
Dragutin BRANDAJŠ

ACROSS THE BARBED WIRE



Dragutin Brandajs was born in 1912, in the Sremska Mitrovica village of Čalma, to Sigmund and Berta (née Bencl). His brothers, Julijus and Rajko, and sisters, Evgenija, Rozsika and Laura, all perished in the Holocaust, as did his parents.

After the war he was first a clerk and then a manager in various Yugoslav banks, then a director first of Genex and then of Combik Ges. m.b.H in Vienna until his retirement in 1978. He has one son, Branko, from his marriage to Bosiljka Cvetić.

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

In Podgorica people were arriving from Belgrade and it was from them I heard that Jews were wearing yellow armbands and working on clearing rubble. All the same, for some reason I wanted to go to my family in Zemun, because I didn't want to desert them, I wanted whatever happened to them to happen to me as well. My friends found me a travel permit and on May 9, 1941, I arrived in Zemun.

My parents and my wife were angry with me for returning but I calmed them down. "I'll work like the others, it won't do me any harm." Two days later I registered with the German police and they put

me to work immediately. I was with a group of Jews cleaning clogged toilets in the German barracks. Things improved later and I was sent to work in the former Cavalry School where I cleaned out the stables and groomed the horses. I consoled myself with the thought that it would all be over soon and that I had the pleasure of seeing my family every day.

At the end of December, 1941, the Ustasha police in Zemun gave me a temporary exemption from wearing a yellow armband because my wife, Nina, was not a Jew. Nina's father was from Lika and her mother Russian. But then on the night of July 28, 1942, the Ustashas deported the Zemun Jews to Jasenovac. Among them were my elderly parents who were the reason I had returned to Zemun. I didn't feel safe and spent the night with friends. A few days later they began arresting Jews who were married to members of the Orthodox Church, while those married to Catholics remained free.

Things were getting too hot for me. I felt like a trapped mouse, running from one corner of the room to another. The people who were sheltering me were gripped with fear when a mobile Ustasha court arrived in Zemun, so I couldn't stay with them any longer. There was a plan to flee to the Croatian interior with forged identity papers, but this fell through and then I learned that the police were looking for me. The only open road led to Serbia.

At this time a lot of the young people in Zemun were registering for work in the Bor mine with the German Todt organisation as a way of escaping the army or other problems. Nina, my wife, registered me for work with the help of Mara Bulić, our fellow tenant, and managed to get a pass for me to transfer to Belgrade and in Belgrade another one for Bor. This wasn't at all simple, because I didn't want to travel in a convoy with the other workers because I might be recognised by people from Zemun. I needed to get a permit to travel alone.

I didn't want to stay long in Belgrade, because I was heading towards Zaječar to Veljko Perović, who used to visit my sister and brother-in-law. But there was no train until the next morning so I began looking for a place to spend the night. I could have stayed with my wife's parents, if they hadn't been arrested. I went to Drago Grahovac, my nephew's brother in law. They were very frightened when they saw me. I asked them if I could stay there overnight, but they told me there was no room. I completely understood them, it was extremely dangerous and harbouring Jews was punishable by death. My situation was worse and worse as darkness fell and I still had no place to spend the

night. Then I ran into someone in the street who I knew well from Zemun. He was extremely delighted to see me alive but was amazed that I had dared to cross into Serbia. I asked him if he could put me up for the night. "You know, there are a lot of us, and every night the Germans seal off part of the city and conduct searches. You have to understand me," he replied.

By now it was 7.30 in the evening and the curfew would begin at eight. So I went to the nearest person I knew, Duško Stefanović. He's now a retired professor from the Faculty of Economics at Belgrade University, but before the war he was a clerk in the inspectorate of the Hipotekarna Bank. We had been friends' from our early years, we had rowed together in the Zemun Galeb club and skied together on Tara, Kopaonik, Avala and Košutnjak. We were among the first to take up skiing in Serbia in 1932. "Duško, I have nowhere else to go. I have to spend the night with you," I told him. I spent the night there and left the next morning.

