

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

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

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Berta **POSTRUŽNIK**

**HALID MUFTIĆ –
SAVIOUR OF THE JEWISH FAMILY**



*B*erta Postružnik, née Fišbah (Fischbach), was born in 1909 in the place Sokolik in Galicia, of father Lav (Leib, Lajbiš, Leon) and mother Sofija-Soša, née Finkelman.

She had three sisters: Klara, Lota and Tila, and a brother Jonas, a doctor of internal medicine.*

In her first marriage she was married to Draganić-Vrančić, who soon died. From her second marriage with Oto Postružnik she has a daughter Eva.

After the war she worked in the publishing business and a copyright agency.

I was five years old when the World War One broke out. At that time us five children were living with our parents in a place called Holodenka (Poland). Until the war we lived peacefully as Jews under the Austrian administration.

When the Russians occupied our town, the expelling of the Jews started and we fled to Bukovina, place called Radauc, which was still under the Austrian rule.

During the winter 1914/1915 the Russians took over Radauc, and we children with our parents once again returned to Holodenka. In the meantime, father went to Vienna for business reasons.

*See testimony by dr Jonas Fišbah in the chapter about Jasenovac, Pg. 196.

During the war our little town frequently changed hands, from the Russians to Austrians and back again. Once, during the Russian occupation, there was a rumor that Russians were going from house to house and slaughtering Jews, which they actually did!

Due to the constant war conflicts in this area, our father, having in the meantime returned from Vienna, decided that we should flee again, but I do not remember where. We went by our horse and wagon.

We came to an Austrian refugee camp with lots of Jews. The accommodation and food were very poor. That was in 1915/16.

Jews from that camp were scattered around into various places. Along with a hundred other families we were instructed to go to present-day Slovenia, at that time Austria, to a place called Golovic, in Slovenske Konjice. We could choose between that place and Vienna. Father rather opted for the smaller settlement where he was hoping there would be more food, and we starved less than those in Vienna. We arrived to Slovenske Konjice, and it was now about getting settled and finding our living there. No one cared about refugees.

We found a small house in Slovenske Konjice in which we could live. My brother went to Vienna to grammar school, and lived with relatives there. Since we moved from a village, my sisters started attending school and they tutored me at home, so the following year I could start regular school as well. Anti-Semitism was quite strongly felt there and we felt different. We were accused of spreading the scarlet fever and we were moved out of houses and flats.

In the meantime, father went to Bosnia. It was already 1918, the World War One was coming to an end. Father found employment in Turbe, near Travnik, as an expert in saw mills. We were waiting for the war to be over and only then moved on to join him in Bosnia.

The elementary school was just opened in Turbe, first and second grade only. Although I had completed the third grade in Slovenske Konjice, in Turbe I went again to second grade, because I had to go to school. My brother was attending the grammar school in Travnik, and my sisters in order to attend school had to walk seven kilometers every day until the time when we moved to Travnik. Brother graduated from grammar school there.

My mother Sofija-Soša came from a very poor and religious family. Grandfather, reb Finkelman, was a very learned man, he studied the Talmud every day. He was not a formal rabbi.

Under the influence of her father, my mother was observant of all the kosher rules during the war, and she kept it after the war as well. On Friday evenings she would light the candles and with her head covered pray over

them. To please her, father would put on his talet and tefilin; he was in love with her until the end of his life.

We observed all the high holidays at home and we also went to the temple.

There were two synagogues in Travnik, a Sephardic and an Ashkenazi one. I also went for religious school. Travnik was a multicultural place which accepted us well. We socialized equally with the Muslims and the Serbs there.

Our family lived in Travnik until 1926, when we moved to Zagreb. While we were still living in Bosnia, my sisters found employment. The eldest, Klara, worked in a bank in Žepče. There, she fell in love with Halid Muftić. It started as great love, but later my sister wanted to flee Žepče and run away from him, and she went to Zagreb. However, Muftić could not come to terms with losing her, he followed her and finally they got married. And, in fact, it turned out that Halid Muftić saved all of us! His brother was the infamous mufti – Ismet Muftić.



*BERTA'S
parents – mother
SOFIJA-SOŠA and
father LAV-LAJBIŠ*

Upon arrival to Zagreb I continued my education, my sisters were employed, brother was finishing his medical studies. When I graduated I married for the first time. My husband's family name was Draganić-Vrančić. He soon died. That family name written on the door to our apartment saved my life in 1941. When the Independent State of Croatia was declared, in April 1941, I rented an apartment in the "Cvjetno naselje" and put the plate with the name Draganić-Vrančić on the door, after my late husband. That was where I lived with my father, sister Tila and my dear friend Branimir Fridman, a communist. In June 1941 the Ustaša took my friend Branimir to Jadovno, where he was executed.

