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*Mina KOVAČEVIĆ*

WAITING FOR THE TORMENT TO END



*M*ina Kovačević was born in Kaunas, at the time the capital of Lithuania, to Rebecca (née Solski) and Solom Haim Brauda. She had one sister; Braina, who was three years younger. She was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust.

*After the liberation she worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an interpreter. Later, in Skopje, she married Voja Kovačević, a commissar and general of the Fifth Army who had been decorated with the order of National Hero. In Skopje she worked for OZNA, the National Security*

*Service as an interpreter. She subsequently worked in the Belgrade Interpol office until her retirement.*

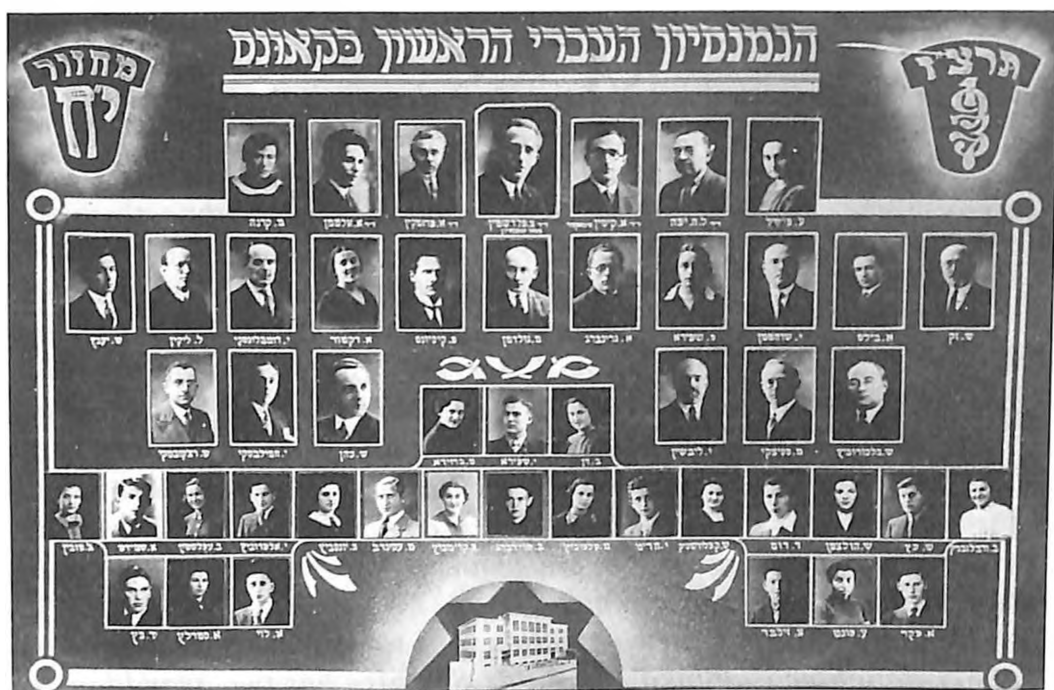
*Mina Kovačević has two children; her son Goran is an economist and her daughter Planinka, a painter. She also has two granddaughters, a grandson and two great-grandsons.*

I am one of the more than 4,500 Yugoslav Jews who fought against both Fascism and Nazism.

I was born in 1920, in Kaunas which, at the time, was the capital of Lithuania. Kaunas was a city of about 180,000 people, of whom forty thousand were Jews. My mother, Rebecca Solski, and my father, Sholom Haim Brauda, came from wealthy intellectual families, noted for both their philanthropy and their success in industry. My family,

together with the families of my five uncles, lived in a block of buildings which had belonged to my grandfather, Abi Solski. My younger sister Braina and I were only two of the many children in this community. Our courtyard and orchard were the gathering place for Jewish children from all over the city. All these children were brought up in the spirit of Zionism, going to Hebrew kindergartens and Hebrew schools.

My life as a student in Paris, the Yugoslav friends I made and my registry-office marriage to Spasoje Spajić, a Serb preparing his doctoral thesis in law at the Sorbonne, were the turning points in my early life. The years and the events which followed bound me forever to the country I came to call home.



