
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.