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*Gonda Pinto IZRAEL*

FRIENDS SAVED THEIR LIVES



*Gonda Pinto Izrael was born in Sarajevo in 1922 to father Dr Samuel Pinto, a lawyer (died in Sarajevo in 1957) and mother Pepi Pinto (died in 1939). She had a sister, Nela, born in 1927 (died with the Partisans in Slavonia in 1943).*

*After the coup of March 27, 1941, she returned to Sarajevo from Zagreb, where she began to study English at the Zagreb University Faculty of Philosophy. After the war she worked as a stenographer for "Borba"*

*Gonda Pinto Izrael lives in Haifa, Israel, where many visitors who have met her describe her as an excellent tourist guide.*

When the Germans entered Sarajevo in April, 1941, my father, who was a respected public servant – president of the Jewish Sephardic Community, member of the Sarajevo City Council and member of various organisations – knew he would be among the first to be targeted. Because of this, with the help of his brother Dr David Pinto, a doctor in the City Hospital, he went into hiding. My sister and I stayed all alone in our apartment, where the authorities moved in a family who had been expelled from Slovenia.

At the end of September, 1941, with the assistance of the Ustaša, the Germans began rounding up Jews and sending them off to camps (Kruščica, Lobargrad). This was done at night. Carrying their list they would burst into Jewish homes and force the residents out.

At the beginning of October, I was at the house of my school friend, Vera Perić, a Croat. A mutual friend of ours was also there. He brought with him a young man whom he introduced as Veljko Džiković, a student who had come from Split to visit his brother. On that occasion Veljko said to me "Lela sends you greetings and told me to take you to Split".

Lea-Lela Montiljo was a close friend of mine from school. Immediately after the war broke out she had left for Split, where she had uncles. Split was sovereign Italian territory. It was well known that the Italians were not persecuting Jews the way the Germans were. (Lela moved to Israel in 1949. She lived and worked in Israel, in the Government Presidency, until she died.)

Veljko Džiković, as I discovered later, was a member of the Communist Party and lived in Split with his mother. However his brother, Branko Džiković, was an Ustaša, and chief of the Ustaša police in Sarajevo.

How would Veljko take me to Split, I wondered, when Jews in Sarajevo were in a trap and not allowed to leave the city at all.

Veljko had come to Sarajevo with a friend of his, Nevenka Marija Barić, also from Split, a student. She had brought with her two identification documents, an identification card in the name of Nevenka Barić and a student identification in the name of Marija Barić. She made two trips to the Sarajevo police. The first time she was issued with a pass for Knin in the name of Nevenka Barić, based on her identification card. The second time she took another pass for Knin, in the name of Marija Barić, by showing her student identification. Why Knin and not Split? Because Knin was within the Independent State of Croatia, but the only way to get there was through Split. So it was necessary to take a train from Sarajevo to Metković and then continue by boat to Split. From there, passengers for Knin would take a bus. But anyone who wanted to remain in Split could do so. Of course Nevenka's photograph was on the pass.

The same day, Veljko and Nevenka took me to an apartment they had got from Veljko's brother. This apartment belonged to the family of Leon Finci (his daughter Sida Papo lives in Sarajevo). The Finci family had fled in time and the apartment had been seized by the Ustaša police.

We were sitting in the kitchen racking our brains about how to change the photograph on the pass without it showing, because we did-

n't have a stamp. I don't know why, but for some reason we opened a cupboard and, to our surprise, found several stamps for the Leon Finci Company. We used one of these to stamp my photograph which we had glued to the pass instead of Nevenka's and then smudged it so that it was impossible to tell whether it read "Leon Finci Company" or "Ustaša Police of Sarajevo".

In the meantime my father advised me to flee as soon as possible. The following day we left for Sarajevo.

In Split, a cousin of my mother's, Štefi Broner, who was married to a local, took me in. I helped out a bit around the household. I also did some work – played the piano in a ballet school and gave classes.

At the beginning of 1942, my father came to Split with my sister.

The members of the Council of the City of Sarajevo were in a ratio according to the size of the population they represented (Serbs, Croats, Muslims and Jews). My father represented a small minority – about ten per cent of the city's population was Jewish - and so he often collaborated with the Muslim representative, Uzeir-aga. When they voted together they would have a relative majority in the Council.

Uzeir-aga proved to be a true friend. He was a man of high repute and, as well, a Muslim. The Ustaša authorities were interested in winning over the Muslims. Uzeir-aga took advantage of this and arranged for my father to travel legally to Dubrovnik, as a convalescent. Dubrovnik was part of the territory of the Independent State of Croatia, but it was under Italian military occupation.

Not only did my father receive permission to travel, but they even allowed him to take his daughter with him, my sister Nela. On top of everything they even gave him a nurse to escort him – and all this at the same time as the Ustaša were sending Jews off to camps in large numbers!

When he arrived in Split, my father rented a small room and I managed the household.

At the end of 1942, the Italian authorities sent my father and my sister to Brač and then on to Rab. I escaped this fate because I was not on the same list.

Left on my own, I looked for any kind of work and found a job as a nanny with the Fišer family from Zagreb. Like me, they were refugees, but they were well-off. This is what the situation was like there: Mr and Mrs Fišer lived in the apartment with their son and daughter-in-law and their two-year-old grandson Dundek, whom I was

to take care of. In practice, I was a servant. I would get up before everyone else in the morning, bring coal up from the basement, light a fire in the stove, clean the shoes, make breakfast and do the dishes; after that I would go to the market and only then would I take Dundek for a walk. The afternoons were more or less the same scenario. I had two free afternoons a week. My monthly wage was 300 lire – the total household budget was about 15,000 lire per month – but the food was really good there, with everything purchased from the black market, and I had a roof over my head.

On September 8, 1943, Italy fell and I decided to join the Partisans.

For a while my unit moved around in the area of Biokovo, but when the Germans advanced they transferred us to the island of Brač, then to Hvar, then to Korčula and finally to Vis.

About ninety of the fighters in my company hadn't completed more than four years of primary school and a number of them were illiterate. Because of this I was put in charge of cultural work. Whenever we weren't involved in an "operation", in other words a battle, I would give lectures in various fields (history, geography etc.). I also published a bulletin-board newspaper and taught the illiterate to write. Once I even directed a play to which we invited the locals from the village in which we were stationed. An illiterate soldier played the lead role. He learnt the dialogue by heart with great enthusiasm and didn't make a single mistake.

On the island of Vis they sent me to a training course for nurses and, in this capacity, I took part in battles for the liberation of a number of islands.

In the meantime the National Liberation Army was gradually freeing Serbia. I knew that once Belgrade was liberated they would establish civilian rule and that personnel would be required. To this end various courses were organised for us on Vis. I was sent on a stenography course and then to Belgrade, about a month after the city was liberated. There they assigned me to the editorial office of "Borba".

There were bloody battles fought in the country up until May, 1945. But for me the war ended the day I arrived at "Borba".