
Dr Igor NAJFELD and Dr Vesna NAJFELD

DR ALFRED NAJFELD – CONVERSATIONS WITH OUR FATHER



*A*mong our memories of our father, the most lasting impressions are of conversations with him. Our father had an unusual ability to easily engage in communication with everyone, from the street carriers with whom he played chess in Kalemegdan to philosophers with whom he discussed abstract ideas and social processes. He was able to bring inspiration to all of them to conduct a meaningful debate. Whatever their educational or social level, everyone he spoke to had the feeling that they were talking not only to a doctor but to a man who respected them. As well as being part of his profession, this ability stemmed from his gift for lecturing and his ability to resolve complex situations with an analytical approach. We would like to record some details from these conversations which, to some degree, depict how he experienced and lived through the pre-war and war years.

He was born in 1911 in a town called Rzesow (Reisha in Yiddish), in the south of Poland (Galicia) which at that time had a population of 20,000, of whom 18,000 were Jews. He had two younger brothers. One of them, Poldek, perished with his wife and son in the Belzec concentration camp. The youngest brother, Otto, with his wife and her family saved himself by somehow managing to get to Siberia. Having returned

from Siberia after the war, he once again faced a pogrom in Kielce. He then fled Poland and settled in Israel.

Grandfather Mauricije was a lawyer. Because of the notorious anti-Semitism in Poland, both among the people and that encouraged by the authorities, his legal practice was not doing well. Because of this, the family would move to ever-smaller places in order to avoid competition with Polish lawyers. However even this did not bring success and the family continued to fall into ruin. Under very harsh conditions, the children had to go to school in a larger town nearby so that our father, by the age of ten, had left his parents' house and virtually never returned there again.

Grandfather Mauricije died a natural death before the war. Our grandmother Hermina was in a hospital where she had undergone surgery for cancer when the Germans came into town in 1939. While still in hospital she sent a card to our father describing her desperate situation. As soon as the Germans arrived in Rzesow she was thrown out of the hospital. She was extremely ill at the time and was taken in by some Jewish neighbours, but died soon afterwards.

After matriculating from the classical secondary school in Rzesow in 1929, our father wanted to enrol in the Medical Faculty of Cracow University. He was refused three times because the *Numerus Clausus*, the quota system for Jews was already in force. Because our grandfather's brother, Dr Filip Najfeld, had already been transferred as a judge to this part of the world back at the time of the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia, our father decided to enrol in medicine at the University of Zagreb, counting on support from the family. He supported himself by giving classes to high school students, ate at the Jewish Students refectory, played sport with the Maccabis, the Jewish sporting organisation, and lived very modestly, almost on the edge of poverty. It was at the refectory that he met our mother, Eta Špicer, whom he married in 1941.

Father finished medical school in 1938. However, as a Polish citizen, he was banished from Yugoslavia before the war and so had to live illegally in Zagreb. With the assistance of Professor Andrija Štampar he obtained a position as a doctor in Koprivnica, but soon returned to Zagreb because it wasn't safe for him in that town. At the time when it became certain that the Germans would enter Yugoslavia, he voluntarily reported to the Yugoslav Army in order to fight Fascism and, at the

same time, to legalise his status. He didn't succeed in this because the Germans and the Ustaša pre-empted him, entering Zagreb on that same day, April 10, 1941. With his uniform in his hand he and our mother watched the citizens of Zagreb welcoming the Germans and the Ustaša: the streets were covered in the flowers, fruit and sweets with which the people were enthusiastically showering them.

