

סאנסקי מוסט

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TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

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SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

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BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

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*Livia BABIĆ*

## A LIFE BETWEEN JEWERY AND SOCIALISM



*L*ivia-Lili Babić was born on 15 February 1920 in Kecskemet, Hungary, of father Geza and mother Ana Brajder, née Špicer. She was the only child in an Ashkenazi family. The family moved to Osijek in 1927 and that was where Livia completed her primary school, the real grammar school and the secondary school of music. In Belgrade, where the family moved in 1938, she started her medical studies. She became active with the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia (SKOJ) and after the demonstrations of 27 March 1941 followed by the occupation of Yugoslavia she went to Dalmatia where, along with the hus-

band Mato Babić, she joined the Partisan units. She is decorated by the Partisans Commemorative Medal of 1941.

A total of 57 members of her immediate and greater family perished in the Holocaust, including her parents.

After the war, she lived with her family in Zagreb, where she graduated from the Faculty of Law in 1949. Until 1951 she worked for the State Prosecution Office in Zagreb, after which she moved with her family to Mostar and worked first in the personnel department in the aviation factory „Soko“ and later, until her retirement, as deputy director of the Social Insurance Fund for the Mostar District.

She died on 13 May 2001 in Belgrade. Her husband Mato died on 1 January 1964 in Mostar.

She had a son, Goran Babić, and twin daughters Branka Džidić and Zora Itković Zuckerman, eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

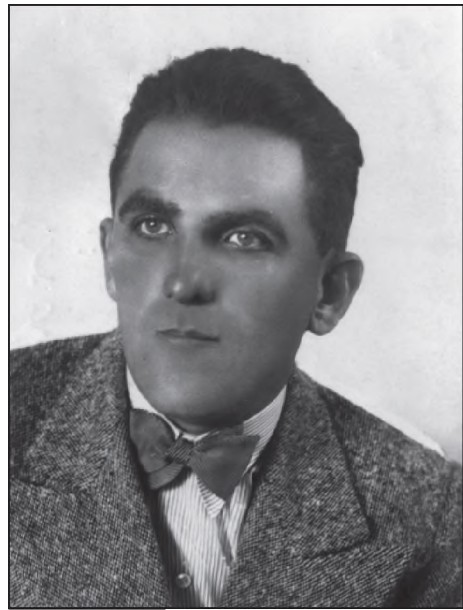
I was born in Kecskemet, Hungary, on 15 February 1920. My father Geza Brajder, a construction worker and trader, was born on 1 April 1895 in Velika Kikinda. During World War One he served for four years as officer in the Austria-Hungarian Army. He was decorated for his merits on the front with the highest decoration for courage – the „The Cross of Iron“, while his personal assistant received the order of „Knight“ (equivalent to our national hero), which my father did not receive due to his Jewish religion, although he was the commanding officer in that battle. On one out of the total of seven occasions in which he received injuries, he lost all of his teeth, so subsequently he had a prosthesis made of gold. After World War One in Pest he completed the High Commerce Academy and in 1927 the family moved to Osijek. In the period between the two wars he worked as representative of a German factory of construction machinery, including among others also the porcelain factory „Rosenthal“. That is why he travelled on business across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, always bringing home different valuables. One of such things were the notes for piano for my mother. I remember that he once brought for me as a surprise a whole branch of bananas, while I was still a child.

In September 1941 he bribed a member of the Gestapo to get a pass to leave town, and travelled with an automobile towards Zemun, taking with him a significant amount of money. He was arrested near the Belgrade Sava Bridge by Gestapo, who received prior intelligence. He was taken to the Banjica camp, and already the following day he was taken out of his prison cell and beaten to death by blows with the back of the gun, at the age of 46. While he was being beaten, his golden prosthesis fell out of his mouth. Subsequently, a plumber from Belgrade who was with him in the same cell and was subsequently released, provided testimony regarding the manner of my father's death. Father's lifeless body was thrown into the pit in Jajinci, in the vicinity of Belgrade.