I arrived in Zaječar in the evening and the next morning I found Veljko Perović, my sister and brother-in-law's friend. However he was not at all happy to see me and left me standing in the street. I didn't know anyone in Zaječar. I went to see Perović again and told him that I couldn't go to work in Bor because there were a lot of Germans from Zemun there who might recognise me. I also told him that there were others who might not denounce me but who might tell somebody they had seen me and then the ones who could hardly wait to catch me would hear about it and everything would be finished. I visited Perović on a number of occasions, and on one of these there was a clerk from the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives there. He told me they needed a clerk for a cooperative in Negotin, but that I would need to get refugee identity papers in Belgrade. I was claiming to be a Serb refugee from Srem. The job was just right for me but it would be a problem returning to Belgrade because the only documents I had were a permit to travel to Bor, and a false identity card in the name of Danilo Krsnik which was issued in the Zemun municipality and only valid in Croatia. But there was no other solution, so I returned to Belgrade. I couldn't get refugee documents as they required two witnesses. I again spent a night with Duško Stefanović and met Nina who was desperate at not being able to find a solution for these problems.

I travelled again to Zaječar, this time with Nina because she had heard there was a Russian who could find us jobs, but this came to noth-

ing. Again I went to see Veljko Perović and he sent me to someone called Majcen from Maribor who worked as a cashier in the German company Karl Kutsch. He gave me a job in the village of Metovnica, halfway between Bor and Zaječar. I worked as a tally clerk for the loading of sand into wagons. In the middle of November, 1942, Nina arrived in the village. She had also obtained false identity documents in Zemun in the name of Nina Krsnik, and so the Metovnica municipality now gave her documents in the same name. We rarely left the village and might have led a relatively peaceful life there until the liberation, had I not been transferred by the German company on May 1, 1943, to their warehouse, four kilometres from Bor. I had to accept this transfer, but continued to spend my nights in Metovnica. I didn't want to move to Bor, so instead I travelled to work every day.

There were about twenty people from various parts of Serbia working in the warehouse. When I got to know them I told them they shouldn't give the Hitler salute to the Germans, as some of them did. I translated various articles from newspapers for them and two young people I worked with would tell me the news from the radio. These were Stojanović, a secondary school graduate from Zaječar who was executed in Niš in October, 1943, and Šaljić from Negotin, originally from Montenegro, who later joined the Partisans and became a journalist after the war.

Apparently the Gestapo had been following my activities because, on October 1, 1943, at 6.00 p.m. as I was preparing to leave work, a German officer and a soldier came into the warehouse and told me, at gunpoint, that I was under arrest. The officer took my documents and began shouting. "How dare you get your hands on documents belonging to a Croatian soldier!" The documents actually belonged to a colleague of mine from the Jugoslovenska Udružena Bank in Belgrade, a Croat named Dominik Krsnik who had been drafted into the army of the home guard. I'd changed Dominik to Danilo, as I wanted it to look like a Serbian name. I even had his birth certificate. When the German officer told me that I would "get a bullet" for having the false papers, I was sure it was all over. At times like this thoughts fly like lightning and the brain works like a finely-tuned machine. They were going to interrogate me, which meant there was no salvation because I knew that all male Jews in Serbia had already been killed. They would torture me but if I tried to make a break for it immediately they would shoot me dead and there would be no torture. They made me walk two steps in front of

them. Bor was four kilometres away. When we reached the first buildings of the New Colony, there were heavy trucks all around. By now the two Germans had probably relaxed a little, so I ran to the right towards the new buildings. I expected them to start firing and that that would be the end of everything, but instead they ran after me shouting "Halt! Halt!" However I was widening the gap between myself and my pursuers and I began to think I might be able to get away from them and mingle in with other people so that they would be unable to find me.

