
Dr Jakob "Jakica" ALTARAS

CROSSING THE ADRIATIC WITH THE CHILDREN



Jakob "Jakica" Altaras was born in Split on October 12, 1918, to Regina (née Altaras) and Leon Altaras. He had five brothers: Izrael-Buki, Menta, Avram, Viktor-Haim and Silvije. His father, Leon, perished in Auschwitz and his physician brother Silvije was killed serving with the Partisans in 1945.

He began working as a resident in radiology at Zagreb University in 1953. From 1967 until the present he has been a professor at the University of Giessen in Germany. He was a member of the presidency of the Zagreb Jewish community and also worked in the Yugoslav Aliya organisation during the post-war years.

In 1978 he founded the Giessen Jewish Community, of which he has been president ever since. In 1955 he initiated and organised the building of a synagogue and a Jewish Centre in Giessen, together with his architect wife, Dr Thea Altaras (née Furman), who designed both.

He is the recipient of many Yugoslav decorations and a grove has been planted in the Herzl Wood in Israel in his honour. He is also a recipient of the German Federal Medal of Merit, First Class.

He has two daughters, Professor Silvija Altaras, who lives in Zagreb, and Berlin actress Adriana Altaras, and three grandchildren.

The beginning of the war, in April 1941, heralded the arrival of Jewish refugees in Split. After passing my final exams in Zagreb I fled

to my hometown, without waiting for my diploma to be presented. Dalmatia and Split were immediately occupied by the Italians, so we Split natives automatically became *cittadini italiani per anessione*, and thus were not singled out as Jews. This worked to our advantage and was crucial to the work of our small community in saving Jews fleeing Bosnia, Croatia and even Serbia and other parts of Yugoslavia, to seek refuge in Split. I think that about three thousand Jews passed through Split during the war, found refuge there and, from Split, many went further abroad in the world via Italy. Unfortunately, however, a great number were recognised in trains on their way to Split and taken away to death camps, never to return.

With the refugees came information about the crimes committed by the Ustasas in Bosnia and Croatia which we passed on throughout the world. The Split Jewish Community, on December 12, 1941, appealed for help in a plea to the Bishop of Split, Dr Klement Bonifacije, giving details of the sufferings of Jews in various places in Croatia and Bosnia. As far as I know, no reply was ever received to this appeal.

When the Italians arrived in Split, I managed to travel to Bologna, the city where I studied, planning to stay there until the end of the war. However I returned in less than three weeks at the invitation of the engineer, Morpurgo, the president of the Jewish Community, to help them with their work. My knowledge of Italian was of great importance in contact with the Italians; almost every day I would go to the police station to intervene and secure the release of imprisoned newcomers who very often arrived under false names with fake permits. We usually sought residence permits in Split for them. As the number of these people increased, our ability to help them was more and more modest. The Jewish Community in Split set up an Emigration Committee. As well as the people from Split, a number of refugees also worked with this,



Dr Thea Altaras, wife of Dr Jakica.

including Iso Herman, Jozef Levi, Mavro Sesler, David Alkalaj and Dr Braco Poljokan.

The Emigration Committee had a vast mandate: it successfully resolved many social issues and supported refugees, taking into consideration their economic status. We appealed for financial assistance to Delasem, the Italian humanitarian organisation which was connected to JOINT in the West. There were three prominent people in this organisation, the lawyers Valobra, Lucati and Bernardo Groser. I travelled to the headquarters in Geneva at least once a month to collect money.

I also remember the president of the Jewish Communities in Rome, and Sorani, the secretary. They were always ready to see me and listen to my reports on the situation of Jews in Croatia and Split and on many occasions they intervened on behalf of individuals. Anyone among the Jewish refugees in Split who had a Yugoslav passport could get a visa for any foreign country in the Vatican. They only needed to send their passport to the Vatican. This “only” was a matter of illegally smuggling their passports from Split to the Vatican, which was one of my regular tasks. I used to courier bags full of passports to the Vatican and hand them over. Later, on the basis of the visas in their passports, the Questura in Split would issue them permits for the trip to Rome, which was their salvation. The Emigration Committee raised money from the wealthy members of the community for these services and used it to support the poorer emigrants.

One of the most spectacular achievements was the rescue of about forty children who we managed to move from Split to Italy. Here is what the late Dača Alkalaj, a former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, wrote in a column entitled “With Us and Around Us” in the Bulletin of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in Israel, no. 5/7 1972.

