
Rašela NOAH-KONFINO

SAVED BY OUR SPANISH CITIZENSHIP



Rašela Noah-Konfino was born in Skopje on April 23, 1925, to Esterina, née Amariljo, and Mois Noah. She had a brother, Haim Noah. All the members of her immediate family survived the Holocaust thanks to the fact that they had Spanish citizenship, but fifteen of their relatives perished.

After the second world war, she finished secondary school and a degree in civil engineering, living in the Jewish student hostel at 19 Kosmajaska Street in Belgrade. She began working for Energoprojekt in Belgrade while still a student and remained with the company until her retirement.

She was married to Lazar Konfino and has two daughters, Irina (born 1955) and Vesna (born 1961) and one grandson, David.

Rašela Noah was interviewed by Jaša Almuli for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in the US. The interview was supplemented for this publication with information provided by Rašela Noah at a later date.

There were about four thousand Jews living in Skopje up until the second world war. Much as in all other cities and communities, there was diversity in all spheres of life. I'm thinking here about education and assets, because there were both rich and poor. I lived in Skopje

until the liberation. until the end of the second world war. I'm one of a few, a very small number of Jews in Macedonia who stayed alive thanks to the circumstance that I was a Spanish citizen. I attended primary and secondary school in Skopje. When the war began I was in the fifth grade of secondary school and they granted me, along with all the other students, a pass for the year because the war began in April, two months before the school year was due to finish.



Rašela's mother and father in Skopje, before the war

Most Macedonian Jews were Sephardic, but there were also some Ashkenazi who had come from other regions.

In Skopje, Ladino was spoken in Jewish homes. This was also my mother tongue because I began learning Serbian only when I started school, which was a big problem for children in their schooling. My parents also spoke Macedonian while my brother and I, because we socialised with Serbian children, later spoke mainly Serbian.

The customs were Sephardic. My father wasn't an orthodox Jew. At home we didn't observe the holidays much, but we would go for

each of them to my grandfather, my mother's father. Because this was a large family he would gather his sons and daughters with their families and we all celebrated the holidays there. The customs were very nice and we children really enjoyed it all. We also had a beautiful and large synagogue in Skopje.

My father was a tradesman. He had a knitwear workshop from 1930. Until the war began we lived a pleasant middle-class life. Mother and father worked in the workshop, which was right next door to the house, so my brother and I were not neglected. My brother finished textile school in Leskovac and joined the business. Once a year, the family went on vacation to a spa.

The Jewish community was very harmonious: people got along well and helped one another. There were also some Jewish organisations such as Hashomer Hatzair for young people. My brother was a member of Hashomer. I didn't belong to any organisations, due to a combination of circumstances, because we were practically the only Jewish family in the area of Skopje where we lived. I was the only Jew in my school and I didn't have Jewish religious classes in primary school, but Orthodox, right through to high school.

The Germans entered Skopje immediately after the attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941. They were followed by the Bulgarians. The Germans made concessions to the Bulgarians because they were their allies. The Germans broke up the country and annexed Macedonia, or South Serbia as it was called in the then Yugoslavia, to Bulgaria. Anyone who wanted could get Bulgarian citizenship. Only those who declared themselves as Serbs had to leave Macedonia, within a very short time and under very rigid conditions. Macedonian Jews were not allowed to take Bulgarian citizenship. This was so that they could confiscate their assets, ban them from working, and limit their movements. We were forced to wear the Star of David. We wore the yellow star as a brooch, like a button. I had to start wearing it in 1941, as soon as the Germans came, and I also wore it during the Bulgarian occupation. Jews were also barred from living in apartments in the new part of Skopje and had to move out of this part of the city. Because of this my uncle, my mother's youngest brother, and my aunt moved in with us, because they were evicted from their apartment.

MONOPOL: CAMP FOR MACEDONIAN JEWS

During the occupation my father lost his right to work. But he was a very resourceful and wise man. One room in our house was used as a store for the larger quantities of merchandise father needed in his business. Before the Germans arrived he sold this stock – because there were still people who wanted to buy these goods. He then changed all the money into gold coins and gave them to a close friend – a Macedonian called Rista. I don't remember his surname. With this money, Rista bought us food and anything else we needed. The money was used to support our refugees: Aunt Berta and Uncle Avram Koen, my father's sister and her husband, and their two little daughters, Rita and Mati. They all fled Belgrade and came to us, just as my mother's brother and his wife had done, because they had nothing to support themselves with. They were later taken to Treblinka where they perished.



