

---

Lea SALCBERGER

## IN THE STEPS OF THE RAB BATTALION



**L**ea Salcberger was born Lea Abinun on May 13, 1913, in Sarajevo of mother Blanka, *née* Musafija and father Jakob.

She had a sister, Šarlota-Loti, a schoolteacher who died in 1928 in Mostar, and a brother, Albert-Buki, who worked in the Geula Bank in Sarajevo as a procurements officer. According to post-war data he died together with a whole transport at the entrance to Jasenovac. Lea's father, a photographer and later a travelling salesman, was killed in Jasenovac. Her mother was a milliner and during the war took refuge in Split, but was taken in 1943 to the Staro Sajmište camp in Belgrade and killed in Jajinci. About 160 members of her extended family were killed. Lea alone survived. She married Ervin-Stanko Salcberger in 1946.

Before the war she worked in the Bencion de Gaon knitwear factory and occasionally taught at the same textile school in Sarajevo from which she herself had graduated. After the war she was employed in the Ministry of Industry, in the Textiles Directorate in Zagreb, and later in the Planning Commission of the District People's Committee in Split. She moved to Belgrade in 1952 and was granted an invalid pension. She has two daughters, Slobodanka, a graduate technologist, and Borka, a mathematician and information scientist, and four grandsons.

*This testimony is based on an interview with Lea Salcberger conducted by Jaša Almulji for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in the USA. It has been supplemented with additional material supplied by Lea Salcberger.*

Before the war broke out I worked as a textile technician in a factory in Sarajevo. I had a very large family. My mother had thirteen and my father nine brothers and sisters. We all lived peacefully with much love and constant visits and observed all the holidays within the family circle, on either my mother's or my father's side.

The year 1941 brought us the war. My engineer brother was among the first group of Jewish intellectuals abducted from Sarajevo by the Ustashas. They then began to round up other Jews, men and women and sometimes even whole families. It was the winter of 1941 when my father was taken to Jasenovac. From the very day the Ustashas arrived we all had to wear yellow armbands with the Star of David. We were allowed to leave the house only between 7.00 a.m. and 7.00 p.m. Anybody who found any of us in the streets outside those hours was entitled to arrest us. The working hours in my factory were from 6.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and it was run by the Germans so, each morning, a German soldier waited in front of my house to escort me to work, because I had to wear my armband. I worked in this way until the mass deportation in 1942.

I think I was in one of the last groups taken to the assembly point at the Sarajevo police station, where we waited for the transport. We stayed in the police compound through a whole night and day, in a courtyard, with just a little tea and food which they gave us. At one point I swore I would not go to the camp, that I would rather be killed than go there. In the courtyard there was a cellar where we went to drink water and where the toilets were. I hid in the cellar, leaving my things outside. When we had arrived at the police station, we had been told that we could take only the barest necessities with us. We had prepared rucksacks with the most essential clothes. I crouched in a corner of the cellar and waited.

After the transport left and everything was quiet, a guard came and asked me what I was doing there. I said that I was unwell, that I couldn't go, that I felt sick. This policeman was from Sarajevo. He had exceptionally blue eyes, as blue as the sky. I remember thinking "What

blue eyes he has!" In this moment of terror and waiting to be taken away, those eyes burned deep in my memory. He began to shout at me "Get out, get out!" I crossed the whole courtyard, with him at my heels, heading for the main gate. I didn't know where he was taking me, whether it was to the police or back to prison. "Keep walking!" he shouted. When we were out in the main street, which was full of people, he came closer to me and whispered "Turn into the street and walk ahead slowly." I began to shiver. I didn't understand what was happening to me. I walked slowly and then turned around. He was not there. Suddenly I could walk no further. I walked through the nearest gate and sat on a step to try and recover my senses. I didn't know where to go or what to do.



*Lea in her younger days*

Eventually I got myself together a little and decided to go to a family who were protected by the Germans. This was the family of Dr Alkalaj, another Jew, who the Germans protected because he worked as a doctor at the Sarajevo railway station. The railway workers all wanted him to be protected and to continue working there. I went to them and told them what had happened. His wife was very kind to me and said "You may stay here for the night, but we can't keep you longer because we ourselves are in danger from the Germans, the Ustasas and the police and we don't know what might happen to us." I spent the night with them. The next day, so that I would not be recognised, she

gave me some of her dresses and a hat, and some money, and said "Find somewhere to go and something to do".