From 1931 I was employed as technical interpreter working for the well known US company „Standard Oil Company“. On 1 May 1941 I was fired, just like the other Jews, Serbs and some Slovenians working there.

My sister Tila was still working, she was a technical interpreter for the German language. She continued to go to her office, she was not fired because she was much needed.

One day the Ustaša came and took my father. I followed them while he was taken away and so I learned where they were taking him. I immediately told Halid about it, and thanks to his contacts he managed to save him. Since that time father lived without a residence permit with Klara and Halid. Life under stress and constant fear were the key cause of his heart attack and death just a month before the end of the war.

I and my sister Tila stayed on in the same district, the “Cvjetno naselje”. One day Ustaša came with an order for her arrest. Since she was not at home, they wanted to arrest me instead. I managed again to let my sister Klara know about it, and she managed in good time to get Tila from her office to Halid’s office in the Ministry. I ran away from the Ustaša and also came to Halid to his office, where both my sisters Klara and Tila were. „Now, even you!“, said Halid. He was desperate.

I asked what we were to do. I got the idea to take my sister to the Merkur sanatorium, and I did so. I was lucky when I got there to run into doctor Hitrec, who studied medicine together with my brother Jonas, and I asked him to admit her to hospital. I was so persuasive in telling dr Hitrec how seriously sick my sister was that he finally did admit her to hospital.

I no longer dared return to the apartment in “Cvjetno naselje”. For a while I stayed with a friend of mine and then, finally, I did go back to “Cvjetno naselje”.

We somehow got through these turbulent events of the first months and we were already into July. One day, I think it was 10 July 1941, I saw a poster listing the first ten citizens that were executed: among them there were six Jews, two Serbs and two Croats. I could not help crying out loud, and I was afraid that someone could have heard me.

Every day new posters were displayed. And there were always numbers of people executed – Serbs, Jews, and communists – executed due to anti-state activity. I read those every day.

In September the same year the landlord terminated my rent, telling me that we Jews were outside the law.

Subsequently I lived with friends and with my sister Klara.

As I was on the list as a Jew, although I was not obliged to wear the yellow armband, I never felt quite safe. I was fed up with Zagreb and everything

else and I decided to go to my friend Nevenka in Makarska, thinking that maybe in Dalmatia I could meet with my friend, painter Oton Postružnik, who was living on the Pelješac peninsula and who offered this earlier.

When I wanted to travel to Makarska in October 1941, Klara received a telegram telling her that on 15 October in Sarajevo Jonas and his family as well as sister Lota and her husband were all arrested. Since I could do nothing to help them, I was persuaded by Klara to leave for Makarska.



BERTA in her youth

agreed to speak German among themselves, and instructed the little one to pretend that she was deaf and dumb. They dressed up in elegant clothes, boarded the train and kept asking all kind of questions of the ticket collector in German. The staff greeted them, saluted, not asking for documents. They were just sitting there peacefully, until my sister in law Bjanka was recognized by a woman, but Bjanka did not respond. So, they nicely arrived to Zagreb.

In Zagreb they went to their sister Klara Muftić. My brother's wife afterwards fled to Split, and sister Lota stayed the whole time in Zagreb, sleeping where she could, with different friends. Her husband was in Jasenovac, and she sent packages for him. The little sister Rutica stayed with my sister, with the Muftić family, for two years. Then her mother, who was in Split, asked that her eight year old daughter should come to be with her, and she did get to Split travelling via Bosnia with a paid smuggler.

That day, when they were to be taken to Jasenovac, there were not enough rail carriages, in fact there were enough only for the men, thus it was my brother and my sister's husband who were taken away; the latter stayed in Jasenovac for a year and was executed. My sister Lota, my brother's wife Bjanka, and the little Ruta first stayed in the camp for two weeks, and were then released, because those who brought them there did not know what to do with them, and were thinking that they would later bring them in again.

My sister, my sister in law Bjanka, and the little Ruta took a train without any documents. They

Rutica later told me that she can remember that journey, every detail of it, such as how scared she was when the train stopped somewhere. Her escort said:

„You stay put here, I will go and get something to eat.“

And she stayed there alone! She did not know where her escort was, but he came back soon enough.



