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*Cadik-Braco DANON*

“SON, JUST KEEP GOING FORWARD”



*Cadik-Braco Danon was born on August 1, 1923, in Sarajevo, to father Isidor Danon and mother Dona, née Danon. Although they shared the same surname, his father's and mother's families were not related in any way. He had two sisters – Sara and Simha. Of his immediate family, his father Isidor did not survive the pogrom in the second world war, but perished in Jasenovac. Another forty-five members of his extended family died in camps in the Independent State of Croatia, mostly in Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška, and in the Treblinka and Dachau camps. His education, which he had begun in Belgrade before the war, was continued in the same city after the war ended, and he graduated from the Belgrade University Faculty of Architecture. He worked as an architect until his retirement. He is the author of a book entitled “The Severed Trunk of the Danons – Memories of Jasenovac” which, in 1999, won first prize in a competition run by the Federation of Jewish Communities for memoirs with Jewish themes.*

*He lives in Belgrade with his wife Olga.*

My paternal grandfather Avram Danon lived in Bijeljina and had thirteen children. My maternal grandfather, Cadik, lived in Gračanica, near Tuzla, and had nine children.

Father had a factory, named Elegant, which made caps and fur hats, and my mother was a housewife. I was my parents' third child: my

two sisters Sara-Ina and Simha-Sida were born before me. My family belonged to the Sephardim. We were not orthodox, but we were traditionalists who tried to preserve the characteristics of Judaism. Temple visits were made only for major festivals, while we celebrated the Sabbath solemnly at home.

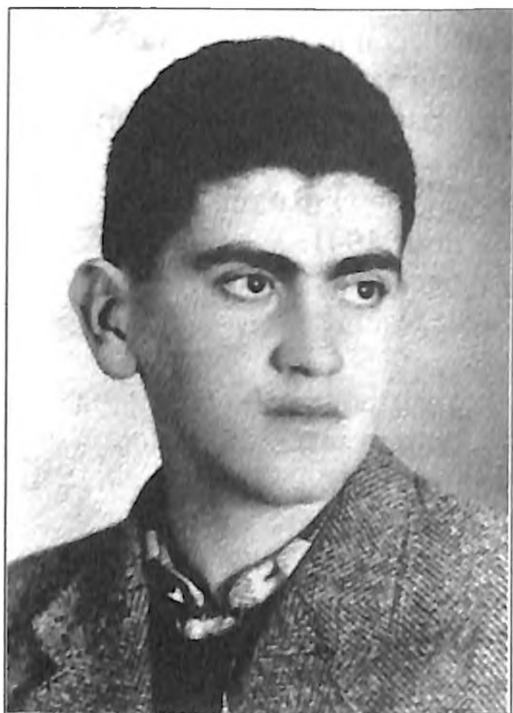
The destructive impact of the world economic crisis also reached Yugoslavia and resulted in my father going bankrupt. To prevent everything being confiscated, he put all his assets in my mother's name.

In 1934 we moved from Sarajevo to Belgrade, where my father opened a manufacturing shop at the Jovanova market. The business went well and we had no problems until 1941. When we came to Belgrade I enrolled in the First Boys' Secondary School, where I finished four years and I then enrolled in the technical school, in the architecture department.

We survived the horrendous German bombing of Belgrade on April 6, 1941, and then fled south, hoping to reach Thessalonica and avoid the occupation. We hadn't even reached Mladenovac when the Yugoslav Army surrendered. When we returned to Belgrade the Germans had already occupied the city and imposed various kinds of repression, particularly against Jews. They immediately took a census and then sent them to compulsory labour – clearing the rubble of the ruins of Belgrade. They immediately confiscated Father's shop and plundered it. Seeing this, my father decided we should flee Belgrade for his native land, Bosnia, and go to his brother Moše in Tuzla. We crossed the pontoon bridge over the Sava into Zemun and soon reached Tuzla. There, at least at the beginning, there were no special measures against Jews, except for the obligation to wear yellow armbands. My sister Sida and I immediately joined the anti-Fascist movement because we were members of SKOJ. Following the uprising of the people in Bosnia, more stringent measures were introduced, especially against the rebel Serb villages. Villages were set on fire and villagers were killed. When they also began forcing us Jews into compulsory hard labour, my sister Sida and I asked our organisation to let us join the Partisans, to go to Majevisa where a Partisan unit was fighting battles.

It was not until December that we were allowed to set off to join the Partisans. We hid in an illegal apartment, but the courier did not arrive to get us because the Chetniks had killed him. This was precisely the beginning of the rift between the Chetniks and the Partisans, which then became an open conflict. After our return home, at the end

of December, all adult Jewish men were arrested. Father and I were sent to prison in Krek, near Tuzla. We were there about a month before being sent to the Jasenovac camp by train. There were 130 of us and I was the only one to survive the camp.



