
Olga ADAM

SAVED BY GOOD PEOPLE



Olga Adam was born on May 25, 1925, in Banatsko Aranđelovo, to father Marcel and mother Margita, née Blau. Her father, Marcel Ungar, born in 1897 in Banatsko Aranđelovo, a trader, was killed in Belgrade in October 1941, while her mother Margita, born in 1905, died in 1971. In addition to her father, nine members of her immediate and extended family also perished in the Holocaust. She has a brother, Tihomir Ungar, who holds a master of science degree in mathematics.

After the war she completed State Acting School in the class of the well-known teacher Juri Rakitin. She worked as a presenter at Radio Novi Sad in Serbia, then as an actress at the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad and as a member of the Radio Novi Sad acting company.

She is married to Tibor Adam. She has a son, Mirko and a grandson, David.

April 1941. We lived in Novi Kneževac, right beside the main road. Night. The thudding of soldiers' footsteps is heard, cars are clattering, truck engines rumbling. The Yugoslav Army is withdrawing. I was sixteen but was aware of the tragedy that awaited us. I also cried the whole of the next day. Some neighbours strongly resented this. They were expecting the Hungarian Army. They had even raised a triumphal arch with *isten hozott* (God has brought you) written on it. Had the

Hungarians come we would have been slightly better off but, as it was, the Germans entered the city on April 16. For us this was the beginning of the end. Local Germans, members of the *Kulturbund*, came rushing into Novi Kneževac from Kikinda and the surrounding places. The terror began. They toured Jewish houses and took anything they felt like.

In the meantime notices appeared with the order to hand over radios and weapons. My father was a hunter and had a hunting rifle. When the girl who worked at our house and I took that rifle to the Municipal Council, I saw tears in my father's eyes. Soon a curfew was introduced. Jews were allowed to go out between 5.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. Within the first few days of the occupation we were required to wear yellow armbands and to go to compulsory labour. I washed floors in Sokol House which was converted into barracks, and I also cut grass by hand at the tennis courts. Our parents, and more or less all adults, found being marked and humiliated very difficult. I wasn't ashamed of the yellow armband, I even told the Germans that I wasn't ashamed of being Jewish. This situation lasted until August 14. That day, at about 7.00 p.m., a neighbour of ours ran over and told us that they were rounding up Jews in the main street of the city. We knew what lay in store and began to pack our essentials. At about 10.00 p.m. a member of the *Kulturbund* came to our house. He was one of the more well-intentioned people there. I had known him earlier, from compulsory labour. He didn't shout at me, didn't insult me the way most of them did. He took us to a building next to the synagogue. Most of the Jews from the town were already there.

At midnight they took us to the railway station. They put us in a train and took us to Novi Bečej. At the same time a train arrived from Kikinda with Jews from there. It was only then that we realised we had been lucky up to that point. What we saw was terrible. We saw not people but monsters coming out of the train. Beaten, covered in bruises and swellings, some were even being carried because they could not stand on their feet. The local Germans had beaten and tortured the Kikinda Jews, their fellow-citizens, in a beastly manner. Fortunately for us there were no Germans in Novi Kneževac. From the railway station they took us to the yard of the synagogue. It was summer, it was hot and there was no shade in the yard. This was a form of torture in itself. One of the Kikinda people was deranged and shouted all day. This had a very negative effect on the exhausted and terrified people. We were demoralised. We were given no food. Some had a little with them but the

majority were hungry. Darkness fell. What would happen to us? No one was telling us anything. Most of the people lay on the ground. One old and lame man whom they caught passing something to someone across the fence was punished by being made to run around the synagogue a hundred times, constantly repeating the Kaddish. This really got under our skin. Our torturers were very skilful at destroying people.

