
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.