My mother Ana Brajder, born in 1902, came from a very affluent Jewish family. She graduated the piano, violin and solo singing from the Music Conservatory in Pest. She was very religious, observing all Jewish holidays and regularly attending the synagogue. Right after the entry of the German Army in the destroyed Belgrade, many Belgrade Jews already in April 1941 were organized into groups to clear the debris in the city. Jews were the last to stand in lines for food in shops, when there was practically nothing to buy. My mother was sent to the group tasked with cleaning the city public toilets. In just one week her hair turned completely gray, she was wearing the yellow Star of David armband, respecting also numerous other anti-Jewish orders. A German collaborator moved into our house, who forced my mother to leave and move into a concrete laundry shed in the yard. Our house

contained a big library, my mother's concert piano, many valuable objects, wardrobe and jewelry. In the spring of 1942, after being first taken to the Zemlin concentration camp, she was suffocated at the age of 42 in the gas suffocation truck used for that purpose, a special German vehicle made for the purpose of suffocating Jews by means of carbon-monoxide poisoning. I learned about my mother's destiny in 1945 from our neighbor Nata Jovanović. My mother's body was also thrown into the Jajinci pit. Both my grandmothers had died before World War Two. My paternal grandmother, Julija Brajder, née Cukerman, died in 1926; while my maternal grandmother, Sidi Špicer, née Singer, died in 1937. My two grandfathers were killed during the Holocaust – my paternal grandfather Henrik Brajder at the age of 75, right after the arrival of Fascists to power in the prison in Velika Kikinda in 1941, and my maternal grandfather Mikša Špicer at the age of 78, after deportation from Hungary to Dachau in 1944.

From Hungary, where I started my primary school, we moved to Osijek in 1927, and we became Yugoslav nationals. I stayed in Osijek until 1938, when I matriculated in the girls' real grammar school. My best friend was a Jewess, Nada Njemirovski, and the two of us were the only two Jewish girls from our class to survive the Holocaust. Nada survived the Holocaust by fleeing Zagreb for Delnice, where she was at the end of the war. In 1945 Nada married a Jew, Tibor Prajs, a chemist, later to receive his Ph.D. in technological sciences. He survived the war as officer of the defeated pre-war Yugoslav Army who was taken as prisoner of war from 1941 to 1945, in a German PoW camp Furstenberg, near Berlin. I had known Tibor already from Osijek, and I met him after the war, after being surprised to see on post boxes in the house in which he had lived before the war the name Prajs written on one of the mail boxes. When we saw each other, we could not say a word; we just embraced each other and cried. Nada and I stayed best friends our whole life until 1987, when she died in Zagreb. Tibor died some months afterwards.



*GEZA BRAJDER, father of LIVIA BABIĆ*

In 1938 with my parents I moved to Belgrade, where I enrolled to study at the Medical Faculty. My parents had planned for me to first complete my studies and then to marry a Jew, my father's business associate Arpad, but in any case a Jew. The following year the World War Two broke out. My parents were aware that this meant uncertainty and lack of safety for the Jews. I shared this feeling, so on 3 July 1940 I married my colleague from my medical studies Mato Babić, a Croat from Dalmatia. He came from an affluent Dalmatian family, his father Boško had been to Johannesburg in the South African mines where he found a gold lode.

Until April 1941 I had no idea what poverty meant. But I still remember today with sadness my school friend with whom I shared a desk at school, Adolf Vajs from Osijek. He was pro-communist, well read, intelligent and proud. He came from a poor Jewish family, and being the oldest of the seven children of a poor tailor, he had to help his father in his shop. During the long break between classes we were often sitting in our desk, I always had a good breakfast, while his was very meager. Being aware that I would offend him if I offered to share what I had I would pretend that I disliked some of the food that was packed for me adding that my mother is very strict and I must not return any of it home. Thus we shared the food and I was happy that he was not hungry. He was killed by the Nazis. Many years later I understood that life brought us together but due to the then prevailing circumstances we did not appreciate it enough. I still keep Adolf Vajs in my memory as a pure, honest and unfortunate person.