At about 11.00 p.m., the camp commandant came with soldiers. They took us to a school. There we lay on the bare floor. Tired, exhausted and hungry, we fell asleep. However this inhuman gang had no intention of letting us rest. They would wake us once an hour, shouting like beasts: "Piss!" We weren't allowed to go to the toilet alone. This was a treacherous way to torture people who were sentenced to death. At six in the morning they again woke us and took us back to the synagogue yard to fry there in the sun all day. And so this went on for about a week. What kind of people were these? Where did such hatred come from? What had we done wrong? In the first days, such thoughts would still come to my mind, but later I became apathetic. I did everything automatically. Perhaps it was lucky that they used to take us to various kinds of work. Otherwise, many would have died of sunstroke.

The men did field work while the women and girls worked in the barracks, tidied up, washed the floors and things like that. At the end of August the days were still warm, but the nights became cold. They moved us to some large warehouse. There we froze at night. Very poorly fed and always hungry, it was very difficult for us. The district head from Kneževac came. He questioned all of us, but mostly the wealthy men, about where they had hidden their money. I personally knew this German, the district head. Karolj Vagner, my good friend, despite his German origins did not like the Nazis. We had still not been taken from Kneževac when his birthday came. On this occasion he organised a large party and invited all his friends. In Kneževac, everyone socialised together, Serbs, Hungarians, Germans and Jews. And this was also the make-up of the crowd Vagner invited. The celebration began in the early afternoon, so that the Jews could stay longer, because their curfew began at 6.00 p.m. The party was a slap in the face for the German district head. He was forced to sit at the same table as Jews. Now, of course, this man recognised me. He came to me, put his gun against my forehead and threatened to kill me if I didn't tell him where my wealthy uncle had hidden his money. I didn't know, but I would not have told him even if I did. Unbelievable it may be, but I was not afraid of

anything at the time. I was young and probably not properly aware of the danger.

On September 23 we moved again. They drove us to the Tisa river and put us on a boat. I suppose they hoped that, under the weight of the load, this small ship would sink. There were about seven hundred of us. The believers, and there were quite a few among us, said that God saved us. But, unfortunately, His concern for us did not last long. In the early morning hours the boat sailed into the Belgrade port. Here they separated men over fourteen out of the group. We had one big loaf of bread we had brought from Bečej, and we gave that to Father. My brother was only eleven and stayed with me and Mother. We later learnt that they had taken the men to Topovske Šupe. They released the women and children who had somewhere to go in Belgrade and took the others to the synagogue in Kosmajaska Street. Mother, my brother, my grandmother, my aunt and I went to 45a Jevremova Street, to my mother's sister who lived there with her non-Jewish husband. We found out that we could visit Father on Thursdays and Sundays. Of course we availed ourselves of this. We visited him regularly and took him food. We were relatively free until the curfew and moved freely around the city. As well as the yellow armband we wore yellow stars on our chests and backs. The Jewish Community was close to where we were living. I would go there often and socialise with the young people. Food was in very short supply. We never had enough to eat. My father's sister-in-law, with her two daughters, fifteen-year-old Lilika and six-year-old Marika were accommodated in the synagogue in Kosmajaska Street. Her sister, who lived in Subotica, sent a message that a woman would come, first to take Marika and that the next time she would come for Lilika and her. The woman came for Marika (who survived the Holocaust and now lives in Chicago, but never returned to get my aunt and Lilika, so they lost their lives in Sajmište.

During a visit to my father in mid-October, he told us that they were taking them to labour and that they would take his belongings to the Council. When I think about it today I find it incredible that we were unable to see the real situation, how we were unable to believe that they would kill people who were guilty of nothing except being Jewish. And we should have wondered why, if people were going off to labour, they were taking their belongings from them. What would they eat from if they didn't even leave them their mess kits. I had a bad feeling. I stood there for a long time, watching my father wave to me from

the window. I left only when a soldier hit me with a rifle butt. I never saw Father again. He was killed either in Jajinci or in Jabuka. As well as my father Marcel, they also killed there his brother, Eugen Ungar, his sister's husband Josip Vajs and my cousin, Franja Vajs, who was twenty at the time.

At the beginning of December, summonses began arriving ordering women to report to the "police for Jews" next to the Botanical Gardens. We did not receive a summons. However posters appeared ordering anyone who had not received a summons to report, threatening them with death if they did not do so. This order applied to us too.