When I left their apartment I was in a real dilemma: where should I go and what could I do? Anywhere I went I would only make an unpleasant situation for other people. So I decided to return and turn

myself in and let them do whatever they wanted with me. The transport had left, which meant that I could no longer count on being deported, but they might lock me up. Then, as I wandered the city streets, I met an old family friend with whom we used to go on excursions. He was with his wife and children. He was wearing a *Volksdeutscher* uniform with a swastika on his sleeve, but we had known he was doing this in order to protect the many people he knew who were living illegally in Sarajevo. He was a Croat named Ivica Foht and he was married to a Jew. His wife was Sara Foht, née Ozmo.

When they were married she had to adopt the Catholic faith and she also changed her first name, because this was the custom in those days. Foht asked me where I was going and what I was going to do. I told him what had happened, how I had escaped and that I now had nowhere to go except back to the police. "Come to my place," he said.

They lived on the outskirts of Sarajevo in a small house with a large yard. His wife Sara welcomed me and hid me.

Foht might have worn the *Volksdeutscher* uniform, but his cellar was occupied by an illegal printing press where material for the Partisans was printed. These were bulletins and pamphlets which were distributed throughout Sarajevo. There were four people involved in this: Ivica Foht, his wife Sara (I don't remember what name she took when she converted), and their two sons. I stayed with them for five days. They were a wonderful family, although they were living on the bread-line. They hid me in their house, in the cellar they had the printing press and in the courtyard they played songs like *Lili Marleen*. The Germans came and danced and sang, because as a *Volksdeutscher* it was important for him to be in contact with the Germans and prove he was their man.

Ivica Foht was a Partisan sympathiser. I even think he and his wife were members of the Communist Party. But they paid a terrible price for all their activities. They worked illegally for the Partisans all through the war and then, on the eve of the liberation of Sarajevo in 1945, one of their neighbours betrayed them. The Germans hanged them on the lampposts in the street, all four of them. That night the Partisans liberated Sarajevo and cut them down. Ivica Foht and his wife Sara were dead, but their two sons were still alive. One of them, Ivica, is alive to this day. He lives in Sarajevo and still has the scar from that rope on his neck. Through the Fohts I was introduced to a judge, I can't remember his name. I only know that he was a Croat. I stayed with him

for two days. His mother was also there and she was very kind to me. One night a railway man came and brought me an illegal pass issued in another name. "You're going to go now to Mostar and then you'll see what you can do from there," he said.



*Lea Salcberger's parents, photograph from the beginning of the twentieth century*

So that night he took me to the railway station and escorted me to a wagon in which sat Dr Alkalaj with whom I had spent my first night after my escape. He had come to see whether I would have any luck in Mostar. The Ustashes held all the territory as far as Konjic and from there the Italians were in charge. It was most important that I cross the border of the Independent State of Croatia and arrive in the territory under Italian occupation. I got through with no problems and arrived in Mostar. There

was an incident in the train which was both comical and odd. I had lived in Mostar for some time and had gone to school in the town. Now one of my old school friends, a Croat, was on the train.



*Lea with her fiancé (1940), later her husband (1946)*

“Hello Lea, how are you? Where are you going? Are you heading for Mostar?” she said to me.

“I’m not Lea, you’re mistaken, my name is Ankica,” I replied.

“What are you talking about? You’re Lea. I know you from the mole on your leg. We used to go to school together,” she insisted.

“No, perhaps it was someone else. I’m not Lea,” I said, shivering with fear that she might betray me and that I would immediately be sent to prison. However she made no further comment and none of the people in the compartment asked anything. So I arrived in Mostar. Three days later I met her in the town. She apologised to me: “I didn’t even remember that you were Jewish; I could have put you in a situation where you would have ended up in prison, but at least it turned out all right.” We greeted each other and reminisced about our school days.

On my arrival in Mostar I reported to the Jewish Community to see if there was anything I could do to help. Everything was very well

organised in Mostar. The town was under the Italians, but they weren't hard on the Jews, which is to say they had not yet rounded them up. All the Jews living in Mostar were still free.

