
Avram SADIKARIO

UNDERGROUND



Avram Sadikario was born on May 14, 1919, in Bitola where he finished primary and secondary school. In 1938 he began studying medicine in Belgrade but returned to Bitola in 1941.

He graduated in 1945 in Sofia and returned to Macedonia where he worked as a doctor at the Children's Clinic until his retirement in 1984. He retired as a Professor of the Medical Faculty, head of the Paediatrics Department and director of the Children's Clinic.

He published about three hundred scientific papers and was involved in the production of a large number of textbooks on paediatrics, particularly in the field of haematology. In 1984 he was named as a Membre Correspondant Étranger of the French Academy of Sciences for medicine. He was decorated with the Order of Merit for the People and the Order of Brotherhood and Unity, 1st Rank.

He has achieved enviable success in literature, particularly as a poet. He has published eight books of poetry, three of which are on Jewish themes. He is the recipient of the Award of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia for the collection of poetry entitled "Three Thousand Years of Jerusalem".

The Bulgarians arrived in Bitola in the spring of 1941. They occupied Macedonia and established Fascist rule. Immediately they pro-

claimed the Law on the Protection of the Nation. This law affected Jews more than anyone else. Jews were proclaimed foreign citizens and enemies of the Bulgarian people. We were given identification documents stating that we were "foreigners" who could be deported from the country. Jews were not permitted to work in educational institutions, in theatres, cinemas or hotels, or as accountants. For some time they were still allowed to work in trades and as small merchants. They did not have the right to own agricultural land. They could be employed as workers on someone else's land, but not in state institutions. They weren't allowed to work as pharmacists.

The had to hand over all funds raised from the liquidation of their companies and shops to banks where the money was held in "frozen accounts". This also applied to savings accounts. Under a special decree Jews had to report all their real estate and other property, and all income, down to the very last spoon. Later, all their property was seized: houses, shops and so on. My older brother lost all his savings in a bank and was left without a single dinar in his pocket.

Soon came a law under which Jews had to pay twenty per cent of the estimated value of their total assets. Everyone had to report everything, even down to their last, mended handkerchief, patched shoes, trousers, everything. A special committee was given the job of evaluating this and it would often triple the value of what had been reported. Any small error would result in confiscation! The real value was far less than what they would record. The most tragic were the *a lus kurtizus* the poorest of the poor. None of them had a penny and they were still asking for twenty per cent of nothing. Even my father had problems with that twenty per cent because he didn't have enough cash. Confiscated property was sold at auction because of the inability to pay.

From October 4, 1941, Jews were banned from working in trade and industry. What industry did the Bitola Jews have? They were the poorest in the Balkans. Small traders sold their goods dirt cheap because they had to close their shops down in three months. This fate awaited both my father and my brother. Tradesmen were free. However, on February 12, 1943, they were also banned from working. Total material destruction was in progress. Funds raised from the sale of tools had to be deposited in the banks in frozen accounts.

Jews did not serve in the Army, but they were summoned to work camps for Jews where they did hard physical labour, with dismal food

and accommodation. Despite working as compulsory labour, they also had to pay a military contribution, which wasn't small.

Jews were required to live in a ghetto. There was an ever-increasing number of streets where they weren't allowed to live and so they stayed only in the areas allowed. It was impossible to get to a doctor or to a pharmacy.

"Jews live here" had to be written on every gate. From September 1942, Jews were required to wear the "yellow star" on their right side. Work was proceeding on preparing the "final solution" There were a number of secret meetings. This had already begun in February 1942 and culminated on February 22, 1943 with the decision to expel 20,000 Jews to regions of East Germany. This deal between Belev (Bulgaria) and Daennecker (Germany) was common knowledge.



Bulgaria 1942, (L to R): Isak Levi, died in Israel, Salvator Levi, killed in 1963 in an earthquake in Skopje, Avram Sadikario and an unknown friend, all wearing yellow stars

And so came March 11, 1943. In two hours, several hundred people from the state security and the police were assembled. There were several hundred cars outside the police station. The city was blocked. The Bitola and Štip Jews were transported to Skopje where they were put in the Monopol Tobacco building, together with the Skopje Jews. They were searched again for the God-knows-how-manyth time outside the building and anything valuable was taken from them.

It's difficult to describe the organisation of life in the "preparatory camp". More than seven thousand Jews "lived" there for three weeks! The camp was guarded by machine-gun posts, mounted police and in other ways. The first food was distributed after five days. As many as five hundred people stayed in one room. They relieved themselves inside the room because there weren't enough toilets in the yard. It is difficult to imagine a room in which people are relieving themselves in every corner. Any attempt to open a window was punished by whipping.

At the insistence of their embassies, 167 people, mostly Spanish and Italian citizens, left the camp.