*Teachers and matriculants of the Jewish High School  
in Kaunas, Lithuania, 1937.*

I arrived here in September, 1940, in someone else's country, knowing neither the language nor the culture of the local people. I'd hardly settled in when the war began. I watched the demonstrations on March 27, 1941, with little idea of what would follow. My husband saw what lay ahead and especially the danger lying in wait for me and so he put me on a train for Hercegovina. I went to his birthplace, Zupce, near Trebinje, to the village of Grab. Having come from the lowland plains

of Lithuania, I had never seen anything like this bare, rocky land. Nor had I ever lived in a village. This, for me, was a completely new world.

Yugoslavia fell not long afterwards and this part of Hercegovina was claimed by the Ustashes<sup>1</sup> for the newly proclaimed Independent State of Croatia. My first shock came as I saw the crimes of the Ustashes against the Serbs. There were no Jews in the region.

My husband rallied a group of young men to prepare for an uprising. I threw myself zealously into this plan, knowing it was the only contribution I could make to the struggle against Fascism. However they insisted I was too delicate for physical work and for trekking over the mountains, so I gave lessons in first aid to the young village women. To this day I don't know how they understood me with my poor knowledge of their language as I spoke to them about everything I remembered from school, from hygiene classes. Nor do I know how I managed to walk, hungry and freezing, in my ragged peasant shoes through the snow and rain. I often became lost in the dark and fell behind the rest of the group.

The Italians took command of the region. The fighting began in December, 1941, when the Partisans liberated all seventeen of the Zupce villages. Next came the attack on the Italian garrison on the border with Boka. This was the first time I took part myself. It was icy cold, with heavy snow falling, and my job was to pass up ammunition to the soldiers from a hole in the ground. I caught cold there which led to a middle ear infection which causes me problems to this very day. The Partisans took thirty Italians prisoner and I gave first aid to one who was wounded in the arm.

Then came a seemingly insignificant incident, over which I almost lost my life. A Partisan woman with a baby came to the village. She was older than me and more experienced. She was complaining that there was no clock in the village house where she was staying, and she had no way of knowing when to feed her baby. Without thinking, I gave her my little gold watch, explaining that my mother had given it to me for my Bat Mitzvah. On the back of the watch my monogram was engraved in Hebrew letters.

An offensive began soon after this and we began getting out, in small groups. I'll never forget that retreat under cannon fire. There were shells falling all around us, but no one was hurt. This went on for sev-

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<sup>1</sup> Ustasha: Croatian Fascist movement.

eral days until, finally we were surrounded and captured by the Chetniks. I was the only woman in the group.

By now, anarchy had set in. The Italians were in command of the area, but local power was in the hands of the Chetniks who were arresting and robbing people. That was how one of them came to catch sight of my watch, which the Partisan woman was wearing. He began to slap her, accusing her of being a Muslim. She denied this, telling them that the watch was mine. A few days later, when the Chetniks brought our captured group to the prison, my problems really began. For the first time in my life I was beaten and slapped, while they swore at me and said my name was Emina, not Mina. It was worse when they slapped me and pulled my hair than when they beat me with a cane. I told them I was not a Muslim, but a Jew. It went on and on and I finally fainted. Later they brought me back to the group I was arrested with. In torment, we lay in a school classroom the whole night and in the morning we were taken out to be shot. We sat tied up in a meadow beside the road and waited, while our friends dug graves for us. A crowd gathered, waiting to see what would happen. Our prison comrades were digging slowly in the hard ground, as though they were waiting for something to happen, while we called out to them to hurry, so that our torture would soon be over. I was silently praying: "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elochenu, Adonai Echad..." I thought that my family in Lithuania would never discover where I had disappeared, and how. I didn't know at that time that they had been ruined and driven from their homes into ghettos and camps.

