

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

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WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

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Olivera ĐURĐIĆ\*

## MY MEMORY IS THE ONLY MONUMENT TO MY FAMILY



*Olivera Đurđić, née Gutman, comes from a well-known family of Partisan Jews from Užice, a town in western Serbia. Her mother Frida, a doctor, and sister Vita died while with the Partisans. Father Iro, also a doctor, died on his return from German PoW camp. Olivera, still very young, was the only one of the family who survived.*

*After their studies in Vienna, the parents of Olivera Đurđić, Jews from Poland, came to work as doctors in Čajetina. They were accepted warmly and with respect. That is where they had and raised their children. An almost idyllic life among the Serbs was interrupted with the beginning of the war. The expansion of Fascism sent members of this peaceful family to different corners and made the family practically disappear: the father ended up in Germany, the mother in Bosnia, one daughter was killed as a Partisan.*

*After the war Olivera married Dušan Đurđić, with whom she had a daughter Zorica, doctor, professor at the Medical Faculty in Belgrade and son Veljko, an attorney at law. She also has grandchildren Vita and Goran.*

*She worked in the judiciary, and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Afterwards, until her retirement, she worked for the Ministry of Interior.*

*She has been decorated with the Partisan Commemorative Medal of 1941 and a number of other decorations and prizes.*

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\*Oliver Đurđić died in March 2007 during the preparation of her testimony for Press.

And here I am, eighty years of age, surrounded by my children and grandchildren ... What else could I want?

The time does its work. Whether we want it or not, our memories are here. Memories of the past, of our childhood – as much as we had it – of the beginning of things.

With this, the feeling of injustice, even if not solicited, comes over us. The overall injustice of the twentieth century which hit most strongly those who were born as Jews.

For me, in my microcosm, it is the injustice that hit my family. A stable, honest family, practically at its beginnings. Of the four of us, of everything that we dreamed, wanted or believed, I was the only one that survived.

The beginnings here in this beautiful country called Yugoslavia were marked by enthusiasm, humanity and human solidarity.

Here is how it started:

My father Iro was born in 1888 and my mother Frida in 1893 in what used to be Austria-Hungary, in a place Podhajce. They lived in houses next to each other. However, my father came from a very poor family, while my mother from an affluent, aristocratic family.

After graduating from grammar school (father in Tarnopolje, mother partly in Vienna), they both studied medicine and graduated in Vienna. With one major difference: my father studied while working as physical laborer, and my mother lived an affluent life in her own apartment in Vienna.

However, the love that was born while they were still at school had persisted.

After completing their studies – and this was the time of the World War One – mother worked as a clinical doctor in Vienna and father was mobilized as doctor – officer of the Austrian Army, and ended up in the mountain of Zlatibor.

Using his position of doctor my father in Zlatibor did not only heal people but saved many of them from mobilization and detention, and the people of the Zlatibor region for this reason saw him and declared him their benefactor. In the end he made them a promise that after the war he would return and they, with hundreds of their signatures, wrote to the Yugoslav Government asking it to grant him citizenship.

After the war, he withdrew with the Army, returned to Vienna, and heard the news that his citizenship had been granted.

In September 1921 Iro and Frida were married in Vienna, and for this reason my mother's wealthy family disowned her (the family came to terms with this marriage only after their second daughter was born). That was

when her mother and grandmother came to Užice and brought her dowry: jewelry, fur-coat, silverware).

Right after the wedding they moved to Čajetina which at that time consisted of only a small number of houses. They were, of course, the only Jewish family in the region.

Soon afterwards, at the end of 1922, they moved to Užice, where father as specialist of veneric diseases worked for the District Insurance Office and mother, as specialist of internal medicine, worked in the school polyclinic. They both also lectured relevant subject in the grammar school and at the teacher training college.

When they moved to Užice they were joined by my father's mother who stayed there until the end of her life and was buried at the Užice cemetery. Children were born: in 1923 Vita, and in 1927 I was born.

We were the only Jewish family living in Užice, although there were Jews who stayed there intermittently: Rašela Hagon Kulišić from Bjeljina, who for a time worked as professor of French; Josip Fenje, veterinary, with his wife and two daughters, Magda and Ilonka, who stayed there in the wake of the war. And there was also Martin Špicer, a dental technician from Sombor, who came and married a woman from Užice and stayed there. We were very close with them.

The language used at home was German, although my sister and I mostly spoke Serbian with our father. Father and mother spoke Yiddish but, fearing that this would damage our German, did not allow us to speak it. We did not observe Jewish or any other holidays.

