

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGREB

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

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SARAJEVO

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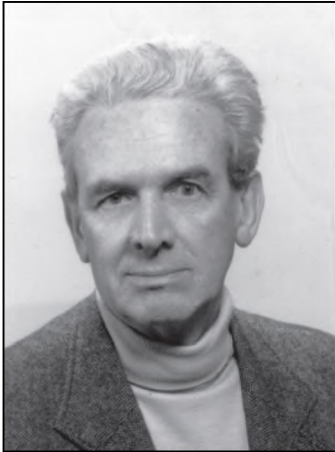
YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

Jakob ATIJAS

OPTIMISM SUSTAINED ME



Jakob Atijas was born in Sarajevo in 1920, in a working class family. Father Moric was a waiter and mother Mirjam, née Kabiljo, born in Žepče, was a housewife. The elder sister Rikica-Rivka was doing apprenticeship for a tailor, brother Samuel for a plumber, while younger sister Flora was attending elementary school. His paternal grandmother, Mirjam, née Romano, had nine children.

The whole of his direct family perished in the Holocaust – mother, both sisters, and brother.

After the war he was employed in the Army, where he retired with the rank of colonel. From his marriage to Anka Atias he has a son Boroslav and a grandson living in Brisbane, Australia.

Editorial note: the manuscript is published in an abbreviated form, while the whole text is maintained with the Jewish Historical Museum.

While I was working as a young man I came in contact with other workers. Among them there were those who were part of the workers' movement, but also those who were not. They wanted to win us over for their ideas and thus I became a member of the Youth URS trade unions. That was the circle of friends that I moved around in. I read as much as I could or knew, primarily books by Jack London and other authors.

I never had any conflicts with other people. Anti-Semitism was first felt with the coming of Hitler to power. Already at that time Jews started to

arrive from Austria. People tended to think: maybe it is not going to happen to me. Still, there was fear. It was becoming increasingly difficult. We were aware of what was happening: starting from destruction of property, arrests and killing, even before the concentration camps were established.

In the business where I was working there were Croats of Catholic religion, Serbs of Christian Orthodox religion, Muslims, two Germans. We lived a normal life. Our boss was not supporter of either Nazism or anti-Semitism. He was a Serb, a decent and honest man. He had six or seven apprentices and the same number of assistants. That was how it was until 1941.

After 6 April 1941, when the German troops entered Sarajevo, my boss had to close the business because he was denied the operating permit. At that time, the commissioner came to the shop. The shop became a workshop in which the Wermacht maintained their passenger vehicles. They kept some of the workers to continue working there. I was called at the end of May and stayed working there until end of July 1941, when the order came from the Gestapo to fire all those who were not „Arian“. That was how I and two more workers were fired.

I continued to live in Sarajevo with my family, my mother, sisters and brother. My father had died in 1937 of heart attack, aged 49.

Living jobless and labeled was not easy. Initially, we were wearing yellow badges with the letter J, and subsequently we were given armbands, because it was believed that the badges were not sufficiently visible. Relations among people changed. A curfew was introduced, at twilight you were not to be out in the street.

Raids began. Camps were already set up. In Sarajevo there was talk that Jews were being rounded up in Zagreb and other places. Some Jews from Sarajevo left the city for places under Italian occupation. My sister Rivka continued to work for a bit longer, as she was a tailor, the younger sister could no longer attend school, and the brother also became jobless.



MIRJAM and MORIC, mother and father of JAKOB ATIJAS, 1919

We were terrified that something was going to happen to us. We had our backpacks packed in case it all came to the worst. We had heard that some distinguished Jews from Zagreb and Sarajevo were already deported. We anticipated that at some point it would grow in scale and that our turn would come.

Going to the forest was not possible. We were waiting to be deported. In the evening on 3 September 1941, the Ustaša police blocked some streets in the centre of town. A person could escape here or there. My brother and I thought that we would be successful in getting away, but we were not, since our mother and the younger sister were with us (the older one had in the meantime married). The Ustaša police came and knocked at our door at nine thirty at night. We knew what it was. They rounded us up into police cars, took us to the Sarajevo railway station and onto animal cargo carriages.

