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*Mirjam FERERA*

USTAŠA, GERMANS, ITALIANS...



*M*irjam Ferera was born in Dubrovnik in 1925 to father Moric and mother Stela. The surname of her maternal grandfather was Finci and he moved from Sarajevo to Dubrovnik, where he opened a business. He died very young. His wife, Mirjam's grandmother Mirjam, after whom she was named, died in Trieste after undergoing surgery there. On her father's side, her grandfather, grandmother and some of her relatives remained in Sarajevo. Her mother came to Dubrovnik where she grew up, was educated and worked. Her father arrived in that city as a young man. He was a travelling salesman. For several years he travelled and lived in Vienna. They had three children: two sons, Jakob and David, and a daughter, Mirjam-Mimica.

*Mirjam spent her working life as the secretary of the Dubrovnik Theatre and then as secretary of the Dubrovnik Summer Games. At the same time she was one of the most active members of the Jewish Community, including holding the offices of deputy president and president of the Women's Division, taking a great deal of responsibility.*

*She has two children and three grandchildren. She lives in Dubrovnik.*

It began in 1941, following the regulations introduced by the Ustaša: this is banned, that is banned. The orders were signed by Rojnica and others, by the Buća district prefect. The bans included

going out between eight in the evening and seven in the morning, going to public beaches, going to restaurants or to the cinema and more. There was even a poster which read that all public buildings were out of bounds to Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and dogs.

I used to see Rojnica every day from 1941, when the war began. We were separated only by the street, his shop on one side and our front door on the other. We would greet each other; he was a perfectly decent and peaceful man. However, he was appointed the district head of Dubrovnik and then appointed his brother as a public commissioner for our shop.

This meant that we had a new boss, and that everything, the whole inventory, everything in the shop, all the textiles, no longer belonged to us, that they were being sold and the money was turned over to the commissioner. Where it ended up I no longer remember, but in any case we no longer had it to live on.

For some time we had a commissioner whose brother was a close friend of my brothers. He still lives in Dubrovnik. I testified in his defence in 1945 when the war ended, because he would say: "Miss Ferera, I am leaving now and won't be here for the next hour and a half." And then he would go. This meant: collect, take what you can, hide it, sell it, do what you like, because he believed he should help in some way. He was tried later on, but for other things, not as an Ustaša. They realised that he wasn't trustworthy so they replaced him and appointed Rojnica's brother as commissioner.

I found it very hard that I was unable to continue my education. I was in the third grade of the Commercial Academy. My class teacher, Dolore Bracanović was a senior Ustaša official. She taught us German and after she had questioned me for a whole hour and given me a top grade, she came to my father at the store and said "Mr Ferera, unfortunately I have come to tell you that, from tomorrow, your little girl cannot attend school. Those are the regulations."

The family council then met. How would they tell me? They thought that I would take it very hard and indeed it really was difficult for me. I wept bitterly. I was miserable and didn't go out into the street for some days. Then I realised that this had also happened to others. I was the only one at the Commercial Academy. However my classmates didn't stop talking to me or inviting me to events or to go for walks together.

We wore pins which were specially made in Dubrovnik. They were made of metal and were very insulting and ugly, so crudely manufactured that they made holes in all our blouses and shirts. We ourselves had to pay the tradesman who used to make them.



*Mirjam out walking during her stay in Dubrovnik*

My younger brother David was about to complete a course in textile techniques in Leskovac. One day a message was broadcast on the radio from the school in Leskovac asking all final year students to attend because the final examination was to be held. We heard this and he said: "I'm going, I'm going." Mother was weeping bitterly and said: "Please don't! It's not important. Stay here. It's important for us to stay together." And my father, who was always open-minded said; "Listen, no one knows what will happen to us or to those who leave. If he wants to go and has decided to go, we should allow him to and hope that everything will end well." And indeed he went and received a diploma.

But the war then escalated to such an extent that he stayed in Serbia.

He really suffered. He was with the Chetniks because this was the only way to save himself. There were no Partisans in the region. He hid in trenches and even managed to get to the headquarters of Draža Mihajlović. From here he began to withdraw towards Bosnia. Then, in 1943, Italy capitulated. He ran into some school friends of his who said to him: "Where are you going? You're coming with us. Your whole family in Dubrovnik has been killed, taken away. You no longer have anyone left alive." And this was horrifying for him. On his own, on foot and in rags, a sorry sight, he set off to find out for himself what had happened to his family. Near Mostar he was caught by a Partisan patrol. They locked him up and then a very strange letter arrived from Mostar, from a Mrs Gaon. "Here, imprisoned in Mostar, is a Jew from Dubrovnik. I don't know what his surname is exactly, Ferera or Finci, but his name is definitely David. So if he has anyone alive in Dubrovnik, this is just to let you know that he is alive." The letter came into my hands. I informed my elder brother Jakica, who was by this time a Partisan officer, about the letter. He came immediately, on the

first military transport available. The two of us got ready that evening and set off in the morning. At that time people used to travel by cattle wagon to the Neretva river. The bridges were demolished so we hauled ourselves to the other side on some improvised pontoon and arrived in Mostar where we learnt which prison he was in. We went there. When my brother appeared in a Partisan uniform, a man from OZNA asked him: "Why are you coming to enquire about this man, about David Ferera, who you say is your brother? Did you know that he was captured as a Chetnik, although I see that you're a Partisan officer?"

