
Đuro SELEŠ

MA CHE EBREI?



Đuro Seleš was born in Sarajevo in 1923, the only child of mechanical engineer Herman Seleš and mother Roza, née Špacir. The 1941 war caught him as he was completing the eighth grade of secondary school.

After the war he studied English language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy of Belgrade University. He worked in the Federal Secretariat for Foreign Affairs, from which he retired as an advisor in 1989. He has worked in diplomatic offices abroad, in Washington and New York.

He is married to academic painter Mirjana Zdravković-Seleš. They live in Belgrade.

The war began on April 6, 1941, with the heavy bombing of Belgrade and the penetration of Nazi troops and their allies into Yugoslavia. Bombs also fell on Sarajevo that day and one of them fell exactly on the building in which we lived. We were in the shelter (our house being one of the few which had a shelter). After the alarm stopped, we returned to our apartment, now somewhat damaged, because materials from the building across from ours had ended up in our apartment, having been propelled in, during the bombing, through the broken glass of the windows.

This meant the complete end of the normal life we had lived up to that point, although at that time there were already dark clouds cover-

ing this region of ours, in a Europe of which the greater part was enslaved and caught up in the war. Of course, like everyone else (and particularly as Jews), we too were gripped by and filled with foreboding about the times ahead of us.

For several days we were in a state of confusion in which we knew very little about what was happening; there were all kinds of rumours about the fate awaiting this part of the country. This gave way to awareness of the capitulation of the Yugoslav Army and of the fact that the so-called Independent State of Croatia was being established. Bosnia and, therefore, Sarajevo would also become part of that Nazi creation.

Several days after the Nazi troops penetration into Yugoslavia, the German war machine also arrived in Sarajevo after days and nights of motorised troops thundering by and a festive welcome organised and presented by one part of the population, with flags bearing swastikas and Ustaša insignia. This was an omen of difficult times.

Among their columns the German troops had special vehicles in which they printed what they called “vouchers”, apparently worthless, but with which they browsed clean the city, which at that time was still well supplied. Within a few days there was nothing left in the shops. As for Jewish shops, state officials were appointed to them immediately. In this way they were seized from their owners.

We personally felt the beginning of the problems when a decree was passed according to which we had to personally bring our radios to designated places. When I did this, I had a chance to see the various other things that were being seized, such as typewriters, rugs and furniture. Very soon came various regulations, put up in public places, the most remarkable of which were those banning Jews from visiting public and cultural institutions, from sitting in parks and so on. Then came the obligation to wear the yellow band with the Star of David, the sign with the letter “J” and then came compulsory labour. My father was assigned to go to the nearby spa, Ilidža, which was heavily bombed because it was where the government-in-exile stayed for a short time. Following the bombing, bodies had to be dug out. Father never talked to me about this.

As for me, the first time I was called in was to clear out some warehouses and other buildings for school canteens. This was quite bearable compared to what others had experienced. However the next time I was called in was quite a different matter.

There were ten of us, of various ages. We were assigned to go to the main Sarajevo barracks, where the German Army was stationed, and to work in the big barracks courtyard, chopping wood. We worked for a number of hours in the mornings and afternoons, under the supervision of two staff sergeants, who took turns. It's interesting to note how differently they treated us. One of them was definitely a monster while the other showed some human feelings. For example, the first made a man from our group chop a very hard and knotty stump on and on without stopping. When this man (who was of a weak physical constitution), suffering with his stump, annoyed our supervisor, he personally took the axe in his hands and swung it a couple of times with such anger that the wood, already eaten into by the earlier chopping, broke into pieces. He then took a piece of the split log and threw it at the man's head. Fortunately he missed. We worked in this atmosphere for a week. Then our labour was extended a few more days.

Sometime in the middle of the week we heard an unusual roaring. Suddenly the gates of the courtyard opened and trucks began coming in, one after another. We were some distance away and at first weren't really aware of what was happening. The trucks were full of people of all ages and both genders. This is where they unloaded them. We could see that they were carrying rucksacks, bags and suitcases. They were Jews, our compatriots, who had been collected from all over the city in a sudden raid and brought to the barracks courtyard. It's not difficult to imagine how we felt at the time, not knowing whether members of our families, our friends and acquaintances were among those who had been rounded up. On the other hand we weren't allowed, even during our break, to approach them, nor were they allowed to come near the place where we were working. When the usual end of the working day arrived, we didn't even know what would happen to us because, logically, it was realistic to expect that they would simply put us in with the people who'd been brought in. That day the "better" staff sergeant was on duty. It seemed that he knew what was happening. He took us to a cellar, shut us inside and said he would go and get us official passes so that we could reach our homes more or less safely. We languished in this cellar for several hours, conjecturing about what would happen and consumed by dark imaginings. Finally the man came and brought the documents for us. We now needed to get to our homes. Of course the first thing that came to my mind was to wonder whether I would find my family at home, or whether I'd find a sealed door, which would

mean that my parents had been taken away. I shall never forget approaching my home. Luckily there was no seal and my mother, in tears, opened the door for me because she had learned what was happening. She was sure I had been kept behind with the people who had been taken away.

