leave on a business trip. He came to meet us and took us to the Hotel Astoria where he was living. There we freshened up and slept soundly after our days of travel. Anika was busy that day, but came to the hotel later in the evening.

The Schmucklers moved to a room in Jevremova Street the next day. Betika was put into an orphanage and suddenly I was alone in the hotel room. Anika and Nedo were both at work and I spent the whole day alone and miserable. I didn't know Belgrade and couldn't find my own way around. The problem was solved when Anika found me accommodation in the Red Cross kindergarten and enrolled me in school.

I was very distressed at being separated from the Schmucklers. I was crying and miserable, in the same kind of pain I felt after I was separated from my mother. I wept night after night. Once I began to learn my way around the city I visited them nearly every day until they returned to Osijek. Later I would spend my summer vacations, or at least part of them, there.

As time went by it became more and more obvious that my mother and father had been killed in the camp and that there was no longer any hope of them suddenly reappearing. Nevertheless, for a long time, I imagined this happening.

Anika and Nedo had learned of my parents' death long before I did and had already decided to adopt me before I arrived in Belgrade. Nedo had prepared me for this in a letter I received while we were on our way there. During our meeting in Bosnia, he had asked me if I would agree to be their daughter once the war was over. I told him straight away that this was also what I wanted. When the war ended I was twelve and a half years old.



X

PROTECTED



Debora OSTOJIĆ

IN THE SAJMIŠTE CAMP



Debora Kabiljo was born on April 6, 1915, in Derventa, to Blanka (née Atijas) and David Kabiljo. There were four other children in the family, brothers Jozef and Samuilo and sisters Sarina and Rifka. Only Debora and her brothers survived the Holocaust.

She studied law in Belgrade and at the end of her third year, in 1936, married Milan Ostojić, who died in 1973.

After the war she lived in Belgrade until 1947, then in Prijedor before moving to Sarajevo in 1949. When war broke out in Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1992, she moved to Belgrade where she now lives with her daughter.

She has a son, Kamenko, and a daughter, Gorjana, and four grandchildren.

I was a prisoner in the Sajmište camp in Belgrade. As far as I am aware I am one of the very small number of surviving witnesses to the suffering of Jewish women and children in this Nazi camp. Although I am now more than eighty years of age, many of the events and people live in my memory to this day and I have already written a great deal about them.

I was taken to Sajmište on December 9, 1941, among a group of Jewish women from the camp in Banjica. I had been in Banjica as a political prisoner, together with my husband and a group of prisoners

from Smederevska Palanka. It was there that I heard that they were opening a camp for Jewish women and children and at first I couldn't believe it.

One day the Banjica camp commander, Vujković, burst into our room with several Gestapo and begin to call out Jewish women, which made me think that the camp must have been built. My four-year-old son was still in Smederevska Palanka, all alone in a strange world so, little suspecting what kind of camp it was, I registered to go there, although I had not been called for it because I had the surname of my Serb husband. It seemed like a good opportunity to be with my child and I couldn't imagine that a camp for women and children could be worse than the notorious Banjica where I was rotting away as a political prisoner. But one day in Sajmište was enough for me to realise the kind of hell I had landed in, and I immediately gave up the idea of bringing my son there. So now I was no longer with my husband, who was still in Banjica, nor was I with my child, who was staying with strangers.

Some of the other Jewish women in Banjica were political prisoners like me. These included Olga Alkalaj¹ and Frida Berman from Bosanski Brod, who was in the camp under the name Mila Radunović-Laban. Others said they had ended up in Banjica by being handed over to the Gestapo by people they had paid to get them out of Belgrade. Among these were mother and daughter Loni and Roza Ast, a Mrs Dajč², whose first name I don't recall, but she told me that her husband was a timber merchant. There was also Gracia Gabaj.

When we arrived at the Sajmište camp several of us were put into a large pavilion, which was almost full while the others were taken to a smaller pavilion, in which Jewish women and children from Niš were later housed. They immediately transferred us to the quarantine block where we had to sleep on a fence which had been laid on the ground. There were also Gypsies with us.

Fifteen days later they returned us to the pavilion and put us in the regular dormitories. There were 46 dormitories on three levels. The bot-

¹ There is a street in Belgrade named after Olga Alkalaj.

² This was Augusta Dajč, the wife of engineer Emil Dajč who accepted the painful and arduous duties of representative of the Jewish community in Belgrade during the German occupation. Their daughter, Hilda Dajč, a medical student, worked in the Jewish hospital then voluntarily went to the Sajmište camp, believing that this was where she could help the sick.

tom level was a metre above the ground, the second one had stairs leading up to it and the third was a kind of terrace with no railing. It was the only floor on which you could stand upright. The pavilion was paved with large stone slabs. The ceiling was high and the windows were small, and had remained broken since the bombing. Because of this it was very cold, although there were a few stoves which would be lit when there was wood. The wood, just like the bread, was carried by the women over the frozen Sava River.

Food was mere subsistence rations: a piece of bread or corn bread the size of a box of matches. For lunch there was a thin soup with beans, cabbage or potatoes and often there was not enough to go round. The potatoes were frozen and would rot soon after they were thawed. We ate them, nonetheless, and would soon get diarrhoea. The recovery from this was slow and difficult. The ablutions in the camp were a few taps and improvised toilets overflowing with faeces. All of this indicated that the camp was to be liquidated in the near future.



*The Kabiljo family before the Holocaust.
(Debora third from left in back row).*

Everything about life in the camp was horrifying. Some women were beaten and had their hair shorn. One of the most distressing incidents was when a group of boys were beaten because they had crawled under the wire and gone to Zemun to get some food. When they returned in the evening the Germans beat them brutally and returned

them half dead to their mothers. These criminals were certain that no one would leave the camp again. They already had plenty of experience in handling prisoners. First they would torture them with hunger, then frighten them with repeated roll calls during which they had to watch other prisoners being beaten or being forced to have their hair shorn. In this way they soon reduced us to apathy and despair. We had only one wish: that the end, our death, would come as soon as possible.

One of their most successful techniques was the psychological trick of spreading false rumours. One of these was that we were to be sent to Poland to work. Many saw this as salvation for themselves and their children. We needed only to wait calmly and patiently. Some women were telling fortunes from cards or beans and everyone saw a journey with everything going well. There was indeed a journey ahead of us: all this time the gas chambers were being prepared.

My most distressing memories are of the children in the camp. In the block next to ours there was a woman called Mrs Mandil, whose first name I don't remember. She had a young son who had just begun to talk. The first sound I would hear every morning was the child crying "Mummy, bread..." When the rations arrived and his mother gave him a slice of bread the crying would continue "Butter, Mummy, butter..." I don't know how his mother managed to calm him down, but to this day his heartrending crying rings in my ears.

The older children are also ingrained in my memory. They would gather in the middle of our pavilion, playing and singing:

*Ašafan, see we can
Play all day and win.
More, more, a little more
We'll jump out of our skin.*

They would stand in a circle, jumping two by two as the others clapped. The pairs would change all the time. But, as time went by, the song was heard less and less and more and more softly.

There was a small first-aid clinic run by a Jewish doctor whose name I've forgotten and there was also an office. A camp prisoner called Mile Demajo worked there. Because I was married to a Serb, they told me I should ask Demajo about the possibility of being released. When he heard that my husband was in Banjica, he told me not to tell anyone about it, but to remain silent and wait. Mr Demajo

was very highly regarded and I had an extremely good impression of him. He was a wise and gracious man. Sadly, he ended the same way as all the others in the camp.

I remember a beautiful young woman in advanced pregnancy who eventually gave birth in the camp. She wasn't Jewish but was married to a Jew and had applied to go to the camp herself because, she said, she wanted to be with her husband and his people.



*Debora Ostojić on the eve
of the war.*

take this latter course, thinking that Gracia would easily find her child if she ever came back. I didn't know at that time what the fate of the people in the camp would be. I don't think many people could have had any idea of what was to come. The Lukić family had no children of

Gracia Gabaj³ was also very young. She told me that she had left her two-year-old daughter Jenny with the Lukić family who had a picture framing shop. When she found out that I was leaving, she asked me to visit her child and ask the Lukić family not to change her name. As soon as I was released I went to visit the family but they were not at home. They were probably in the neighbourhood because there was a nicely-dressed girl playing in front of the house. When I asked her name, she replied that it was Nada Lukić.

I was wondering what to do, to keep looking for the Lukić family or, as the child was obviously well looked after, to leave her in peace. I decided to

³ Gracia was a young Jewish woman from Thessalonica who married Haim Mika Gabaj in Belgrade. Her husband was mobilised on the eve of the war and killed in the first battles in April 1941. Because she had no news of him and expected him to return, she remained in Belgrade with her two-year-old daughter Jenny, while her mother-in-law left Belgrade together with her two daughters, sons-in-law and four grandchildren. All of these were saved and took up residence in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Gracia was killed in the Sajmište camp. Jenny survived, thanks to the love and care of Mrs Lukić. She too now lives in Buenos Aires where she has raised a family. She has never forgotten her saviour whom she visited regularly in Belgrade and helped until the end of her life.

their own. After the war I went in search of any surviving members of the Gabaj family, but found no one.

Olga Alkalaj came with us from Banjica, where she was also a political prisoner. She had been tortured in Banjica and arrived at the Sajmište camp in a very poor state. I knew her from Banjica and also through Frida Berman. Sometime in January I came down with pneumonia and the doctor in the camp clinic gave me some medicine and later a lemon. I took this to Olga Alkalaj who was still recovering from the torture in Banjica. When I received a letter from my husband, passed to me by Mrs Ruso, who had been working on the ice that day, I went to the small pavilion to read the letter to Olga. In it, my husband told me that he had been released from Banjica with the whole Smederevska Palanka group and that he had submitted a request to the authorities for me to be released from the camp as the wife of “an Aryan”. Olga was delighted that I was to be released. When I told her I would stay there if I knew that everyone would be released, she told me “Go, just go! No one is going to get out of here.”

