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*Lajčo KLAJN*

## SAVED BY BRAVE EČIKA HAUER



**L**ajčo Klajn was born in Subotica on June 7, 1925, to father David and mother Debora, née Gutman. He spent his childhood in Subotica, finished primary school there and worked in textile sales until the beginning of the Hungarian Fascist occupation. His father, David Klein, was the shamas for the Jewish religious community in Subotica from the beginning. His mother, Debora Gutman, was a housewife and took care of the pleasant life of the family. His older brother, Josip, was a rabbi in Vrbas, educated in Sarajevo. He established a family and he and his wife Anuška had two children. His younger brother, Israel, devoted himself to the study of the Talmud and later found employment in a sugar factory. He was not married. Both brothers came from his father's first marriage and their mother had died. His twin sister Ana was learning the tailoring trade. He also had a younger sister, Šarika, who died at the age of seven. At the time of the persecution of Jews in Subotica, in the first days of the German-Hungarian occupation, on April 11, 1941, they lived at 22 Jugovićeva (Erdo) Street.

*Lajčo Klajn, a doctor of law, performed various important duties. Among his other posts he was also a professor at the Novi Sad University Faculty of Law and a judge of the Constitutional Court of Vojvodina. He is the author of a number of academic and professional works in the fields of criminal, international and constitutional law and*

*the author of the book "Genocide and Punishment in the North of Occupied Yugoslavia, 1941-1945".*

*He lives in Subotica with his wife, Margita Rogić-Klajn.*

After the German troops arrived, in 1944, the forcible removal of Jews to the ghetto began. This was located next to the railway station in Subotica, from which my parents and my sister Ana were packed into wagons and taken to Auschwitz. My brothers and I had already been taken to compulsory labour. In Auschwitz, my sister Ana was separated, with a rifle butt, from our parents, who ended in the gas chamber. My sister Ana was overcome by this. They hid her, so she would not suffer the same fate. It was in an extreme psychological state that she and I met again in Subotica in 1945. She married and bore two daughters, Darinka and Verica, who both started their own families, but Ana did not live to see this happiness. She died from the consequences of the horrors she had lived through. Under her pillow, a family picture was found. My two brothers perished in places unknown. Josip's family also ended up in Auschwitz. My father, David, used his prayer book in Auschwitz up to the very last minute.

People born in the same year as me (1925) began with compulsory labour in Subotica – the woods at Veliki Radanovac and then, after Hódmezővásárhely, we were taken under guard to Budapest and nearby places (May 1944 to January 1945): Buda, Pest, Buda Kalas (Pest Budakalász, Kápolnásnyk) and several others.

Andrija Liht, a tailor from Subotica, had earned credit in the first world war on the Hungarian side. He was in Budapest in the second half of 1944, as was I with others of my generation. My childhood friend, his son Josip, was also with him. He took it upon himself to lead a large group of Jews from the occupied northern territories of Yugoslavia as a special labour company which allegedly did work for the benefit of Germany and Hungary. At the time it was still known that we were Jews. We went from one place to another, wherever Liht felt that it was less dangerous.

We slept in abandoned schools and other buildings and avoided raids. We would be stopped by German and Hungarian army and police forces. Instead of verifying our identification papers and confirming our presence in Hungarian areas, Liht settled the matter with the German and Hungarian forces on his own. He was well stocked with documents

testifying to the great recognition accorded to him from the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Of course none of this happened without bribes. That was how they would allow us through to continue our stay unregistered.

Andrija was an extraordinary representative and advocate of our vital interests. On one occasion we thought the end of our lives had come. During the night a large armed group of German soldiers with machine guns, led by an SS officer, burst into an abandoned room in which we were sleeping, in other words we were staying there illegally. They shouted *Auf!* We soon realised they were going to shoot us. We had been discovered. At that moment Andrija Liht appeared and approached the officer, bravely and, seemingly, calm. They spoke in German. The conversation ended with him telling the soldiers in German *Alles ist gut* (Everything's fine), and then he told us *Schlafen Sie!* (Get to sleep.) Later, Andrija Liht revealed to us the secret that had saved us. He had taken a diamond ring from his pocket and handed it to the SS officer without anyone else seeing.

