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## *Žamila-Andžela KOLONOMOS*

### IN BATTLE FROM DAY ONE



*Žamila-Andžela Kolonomos was born in Bitola on June 18, 1922, to father Isak Kalef Kolonomos and mother Esterina Samuel Fransez, from Skopje. They had five children: Žamila, Bela, Rašela, Kalef and Menahem.*

*Her mother, Esterina, died in March, 1941, from a heart attack. Her father, Isak, was the director of the French-Serbian Bank. Her sister Bela married Mois Kasorl. Together with her three-month-old baby, she and her student siblings, Kalef, Menahem and Rašela, all perished in the*

*Treblinka camp. Her grandmother Žamila, grandmother Rahel, grandfather Samuel and all their relatives also perished in the Treblinka camp on March 11, 1943. Of her entire immediate and extended family, Žamila was the only one to survive the Holocaust.*

*She matriculated from the French school in Bitola in 1940. From 1941 to 1945 she was involved with the National Liberation Movement in Macedonia. As the battle developed the number of fighters grew and, as new units were being formed, Žamila worked her way up from being a deputy company political officer, to that of a battalion, then of a brigade, eventually becoming deputy political commissioner of the 42nd Division of the Yugoslav Army.*

*After the war she was a political official: an MP in several parliaments, president of the Union of Women's Associations, of the Council for the Care and Education of Children, of the War Veterans' Union and*

*others. She retired as a member of the Council of the Republic of Macedonia.*

*In 1961 she graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy and was appointed a senior lecturer in the Department of Romance Languages. In 1962-63 at the École des hautes études of the Sorbonne University in Paris, with her mentor, Professor Izrael Revah, she published a paper entitled "Les parles judeo-espanjol de Bitola (Monastir) et Skopje (Üsküzb)". She is the author of a number of published works on the Judaeo-Spanish language and of articles on the role of Jews in the National Liberation Struggle and the life of Jews in Bitola. She is the author of a collection of documents entitled "Evreite vo Makedonija vo vtora svetovna vojna 1941-1945", and of the book "Proverbs, Sayings and Stories of Sephardic Jews of Macedonia", editor of the books "Sefardski odglasi", "Cvetovi vo Plamen" (documents on the participation of young people in the National Liberation Struggle), "Collection of Proverbs of Sephardic Jews of Bosnia and Herzegovina", consulting editor of the books "Women in the National Liberation Struggle", "Bitola Jews", "Estreja Ovadja Mara national hero", and others. She is a holder of the Partisan Commemorative Medal, 1941, and of a number of military and peacetime decorations and awards.*

In April, 1941, following some minor gunfire, the Germans occupied Bitola. Hakham Ham Zaharija was at our house at the time, having come to take the lamp which was burning to mark my mother's death which had occurred in the month of March. He didn't want to stay and wait for the situation to calm down. We could hear occasional bursts of machine-gun fire. We went down to the basement and, from a small window, saw a motorcycle with an SS sign pull up outside the French-Serbian Bank building. We were pretty frightened. My father suggested that we pack as soon as possible and move to our nearby house. The Bulgarian Fascist Army also arrived soon after. This was the beginning of dark days for us Jews. Together with the Germans, the Fascists plundered all Jewish shops and many apartments. Signs began to appear reading "No entry for Jews, Gypsies and dogs". My father, as director of the French-Serbian Bank was taken by the Germans, by force, to open the vault of the bank, which was immediately robbed. He lost his job and, just like all other Jews who were dismissed from all services,

he was left without a pension. More than 42 laws, bans and orders against Jews were passed, with the signature of the Bulgarian Czar Boris. All shops were closed, all business, cultural and social activities were banned. Properties were being confiscated every day. We were left with no means of support, people were selling everything that hadn't been stolen: family jewellery, wedding rings, dowries. There was a very high level of solidarity among the Jews. We were given yellow Stars of David and banned from leaving the town and travelling. As members of Hashomer Hatzair, almost all of us joined the National Liberation Movement. The Jews has no choice, so more than twenty per cent of the population helped the National Liberation Struggle in Bitola in various ways. Sheltering people without papers, Partisans, the wounded, having illegal meetings, stockpiling food, printing leaflets in Pepo Hason's house and distributing leaflets around the town were just some of the illegal activities being carried out in Jewish houses by young Jewish people. All of this work was done more or less as though it was legal because there were no informers in the Jewish settlements.