The case of Blanka Levi from Zenica was interesting. Her married name was Milanović and everyone called her “the Seventh Day Adventist”. When Blanka and the other Jews from Niš were brought to the camp, Blanka’s husband was away from home. My cousin, Rifka Baruh (née Atijas) from Niš was in the same pavilion as Blanka. She knew that I was to be released soon and asked me to go to the Adventists in Belgrade and tell Blanka’s friend to let her husband know where they were, because he had no idea what had happened to her. In the meantime they started call-ups in the camp in which people were taken out and gassed in trucks. Blanka didn’t answer any of the call-ups, she just sat, reading the Bible and praying. Everybody kept encouraging her to apply but, thinking that this was for transport to Poland, she would say “I don’t want to die in a foreign country. I want to die here and I’m not going to go anywhere.”

Convoy after convoy left and Blanka just sat and read her Bible. Finally, at the eleventh hour, just before the camp itself was demolished, her husband arrived and rescued her. Blanka didn’t know at that time who had sent the message to her husband, and nor did I know for whom I was doing it. By a strange coincidence I met Blanka more than forty years later. In a chance, spontaneous conversation in a train compartment, Blanka and I discovered our connection. This was the first

time we ever met, in 1985. Blanka was from Zenica and lived in Banja Koviljača after the war.

Margita Olujić and Frida Radunović-Laban were rescued before us, both of them also being married to “Aryans”. Three of us (Ružica Petrović, myself and a third person whose name I don’t recall, although I know she had a patisserie at the entrance to the Academy of Science) were informed on February 24, 1942, that we were to be released. I remember that the convoy from Niš arrived the same day. But because a lot of the female inmates had asked us to deliver messages, we decided to spend another night there and leave the next day. This was also an opportunity to give our food rations to those who remained to suffer in the camp.

Loni Ast asked me to contact her son Izidor Ast in the Shaar Haamakim kibbutz in Palestine, which I did immediately. Her message was about some valuable items which she had left in the care of someone named Injac who worked in a fabric shop in Knez Mihailova Street and lived in Cara Uroša Street. Izidor Ast didn’t call me. He apparently sought me many years later, but I was no longer living in Belgrade. Later I heard that he had been killed in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Among the newcomers from Niš, there was my cousin Rifka Atijas, the daughter of Isidor Atijas from Bugojno. She was married to Baruh, a surveyor from Niš. She was together with her cousin, Rifka Salom, the daughter of Kuća Salom from Bugojno. She was also married to a surveyor from Niš. She had her one-year-old son with her, but had left her daughter with her grandmother in Bugojno.

I remember one day a sister of Dijana Levi from Banja Luka called me. I also saw Flora Levi, the daughter of the cobbler Levi, also from Banja Luka, who was there with her mother-in-law.

I also remember a woman (I don’t recall her name) who had a house at the beginning of Vojvoda Babunski Street, immediately behind the Babunski tavern, next to the tram stop across the street from Lion.

I remember, I remember... The memories are painful and they will burden my soul forever, because there is nothing to compare them with except “the scar on the soul borne by anyone who has ever lain in prison” (Crnjanski, *Migrations*).

Lili TIŠMA

IN OCCUPIED
ZAGREB AND VUKOVAR



Lili Štraus was born in Zagreb on July 27, 1912, to Regina (*née* Herman) and Josip Štraus, a veterinary surgeon who worked as an inspector in the Ministry of Agriculture of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Her uncle was the painter, Oskar Herman. She has a sister, Anika Kovač, who survived the second world war together with her five children. Her mother Regina was killed in Jajinci, near Belgrade in 1942.

After the war she worked in the Presidency of the Government of the Federal National Republic of Yugoslavia, then in the Putnik tourist agency, and Jugobanka. Finally, she worked until she retired as a secretary in the Mathematics Institute at the University of Novi Sad. She married Teodor Tišma in 1963.

From her marriage to the non-Jewish Bogomir Herman, she has a daughter, Maja Herman (married as Sekulić), a doctor of literature who now lives in New York.

The German occupation of Yugoslavia and the Ustasha creation, the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia, had their most direct and painful impact on me by the deportation of my mother, Regina (Beba) Štraus (*née* Herman), to a camp and the arrest of my husband, Bogomir Herman.

Even today, under the burden of the years, I see my mother's face before me, her dark, deep eyes which could blaze with anger but which, for the 44 years they looked upon us, so warmed my father, my sister and myself that we could never forget them. Nor could we forget her velvety mezzo-soprano which thrilled us every Friday and Saturday in the Vukovar temple.

My mother Regina was arrested in February, 1942, in Belgrade. We had lived in the city since 1934, with my father, Josip Štraus, who was a general inspector in the Ministry of Agriculture. When he died, in 1935, my mother remained in Belgrade, thanks to my father's pension. The pain of her arrest, of them taking her to the Sajmište camp and then to the death camp of Jajinci from which she never returned, was made worse when we discovered that she had been arrested after being denounced, anonymously, by a neighbour who was keen to acquire our garden.

My husband Bogomir Herman, an ethnic German and a publicist by profession, had been a member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia since it was founded in Vukovar in 1919. He was a man of strong principles and he paid a high price for this during his lifetime. As his wife and companion in life, despite all the problems caused by sticking to those principles, I felt safe and secure because I knew him as a profoundly conscientious man. This was also the kind of father he was to our daughter Maja who was the centre of his world.

When the Ustasha state was created, my husband was in Vukovar where his father, mother and brothers were. The Ustasha authorities knew about his political convictions, but his being German saved him, at least for the moment, from more severe consequences. However he and a number of other like-minded people from Vukovar were under observation and the Ustashes were only waiting for the right moment to arrest them. That moment came once the Ustasha regime was stable and arresting people with a Communist background became a way of showing their cooperation with the German authorities. Bogomir was arrested at the end of April, 1941, and taken with a group of political prisoners to Koprivnica, a transit camp from which people were sent on to Jasenovac. There was a stroke of luck here because his friend, Dr Branko Oberhof, lived in Koprivnica with his wife Tea, who was also a doctor and a daughter of the Koprivnica rabbi. Dr Oberhof was assigned to examine the prisoners and immediately "diagnosed" my husband as having appendicitis. He kept him in hospital with this diag-

nosis as long as he could but the Ustashes eventually sent him to Jasenovac in December, 1941.

We wives of the arrested men from Vukovar agreed that one of us would go each month to Stara Gradiška to take food to all our husbands in the Koprivnica camp. I was arrested for the first time on my way to Stara Gradiška with food but was released soon afterwards. Apparently they didn't investigate my origins in any great detail. But one night in prison was enough for me to see the long lines of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies, being led somewhere far away, with no idea of the fate which awaited them.

My husband's German surname, which I had taken when I married him, no longer offered me protection.



Left: Lili Herman in 1944. Right: Her mother, Regina "Beba" Štraus.

Apparently someone became suspicious about my regular visits to Bogomir and the parcels being forwarded and, on my next visit, I was again arrested. I spent the night in prison in Stara Gradiška and was released the next day without any special interrogation. I returned to Zagreb in fear with a feeling that this would not be the end of it.

In Zagreb I lived with Dr Koporac, a friend of the family, and had meals with my uncle, Dr Anton Gotlib and his wife Anka. Knowing that

Bogomir was in poor health, I wrote to his father, Franja Herman, asking him for help. In these letters I used the name of my other aunt, Micika Gotlib, naively thinking that her German surname and Catholic religion would be less suspicious.

It was a cold Sunday in May, 1942, when there was a sharp knock on the door of my uncle's apartment in the middle of the family lunch. An Ustasha policeman came in and called my name, ordering me to accompany him at once. I remember I was wearing a dark blue suit with gold buttons. In the first moment it occurred to me that I should keep them as I could trade them if I was in prison for any length of time, but then gave the idea up because they would certainly have taken them from me during the search.

When I got into the car I was astonished to see my Aunt Micika already inside. Obviously the letters I had been writing with her name as the sender had been intercepted. I comforted the frightened Micika, assuring her that nothing could happen to her. And, indeed, she was released immediately and I was taken to the basement for interrogation. The first interrogation was conducted by a female investigator and was brief, covering only my personal data. I remained in the police station until the evening, when a policeman took me to the railway station. At my request he allowed me to stop at Dr Koporac's apartment to change into warmer clothes. While I was there, I asked the maid to take my suit to Aunt Anka.

When the train set off, I realised that we were heading towards Jasenovac. We stood overnight at Jasenovac station and in the morning they took me to the reception centre where I waited until the evening for interrogation. I was interrogated by two Ustasha policemen who sent me under an Ustasha escort to an old mill nearby to spend the night. The mill had one floor and a toilet right next to my room. My escort suggested to me that I sleep with him, so that I would be "warmer". I was astonished, and replied that I was an honest Christian woman who loved her husband and that I would not betray him even at the cost of my life. His reaction was the last thing I expected, given the circumstances. He blushed, and mumbled, "Forgive me." Later he brought me a blanket and a pillow and the next day some food and fruit, sent by his wife after he told her about me.

During my several days in the mill, I met Ada Klajn, the twin sister of Hugo Klajn, an old friend of Bogomir's and mine. Ada had her children with her and whenever I could I gave them some of the food

the Ustasha brought me from his wife. Neither Ada nor her children ever returned from the camp.

After several days in the Jasenovac reception centre they took me back to Zagreb, to the prison on N. Square, where I was interrogated by two investigators. I remember the scene well, the two of them giving me superior looks and sneering, then giving me a piece of paper and telling me "State your origins and your religion before you married Bogomir Herman." I had long known I would eventually be asked this question under circumstances similar to this. The faces of my father, Josip, and my gentle mother, Regina, appeared clearly before my eyes, marching on in the column without returning, and then my dear husband, looking pale and ill. If I wrote "Catholic", there was a slim hope this might save my life, but it would be a betrayal of these three dear souls and my life, if I kept it, would be empty and worthless. I took the pen and, without hesitation, wrote "Jew". They underlined it in red down to the bottom of the page.