My brother then told him how we had parted in 1941 and gone our separate ways, surviving as best we could. And it was only then that he told us: "He is no longer here, he's been moved to Sarajevo. He will most probably be returned to Leskovac to investigate his activities there and what he was doing." My brother asked if he could follow him to Sarajevo and look for him. He received permission, but I was refused because this was still a time of battles and it was not safe. I returned from Mostar in despair, knowing nothing, while my brother travelled on to Sarajevo. There he learnt that they were all in Koševo and that there were about ten thousand prisoners. He managed to send photographs for him to see that we were alive and a letter saying that our parents were also alive in Italy, in internment, and that we were all accounted for. This certainly raised his spirits.

Then came some major holiday and all ten thousand prisoners were amnestied. They were unable to feed them or provide accommodation. And they were all over Sarajevo. My brother went to the Baruh family, close relatives of ours and there learnt the truth. They dressed him, washed him, cut his hair, shaved him and sent him to Dubrovnik. I had been for a long time on the terrace of the house in which I lived with my husband. I already had little Bob and was pregnant with my second child. I was sitting there, sad and thinking, when suddenly I saw a man with a shaved head walking with difficulty up the stairs! He had been a man of more than a hundred kilos and this one didn't even weigh fifty. And at that moment I recognised my brother who had returned after all that Calvary. We informed our parents in Bari that my brother had returned alive. My mother managed to learn this before her death.

Because I was married to an Orthodox Christian and lived with him in a house, an Italian officer moved into our apartment with his family. He managed a military supply store, what they called the *Unione militare*. They were very decent people. I kept in touch with

them and they would come to my place. Italians – Italians! Always full of emotion, especially with children.

My parents were on Rab when Italy capitulated. My brother Jakica immediately joined the Rab Battalion. My parents, while they still had some money, rented a boat and got themselves across to Vis, to the liberated territory. When the Germans arrived and occupied Rab they were no longer there. From Vis the group broke up and went their own ways. My parents went first to Bari, then to Monopoli, then to Barletta, where they lived, and then they set off to Taranto. They also found private accommodation there in Taranto. My mother ended up in hospital there, died and was buried there. (I went to the cemetery after the war with my son and daughter-in-law. We found the common grave. The Italians had kept records on everything. I knew that she was in the fourth common grave at such-and-such a cemetery, and that's how we were able to mark her resting place.)

On November 1, 1942, we were all required to move to the Hotel Vreg. The Italians had received orders from the Germans that a final solution should be found for the Jewish question, but they were stalling. Their senior leaders were mostly anti-Fascists. There was little sense of anti-Semitism there, so the people helped as much as they could. I know this from my parents: they were in Taranto and always talked about it.

At the hotel they gave me 24 hours, just long enough for me to go and get married and return. Then the orders came for transport to Rab. Colonnello Gianbertoni, the commander of the Fifth Corps, which was based in what is today the Excelsior Hotel, said “The little lady should get ready, we'll let her out, see her off with the *carabinieri*, let her go to her husband.” And so they let me go. My parents were transported to Rab.

By now it was 1943. The Italians left, the Ustaša reappeared and the Germans came too. We were hiding, my child and my husband and I, in a bedsit without electricity, without heating, without anything, for several months. This was also somewhere in Boninovo, with the wife of the famous General Černi.

Most of our family in Sarajevo perished. On my father's side of the family no one survived. Our last contacts were with my cousin, whose name was also Mirjam Ferera and who had completed pharmaceutical studies in Zagreb. She married before the war. She was taken to one camp and her husband to another. I would get letters from her. She

asked us to send her old jumpers, things she could unravel and knit again, because otherwise she would have a nervous breakdown. She wrote to us that the atmosphere was terrible. We sent her food hidden in two tins of ersatz coffee. We emptied half the tin out, put in a layer of sugar cubes and then put the coffee on top again. The parcels which arrived were being stolen. They took anything good and valuable from them. We also sent clothing. We tried to calm and comfort them in some way, assuring them that there were better days ahead. However those better days never came for them.

My grandmother, Bona Ferera, ended up in Đakovo. I found her grave there. Then Aunt Bonči ended the same way and my cousin Mrijam Ferera was also killed. Whether they died of typhoid or hunger I don't know, but none of them survived. Twenty-seven family members!

At the end of the second world war, I was in Dubrovnik. When the Partisans were liberating Dubrovnik and heading for the Dubrovačka river, suddenly the light began to shine and the whole city lit up. From our terrace, where we lived in front of the Srđ hill, we could see everything and everything was clear to us – our boys had arrived. Then began a celebration which lasted for several days. Nobody did any work, people just danced, kissed and hugged, and went to welcoming receptions and speeches. There was enormous joy everywhere.