Some days after taking part in the massive demonstrations in Belgrade against Yugoslavia joining the Tripartite Pact on 25 March and the event after the Pact was broken on 27 and 28 March 1941, together with my husband and my mother I took a train from Belgrade to Metković and further to Slivno, the birth place of my husband. While going through Sarajevo I saw a hand written notice saying: „No entry allowed for Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and dogs“. Upon arrival to Metković we went to the nearby Slivno, and my father also arrived there in the meantime. He planned to go to Split with my mother, but she insisted that they should return to Belgrade to try and protect their house and property. I never saw them again.

The proclamation of the so-called Independent State of Croatia on 10 April 1941 found me with my husband in Slivno. I found myself in a place where I did not know the people, or the mentality, I was never before in such rocky scenery. In that region women had no role in public life, and from a politically active woman I became like all the other women whose names were not even mentioned, rather they were referred to as the wife of Jure, of the wife of Marko. The district of Metković had very few Jews, but they were prominent, like for instance the Hajmer couple, who were doctors, and

also doctor Papo and some others. I do not know what happened with them afterwards.



*LIVIA with her parents in Split in 1935*

Since my arrival in Slivno until the time I joined the Partisans there were two favorable circumstances: others were not aware that I was Jewish, and besides I was a woman. I must say that Mato's family never made a single comment or allusion regarding my Jewish origin. The Ustaša commissioner in charge of the region, don Petar Antić, did not attach any significance to women, he neglected them and belittled them as politically dangerous, in contrast with men. With the Ustaša coming to power, news began to arrive regarding the persecution of Serbs by the Ustaša in Hercegovina. We heard of property being hoarded; there were numerous murders; men, women and children were thrown into pits or the Neretva river, either individually or jointly tied by wire. There was news that many Serbs fled the killing and the persecution by going into the woods. The then directive for communists was to be ready at the moment when the Party calls them to join the fight; only those who were well known communists and at risk were to go underground; and others were to stay at home until further notice.

Just one day after the German attack on the USSR, on 23 June 1941, some young men informed us that an Ustaša patrol from Opuzen is arriving to Slivno to arrest certain individuals. Mato right away went under-



ground. I was concerned that the Ustaša would kill me immediately if they arrested me. Early in the morning on 24 June 1941, Ante Juračić "Mali" came from Duboka with a message that I should come and join the anti-Fascists. Right away I packed a bag and left home. Excited and fearful I arrived in Duboka, where I was met by some relatives of fled anti-Fascists. They gave me some food for our comrades and in a boat, along with Petar Juračić, I moved to the Pelješac peninsula, to the place „Bezzemlje“. Thus, we were the first illegal activists in that region of Neretva, and every day we were joined by new anti-Fascists. It is a fact that I was among the first women in Dalmatia in the woods as an illegal activist in a military camp run by the Communist party. We used the name guerilla for the camp, and only after consultations of the Army HQ under the command of Josip Broz Tito in Stolice on 26 September 1941, the names of partisan formations were officially introduced. Our camp was a core of future units. The Partisan military camps in the region run by the Communist Party were located in the vicinity of Dančani and Bristava, but all camps were constantly on guard and often changed locations.

Our camp consisted of about twenty individuals. I cooked and darned clothes, and I learned to use a rifle, I kept guard like the others. At the beginning of autumn 1941 our Partisan camp was disbanded due to difficulties in getting food and weapons. We returned to Mato's house in Slivna. At that time, at the beginning of October 1941, don Petar Antić denounced me and Mato to the Ustaša authorities. We were accused of listening to Radio-Moscow, advocating communism and the Soviet Union. We were arrested in the house of Mato's parents and taken to the prison first in Mostar and subsequently in Dubrovnik. Although the Ustaša laws stipulated that all detainees from such groups would be handed over to regular courts, certain local Ustaša specifically asked that we be handed over to the court-martial in Sarajevo. I remember the day when a group of our comrades from Ljubuški was acquitted how happy they were there in the corridor of the Mostar prison. While in Mostar prison I maintained contact with Mato by means of food portions. Due to conflicts over jurisdiction between Italian and Ustaša authorities (since the region was declared the Italian occupation zone), a whole group of about thirty communists from all over Dalmatia and Herzegovina was handed over to district courts. There was, however, an order from Zagreb to the Mostar District Court that all prisoners be handed over to regular district courts, meaning that for the two of us it would be the District Court in Dubrovnik. Dr Zlatar, the president of the Mostar District Court, made an order giving jurisdiction over us to the Dubrovnik District Court, meaning not granting the local Ustaša their ambition to send us before the court-martial. After