And then, just as our friends finished their digging, a miracle happened: a car arrived with two Italian officers. They stopped the car and got out to see what was going on. They noticed me and my husband, saw that we looked different from the others and asked us in Italian what was happening. We answered, in French, that we had been brought there to be shot. The Chetniks were collaborating with the Italians, but they didn't have the authority to shoot people without permission. The officers gave orders for the other prisoners to be taken back to the prison and then took me and my husband by car to their own prison in Trebinje. We were quite a curiosity for them, a professor of law from this poor and isolated area and his young wife from far-off Lithuania. We spent ten days in the Trebinje prison and then we set off, escorted by two *carabinieri*. And then, on the train, another miracle happened. The non-commissioned officer who had been wounded in the arm and captured by our unit was there, the same one to whom I had

given first aid. When he recognised me, he came into our compartment and showed me the scar on his arm. At first I didn't know what was going on, because I didn't remember his face. Then this Italian, whose name I never learned, took it on himself to go to the headquarters and tell them that I had helped him when he was wounded and that I hadn't been armed at all. And so, in this way, I was again saved from execution.

They took us from the train to a prison called Kazbek, in the Lapad area of Dubrovnik where the *carabinieri* now had their command post. Before the war Kazbek had been a nightclub and the prison was in the dark, stone cellar under what had been the bar. As soon as I arrived, the women prisoners gathered around, asking me who I was and why I had been brought there, but I was tight-lipped. I was dressed like a village woman, but some of them noticed immediately: "You're different, you sound different. You're not from around here". I lay and sat on the bare and filthy stone floor. In one corner there was a beautiful middle-aged woman, a real lady. She was lying on a mattress, watching me, not asking anything. As darkness fell and the women began settling down to sleep, she beckoned me over to lie beside her. So I lay there, and she whispered to me:

"When I heard that you were from Zupce, I knew immediately that you were Dr Spajić's wife. I know all about you. I'm sorry that we're meeting for the first time under these circumstances. My name is Dada; my husband is Dr Novaković from Cavtat".

As soon as she told me this I remembered that a courier had brought drugs and mandarins for the wounded from Cavtat to our unit.



*Mina in Paris, 1939.*

We whispered to each other the whole night, without the other prisoners noticing that we knew each other. Because the Chetniks had whipped me, I couldn't lie on my back and spent the whole night lying on my stomach on the bare stone. For a long time, even after the liberation, I continued to lie this way.

Dada thought that she would soon be released because there was no evidence of her having helped the Partisans. She grasped my situation immediately and promised that she would not forget me and, later, she kept that promise. At this time, my husband was shot, together with all the other young people captured from my group. My sobbing could be heard so clearly out in the Kazbek yard that the Italians had to put on some loud music to drown it out, because people passing by were stopping at the gate. Later I discovered that the Chetniks had tried to make sure that I was executed with the rest of the group, because I knew so much about their crimes, but the Italians protected me. The commander of the *carabinieri* called me to his office and told me that he wouldn't let the Chetniks kill me because I'd saved the wounded Italian soldier. They would have been happy to transfer me to the island of Rab where there was a camp for Jews, but this wasn't really feasible for a single prisoner.

Soon after that they moved me from Kazbek to another Italian prison in the Lovrijenac fortress. Here, too, the walls and floor were of stone, but there was more light than in Kazbek. There was little to eat and the water was rationed. From Lovrijenac they transferred me to a camp on the Prevlaka peninsula. There we were free to move around in an area fenced with wire and we slept with just one blanket on wooden floors in wooden barracks. In this camp there were a lot of children and women of all ages, all of them being held hostage for their husbands, brothers and fathers. Many of the inmates of the camp, especially the children, died of hunger and thirst. We each received a litre of water a day, and the only thing that saved us was the rain, which we collected in all sorts of tin cans. Dada sent me parcels of food once a month, which was all that was allowed, and this kept me going. Through these parcels, in code, she let me know that she and her husband wanted to adopt me and had already taken the first steps towards this. I was on Prevlaka for nearly a year before the Italians moved the women's camp by ship to Italy and I was sent back to Lovrijenac. Soon after that Italy fell and all the prisoners and guards from Lovrijenac fled.

