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: Ustashas 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 Ustashas 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 Ađem 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 skilfully 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 seaplane 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 cafés, 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 flour 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.