the liberation, dr Zlatar was not convicted, but he died several months after being released from remand prison.



*Fighting Fascism together: husband MATE, in the photograph of 1939,  
and LIVIA in the photograph of 1945*

Thus, in May 1942, Mato and I were transferred to the Dubrovnik prison. Since don Petar Antić, as the key witness, did not appear before the court, I was acquitted and released after the first hearing. My husband was also released soon afterwards, since don Antić, coming to Mato's hearing, withdrew his allegations. At the end of the hearing don Antić told Mato that all ended well and that Mato should not forget this. Mato briefly responded: „Neither this, nor anything else“.

Right after leaving prison we wanted to join the Partisans again, but the links needed for this were interrupted and we had to wait. Soon, Mato was transferred; there was no place for me. The situation in Dubrovnik was becoming increasingly difficult and there were some inquiries about me in the house where I lived alone. As a young woman of only 22, I remember one awful and terrifying day. I was going down towards the main street Stradun to meet my contact person, and I ran into a cordon of Italian Army around the street on which trucks were driving. We passers-by were told to leave and take another road to town. Yet, a crowd of people gathered before the cordon formed by Italian soldiers. Italians were rounding up Jews in several trucks: men, women, children, the old. I saw families with children, all

calling each other; men were loaded on the trucks separately; the elderly women had difficulties getting on; the children were crying; the trucks were packed full. The Italian soldiers were shouting, the children were crying, and I – a Jew – stood there outside the cordon watching! Everything within me was breaking up, the trucks were driving off, the cordon was disbanded, the passers-by continued on with what they were doing. I was thinking of my family of whom I knew nothing. Then I went to the square, and there was Italian music playing, the Italian flag was being displayed. All those present raised their hand to the Fascist salute and I, devastated, with my hands down, waited for the music to stop. That was when an Italian soldier came up to me and caught me by the hand trying to demonstrate what I needed to do. I understood him only too well, but I was just blankly staring at my hand, so he angrily turned around, mumbled „imbecile“ and left. Although it was not wise of me to do this, still I could not help it, I just could not raise my hand into the Fascist salute.

In autumn 1942 I came by ship to Trpanj on the Pelješac peninsula, where the Italians had a garrison and guards at all exit points from the town. I got through with fake documents as Nikica Brajković, from the island of Mljet, born in 1918, single. Leaving the Italian guard behind us, a few of us came to Partisan positions close to settlement Donja Vručica. There I asked a partisan to briefly give me his Partisan hat, he was surprised and did as asked, and I gently caressed the Partisan star on it and I started to sob. All that I had been through came out in this sobbing of joy, because I was again among people of the same mind, in the liberated territory. Men stood in silence; they certainly would not react as I just did, but they understood. A partisan put his arm around my shoulder and calmed me down.

As I was fluent in foreign languages, including German, French, Latin, Hungarian and Yiddish, Ivo Mordin-Crni, the political secretary of the District Committee for Southern Dalmatia seconded me to work for the logistics of the district committee for that region. We were printing leaflets and other propaganda materials, our newsletter titled „Our Weekly“. At night, under the light given out by the radio station, I would be listening at different news stations and writing information that I would re-type on a copying matrix and publish. The machines on one occasion were located above the town of Trpanj in a cave on the highest point of the peninsula. I would sit up through the night by the radio and write, while wolves would come to the entry to the cave, I could see their burning eyes in the dark, and hear their terrifying wailing. I had a pistol, but I could not even think of shooting because of the Italian positions nearby. We had orders that we were liable with our lives for the machines, as such machines were more difficult to come

by than people. Very few people knew where the machines were located. I repeatedly expressed my wish to join combat units, but Mordin would not allow this, as I was more useful where I was.