Since at that time Orthodox Christian course was mandatory in schools, both my sister and I attended it, with our father's written consent. There was nothing Jewish in Užice and we were brought up in the spirit of the place in



*The GUTMAN family in Užice in the 1930's*

which we lived. This was possibly best illustrated by the testimony of Blažo Savičević, professor of the Užice grammar school, arrested together with Vita Gutman in June 1941. When asked by the investigator about his nationality, Vita responded: „Serbian“. Irritated, the investigator, emphasized: „Vita Gutman is clearly a Jewish name and therefore you are Jewish, not Serbian“. To this Vita calmly responded: „I speak Serbian, write Serbian, think and feel like it. I completed Serbian primary school and Serbian grammar school in Užice and was member of the choir of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Therefore, I am Serbian, and put it down like that, otherwise I refuse to sign the interrogation protocol“.

Equally, the way that the people there treated us was so natural and good that we felt at home.

At that time father did not travel anywhere, while mother, my sister and I did from time to time travel to visit our grandmother, grandfather and uncle in Podhajce, Vienna and Lviv. Podhajce, near Lviv, was a small town, like Užice. Before World War Two it had a population of 8,000. We went there for the last time in 1935.

By the nature of his work and also by his character my father became very much appreciated among his patients – workers. In his private practice he did medical examinations for the poor without charging them, issued medical certificates and often also bought medicines for them, and was soon known as the „doctor of the poor“. Thus, his professional activity was also getting a political meaning. More so since he often used his physician's right to make referrals for specialized examinations thus enabling many emancipated people not only to get treatment but also performing their political tasks in Belgrade.

Understandably, this did not go unnoticed. In the increasingly Fascist environment, which was manifested in many different ways, the newspaper „Užički glas“, within its seven-months long debate regarding Jews, in December 1935, in a deplorable manner attached the Gutman “Chifuti” couple (derogatory local term for Jews). Encouraged by his friends from Užice, father filed a lawsuit against the author, who was a teacher in the teacher training college. The author was sentenced with conditional sentence and a fine for defamation. The fine, at my father's request, was paid in favor of the widow Vida Penezić and Radojko Vidić, worker of armaments factory.

The well known political atmosphere was becoming increasingly complex and the Gutman home became a meeting place for many emancipated people and ideas, more so since the older daughter Vita was already involved in the illegal communist youth organization.

After 27 March 1941, my father was mobilized as reserve officer of the Yugoslav Army and sent to the region of Timočka Krajina. As his unit,

during its withdrawal to Bosnia, was passing through Užice, he used that opportunity and told us to get packed. He intended to have the three of us go via Sarajevo to Italy and onwards to America. We had all the necessary documents which were secured for us already in 1940 by my father's step brother. Initially, father rejected this offer for us to come to New York, not wanting to „desert his homeland“. But, as everything around us and for us was becoming increasingly risky, he made an irrevocable decision to save his family. It happened, however, that the Germans entered Užice that very night, and our departure failed.

With his unit my father went to Rogatica, where the whole unit was taken prisoners. The Germans soon released the sanitation staff, so he returned to Užice already in April, for Easter.

Of the total of four doctors in Užice at that time (population of 8,000) father and mother were the only ones fluent in German, others were mostly French oriented or studied in France. That was why, at the meeting of the German authorities with all the doctors, the head doctor recommended my father (who in all his administrative documents declared himself as Serbian) to take the post of hospital manager. The hospital surgeon reacted to this with a question: „Should we have a Chifut to be a hospital manager?“ The situation was very unpleasant and the head doctor then addressed my father, saying that Führer's ideology does not allow cooperation with Jews and that for this reason he would as of that day have to report three times a day to the local command.

After this, again following the advice of his friends, my father went to the camp for Yugoslav officers' prisoners of war to Germany. While in Germany, he was all the time a prisoner of war and, as doctor, he was moved from one camp to another.



*IRO GUTMAN, doctor, reserve officer of the Yugoslav Army, in the wake of the war*



Užice was completely overwhelmed by the atmosphere of war. Although the citizens of Užice, irrespective of their political beliefs, were mostly protective of us, we are anyway very much concerned. Father and mother had already earlier removed from the house exterior the table indicating their private medical practice with their names on it. The whole town was preparing for the time of absolute shortage of everything, so we also had at home huge stocks of everything. Aware of our Jewishness, father (briefly, until leaving as PoW) and mother stopped working. We lived on those stocks and some savings that my parents had.