I came out onto a meadow. On my left there was a football field with a match in progress, so there were a lot of people. I was now well ahead, my pursuers were now firing, but the bullets were passing right and left of me. This caused a panic and the people on the football field began running in all directions. On my left, a few metres away, there was a trench with Russian soldiers, Vlasov's men, and they also began shooting. I made it to some barracks, not knowing my way around Bor, and found German soldiers coming out. Some of them asked me what the gunfire was about and I replied in German that we were pursuing someone. They began running with me, thinking I was a police agent. Behind me the officer was shouting in German "Seize him! Seize him!" The astonished soldiers around me again asked me what was going on and again I told them that someone had escaped so we were chasing him. Nevertheless, one of the German soldiers now grabbed me by the sleeve. The whole time my pursuers were shouting at them to seize me. Eventually they did and we waited for the first two Germans to arrive. I broke out into a sweat, but the officer was sweating even more heavily. His face red as a crab, he howled *Das ist ein Jude* (He's a Jew) and told them I was trying to escape. When they began punching me I thought they would beat me to death right there and then, but they didn't.

They took me to a Gestapo cell and put me on the edge of a board so that my feet didn't touch the floor. My arms were tied behind my back and my feet were tied to my arms. Then I received a severe beating from the officer who had chased me, and the others joined in. They put a guard in my cell and another one outside. The officer beat me on four separate occasions that night. The next day two soldiers had to hold me to go to the toilet because I was unable to stand.

It was a Friday when I was arrested and on Sunday I was tied and taken to Zaječar. It would be my last trip, they told me. They took me to a camp for hostages and put me in solitary confinement in a cell with no mattress. On Tuesday, October 5, 1943, the interrogation began.

According to them I was neither Danilo Krsnik nor Dragutin Brandajs, but Arish Taorescu, a Romanian Jew whom the Gestapo had been after for a long time on charges of espionage. The police officer, who in civilian life traded in colonial goods in Hamburg, would not let his assistant, a German from Romanian Banat, beat me. I confessed that I was a Jew and told him my true identity. He took me back to the cell where the air was heavy with an unspoken death sentence. People were taken from this hostage camp for execution whenever the German command wanted retribution for some incident in the area. There was no mistreatment in the camp because all the inmates were going to be executed at some point anyway. There were lice and mice and very little food, some kind of soup and piece of corn bread once a day. I put the corn bread in my mouth, then threw it over the wire to the German Shepherd guard dogs so that they'd get to know me. It seemed to me that there were only two ways out of the camp: execution or escape. During my time there, two groups were taken for execution. Whenever we heard the Germans in the corridor everyone would begin making the sign of the cross, as though preparing to depart this life.

I escaped on December 21, 1943, the shortest day of the year, when sunset came early. The entire German Banat SS unit was out in the field and there were only three SS soldiers in the camp. One of them was at one end of the corridor, the other at the other end, together with the turnkey guard. The two in the corridor had opened a cell and were talking to a camp inmate, a blacklisted German. The turnkey guard was alone with the group from my cell, first he escorted us to the toilet which was at the back of the building, then around the building to the tap which was located at the front of the prison. I went with the group to the toilet, but remained there when they left and didn't come out until the guard had led the group to the tap, from where my escape would not be seen. I ran straight towards the barbed wire fence, five metres high. I managed to reach the other side, my arms torn and bleeding, and lay in the trench which surrounded the camp. The searchlights on all four sides were trained on the building. I crawled along the trench, heading for the outer barbed wire which was standing open at one spot where a bunker was being built. Then I stood up, crossed the road, and found myself just outside the town. The camp was in a former artillery barracks in a suburb of Zaječar. I was already a long way from the camp when they discovered my escape while counting the inmates. Then they began firing rockets.