“In January this year our friend Dr Jakica Altaras, a native of Split and a professor at the University of Giessen in Germany, was in Israel. He told me how he took about forty of our children to Italy in March, 1943, when it was feared that the situation in Split might deteriorate.

“As a representative of the Jewish Community in Split, he was in touch with Delasem. He discovered that in Nonantola there was a group of about fifty children from Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic who had arrived through Yugoslavia. It was agreed that a number of the children were to be moved to Nonantola from Split.

“When he returned to Split, Jakica asked the Jewish Community to organise the registration of the children. It was not easy to convince the parents to be separated from their children for the children’s sake. Nevertheless, forty of them applied. It proved difficult to obtain permission from the Italian occupation authorities to transfer such a large number of children to Italy as Jakica was the only one who had a passport. But luck was on his side and, for a bar of fine soap, he managed to acquire the necessary piece of paper from the police sergeant who held the Questura seal. There it was written that Jakica was authorised to escort the forty children to Italy, without giving any of their names. Jakica and the children arrived safely in Nonantola, where Dr Aleksandar Licht and his wife Erna were waiting, as were Joško Itai-Indig and Ruben Štajn with his wife, Dr Helena. They had been looking after the children who had been brought from Yugoslavia. The group from Split brought the total number of children to about a hundred.

“New concerns arose for the children and their guardians after the capitulation in 1943. All the children were saved, thanks to a priest and a doctor from Nonantola. While I was preparing material for these two righteous Italians in Yad Vashem, I had no idea that our own Jakica Altaras had earned such great merit in getting the children from Split to Italy.”

There is an anecdote about the spectacular transfer of the children from Split to Nonantola on April 14, 1943, which I am happy to retell.

The group arrived safely in Nonantola by ship, via Zadar, Rijeka and Trieste. I kept the children close to me as I didn’t want them to strike up a conversation with other passengers on the ship, because there were a large number of Black Shirts on board. So all the way from Split to Trieste we sang, over and over again “Ćiribilibela, Mare moja, odoh u marine.” (Chiri-billi bella, O my Mare, I’m off to join the sailors.)

When the Germans arrived in Nonantola and our children began to flee (their salvation partly thanks to them being hidden in the monastery), they tried on a number of occasions to reach Switzerland by swimming over the small river which marked the border. They took with them on their backs a four-year-old boy named Moric, whom a peasant woman had brought in one morning to the Split Community. The Ustashas had taken his parents off the train the woman was travelling in but she had managed to save little Moric by hiding him beneath her skirt.

A Swiss customs officer was watching their attempt to cross the little river. He suggested to Joško Indig and Ruben Štajn that they leave Moric in his care before he drowned in one of their attempts. Joško and Ruben accepted the offer. Two months later, after they had been to Geneva and obtained the papers necessary to travel to Palestine, they remembered Moric and went back to the customs officer to collect him.



In Split, before setting off across the Atlantic. (left to right) First row: Moric Atijas, Ela and Lezo Altarac, Sida Izrael, Aron Švarc, Albi Izrael, (unknown), Rikica Altarac; Second row: Sida Levi, Lotika Izrael, Lezo Kaveson, Flora Kabiljo, Relica, Zlatica and Tina Gaon, Neli Šlezinger, Sarina Brodski, Jahiel Kamhi, Markus Finci. Third row: (unknown), Albert Albahari, Danko Šternberg, Rabbi Romano, Lezo, Bunika and Sarina Altarac, (unknown), Velko Halpern. Back row: (unknown), Leon Kabiljo, Marsel Hofman, Zdenko Šmit, Bela Grof, Josif Papo, Jakov Maestro, (unknown), Dr Jakob Altaras, Rabbi Albert Altaras, Engineer Vitorio Morpurgo, Iso Herman, Josif Levi.

“Don’t take Moric away from me, he’s brought great happiness to my family. We’ll take good care of him, because we have no children. You can rest assured that I’ll do my best to make a good Jew out of him.

We're already educating him in the Jewish spirit. Moric, come here and sing that Jewish song."

Moric began to sing out loud "Ćiribilibela, Mare moja...!"

After this demonstration, Joško Indig and Ruben Štajn gave in and for many years later they received information about Moric from the customs officer.

