
Moric MONTILJO

WAR AND THE YOUNG MAN



Moric Montiljo was born on December 22, 1922, in Sarajevo, to father David and mother Rena, née Montiljo. He was an only child in a Sephardic family who were not very religious. More than fifty members of his immediate family perished in the Holocaust. Among them were his grandfather Moše, his grandmother Rahela and his aunts and uncles and their families.

He completed training as a carpenter. After the war he attended a technical school for aviation and worked as an officer in the military service, retiring in January, 1971. He lived in Belgrade but, since November, 1993, has lived in Naharya in Israel. He has two children, a son David who is a graphics engineer, and a daughter Renata, a graphics technician. He has three grandchildren.

For twenty years he was a Gabbai of the Belgrade Temple. At the proposal of the Jewish Community of Zemun, he was entered in the Golden Book Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael for his years of work as secretary of the Community.

My closest ancestors – parents, grandfathers and grandmothers – were born in Sarajevo. My father's father was Moše, known as Hasid, and my grandmother's name was Hana, née Elazar. My mother's father's name was Naftali, known as Il Bojađi, and the name of my mother's mother, my grandmother, was Rahela, née Pardo. My father

was the eldest of eleven children and he had to take care of his brothers and sisters which, I suppose, is why he only had me. My parents spoke Ladino at home. I spoke Serbian, but when they spoke to me I always replied in Ladino.

My father died on April 18, 1938, in Sarajevo. My mother and I were left alone without any income, because my father died at the age of 46 and we had no pension. We lived as best we could. Mother had to get a job in the Ključ hosiery factory, which was owned by Avram Levi Sadić. This is when I began learning my trade, and had to drop my schooling.

As a boy I sang in a boy's choir which was renewed every two years. It consisted of 22 boys, between the ages of ten and twelve. I sang in the choir from 1933 to 1935.

I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair in Sarajevo from primary school until 1941. This was a leftist youth organisation to which many young Sarajevo Jews belonged. We were divided into groups according to age. We each had our Menahels, our group leaders. My first Menahel was Žak Finci (who later joined the Partisans) and after him was Šmuel Kamhi (before the war he had been a member of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia Navy, he returned home in 1941, joined the Partisans and remained with them until the end of the war). Between these two my Menahel was Jakov Montiljo who now lives in Israel, in the Gat kibbutz.

At the beginning of the war I lived with my mother in our apartment at Bregalnička 16. During the war this street was renamed Karpuzova and after the war became Hristo Botev Street. There had been an atmosphere of fear in Sarajevo even before the beginning of the war, because rather a lot of refugees had already come from Czechoslovakia, Poland and other countries. From those days I remember Jozef Štok, who had joined the work of Hashomer Hatzair.



Parents David and Hana with Moric, 1924 in Sarajevo

The bombing began at Passover. Our Sephardic women were preparing nice food for the festival. I especially liked *fritulitas* (fritters made of matzo) and *guevos enjaminados* (hard-boiled eggs prepared with onion peel, a little oil, salt and pepper). I also liked Passover because of *albondigos* (soup dumplings). Grandfather Moše would assemble the whole family on Seder night. When the bombing began I was having these dishes for breakfast. Mother was shouting, in panic, that we should run, but I didn't want to. She fled, shouting that I should too because I would be killed by a bomb. In the end I interrupted my breakfast to flee and hide with my mother in the basement. There were other neighbours there too. The bombing lasted quite a long time, because it came in a number of waves.

Soon the Germans arrived in the town. The "cleansing" of Sarajevo of Jews began. Commissioners were appointed to Jewish shops and their assets were seized. They gave us yellow armbands with the Star of David and the word "Jew" in German and Serbo-Croatian. The Independent State of Croatia was established. They made us do compulsory labour in the city, recognising us by the armbands we wore. I was taken to unload wagons. We wouldn't stop work until a wagon was completely unloaded. The work was very hard, with a lot of dust everywhere. We also did other kinds of work. Whatever they needed, we had to do. Sometimes I would remove my armband, but this was very dangerous. I was arrested three times, just because I was Jewish and wasn't wearing an armband.

