
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.