The terror of the Bulgarian police was becoming more and more cruel and the fear of the population greater and greater. The development of the National Liberation Movement was slow. There was no chance of accommodating all the young people who wanted to join Partisan units.

In March, 1943, we still knew nothing about the existence of death camps. The newspapers published nothing about the reprisals and deportations. Communication with relatives abroad and Jewish communities was cut off. The Bulgarians spread information that they would mobilise young people for work in Bulgaria. We were all very anxious. We would go to bed fully dressed, not turning the lights off at night, we were making bags and baking bread, just in case. There was a message passed around that anyone who could cross into Greece or Albania and hide there should do so as soon as possible and later they would be put in touch with the Partisans. However very few young people managed to leave town. Salamon Sami Sadikario, Albert Ruso and Albert Kasorla found shelter with Boris Altiparm. I was given an address by Bora Miljovski for a place I could find shelter. On March 9, I hid in a kiosk owned by Bogoje Siljanovski, a disabled man with one leg, and spent the night there. In the morning, I returned home to make lunch, tidy up and feed my grandmother, who had had a stroke, and to prepare a rucksack with one change of clothes for each of us. My father

had nowhere to hide with his invalid mother and young brothers and sisters. No one had any idea of the coming mass deportation to Poland and the total destruction of the Jewish population.

In the evening I went to the kiosk again. We didn't even say our goodbyes, thinking that I'd return home in the morning. I took Estela Levi with me so that I wouldn't be alone. The kiosk was close to the Bulgarian police station; agents and police officers would come there to buy cigarettes. The kiosk, of about three square metres, was divided into two parts, one for sales and the other, separated by a straw curtain, was storage space. That's where we spent the night with another two people without papers. There was no space to stretch out our legs, we had no water, no food, no light or heating and not even a toilet. We shivered in the dark from the cold and fear. We waited, not sleeping, for the dawn to break. Halfway through the night we heard people rushing, talking, the sound of horses and cars. Something was happening and we had no idea what. Soon we heard a loud noise like thunder. Gradually we began to recognise voices, shouting, pleading, begging, the cries of women and children, even prayers, "Shema Yisroel". These cries tore our souls and hearts apart. We hear them to this day in nightmares. This is something I cannot forget. Locked in as we were, we began crying. We couldn't get out, there was not even a window in the kiosk. Through the keyhole we could see the snow falling in big flakes. We could hear the orders given by the police officers; "Hurry, hurry!" The cries were slowly fading into the distance, in the direction of the town centre as the column headed towards the railway station. Soon silence took over, as though the town were dead.

On March 11, no one went out. Even our boss didn't come. We spent the whole day waiting. In the evening, Bogoja came with Pavle, with the secretary of the Local Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Estreja Ovađa, with Adela Farađi, Roza Kamhi and Đoka Tapanđiefski. They had been hiding in a store in the Jewish quarter and had seen everything the Fascist police officers and soldiers did while rounding up Jews and taking them away. They took their money, their blankets, even their coats. They were allowed to take only one bundle each. They crammed the sick and the frail, elderly people into carts drawn by old horses. In the general panic, the Jews were taking their places in the sad procession, not knowing what was happening to them. Not until 1945 did we learn that they were loaded into cattle cars and taken to Skopje where they were packed into tobacco warehouses in

Monopol, as a temporary camp. It was here that our compatriots underwent unprecedented suffering: hunger, thirst, insanitary conditions, cold, illnesses, suffocation from the lack of air, from boarded up windows and from the stench. They were crammed in on top of one



*Zamila Kolonomos' membership card of the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia (above);  
Zamila as a National Liberation Movement fighter in Kičevo, 1943 (right)*

another, living like this until the month of April when they were turned over to the Germans. They were deported in several groups. As soon as they arrived in Treblinka they were pushed into the so-called bathrooms, immediately suffocated and then incinerated. Not one survived. The Jewish communities of Bitola and the whole of Macedonia were extinguished forever.