From the prison on N. Square, they took me to the Savska Road prison and ordered me to stand in the corridor with other prisoners. I was desperately tired, but, looking up, I recognised Hans Celinščak, drab little Hanzika, who tried long and unsuccessfully to win my friend Zlata Šik, coming down the corridor towards me in an Ustasha uniform. When he recognised me he winked and barked rudely "You'll be in front of the firing squad tonight." He walked past me and began calling out the other female prisoners. That night I imagined someone bringing me fresh bread and hot coffee in the morning. And in the morning there indeed arrived an Ustasha with a pot full of hot coffee and a piece of bread. He asked for Ljiljana Harvej. I realised that this was me so I stood up and went over to him. He told me Mr Celinščak had sent me the coffee and that he would come back later to take me to him for interrogation. I shared the coffee and bread with the other women for whom this was the first hot meal for many days.

The same Ustasha soon returned and took me to Celinščak. He kept reassuring me, promising he would do all he could to help me. I remained in the Savska Road prison until the end of July, 1942, when I was released.

After getting out of the prison I stayed with Mrs Jančić, the mother of my friend Dragica Kajfeš, the wife of Dr Kajfeš, who was an assistant to my uncle, Dr Anton Gotlib. During the summer of 1942, my husband Bogomir and a group of other prisoners with German

surnames were transferred from Jasenovac to Vukovar where they were obliged to report to the police three times a day.

I was safe staying with Mrs Jančić until late autumn, 1942, when the Ustasha authorities issued an order that everyone born a Jew must report with their landlords to the authorities. Failure to do so would carry the death penalty.

I had to leave this dear woman who had done all she could to make me feel secure. I accepted an offer from my friend Đina Buterin, whose married name was Sarić, to live with her and her husband. He was a lawyer and was able to protect people with German surnames through his connections with the authorities. In the meantime, at the beginning of summer, 1943, my husband was transferred from Vukovar to Zagreb to work in the administration of a civil defence unit. At the same time, he was drafted. Sarić also took him in and so, after a long time, we were again together. However it became too dangerous to stay with the Sarićs any longer after I was recognised by an Ustasha driver who had lived with my aunt in Vukovar. We managed to move to Đina Sarić's mother's in the short term, but we knew we had to find a way to join the Partisans as soon as possible. Through the Gotlibs, I met Oberol, the head of the hospital motor pool. I knew he had been a Communist before the war and was sure he would be able to get us to the Partisans. It had become extremely dangerous to stay in Zagreb with Mrs Buterin, especially after the Italian capitulation in September, 1943. We had to search for a new refuge where we could wait for news from Oberol about when we could be moved to the liberated territory.

Mrs Frangeš, the wife of Dr Frangeš, a professor at Zagreb University, put us up at great risk to herself.

Finally, at the end of September, 1943, Oberol managed to get us through Dubrava to the liberated territory, to the Partisans.

One of my reasons for writing this is to record the series of circumstances by which a young Jewish woman who was married to a German managed to survive Ustasha-controlled Zagreb, join the Partisans and make her contribution to the struggle against Fascism. But primarily I am writing it to record my gratitude to everyone who, at great risk to themselves, offered me help and protection.

Blanka POLICER-TASIĆ

MY MOTHER AND I IN KIND HANDS



Born in Županja on September 28, 1932. She is a physician specialising in microbiology. Lives in Montreal, Canada, occasionally in Belgrade and in the Sveti Stefan area. Her mother Stanislava (née Filipović), a teacher, died in 1948 during surgery in Ljubljana at the age of 39. Her father, Dr Stjepan Policer, an epidemiologist, was born in Bogojevo in 1894. After the liberation, he worked in the police emergency clinic. During the difficult years of Cominform, as a doctor he was faced again with human tragedy and the difficult fate of political prisoners. Although he did not share the beliefs of these prisoners, he was indignant at the “re-education” techniques employed and did not attempt to hide this. Subjected to pressure and daily harassment and threats, and deeply disappointed in the outcome of the great idea for which he had fought, he took his own life on February 3, 1951.

When the war began in 1941, I was eight years old. We lived in the small Bosnian town of Derventa. On the eve of the war, my doctor father was appointed head of the epidemiology service which was battling the typhus then endemic in the area. My mother wasn't Jewish, her mother was a Croat and her father a Serb. She was baptised in the Catholic Church and because she married a Jew she had to promise her family that the children of the marriage would be baptised as Catholics.

My parents weren't religious. My father's only request was that his daughter bear the name of his mother who he had adored and who he had lost very early. And so I was named after my grandmother, Blanka, née Erenvald, who was married to Dr Moric Policar, a district doctor in Bogojevo.

Derventa, where we lived, was a town of mixed nationalities: there were Serbs, Croats, Muslims and a number of Jewish families, most of them merchants or doctors. I don't remember anyone ever asking me about my nationality or religion before the war. It wasn't spoken about, either at home, at school or in the street.

After the bombing on April 6, 1941, my father returned very quickly from the war and I began to feel that my family was in great danger; the atmosphere in the house was very tense and heavy with evil foreboding. When I went to play with my friend, Mira Štraus, I saw that her parents had packed their things as though they were planning to travel somewhere. Her older sister told me not to come any more because I might be taken away with them. I realised then that we were not in the same kind of danger as them. Mira Štraus was my best friend and we used to sit together in school. I never saw her again.

My father didn't go to work and I didn't go to school. Instead I played by myself or with my father in our yard. One day in April we were playing *klis*, our favourite game, when two German soldiers with red stripes on their sleeves interrupted us. My father had to go with them so he hastily bade us farewell. After that, my mother would take food to him in the Ustasha prison, always coming home in tears. They wouldn't let her see him and she had no idea whether the food she took was reaching him. One night not long afterward we heard chains clanking and the Ustashas shouting as they took the prisoners to the railway station. The prisoners were respectable people, most of them Serbs, and among them was my father. At this time the Jasenovac camp had not yet been built and they were all taken to a temporary camp at Gospić.

Our next door neighbour, Dr Grinberg, and his mother took their own lives before they came to take them away. My father's friend and colleague, Dr Hirš, was taken away with his daughter, a young woman married to a Serb who was already a prisoner of war. Their baby, just a few months old, was given to a Serb family to take care of. The night they took all the Jews away, they took this grandson of Dr Hirš's as well. The mother had been forced to tell them where the child was. They didn't spare him.

My maternal grandmother lived in Županja, so we went there, thinking we would be safe. One day, I think it was at the beginning of 1942, we received a letter from a peasant in the village of Jasenovac. He told us that my father was alive in the camp and had given him his address while he was out cutting wood with other camp inmates. The man also gave us his own address in the letter. Without much hesitation, my mother prepared some food and some warm clothes and we set off to visit this Jasenovac villager. The Jasenovac station was swarming with armed Ustashas. We were very frightened, as was the man who was waiting for us. He took us to his house and told us we should return to Županja on the first train because if anyone found out who we were and why we'd come here we'd soon be behind the wire ourselves. He explained to us that this was no ordinary prison: no one who went in ever came out; people were being tortured and killed in the most cruel ways possible. This was how we found out what the Jasenovac camp really was and what was happening there.

In the summer of 1942, we saw my father in the Đakovo hospital. In Đakovo, as everyone knows, there was a camp for women and children. When a typhus epidemic broke out there, the camp authorities sent my father and another two doctors, a Serb and a Croat, to treat the women in the camp; the Ustashas in the camp were concerned about their own health as well. My father had a colleague and good friend in the Đakovo hospital but unfortunately I don't recall this brave man's name. Because they were afraid of the epidemic spreading outside the camp, the doctors in the Đakovo hospital were in constant contact with the three inmate doctors and so my father would be escorted to the hospital every day by an Ustasha guard. My father's colleague wrote to us and invited us to Đakovo. That day the Ustasha assigned to guard my father was diagnosed as being "seriously ill" and spent the whole morning undergoing all kinds of examinations, and my mother and I spent this time with my father in his consulting room. We returned to Županja and didn't tell a soul where we'd been.

The camp in Đakovo was liquidated and my father and the other two doctors were sent back to Jasenovac, but he managed to escape to the Partisans. Dr Nikola Nikolić later wrote about this incident in detail in his book on the Jasenovac camp, but at the time we found out about it from the Ustasha newspapers. They wrote that the Partisans were an ordinary gang of mainly Serbs and Jews, and among the names they mentioned were Dr Paja Gregorić and my father. My mother was arrested

soon after this and taken to the prison in Vinkovci, near Tolje. This place was noted for its cruelty.

The husband of my mother's sister was an officer in the civil defence. My mother was released on his guarantee that she would live in his house and have no contact with the Partisans. So from then on we lived in Nova Gradiška in my aunt's house.



Blanka in her youth.

I didn't go to school and my mother didn't leave the house. My cousin was the same age as me and she would come home cheerful and full of stories. I wasn't at all sorry about not going to school. I remembered the school in Županja where my teacher would come to class in his Ustasha uniform. He would always insist on me reciting poems praising the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia and its leaders. He enjoyed watching me tremble in fear and disgust. Fortunately there was a

woman teacher who often replaced him because he had "other duties" in the Jasenovac camp.

We exchanged letters with my father through my uncle's orderly. He was from Podgradci on Mt Kozara and would frequently go "on leave" and bring us letters from my father. By this time he was working as a doctor in the Partisan hospital in Podgradci. Before the liberation we had to flee to Bosanska Gradiška where we were taken in by a Muslim family whose son was with the Partisans. Their house was right beside the bridge over the Sava and the Ustasha camp of Stara Gradiška was opposite on the other bank. I knew that people were being killed there every night because we saw the bodies of peasants from Kozara floating down the river. It seemed to me that the majority of them were women. The bodies would often catch in the reeds along the banks. We would dislodge them with long pitchforks and let them float on down the Sava. My mother was unable to stay silent as she did this and

from her mouth the whole time would come dreadful words which no one dared hear.

At the end of April, 1945, we were waiting in the house by the bridge for our liberators, the Partisans. I remember the soldiers being very young, almost boys, from around Knjaževac, from Stara Planina.