We could take with us only what we could carry in our hands. Everything was already packed. The Ustaša police handed us over to Ustaša supervision service in the carriages.

The first looting of our belongings happened when we were loaded onto carriages. „Open up, what do you have? Take it out!“ Less than half of what we had remained with us. They took whatever was good, including my shoes. Luckily, people from the transport gave me another pair of shoes.

Kruščica is a place near Travnik. That was where they put up a temporary camp. The transport took about half of the night and in the morning we were in Kruščica. We were unloaded, and went into the camp made for Bosnian Jews. They first started rounding up people from Sarajevo. Every day they were deporting new ones. They did not separate us; rather, as the families arrived they took their space in the barrack.

The camp commander was officer Mandušić, a man from the region of Lika or Dalmatia, a “Vlaj” as they said to imply his origins. He was an immigrant. Immigrant Ustaša carried on their collar the three-color flag which distinguished them from others. I do not remember others. Once again they registered us and once again they “cleaned” us“. My mother, brother, sister and I were in one corner of the barrack. They left us alone.

Transports were arriving every day. Humanitarian organizations started sending us food. A kitchen was established.

All that we did was maintain the hygiene in the camp, where we stayed until the end of September, when an order arrived to separate men and send them to another camp, and leave the women and children there. At the time my brother was 16 and he had to go. They lined us up, separated the men from the women and children, putting the women to one end and us to the

other. They opened up the rail carriages and that was when we knew that we were going to Jasenovac.

There was beating and hitting with gun butts. The Ustaša supervision service took us over from the camp guards and transported us to Jasenovac. We travelled in livestock carriages. It was completely dark inside, the windows closed. It was in the carriages that people had to relieve themselves. There were older people there as well. And so it was for two nights and one day.

There were more than fifty people per carriage. We were just watching what was happening around us. Until that time they had not yet killed anyone, but they did hit people with gun butts and feet. They would not allow us to help the elderly, and if we tried they even hit them.

In the first camp we did not carry any markings, except for the yellow armbands that we arrived from Sarajevo with.

When we arrived to Jasenovac in the morning, the Ustaša were there with dogs, at a distance of one meter from each other. They opened up the carriage door and we had to jump out, while being pushed and kicked. That was how they started torturing and arranging us. We were registered, inspected in case someone had a fork or a knife or any valuables. They took all the watches, necklaces, bracelets or anything else that was overlooked in Kruščica and took it all away.

They separated us for camp 1 and camp 2. Camp 1 was located in Krapje, and camp 2 on the river Strug, in Jasenovac. The elderly were separated right away for camp 1. There were also younger ones who volunteered to go there, and they were executed soon afterwards. We then went to the camp in Strug because the Jasenovac camp was not yet completed. There we found inmates from Croatia. We continued building the barracks. The fighting and the killing started. Every morning we had to go to work. We worked with shovels, transporting earth to the embankment.

We spent the first night outside. It was raining. The barracks were still not there.



JAKOB ATIJAS as a youth

The second day they organized us into groups, each of between 25 and 30 people, and we were put up in barracks.

As of the next day it started with the roll call and then going to work. We were given shovels, hacks, hoes. We were excavating the earth. About 45 inmates were accompanied by 7-8 Ustaša. The food was very poor: water, a few pieces of beans, very little potatoes, there would sometimes be a small piece of bread, and sometimes not.

On our return we were searched. We would leave our tools and had to go in between Ustaša as if through a tunnel of some kind. They intersected us and beat us up with gun butts or bayonets. Three or four days later I ran into a bayonet. There was no doctor, and the wounds did not heal properly as they were not sutured.

They had there what we called mouse-traps, made of barbed wire, about 80 centimeters high. A person was to go inside, but could not sit, rather had to take a semi-lying position. Once we spent the night in it. They said we did not do the work well and in the morning we were sent back to do it again. There were also non-Jews there, but less at that time than later. Later on Croats who did not support the regime also arrived, along with anti-Fascists and members of the National Liberation Movement.