We five Jewish women hid in the kiosk for a month, waiting for a contact with the Partisans. Bulgarian police officers and agents were coming by all the time to buy cigarettes. They would hang around, talking to the boss and swearing. We listened to all of this. We were separated



from them only by a thin straw curtain. We couldn't breathe loudly, couldn't cough or move around. If there was even the slightest creaking sound from the rotting floorboards, Bogoje would bang his hands and laugh loudly to camouflage the sound. He couldn't carry anything with him in case the Bulgarian guards became suspicious. He would bring water in a small container and, occasionally, a bit of bread wrapped up in the stump of his amputated leg. We were starving dreadfully. The little shop began to smell filthy and the agents became suspicious. The boss promised to clean and paint it. Before we left the kiosk, Adela Faradi and I had to collect the valuables that our people had left behind. We exposed ourselves to great danger with this and it was only luck that we weren't discovered. Unfortunately everything had fallen into the hands of the police so neither we nor the National Liberation Movement had any benefit from them. For two nights we hid at Pavle's, and during the day we were closed up in a closet. Meanwhile Bogoje painted the kiosk and let the police see that it was empty. We returned to the kiosk without any food, water or blankets and stayed sitting upright. Estreja Ovađa fell ill and developed a high temperature. We had no water to give her, not to mention medicine. Her whole body was trembling from the fever and we were hugging her to keep her warm. We begged them to rescue us as soon as possible and send us to join the Partisans. After a lot of haggling and argument, thanks to our persistence, a patrol came to escort us. Only Roza was given the password and the name of the place where we were to meet up with the couriers.

We thanked Bogoje and came out of the kiosk, one after another. At a crossroads we lost contact with Roza. We were in a difficult situation, not knowing where to go. I remembered Bora Miljovski's flat at the other end of town. The curfew had begun.

We waited in his house. He finally arrived and immediately took us to Elen Skobern's house, again at the other end of the town. We ran into a police patrol and escaped by a hair's breadth. Elen put us in an empty shed in the yard. We froze there for two days until a new contact came. We were given a password and a meeting place. We had to cross the whole town once more to get to the park. Thanks to the fact that I knew this part of town well, we reached the designated place by taking back streets. There we waited for two hours, sitting on the snow beside a bush. A police patrol on horse passed by, lighting up the park with a powerful torch. We pulled our coats over our heads and huddled together: the torch beam swung past our feet, they didn't see us. Finally after

a long delay we heard someone whistling the song “Lili Marlen”. We reached the Partisan couriers and, with rapid steps, headed for the direction of the Greek border. Meanwhile Roza had been captured by the police and everyone was exposed. Our saviours, Bogoje, Pavle and Bora Miljovski were arrested. We were also exposed, but by then we were out of the clutches of the police.

In the Damjan Gruev Partisan unit, in April 1943, we met a group of young Jewish men. Everyone wanted to know what had happened to our people. We had no idea what had happened after the deportation from Skopje. The warm and friendly reception and the knowledge that we were to fight against the Nazis, the enemies of the Jews, heartened us. About ten of us Partisan Jews were assembled and took an oath that we would fight well and bravely.



*Žamila Kolonomos and husband  
Avram Sadikario in 2000*

Bulgarian propaganda was disseminating information that there were very few Macedonians in the Partisans and that most of them were Vlachs, Jews and communists. There was also a story around that Jews were not good fighters, that they were cowards. But, on the contrary, we were exemplary, decent and brave, we all held responsible positions in the military units. Estreja Ovađa was pro-

claimed a National Hero of Yugoslavia and we all received major military decorations. We eleven Jews from Macedonia hold the Partisan Commemorative Medal 1941. We had to endure many battles with Germans, Italians and Balists.