In October, 1941, Mosko Papo, Nisim Altarac and I were standing in the street. Two agents approached us and asked for our identification documents. They took us to a prison near Beledija. It was Sunday that day, some German holiday, and they kept us in prison for five days. They wrote in the arrest report that they had found us in a street from which Jews were banned. I remember that they immediately cut our hair. Izrael Papo cut our hair, he was my father's cousin and this was his compulsory labour. Every Monday the new prisoners would have their hair cut. I asked him to go to my mother and tell her that he'd seen me, that I was alive and well, and to ask her to send me a little food. In the prison we received only one loaf of bread each day, but when my mother sent food, only half a loaf. On the fifth day we were interrogated. An officer asked us why we were in prison and we said that we hadn't done anything. He said that we were in a banned street and that this was what the arrest report said. But I remembered that the street was only banned

in the afternoon. The agent had written the time of arrest in the report and it was in the morning. Because of this we were released. Nisim Altarac and Mosko Papo later joined the Partisans and, unfortunately, were killed there.

My mother was terrified. At three in the morning German agents knocked on a neighbour's door. They asked if Moric Montiljo was there and she told them she didn't know, so they left. Mother woke me up and explained, using gestures, that I should run away and keep quiet. I grabbed my winter coat and ran down to the basement. That morning they evacuated the entire street. In this way I avoided arrest and being sent off to camp.

I went to work for the tradesman Franja Štampfel, a religious Croat and a good man. He did not agree with the policy of the Ustaša and what they were doing to Jews. He was a decent man, and former director of the Sarajevo Furniture Factory.

This is when I was arrested for the second time. About half past one at night we were intercepted by a patrol in the street. I wasn't wearing my armband, but my identification card revealed that I was Jewish. They collected about a hundred men and, in the middle of the night, in winter, took us to the same prison from which I had been released a week earlier. I remember that because my hair was still freshly cut, they put us in rooms, thirty of us in one small room. It had been snowing on our way to the prison so we were all wet. Inside the room we had to take up as little space as possible, so we were all cramped and wet, the air was stuffy from the water vapour. And so, cramped up, we awaited the morning. Then suddenly an agent knocked on the door and asked "Is there anyone under 16 or over 50?" One of the detainees lifted me up from the



The building of the La Benevolencija Jewish humanitarian association in Sarajevo where women and children were interned in 1941

floor and said that I was under 16 (even though I was older), and the agent threatened me and said I had no idea what was in store for me if this was a lie. One elderly man and I were escorted to the police administration. We waited outside the office of the chief agent for our names to be called while, every now and then, people came out of his office having been beaten. I assumed that the same fate awaited us. However the chief came out of his office and asked what we were doing there. "Nothing," I replied, and he chased us away saying "Get lost!" We immediately seized the opportunity and ran out into the street. While waiting outside the office I had thought about escaping, because there was no one guarding us, but I was afraid it was some kind of setup. But when the chief agent told us to go I had an excuse to leave the building. Mother was very happy to see me at home.

The next move against us was our eviction from the apartment. We were forced out, they sealed the apartment and the keys were handed over to an agent, an Ustaša. I managed to put one key in my pocket. Together with all the other Jews who had been found in their apartments and houses, we were forced into the German barracks at the end of the city. These had been the barracks of the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia which the Germans had occupied. The men were crammed into sheds with cobblestone floors. I remember sleeping on a wooden beam. The women and children were shut up in barracks used by the Germans as a canteen. There was nothing in there and everyone was sitting or lying on the bare floor. We remained there for seven days. The Germans obviously needed these facilities, so they moved us to a Jewish residential building belonging to the *La Benevolencia* humanitarian organisation. The apartments had been completely emptied. I escaped from there. The building had two entrances and there was only a guard at the first one. I was on the first floor. I jumped through a window into a hallway leading to the second entrance, where there weren't any guards, and I escaped. Others escaped too, including my mother, and we then moved in with her sister, Gracija, who had not yet been taken away.

In the course of these arrests I lost all my identification documents; they had all been left behind with the police because I did not ask for them to be returned. I lost my real identification, with all my personal information, during the first arrest. when I was arrested the second time I left my identification from the railways, which was where my father worked. I gave my student registration book with my photo and all my

personal information to the police during my third arrest and so, by the end, I had no identification documents whatsoever.

Master carpenter Franja Štampfel helped out a number of Jewish carpenters by employing them when they lost their jobs at the Jewish company Konforti. In this way he hired an excellent carpenter, Dani Katan, then another carpenter, Altarac, whose first name I don't remember, and another Jewish carpenter whose name I have forgotten. I was a carpentry apprentice at Franjo's. When Altarac and the other one were taken away in a night raid and transported to Jasenovac, Master Franja proposed to the two of us that we stay the night in the workshop and we accepted. We were locked in with a padlock on the outside.

