
Albert ALKALAJ*

A PAINTER GROWS UP IN THE CAMP

Albert Alkalaj is the son of Samuilo and Lepa Alkalaj (née Afar). His father was a clerk in the Franco-Serbian Bank. When the Austrians entered Belgrade during the first world war, his family moved to Paris, where Albert was born in 1917. After the war the family returned to Belgrade, where Albert completed secondary school and enrolled to study architecture and was involved in the Zionist movement Hashomer Hatzair.

He taught himself to paint with the help of Bora Baruh. While he was interned in the Ferramonti camp during the second world war he met the Austrian painter Michael Fingenstein who gave him lessons. After the liberation he went to Rome, remaining there to paint. In Rome he met Oskar Kokoschka and Karl Levi, who wrote the introduction to the catalogue for his first major exhibition in Rome. From Italy he moved to Boston in the United States where he now lives as an independent painter and academic.

I was an officer in the war and was captured in Macedonia. While imprisoned in Bulgaria I managed to convince the camp commandant to release me before all the camp inmates were transported to Germany. I returned to Belgrade but was unable to find my parents who had left after the first bombing on April 6, 1941.

* This testimony is based on a letter from Albert Alkalaj to Vera Kon Alkalaj and a telephone discussion with Eta Najfeld.

When I arrived the Jews were already wearing yellow arm bands and I now had to do the same. I worked in Belgrade with other young people, mostly on the forging of documents for refugees, Jews from countries already invaded by the Germans who were passing through Belgrade with the plan of going to Palestine. After an act of sabotage, all male Jews were summoned to Tašmajdan and every fifth one was shot. I was fourth. This made it clear to me that I had to flee. I forged passports for a friend and myself and we fled Belgrade towards the south, hoping to come across the Italians.



The Refugees, Albert Alkalaj, India ink, pen.

Passing through Niš, Uroševac, Pristina and Prizren, we managed to reach Albania where we travelled from the capital, Tirana, to the port of Durres. There we caught a ship for Split after waiting for fifteen days. Walking around Durres I saw some Jewish shops and went into one of them. The Jews there, speaking in Ladino, told me that there was a concentration camp in Kavaje. I went there the next day by bus and saw, from the bus, my sister and Jaša behind the wire. This was how I discovered that my entire family was there. I visited Kavaje several times, as my father's "nephew", bringing them news about events in Belgrade. Jaša and I had attended school together, lived in the same house and been friends from our early childhood.

I left Kavaje reluctantly and went to Split. I didn't like the way the Fascists treated the Jewish refugees there. I knew there was going to be trouble, so my friend and I obtained new false documents and moved to Ancona in Italy. We were both keen mountain climbers, so we planned to cross the Alps, then go to Zurich and fly from there to Lisbon. From there we would take a ship right around Africa to Lorenzo Marquez in Mozambique, travel to Cairo by train and then make our way from Cairo to Palestine.

In the event, none of this happened as we got stuck in Padua where I had met some friends. But I came under suspicion because of my documents and fled to Milan, where the situation was very difficult. I had no documents for the city so I had to sleep in waiting rooms at the station or in the cinema. Both the Carabinieri and the Germans were looking for me. I didn't sleep, ate little and froze in the Milan winter. I thought that the best possible place for me would be prison, where I would be able to sleep and no one would look for me. So, on December 9, I managed to get myself arrested in Vicenza and, after three months in prison, in isolation, they moved me to Ferramonti.



The Last Day of the War, *Albert Alcalaj, oil pastels on card, 1945.*

I was in Ferramonti for ten months before my family succeeded in being released to “free confinement” in Pergola in the province of Pessaro. There we lived peacefully, waiting for the war to end. However, once Badoglio arrived on the scene and Mussolini was arrested and then released by the Germans, a telegram arrived with orders to arrest us. The girl who received the telegram came and warned me. That same evening we fled into the hills and hid there until the liberation. During those two years we went through everything: hiding with farmers, with the Partisans, with priests and so on. Finally, following the liberation, we returned, exhausted and hungry, to Pergola.

Much later, after I managed to sell some paintings and saved money to buy a truck, we went to Rome where we were accepted. We didn't want to return to Belgrade. We had lost everything we owned including all the members of our extended family. We remained in Rome until 1951, when the Truman Directive allowed a hundred thousand refugees to be admitted to the United States. In this way we arrived in Boston. While we were in Rome I met Vera Eškenazi whom I had known in Belgrade. We were married in Campidoglio under the Michelangelo monument. It was in Rome that I matured as an artist and Vera studied medicine.

We arrived in Boston as refugees, and were assisted by the Jewish Community Appeal. My parents subsequently died and my sister Bojana lives in the United States with her family.