In April 1943, a group of ten or so very exhausted young men arrived in the free Greek territory where we were resting temporarily. They asked for water and I gave them a canteen. While they drank, one took some *matzo* from his bag. I became very excited and, in Ladino, asked if they were perhaps Jews, and they gave me an affirmative reply, also in Ladino. They told us they were Jews who had been deported

from Thessalonica and that they had barely escaped. Their leader had a fierce argument with our commander and they signalled to us that they were going back. I ran to ask why they weren't being taken into our units. They told me that there was an agreement with the leadership of the Greek Partisans that their fighters be sent to their own units. There were Germans in the vicinity and they probably fell into their hands. I was depressed. After the war, in Thessalonica, I enquired about their fate, but no one knew anything about them, not even people who had been in Greek units.

There was another case which really affected me. In March 1943, in Skopje Montenegro, seventeen young Skopje Jews waited for several days for a contact to join the Partisans. For reasons unknown the couriers never appeared, although they had been promised that they would come. They all fell into the hands of the police, were taken to the Monopol camp and ended up in Treblinka.

All those people who spoke in thunderous tones during and after the war about the Jews not wanting to join the Partisans and fight against Fascism should be ashamed, even on the basis of these two "accidental" cases alone. And there were other similar cases.

The first Macedonian-Kosovo assault brigade set off in February 1944 to expand the free territory occupied by the Bulgarian Fascist army. It was a very cold winter with winds, snowstorms and a lot of precipitation. The police and army quickly discovered us because of the tracks we left in the snow. Together with German units they surrounded us. The offensive lasted fifteen days. We were constantly encircled, but kept breaking out of the encirclement and fought battles day and night. With no rest, without food, poorly equipped and dressed, in deep snow, on mountain tops, we began to lose momentum. For the first time I saw the meaning of white death. Exhausted fighters would take cover behind a bush in an attempt to snatch some rest. They would fall asleep there and death would quickly follow. We forced the fighters to move around. Many of them were hallucinating. We would see them smiling, their arms outstretched as though they were warming themselves, some of them would cut up their rucksacks or clothes, thinking they were bread. I didn't escape this danger myself: I thought I heard dogs barking. I was seeing us getting closer to houses and myself eating roast meat.

In a number of difficult Partisan battles and situations, Čedo Filipovski – a national hero whom I called "my saviour" – had saved my life several times. He had often exposed himself to mortal danger to



save me. Now, once again, he was quick to respond and asked an English officer from the Brigade military mission to give me a sugar cube. The officer didn't refuse. This sugar cube helped me to come back to my senses. Assistance arrived from the Second and Third Macedonian Brigades who took over the battles with the Germans and Bulgarians. We crossed over to the liberated Greek territory. I was left without shoes, they had fallen apart from the damp. I would wrap my feet in rags. A wound developed on my leg and the doctor, having no medicines, was pessimistic in his prognosis. An old lady helped me with a balm made of wax, cooking oil and grass.

There were many difficult events that I lived through in 1944. At the beginning of 1945 I was demobilised and began work at the Provincial Committee of Anti-Fascist Youth. I married my "saviour", but good fortune was not with us. In June, 1945, he was killed on a seized motorcycle, as the commander of the 48<sup>th</sup> Division. But soon after, on July 27, 1945, I gave birth to my daughter and she kept me alive after the loss of my whole family and my husband. But misfortune kept following me. In 1963, at the age of eighteen, my daughter was killed in the Skopje earthquake.

I have lived to see my days as a pensioner and my old age with many good and bad events. I am married to Dr Avram Sadikari, we have a son, Samuel, who is a doctor of science, and a professor at the Medical Faculty. He is married and has two daughters, Hana and Lea, who are now in Israel.

It took a great deal of courage, endurance and luck to survive the Holocaust, as well as the luck of meeting people who were willing to help.