

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE





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## Natalija KOVAČEVIĆ-TAJTACAK

### A LONG RACE WITH DEATH\*

**N**atalija Kovačević, née Tajtacak, born in Kruševac, of father Moric and mother Rebeka, née Adut. After the war she lived in Belgrade.

*The whole family Tajtacak (mother Rebeka, sisters Sultana, Sofija, Natalija, and brother David) were saved thanks to Krtsa Novaković, the then President of Municipality Kruševac, and villagers from the surrounding villages. Father Moric, who took part in World War One, got sick and after treatment in Switzerland, died and was buried in Zurich. After her husband's death, mother Rebeka alone raised the four children.*

*Natalija graduated from the girls' crafts school. Before the war she worked in Mladenovac as teacher in girls' crafts school. She died in 2002.*

*For the help extended to the family Tajtacak, the President of the Municipality Kruševac, Krsta Novaković, was awarded the charter of the Righteous Among the Nations in 2004.*

In April 1941 I was in Mladenovac and I was sitting in my room full of fear. The town was shaking under the German tanks and the noise of the trucks. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was collapsing ... What am I to do? I am a Jew, and the stories of how Germans treat Jews have reached me. Whatever was happening with Yugoslavia happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that I did not manage to take any steps. And what could I do anyway? Where could I go? My predecessors have been in Serbia since who knows when. I

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\*The testimony about saving the family of Natalija Kovačević was recorded by journalist Milorad Simić.

know that at the end of the XIX century my grandfather Anđelko Tajtacak moved from Belgrade to Kruševac. He was married to Sultana. I do not know my grandmother's maiden family name, but I know that Anđelko and Sultana had sons Moric, David, and Avram, and a daughter Kalina. With time, Moric had stayed in Kruševac and had continued his father's trading business, and the other two brothers went elsewhere following their jobs, while Kalina got married and went with her husband during World War One and ended up in Switzerland.

Moric, who was living in Kruševac, was married to Rebeka, the daughter of the Belgrade trader David Adut. They were my parents. Moric and Rebeka had a son, David, and three daughters: Sultana, Sofija, and me, Natalija. Father went to World War One, all the way across Albania with the Serbian Army, got seriously ill, and with the help of his sister Kalina went to Zurich in Switzerland for medical treatment. Regretfully, there was no cure. Even today in the Zurich cemetery there is a stone saying: "Moric Tajtacak, serbischer soldat" ("Moric Tajtacak, Serbian soldier").

After World War One was over, my mother was in Kruševac, without a husband, and with four children that she was to raise. She did not know about cereals trading and could not pursue her husband's business, and she was not capable of running the silk plant which my father also had. So, she did the best she could: she mortgaged the properties with a bank. With the money paid her she turned them all into apartments that she rented. There was not too much money, but it was enough to make ends meet. Time went by and David completed the commercial school, Sultana completed the matriculation course, and I completed the senior girls' trade school. So, everyone went his or her way: David and Sultana to Smederevo, I to Mladenovac, and Sofija stayed with our mother.

Now, I wanted to go back to Kruševac, but how? We are under occupation. From my documents it is not difficult to conclude that I am a Jew, and without documents it was impossible to get a pass for travelling, and without the pass one could not buy a ticket to travel. That was why I continued to sit there and wait. I believed that my mother would somehow manage to get for me the necessary papers. And I was right: mother soon came, bringing for me the documents with a new name for me – Ruža. We also had a new family name – Anđelković. So, mother became Sofija (which was my sister's name), and my sister got a new name. Mother got the counterfeit documents with the help of Krsto Novaković, the pharmacist who was elected before the war President of the Municipality of Kruševac, and who continued to perform the function under the order of the occupier. Mother went to see him. They had known each other, both came from old families in Kruševac. Krsta understood the difficulty of the only Jewish family in Kruševac. Mother did

not know how he managed, but he did get her the papers and she came to get me. Soon, we arrived safely to Kruševac.

My mother, sister Sofija and I stayed quietly at home and worried about what was happening with David and Sultana, who were working in Smederevo. And, one day, there they were. It was two or three days, maybe more, after the awful explosion in Smederevo on 5 July 1941. The explosion resulted in a general confusion, passes for travel were issued without any checks or verification, and they arrived in Kruševac. Mother urgently went to see Krsto Novaković, who provided counterfeit papers for them as well. Now, they too were Anđelković.