One day three completely exhausted, starving but happy men knocked timidly on our door. They were inmates from Jasenovac who had taken part in the breakout from the camp. I remember one of them was called Moni Levi. He knew my father from the camp and told my mother about one episode. My father had a fur-lined leather jacket which he was wearing when he was arrested and so he also wore it in Jasenovac. The camp inmates were often taken out to cut wood and an Ustasha who was escorting them one day noticed the jacket and ordered my father to remove it immediately. My father hesitated but the Ustasha soldier was impatient and stabbed my father in the chest with a knife and took the jacket. Moni Levi saw that my father was still alive, but bleeding profusely. He carried him back to the camp on his back and hid him. He would secretly bring him some scraps of food, potato peelings and water. My father told us later that Moni Levi had saved him from certain death.

We kept the escapees in the house for a few days until they had recovered enough to go wherever they were going. In those days, people mainly travelled either on foot or in farm carts. Sometimes, if there was room, they would get a ride in a truck. The trains were not running. We set out for my grandmother's house in Županja. It took us hours and hours and was very hard going but we were happy. We were no longer living with the awful fear, and now "our people" were everywhere around us. We heard that my father was still alive and happily looked forward to embracing him and freedom.

Vera TOMANIĆ

JEWISH IN BELGRADE



*V*era Tomanić was born on January 9, 1917, in Bistrince near Osijek, to Elza (née Grinvald) and Pavle Blum. She has a younger sister, Lili, (married as Alpar) who is temporarily living in Frankfurt.

Her father, mother, grandmother Eleonora Grinvald and her mother's sister Berta, all of whom lived in the same home, were killed in the Holocaust.

After the war, as the wife of an active officer, she managed the household and raised the children. She has a daughter, Mirjana, born in 1941, who is a paediatrician, and a son, Rodoljub, seven years younger, a geodetic engineer, as well as four grandchildren and a great grandson, Stefan, who was born in Jerusalem.

My name is Vera Tomanić (née Blum) and I come from a Jewish family from near Osijek. My father was a very religious man and the Jewish holidays were all observed in our home.

After marrying a Serb, I moved to Belgrade. I happened to be there for the bombing on April 6, 1941, and when the war and the occupation of Serbia began. I was about to give birth and so went to my parents in Osijek. The situation was similar there, the Ustasha Independent State of Croatia had been established, so Jews had to wear yellow armbands, synagogues were being set on fire, people were being arrested as hostages and the first convoy of Jews was deported to the Jasenovac camp.

At the beginning of 1942 I returned to Belgrade where there were no longer any free Jews. The German authorities were insisting that Jews register, so I went to report and was given a yellow armband which I had to wear. My husband was an officer on active service in the old Yugoslav Army and was captured in Germany. Because of this I was given a special identity card from the Special Police, Department for Jews on the basis of the Gestapo decree for Serbia. This document allowed me to live in Belgrade, but I was not permitted to leave the city, nor my place of residence. I got the document from 21 George Washington Street and it was verified in the *Feldskommandatura*, the building

<p>SPEZIALPOLIZEI Abteilung für Juden</p> <p>BESCHEINIGUNG</p> <p>Die Jüdin <u>TOMANIĆ M. VERA</u> geb. am <u>9.1.1917</u> in <u>Bistrinci</u> wohnhaft <u>Koste-Taušanovića 3</u> kann, auf Grund anliegender Genehmigung des Chefs der Einsatzgruppe der Sicherheits- polizei und des S.D., Abt. IV/3D., vom <u>23.6.1942</u> weiter in Belgrad verbleiben.</p> <p>Belgrad, den <u>29. VI. 1942</u></p> <p><i>Köster</i> 44. Gau-Regierungsrat</p>	<p>SPECIJALNA POLICIJA Odeljenje za Jevreje</p> <p>OBJAVA</p> <p>Jevrejka <u>TOMANIĆ M. VERA</u> rodjena <u>9-1.1917</u> u <u>Bistrinci</u> sa stanom <u>Koste-Taušanovića 3</u> može, na temelju priloženog odobrenja GESTAPO-a Odel. IV/3D., od <u>23.6.1942</u> da ostane i dalje u Beogradu.</p> <p>Belgrad, <u>29. VI. 1942</u></p> <p><i>Musaev</i> policijski komesar.</p>
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Document issued in 1942 based on Gestapo approval for Vera Tomanić to remain in Belgrade. This is the only document she kept from the time of the occupation

opposite the National Theatre which today houses the National Museum. I had no documents for my daughter, Mirjana, and so had to keep her hidden. It was not until October 16, 1943, that I obtained an identity card for myself and a minor under the age of 16. I got this from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Prisoner Welfare on the grounds that I was the wife of a prisoner of war, Mirko Tomanić, and it allowed me to move around more freely.

In the apartment where I lived there would be checks several times a month to see if I was hiding someone. These checks would be done at night. My liberty was very curtailed: the slightest suspicion would be enough for me and my child to be taken to a camp. Because of this, I immediately removed the radio from the house so that I would not be suspected of listening to Radio London or some other "enemy radio station".



Four generations: photograph sent in 1942 to Vera's husband, Milorad, who was imprisoned in Germany.

I would see other Jews, my fellow citizens, in the streets, clearing away debris from the bombing. I also saw announcements about Jews being executed in retaliation for various acts of sabotage. On one of these posters I found the name of my cousin, Ernest Grinvald, who had lived in Strahinjića Bana Street.

When six Jewish officers were brought from a camp in Germany in June, 1942, because they were sick, I discovered that among them was an acquaintance of mine, the pharmacist Bela Gutman. I visited him several times in hospital and tried to arrange for him to get to Osijek, because the Jews in Osijek were still free at that time. However, after several days, this group was taken away and executed.

Life in Belgrade during the occupation was really difficult, not only materially but also because of the total lack of security. I sold everything anyone would pay for just to be able to survive. Despite the

difficulties I managed to send parcels to my father in the concentration camp but, after two or three months, I no longer heard from him and so I stopped sending the parcels. There was no chance to send even one parcel to my mother because she was executed as soon as she arrived in the Stara Gradiška camp, along with the other women from Osijek. I would also send parcels to my husband who was in a prison camp. This was the way my life was during the war years, fraught with worry and fear for myself and my child, for my family in the camp, for my prisoner-of-war husband.

Only Jewish women from mixed marriages remained free in Serbia. Jewish men married to Serbian women were deported immediately in 1941 and subsequently executed. My parents and about seventy members of my extended family were taken to Jasenovac, Stara Gradiška and Poland; my father's family was executed in Hungary.

After the liberation, only my sister Lilika returned alive.

The only document I have kept is the one which enabled me to survive as a Jew in occupied Belgrade.



*Monument on the bank of the Danube in Dorćol to Belgrade Jews executed during World War Two, Sculptor, Nandor Glid.
(photograph by Malvina Humski).*



XI

PHYSICIANS



Dr Etelka NAJFELD

“GOOD LUCK, LITTLE IGOR!”



Hospital Medical Director Dr Etelka “Eta” Najfeld was born in 1916, in Slavonski Brod to Rudolf and Helena Špicer (née Adler). She had a younger brother, Zdenko. Fifty-six members of her immediate and extended family perished in the Holocaust.

She completed high school in Slavonski Brod and enrolled to study medicine at the University of Zagreb.

During the second world war, she spent time in forced labour in Bosnia, treating endemic syphilis. She collaborated with the resistance movement and later actively joined the struggle against Fascism.

After the war she specialised in microbiology at the Republic of Serbia’s Hygiene Institute in Belgrade. She lectured in her specialty at postgraduate level and worked at the Serbian Institute for Public Health in Belgrade until her retirement.

She has two children, a son Igor, who is a mathematician, and a daughter, Vesna, who is a geneticist.

When I was born my father was still at the Russian front, fighting in the Austro-Hungarian Army. My mother had a small store selling various goods and in this way supported us. When my father, who was a textile merchant, returned after the war they opened a fabric shop. I remember them both being very diligent and working long hours. They

soon amassed enough assets to open a large store where everything needed for clothing and home decoration could be found, from needles and thread to shoes and carpets, from fabrics by the metre to ready-made clothes. The stock was mostly purchased from abroad: the fabrics from England, silk from France, linen from Czechoslovakia and the ready-made clothes from Vienna and Budapest. The range was of good quality and wide variety.

My brother Zdenko, who was five years older than me, graduated from a textiles school in Brno to equip himself for taking over our parents' shop as a qualified textiles professional.

While we were still very young, our parents engaged a German governess who not only took care of us while they were working but also taught us her language. Once we were both fluent in German, another governess came to teach us French. Our parents put great emphasis on wanting us to learn foreign languages, underlining this with the proverb "You're worth as much as the number of languages you speak." They apparently wanted to make up through us children for what they had lacked in the way of education. Both of them had only completed primary school. It is extraordinary that at that time they managed to provide us with such opportunities to acquire a sound education, managing to implement this systematically in a small town while at the same time creating a wonderful, warm atmosphere in the house. Our parents lavished us with endless care and they were interested in everything we did. Today, after so many years, it seems to me that my happy childhood is the greatest wealth of my life, and gave me the strength to endure all that happened later.

At home we spoke Serbo-Croatian and German. When our parents wanted to discuss things we weren't supposed to know about, they would speak in Hungarian, with some Yiddish words.

We were aware from our early childhood that we were Jewish. I think that our mother warned us that we could face unpleasant situations because of this. The small town in which I was born was not free from anti-Semitism, which could be both heard and felt. I remember them shouting at me when I went into the first grade of primary school: "You Jews with tails, you'll soon be finished, I'm sorry for the shovel that will dig your grave." To this day I get a lump in my throat when I remember this. Once I came home distressed and in tears. My calm and wise mother knew how to comfort and hearten me so that I was always

courageously Jewish, even to the point of defiance. I was not ashamed of it, even at the most difficult times.

We had Jewish newspapers regularly at home and would discuss issues around the table. There was a small, blue and white money collection box for Keren Kayemet prominently displayed and we children, and of course the adults, would regularly put coins into this. There was not a lot of discussion about Zionism, but it was taken for granted that we should collect money for the purchase of land in Palestine.

My mother had a large family in Brod and on Sunday afternoons and holidays they would all come to visit us. This was always a pleasant occasion. On the holidays, especially Purim, we would exchange plates of cakes called *Schlachmones*. We children would wear fancy costumes and go to the Purim Ball in the Tri Gavrana tavern, whose owner was Jewish. I remember my little brother reciting a poem from Hanoar about the yellow citrons from Palestine at one of these parties. My favourite memory of Purim is the good *kindles* and plenty of other kinds of cakes.