Mother, Vita and I stayed in Užice and Vita finally managed to matriculate, as one of only eight pupils who matriculated with excellent marks, with huge support of some of her grammar school professors, despite the difficulties caused by other anti-Semitic and Ljotić-supporting pupils and professors. She was repeatedly arrested, contested, but she was committed to her activity as member of SKOJ (Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia).

In June 1941 we were evicted from the apartment that we lived in, with only some bundled-up things to carry with us. The apartment was seized for the needs of the armed forces. We were told to go to the collection center for Jews, which was used for deporting Jews to concentration camps.

We were saved thanks to the appeals made by friends and guarantees given by teacher Dragi Đoković. That man, father of five children, aware of the risk he was taking, and with the support of some other citizens of Užice, managed to save us and take us to his home.

The war reached us.

Father was in PoW camp, the three of us in Užice.

The courageous, committed, dynamic Vita was becoming increasingly active. Through her, mother made contacts and treated wounded and sick partisans of the newly established Užice detachment. When Partisans liberated Užice on 24 September 1941, mother started volunteering in the Partisan hospital. There she met and treated the heavily wounded Joža Baruh who, unfortunately, died of consequences of the severe wounds. Vita joined a Partisan detachment, and I got engaged in the unit for culture and arts.

Užice was bombed in October 1941, and in November the same year there was an explosion in the armaments factory. There were casualties and injured people all over the place. Next came the order to withdraw from Užice and my mother, together with me, accompanied the withdrawing line of injured people who could move, via Zlatibor, towards Sandžak.

That is how our wartime Calvary started. Zlatibor, Sandžak, Montenegro, Bosnia, and more. Kilometer after kilometer of moving on foot in the rain, snow and ice. Mostly along hilly areas without roads. We were moving

sometimes on our own, sometimes in chance encounters. Each of us always wondering – where are the others. And the news that we got was uncertain, often cruel: „Vita was executed... No, she is with her unit at such and such place.“

For the first time we were all three together in wartime in February-March 1942. Mother and I with the group of refugees and the field hospital were crossing the river Lim, we met Vita there and continued together towards the hospital in Žabljak. Soon afterwards mother was seconded to be manager of the hospital in Čajniče, Vita joined her brigade, the hospital from Čajniče withdrew to Rudine, and I went to the Zlatar battalion as a nurse.

There was another encounter with Vita, in June 1942, but only a brief one in passing.

At the time mother was managing a number of hospitals in the surroundings of Bosanski Petrovac. By that time she was a respected Partisan doctor who, despite advanced years (she was already fifty) and her origin which was quite different than those around her, was closely integrated in her environment. Thus, in May 1943 she was awarded an impressive recognition for the time: with the first decree regulating ranks in the National Liberation Army she was made a major.

With my unit I was part of the Fourth (Neretva) and Fifth (Sutjeska) offensives. At the time of the Neretva offensive, in Jablanica, I met my mother. We were in a house that was hit directly by a bomb. The house collapsed on us, but luckily the bomb did not explode. All along the river Neretva I saw dead fighters of the Seventh Banija Brigade, killed by aviation machine guns. With my unit I crossed the river Neretva and went into combat with the Chetniks who, together with Germans, had us under siege.

I am trying very hard to resist the natural tendency to say only the best about my family, therefore I must note that what I am saying here is just a small part of the testimonies by many people recorded in the document: „Užice Compendium“, published in 1979 in Užice. For the most part I relied on the contents of this document, and less on my personal memories which always pose a risk of letting our emotions lead us.

In their memory, many people whom my mother treated as doctor emphasize her professionalism, and especially her human approach and empathy which, in improvised Partisan hospitals sometimes was more valuable than medical therapy. Even in situations when her own daughters were among the sick and the wounded, she always treated everyone equally. She was very demanding of herself and this was, obviously, what won her the general respect of others.

In my present situation and age I cannot but mention one detail: while treating the Partisan Kosovka Tus – and I am quoting here the memories of Kosovka – she became quite attached to this young girl. By coincidence, Vita and I happened to be there at the time. She introduced us to each other and she divided one ampoule of glucose to the three of us, saying: „Children, if you survive this war, think of each other as sisters!“ I cannot but wonder how it feels for a mother to tell her children, with good reason, „if you survive“?