As Anđelković family, we lived peacefully until the time when the first bigger groups of refugees began to arrive to Kruševac. Among them there were also Jewish families, including families who knew us. Who would know what happened in that chaos – but in any case we found ourselves on the list of Jews and we were given the yellow armbands, the visible marking of Jews. And then one day a message came for my mother from Krsto Novaković. The message said that we should flee town. We were at risk. The Germans were about to do something. David was the first to go, as they would first be rounding up Jewish men. But, Krsto Novaković said, David should not join either the Chetniks or the Partisans: he should work towards helping his mother and sisters to survive. “The people from the forest” are already there and Krsta anticipated that they would be antagonistic to each other. There had already been a strict division between Chetniks and Partisans. And Jews under such circumstances have enough danger to deal with from the side of the Germans. As I remember, Krsto’s message arrived to us a day before a German officer came to our place. He had some military rank. Mother told him that David had gone to a village to buy some food. The German looked at her and said something that she could not believe was happening: the German asked my mother what we were waiting for and didn’t we see what was happening? He added that he would be coming every day to inquire about David, and David should take care of himself. This conversation between the German and my mother took place in one of the rooms. David was in another. He heard and understood everything. Yet, he was not ready to leave Kruševac.

The following day a truck full of Jews stopped in front of our house – it was Jewish men. David saw them through the window and stormed out by the back exit. He found himself in an alley behind the house. There he was noticed by Kosa Petrović, who worked in a coffee shop. She understood what was happening, gave him a sign to come in and he was in the neighbor’s house. In that house there were single lodgers Mica Vasić and Jelena Veljković, from Donji Krčin. Pupils. They rented the room with the woman

coming from their region. All three of them accepted David and forged a plan how to get him out of town. Once they had the plan, they went along with it. A villager came from Donji Krčin to Kosa's place with a horse-drawn wagon and put David onto it. At the bridge he presented the fake document made out to the name Anđelković and – everything went well.

A day later mother received a message from Krsto to get her daughters away, as the Germans were about to collect also Jewish girls ... We did not waste any time. It was the sister Sultana who first left town. She was taken out by Vidan Maksimović, and Sofija and I left with another villager, again from Donji Krčin. This man, too, was an acquaintance of the woman from the coffee shop. The next one to leave was our mother. Thus, our mother, us three sisters, and our brother David were all in Donji Krčin. We all had counterfeit documents which did not show that we were Jews. In the village they gave us a house to settle in, and some days later came Vidan Maksimović bringing for us the food rationing cards. They were sent by Krsta Novaković. As President of the Municipality he had people in the administration and he managed to pull this through.

Under the name Anđelković we lived in Donji Krčin, in a house close to the road. When the villagers notified us that the Germans were coming, we would flee to Srednji Krčin or Donji Krčin, other parts of this settlement, or to another village in the vicinity. It was a constant race with death. Some villagers kept us continually informed about the dangers, we fled, others took us in and put us in safer places. They were aware that we were Jews and that by helping us they were putting themselves in danger. Despite this, they took the risk without a word. We repaid them by David helping them do the work in the fields, Sultana was giving private lessons to pupils, and mother, Sofija and I were knitting and sawing. In return for this, we got food.

And thus the days went by, and weeks and months, while the war was at its peak. Somewhere in spring 1944, a villager from Donji Krčin, a railroad worker, walked into the local inn. He was angry for who knows what reason, maybe he heard something, who would now ... but anyway, he said out loud:

– I will now go to Belgrade. And I will report those Jews ... Should our whole village suffer for their sake?! ... The Germans will kill us all!

The villagers tried to calm him down, but – no use. He just kept repeating: the Germans will find out about these Jews ... he finished his drink, paid for it and left. The villagers were confused. Some ran to us and told us about this sudden trouble. Immediately, we left the village, going as far as we could.

It was getting dark when the railroad worker got to Stalać. There he was, as an engine driver, to meet the train coming from Niš and continuing to Belgrade, and his colleague was waiting for the train coming from

Belgrade and continuing to Niš. According to their working schedule, the second one was to go to Niš, but he had some urgent business to attend to in Belgrade. So, he asked his colleague to change shifts. The man accepted. Why not? There is time, he would report those Jews the next time he goes to Belgrade. And, he got on the train for Niš. However, there was shooting when the train got to Đunis: the Partisans attacked the train. There was only one victim in the train: the railroad worker from Donji Krčin!

The man was buried, and we went back to Donji Krčin.

We were fortunate to still be there at the end of the war. We were faster than death. Thanks to all those whom we met along the road: starting from the President of the Municipality to the last villager.

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After the liberation, the District Court in Kruševac, by its decision KT 26/46-ST 20/46 of 15 June 1946, sentenced the pharmacist Krsto Novaković, a municipal counselor, to death. This decision was replaced by a sentence of imprisonment and forced labor for twenty years. He was released twelve and a half years later.

Krsta Novaković died. The burial ritual for him was held by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

As a sign of recognition for his assistance to family Tajtacak, Krsta Novaković received from Yad Vashem the charter of the Righteous Among the Nations.