Celebrations of the important holidays were taken very seriously. For Rosh Hashanah (which we called Rosheshone) we would get new clothes. I would usually get a velvet dress and my brother a sailor suit. My parents fasted for Yom Kippur, going to the temple dressed very formally with a clove-studded quince to make the fast easier.

We had a lovely temple, built in 1895 in the Moorish style, with two domes and a Star of David rosette in the centre. The outside was clad in yellow brick and separated from the street with a wrought-iron fence. The vast interior had space for the whole community. There were pews for the men on the ground floor and a gallery for women and the organ. On important holidays the service was conducted with singing by the cantor, Hendle, accompanied by the organ and the choir, according to the Eastern European liturgy. The entire ritual was very solemn, although the congregation wasn't particularly religious. When the Ustashes came to power in 1941, the temple was desecrated and turned into a warehouse. I even heard from some people that they kept horses there. It was finally destroyed in a bombing raid towards the end of the war.

My mother had an extraordinary voice and used to sing in the choir. I still have great nostalgia for some of the Yiddish songs I learned from her.

During my childhood and right up to my eighteenth birthday, when I left to study in Zagreb, there were about four hundred Jews living in Brod. Most of these were merchants and tradesmen, but there were also doctors, lawyers and engineers. Brod was a well-developed industrial centre. It was a rail gateway to Bosnia and an important port on the Sava River.

The Jewish Community, which was Zionist in orientation, was very active and well organised. In 1919 a Jewish youth conference was held in Brod to establish a federal youth organisation. There were regular lectures, performances, afternoon teas and dances at which money was raised for the purchase of land in Palestine, to buy clothes for children from poor families and to assist the Bitola Jews. The collections were always for worthy causes and in the name of Jewish solidarity. We had speakers who were able to convince everyone present that these causes were justified and all the community's activities were successful in every way.

I wasn't involved in the Zionist movement because I had too many other commitments after my school hours, but I often went to Hashomer Hatzair meetings. However my path in Judaism, apart from the things I had learned from my family, lay in a different direction. In my high school, were there usually three or four Jews in the class and we had compulsory religious lessons. These were supposed to be given by our rabbi, Dr Leib Weisberg, who had come from Poland. He was not a good lecturer and did not know our language very well, so his wife, Dr Ada Weisberg, who spoke the language excellently, often replaced him. She was a very interesting lecturer, a good teacher and an extraordinary person. She proved this when the Jewish women and children were taken from Brod to the concentration camp. They were taken on foot to the Stara Gradiška camp in the harsh winter of 1941–42, and many of them fell, exhausted from trudging through the deep snow, losing their will to live. Ada Weisberg would stand at the head of the column with her two small sons, singing, praying and urging the women on, although she knew the fate which awaited them.

This clever woman introduced us to Jewish history, taught us to read and write Hebrew and unobtrusively planted in us a love for our people. I no longer remember how she managed this and nor do I have the words to express it, but I know that I think of her often with respect and gratitude, and with the same sorrow I would feel for someone close to me.

After I matriculated in 1934, I went to Zagreb to study medicine. Immediately after I arrived I registered for meals at the Jewish refectory. The refectory was the centre of our lives and I spent the happiest period of my youth there. It was also there that I met my husband, Alfred Najfeld. He had come from Poland to study because, as a Jew, he was unable to enrol at Krakow University.

My time in the refectory gave me a broader outlook on life in a variety of ways. It was there that I met people from various parts of the country: from Vojvodina and Macedonia, from Bosnia and Dalmatia, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, Orthodox Jews and atheists, assimilationists and Zionists. It was a beehive, buzzing with argument, persuasion and criticism. Despite our many differences, we felt the deep connection of belonging to the same people. It was at this time that the anti-Jewish propaganda had begun in Germany and the Spanish Civil War had erupted. There were a number of people from the refectory who went to fight with the Spanish Republicans. Refugees had begun to arrive from Czechoslovakia and Austria and we began to hear about persecution in Germany. Restrictive measures began in Yugoslavia in 1939, especially against Jews who were not Yugoslav citizens. This particularly affected my future husband who from this time on was living in Zagreb without papers.

In these dark days, the war began. Belgrade was bombed. We were still not married and didn't know what to do. In the confusion, my husband decided to enlist voluntarily as a doctor in the Yugoslav Army.

No sooner had he got his uniform than a muffled roar was heard. The Germans, together with the Ustashas, rolled into the city in tanks. This was April 10, 1941. The crowds in the streets were cheering enthusiastically, strewing the path of the tanks with flowers, sweets and oranges. We were struck dumb with despair, helplessness and the awareness of what was to come.

That same day the Independent State of Croatia was proclaimed. This German-Italian-Ustasha creation was set up under Nazi laws. A few days later we had to register as Jews and soon after that we were forced to wear yellow Stars of David on our chests and backs so that we could be recognised from all directions. Every day there would be new regulations limiting our movement, our education and our right to health care. We were stripped of our property, evicted from our apartments and forbidden to have stocks of groceries, except in the time when nothing more was available.

And so each day the noose was tightened, with more and more discriminatory measures until, finally, the worst arrived.

By then my parents and brother had already been thrown out of our large apartment in our own building in Slavonski Brod and been put in a small room in the attic. My father and my brother had been conscripted into forced labour, cleaning the streets with the other Jews. Our neighbours took the furniture from the apartment, the piano, carpets, beautiful paintings and other valuables, anything they could get their hands on.

An "Aryan" commissar was appointed for our shop. This meant that the business was now owned by the Independent State of Croatia and the commissar had to hand over the daily takings to the authorities. Of course they'd already started stealing goods and money, but it didn't matter any more because now we were struggling just to survive. My father was in forced labour until the end of July when, lashed with wire around his wrist to a Serb, he passed through Zagreb under Ustasha guard. I don't remember how I discovered that he would come through the town, but I ran to the railway station to see him. We exchanged a few words in the presence of the Ustashas. He appeared calm and composed, but his bottom lip trembled as we spoke. That is how I remember him: I never saw him again.

My father's road to death was terrible. I heard about it from my uncle, Arnold Adler, who escaped from Jasenovac and whom I met after the war. My father was taken from Zagreb to Jastrebarsko, where there was a camp, from there to Gospić, and finally to a camp on the island of Pag. There the inmates worked in terrible conditions in salt factories. They worked barefoot, their feet cut and inflamed from the salt. Because of the Ustashas' exceptionally brutal treatment of the inmates and the screaming of the sick, the camp was transferred to Jasenovac at the request of the Italian occupational authorities. As soon as they arrived, my father was taken to Gradina, where he was killed with a mallet blow to the head. Gradina had been a Serbian village on the opposite bank of the Sava before all its residents were murdered and it became the site for the most brutal and bestial mass murders of Jasenovac inmates. The camp was certainly the most criminal in Europe. Victims were executed with knives, mallets and axes, hacked to pieces and thrown into the Sava. Bloody, evil handiwork.

My brother was still cleaning the streets. He was connected with the resistance movement and was assigned to distribute pamphlets at

the railway station. This was an unforgivable mistake, sending the son of a well-known Jewish merchant on such an assignment. It was as though somebody had done it on purpose. Of course he was immediately arrested and remained in prison until all the Jews were taken from Brod to Stara Gradiška and Jasenovac. This was in February, 1942. My uncle told me that as soon as he arrived in Jasenovac, my brother was executed after a drumhead trial.

My mother was left alone in the little room in the attic until she, too, was taken to Stara Gradiška in February, 1942. I managed to see her in October, 1941, before I left for Bosnia.

In the meantime, we were in Zagreb, our rucksacks already packed for the camp, wondering what to do. We tried to find a connection with "the woods", with the Partisans. The uprising had not yet gathered momentum and we couldn't find anyone in the city to put us in touch with any of them. It was out of the question to leave the city with yellow armbands and no travel pass or permit. We waited helplessly. At that time, Jews were barred from receiving treatment in hospitals and other state medical institutions, so the Jewish Community in Zagreb organised its own medical service. My husband immediately reported there and was given a certificate exempting him and his family from deportation to the camp. It was then that we decided to get married. Ours was the last marriage performed by the senior Zagreb rabbi, Dr Gavro Švarc before he was taken to Jasenovac and executed.

The pursuit of Jews was stepped up more and more. By May, 165 young people had been deported to the camps. Only five survived. Then Jewish lawyers were arrested. Some of these were taken to the Gospić camp while some were temporarily released. After them came the Jewish doctors. Again, some were released and some were taken to camps. In this way the Ustasha authorities played with our nerves and our lives until they dreamt up what they called the "contribution". One day there was an announcement that the Jews had to collect a thousand kilograms of gold in order not to be sent to the camps. We all took off our rings and gave everything we had to meet this ransom demand. The gold was collected, but the Jews were taken to the camps anyway. The Jewish Community in Zagreb has precise data on the quantity of gold collected.

Every day there was something new, and each day worse and worse: new evictions, new deportations, new executions.

One day we heard that Jewish doctors were being sought to go to Bosnia to treat the syphilis which was endemic among the Muslim population. The idea was proposed by Dr Miroslav Schlessinger, an epidemiologist, and was accepted by the Health Ministry. My husband registered immediately and in October, 1941, we were assigned to the Medical Centre in Tuzla. On our way to Tuzla we stopped in Brod to see my mother. This was an awful meeting. I don't know what we talked about and I don't know whether we had any idea at all of how to save her.

When we arrived in Tuzla we were sent to work in the villages around the Banović mines. I had not yet graduated because I still had to pass two exams, which I was not permitted to take because I was a Jew, so I worked under my husband's supervision. We had to go to a different village every day. We were relocated to the village of Živinice in order to be closer to our work territory. A forest train set off at 5.00 a.m. every day for the mine. We would get up at four every morning, come rain or snow, to catch the train in which we would travel to the mine in open coal wagons. We carried all our medicines and other material we needed on our backs. From the mine we walked or rode horses in order to reach the village where about 150 or 180 patients would be waiting for us. The work was both physically and emotionally exhausting.