*Wartime
photograph of OTO
POSTRUŽNIK,
BERTA'S husband,
to the right*

My sister Lota stayed in Zagreb with Klara, who was protected and safe through her husband Halid. Although he was part of the Ustaša movement, he soon realized what the Ustaša movement was, but could no longer get out, because with them there was my father, little sister Rutica, and my brother from Jasenovac. Halid was an advisor in the Ministry of Forestry.

As I only later found out, Halid had a visit by his brother Ismet, the great Mufti. At the very same moment the little girl Rutica was coming in and going out. The Mufti asked his brother, in derogatory terms:

„Why do you need this Jew in your home?!“

Halid stood up, he was twenty years older than the brother, and said:

„Brother, I do regret if there is something in my home that you dislike.“

And that was how they parted.

The Mufti was executed after the war.

After my arrival in Makarska I started exchanging letters with Postružnik, and in December I went to Pelješac and remained there with him.

Jonas was, by that time, in Jasenovac.*

Some months later Oto, too, was conscripted to join the army. He went to Zagreb trying to get exempted from this military obligation. He went to

*See testimony Jonas Fičbaha in this book, on pages 196-205.

see a good friend, the conductor Lovro Matačić, at that time an Ustaša colonel, wearing a green Ustaša uniform, asking him for help so that he would not be sent to the Russian front. Matačić replied: „Well, it is all very well there. You will have wonderful scenery, you will be able to do excellent paintings.“ Despite this, Oto managed not to go to the military.

I too was trying to go to Zagreb, because I wanted to see my father and Jonas who was released from the camp in the meantime. I only managed to do so in May 1942.

Namely, Jonas was arrested in Sarajevo on 15 October 1941, but he had already before that time volunteered to participate in the campaign suppressing the endemic syphilis led by Professor dr Vuletić. Yet, he was taken away to the camp. Doctors who applied for that campaign were to be protected against being taken away to camps. While Jonas was in Jasenovac, sister Klara continually made efforts for his release, which she finally managed to accomplish. With the help of Klara's husband Halid Jonas was admitted to hospital as he became sick with typhoid. Once he recovered, Jonas again went to Klara.

Since Oto was exempted from going to the army, we were to return to Dalmatia, but we needed passes which were hard to come by. With much skill and good luck we managed to get to Pelješac, and we stayed there until September 1943, when the Germans arrived and we joined the Partisans. We moved from one island to another. After a chance encounter with Mato Jakšić, a pre-war diplomat, we were sent to the island of Vis because Oto, as an already reputable painter, along with other artists (Detoni, Tiljak) was to be protected.



BERTA'S photograph for ID, with the seal of the Independent State of Croatia

On the island of Vis, in Komiža, based on radio-news I wrote reports about the status of the battle-fields, which were disseminated to soldiers so that they knew what is happening in the world. This went on for several months, and at that time Augustinčić came with his family, and according

to the orders issued by Josip Broz Tito he was to be in charge of getting all people of distinction to Italy.

We arrived to Bari and were given a villa near Monopiglio to use for accommodation. That was where Oto and I got married. With us were Tijardović, some writers and painters, about twenty of us altogether.



*BERTA'S niece RUTICA FIŠBAH
was incarcerated as a seven-year
old girl*

I was the house-keeper and in charge of receiving guests, Allied officers. Since I could speak some English, I talked with them and played chess. Oto already had a room full of paintings and we organized an exhibition. The exhibition and the artist Postružnik were photographed and displayed in the US newspapers.

In the autumn of 1944 Oto and a group of painters and writers returned to the country, to the liberated territory around Topusko.

I was pregnant at the time and I stayed a bit longer in Bari, and soon afterwards the HQ of the base was closed and we, accompanied with our mothers and children, returned by boat to Split.

I arrived to Split. My sister Tila was there, the one I saved. After the hospital she managed to flee to Split and live there. A friend in Zagreb gave her all her documents, including her ID card, and under the name of Štefica Ravnogajac she was living in Split.

In April 1945 in Split I gave birth to our daughter Eva. At the end of 1946 we moved back to Zagreb, again staying with my sister Klara.

Oto was a free-lance artist, and I started working only in 1956, initially for a publishing company and later for the copyright agency.

We were very fortunate that Jonas was saved, thanks to the efforts of dr Vuletić and Halid; we were also fortunate that I could save Tila by manipulation, that I had a friend in Dalmatia, and later also that I had Postružnik. That was how all members of my direct family survived.