The raid ended and the people who had been rounded up were kept in the camp. We didn't know where to go so we continued to report for labour as before. Contact with the people who had been brought in was forbidden. Surprisingly, only one of the ten of us had the misery of having those closest to him – his wife and daughter – brought to the camp. When the “better” guard was on duty he allowed this man's wife and child to be with him during working hours and allowed him not to work. Each of their meetings was very hard on all of us because it brought home to us the situation we were in.

A few days later, just as we finished work, there was great relief. All those who had been brought to the camp were released and allowed to return to their homes, so we thought that our worst forebodings had been dispelled and that the situation would become relatively better. However, on the following day, we were shocked to learn that all these people had again been driven out of their homes during the night and taken to trains which had been prepared to take them to Jasenovac and other death camps. This meant that the plan was for total extermination of Jews from Sarajevo and, of course, not only from that city. They went as far (and fortunately I only heard about this) as to issue orders that Jews were to report to a designated Ustaša-police office to be given papers on the basis of which they would be registered. The unfortunate people who reported were given “identification documents”. However they were then shown out through a door behind which stood trucks in which they were taken away to an unknown destination.

Sometime around the end of the year I managed to use the identification which all members of railway workers' families had (my father was a railway engineer) to somehow reach the Italian occupation zone and to get to Dubrovnik. There the Ustaša only held local power formally, while the real power was in the hands of the Italians.

My parents also arrived in Dubrovnik. Thanks to some documents they had somehow, with great difficulty, managed to get out of Sarajevo taking only two suitcases with them.

Towards the end of the summer of 1942, we were informed by the Italian authorities that we were to assemble on a certain day at a certain

place, with the few things we had, in order to go into internment. We weren't very concerned, given the procedures up to that point, and we'd already heard about internment camps which couldn't be compared to the notorious ones from which we had narrowly escaped.

We were interned in the Kupari Camp, in the south Dubrovnik coastal region. At first we were allowed to freely go out and visit nearby places, but later our movements were restricted to the camp. Life was slowly getting organised within the camp; our stay there was tolerable, although this was some kind of a prison with suitably monotonous food and not very much of it. Fairly soon, in the spring of 1943, rumours began circulating that we would be moved to another camp. We were also told officially about the move, that is about being transferred to another camp. In the meantime, some German officers came to visit the camp, which made us inmates feel nervous. However it turned out that they were investigating the possibility of using it to accommodate convalescents from their army.

The day eventually came when, ready for departure, we waited for transport to take us to a ship on which we would travel to the island of Rab. The journey itself wasn't bad, because a decent passenger ship was used to transport us. As we embarked, the crew members looked in disbelief at the kind of people boarding the ship, especially as they were mostly elderly people, women and children. We were in a convoy with the Italian gendarmerie and army and they couldn't understand where they were taking us and why, so they asked us exactly that. We replied saying we were *Ebrei* (Jews). They didn't understand that either, and asked "Ma che Ebrei?" (What do you mean, Jews?) in the sense of what kind of crime was that, and was that really something people were persecuted for.

The following morning we found ourselves on Rab and were curious as to what awaited us. However we soon found out, and then also felt it on our own skin, that we had come to a real concentration camp, with barracks, encircled by a barbed wire fence and guard towers. Although the camp was on an island, the sea was nowhere in sight. No greenery, just dry earth, sand and rock. There were several thousand of us there. We gradually became accustomed to life in considerably aggravated conditions, and were comforted in the knowledge that the end of the war was in sight, together with the victory over Fascism. Even the guards, Italian soldiers, encouraged us, saying that very soon we would go *a casa* (home), which they themselves could hardly wait for.

But quite some time was to pass before that would happen. Italy capitulated at the beginning of September, 1943, and the camp was disbanded. We, the younger ones, joined the national liberation struggle, while various fates awaited the elderly.