Our residence in the field was regulated by a document which nominally protected us and our families from being taken away to camps. However this document proved to have little effect, because seven doctors from the group were taken and executed in various camps. Needless to say we were all under surveillance and, from time to time, some of us would be summoned to the Ustasha police station over our alleged links to the Partisans. Not that we didn't have those connections; we were all keen to support the struggle for liberation. This was demonstrated by the fact that all the doctors from the syphilis service sooner or later joined the national liberation struggle.

In the meantime, in February, 1942, my mother was taken to Stara Gradiška and then to the Đakovo camp. On the basis of our indemnity document we immediately submitted an application to have my parents and brother released. The reply to this application was that my father and brother had died of natural causes in Jasenovac and that my mother was to be released from the Đakovo camp and I could collect her by presenting the reply. We immediately brought my mother back. She had lost thirty kilograms and was almost unrecognisable, but this wasn't the

worst. She had nightmares night after night. She had seen my brother at the railway station in Brod. He had been heading for the Jasenovac camp in a train parallel to the one in which she was travelling to Gradiška. He saw her through the window and shouted "Mother!" She recognised him only from his voice, because he had changed so much in the prison and had no teeth.

She knew that she would never see him or my father again but never spoke about this. She had a constant compulsion to talk about everything she had been through in Stara Gradiška and especially about the crimes of a Catholic priest named Miroslav Filipović-Majstorović. In front of everyone he would slaughter Serbian women and children from Kozara; he would open the floodgates on the Sava dam and flood the prison cellars, drowning the women and children. The shouting and screaming of the dying was meant to be a warning to the living about what awaited them.

Now that we had my mother and our new daughter Irina with us, life became a little calmer. We had the feeling that we had someone of our own. But not for long!

The director of the Tuzla Health institute, our friend and protector, Dr Luka Šimović, summoned my husband and told him we should move immediately from Živinice to Bosanska Krupa. He had learned in the police station that we were suspected of collaborating with the Partisans (which was true enough) and that a report denouncing me had arrived from Slavonski Brod. We hurriedly packed our beds, the most essential cooking needs and jumped on a freight wagon meant for six horses and forty soldiers and travelled about thirty hours to our destination. This was in June, 1943.

Bosanska Krupa was a small town on the Una River which was alternately controlled by the Partisans or the Ustashas and Germans. It was a strategically important spot inhabited mainly by Serbs who were gradually being killed. As the Partisans held quite a number of liberated territories in the Serbian villages in the neighbouring region of Podgrmeč, there were a lot of armies represented in Krupa: the Ustashas, the Civil Defence and the German Army. The Partisan Supreme Headquarters were located nearby in Drvar. So there we were, in this hornet's nest. My husband worked as district doctor, because there was no one else, and had an infirmary full of medicines. We were accommodated in an apartment opposite an Ustasha unit so that they could keep an eye on us.

Not long after this a peasant woman named Milka came to our house with a bottle of milk. I refused to buy the milk, telling her I hadn't ordered it, but she was persistent. Not until we were on our own did she tell me the real reason she had come. There was a message for me in the corncob stopper of the bottle. She was a courier from the Podgrmeč division of the Partisans and the message was an invitation to collaborate. We accepted the invitation and made a connection through Milka. The collaboration consisted of sending medicines and information about the movements, number and types of military units in the area. We had a code which we used to pass on the relevant information and the messages would be plaited into Milka's hair or inserted into her vagina. This Serb peasant woman considered this activity her human duty, because the Ustashas had executed all the men in her family.

We had some very dangerous moments in the course of this activity. Once the police stormed our apartment, searching it for compromising material which would justify arresting us. Another time they sent a message saying they would arrest us because they had received a report from Bihac denouncing us.

And then came May 29, 1944. It was a lovely, sunny day and from early in the morning we could hear the dull roar of the Allies' flying fortresses. My husband had a bad feeling and decided that we should flee the town because they might bomb the Bihac railway line. He went to a village to look for accommodation for us. The house in which we lived was at the bottom of a hill through which ran a railway tunnel. My mother and I decided to leave the house and hide in a wooden cottage, just not to be in our house. And then the bombing began. It was as if the earth had opened, everything was shaking, and yet we could see nothing. When it was quiet again, my mother and our little girl lay dead beside me, buried in the earth which rained down the hill onto them. I tried to dig them out with my hands, but I couldn't, and it was too late. Then my husband arrived. We were in despair.

We dug them out, wrapped them in sheets and buried them at the edge of the Muslim cemetery. What a cruel and ironic trick Fate had played on us! Krupa had been bombed by the Americans and the English, our allies. The attack had not killed a single German or Ustasha soldier, only two Jews, my mother, an inmate of the camps, and our two-year-old child. I don't know how we were able to endure it.

We were shaken out of this by reality. My elbow had been broken in the bombing and my husband now put a plaster cast on my arm. I was

eight months pregnant. The bombing continued and we would run to the tunnel every day to shelter. One day a train entering the tunnel was set on fire by the bombing and panic erupted. People were falling between the train and the walls of the tunnel while others ran over them, fleeing the smoke and the flames. I also fell, but my husband grabbed me by my free arm, shouting to the others to run in the direction where the fire was dying down and, in this way, he managed to save me. I don't remember how we got out of there, but I know that we decided to join the Partisans. Long before this we had told our Partisan connection that we were under surveillance and that they were threatening to arrest us, but the Podgrmeč division kept delaying our escape, saying we were their only source of information in Krupa. Now we could no longer endure it. My pregnancy was approaching full term and this would only have made it more complicated to join the Partisans. Finally the date and place of our departure was set in agreement with the detachment headquarters. We were to pass a wrecked tank in a place called Otok on the way to Bosanski Novi. We would travel in a horse-drawn carriage and be identified by the plaster cast on my right arm.

We hired a carriage and horses and invented an appropriate reason to travel: I had to go to the hospital in Bosanski Novi for an x-ray to check that my arm was properly set in the plaster cast. We might have needed to stay several days and so we were taking clothes and baby things in case I delivered in the meantime.

We set off early in the morning. A few hundred metres before the meeting place, we saw German soldiers patrolling the railway tracks. My husband told the horseman to speed up because the aircraft would soon begin bombing. The moment he whipped the horse, three men jumped out of the scrub in strange uniforms and caps with five-pointed red stars. "Are you the doctor?" they asked, then turning to me "Show us your right arm, Comrade." They immediately started unharnessing the horses, which they needed, while we began a frantic dash towards the forest. The patrol was almost upon us. In our hurry, we left all our belongings in the carriage: our documents, family pictures, and all the baby things. The patrol began firing heavily and I was unable to run, so a soldier put me on his back and ran with me up the hill towards the denser forest. My husband ran with the horses until they stopped shooting. The soldiers who had covered our escape came up to us. I had never seen any of them before. I don't know how or where, but somehow they found a cart. They put me in it and harnessed the horses. We

set off quickly in order to get deep into the liberated territory as soon as possible because there was a danger that the German patrol would call for reinforcements. As we raced against time, one of the soldiers was whipping these horses, with which he wasn't familiar; they broke into a gallop down the slope and the cart overturned. I found myself under the cart, my legs bleeding, my arm in its plaster cast and pains in my abdomen. I was in labour. They put me back in the cart, harnessed the horses and pressed on. My husband walked behind the cart, his head bowed in deep concern.

It was night when we finally reached the headquarters of the Podgrmeč detachment. This was a two-roomed house in the village of Srednji Dubovik, under Mt Grmeč.

The soldiers and guards settled themselves to sleep on straw on the floor and gave me the only bed, which someone had already been sleeping in. It was covered with cornhusks and a dirty hemp sheet. The soldiers were lying on the floor. Not a word was heard, and there was no light except for the torch in my husband's pocket. I was well into labour, my contractions came faster and faster and, finally, at about three in the morning, my son was born. I couldn't see him until the sun came up. Then I saw a small, dirty creature, with a louse on his tiny head. In the morning we had to move on, deeper into the liberated territory: I needed medical care for my lacerated skin. My son and I were loaded into an ox-cart and, accompanied by the soldiers, we set off for the hospital. The cart trundled slowly along the rutted road. I was in terrible pain, but could only think about how my son could be saved under these circumstances. My husband followed on foot behind the cart. We didn't speak. After all we'd been through, any conversation would be redundant.

It was June 28 and the sun beat down on us as we headed along the treeless mountain terrain. It was then that I struck up a conversation with Jova, one of the soldiers.

"What are you going to call the little one, Comrade?" he asked me.

"I don't know, Jova, but the name has to begin with the letter žI'," I told him.

"Why the letter 'I'," he asked.

"Because my daughter's name began with žI' and she was killed a month ago," I replied.

During this conversation the name žIgor' occurred to me and I told him that this would be my son's name. Then he noticed that the child's

skin was reddening from the sun and the heat. He went to a walnut tree, tore a branch from it and set it above the baby's head.

"Good luck, little Igor," he told him.

After a long and painful trip we arrived at the hospital. I was laid up for three or four days while they treated the wounds on my legs. Then we were given our postings for the hospital in the 39th Krajiška Division. My husband was appointed as medical director of the hospital and I worked as a doctor in the typhus department. The commanding officer was Voja "The Spaniard" Todorović or Samuel Lerer, our friend from the Zagreb refectory and one of ten Jews proclaimed National Hero of Yugoslavia. The hospital administrator was Dr Jaša Romano.