I was there until the end of October; then, one day, we were lined up and asked what each of us could do, what our qualifications were. So they separated us by trades into carpenters, metal workers, and so on.

My brother stayed in camp 2 because they did not need plumbers, and I was taken to Jasenovac, to Lančara (the chain factory). Already at that time they started setting up the camp in the chains factory. I was assigned to Egon Fišer, from Koprivnica, a truck driver. We did not go to the Lančara camp. In the yard near the church there was a garage for the truck and we slept on the floor above the garage.

At the beginning of November a big transport arrived to the camp. The exhausted newly arriving inmates were walking on foot from the railway station to Lančara. They were massacred right away. I had to get out of the truck and with my hands make way for them, holding the still warm blood covered bodies so that we could go through with the truck. Behind us were horse drawn carts, collecting those who were massacred. It was mostly men.

The food was abominable. People got beans out of feces and washed them to eat them again. At that time, since they needed us, they gave us somewhat better food. I did not live under the same conditions like those who were in the camp. It was very difficult to steal some food in the camp. My brother paid for it with his life. The Jewish Community from Zagreb was sending food, but it was all robbed. Whatever good was there they set it aside for their army.

At the end of November I moved into Lančara, where the old craftsmen worked, only now dressed in uniforms. They produced chains, and some workshops were established to produce weapons, carpentry and other stuff.

In Lančara we slept in the attic, under the roof. There were about fifteen of us, including Jews, Serbs, Croats and Muslims. That was where I was until the beginning of December, when the camp in Stara Gradiška was set up. A group of us was set aside to go and assist in the kitchen and cleaning of officers' quarters.

We were among the first to arrive in Stara Gradiška. There were still inmates there from former Yugoslavia. When we met them, they were carrying chains and balls and were in shackles.

We were transporting construction materials and also possessions taken from inmates on their arrival. These things were taken to a warehouse.

The relations with the local population in Jasenovac were good. When I arrived there, there was still quite a number of the local population. Some of them openly showed empathy for us. There were also families who, for reasons of fear, took the side of the Ustaša. Later on Jasenovac was emptied. While we were still in camp 2, working on the embankment, the locals were displaced and evicted, I do not know where to, and thus Jasenovac was emptied and made ready for a camp. The location of Jasenovac is such that from autumn to spring there is only one road leading to it, and on all other sides it is surrounded by water. There was no way out of it. Some locals helped us, gave us food when they met us. By their faces and actions one could tell that they were good people sympathizing with us.

When we arrived to the camp, our heads were shaved, because of lice, although lice were such a pest that you could not get rid of it. We were not given any clothes. Whatever I had on when I arrived was all I had to wear: a suit, a shirt, and a vest that my mother knitted for me, and which after the war I had to get rid of since it was tight around the neck and that was where the lice persisted.

In Stara Gradiška I worked in the auto and motorcycle garage. I lived together with the cooks and food serving staff. We lived in the administrative building.

They liquidated the inmates who were there at the time, after which they started to set up the camp. They set up workshops: shoe-makers, tailors, etc. The tower was also being built. Among the inmates, mostly women, who came from Tešanj and Žepče in 1942, I saw my step-aunt and step-grandmother. They were sent right away to the tower!

In this part of the camp it was dominantly men, with some women working within the perimeter containing prisoners and inmates, sewing

uniforms, darning clothes, making shoes. As I was moving around the camp a lot, I had the opportunity to go into the tailors' workshop, where mostly women worked. That was how we came to know what was actually going on.

As the camp grew, the administration grew in parallel to it. We were moved from the administrative building inside the camp to a building called the hospital, to two rooms: the cooks, I, Švarc, and Feliks. That was where we slept. Below us were the torture chambers, in the cellar. Often during the night we heard sounds of fighting, beating. That was the place of beating, extortion. In that place called the hospital, or „Hotel Gagro“, there was an Ustaša, a colonel, his name was Singer. I do not know if he was a Jew. He was detained as well. There were also some members of the HSS and other politicians who were detained separately.



