
Dr Rafael PIJADE

FROM LABOUR GANGS TO THE PARTISANS



Rafael Pijade was born in Belgrade on June 28, 1916, when the city was occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, Heskija Pijade, retreated through Albania with the Serbian Army. Both his father and his mother, Rebeka Demajo, came from old Belgrade Jewish families.

Rafael Pijade finished high school in 1934 and graduated from medical school at the end of 1940. Because of the difficulties of the pre-war period, it was several months later when he obtained his diploma.

He remained in the Yugoslav Army for sixteen years after the war and emigrated to Israel with his family in 1963. His mother, who survived by sheer chance and fortunate circumstances, also moved to Israel, where she died in 1974. Rafael Pijade now lives in retirement in the town of Holon with his Belgrade-born wife Dezi-Dvora Mandilović. He has two daughters, Lili and Tilda-Tal, and five grandchildren.

I was born in Belgrade in 1916, in the primarily Jewish suburb of Dorćol. The Jews there lived in their traditional way, keeping the Jewish customs, speaking Ladino or Judaeo-Spanish and singing Spanish songs. I lived with my father, Heskija, and my mother, Rebeka, in a block of about thirty homes around a huge courtyard. All these homes opened onto the courtyard and each family had a room and a kitchen. In the middle of the courtyard there was a drinking fountain with two spouts. This

was the centre of the world for us children, the centre of our fights and games. For our mothers it was an information clearing house, a place for confidential chats and occasional trivial arguments.

I finished primary school and the first five grades of high school in Belgrade before we moved to Skopje, where I matriculated from high school in 1934. By this time we were rather better off and had our own proper house. I first enrolled in the Academy of Music at the Prague Conservatorium, but my father wanted me to be a doctor so I enrolled in the Medical Faculty of Belgrade University. My carefree student years with my father's generous support were the same years that Nazism and anti-Semitism were on the rise, first in Germany and then throughout Europe, including Yugoslavia.

I graduated in 1940 and joined the army to complete my military service. The barracks were in the courtyard of the military hospital and about 120 young doctors, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons lived there. At dawn on April 6, 1941, the Germans launched their air attack on Belgrade. The war had begun. A few days later we got our orders to move out. We travelled on the narrow-gauge railway to Sarajevo through Valjevo and Užice. At the Sarajevo Military Hospital we discovered that Yugoslavia had capitulated. There were personnel from all units gathered there, together with stockpiles of arms and military equipment. Our commander gathered us together and told us that he had a truck laden with cash under his command and he thought it would be fairer to distribute it among us rather than give it to the occupiers. With the money we received, my faithful friend Dr Maksim Aruesti and I decided we would go to town and buy civilian suits. We returned to the barracks and the same evening we went through the fence and set off for the railway station, intending to return to Belgrade. It was a sorry sight along the way to Belgrade: overturned cannons, demolished cars, dead horses, the image of a crushing defeat. We returned to the outskirts of Belgrade by the same route we had left, and in Topčider we went our separate ways. Maksim went home and I went to some people I knew in Čukarica. Dr Aruesti worked in the Jewish hospital in Dorćol until the early winter morning when the Germans stormed it, beating and swearing at the patients and doctors and throwing them all out into the street where a truck was waiting for them. During the trip to Jajinci, all the patients and doctors, including my friend Maksim, were gassed to death.

I spent only a few days with my friends in Čukarica, learning about the horrors of the occupation. I decided to go to Skopje and left secretly,

on foot, for the nearby Ralja railway station. After a tense wait for the train, I left for Skopje, where my parents were.



Rafael's parents at their wedding in 1915.

A few days after the Germans entered Skopje, one of our good neighbours was kind enough to conduct a German unit to our apartment. The Germans threw my parents out into the street immediately and we never entered our home again.

Several days after I arrived in Skopje, I was summoned to report immediately to the city health authorities. I was one of a group of doctors and pharmacists, about 25 people altogether. They put us in horse-drawn drays and drove us to villages to vaccinate people against the contagious diseases which had broken out. This went on for a month or so. At that time, part of Yugoslavia and occupied Macedonia had been annexed to Bulgaria. The new authorities drafted me into treating contagious diseases, boiling clothes in vats for delousing, mass vaccinations against malaria and so on. I had to report to the police station each morning to assure them that I was present and had not fled. It was forced labour. This is how my odyssey began through one village and provincial town after another, through Macedonia, Bulgaria and those parts of Greece which were occupied by Bulgaria. I was isolated and lonely, a long way from my family and completely without news of them. I found out later that I had been lucky in my loneliness. I had been on the list for transport to Treblinka but they hadn't found me at home. This was at the beginning of March, 1943, when the Bulgarians sent all the Macedonian Jews to their deaths in the Treblinka concentration camp. Nobody from the first convoy returned alive.

It was not until the beginning of 1944 that I managed to make a connection with the Greek Partisans, whom I supplied with drugs and other medical supplies.

My only joy in my solitude was seeing the huge Allied formations flying through the sky on their way to Eastern Europe. The sound of their engines was music to my ears.

At the beginning of September, 1944, when the Soviet units reached the Bulgarian border, there was a coup in Sofia. This meant that freedom was also close at hand for me after so many days of forced labour and detention, but I was afraid of what I would find at home. My first concern was for my parents. By pure good luck and fortunate circumstances, they had been saved from deportation to Treblinka. I immediately moved them in with my cousins near Sofia because they were Bulgarian Jews. Unlike the Macedonians, Bulgarian Jews were not deported to Treblinka or Auschwitz.

As I wandered around Sofia in my down-at-heel shoes, with no socks and threadbare trousers, I happened to pause near the entrance of the rather smart Hotel Bulgaria. Suddenly a large car with a Yugoslav flag pulled up and out got Vlado Popović, my school friend and roommate from my student days and a veteran of the Spanish Civil War. He was wearing the uniform of a Yugoslav general. We hesitated for a moment

before recognising each other and then greeted each other warmly. The general took me into the hotel and I quickly told him my war story.



Rafael Pijade in his Partisan days.

My friend called his assistant and told him to bring me a military uniform. As he handed me the uniform he said: "From today, you're a fighter in the National Liberation Army".

And so, in a hotel room in the middle of Sofia, I joined the ranks of the Partisans. I returned to Yugoslavia with General Vlado Popović and reported to the military headquarters in Skopje. I was appointed as a medical officer to the 50th Partisan Brigade which was serving in Kosovo.

It was only then that I discovered that I had lost my only sister, Lilika, in the war. She had been in Belgrade taking care of our grandfather Rafajlo and our grandmother Luna. The Germans gassed them all in 1942, in mobile gas chambers on the trip from Sajmište to Jajinci.

At that time I still knew little of the terrible details of the Holocaust. I didn't know about the millions of Jewish victims. The memories of those lost are extremely distressing and, as time passes:

*I often return to the days gone by,
And let the memories pound against me.
I want the wheel of time to stop, just for a while.
I feel them circling me then,
The shades of the long lost,
Keeping me company. I chat, I talk,
I know now the same sights await me.
I'm not afraid of that, not at all, I'm glad,
To be among such lovely folk,
I'll travel back with them beside me
And, believe me, I'll be truly happy.*