Rašela Noah as a bridesmaid at the wedding of her uncle, Menteš Noah. Only eleven members of her large family survived the atrocities of the war

My parents usually learnt about measures imposed on the Jews through the Jewish Community or through public announcements. There wasn't any real change in the attitude of the neighbours, most of them Turks, in our area although our Macedonian neighbours dis-

tanced themselves somewhat and there were no Serbs because they had all left Macedonia when the Germans arrived.

Jews were subject to many restrictions. However, compared to those in Serbia, Germany, Austria and other countries, even with all these restrictions, Jews lived under relatively tolerable conditions until March 11, 1943.



Same face, different situations in life: Rašela in 1941 and, a year later, in occupied Skopje

Up to this time, the Bulgarians didn't force anyone to enter concentration camps. There were many Jewish refugees from Serbia who had heard that conditions were much better for them in Skopje and in Macedonia in general. However in 1941 the Bulgarian authorities proclaimed that anyone who came from other countries had to report. Some Jews from Belgrade took the bait. They were arrested when they reported to the authorities and were immediately returned to Belgrade. Later, after the war, we heard that they had been killed soon after that.

I have already mentioned that, like all Jews, my father did not have the right to work. The German and Bulgarian occupying forces had stripped Jews of their citizenship so they were able to deprive them of the right to work and seize their assets, all under the pretence of legality.

And so we lived on a razor's edge, from one day to the next, until March 11, 1943. At dawn on that day, virtually without warning, they rounded up all the Jews in Skopje. This was done thoroughly and "successfully", demonstrating that there was a register of all Jews and they knew where everyone lived. At first we had no idea what would happen to us. In most cases the Bulgarian police came into our apartments, forced us to prepare quickly and pack some clothes. We were allowed to take blankets and food. I remember the long line of horse-drawn carts in which we could put our belongings. We walked beside the carts as the column headed for Monopol. This was the name of the tobacco warehouses on the outskirts of Skopje, which had their own railway siding. As far as I remember there were four buildings of four storeys each. They put all the people from Skopje in there and then, during the day, we were joined by Jews who had been arrested in Bitolj, Štip, Veles and other places throughout Macedonia.

CONVOYS

At the time we had no idea who had given the orders for this, but we learnt later that it had been the Bulgarians, under pressure from the Germans. In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian authorities were protecting their Jews. Czar Boris and the patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church stood up to the German request to round up and hand over Bulgarian Jews. Their position was that they were Bulgarian citizens and they wouldn't hand them over. However they soon paid recompense for this concession by conducting a thorough deportation of Jews from Macedonia. We remained in Monopol for twenty days or so. There were more than seven thousand Jews assembled there. For a few days we received no food: we ate what we had brought from home. The accommodation was the worst. Each family was allotted a patch of floor. There we laid out what we had brought with us from home. There was no water in the Monopol compound, except in the yard. They only let us out in groups, whether to relieve ourselves, wash our faces or fetch water. However very little time was allowed for each of these needs, so we had to do everything at breakneck speed. Because of this there were soon lice, mange and contagious diseases, all in the short period we spent in Monopol. Of course we had nothing in the camp – we had no beds nor did they give us blankets. There was only the wooden floor and, because the ceiling was so high, lofts

where tobacco was dried. People were also accommodated on these lofts. We were living in these terrible conditions when the convoys began. The Jews were taken away from Monopol in three convoys. The first left on March 22 and the last on March 29. We later discovered from documents we had access to after the war, that there were supposed to be four convoys. However they squeezed many more people into the wagons than would properly fit so that everyone was taken in just three convoys. We were never told where they were taking us, although there was a rumour, but it was only guessing, that we were going to forced labour somewhere in Bulgaria. When we saw German guards beside the wagons we began to be suspicious.



Rašela's mother Esterina with her son Haim, Rašela's brother

And this is the point to tell the story of how my immediate family and I survived.