In spring of 1943 I was admitted to be a member of the Communist Party. That happened at the time of deplorable terror by Italians including killing, arrests, and burning down of villages. The majority of the Partisan army was moved to the mountain Biokovo. I abandoned the machinery and left Pelješac in May 1943 and was never back there. That also meant saying goodbye to Mordin, whom I never saw again, as he was killed in 1944 in Pelješac. The Committee sent me to the Metković district to work for the AFŽ (the Anti-Fascist Women's Front), taking over the task of secretary of district AFŽ committee. My husband Mato was in the Biokovo-Neretva region and after a long while hearing that I have moved, he came to see me. He seemed changed, dressed in a semi-military fashion and carrying a rifle, Tito-style hat and the red Partisan star on it. In the period that followed Mato was working along the Party lines; we seldom met, and spent very little time together.



*One of the favorite portraits: LIVIA in a Partisan uniform, as seen by the artist*

On one occasion we arrested a number of Germans. They were terrified and young, like us. I translated while they were interrogated. They said that they are not Fascists and are not in the Army on voluntary basis. They were sentenced to be executed before a shooting range, and commander Prpić named me as the person to execute it. I rejected. He was furious and I am sure that it was a man doing what I did he would shoot him right there. I was very much upset and told him all kinds of things, primarily that I do not see executing tied up Germans as heroic.

When the Biokovo-Neretva region was under the risk during the Sixth Offensive, the regional management decided to transfer by ship the local women, children and the sick to take refuge on the island of Hvar, from where they were moved on to Italy and subsequently El Shatt refugee camps in Sinai. This transfer started near the end of 1943. About ten of us women

comrades were sent along to assist these refugees. I had two bombs and a revolver that I received in Hvar from the navy commander Josip Černi, whom I met earlier in Dubrovnik. Soon the group of refugees was shipped to the island of Vis. Some of my friends, among them Paula Zon, went along with them, while some of us returned to Biokovo.

Very soon it was 1944. Resistance to fascism became widespread.

I was afraid that Mato might be killed in these last years of the war. Already then I had fears that my parents might have been killed. I wanted to have a child so that, in case I would survive, I would not be all alone. It was soon decided that I am to be sent to the island of Vis, where I arrived at the beginning of spring 1944. I was seconded to work in the hospital and had the duty of deputy political commissioner. It was the military hospital of the VIII Corps. Once the combined British-Partisan hospital was established in the village Pothumlje, between Komiža and Vis, I was appointed deputy commissioner of the hospital and secretary of the party unit. Already at that time I started feeling that I was pregnant. While in advanced pregnancy, I was transferred to Vis, to the post of commissioner of the regional hospital. I worked until my labor started. My joy about having a baby was immense. I gave birth to my son Goran on 18 October 1944 in Vis. I was soon given a pass to travel freely with my son from Vis to Makarska, to be closer to Mato and his family. The child was not thriving; I had serious difficulties in getting milk for him. At the beginning of 1945 I was appointed commissioner of the regional hospital in Makarska, while Mato was in the Neretva region engaged at founding the national liberation committee there.

Subsequently I moved to work in Metković. Within the District National Liberation Committee I was initially in charge of health care, later education, and was secretary of the district committee of AFŽ. I was soon appointed member of the District Committee of the Communist Party of Croatia for Metković.

In 1946 we moved to Zagreb and I enrolled to study at the Faculty of Law, where I graduated in 1949. In Zagreb we had two daughters, twins Branka and Zora.

It was only after the war was over that we faced the fact that of our numerous direct and greater family a total of 57 members had perished, while only seven of us survived, living all over the world. Two of my relatives are living in Budapest, one relative in Buenos Aires, her brother in Paris, my grandmother's youngest brother in Netanya, and my uncle and myself in Yugoslavia.