Olga with her mother Margita and Dragoljub Trajković, who saved their lives, on a pleasant walk immediately after the war

One day during that period, a gentleman appeared at our door. He brought us a letter from Barbara Vajs who was writing to her mother, Irma Vajs, my mother's cousin. The name of the gentleman who brought the letter was Dragoljub Trajković. He was an employee of the railways and could travel to Kanjiža via Szeged. His wife, a Jew, had fled Belgrade and gone to Kanjiža, and he used to visit her there from Belgrade, where he worked. When Mr Trajković had given us the letter, he turned around and left. I walked after him and asked him to tell us what it was like in Kanjiža. We became friends. He lived alone in Belgrade and he needed company, someone to talk to. He would visit often. The final

deadline for Jewish women to report to the German police was December 12. The first group had already left on December 8. We had already prepared ourselves.

In the meantime I became acquainted with a neighbour, Mile Stavrić. He told me that he knew a man who could get us authentic refugee identity papers with false names for 10,000 Nedić dinars. This

was on December 11, a day before our deadline to go to the police, that is to camp. I went home to tell mother what I had heard, the proposal I had been given. Mr Trajković was at the house, as was Čepika Štajner, who had been running late and unable to get to Kosmajška Street before the curfew began. If I were religious I would have said that God himself had sent Trajković to us. When he heard about the possibility of obtaining refugee papers, he suggested to us that we move to his house at 15 Limska Street. Because this was a detached house, we could hide there. We had already packed ready for camp but, having accepted Trajković's offer, at five the next morning when the curfew ended, escorted by him, we set off for his house. Needless to say, mother and I didn't sleep at all that night. It was very difficult to make the decision to flee and to leave my grandmother, my father's sister and sister-in-law and my cousin to go to camp. We decided that we should go to the camp with the others. But Mr Trajković was very persistent. He almost forced us to go with him.

My mother, my little brother and I set off on foot, via Slavija and Autokomanda, to 15 Limska Street. It was a rather long walk, it was cold and we had a heavy load to carry. But we got there. The great adventure began. We settled into the house, but we couldn't heat it because Mr Trajković went to his office and there wasn't supposed to be anyone in the house. The smoke from the chimney would have exposed us. The winter was very harsh and we would freeze until he returned from work. After a few days, Mile Stavrić brought Vlada Katanić to the house. With his help, we invented the following story. Our family lived in Bitola. My father, we named him Dušan Urošević, was a mechanical engineer. He had joined the army and we never saw him again or heard anything about him. My elder sister was married to Vlada Katanić and they lived in Priština, so we moved there. Because Mother spoke Serbian rather badly, we claimed that she was Slovenian. From Priština we came to Belgrade with the Katanić family. The Albanians seized our documents at the border. Of course we changed our names. Mother became Marija, I remained Olga and my brother changed from Tibor to Tihomir. Our new surname was Urošević. We practised our signatures all the time so we would seem as natural as possible at the police when signing anything. Mother and I went to the police on December 23, 1941. We told my brother that if we did not return by noon, he should look for us on a lamp post in Terazije.

The Belgrade City Administration was in Kosmajaska Street. We walked from Voždovac. We froze. In the police, that is the City Administration, Dragoljub Trajković and Vlada Katanić confirmed in writing that they had know us from before the war. They were taking a great risk because, if we had been exposed as Jews, they could have paid for it with their lives. Our story was accepted. We gave them our photographs and were given identification papers, real documents, with false names. My brother didn't need identification papers because he was a minor. With these documents we went to the Refugee Commissariat in Kneza Miloša Street. There we were given refugee identification papers. So now we had documents and felt much safer. We returned home and my brother was overjoyed, he had been frightened for us. Now we could even light a fire during the day and finally warm ourselves up. Still we could not afford to completely drop our guard. We were constantly alert, and not entirely without reason.