*Family ATIJAS in 1936.
Jakob's mother, both sister
and brother perished in
the Holocaust*

One day a big transport came. Those who could not walk, the women and the children, were loaded on a truck, their things just thrown on top of them, and taken to the camp. They went straight to the tower. There were liquidations going on all the time at the tower.

I remember one night, a liquidation was about to happen. I do not how many women were executed on that occasion. I was at the tower when they emptied the rooms. The walls were flood stained after torture. They brought in a group of children. That group was put in on the ground floor, where there were holes made in the walls. Cyclone was let in through those holes and all those in the room were killed. We found out about it from the graveyard keepers who were loading the bodies of murdered children onto carts and burying them.

My brother, who stayed on in Jasenovac, was working and going out of the camp. One day, at the beginning of April 1942, he put a few potatoes into his pocket. He also had two or three corns on cobs that he found somewhere. On the way back they were searched, he was found to have these in his pockets, he was detained and two days later executed.

My grandfather, aged 72, was brought in from Žepče in 1942. He was hid in the infirmary; he lived for some six or seven months in Jasenovac until he was executed during one great “cleaning” campaign. There was a commission which came and the infirmary was „cleaned“ as well. A barrack was set up with nice clean beds, there were no pijamas, but the clothes were clean.

We were walking on foot from Gradiška to Okučani, where they put us onto carriages and in the morning we were in Jasenovac. We were to go to Gradina or across the river Sava, where liquidations were carried out. However, since a transport had arrived during the night, we were not sent there.

We were unloaded behind the administration building. However, since other inmates knew me too, they went to the manager Šomođi, a Croat from Osijek, and told him that I was there. There were also some other craftsmen from Stara Gradiška whom the inmates knew and also went to the managers of carpentry, metal workers, shoe-makers, to tell them. Those foremen tried to save us. So, a number of people were removed from the transport. I was put up in a workshop. The others were there until the evening, until they were transferred elsewhere and executed.

The father of the man who was my boss in Sarajevo was doctor Milan Jojkić. One day, as I was coming out of Lančara, I saw an Ustaša bringing in a gentleman. He was standing with him in front of the administrative building. I recognized my boss’s father. I managed to greet him and ask him when he arrived. He said: „Just now.“

He disappeared. I had no one to ask about him because he did not go in at any point, he had not even entered a barrack. He was brought in individually, with escort. I guess he was waiting to be entered into the records – and he was liquidated.

I was in a group consisting of mechanics: Maks Samlajić who owned a garage in Brod; Šomođi, a Croat from Osijek; Luka Đaković; Ante Miljković from Zagreb; Ahmed Ahmedić from Tuzla, and some others

We were protected to some degree because they needed mechanics. However, one day vehicles were used to go to a trial. An Ustaša was driving. With him was Luka Đaković, from Brod. He cut the throat of the Ustaša and invited Samlajić to escape with him. Samlajić refused. Luka Đaković did escape, and Samlajić went to the first house to report that the Ustaša was wounded. Ustaša from the camp came. The wounded Ustaša was taken

to hospital. Samlajić returned to the camp. We were not executed. In fact, we were not executed because Samlajić returned. They could not execute us because they did not have others who would maintain the vehicles. The punishment was that they put us in shackles, all twenty-five of us.

The next day we were to go to work. How can one get on a truck while in shackles? When they realized this, they ordered for the shackles to be removed, and that was how the escape of Luka Đaković ended.

Which methods did they use to kill? Knives. A pit would be ready, the inmate naked to his waste. One would strike the victim with a mallet on the head, the other would intersect the victim with a knife and cut his throat. They had a special knife for slaughter.

We, the inmates, were not aware of the scope of atrocities which were happening in the camp. But from the horrific images that we witnessed every day we could understand that this unreasonable and deplorable undertaking was devised to exterminate Serbs, Jews, and Roma, along with some progressive Croats and Muslims. The approximate number of innocent men, women and children who were executed in the cruelest of ways became known to us inmates only after the war was over. In terms of number it was Serbs who suffered the most, and they were here the most numerous people; the Jews were practically exterminated from the region; and the number of executed Roma has never been even approximately identified.