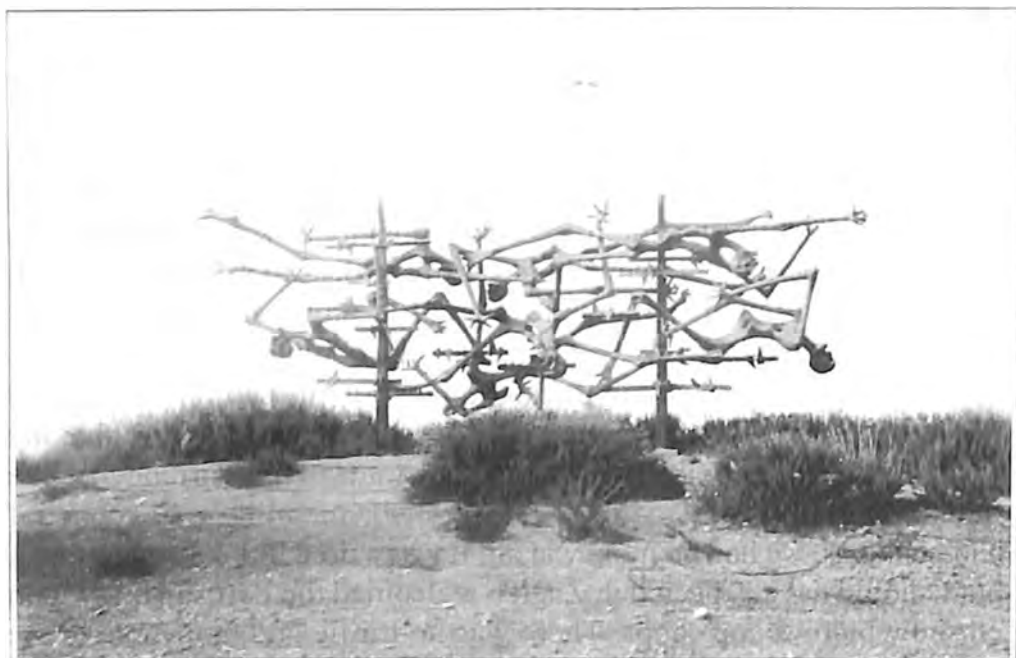
Everyone was very considerate and took care of me and my baby. One of the nurses would take care of the child while I was working and I would get extra rations of milk, sugar and everything else that was available. When we were on the move the soldiers would help me carry the child and during the final battles for Zagreb I was always in a truck or a car. The travelling was very difficult both for me and the baby. We drove for three days and three nights, stopping only for destroyed bridges and roads, hungry and exhausted. My son was crying from hunger the whole time. There was no chance to change his clothes or bathe him. I don't know how I coped. Finally we arrived at the bridge over the Sava River, the entrance to Zagreb. I was seized by a strange feeling. Here I was, a persecuted and humiliated Jew, coming into Zagreb with the victorious army, into the city where I had been subjected to so much suffering and pain. I knew that there was no longer anyone close to me there. I knew that everything dear to me had vanished. I had a sudden impulse to take revenge. But on whom, after so many deaths? And suddenly I was convulsed with sobbing.

We came into Zagreb in trucks, stopping in the central city square. I saw a peasant woman carrying a milk can and asked her to give me some milk for my baby. "If you've got kunas (the currency of the Independent State of Croatia), I'll give you some milk," she replied. I had no kunas, we had no money at all. It was a dreadful disappointment, but I should have expected it. Zagreb welcomed the Partisan army with closed windows and shops. There was no traffic and no people in the streets. It was all very sad.

I stayed in Zagreb long enough to finish the two exams I still needed to pass in order to complete my medical degree, then went to

Belgrade. I worked in Belgrade as a doctor until I retired and still live in the city.

As I finish the story of my life, I am left with only an infinite sadness, the everlasting memory of the 56 members of my immediate and extended family who were executed, the memory of my dear, close friends from the Jewish refectory who are gone, and of the six million Jews who vanished into smoke and ashes in concentration camps throughout Europe.



Sculptor Nandor Glid's monument to Holocaust victims on Mt Herzl in the Yad Vashem Memorial Complex in Jerusalem.

SAVED FROM THE TREBLINKA DEATH TRAIN



Jelena Kelner was born on October 21, 1914, in the village of Padina in the Kovačica district, the only child of Jozefina (née Kraus) and Teodor Kelner. Her father was taken from Topovske Šupe in Belgrade to an unknown destination on October 4, 1941. Her first husband, Leon Išah, a lawyer from Bitola, was also executed in the Holocaust, as were many of her relatives.

After the war she returned to Belgrade with her mother. She was employed at the Institute of Hygiene, where she specialised in bacteriology. She was assigned by the state in 1950 to work in Pirot, then in Niš, and returned in 1955 to Belgrade, where she worked at the Institute for Tuberculosis. She spent the last twenty years of her career as a bacteriologist at Železnička Hospital (later Dragiša Mišović Hospital). In 1961 she married engineer Franja Hidvegi.

The Jewish Medical Service administration was located in the premises of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Belgrade, where all the Jewish doctors, pharmacists, nurses and other health workers in the city had to report. The service was headed by Dr Isak Eškenazi and Dr Bukić Pijade was the hospital director.

My first post was at a clinic in the Oneg Šabat building in Dorćol. At the time I was supposed to be an intern and worked beside the older doctors. Dr Bukica Levi was also working there for some time. I was

afraid for my parents and stayed with them until August 15, 1941, the day when all the Jews were expelled from Banat. When I returned to Belgrade, I reported for work and was given my roster for a Jewish hospital which had been set up in the building of the Jewish Women's Society at 2 Visokog Stevana Street. The Jewish Medical Service was established by a Gestapo decree which banned Jews from treatment in other hospitals or clinics.

The hospital was well equipped, under the circumstances. The doctors brought their own medical instruments and the pharmacists their own medicines. There were about a hundred beds in the hospital. However the situation became more and more difficult every day. There were so many helpless Jews in Belgrade and many were forced to leave the state hospitals. There were a large number of sick, elderly and helpless Jews expelled from Banat.

As far as I remember, as well as the clinic in the Oneg Šabat in Jevrejska Street, we had others in the Federation building, in Zmaj Jovina Street, at 19 Kosmajaska Street (as part of the synagogue) and at Tašmajdan next to the German Police Headquarters for Jews.

Things became worse in Belgrade when the first camp was established in Topovske Šupe, near where the Mostar interchange and the Belgrade Fair stand today. The Jewish men expelled from Banat were taken there first and then, ten days later, in September 1941, all the others from Belgrade.

We doctors tried to house those most in danger in the hospital. All our efforts went into creating as much space as we could in order to admit as many patients as possible. Even under these circumstances, the patients had to be given medical attention, their histories had to be written up, precise records had to be kept of everyone who received treatment because the Germans would check these every day. There were not only inspections, but also a cruel procedure. The Germans didn't examine the patients, they would merely point at any patient they considered shouldn't be in the hospital and they would be returned to the camp immediately. So there was an ever-present climate of fear. The Gestapo would storm the hospital without warning and take away selected patients, and sometimes hospital staff as well.

Despite these conditions we took our work extremely seriously and conscientiously. I remember one girl who was in the neurological department. She was about twenty years old, a refugee from Austria who had been transferred from Šabac hospital because she was com-

pletely immobile. The department was run by two eminent Belgrade neurologists, Dr Alfandari and Dr Eškenazi. They treated this girl as though they were conducting their normal work at the clinic. They came to the conclusion that her paralysis was psychological in origin so they strove to do everything possible to get her back on her feet and make her life easier.

By this time, mid-October, 1941, the deportation of Jews from the Topovske Šupe camp had begun, while others continued to work in labour gangs, clearing rubble in and around Belgrade, one of the worst jobs. Sometimes we were able to admit people to hospital claiming they were ill. This respite enabled some Jews, not a significant number unfortunately, to organise their escape from Belgrade.

The systematic deportation of men from Topovske Šupe to the unknown destination from which they were never to return began on November 15, 1941. It was only later that we discovered they had been executed en masse. Female Jews were still "at liberty" and enjoyed limited freedom of movement until December 8, 1941, when they were all ordered to report and imprisoned in the Staro Sajmište camp. It was a harsh winter that year, there were large numbers of helpless and ill women and children and the assistance we were able to give was rather limited. Even when we obtained permission to take someone to hospital, many of them refused to be separated from their children and families. The hospital and its doctors tried to admit as many patients as possible, particularly children. These children were mostly frostbitten, often swollen, covered with skin infections and starving. Dr Klara First and Dr Eva Sabadoš worked day and night running the children's ward. Although both could have fled, they stayed out of humanity, feeling they couldn't leave their little patients.

As far as I remember, Dr Nada Kon worked in the medical ward, remaining at the hospital until the end, March 17, 1942, when all the patients and doctors were gassed in trucks.

Two days earlier, on March 15, my mother and I, as Bulgarian citizens, had received permission from the Germans to leave Belgrade.

We travelled to Bitolj which was under Bulgarian occupation. There we lived for a year in constant fear, forced to wear yellow armbands with the Star of David. A curfew was imposed, children were barred from attending school and Jewish merchants, tradesmen, doctors and lawyers were deprived of their right to work. Property, shops and stores first had high taxes imposed and then, finally, were seized. In the

second half of 1942, special residential areas were designated for all Jews. In this way they established ghettos and we in Bitolj were also in a ghetto. At that time rumours began to spread about the deportation of Jews and some fled to neighbouring Albania while others joined the Partisans. Unfortunately there were a much greater number of those who were unable either to find a contact to join the Partisans or to flee across the border, so the majority of us decided to share the fate of our families.

On the night of March 10, 1943, we were all on our feet, having packed our most essential belongings, as much as we could carry. At about five o'clock in the morning there was a banging on the door. Outside stood Bulgarian police and soldiers with a list of households. They called each of us by name and threw us out into the street. The young, the old, the frightened, all were crowded together, some wailing loudly, most of them controlling themselves so as not to increase the panic. When everyone was outside, we were lined up by fours and escorted under armed guard to the railway station. Before entering the cattle wagons we were subjected to our first search and everyone had their money and valuables confiscated. Despite the thoroughness of the searches, they were frequently repeated. Then they loaded us, fifty or sixty people to each wagon, and the train set off towards Skopje, where we arrived at about midnight. They opened the wagons and forced us to quickly climb out in the dark and go into two buildings. There were more than four thousand Jews from Bitolj and Štip. We climbed over one another dragging our belongings, the children, the old and the sick with the Bulgarian soldiers beating us the whole time.