With the rise to power of the Ustaša in the new, fascist Independent State of Croatia, anti-Jewish laws were immediately put in place. Among other things, Jews were banned from using the service of public health institutions (clinics, hospitals and so on). The Jewish Community in Zagreb immediately organised its own health service. Our father was among the first to sign up to work there. He called on the sick in their homes and visited the Jewish inmates in Kerestinec (a camp close to Zagreb). He soon learnt that a campaign to combat endemic syphilis was being organised in Bosnia. The aim of this campaign was to demonstrate the concern of the Ustaša authorities for the Muslims in Bosnia (which was occupied by the Independent State of Croatia). Endemic syphilis was widespread among the Muslim population. For Jewish doctors this was compulsory labour. According to our parents, about eighty Jewish doctors took part in this campaign. Sooner or later they joined the resistance movement and became the nucleus of the future Yugoslav People's Army Medical Corps. Our parents said that one of the reasons for this humanitarian campaign was the desire of the Croatian doctors to get rid of competition from Jewish doctors who enjoyed great professional respect and had pleasant and well-equipped surgeries. Our father simply had the desire to save himself and our mother, because doctors doing this work enjoyed some kind of protection from the camps for themselves and their family members. Father signed up for this campaign and, in the autumn of 1941, my parents left for Eastern Bosnia. They were assigned to the local Health Centre in Tuzla, which deployed them in the area of the Banovići mine, where there were five villages. There they both worked in the Muslim villages under very difficult conditions, constantly in fear of the Ustaša authorities and always suspected of collaborating with the resistance movement. And, truth to tell, they did provide medications and advice to the persecuted Serbian population from the surrounding villages and also had contacts with the Partisans.

At the beginning of 1942, they suddenly found themselves in a difficult situation when the Ustaša began rounding up the entire Tuzla

Jewish community and taking them away to camps. They saw their good friend from the refectory, Rašela Albahari, being taken to the camp with her daughter, Herut. Rašela had worked as a pharmacist in Tuzla and was in contact with the Partisans. It was particularly painful for them when their landlady, Mrs Zlocover, was taken. This kind and sweet old lady, a Polish Jew, the childless widow of a postman, had arrived in Tuzla back in the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. When she heard that a Dr Alfred Najfeld had come to Tuzla, she immediately contacted Dr Filip Najfeld, the former judge from Tuzla. Having learnt that the judge was our father's cousin, she immediately invited our parents to live in her apartment and they gladly accepted. She came to love our father like a son, taking care of him and trying to please him in various ways. My father repaid her kindness by taking care of her health because she had a serious heart condition. And so they lived in harmony, like the closest of relatives, for about a year until the Ustaša began taking Jews away to camps. When they came into the house to take her, my father put up a very strong resistance and tried to save her by telling the Ustaša that, as a seriously ill heart patient, she was unable to walk because of her swollen legs. Unfortunately nothing helped. The Ustaša were persistent, they loaded her onto a freight cart in order to do their job and hasten her to her death. And that was exactly what happened: Mrs Zlocover didn't get far, she died on the cart half an hour later.



Always one step ahead of the many mortal dangers: Dr Alfred Najfeld in Partisan uniform

Before Mrs Zlocover departed for the camp at which she never arrived, our parents had managed to free our maternal grandmother

from the Đakovo camp by using the documents which protected them and their families. She lived with our parents and our older sister in the apartment with Mrs Zlocover.

Because my father was suspected of collaborating with the Partisans, the director of the local Health Centre in Tuzla managed to arrange for him to be transferred to Bosanska Krupa (Western Bosnia) in June, 1943. There our parents managed to make contact with the Podgrmeč detachment and they began to work as intelligence agents, providing information on the movements of the German Army. This was very dangerous work because they were under constant surveillance by the Ustaša and Germans who suspected they were connected with the Partisan movement.

In a difficult situation, one day an officer in German uniform came and asked for our father. In line with German military rules he set a guard of two soldiers outside the house. The situation became tense and Father went with him to a separate room. Mother was beside herself, expecting the worst. After some time the officer left the house. When Father calmed down, it turned out that the officer in German uniform was actually a Partisan collaborator who had brought news from our father's cousin. Our cousins, Dr Leon and Irena Vilf, had already joined the Fifth Corps of the National Liberation Army and wanted to let our parents know about this. In the constantly tense situation in Bosanska Krupa, our parents were living in uncertainty and great concern, because they also had with them our grandmother, who had just returned from the camp, and our two-year-old sister, Ira. Because of the insecure and grave situation in the town, Father began touring nearby villages, searching for adequate accommodation for the family.