When the trouble with the shackles was over, we moved on with our work. At that time there was a new arrival: Adžija, a colonel, who served as driver of Maks Luburić. Dinko Šakić was Adžija's deputy.

Behind the Lančara there was a barrack where motorcycles were kept. I had in our group two or three very young boys. Ostoja Mijić, aged 13, was brought in allegedly to be an apprentice. Namely, in 1943 the discipline became a bit more lenient and the children from the Kozara region were brought in to allegedly learn a trade. There was another child from Hercegovina, named Mile Naletilić, also aged 13. In my group I also had two boys, brothers Svjetličić, from Pakrac.

Groups were set up. The Svjetličić brothers, one was a graphic worker and the other a metal worker, had parents in Pakrac who sent them food. In 1943 the groups of Croats from Jasenovac were being transferred to Stara Gradiška and subsequently to some exchange arrangement. I maintained the link with them. They continued to send me packages, via their nephews who served as staff in Jasenovac. When they left, there were with me still one Serb, named Jeftić, from Sarajevo, and Ahmed Ahmedić from Tuzla.

There were attempts in Jasenovac to set up an orchestra, but I never heard it perform. On Sundays sometimes one worked and sometimes not,

so one could wash his shirt and himself and that was all the „fun“. You could not get out of the “wire”.

As 1941 was turning into 1942 the Sava river froze and sledges were used to cross the river. At that time there were attempts that I later learned about to get the people united from Bosnia, from the camps and from Slavonija and to organize a rebellion and liberation. However, it somewhere went wrong. Allegedly, on the Slavonian side.

Inside the camp in 1943 there were the first efforts for political units to be organized. How? Doctor Bošković was committee secretary. Triads were set up. My contact was Šušković from Zagreb, a metal worker who worked in Lančara. And a Serb, Ilija, metal sheets worker. But, this did not amount to anything. Someone betrayed the scheme. Bošković was hanged along with ten or fifteen other committee members.

Apart from Serbs and Jews the camp was also detaining sentenced Ustaša, even officers: I remember, for instance, an Ustaša named Nemet, from Pakrac, he was an elderly man, wearing a beard. There was also another one from Zagreb, a driver. They were under disciplinary sentences, by imprisonment for up to one month.

I was in contact with the Svjetličić family, through their nephews who were in the camp and later, I suppose, released. They had contacts in the Ministry of the Interior. Two of them, who brought food for me from the Svjetličić family, came to the barrack that I was working in. They started talking about how the situation on the frontline had reversed. I said nothing. I talked about it with Šušković, committee member. I said: „I gather that they are in fact saying that they would want to escape from the camp, these four nephews, Ustaša. How should I act?“ He said that he would let me know as soon as he discussed it with other committee members. Later he said: „Do nothing, just listen and keep silent.“ So it was for about ten days.

The older of the two Ustaša who was preparing for the escape had a girl-friend in Pakrac and wanted to take her with him. He ordered boots to be made for her, and in the kitchen they gave him some 5–6 kilograms of foodstuffs to take with him. He was to go to Pakrac during the weekend. However, the Herzegovina Ustaša ambushed him at the railway station in Novska and brought him back – to the prison. He was sentenced for thirty days.

We were making plans with Šušković to establish a group of inmates and try to escape on a Sunday. It was on 14 March. On 15 March Maks Luburić was supposed to come. In the morning there was a roll call. The little Ustaša who was working in my workshop said he had to get everything ready for the line-up. He told the other Ustaša, Ostoja, to go to a different place. Then I went to Šušković and said: „I am going.“ He asked me how I would go, and I

said that one of these two would go and the other would wait for him somewhere near Novska towards Gaj. The following day, around noon, I sat on the motorcycle. The younger of the two Ustaša was sitting behind me with the tools, and that was how we got from Novska to Broćica. There were guards there. We stormed pass them and got out on the road Novska–Bjelovar. Now, something happened. The guard from Broćica called the camp, asking what was with the motorcycle that went by, saying that on the motorcycle there was a person driving and an Ustaša in the back.