I reached Dubrovnik as night was falling. Everyone was afraid that the Germans would enter the town at any minute. I was alone, I didn't know the town and I had no place to go. I wandered around, with no idea where to hide for the night. The people were all locked in their houses and there wasn't a soul in the streets. And then, yet another miracle happened. I saw two female figures, dressed in black, slowly coming towards me in the darkness. They were not an apparition, but the mother and sister of my friend Dragica Pravica<sup>2</sup>, who had been killed. These women and I had spent some time together on Prevlaka, where they were being held hostage. They hugged me and quickly took me home with them. I stayed there, without papers, never alone, and always with someone to arrange places to hide. I moved frequently from place to place. There was danger on every corner, but I quickly learned to be careful. For some time I hid in the contagious diseases ward of a Dubrovnik hospital. The Gestapo even began sticking their noses in there, and discovered a number of young men without documents.

After various difficulties, I eventually made contact with the Konavle Partisan unit in the winter of 1943. This was a small unit of about thirty fighters, huddling in an abandoned log cabin on a mountain called Dunavske Rupe. My friend Fanika<sup>3</sup> and I stayed in a little cave about a hundred metres away, taking care of the wounded Ljuba Kosić<sup>4</sup>. We had a battery radio on which we listened to the news on *Slobodna Jugoslavija* (Free Yugoslavia) and anything else we could pick up in other languages during the night. I translated the news while Fanika typed and copied. A courier from the unit would bring us a little food, as much as they had themselves, and we would give him ten or twenty typed leaflets with the news. At night they distributed these around the surrounding areas. Despite the secrecy with which this was done, enemy spies discovered the source of the leaflets. But when the Germans, one night, climbed the mountain and found our cave, we were already down in the village, having learnt in time that they were coming. I spent that night hiding in a vineyard, dressed in the Konavle village clothes of a twelve-year-old girl, Nika Valjalo (later Lasić), who is still my close friend now after all the passing years.

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<sup>2</sup> Dragica Pravica, National Hero. Killed by Chetniks in June, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Fanika Božanić, certified as a Partisan fighter in 1941. Died in 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Colonel Ljuba Kosić, certified as a Partisan fighter. Died during the 1980s.

In the first days of May, 1944, my contact came to escort me to the liberated territory of Hercegovina. They had obtained forged documents and a decent dress for me. The activist Ljubo Filipović<sup>5</sup>, who had no documents himself, took me from Cavtat to Zaton on a motorcycle in broad daylight, right under the nose of ten German guards.

From Zaton, a new guide took me to the unit. The only way we could get there was to cross the Trebišnica River at night. At this time of the year the river was swollen and cold. We crossed it under a bridge where the Germans kept watch, their heavy military boots pounding above our heads. The slightest sound would have given us away. Of all the physical hardship I lived through during the war, I still think this was the worst. The water, black and filthy in the moonlight, came up to my mouth as we waded across. Finally, soaked to the skin, our clothes sodden and heavy, we ran four kilometres to the first village in the liberated zone.

There, on liberated territory, in the 29<sup>th</sup> Hercegovina Division, with my knowledge of the language already much better, I felt safer and more independent with the Partisans. I travelled through Hercegovina, Montenegro and crossed Bosnia, Croatia, Istria and Slovenia. When liberation came, I was in Bled.

I came back to Belgrade from the war with a certificate of Partisan service and the rank of captain, to begin the search for my closest relatives in Lithuania. Sometimes, when alone, I would sit and think about how I survived the Holocaust. I was sure my family would never believe me when I told them everything I had gone through. Little did I know that my entire family had perished, some in the Viampola Ghetto, some in Dachau and other concentration camps. All I have left is photographs.

At the end of 1945, I married General Voja Kovačević, who had been decorated with the order of National Hero. Together we had two children: our son, Goran, who works for Yugoslav Airlines, and our daughter, Planinka, a painter, who now lives permanently in Raanana, Israel. Grandchildren and then great-grandchildren were not long arriving. To my great sadness, my husband Voja, with whom I travelled frequently through Israel, died in 1997.

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<sup>5</sup> Ljubo Filipović, engineer and retired colonel. My brother by adoption.