
Flora ALBAHARI-D'ACAMPORA

SAVING ONE ANOTHER



Flora Albahari-d'Acampora was born on August 13, 1919, in Sanski Most, to father Jakob and mother Rene Albahari, née Levi. She lived in Sanski Most, Sarajevo and Banjaluka. Immediately before the war she was living in the village of Hrváčani, near Prnjavor.

She had three brothers, Moric, Šalamon and Braca, and two sisters, Matilda and Rahela. All perished with their families and she is the only one who survived. She lives in Florence in Italy. She has three children.

As a member of the Women's International Zionist Organisation, she received a medal for her thirty years of work in this organisation.

In our family home we observed all the festivals, my family lived strictly according to Jewish customs. We ate kosher, we had two stoves, two kitchen dressers, two sets of crockery. I had religious education at school and learnt Hebrew, we read prayers but didn't understand the language.

My father Jakob was killed by the Chetniks at the beginning of the war because the Command of the Zdravko Čelar Proletarian Battalion spent a night in our house. My youngest brother, Mita-Šalom, was captured by the Chetniks in the village of Potoča near Prnjavor and was killed there in 1942. His wife Tilda and son Moric also perished. My eldest brother Moric lived in Zagreb. He and his wife were captured by

the Ustaša at the Zagreb station when he was attempting to go to Dalmatia with his family. They perished in Nazi camps. My middle brother Izidor-Braco, lived in Sarajevo and was taken off to Jasenovac. He did not return. My sister Matilda was married to Fajngold, a German Jew. Both of them, together with her little son Leon, were sent to some camp from which they never returned. My sister Rahela, married name Lajpnik, was sent with her husband from Podravska Slatina to Hungary and then further on. No one returned and there has never been any information at all about their fate.

My mother stayed behind in Hrvaćani, all alone, until 1943 when the Chetniks killed her, believing that she had gold belonging to her son Moric. There were rumours that he had left this gold with her before he fled to Split. She was killed with an axe.

I also stayed behind in our family home in Hrvaćani for some time. One day my father said to me: "My child, all kinds of things are going to happen here. You're young, you must run. We can't." I kept refusing, saying that whatever happened to them should also happen to me. My parents insisted that I leave. Mother packed things for me, embraced me and said "Fiža, kali ke vas, tu sos manseva." (Daughter, you must go, you are young.) Father comforted me, saying that they had never harmed anyone and so no one would harm them. He gave me money and I began to cry as though I knew that I would never see them again."

During my flight from Hrvaćani, I was helped by the village postman, a young man named Vlado. Somehow he managed to get me false identification papers in the name of Fedora Mlinarić. I went by train to Banjaluka. There I stayed with a cousin of my mother's, Ernestina Levi, who told me a few days later: "Mira, jo sto jendo a Jajce ondi mi iža Luna. Tu vaz venir kun mi!" (listen, I'm going to Jajce, to my daughter Luna. You're coming with me.) And then she told me to leave Jajce and go to Split, that many Jews were seeking refuge there. Her other daughter, Flora, was also there. Before I left my mother had also told me that I should go to Split and there get in touch with Mrs Budiselić, a friend of hers. I had to get a permit for travel to Split and this was issued by the Supreme Command of the German Forces, in the department for passes. I managed, with my fake identification papers, to get this document that I needed. I went to Jajce with Aunt Ernestina to Luna, who was married to a Muslim. Her husband, Naim, kept trying to talk me into staying in Jajce and converting to Islam, which would save my life. But

my aunt simply said: “Para nada, tu vaz ir a Split!” (It’s out of the question, you’re going to Split!).

The following morning I boarded the train. Three German SS officers came onto the station. They were checking personal documents. I noticed them from the distance, while they were still at the beginning of the wagon. Although I had a permit, I was very frightened that they would discover me. I sat on a seat close to the other door. When they had almost reached me, the train stopped, I opened the door, got off and got back on the train again through another door. They, too, left the train.



Photograph from Sanski Most, 1928: Flora in the front row, fourth from (L); father Jakov and mother Rena in the second row, second and third from (L); third row, (L) brother Šalom Albahari-Mito (perished in Šnjegotina), second from (L); sister Rahela Albahari, married name Lajpnik (perished in Hungary), and third from (L) sister Matilda, married name Fajngold (perished in Stara Gradiška)

I found refuge with my mother’s friend, Mrs Budiselić. The director of the civilian flying boat port, Valentino d’Acampora, also lived in her house. I established contact with the Jewish Community, from whom I received seven lire per day. For some time I lived with Mrs Budiselić. I worked in her house. I cleaned, went to the market, worked as a maid to repay her kindness in taking me in. There were many peo-

ple in the town whom I had known in Banjaluka and Sarajevo, where I used to go often to visit my immediate family. There was also a rabbi from Sanski Most, Kabiljo, and another from Banjaluka whose name I don't remember. We helped one another.

Because the tenant d'Acampora was very interested in me and knew that I used to swim at Bačvice beach, he would go there as well just to be close to me. At that time Mrs Budiselić's niece had also come to her place. She was a pretty, blonde girl and she fell in love with Valentino. In order to get me away from him, she reported me to the police, saying I was a communist. The Italian police took me to the prison in Tartaljina Street. I spent four months there. No one knew I was Jewish. They interrogated me three times, but didn't beat me. They never physically abused me. I only had psychological difficulties.