Then tragedy struck. While father was looking for accommodation, the Allied bombing of Bosanska Krupa began, on May 29, 1944. Our sister Ira and our grandmother Helena were killed in this bombing.

We two, brother and sister, were in deep distress from our earliest days, from the time we learned of this tragedy which had befallen our parents with the death of our sister, their first child, and Grandmother, our mother's mother, under the bombs in the winds of war. We keenly felt the pain of our parents over their lost child and parent. We know that this tragedy left a permanent imprint on them and, together with everything else they suffered through and lost during the war, it haunted our father until the end of his life and our mother has not succeeded in freeing herself of it to this day.

After this incident, which followed a series of earlier ones, our parents decided to inform their Partisan contact that their situation in Bosanska Krupa had become far too dangerous for intelligence work and that they should be transferred to the liberated territory.

The departure took place under dramatic conditions. Mother was pregnant and the day they were assigned to meet the Partisans in a designated place, they were caught in crossfire between Germans on one side, who were patrolling the railway station and hinting that something was happening, and Partisans on the other, who were securing Mother and Father's transfer to the liberated territory. The battle lasted almost an hour and our mother almost lost her life. That evening, when they arrived in a small village, high on a mountain, she gave birth. We would often hear about this event (documented in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and described in *We Survived I*) when our parents' wartime friends met in our house to recall the memories of those tragic events.



*Routine work on the battlefield: Dr Alfred Najfeld
in an improvised war hospital*

On their arrival in the liberated territory, Father was assigned to head the hospital of the 39th Krajina Division, which was operating in

the territory of Western Bosnia, around Banjaluka. Despite having a newborn son, Mother worked as a doctor in the typhoid ward in the same hospital. Father felt that he should go into battle as soon as possible. He was reassigned to a mobile hospital with the combat units. In this position he treated the wounded and sick who had liberated cities from the Germans and Ustaša, beginning with Banjaluka in Bosnia and Zagreb and all the way to Trieste.

The war came to an end. Our parents searched for their relatives and friends, trying to discover who had survived. Unfortunately there were great losses on both our father's and our mother's side, and among their friends from the refectory. We have heard many stories about the Jewish refectory which was, for our parents and their refectory friends, the centre of life during their student days. Many moving memories of friends who disappeared in the first days of the war were recounted to us with the same kind of sadness one feels for lost relatives. The nine of them who survived met up again for the first and only time when Lutek Meblo arrived in Belgrade from Poland. This meeting took place at our house in 1956 and it was an event full of excitement and anxiety, sadness and joy, which left an indelible impression on us children.

After the war, thanks to his organisational and professional skills, Father quickly advanced in the military and medical service. He completed specialisations in physiology and neuropsychiatry and, finally, in aviation neuropsychiatry in the USA. He was responsible for a new direction in the use of neuropsychiatry in Yugoslav wartime aviation. At the end of his military and professional career he was a colonel and head of the Yugoslav Military Air Force Medical Corps. He retired in 1970 and died in 1989.

In our story about our father and his successful career, we would be guilty of an injustice were we not to mention our mother as well. She was also a doctor with an enviable reputation and, in her, he had great and constant support. It was as though she subordinated her life and her personal career to the advancement of our father and his professional and scientific work. This was not the result of any patriarchal relationship or upbringing, rather it was understanding born of the great love which existed between them throughout their life together. Thus we can say that the greatest quality which we two, brother and sister, felt and received from the warmth of our family home is this love which imbued

their relationship and which was passed onto us in abundance, making our childhood and our whole lives happy and complete.

We feel great pride in our very vivid memories of our father because of his human characteristics, professional achievements, warmth and the love with which he surrounded us. He has been our role model and the best confirmation of how a valuable, meaningful and honourable life can be forged despite painful and unforgettable losses.