While we were in Monopol, the Italian consul made an attempt to save some of the Jews at any cost. He was opposed to this extremely inhumane transport of Jews. Because he was unable to do anything else, he tried to save at least those Jews who were Italian citizens and succeeded in doing this. Several families of Skopje Jews were released while we were in Monopol. They were rescued as Italian citizens. In addition a Bulgarian, Dr Kostov, tried to have physicians, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons released from Monopol saying that he needed them to do skilled work for which people were in short supply in remote parts of Macedonia, where epidemics had broken out, and for other health protection projects. He succeeded. There were about sixty of these. He first asked for pharmacists and physicians, but they refused to leave the camp without their families. Then he went to the Bulgarian authorities with the request that their families be released with them. He succeeded again and so a second group of Jews was released. However the veterinary surgeons were not allowed to leave the camp.

In this situation my brother Haim Noah began to agitate for the release of Jews. He had an idea that perhaps we could also try to save ourselves as Spanish citizens from the time when Jews were expelled from Spain. Most Spanish citizens in Skopje had never renewed their documents, because it was very difficult for Spanish citizens to get jobs in Yugoslavia, so a number of people who had had Spanish citizenship took Yugoslav citizenship and allowed their Spanish citizenship to lapse.

By tradition, my father's entire family had Spanish citizenship and we had documents at home proving this. My brother, who was ten years older than me, had graduated from a specialist secondary textile school in 1937. As a Spanish citizen he had problems finding a job, so my parents then applied for Yugoslav citizenship for the whole family. We got it. My brother even did military service, but my parents didn't throw away the documents which proved we had Spanish nationality, but kept them as a souvenir. Because we didn't have these documents with us, my brother was taken under guard to our house in Skopje and brought back some old passports. I don't even know when exactly we acquired Spanish citizenship, I suppose it was passed down from one generation to another. He brought all these documents to

the camp and gave them to the Bulgarian authorities who, it seems, were willing to take this into consideration. We learnt later that the Spanish ambassador in Sofia and the Spanish consul in Skopje had pushed this case very hard. Once the whole issue was raised, they insisted that Spanish citizens be released from the camp. So we, too, were released, along with about 25 families of Spanish citizens, a total of about seventy people. A family friend, a Bulgarian woman married



*Three brothers and two sisters of Rašela's mother Esterina perished.
Of the people in this photograph, only two (sitting in the first row)
died of natural causes*

to a Polish Jew who had converted to Christianity, helped us do all this quickly and successfully. We got a note to her telling her that we had submitted the papers, and she interceded with the police, insisting that everything be sent to the Spanish ambassador in Bulgaria. For us, this meant that things were virtually taken care of because the ambassador really wanted to help, without raising the question of the documents being renewed. We were given new Spanish passports. The whole operation took more than twenty days, so we saw all the transports leave Monopol. They wouldn't allow us to leave the camp, as the Ital-

ian citizens had done, and the doctors and pharmacists, they released us only once the convoys had left. And so until the very last day, or to be exact the very last minute, we didn't know whether or not we would be released. Leaving the camp was completely shattering for me because everyone I loved had left! From the detached room in which we were accommodated, I watched them board the wagons. It was especially difficult for me to watch Nina, my best friend, drag her bundle and not be able to help her.

It was terrible in Monopol when the transports were leaving. There were many elderly people, there were also children; people were beside themselves in chaos and panic, they were carrying bags and were simply shoved into cattle wagons. When they'd crammed in as many people as they thought could fit, they would close them. The wagons had barred windows for ventilation. All of this, happening before our very eyes, could only be described as horrendous. While we were in the camp, wagons taking Jews from Thessalonica to execution sites passed by. I had an aunt in Thessalonica, my mother's sister, who perished in Treblinka together with her husband and two children. My father's brothers were, like us, Spanish citizens, so they too were released from the camp with their families. On the other hand, the plan to wipe out an entire people cost the lives of many of my mother's family.

We weren't allowed to speak to the people who were leaving Monopol, most of them on their last journey. The local Fascist collaborators, who had rounded up the Jews and their families, tortured them in the camps and from there delivered them to the masters of death, allocated a building to those who had been selected for transport, while they locked the rest of us up and made it impossible for us to get out and get anywhere near the wagons. Our view was limited to what we could see through the window: those on the transport left without saying goodbye and without any messages for anyone anywhere.