1943 photograph of the Damjan Gruev Unit, which included about ten Jewish members

On March 22, 1943, the first group of about 1,600 Jews was transported in forty cattle wagons. Some of these wagons had no windows. Who knows whether anyone survived in these windowless wagons? Another eight hundred were transported later. So many people were crammed into each wagon that there wasn't even room to stand.

The second transport departed on March 25, 1943. There were 2,402 people in this group, in the same conditions as the first group. The trip to Treblinka took eight days.

The third transport set off on March 29, 1943. There were 2,500 people. That's when Belev and Daennecker arrived and stood outside the wagons to check that everyone was going on the journey. Treblinka was unlike the other camps in that there was no place for inmates who were left to work in the camp for some time: instead everyone went straight to the gas chambers.

That was the fate of the Jews from Macedonia. (Ninety-eight of them perished, which, together with Lithuania, was the highest percentage). And that is also how all of my people perished – my brothers, aunts and others. There were 150 of my relatives. One of my cousins went to her death with her ten children.

Of my family, only my two brothers and I stayed out of the camps. We were among the first members of the resistance movement. I had become a member of the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia as far back as 1937. I contributed by distributing literature and holding courses on political economy.

One day, in history class, a classmate of mine was secretly reading an article from an illegal magazine which I had given him earlier. The teacher saw this, seized the magazine and turned it over to the headmaster. Afterwards, they kept us behind, separately, each of us in a special room, and called the police, who interrogated me. I said that I had bought the magazine from an antiquarian, and I gave them his name. When they interrogated him, he confirmed that I used to buy second-hand books and magazines from him and said that it was possible that I had also bought this one in his shop. He said he knew nothing about the contents of the books and magazines he sold because he was barely literate. My class teacher proposed that I be excluded from all Yugoslav schools. However some teachers defended me, saying that this had been naivety on my part because there was no evidence that I was a member of any organisation, and this was accepted. I also continued with this activity while I was studying in Belgrade. I took part in all Party activities at the time. I went to demonstrations, was in physical confrontations with the police, and was beaten more than once. In one of these conflicts I lost several teeth. That's how things were until April 1941 when, after the big demonstrations in Belgrade, I left the city and returned to Bitola.

In Bitola I was immediately included in operations. I was accepted into the Party and became a member. Viktor Pardo and Moric Šami were also in my cell. Our local party secretary was Done Pop Andonov.

I organised a group which became a cell. It included Nisim (Miki) Alba, Marsel Demajo and Simo Kalderon. They each organised three SKOJ groups. I organised a separate SKOJ group and a number of sympathiser groups. Everyone had previously been in Tekhelet Lavan so we managed to include almost the entire Tekhelet Lavan organisation. On the other side, Moric Šami and Viktor Pardo established SKOJ groups from the former Hashomer Hatzair. If we take these two cells into account, together with the large number of SKOJ and sympathiser cells, there were about a hundred members included through our cell. It is believed that about six hundred Bitola Jews were involved in the resistance movement. This was the strongest organisation in the town and had the greatest numbers. Even in the first Partisan units in relative terms the largest numbers were Jews. The units withdrew to Greece so, for some time, there was no one to accept new people who wanted to join.

At the time the Jews were deported I was in Sofia, where I had taken my brother for a medical examination. He returned quickly and through him I learnt about a number of "exposures". Such exposures were frequent, although there weren't any among the Jews. My basic cell was exposed at the end of 1941. That's how Moric Šami and Viktor Pardo ended up in prison. Because of their bravery I was not exposed, but I did spend some time underground. Not long after, I had to go underground again, only this time in Sofia. I was staying with a Jewish family. However, in July 1943, Jews from Sofia were also deported to other Bulgarian cities, with a plan for sending them from there off to concentration camps in Poland. I had to go with the family with whom I was hiding to Pleven, where we were in a camp in a school for some time. Later they disbanded this and we were moved to the Jewish ghetto in Pleven.

Again I was in a Jewish family with another three members of the underground. I was involved in their operations. One of these was to break into the Pleven prison and free the prisoners. We broke the guard, disarmed the police, seized their weapons and freed all the prisoners. In this prison were the leaders of the organisations from Bulgaria (led by Trajče Kostov) and Macedonia (led by Lazar Koliševski) organisations. Out in the street we were intercepted by the Army. However we managed to persuade them not to shoot at us and to cross over to our side. This happened on September 7, 1943. Two days later, on September 9, 1943, the Bulgarian National Front government was toppled.

After that, in Pleven, I took part in the arrest of former police agents, with whom we also had armed clashes. At the end of 1944 I went to Sofia, where the Macedonian Representative Office gave me approval and assistance to finish my studies.

My two brothers were killed as Partisans. Solomon Sadikario, known as Mo, a battalion political officer, was killed in 1944 in clashes with the Bulgarians. My other brother, Samuel Sadikario, was killed on the Srem front in 1945.