The Jewish Community had a community kitchen where the masses of Jewish refugees, from Sarajevo and other towns, could have a free lunch and dinner. Those who could afford it paid, but everyone there was doing some volunteer work. They washed the dishes, they cooked, waited and served the food, and cleaned the dining room. We lived like one big family. All of us had the same problems and we all felt the same way about them.

I stayed only a short time in Mostar. Very soon the Italians issued an order for all Jews to report to be transported to a camp. We didn't know which camp we would be taken to. It was no problem for the Italians to assemble us because the Jewish Community had a list of all its members as well as those who had come to the Community for help.

No one in Mostar wore armbands, because the Italians didn't insist on Jews being identified. There was no such requirement there, but everyone felt obliged to report. We went by bus to Split and were then put on board a ship. A number of Jews left the group in Split. We were given juices, some of us drinks, some other things, probably thanks to the Split Jewish Community. We boarded the ship and sailed to the island of Hvar.

On Hvar they put us up in hotels. The accommodation was very good but our movements were restricted, as to both time and place, so we were not allowed to move from one street to another. Further on there was barbed wire and we couldn't pass it. We could leave our Hvar hotel between 8.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. We were given food by the Italians. There again we organised various jobs, as cooks, waiters, people who cleared the dishes, cleaned the tables and floors and others who washed dishes. We made contact with locals sympathetic to the National Liberation Movement. They brought us bulletins. They also asked us to do some political work, to explain the aims of the national liberation struggle to them and how to escape what was in store for us. We struck up connections with them and worked in small groups, cells of three people, so they could not find out people's names. Everything was very conspiratorial, so that if anyone were caught they would only be able to name two other people and not the whole organisation.

We stayed on the island of Hvar until May, when we were moved to another island, Rab. We travelled by ship, boarding at night; we had

no idea where we were going or what was going to happen. They only told us that they were taking us to another camp. They gave us a little food and we arrived on Rab early in the morning. The camp itself was about twenty kilometres away from the Rab township. It was surrounded by three rows of barbed wire with guards around it. There were guard towers every ten metres with Italian guards holding their rifles at the ready. There were small, single-storey wooden barracks which held six or eight people. They told us that if anyone wanted to be with their family or friends they could arrange to stay together. I thought we would never get out of there. There was sand everywhere, about twenty centimetres deep; it all looked like a desert. Everyone went into barracks with family members or friends. People who didn't know anyone got to meet them here. And thus began life in the camp.



*Lea Salcberger's service record, 1946*

The first thing was that anyone who had gold or money had to hand it over to the Italians. It was better to do this voluntarily than for them to go through the barracks looking for it. Some people obeyed the order, others didn't. We were allowed to be outside at prescribed times and then had to return to the barracks. I was in a barracks with another three women and two men. The women were the three Samokovlija sisters. One had a two-year-old son. Her name was Laura Ast and the other two were Ela and Beba. The men were David Pardo and Branko Štrasberger. All of us were from Sarajevo and we got on



well together. For food we received a small bread roll to last us the day. It was up to us whether we ate it straight away or divided it for our mealtimes. For lunch we received a broth with nothing in it.

There was an illegal committee in the camp connected with some of the Italians, camp officers. I don't know the details. There too we were linked in cells. I was the leader of one cell which encouraged people to escape from the camp, to volunteer for work in the liberated territories and to fight as Partisans. However, in the end, nothing happened because the contact who was supposed to come didn't ever arrive. There were a large number of teenagers and children in the camp; groups of children were organised, say from five to eight years of age. I had a group up to age twelve. We worked with them from memory because we had no books at all. A little geography, a little history, a little mathematics, a little literature, whatever people could remember. There were twelve boys and girls in my group.

There was also a first aid course, run by Dr Špicer. Here we learnt some medical basics and passed an examination so that, one day, if we were to flee again, we might be of some use to the Partisans. But we didn't escape.