I had been in the hostage camp for 82 days, and now I headed for Zvezdan, four kilometres from Zaječar. I had met a farmer from this village, Čedomir Marković, while I was working as a tally clerk for the Todt organisation. He had been loading gravel onto trucks. Zvezdan was a village inhabited by Serbs from Kosovo. During the time I worked there I met many of the villagers and became friendly with them, they would often invite me for celebrations and I would visit them. I often saw Čedomir, his wife Stana, their two sons and his parents, who still wore the traditional Kosovo peasant clothes. Čeda had served in the Yugoslav Royal Army, he was devoted to the king and was on the side of the Chetniks, who had mobilised him. When I arrived at his house in the dark he told me "It's lucky you arrived before the village guards." Early in the morning we sent two of the villagers to Metovnica to fetch my wife. She had escaped from the apartment before the Gestapo had come to get her.

At that time the followers of Draža Mihailović held eastern Serbia, so Čedomir had to report me to the Chetnik commander in the village. The commander told me apologetically that he had to take me and my wife to the brigade command, because no one from outside the area was permitted to be in the village without the knowledge of the high command. We were escorted by two guards through the village of Lubnice to Gornja Bela Reka and there the Chetniks searched us. They made a number of remarks, observing that my shoes were of good quality, and saying that I hadn't escaped from the camp but was from a Partisan unit which had fallen apart. We spent the night under guard and then in the morning four guards escorted us to the Chetnik brigade in the village of Zagrade.

I was interrogated by the brigade commander, Captain Leonid Petrović. I tried to explain everything and then had the good luck to be recognised by one of the deputy commanders, Sergeant Boža, a former policeman whom I had met while skiing on Kopaonik. The captain allowed me to take my belongings to the village, escorted by guards, but my wife had to remain in the brigade headquarters. I returned to Zagrade on December 31, 1943. I had wanted to remain with the peasants, but the commander told me that he still had to verify who I was and whether I was patriotic. My wife was sent to the village of Leskovac and I was enlisted into the unit.

I spent the next month armed with a rifle, patrolling the Zaječar area with the unit. We walked a lot, day and night, especially at night,

visiting villages on the outskirts of Zaječar. We also commandeered the hospital pharmacy and all its stock, so that the people had to come to the unit to ask for medicines, which were in short supply at the hospital. There were about sixty or eighty people in the unit.

We had no conflicts with the Germans. I think that the Germans were tolerating the Chetniks at that time whereas earlier, during the time I was in the camp, they were executing Mihailović's followers. In the camp, the Germans called them "DM". The peasants didn't talk about politics. They sang patriotic songs, as though we were serving in the army. There were also some new songs we sang. I believe our mission was to save Serbia from the Partisans and the left-wing movement. I don't know whether there were any Partisans in the area at the time, but if there were they were only individuals or small groups which could have no real effect.

While I was with the Chetnik unit four people disappeared: a policeman who was said to be "a Gestapo man", one of Vlasov's men from Russia and two former prisoners, escapees from Bor, who had been captured a few days before I arrived. One of them was a Croat and had come to the Chetniks by mistake, instead of to the Partisans he was looking for. The other was one of the six thousand Hungarian Jews who had been brought to do forced labour in the Bor mine. When the Chetniks reached the village of Marinovac, below Mt Tupižnica, they called the villagers together and the two captured men were brought out and ordered to make the sign of the cross. The Croat did so, crossing himself from left to right in the Catholic way, while the Jew didn't cross himself at all. He obviously didn't speak Serbian and had no idea what was going on.

"You see, they're Partisans; they either don't cross themselves or they do it differently from us," said the leader. They slaughtered them that night.

The next day I went straight to Commander Petrović and asked why he wanted to kill me as well when I had done no harm to anyone.

"Who says we want to kill you? You're safer with us," he replied.

"And those two men yesterday?" I asked.

"They were sentenced by a military court, they wanted to join the Partisans."

I spent Orthodox Christmas in the village of Leskovac with my wife. A few days later my joints became inflamed, probably because of

the same flat-footedness which had limited me to being a military clerk in the former Yugoslav Army.