My parents stayed on Rab a while longer. When, not long after, the Germans and the Ustaša set off for the island, there was a swift evacuation of people with the help of boats and two-masters. In this way they too managed at the very last minute to cross over to Italy, which was already occupied by the Allies. Unfortunately there were some who didn't manage to do this and this sealed their fate.

Of the people who perished, there is one whose tragedy I have to mention. He was a musician and composer whose name I no longer remember, an Austrian Jew who at the time of the *Anschluss*, when the Nazis seized power in Austria, managed to get to Yugoslavia. After many difficulties and moving from one place to another, he somehow found himself in Dubrovnik precisely at the time we were being moved from Dubrovnik to Kupari. He had all his music with him.

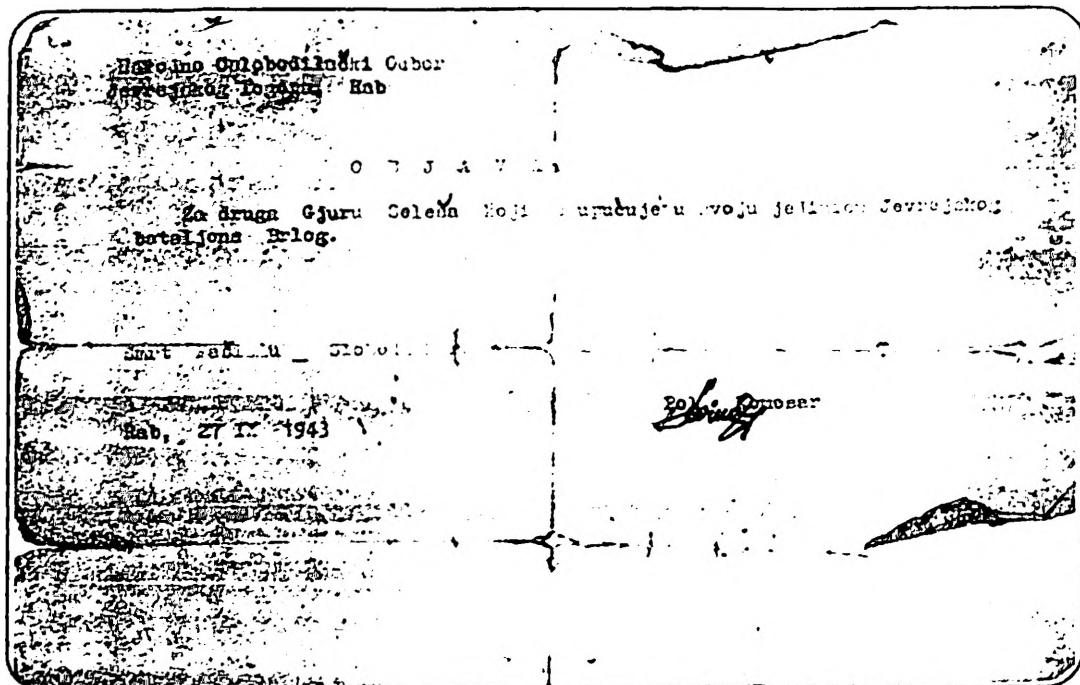
In the camp we tried to engage in some activities, such as cultural and sporting activities. In this way we came to the idea of making an operetta about our life in the camp. This musician composed the music and wrote a libretto for this. The whole thing was pretty successful, so the entire Italian command, led by their commander, attended the performance. Our performance was met with general approbation. In German the main aria went *Links die Palmen, rechts das Meer, und der Magen der ist leer* (Palms to the left, sea to the right and the stomach is empty.)

After the camp was disbanded, the composer stayed on the island. When the sudden evacuation happened he refused to leave without the trunk containing all his compositions and other music. There was no way to take it, nor was there room on the boat for the trunk, but he wouldn't part with it because it contained his life's work and his reason for living. Thus he became one of the victims.

A Jewish battalion was formed in the Rab camp. We reached the Banija Brigade units. Very soon the battalion was dissolved and we were reassigned to the units. This was necessary because we were inexperienced. I took part in the national liberation struggle in combat units and actions and in the units of the regional commands of Banija and Kordun.

Although young, we were quite exhausted by what we had been through. Despite having some theoretical preparations in the camp, we

lacked practical military-combat training and experience which had had to acquire on the spot. We were poorly dressed and shod because the pieces of Italian uniforms and footwear we had managed to acquire in the camp were not made of durable materials.