One day we heard a commotion in the camp and realised that all the Italian soldiers were leaving. Then someone in the camp, I don't remember who, shouted "Don't let them take their weapons! Disarm the Italians." Barehanded we stormed the Italians to disarm them. They began running and threw their weapons away. We didn't know what was happening. This was a day before or, perhaps, the very day that Italy capitulated, in September 1943. Meanwhile the committee was working and we were now given orders to go to their warehouses, take their food supplies and distribute them among the camp inmates. During our stay on Rab we had become so organised that we were ready to form a battalion if events demanded it. After the Italians withdrew we got into the warehouses and distributed the food. Everything was organised, there was nothing haphazard. The people stayed and waited. Across from our camp was that of the Slovenes. They had fared very badly, spending a winter on Rab, a winter which had carried off many victims. After the capitulation, when we disarmed the Italians, the colonel who was commander of the whole camp had fled. However the Slovenes and the Jews managed to catch him and bring him back to the camp, where he was killed. The Slovenes and Jews removed the barbed wire barricades and opened the gates. There was a great cele-

bration which lasted a whole day and night. The Slovenes organised their own units and the Jews organised the Rab Battalion.

The battalion commander was a former reserve officer, David Kabiljo. There were 180 men and 20 women in the Rab Battalion, all of them Jewish. We set off with the intention of working with the medical service. The underground people on Rab, who had kept in touch with the camp, came and joined the Partisans in an organised way. Because we were very poorly off for clothes and shoes, we agreed that anyone who was not going to join the Partisans, if they were young and had good footwear and clothes, should hand them over to us so that when we arrived at the unit we would look like soldiers, decently dressed, not ragged and barefoot. Some of them even carried rucksacks and a few spare things. We looked like starved zombies. When I left the camp to join the Partisans I weighed about forty kilograms. But we survived it all. We crossed by boat to the coast, where we were met by guides. These were farmers who'd gone underground and Partisans. We were in liberated Partisan territory. They met us with food and drink and allowed us to have some rest. We then went to Brlog. There we were met by a member of the Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Dobrivoje Vidić. He greeted us and told us what was in store, so that we would be prepared. He gave us a political talk and then we rested. I think we travelled for seven days until we arrived at the unit for which we were to be reinforcements.

This was the Seventh Banija Assault Division of the National Liberation Army. This unit had just returned, decimated, from the battle of Sutjeska. Of the 1,800 troops who had gone to Sutjeska, only 700 returned. Naked, barefoot and exhausted. The Rab Battalion was to fill the holes in the unit. The name of the place was Lipe. There we were met by the division commander, Vječešlav Holjevac. He wished us a warm welcome on behalf of the Seventh Division, prepared us for all that awaited us and said that we would stay there for a few days to rest and learn something about weapons, so that we would know how to handle a rifle.

First they divided us into units. The division had four brigades. I was assigned to the second brigade, as a signals private. They asked who wanted to go to the unit, some volunteered and the others would be sent to other companies or into the medical service or the cultural and artistic group. Then they taught us how to use a rifle, how to load and unload it. We were there for two or three days and then we went

into action with the unit. However it was much harder in the signals company than in the infantry, because signals was responsible for the telephone line between brigade headquarters and the battalion. This was a cable wound on a wooden drum which we had to unwind all the way to the battalion or company. We used them to connect the field telephones.

Why do I say that this was harder for us? Because we first had to set up the line and then, whenever the action ended, we had to lift it. We had to cross the entire distance twice as many times as the fighting men. Communications had to function because this is how the orders for attack and defence or retreat were relayed. But one thing was very difficult for me: after each action I was always on the first sentry duty. This duty was very hard, always at night and two or three hours long. Finally I complained to the commander, Đuka Arbutina, and asked why it was always me who was put on first guard duty because I was deadly tired after returning from the front line. "That's because you look the worst, the weakest of everyone," he said, "So in order for you not to die on the next march you go first on guard duty, do your turn, then you lie down and sleep." I had thought he disliked me but instead he was being considerate and taking care of me in this way. I was frightened on sentry duty. It was dark, night time, and in the snow and the cold, you couldn't see anything, you began to hallucinate: is that an enemy coming? Is that something over there?

Most of our actions were against Germans. We also fought Ustashas, but rarely Chetniks. The Seventh Assault Division was from Banija, so it operated mainly in Croatia. There were very many Ustashas and still a lot of German divisions who were being held down in Yugoslav territory by the Partisans. The Independent State of Croatia didn't have so many Ustashas to oppose the Partisans, so reinforcements had to come from the Germans. We crossed the river Lonja, which was up to my waist, carrying materials, telephones and cables. All this was carried across rivers, across railway lines, we would come close to the enemy positions in order to find out where they were going and what they intended to do.