Even before my trip to Nonantola, some time in the summer of 1942, the Italian authorities had collected our refugees and internees from the islands of Brač, Hvar and Korčula and escorted them overnight to Rab. In the Questura they tried to persuade me that it was for their own good. We were suspicious of course, and little wonder, we were frightened whenever anyone was rounding up Jews. Our emigrants could take nothing with them except their clothes. Letters would arrive from Rab asking us to send them some of their remaining belongings. I spent several days on the islands, gathering their things, and loading them onto the ship and then, on my return from Nonantola in August, 1943, I sent them on to Rab.

I managed to get into the camp surreptitiously and distribute everyone's belongings to them, spending several days and nights there. I remember that one night I stayed with Apa Han, one with Dr Gotlib, then with Paul Goldštajn, a friend from the Makabi in Zagreb. I remember passing on written and verbal messages my brother Silvije had given me from the Party organisation in Split for the Levi brothers from Banja Luka. Through me they sent an answer to the Party in Split. Photographs shot by the youngsters in the Rab camp, showing the areas where both Jews and Slovenes were housed were the only documentation about the camps which reached the War Crimes Committee after the war. I had managed to get them out of the Rab camp and courier them to Split.

The situation was extremely tense: I had the feeling that Italy would capitulate and it was feared that the Germans would bomb Rab if the Italians didn't hand the islands over to the Ustashas. When I managed to get out of the camp and off Rab, I alerted my friends, Armadi in Trieste and Sorana in Rome, asking, among other things, that they remove the wire fence around the camp so that the inmates could seek shelter in the event of bombs.

From historical documents we now know that, at the time, Hitler's envoy in Rome, Ribbentrop, was insisting on the handover of Jews from the camps, as well as those living on the islands, with no excep-

tions, to the Germans and the Ustashas. He was given approval for this from Mussolini. However the fate of the inmates from Rab is well known: the Partisans liberated the island and all the young Jews joined the liberation struggle. A number of the older camp inmates managed to reach refugee shelters via the island of Vis, some of these went on to Palestine. However the sick and weak, who remained in hiding on Rab, were later found by the Germans and killed.

Of all the terrible events we lived through under the Italian occupation of Split, perhaps the most tragic occurred on June 12, 1942, when the Black Shirts and their leaders, the majority of whom were from elsewhere, and no locals were involved, stormed the temple before the service began. They forced us outside, beating us mercilessly with rifle butts and fists, wounding many of us. They took all the valuables, including the Sefer Torah, candlesticks, prayer books and pews, out into the square and burned them. We managed to save some sacred items from the flames and hid them in nearby shops belonging to non-Jewish friends, Split merchants, who returned them to us after the war. They are now back in the Split temple. The next day the Black Shirts continued their looting and vandalism of Jewish shops. First in line was the Morpurgo bookstore, then the Luksor perfume shop, whose manager was Jakov Kabiljo. They took particular care with the destruction of Markus Finci's shop, full of crystal and porcelain. My uncle Viktor Altaras' shoe shop was also plundered and the door of Rafael Eškenazi's menswear store was smashed. They stormed my brother Mento Altaras' shop by breaking through the floor of the temple office. Mento's shop was immediately below. Mr Morpurgo intervened and the plunder stopped the same day and further evil was prevented.

Jews from Split took part in the National Liberation Struggle after the capitulation of Italy. Earlier they had been involved in underground activities and all of this contributed to the defeat of the occupier and the liberation of the country. Many institutions established by community members and refugees coordinated their activities with those of the illegal National Liberation Struggle. I would like to mention just a few examples. In the first-aid station for refugees, Jewish refugee doctors trained Partisan medical assistants; one of those who attended these classes, Dušan Jelovac, later became the chief commander of Zagreb and was well known as a fighter in the National Liberation Struggle. One of the doctors from the first-aid station, Dr Silvije

Altaras, dressed like a Split peasant, took one of the leading rebels, Maks Baće, in a peasant cart from Mostar to Split after he had been shot through the lung.

Towards the end, fate was not so kind to the Jewish community. The deportation of Jews from Split began on October 12, 1943. They were taken to the Sajmište camp in Belgrade and then on to Auschwitz. On March 11, 1944, the remaining members of the Split Jewish Community, mostly women and children who had been in hiding with local Split householders, were deported to Jasenovac. This was a tragic end to the life of the pre-war Jewish community in Split. Only a small number of us survived by fleeing from occupied Split to the liberated territory, to the Partisans.