Then the Italians decided to send me to some camp in Italy. When Valentino learned this, he intervened to stop them sending me to Italy because he knew that he would never see me again. The Italian police released me on condition that I go to Croatia, so an order was issued for me to move to the Independent State of Croatia. Valentino knew some fisherman who supplied their canteen with fresh fish. He found accommodation for me with a fisherman in a place very close to the border, a place called Grljevac. He would come to visit every week bringing *pagnocca*, little bread rolls, his ration, and coffee. He was very thoughtful and decent, asking nothing from me. And then I began to fall in love with him. I saw that he was serious and devoted to me.

One day he came and said that I was in danger there, that I was no longer safe, and suggested that I return to Split. I didn't know what to do. I was living "j o m b a j o m" (day to day) as my mother used to say. I returned secretly and Valentino hid me in a house on Marjan Hill for a while. Every evening after work he would walk over to my place and bring me food. This was in 1941. He saw that the Germans in Split had become too oppressive and were wanting to take everything into their own hands. He decided to return to Italy once he realised that they also wanted to take over his seaplane port. He went to Trieste in a seaplane which made regular flights to Italy. He left me the keys to his apartment. He then told me that he wanted us to marry and that, if it was at all possible, I should make my way to Trieste with the Italians, and he would wait for me there until they transferred him to a new position. After he left I found out that there were seaplanes flying into Split, but that the pilots were Germans. Then I received a note from Trieste in

which Valentino told me to get away any way I could, because he would soon be transferred away.

Split was bombed and I hid in the Diocletian Palace, in the cellars. There was a German officer sitting next to me. He asked me if I had a Croatian-German dictionary. I seized my chance and asked him to get me a pass for Trieste. The next day the air-raid sirens began again and we met there, he with a pass and I with a dictionary.

The next morning I boarded a boat. There was room for twenty or thirty people below, that was as many as the boat would hold. This crossing from Split to Trieste was run by the Germans. We travelled for eight days, only at night from 10.00 p.m. to 6 a.m. and during each day we would hide on the coast of some island. There were a lot of women and children. All the food we had was one small slice of bread and half a glass of water.

Finally we disembarked in Trieste. There was a German guard checking passes. What I didn't know was that my pass said I had volunteered for work in Germany. They told me to wait there. I thought they had discovered that I was Jewish. I was helpless, sitting in the police building on a bench in a corridor, between two doors. The second door was the Italian Women's Fascist Department and it was open. From time to time a woman would come out dressed in the black Italian Fascist uniform. Suddenly it occurred to me to go to them and ask them to save me. And that is what I managed to do. I hugged one of them and asked her to save me. I told her that my fiancé was Italian and this persuaded them, because they hid me when the German police came looking for me. This Italian Fascist woman, a Trieste resident, telephoned the *idroscalo*, the seaplane base, where Valentino was still working. This



Flora from the days when there was still no trace of life's hardships on her face

was sheer luck, because he was due to travel to southern Italy that day. They fed me, even gave me chocolate and white bread, saying *Povera creatura sola* (poor lonely creature).

When we finally met, Valentino took me to the *idroscalo* where he showed me what he had bought for me because I didn't have anything to wear. That afternoon we set off for Rome by train. We stayed in Rome for eight days, without money. We got a little money and train tickets from the Vatican, because we had heard that they were giving assistance to refugees. Because there were no passenger trains, we arrived in Arezzo in a cattle wagon. One of Valentino's colleagues was waiting for him there. We stayed there until Italy capitulated. Then we went to the village of Lucignano where we were married in a civil ceremony. The Germans were withdrawing from Lucignano ahead of the Americans, and my husband took photographs of the withdrawal from a window and in the streets. The Germans were carrying everything in their trucks: cows, pigs, poultry, furniture. When the American tanks appeared, everyone was in the streets. We were hugging one another and kissing. I hugged a woman, shouting at her that my name was not Fedora, but Flora. The thought of my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters, has followed me always.

A senior American officer came by in a jeep. When he saw Valentino photographing everything, with me beside him, he put us in the jeep and took us to prison. He thought that we were spies. On the fifth day they came for us and took us for questioning. It was very hot. Across from me an officer unbuttoned his shirt a little and I spotted a chain with a Star of David on his neck. I couldn't believe it, I stood up and said to him three times: "Shalom!" He just raised his hands and said: "Stop! Spies? Trial? Can't you see these are victims of Fascism!" Briefly I explained who I was. We were given food and taken by jeep to the station where we continued on. I remember my husband saying to me: "Now we're one all. I saved your life before and now you've saved mine." We went to Catanzaro, to his family. We were there until they moved us to Reggio Calabria, in Calabria, on the toe of Italy where an airport had been built. Our first son, Jakob-Marko (named after my father and his father) was born in Catanzaro. Our second son, Luigi, and our daughter Irena (after my mother, Rene) were born in Reggio.

Later we moved from Reggio to Florence, where my husband was transferred as airport director.

After the war I had a growing desire to visit Yugoslavia to learn something about my family, my many relatives.

It was not until 1953 that I finally reached Yugoslavia. After that first visit I came back several times. The family of my cousin, Judita Albahari-Krivokuća, exhumed the bodies of my parents and moved them to Sarajevo. As for all the other graves of my brothers and sisters, we have no idea where they are.

Florence, a city with a population of 600,000, has a large Jewish Community. It supports itself from taxes, contributions to the community and the voluntary work of its members.