
Rukula BENCION

I WATCHED THEM KILL MY LOVED ONES



Rukula Bencion was born in Priština in 1925, to father Gavriel and mother Estera Navon. Her grandfather and grandmother, who lived with the family, perished at the very beginning of the war.

After the war she worked for the Economic Council of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, which later changed its name to the Council for Economic Planning of the SFR Yugoslavia, until her retirement in 1982.

She was married to Jakov Bencion.

I was a girl of sixteen in an early year of secondary school when the first misfortunes occurred to me. While I was still at school, I knew nothing about the Holocaust. I would only see the sad and concerned faces of my parents, in constant fear that something would happen. I found it odd that they were preparing rucksacks ready to flee because all the events of this period were kept secret from me.

And then, at the beginning of 1941, when Jewish families and individuals from other countries and from occupied Serbia began to arrive in Priština and other towns in Kosovo and Metohija, I began to understand the truth about the concerns of my family and the dangers which awaited us.

Fleeing from death, with the plan of somehow reaching Palestine, Jews were assigned in Priština to various Jewish families because they

had no documents. They hoped that this was a temporary solution until they could in some way obtain the documents which would enable them to continue their southward journey.

The Jewish Community in Priština set up a group of young people responsible for assisting in finding accommodation and food, obtaining medications, clothing and footwear for elderly and unwell Jewish refugees. This group was led by the then rabbi Josif Levi and my brother Nisim Navon. The group was also responsible for obtaining false documents with bribes for the Jewish refugees so that they could continue their journey to the south.

Soon there was a deadly danger for all of us. The Germans entered Priština in April 1941. They immediately imposed measures against Jews. We were ordered to wear yellow armbands with the word "*Jude*" (Jew) on them. We became outlawed citizens who could be killed by anyone without having to answer for it.

The men were ordered to do compulsory labour in the quarry from six in the morning until six at night, under guard, and I was put in a group of Jewish women assigned to clean the public buildings used by the occupying forces, and the streets, also from six in the morning until six in the evening. I was only sixteen, the youngest in the group. Like the rest of my group, I was exposed to humiliation and insults, as well as frequent slaps in the face by the police guards or local people.

In the meantime the Gestapo brought four trucks and stole all my parents' belongings from the house and from a warehouse full of goods from my father's department store. While they did this the Gestapo men lined us up in the hallway, then killed my grandfather and grandmother, beat my father with rifles and kept hitting my mother, my brother and me with a pistol butt and a braided whip, on our heads and backs. From my grandfather's body they took the belt around his waist into which several generations' worth of gold and family jewellery, enormously valuable, were sewn. They also took a metal safe full of money and various kinds of securities.

This was one of the most difficult days of my life, full of sadness and fear. For the first time I was seeing corpses and beaten people, the people dearest to me. There was blood on the floor and, even today in my old age, I am unable to forget this sight.

After the funeral the Gestapo people chased us down to the basement, to sleep in our clothes on the concrete. My brother's hands were bloody from the hammer for breaking stones and mine from the broom

for street sweeping. I would wrap my hands in rags because I had neither bandages nor medications. Illness and hunger without any medicine took their toll. This lasted until May, 1941, and the surrender of this territory to the Italian authorities.

In February 1942, they deported me, along with my father and mother, under police guard, to a ghetto in Elbasan, Albania. There were another six Jewish families from Priština there, and the others were taken to Berat, also in Albania. At that time we had no information about my brother. Later we learnt that they had taken him from the quarry to be shot but that then instead of shooting him they sent him to prison in Priština, then to Tirana, and then, finally, in February 1942, he too had been brought to Elbasan, to the men's prison – a ghetto known as *Casa dei prigioneri*. After a long time my parents and I, who had known nothing about what had happened to him, learnt that he too had been brought there.

With daily physical labour, enduring hunger, illness and cold, we were in the ghetto from February 1942 to the end of August 1943, that is until just before Italy capitulated (on September 9, 1943), when the Germans once more occupied all of Albania, all prisons, camps and public institutions. Watching the Italian soldiers fleeing into the woods to avoid capture by the Germans, we realised we were in deadly danger and decided to flee. There were now no more guards or police, so we paid for a truck in which we escaped into the woods. Then, on horses and mules from a village we climbed deep into the mountains, to the village of Shen Gjergj, where the villagers put us in different houses, with six families, in the lofts of their barns with wooden roofs and stone walls. We were using false names.

We slept on ferns and covered ourselves with sheepskins. Instead of pillows we had wooden logs. We were without food, clothing or medicines, we were sick and had no water. Instead of water we melted snow, because we were at a height of 1,200 metres. We went out only at night because up above us, above the villages, there were German motorised convoys cruising past looking for Partisans. We fed ourselves eating grass, whey and cornbread which we would get from the house owner or from the shepherd, Đafer. The village teacher, Elmaz Mema, used to secretly bring us a handful or two of beans. He suspected that we were Jews, although we all had false Muslim names. The owner of the house was named Kaplan Bala and his son was Destan Bala. We lived in fear of being denounced to the Germans and were

always hungry and sick. Mother and I were skin and bones. We were both sick and had no medicine for the various illnesses we contracted during our time in the barn. We were fighting for our lives. We lived like this until the end of April 1945 when, finally, we travelled by cart and on foot to arrive at our plundered and empty house.

Mother and I had to go immediately to seek medical treatment. My brother contracted pneumonia and a growth in the top right corner of his lung. Father died at the age of 53 as a consequence of the beating and a throat operation.