THE EVIL FATE OF THE SERBIAN JEWS

At the time all of this was happening, in March 1943, we knew nothing of the persecution of Jews and other peoples. Nor did we know about Auschwitz and the other camps. The only thing we Jews from Macedonia knew was what we heard from Jewish refugees com-

ing in from Austria, or those who had fled Serbia. No one even suspected the existence of death camps, liquidation camps, such as Auschwitz, Treblinka and the others. We expected to see our relatives after the war.

Of the more than seven thousand Jews interned in Monopol, not one survived. Of the Macedonian Jews, no one returned.

They released us from Monopol, on a Sunday evening if I'm not mistaken, during the curfew, so we had to get home fast. However we were unable to get into the house because it was locked and everything from inside had been stolen and taken away. But we had good neighbours, Turks, and when they heard us ring, when they saw we were trying to get into our house, they immediately came out of their homes and took us in. We were their guests for three days, until we managed to get the keys to our house. In the rooms stripped of everything we lived as though we were under some kind of house arrest, aware that there were very few Jews left and that we were still required to wear the Star of David and report to the Bulgarian authorities. On top of that there were also quite a few Germans in Skopje. We assumed that we would attract attention out on the streets, so we lived in isolation; our neighbours kept us supplied with food and took care of us. Legally speaking we were protected, but we were afraid that all kinds of things might happen to us.

At the time the British had several times bombed Ploëști in Romania, a place with oil wells and refineries, so there were air raid alerts in Skopje every evening. A permit was needed to leave the city and so our Turkish neighbours applied for permission to evacuate to a village in order to avoid these frequent alerts. We did the same – applied for permission and received it. We went with our Turkish neighbours to an Albanian village near Tetovo – I can't remember what it was called. Because it was summer and the school was in recess, the locals put us up in the school building. Here we lived as best we could, slept and battled the shortages. The important thing was that we stayed alive. Our Turkish neighbours' Albanian friends took as much care of us as they could. But one morning we faced an unpleasant surprise when we wanted to go out. Some Albanians we didn't know blocked our way; they were standing in front of the school as guards, with guns. We were astonished – we hoped to get through and now we were unable to get out! But because our Turkish friends were there and they were allowed out, they went to Skopje, reported

everything to the Bulgarian authorities and the Bulgarians came and freed us. Later we learnt that these people had been Balists who knew that we were Jews and that people had hidden us there. They were counting on getting a bounty for us. The Balists were Albanian Fascists who collaborated with the Germans during the war. This incident was a warning to us that we weren't safe, even here, so we returned to Skopje. We went to the outskirts of the city, to Rista, the man I mentioned earlier who had worked in my father's shop in 1928 and 1929 and who had remained a true friend of our family. Because he had a very large family and very little space, he couldn't take us into his apartment, but he allowed us to use a shed in his yard. We stayed there until October 1944, and were there when the liberation happened. I should mention that my father really trusted this man, so he gave him the coins and all the money he had raised by selling the stock from his workshop which he had before the war and which he was forced to get rid of under pressure. He left all the money with his friend who supplied us with everything necessary.

Even though Rista had not had any work for the whole four years, he spent all the money, to the last dinar, on us and didn't keep anything for himself.

And so the liberation came. I then completed the sixth grade, because I had not attended school during the war. Then I moved to Belgrade and finished seventh and eighth grades in one year at a school for students whose education had been interrupted by the war. Then I enrolled in the Belgrade University Faculty of Civil Engineering and, after graduating, worked as an engineer until my retirement.

My parents moved to Israel right after the war, in 1948. I have never been back to Skopje since they left the city. I had neither the will nor the strength – the memories were far too painful. I have some very nice memories from the war period but, despite the fact that my family survived, the tragedy of war laid a dark pall over everything with the senseless crimes which cause people to lose faith and hope. Skopje is a city which has the worst possible memories for me, a city in which I no longer have any family, in which I no longer know anyone, so there is no reason, no motive for me to go there.

In one of my moments of facing the past and the horrors, I once calculated that fifteen members of my immediate and extended family perished in the war. My mother's brothers and sisters all died, with their families, all of them in Treblinka.