*VITA, OLIVERA'S older sister, killed in battle in 1943 at Sutjeska*

In June 1943 there was another brief encounter of Vita and me and our mother. In May I contracted spotted typhoid fever and was again in mother's hospital. That was the time when the Fifth offensive was at its peak. One and the same bomb wounded both my mother (in her head) and myself (lungs). During the break-through across the river Sutjeska, as we were passing, we saw Vita. I crossed the river Sutjeska with the group led by Sava Kovačević. The following night we continued breaking through the German siege. I was in a line with some ten Partisans ahead of me when the rumor spread – „Sava has fell“. I moved on trying to get closer and I slipped, plunged down the hill all the way to the river Hrčavka and stayed there.

Soon afterwards Vita was killed, and I remained in the siege alone. Exhausted, lost, hungry. Some of us who had lagged behind started to get together in village Vrbnica and organized a search for our Partisan units. As this seemed impossible, I had no choice but to find any unit. In Vrbnica I met dr Sima Milošević and Ivan Goran Kovačić, who were also killed there.

By coincidence I ran into a local Chetnik unit, whose head of HQ was in fact collaborating with partisans. To cut the long story short, after many complications, I came to my mother who at that time was a doctor of the Banija Division.

In June 1944 it was decided that mother should go to Bari, as doctor of the partisan hospital. She rejected, wishing to be at home at the time of liberation.

She was repeatedly moved from one hospital to another and finally in September 1944 she was with the mobile division hospital caring for the wounded. My last encounter with my mother happened at the time when the

hospital was on its way to Banja Luka. She accompanied my unit as it was leaving town, and then she helplessly started to cry.

Some days later, leading a group of wounded fighters to the corps hospital and having received the order to take the task of hospital manager – my mother was killed at the end of September 1944, the details of this being unknown.

There are several versions of how it happened: that she was arrested, that she was murdered by her throat being cut, that she fought until the last moment, protecting the wounded from about 2,000 Chetniks, knowing how hopeless the situation was she, together with another woman, threw a bomb in front of her.

And what about the father?

Throughout the war he was in the prisoner of war camp, maintaining correspondence with his patients and friends from the past. From the letters that have been preserved it can be seen that they practically regularly sent packages to him, gave him information about us, as much as possible. This information is valuable for him, especially since the newspapers that he could get hold of often included different malicious and misleading articles regarding the fate of Jews, and our own.

He lived until the end of the war and then, returning home, on 29 April 1945, he met an acquaintance – a Chetnik, who intentionally misled him, telling him that his whole family had been executed already in 1941. His weak heart could not sustain this. (That man was in Užice all the time until 1943 and knew too well that Gutman's wife and both daughters were with the Partisans. But, he was exercising his task of discouraging every Yugoslav officer returning home.)



*With her mother, in an intermission between fighting for liberation that they both took part in from the very beginning of the war*

I do not know the exact burial site either for my mother or my sister. Still, some marks do exist. Mother's name is inscribed on the commemorative plate of fallen Partisan doctors in the building of the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade, and my sister's name is inscribed in the commemorative plate of fallen pupils of the Užice grammar school.

The war was over. None of my family was there. I was seventeen and a half. Without anything or anyone, without a home or an apartment. But I was not alone. In the post-war enthusiasm which to present day generations may be unthinkable, on the wings of youth, with friends and brothers in arms, it seemed as if I was not without a family. I felt as if it was one big family.

Subsequently I married a man from Užice, Dušan Đurđić. And a new, young family was thus created.

Today, my daughter Zorica is a doctor, professor at the Medical Faculty in Belgrade, and my son Veljko is an attorney at law. I also have grandchildren Vita and Goran. They are my new youth and a strong motivation for me to live even in my advanced age.

Right after the war I was employed in the Prosecution Service, subsequently in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was to be sent abroad, but my husband Dušan was scheduled to work in Užice and I naturally joined him. At the end of the 1950's we moved to Belgrade, and I worked until retirement in the Ministry of Interior.

I was decorated with the Partisans Commemorative Medal of 1941 and a number of Partisan orders. Due to the lungs injury (a piece of exploded bomb is still in the tissue) I am disabled with 40 percent disability. I live with my children and grandchildren. Despite the burden of age I am still well.

Finally, I wish to underline that I have always been – during the war, after the war, and still today – proud of the fact that I was a soldier of the National Liberation Army which fought the occupiers and quislings in my country. My parents, who came here as foreigners – Jews from Poland – loved this country and called it their own. And I, when I speak of this country, I am speaking of my only country – Yugoslavia. That is where I was born, where I lived and where I will end my life.

I proudly remember my parents and my sister who died fighting against the Fascism. I remember and this memory of mine is the only monument to them. They do not have other monuments. This memory will continue to live through my children and grandchildren. Who could say that this is too little?