
Zoltan BIRO

JEWISH DOCTORS IN THE BOR CAMP



Zoltan Biro was born in Budapest on March 30, 1912, the only child of Ilona (née Mendelson) and Mirko Imre Biro.

His father and mother were taken to Auschwitz in 1944 and, like the majority of inmates, did not survive.

He worked in the Military Court of Subotica from the end of 1944 until autumn, 1945, then in the Ministry of Finance and Justice in Belgrade. Until his retirement in 1975, he worked in the Supreme Commercial Court. He continued in the post of arbitrator in the Foreign Trade Arbitration Commission in Belgrade until his death on April 2, 1998. He wrote legal commentaries in a number of fields, particularly in construction legislation. He was married to Eva (née Rosenfeld), and had two daughters, Eva Blumenberg and Judita Jovanović, and four grandchildren.

This account is part of a testimony based on an interview with Zoltan Biro by Jaša Almuli, former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

After the occupation in 1941, like other young Jews in Bačka, I was mobilised into Hungarian military labour gangs and, in 1943, sent with one of them to forced labour in the Bor mine. Jews, like other members of “inferior races” in Hungary and Vojvodina and other areas under occupation, were not sent to the Hungarian Army. Instead, from

the first half of 1942, they were deployed in work such as clearing mines on the Eastern front and hauling cannons.

Part of my unit was dispatched to the Bor mine. I was one of rather more than six thousand Jews handed over by Hungary to the Germans and sent to the mine. Of these, about a hundred were from Vojvodina.

In the beginning I worked with the military sappers and lived in the Feralberg camp. There was a base of the Poreč Chetnik Corps in the nearby village of Gornjani. The commanding officer was named Piletić and he was either a major or a lieutenant colonel.

There were a number of active officers in Piletić's headquarters who brought their families to the neighbouring villages. The villages were primitive and contagious diseases abounded, and when members of the officers' families fell ill, there were no doctors either in the headquarters or anywhere in the vicinity. However there were three Jewish doctors doing forced labour in the camp: Nikola Szemzo from Vojvodina, who was near the end of his medical studies, Dr Kadar from Budapest and a doctor from the Carpathian area of Russia. Piletić sent a courier to the German commander asking him to send the interned Jewish doctors to treat the families of the officers. They were duly sent, escorted by a German soldier. In this way we came in contact with the Chetniks who began trying to persuade us to join them. We agreed and, in order to cover our escape attempt, a Chetnik attack on the camp was staged. A platoon of Chetniks came to the work site with automatic rifles, they disarmed the guards and took the Jewish doctors away. Another five or six Jews went with them, three from Subotica and the others from the Carpathian Mountains in Russia. Before the breakout, Dr Szemzo asked me to join them, but I declined. The Chetniks also invited me to join them after they found out that I was a reserve officer in the army but I refused this as well. In the thirties, at Belgrade University, I had been a leading member of the Association of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia.

Szemzo had only one more exam in forensic medicine to take before being awarded his degree. He worked as a doctor for the Chetniks until they were defeated by the Partisans near Rtanj in the middle of 1944. Some of the Chetniks then went home while the others joined the National Liberation Army. All the Jews who had fled with Szemzo to the Chetniks were among them. Szemzo himself became a Partisan doctor. After the war he worked in the army, completed his degree and became a specialist.

I managed to flee the Bor camp when the Hungarians began deporting Jews to prevent them being liberated by the National Liberation Army and the Red Army, both of which were advancing. The situation of Jews, both in the camp and in Hungary, had deteriorated rapidly by then, after the far right Nazi collaborators seized power in Hungary. In the spring of 1944 they began handing Jews over to the German Nazis, who sent them to death camps. In autumn they began taking Jewish prisoners working in Bor to Hungary in order to deliver them to the Germans. A number of us felt that it was dangerous to wait and that we should flee while we could. When the camp was moved closer to Bor, seven of us used the confusion which followed an explosion to leave the column and head for the forest. We were in the Homolje forest for fourteen days, staying in cottages with Wallachians and working for our food, before we came across a Partisan road maintenance worker from 1941. He was from Brestovačka Banja and put us in touch with the nearest Partisan unit. I joined the Seventh Serbian Brigade and arrived with them in Belgrade, two days after the liberation. Not long after that I joined the military justice service in Vojvodina.

Those taken by force from Bor by the Hungarians had a sad destiny. The first column of Jewish workers, about 3,600 of them, left Bor on foot on September 17, 1944. They set out via Petrovac and Smederevo for Belgrade. On this death march they were given only a kilogram of bread each for seven days. Many individuals and groups among them were killed by the Hungarians along the way. In Crvenka the Germans took the prisoners over and immediately shot seven hundred of them in a brick factory. About 1,500 inmates remained and these were now taken by SS men towards Baja in Hungary with more killing along the way. Only about 1,300 reached Baja, from where the Germans took them to concentration camps. The second group taken from Bor fared no better. Of the more than a hundred Jews from Vojvodina who were sent to forced labour in Bor, only ten survived: those who managed to flee and just three who survived the concentration camps.