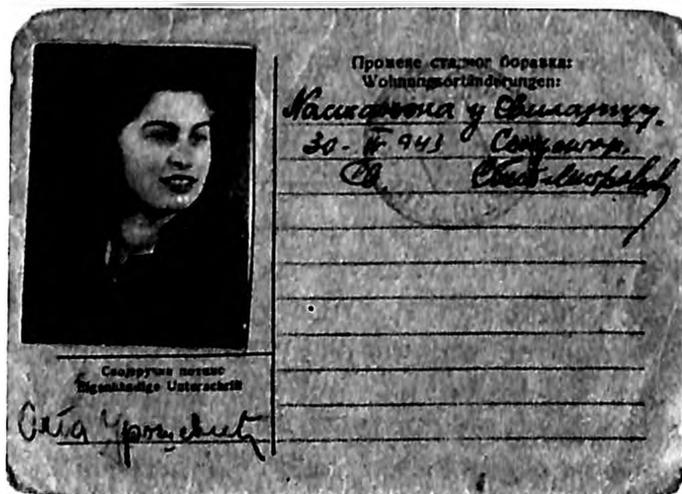
Summer came. There were no more Jews in Belgrade, apart from those who were deep underground, as we were. Mrs Trajković returned from Kanjiža. One day Mother went into town with her and there they ran into our former maid, a German. She recognised Mother and started shouting: "What's this Jewish woman doing still in Belgrade?" Fortunately there were a lot of people on the street and they lost themselves in the crowd. Of course by now we knew the neighbours and a woman from the countryside who brought dairy products to sell. She was from Grabovac. We asked her if we could move to her place. We were unable to stay in Belgrade any longer because of the danger of someone recognising us in the same way as the former maid had. The woman agreed to us moving in with her and we travelled via Svilajnac to Grabovac on July 4.

Banat Jews in a Serbian village. This was a new world for us. The house we had come to was large. The owners had lived in America for years and were quite wealthy. We arrived on a Saturday, late in the afternoon. The following mourning we were woken by loud keening, from an entire choir. We were afraid of course. We couldn't imagine what could be happening. It was not until later that we learnt that it was a village custom for women in houses in which someone had recently died to go into the plum orchard every Sunday for a year, hold onto a tree and wail. This was our first experience of this. I was nauseous from the excitement. I lay down on the ground in the garden and the children gathered around me. They thought it was strange for someone to lie

down during the day. However I managed to make friends with them. I told them stories. I was afraid that the same thing that had happened to me two years earlier would happen again. At that time I vomited for four days and had to go to a sanatorium. Fortunately the nausea passed this time.

After some time we moved to another house. There I met a girl my age, Jovanka. I went to tend sheep with her. She taught me to spin. Gradually I adapted to real village life, and that in a Serbian village which was completely different from life in a Banat village. One great problem for us was the religious customs which we knew almost nothing about. When we arrived it was the fast for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. We knew nothing about this. We were surprised to see that the locals ate nothing but beans boiled in water. Because of the circumstances we too had to fast. Mr Trajković

came every month and brought us a little money and food from my aunt. It was difficult for him because he had to walk from Svilajnac to Grabovac carrying a rather heavy package. We also went to Svilajnac every Friday, on foot of course, to the market. Mother and my brother would go to the markets in the surrounding villages. They would sell a few things because we were very poor. In September we moved to



Olga Adam's refugee identification in the name of Olga Urošević, 1942

Svilajnac. We couldn't stay in Grabovac and wait for the winter because Mr Trajković would not have been able to walk through the snow and snowstorms. We found a room with a man named Duško who made traditional peasant footwear. His business was flourishing because there were no shoes. There was a woman living with her daughter in the same street. They were Jews and no one reported them although everyone knew who they were. I don't think they would have survived the war in our home village. Someone would certainly have reported them, but in Svilajnac they lived to see the liberation.

My brother went to Duško's workshop and learned the trade. There were many refugees from Bosnia in Svilajnac. The locals didn't associate with either them or us. We felt like second-class citizens. However at least we felt relatively secure. We became accustomed to this kind of life, to a kind of isolation. However there was something we could not get used to in any way and that was the constant undernourishment, not to say hunger.