I began treatment but, on February 14, I had to leave the village again. Then I met Moma Bogičević, a cavalry captain whom I had known in Zemun. I asked him to put in a good word for me with the commander. Back in the unit I was limping all the time because the constant marches were bad for my feet. Because of this, Commander Leonid told the medical sergeant to examine me. He didn't find anything wrong, so the commander decided I was a malingerer and that my limping was a disgrace to the entire unit. I think it was at the beginning of March when the captain again summoned me. "I've had a bad report about you," he told me, "but because you escaped from the Germans, I'm not going to do anything to you." He discharged me from the unit and gave me a written recommendation for employment in the coal mine. I don't know whether it was his idea to discharge me or if someone else made that decision. The captain was very careful not to let undesirable types infiltrate his unit. After the war I heard from two peasants, one from Zgrade and the other from Leskovac, that they had been told to report everything I said to the captain and to listen carefully for any kind of propaganda. He was suspicious of me, probably assuming that I was a leftist. He had no reason for this as I had not been inclined towards the Communists before the war. I kept the reference he gave me. It read as follows:

"Dear Mr Mile, the bearer of this letter, Mr Brandajs, is a Jew by descent. Until now he has been under the protection of our organisation, but was not accepted into the army because of his race. Nevertheless, he still enjoys a degree of protection from us. He has no further means of support, and so should be offered the chance to earn a living. I would kindly ask you to employ him in your mine. He is accompanied by his wife, who is of Russian descent. With thanks in advance and best wishes. Yours, Captain L.M. Petrović. 8/IV."

I didn't use this reference because, in the meantime, the coal mine was closed down. I was sent with my wife to Leskovac where I worked for a farmer in exchange for food and corn flour. I said I was a refugee named Danilo Branković, but the village commander, Old Mita, knew I was Jewish and probably told the others. The peasants accepted me without a problem: the neighbours would always give me some food, a chicken or some eggs, for example, and I also raised a sucking pig. It was a poor village with about a hundred houses. Only three of the

young people had run away to join the Partisans, the Chetniks had killed about ten of the peasants because of their connections with the Partisans. Neither Nina nor I ever left the village because we had no documents and there were Chetniks and Chetnik police in every village. We didn't feel safe because there were patrols constantly circling. Whenever we heard that the Germans were in the area we would sleep in the stables outside the village. However when they retreated from Greece, the Germans travelled only along the main Knjaževac-Zaječar road.

An American paratrooper once landed near our village. His plane had been hit while he was bombing the Ploesti oil refineries in Romania. The parachutist was hysterical and asking "Where are the Nazis? I'm a Jew!"

"So am I," I said, which calmed him down. The Chetniks rounded all the rescued paratroopers up in the north.

So Nina and I lived our lives, barely managing to exist, in the village until the Partisans arrived in the area. On September 11, 1944, we volunteered for enlistment in the Seventh Brigade of the 23rd Serbian Division. After a medical examination revealed I was flat-footed, they didn't send me to the unit, instead I was assigned to be a scout. At the end of October, 1944, I asked to be transferred to Belgrade, where I worked as a financial clerk in the city administration.

One day an OZNA official called me in for interrogation and asked how I had survived as a Jew and whether I had collaborated with the Germans. I felt like crying. Now, after the liberation, was I going to have to make excuses for surviving?

Not long after the liberation I began working in the business sector. When I retired I was a foreign representative for General Export.

After the war was over I had the opportunity to repay some of the people who had helped me to survive. One day I received a letter from Ljubiša, the son of Čedomir Marković, who had hidden me in the village of Zvezdan after I escaped from the Zaječar camp. He told me that Čedomir had been imprisoned as a Chetnik. My second wife, Bosa Cvetić, who had been a Communist since before the war, interceded with the national delegate for the Zaječar district and Čedomir was released. Twenty years later, while I was on a business trip, I called in to Zvezdan and visited the Marković family in a reunion which brought great joy to both sides.