As there was a danger of us being arrested and taken to Jasenovac, Dani Katan found a man who helped him, for money of course, to get personal documents in a false name so that he could go to Mostar, which was occupied by the Italians. Dani Katan suggested that this man help me too, so I could join him in Mostar. He was to contact me as soon as he got to Mostar to tell me how the trip went. Dani arrived in Mostar in April, 1942, and I joined him just a month later. It's interesting that on that very day he got a job as a skilled tradesman with Master Carpenter Lekić, whom he had known before.

Because I also had documents for a trip to Mostar, I told my trade master that I would like to take the carpentry exam. He recommended me to an acquaintance of his, a carpenter, who was to examine me. I took the theoretical part of the exam before a committee and received a tradesman's certificate. After the exam I was issued with an employment registration booklet on the basis of which I would be able to get a job in Mostar later.

Mostar

I arrived in the city during a curfew. All I had with me was a twig basket with one umbrella and a bit of bread and cheese. I also put a tarboosh in the basket because my identification was in a fake Muslim name. I took the night train because the identification was pretty bad, while the pass was a clean original. I didn't dare use the identification. I had about 500 kunas with me.

In the street I ran into Avram Altarac, a neighbour from Sarajevo (he now lives in Israel). He invited me to stay with his landlady, who had another empty bed in the room. This cost me the 500 kunas I had and after I spent the money I had to move out. Another neighbour from

Sarajevo offered me a cheaper, but less attractive room, which I accepted. I was having a very difficult time. I had no money and was hungry. I even wanted to return to Sarajevo because there the kitchen operated from 1941 to 1942, until all the Jews had been interned in camps. Back in the days of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, there was a canteen where poor schoolchildren and students ate free of charge and some apprentices paid one dinar for lunch. At the beginning of the war the canteen was turned into a kitchen from which food was sent out to Đakovo and given to Jews who were hiding in Sarajevo. My mother's youngest brother, Jahiel Montiljo, was a labourer in this kitchen. In Mostar, at first I was so hungry that I wanted to return to Sarajevo just because of this kitchen, but they talked me out of it. It was very difficult there, the situation was even worse than that which I had left behind.

I worked in several places, gradually getting better jobs. In the end I was working on assembling barracks. This job was quite well paid. And that was how it was until November, 1942, when we were deported to islands and towns in Dalmatia. I went with a group by train to Metkovići, and then on a two-master down the Neretva River. We sailed towards Hvar, to the town of Jelsa. Some were going to Stari Grad, some to Hvar. I stayed in Jelsa. We were put up in the Jadran Hotel where we received some food. There was no work for us to earn money and I remember that we sold underwear for figs or corn. At the beginning of 1943 we were in Jelsa but, in January or February, we were moved to Hvar, a town on the island of the same name. From there, at the end of spring, we were moved to a camp for civilians on Rab. The ship from Hvar stopped in the open sea outside Split. People from the Split community were standing on the shore waving to us, but the ship could not enter the port. The Italians were afraid that we would escape to Split.

Rab

Searchlights at the camp entrance. The whole camp was lit really brightly. We were accommodated in wooden barracks. It was very hot. There were only young men in my barracks. In some barracks entire families lived together. There were patrols walking around the barracks at night. We had to go into the barracks quite early in the evening, despite it being so hot. We worked in the kitchens, helping to prepare the food. Our job was to bring in supplies from the storehouse. Jakica Kabiljo, a cook from Sarajevo and my neighbour from my street, was

also there. There wasn't enough food, but those who wanted to could earn a *pagnocca* by working on assembling barracks. The additional barracks were for internees from Kraljevica and northern parts of the Croatian coast. Across from us, across the road, there was a camp for Slovenes. They used to come across for work and when we met them in the camp we would ask them how they were doing and they would reply that they were alright "now". Their camp had been set up before ours and they had originally been living in tents which leaked, especially during winter. They were experiencing terrible hunger, people were dying in the tents and they weren't reporting the dead in order to keep receiving their food.

We went to the sea to swim, escorted by guards. This was only allowed occasionally, for reasons of hygiene. I remember a group who came from the north Croatian coast. They were fleeing Zagreb and were stopped in the Kraljevica camp and later sent over to us. They set up a puppet theatre, a small stage like a window frame. That was the first puppet show I had seen in my life. Later, when I had grandchildren, I used to take them to puppet shows in Zemun and Belgrade.