Even after six decades the exact scope of atrocities perpetrated by the Ustaša against the Serbs, Jews and the Roma have not been established, nor have sentences been pronounced for the unprecedented pogrom

There were no more guards. I went through. A German division was withdrawing towards Bjelovar. I was driving along the edge of the road. We were stopped twice by military police. We had some tools with us, and I could speak some German, and they let us go. When I got to Gaj, in the direction of Bjelovar, I took a turn for the woods. I was close to Gaj, and the ramp there was down; behind the ramp was semi-liberated territory. I came up to a soldier; he stopped me. But, when I got to his post, I spurned on the curb, stepped on the gas, and speeded away!

The soldier got his gun off his shoulder and started shooting after us. We were lucky that he missed us. That was how I got to the Partisans.

When I joined the Partisans the atmosphere among them was optimistic. At moments of relaxation, they were even singing. I knew some of the songs, and I joined them happily. I owe thanks for knowing the songs to some workers who were with me and who taught me the lyrics and the melodies. For instance, I knew the „Internationale“.

One morning there came a man. He was looking at me and I was looking at him. His name was Carić.

„What are you doing here?“ he asked me.

„I have escaped“, I said.

He, too, had escaped, but a year before me, also from Jasenovac.

I also found another friend: Moric Montiljo, from Sarajevo; he had been through the Igman march.

If I had gone a bit further to the region of Brod I would have ran into Luka Čarković, who was escaping with a truck.

I later joined the 17 Slavonija Brigade. A month later I was a unit delegate, later a unit commissioner, but then I got sick due to exhaustion. I became distracted. Fear, insomnia, all of this manifested itself in my disorder, and I was hospitalized for fifteen days.

Afterwards I went to the VI Army Corps, where I worked in the workshop, in Psunj, and subsequently moved to Osijek in May.

I arrived in Zagreb on 11 June 1945. I married a woman who was also with the Partisans. We had a son.

There are not many people who survived Jasenovac. The day I escaped, I later heard, Šakić organized a search for me, going all the way to Gaj. I was not invited as witness for his trial. I also knew Ljuba Miloš and Brzica, I met them all the time. They too were tried.

In the camp there were also women Ustaša. In Gradiška I used to see Luburić's sister and Nada Šakić. Not that all priests were bad, but fra Ljubo Majstorović was an evil criminal.

My mother and my younger sister were inmates in the camp in Loborgrad, where they were transferred after Kruščica. In 1942 I received three camp post-cards from my mother. I can still remember their bluish color. You could write up to ten words per postcard. I received them while I was in Jasenovac. The first one I also answered. The second one I did not answer. Then I received the third, and that was all, I no longer received any.

In my post-card I wrote that we were fine, saying nothing about my brother. My mother and sister were there all the time until the camp was disbanded.

A man from Sarajevo, Moni Altarac, came from Loborgrad to Jasenovac when the Gestapo was preparing to disband the camp. He was not taken to

Auschwitz but was sent to Jasenovac. It was from him that I learnt about the destiny of my mother and sister.

I was searching for information about my mother, not knowing that they were in Auschwitz, because I was told that the Gestapo took over a part of the camp in Lobargrad. Only recently her name was found in the list of inmates of Lobargrad who were sent to Auschwitz. However, her name was not found in the list of inmates of Auschwitz.

The older sister Rikica, Rivka, married in March 1941. She moved away since they both worked and could rent an apartment for them. During the raid in their part of Sarajevo her husband and she were rounded up. She was deported to Đakovo, and he to Jasenovac. I found in documents that my sister did arrive in Đakovo, but I did not find her name in the list of those who were executed. The younger sister was with our mother all the time.

I found my grandmother and two aunts in the monastery St. Vinko in Sarajevo. By coincidence they stayed alive, because they fled to Mostar, and from Mostar to the island of Rab and later to Banija. They returned after the war was over.