For breakfast we'd share half a litre of milk with a little polenta, for the three of us. For lunch we would have a little soup, some stewed vegetables and cornbread and for dinner a piece of cornbread and a little lard. We almost never ate meat.

We got to know the Jews in our street. We didn't tell them what we were, but they felt that we were close to them. They were from Banat, from Bečkerek. They were very pleasant company. Before the war, Mother had never been interested in politics, but now she was closely following everything which was happening in Europe. She even managed to get a map and took down notes on the situation on the fronts. There were still some Vojvodina people in Svilajnac. Mrs Isaković, from whom we bought milk, was from Sremski Karlovci and was the sister of Pavle Beljanski. She befriended my mother and invited her to help make cakes for her son, who was in captivity. A terrible tragedy faced this family. When Belgrade was being heavily bombed in 1944, Mrs Isaković's nephews came to stay with her. Just one, single bomb fell on Svilajnac, probably by accident. And this bomb hit the house of the Isaković family. Six of them were killed there, including Mrs Isaković.

In the Svilajnac area, power was in the hands of Draža Mihajlović's Chetniks. We were once summoned to the Chetnik command to report to them. I went, because mother was afraid, and also because she did not speak Serbian very well. Nor was I comfortable

going to the command of a pretty notorious para-army. However they received me very politely. They asked me if my Slovenian mother had converted to Orthodoxy when she married my father. I said that my father would never have married her if she hadn't converted to Orthodoxy. They let me go, and apologised for bothering us. That was all, but even small things like this seriously disturbed our peace. In the meantime we moved in with the Jewish women. Some strangers, people in rags, arrived in Svilajnac. They were Jews from Hungary who had fled from the Bor mine where they were doing compulsory labour. The Chetniks would feed them and behaved very decently towards them. Basically, they were free there. They heard about the Jewish women and would come to their place. They spoke Hungarian with them. We pretended not to understand anything. In the summer of 1944, Rahela Ferari came to Svilajnac with her husband. She too came to the Jewish women's house. One morning she came and spoke to Eržika, the daughter.

They were sitting in the kitchen. I was chopping onions, making lunch. And Rahela said in Hungarian: "This girl even chops onions like a Jew." I couldn't control myself, I laughed and said that she'd guessed, that we were Jewish, all three of us. Rahela was pregnant. There were already battles being fought in the area. Explosions and machine-gun fire could be heard. Probably because of her fear, there were some complications, so the fugitives from Bor carried Rahela to the village of Kušiljevo, where a village man delivered her baby.

Liberation was close. We began to believe that we would survive. For even though we had lived relatively peacefully,



Olga Adam as Madame Parnell in Moliere's Tartuffe in her graduation production of the Theatre School in Novi Sad, 1949

fear had been our constant companion. We lived in great hardship. The local population did not socialise with us refugees. They tolerated us but didn't like us, so I didn't go out much. Perhaps for a short walk with Mother. I read a lot to pass the time. The Jewish women we lived with had a lot of books. I think that it was also very difficult for my little brother. He would go to take care of the pigs with the children, and he would play with them, but he was never fully accepted. Sometimes we would go to Resava and fish. In the summer we also went swimming. The days passed without excitement. We were only excited by the news from the fronts and the region around us. It is incredible how fast news spreads. We knew everything that was happening, although we didn't have a radio. After Stalingrad, we began to hope that the end of the war would come soon. In one tavern, people were openly listening to Radio London.

At the beginning of October the Red Army soldiers entered the town without a fight. It's hard to describe what we felt at the time. It was only then that we realised the kind of pressure we had lived under for all those years.

After the liberation of Svilajnac, I went to Lapovo, from where railway traffic with Belgrade had already been resumed. I arrived in Belgrade on the first train after the liberation. I went to my father's sister. Reclaiming my real identity was the priority now. I went to the Jewish Community and was given a document confirming that Olga Urošević was really Olga Ungar. I returned to life.

A few weeks later, my mother and brother also came to Belgrade.

At the end of November we returned to our hometown, Novi Kneževac, which was no longer the same as it was when we had left it. The three of us had survived the Holocaust, but our father and nine members of our family no longer existed.