Then we crossed into Kordun. These were very tough days: we were starving and were happy when we got corn bread and corn flour. For a while we ate oat bread which I could not stomach because it was like chewing needles. It pricked your mouth and throat and wasn't salted. We only found water here and there. When there was no running

water we drank from puddles. This was in 1943 and 1944. Here we stood up to the enemy's Sixth Offensive, which was intended to destroy us. Not long afterwards we crossed into Slavonia and Moslavina.

For nearly a month I went barefoot. There were no shoes. I wasn't the only one, many of us had no footwear. These were hard times. When we arrived in some village, people felt sorry for me and gave me rags to bandage my feet during the day, but these wore out as soon as I started walking. At night it was very cold, my feet were frozen, my toes and feet bleeding. I would go into action telling myself "Just let them kill me, don't let them wound me. Because if they do it will be worse than if they kill me straight out." However I was never wounded, even though I was in the first ranks and we went every day from one action to another, fighting the Ustasha units. The fighting during our attack on Koprivnica was especially hard and bloody.

One day the quartermaster sent me a pair of shoes. They had received a parcel from the Americans or the British, I don't know who, and the quartermaster sent them to me. They were size 44 and I wear size 36. Walking through the mud of Moslavina, my shoes would stick in the mud and my feet would come out of them. I had to bend over, put my foot down in the mud, pull out the shoe and put it on again. This went on until I got myself a smaller pair of shoes and everything was all right again.

We next went to Ilirska Bistrica in Slovenia and on towards Trieste, where we disarmed a large number of Germans who were fleeing Slovenia because they were expecting the capitulation. Germany capitulated while I was in Slovenia. I was in Zone B and remained there. It was May, 1945.

Apart from my work in the signals company, because we maintained the lines between the brigade and the company, I sometimes worked in the brigade headquarters. They asked for me there occasionally because I knew how to type and write reports. More and more often I was on duty in the brigade headquarters and began working there. They then introduced me to code. The chief of the brigade headquarters was the only one who had the key to the cipher, no one else was allowed to know it. It consisted of the numbers which replaced letters. The code was changed frequently, so as not to fall into enemy hands and allow them to find out what we planned to do. Occasionally I also helped to decipher code. I was a clerk in the brigade headquarters, a kind of semi-cipher clerk.

They then recalled me to division headquarters. I went to take a one-week course in handling ciphers. In this way I became a cipher clerk in the Seventh Division and continued on with them. I reached Slovenia, all the way to Trieste. Then came the capitulation. I was promoted to head of the cipher clerks in the Seventh Division before the war ended. I was commissioned during the war as a second lieutenant and stayed in the unit. Because this was Zone B and I was a cipher clerk I could not be demobilised, as were all the girls who worked in the medical service and the political or technical departments. I alone stayed with the Seventh Division. Life gradually became more or less normal, despite occasional fighting.

Finally, at the end of 1945 and beginning of 1946, my commander said to me, after everyone else had gone to visit their families "Go on, you go too. Go and visit your people!" Suddenly, for the first time, I realised that I had nobody of my own, that all my family had been killed. I broke into hysterical weeping, saying "If the Army lets me go I'll be out in the street. I have nowhere to go, I don't know what to do. I can't return to Sarajevo." They sent me to Bled for a month to recover. There was a hotel, the Toplice, where the Partisan airmen stayed and occasionally came for recreation. During my month in Bled I learnt that my fiancé was alive. He invited me to Belgrade so that we could see each other and decide what we were going to do. My fiancé was a Jew, known in the Partisans as Stanko Salcberger. He was from Sarajevo and had joined the Partisans in July, 1941. His brother had also joined the Partisans the same month, but was caught and returned to Sarajevo. He was tried and publicly executed in Vrace. His family was deported to camps, his brother Alfred-Fredi to Jasenovac and his parents, Katica and Leopold, to Rab together with their daughter-in-law, Paula-Beba, née Krautblat. Of all his family, only his parents survived.

My fiancé, and subsequently husband, was in the Partisans from 1941 and, from the liberation until his retirement, remained in the Army. Before the war he had worked in Sarajevo as an engineer. He retired with the rank of major-general.