Liht's group changed, both in the number and the kind of people included. We were abandoned by those who did not believe that we could survive this way, in such numbers, with the explanation prepared. We managed to hold out throughout this period of our life together and for this Andrija Liht deserves the highest recognition. Both he and his son survived the Holocaust with us.

This group of Jews gathered from compulsory labour companies included Jovan Horović, Ladislav Silaši, Ladislav Brajer and others) as well as me. We did extremely hard work, mostly under the supervision of the German Todt military formation, without any shelter or protection from the carpet bombing of Budapest by the Allied forces. Huge buildings and institutions, along with other facilities, were virtually razed to the ground. Many people could not cope with this psychologically. Sometimes, after hiding in the basement of some building, we would come out into the street and see many buildings had been demolished. It was incredible the way we worked with the bombing going on.

The most difficult and life-threatening work our group did was clearing bombed and demolished bridges on the Danube. We were assigned to the large marshalling yard (*Rakosrendezoe pályaudvar*) and then to clear the bombed bridges at Hatvan. We were to haul metal constructions and heavy metal objects from the river and then carry them on our backs to designated places. Here there weren't only Todt super-

visors, but also Hungarian gendarmes and SS soldiers. Many of us worked under beatings and threats and fell unconscious. They would pour water on us. When they thought that someone could no longer be of any use, they would be taken aside and shot. In Budakalász, with the help and collaboration of the German forces, the Hungarian gendarmerie collected five hundred Jews. I was among them. They shot every tenth person, allegedly in retaliation for the activities of the anti-Fascists. From Budakalász we were taken to Kápolnásnyék under Hungarian military guard. There we dug trenches for the battle against the Allies. With no food or water, with no rest, we worked day and night, in a hurry because of the penetration and approach of the Allied forces. Those who could not endure this were shot.

The most fateful moment for my life and for the life of the group of Jews was capture and the threat of being shot in October, 1944, at Kápolnásnyék. We were close to the line of fire between German-Hungarian and Soviet forces. A few hundred metres away we saw Soviet soldiers. Liberation was coming down the road. Because of the crossfire, we took temporary shelter in a large basement where we found almost a hundred people. There were Hungarians among them, probably also Hungarian Army deserters. On behalf of our group, I negotiated with the people from the Hungarian group. We quickly agreed on the possible outcomes of the war in this area. I offered to save them if the Soviet troops arrived. In return they promised not to expose us if the Hungarian-German Army should retain the territory. However, very soon after this the fighting stopped and Hungarian soldiers appeared outside the basement. They called into the basement, asking: "Hungarian brothers and sisters, who is in the basement?" Instead of answering, the people from the Hungarian group ran out. We didn't expect them to give us up, but they did. They were joyful, hugging one another. And then, betrayal: "There are Jews from Yugoslavia here who have been hiding all over Hungary."

They immediately captured us. One of our group, Ladislav Silaši, who was completely depressed, failed to take his hands out of his pockets. They wanted to shoot him immediately. I took his hands out of his pockets and they didn't shoot. We were taken from the basement. There were eleven of us. We heard the command *Vonalbo sorakozo!* (Line up!). So we were not to be taken away, this was the preparation for execution. Before long a crowd of onlookers gathered. They were enthusiastically waiting for the execution. Our group, starving, with no will to

live, were calm. We were convinced that our end had come. I was third in the line. Then a Hungarian officer with an Arrow Cross (Nyilas) armband appeared.

Everything was ready for our execution. We waited for the command. I closed my eyes. I waited for the shot. Nothing happened in those moments. Dead silence. Slowly I opened my eyes. I saw an unbelievable sight. The Nyilas commanding officer was hugging one of the men lined up for execution! They were good friends at the university in Szeged. The Nyilas officer asks, confused: "Ečika, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here, come out of the line so that I can save you." This was Ečika Hauer, the son of a timber merchant from Senta. We members of the group hadn't known one another well. With no hesitation, Eči Hauer replied to the Nyilas officer "It's all of us or no one!" I'm not sure what the rest of us would have done in that moment. Eči Hauer could have been saved from certain death and no one would ever learn of our execution in Hungary, far from our homeland. The officer was confused. Suddenly: "All right. I'm going to the commandant to get approval for the execution." (There was no need for him to ask for it). He told everyone present: "In the meantime, take them to the barn!" He chose an elderly soldier to escort us there. Discreetly he said to Hauer: "You've got time. Anyone found in the barn will be shot."