When the dawn came we saw that we were in one of the buildings of the Skopje tobacco factory near the railway station. In the other buildings we could see large numbers of Jews from Skopje. We were packed in with more than five hundred people to a room. The buildings where we and the Jews from Štip were housed were sealed that first day because the Bulgarians were searching the Skopje Jews and they wanted to make sure that none of us were in contact with them, as they didn't want anything to be out of their control.

After having been locked in the wagons all the previous day and now being locked into a building without toilets, people were forced to relieve themselves in the corridors and staircases. The stench soon became intolerable and we could hardly breathe. It was not until March 13 that they opened the gate of our building for the first time and let us

go to the toilet and wash our faces. More than two thousand people were let out to do all of this in only half an hour before being locked up again. Less than half of us had managed to wash.

They let us out only once a day, building by building. The ill and the weak couldn't get out at all. We weren't given any kind of food for the first four days but on the fifth day the camp authorities organised a kitchen. However almost nobody had plates or dishes, as these were not the kind of things anyone had thought about when we set off. In any case, everything we were carrying had been confiscated by the organised gangs of looters. On the pretext of searching for hidden money or gold they forced us to remove our clothes and shoes. One would search us while the other six or seven would take whatever they liked. They would take medicines from the sick, even from people with weak hearts or diabetes, they even took our spectacles. If they found anything that someone had managed to conceal, not only would the item be confiscated, but the victim would be severely beaten. After searches like these we had only what we stood up in.

The local services were controlled by the Bulgarian occupation police in the most drastic manner, carrying out their orders by constantly threatening to report us to the Germans if we disobeyed. The Germans were in the camp every day. It was enough for a prisoner to appear at a window of the building for the guards surrounding the camp to open fire with their machine guns. They watched every move we made.

The first convoy of Skopje Jews left on March 22, 1943. The previous day, 1,600 people had been selected for this and given food for their journey: dried mutton, old cheese and a piece of dry bread, but no water. Just before we set off we were told that another eight hundred people were to leave as well. Because they had been selected in a hurry, most of these newcomers weren't given any food. The second convoy left on March 25, with more Skopje Jews, all the Jews from Štip and a group from Bitolj. In the third convoy, about two thousand people were deported, all the remaining Bitolj Jews.

Before the departure of each convoy, there was a blockade in the camp during which inmates were not permitted to leave their buildings. The trains were under German guard. There were Bulgarian police standing in front of the wagons and, from that moment, the Germans took charge of the inmates. Fleeing the camp would have been impossible.

Those selected for the convoys were loaded into the wagons without mercy. There were old and sick people, women in labour and children. There were wagons in the train which had not even the smallest openings for air or light.

Only doctors and pharmacists were spared deportation, instead they were released from the camp and immediately sent by the Bulgarians to forced labour. This was how I came to be released. There were also some families with Spanish citizenship released because Spain was an ally of Germany. Nobody, not a single soul, from those three convoys of Macedonian Jews sent to Treblinka ever came back. Only lists returned, having been neatly recorded by the meticulous Germans who had registered each camp inmate and precisely recorded their personal and family data. The lists were intended to give the impression that those who had been deported had been sent to work somewhere.

But their real destination had been the Treblinka death camp.

Dr Rafael PIJADE

FROM LABOUR GANGS TO THE PARTISANS



Rafael Pijade was born in Belgrade on June 28, 1916, when the city was occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, Heskija Pijade, retreated through Albania with the Serbian Army. Both his father and his mother, Rebeka Demajo, came from old Belgrade Jewish families.

Rafael Pijade finished high school in 1934 and graduated from medical school at the end of 1940. Because of the difficulties of the pre-war period, it was several months later when he obtained his diploma.

He remained in the Yugoslav Army for sixteen years after the war and emigrated to Israel with his family in 1963. His mother, who survived by sheer chance and fortunate circumstances, also moved to Israel, where she died in 1974. Rafael Pijade now lives in retirement in the town of Holon with his Belgrade-born wife Dezi-Dvora Mandilović. He has two daughters, Lili and Tilda-Tal, and five grandchildren.

I was born in Belgrade in 1916, in the primarily Jewish suburb of Dorćol. The Jews there lived in their traditional way, keeping the Jewish customs, speaking Ladino or Judaeo-Spanish and singing Spanish songs. I lived with my father, Heskija, and my mother, Rebeka, in a block of about thirty homes around a huge courtyard. All these homes opened onto the courtyard and each family had a room and a kitchen. In the middle of the courtyard there was a drinking fountain with two spouts. This

was the centre of the world for us children, the centre of our fights and games. For our mothers it was an information clearing house, a place for confidential chats and occasional trivial arguments.

I finished primary school and the first five grades of high school in Belgrade before we moved to Skopje, where I matriculated from high school in 1934. By this time we were rather better off and had our own proper house. I first enrolled in the Academy of Music at the Prague Conservatorium, but my father wanted me to be a doctor so I enrolled in the Medical Faculty of Belgrade University. My carefree student years with my father's generous support were the same years that Nazism and anti-Semitism were on the rise, first in Germany and then throughout Europe, including Yugoslavia.

I graduated in 1940 and joined the army to complete my military service. The barracks were in the courtyard of the military hospital and about 120 young doctors, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons lived there. At dawn on April 6, 1941, the Germans launched their air attack on Belgrade. The war had begun. A few days later we got our orders to move out. We travelled on the narrow-gauge railway to Sarajevo through Valjevo and Užice. At the Sarajevo Military Hospital we discovered that Yugoslavia had capitulated. There were personnel from all units gathered there, together with stockpiles of arms and military equipment. Our commander gathered us together and told us that he had a truck laden with cash under his command and he thought it would be fairer to distribute it among us rather than give it to the occupiers. With the money we received, my faithful friend Dr Maksim Aruesti and I decided we would go to town and buy civilian suits. We returned to the barracks and the same evening we went through the fence and set off for the railway station, intending to return to Belgrade. It was a sorry sight along the way to Belgrade: overturned cannons, demolished cars, dead horses, the image of a crushing defeat. We returned to the outskirts of Belgrade by the same route we had left, and in Topčider we went our separate ways. Maksim went home and I went to some people I knew in Čukarica. Dr Aruesti worked in the Jewish hospital in Dorćol until the early winter morning when the Germans stormed it, beating and swearing at the patients and doctors and throwing them all out into the street where a truck was waiting for them. During the trip to Jajinci, all the patients and doctors, including my friend Maksim, were gassed to death.

I spent only a few days with my friends in Čukarica, learning about the horrors of the occupation. I decided to go to Skopje and left secretly,

on foot, for the nearby Ralja railway station. After a tense wait for the train, I left for Skopje, where my parents were.



Rafael's parents at their wedding in 1915.

A few days after the Germans entered Skopje, one of our good neighbours was kind enough to conduct a German unit to our apartment. The Germans threw my parents out into the street immediately and we never entered our home again.

Several days after I arrived in Skopje, I was summoned to report immediately to the city health authorities. I was one of a group of doctors and pharmacists, about 25 people altogether. They put us in horse-drawn drays and drove us to villages to vaccinate people against the contagious diseases which had broken out. This went on for a month or so. At that time, part of Yugoslavia and occupied Macedonia had been annexed to Bulgaria. The new authorities drafted me into treating contagious diseases, boiling clothes in vats for delousing, mass vaccinations against malaria and so on. I had to report to the police station each morning to assure them that I was present and had not fled. It was forced labour. This is how my odyssey began through one village and provincial town after another, through Macedonia, Bulgaria and those parts of Greece which were occupied by Bulgaria. I was isolated and lonely, a long way from my family and completely without news of them. I found out later that I had been lucky in my loneliness. I had been on the list for transport to Treblinka but they hadn't found me at home. This was at the beginning of March, 1943, when the Bulgarians sent all the Macedonian Jews to their deaths in the Treblinka concentration camp. Nobody from the first convoy returned alive.

It was not until the beginning of 1944 that I managed to make a connection with the Greek Partisans, whom I supplied with drugs and other medical supplies.

My only joy in my solitude was seeing the huge Allied formations flying through the sky on their way to Eastern Europe. The sound of their engines was music to my ears.

At the beginning of September, 1944, when the Soviet units reached the Bulgarian border, there was a coup in Sofia. This meant that freedom was also close at hand for me after so many days of forced labour and detention, but I was afraid of what I would find at home. My first concern was for my parents. By pure good luck and fortunate circumstances, they had been saved from deportation to Treblinka. I immediately moved them in with my cousins near Sofia because they were Bulgarian Jews. Unlike the Macedonians, Bulgarian Jews were not deported to Treblinka or Auschwitz.

As I wandered around Sofia in my down-at-heel shoes, with no socks and threadbare trousers, I happened to pause near the entrance of the rather smart Hotel Bulgaria. Suddenly a large car with a Yugoslav flag pulled up and out got Vlado Popović, my school friend and roommate from my student days and a veteran of the Spanish Civil War. He was wearing the uniform of a Yugoslav general. We hesitated for a moment

before recognising each other and then greeted each other warmly. The general took me into the hotel and I quickly told him my war story.



Rafael Pijade in his Partisan days.

My friend called his assistant and told him to bring me a military uniform. As he handed me the uniform he said: "From today, you're a fighter in the National Liberation Army".

And so, in a hotel room in the middle of Sofia, I joined the ranks of the Partisans. I returned to Yugoslavia with General Vlado Popović and reported to the military headquarters in Skopje. I was appointed as a medical officer to the 50th Partisan Brigade which was serving in Kosovo.

It was only then that I discovered that I had lost my only sister, Lilika, in the war. She had been in Belgrade taking care of our grandfather Rafajlo and our grandmother Luna. The Germans gassed them all in 1942, in mobile gas chambers on the trip from Sajmište to Jajinci.

At that time I still knew little of the terrible details of the Holocaust. I didn't know about the millions of Jewish victims. The memories of those lost are extremely distressing and, as time passes:

*I often return to the days gone by,
And let the memories pound against me.
I want the wheel of time to stop, just for a while.
I feel them circling me then,
The shades of the long lost,
Keeping me company. I chat, I talk,
I know now the same sights await me.
I'm not afraid of that, not at all, I'm glad,
To be among such lovely folk,
I'll travel back with them beside me
And, believe me, I'll be truly happy.*

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