Facsimile of a proclamation by the National Liberation Committee of the Jewish camp on Rab mobilising Đuro Seleš to a unit of the Jewish Battalion

Shortly after arriving in the unit we were to go to combat positions. Efforts were being made to hinder and slow down the German units which were attempting to take over parts of territories held by the Italian Army forces, as well as to prevent the national liberation struggle units from taking advantage of the Italians' war material. This is when most of us had our baptism of fire. I myself, on several occasions, not being very familiar with the terrain, went out into the open, practically in front of Rommel's desert tanks which were moving around in that area and positioned there. Luckily there were no consequences. All this was happening around an important crossroads called Generaliski Stol.

I remember exhausting marches which lasted for more than ten hours without any decent breaks, often at night when, at a forced pace, we crossed over to the terrains on which combat actions were taking place. As I had never been to that part of the former Yugoslavia before,

everything was new to me. I had trouble orienting myself and I believe this was also the case with all the others who had come from the camps. We mainly moved through the areas of Banija, Kordun and Cazinska Krajina, in north-west Bosnia.

As early as the autumn I took part in an attack on Cazin. We walked into the town. Its layout is such that the whole place is dominated by a hill with a fortification in which there were well-armed Ustaša and home guardsmen and from this vantage point they created many difficulties for us. There were also some wounded who, with great effort, we carried up a very steep hill to a safe place. I also had a chance to help a good friend of mine from the camp. The whole operation was successful: a considerable number of home guardsmen were also captured.

On a march through terrain that was soaked with frequent rains and snow, practically through mud pools, on a road through a clearing, several enemy aircraft, old Breguet 14 biplanes, suddenly appeared. There were quite a few of us, several detachments. Flying slowly in circles, unhindered because we had no anti-aircraft weapons, the planes opened heavy machine-gun fire on us. We all lay down along the road in shallow gullies for at least some protection. Unfortunately there were many casualties and I remember that, maybe two or three times, the machine-gun bursts passed very close to me, but luckily I was only splashed with mud. Several guys ahead of and behind me were victims of this attack and the situation was similar along the whole road. Like all the others, I barely managed to get to a nearby forest and so escape death.

Nor did this pass without serious repercussions for me. In the mud, especially as we were crossing ploughed fields, the shoes which I had taken from the Italian equipment had almost fallen apart. At the time there were no army warehouses and it was very difficult to find adequate footwear, so I had major problems. It was a very harsh winter, quite a lot of snow had fallen and I was half-barefoot. My feet soon froze through. I was unable to move around so I was sent off to hospital where they found that there was something wrong with my kidneys as well.

Life in the Partisan hospitals at that time was difficult. They were village houses which had been evacuated in terrains that were difficult to reach, there were shortages of medical supplies and there was a constant danger of enemy gangs breaking in. I remember that we were once evacuated at the very last minute when enemy gangs began appearing at the village entrance. We also couldn't always be separated from those

who were suffering from typhoid. Once I was better I was reassigned to the regional command, where I remained until the end of the war. I should also mention that for some time I was again in a combat unit, at the time of the raid on Drvar. At the regional command I worked on providing hospitals with security, transporting the wounded to places from where they were taken to Allied hospitals in Italy, and on other jobs in areas such as education and culture which aimed at returning life to normal in liberated areas.

Soon after the war ended I was demobilised so I could continue my education.

My parents returned to Sarajevo where I was reunited with them. Other members of our family weren't as lucky as we were to be alive at the end of the war.

My paternal grandfather, Dr Mavro Seleš, was a doctor in Banjaluka at the time when modern transport was a rarity, so he called on his patients in the villages throughout the area on a horse or in a hackney. Patients loved and respected him. At the beginning of 1941 he was in retirement. When Banjaluka fell under the Independent State of Croatia and the Ustaša terror took over there, many people who knew and respected my grandfather kept telling him that he was not in any danger because everyone was aware of what kind of man and what kind of doctor he was. And that's how it was for some time. However, the Ustaša criminal, Vitko Gutić, who called himself "the golden broom", appeared in Banjaluka on a mission to "cleanse" Banjaluka of all "unacceptable elements", especially Jews. And so, at the age of 72, my grandfather was taken off to Jasenovac.

My aunt's son, Hajim-Hari Elijas, was executed by firing squad in Belgrade's Tašmajdan park, as was every tenth member of the group with which he was taken there. His father Avram, an industrialist from Belgrade (owner of the Elka factory), managed to reach Split but, following the capitulation of Italy, was taken away by the Ustaša, never to return.