We seized the opportunity and fled. They found only one of our compatriots, a religious Jew from Hungary who didn't want to run. They shot him. The Hauers emigrated to Israel and that is where our Ečika died.

I have already mentioned the role of Ladislav Brajer, a Hungarian-born resident of Sombor, in securing food for us and passing on information, because he had special approval to move around and to drive a truck. Brajer, who was a friend from earlier, had good knowledge of the terrain in Budapest and beyond. In December, 1944, the Soviet troops encircled Budapest or, rather, Pest. But they were at a considerable distance, about 100 or 120 kilometres. On the other side, the Soviet troops were close to Buda and the liberation of Buda was believed to be imminent. Ladislav Brajer directed us towards Buda. He was in touch with a German officer who escorted us from Pest to Buda and put us up in a hospital 6 Foldvari Street, which had earlier been a school, but a hospital from Kecskemét had been moved into the premises.

Our ever-changing group included Josip, the son of Andrija Liht, the tailor, Josip and me. Josip introduced himself as a medical intern.

He knew a few basic things and Latin words he had heard from his cousin, Dr Antun Liht (of whom there is a bust in front of the Public Health Institute). I introduced myself as his assistant. Josip was wearing a white coat with a red cross on his chest and rubber gloves, which he wore in front of the patients. The surgical officer, I think his name was Abraham, was aware he was providing a cover for us. We were given tasks, carried patients and went to the battlefield to collect the dead and wounded.



*The Klajn family in Subotica in 1937 (L to R): son Lajčo, father David, shamas of the Jewish religious community in Subotica from 1923 to 1944 when he perished in Auschwitz; son Izrael, killed in battle with the Germans in 1941 as a member of the Yugoslav Royal Army; daughter Ana, survived Auschwitz; mother Debora, David's wife, perished in Auschwitz with her husband in 1944; son Jozef, a rabbi in Vrbas, survived the Holocaust but died from typhoid on his way home*

The Nyilas found out about us and made enquiries with Abraham. He signalled to us and we evaded arrest and escaped.

From the end of 1944, the armed forces of the Red Army held the front close to Buda. We hid there, constantly expecting to be liberated soon. In the meantime, we were given the job of moving, on foot, a mobile army kitchen from Buda to Pest. This meant we were moving

further from liberation, because the Red Army units were about 120 kilometres from Pest. It was night.

We were crossing a bridge. Pushing the army kitchen. Some others and I were wearing Hungarian army caps. In the still silence the iron wheels of the kitchen were clattering. Hungarian forces were waiting for street fights with the enemy. We decided to abandon the mobile army kitchen because we believed that we too would be targets. Less than a minute after we left it, the army kitchen was blown up in no time by heavy tanks.

We continued on foot, at night, in silence. Suddenly a German command: "Halt!" We were stopped by the driver of a German tank. And now something incredible happened. There was young Jewish man from Subotica called Tibor Štajn (he had worked in a hosiery factory, a very quiet and passive man). Now he approached, cool and seemingly calm and, putting his leg up on the tank, he asked "*Sagen sie, wo sind die Russen?*" (Tell me, where are the Russians?). The tank driver, certain we were allies, said, warning us: "*Dort.*" He pointed in the direction we needed in the silence of the night to be able to locate where we were and in which direction we should head for the Red Army.

And that's how it was. We hid in a damaged, abandoned residential building, in the basement, which is where we were when the city was liberated.

It was the end of January, 1945. But that was not the end of the story. The Red Army soldiers in Budapest were taking prisoners under guard, with machine guns. Ladislav Silaši and I fell into a trap. We would say: "Well, we're not going to let ourselves be caught now, are we?" There could no longer be any intervention. I remember that I had forgotten about the Hungarian Army cap. I immediately removed it. We waited for the crowd to arrive and we fled.

The Soviets couldn't shoot at us, instead they seized two other men from the street to make up the number of captives.

In the worst cold, in cattle wagons, very slowly and with many problems, and freezing, we got to Subotica railway station. To our great joy, Đorđe Hajzler was there, in the army uniform of the Yugoslav Partisans, in the capacity of political commissar. He welcomed us and took care of us. We were sick and exhausted. We were surprised at how we had survived. Later I married Margita Rogić who contributed to my creative development.