We became used to life in captivity, numb to everything; we were not afraid because there were so many of us. Even back in Sarajevo we had known that it was difficult in Jasenovac, that the living conditions were harsh. The Jasenovac inmates were building an embankment on the Sava River, standing in the water and being killed, so we were aware that the living conditions on Rab were much better.

In September 1943, Italy capitulated. We began to manage the camp ourselves. The kitchen was working and we took turns on duty guarding the camp, because the Italian guards had all left. Our leadership managed all the work in the camp and prepared us for joining the Partisans or going into exile. We were told that from that point on we had to manage on our own. We guarded the food storehouses and the camp. We volunteered and were trained for battle. We took small arms from the Italians, who had left everything behind when they went. Very soon we went outside the camp fence with a flag, to the town of Rab, straight down the road. There had already been a connection between the camp and the illegal resistance organisation in the town of Rab.

Because of the aircraft, we crossed from Rab to the mainland in two-masters. Kraljevica, Bakar, Novi Vindolski all the way to Senj. That was the final stop. I remember it was deep in the night. We broke into a building on which there was a sign reading "Ustaša District

Office". We spent the night in the offices and, in the morning, we were taken by truck, via Velebit, to the Supreme Headquarters of Croatia in Otočac. From there we continued on foot through Gorski Kotar, Lika and, at Generalski Stol we met with staff from the Seventh Banija Assault Division. There they assigned us to various brigades, battalions and units. In Otočac the leadership said that we shouldn't continue to exist as a Jewish unit, but that we should be deployed in the units of the Seventh Division for a number of reasons. The division had experience in combat and we were all inexperienced, we would easily be killed in battle. And also, if the enemy found out about us they could destroy the entire Jewish military unit.

From the camp on Rab, some went to Slovenia, some joined the Partisans and some went into exile, to Serbian territories and settlements.

I was in the Second Brigade of the Fourth Battalion of the Seventh Banija Division. The battalion commander was Simo Čavić and brigade commander was Rade Grmuša. The political commissioner was Slavko Borojević. I remember my shoes coming apart from such long walking and that in the end I was left barefoot. Later we would get clothing and shoes from the British. I got a big pair of shoes, new leather ones, good shoes, but I walked like Charlie Chaplin in them. I treasured them dearly.

The most difficult things for me were the long marches and the lack of sleep. If someone had asked me if I wanted to eat really well or get a good sleep, I would have opted for the sleep. Sometimes I slept while walking, especially during night marches. I was in the infantry unit. Later, after I took and passed a course for a telephone operator, I was reassigned to the signals unit with the brigade headquarters. When the need arose I was reassigned to the artillery unit to work as a clerk. I gained experience in practice. In the Partisans I felt equal with everyone else. I took part in all the battles fought by the unit in Banija, Kordun and on to the Italian border, which is where we were in 1945 when the war ended.

After the war, at a medical examination, I learned there was something wrong with my heart. The doctors told me that this had been caused by arthritis, although I had never suffered from this, but the cardiologist told me that my heart condition came from the inflammation of joints that I must have had in the Partisans when I was young.

After the war, my grandmother, two uncles and their families, women and children, emigrated to Israel with the first *aliyah* in 1948.

In Belgrade, in 1949, I found two cousins. Their mother Gizela, née Montiljo, married name Kalderon, had perished in Đakovo with her youngest, two-year-old daughter and her mother. Her husband, Jakov Kalderon, died in Jasenovac. The children, Sidica-Dina and Menahem, managed to stay alive by some miracle because a Jewish family from Osijek helped them by taking them out of the camp in Đakovo. They were in Bergen-Belsen, but stayed alive. In Belgrade they lived in the Children's Home in Visokog Stevana Street. They turned to me for help, telling me that the Home was being closed and asked what they should do. I advised them to do what most people were doing, to go to Israel. And that's what they did. Now they are both grandparents. After the closing down of the Đakovo camp, my mother Rena was transferred, with the other survivors from the camp, to the Jasenovac camp in June or July, 1942, and there they were all immediately killed by the Ustaša. In Belgrade I worked in the air force. I married in 1949 and had two children. My son and daughter moved to Israel in the summer of 1993, and I followed in November of the same year.