*Of about 130 adult Jewish men arrested by the Ustasha in Tuzla in December 1941 and sent to Jasenovac concentration camp, only Cadik Danon, who was eighteen at the time, survived*

On my very first day in the camp I saw horrifying things. They lined us up outside the brickyard and ordered us to spread blankets in front of us and empty our bags out. Among the many items on the blankets were a lot of pieces of bread. Suddenly I noticed that there were starving young men – inmates – running towards these piles, grabbing bread in their hands and running off. The Ustaša immediately drew their guns and began shooting at the young men. But despite the shooting, the raid on the bread continued, and the young men were falling down, either dead or wounded. When the rush stopped, the Ustaša came up to the wounded and killed them by firing bullets into their heads. When they had finished this, they shouted “Gravediggers, gravediggers!” People carrying

stretchers immediately appeared and began carrying the dead towards the camp gate.

I realised that the camp was in the grip of terrible hunger. For lunch we would be given a ladle of warm water, with no salt or fat, with a few cubes of mangel-wurzel which really stank. When we were given our lunch, we were approached by an exhausted inmate who we barely recognised as Father’s youngest brother, Gedalja. He ate his own, Father’s and my rations and was still hungry. A few days later we found him dead outside the barracks.

The friends we found in the camp when we arrived advised us how to behave in order to avoid danger, if that was at all possible. They told father to shave his beard because they would kill the elderly immediately.

Every morning we had to line up outside the barracks and then the Ustaša would come to take a certain number of people to various kinds of labour. One Ustaša picked about twenty of us younger and stronger inmates and told us to go to a neighbouring village to bale hay. We crossed the frozen Sava where we found a group of Ustaša huddled around a fire trying to keep warm. One of the men from this group came up to me and asked me to give him my almost-new ski boots. I asked him what I would wear on my feet. He told me to search through the village houses and find myself some shoes. I went to the nearest house, opened the door and saw a huge pile of shoes and clothes. I recognised the clothes of Jews from my group, people from Tuzla, and realised this must be a huge execution site. I went on from house to house and saw the same sight each time. I looked for shoes, but without success. It wasn't until I reached a house at the far end of the village that I found a pair of army boots which fitted me. When I left the house I put the boots on and noticed a huge pit nearby with steam coming from it. I saw there were no Ustaša around so I walked towards the pit, to the very edge. The bodies of slaughtered Serbian peasants – women, children and men – had been thrown into it. It was obvious that this had happened only recently. I stepped back quickly, looking to see if there were any Ustaša watching me – I could easily end up sharing the same fate. When I returned, I showed the Ustaša my shoes and immediately joined the group baling hay. That evening, in the barracks, I told them where I had been and what I had seen, and the chief of the barracks, Father's friend, told me that I had been in Gradina, a Serbian village which had been destroyed and from which, up to that point, no one had returned.

One day as I was stacking bricks beside the brickyard, I noticed coming towards me a red-haired Ustaša with a big moustache rolled to a fine point. I immediately recognised the bloody cut-throat Žuća and remembered the warnings of the old inmates to keep out of his way. In his path was a man wearing a black coat; he was so weak that he was moving with great difficulty. When Žuća came up to him he asked him who he was. Hearing that he was Jew, a lawyer from Zagreb, he tied his hands behind his back with wire and, when the man began to walk again, he took out a knife and stabbed him in the neck. He then took out

a tobacco case, rolled a cigarette, lit it and slowly smoked it, swearing all the time at Jews and lawyers. He then stubbed the cigarette out on the poor man's forehead then, in one swift move, took his knife and cut his throat. The man fell and Žuća, with relish, licked the blood from both sides of the knife, saying "Oh, how sweet this Jewish blood tastes!" Then he shouted loudly "Gravediggers, gravediggers!" and moved on. I was watching all this in secret, hidden behind the bricks I had stacked. It was lucky that he didn't notice me.



*Jasenovac victims on the bank of the Sava*

Spring of 1942 was approaching and the snow had thawed. We were standing lined up outside the barracks, waiting. When the Ustaša came they picked about twenty of us younger and stronger inmates, gave us spades and shovels and led us out of the camp to a large field. They gave us the measurements for a pit we were to dig – two metres deep. When we finished, they told us to leave. They then brought over a group of Serbian and Jewish children between the ages of two and six. I would say there were more than two hundred of them. They took the

children one by one to the pit, then killed each child with a blow to the back of the head from a carpenter's hammer. We could hear the last cry of each child and the dull thud as they landed on the bottom of the pit.

Our group of inmates was paralysed; with huge tears rolling down our cheeks. After the job was done the Ustaša ordered us to fill in the pit. On our way back to the camp, one inmate said to me: "We're lucky they didn't kill us too; they don't like live witnesses."

I have described only a few of the horrible events I experienced in the camp, but each and every day I was a witness to similar and perhaps even worse evils. The Ustaša committed these crimes with great pleasure and satisfaction, sadistically doing their best to ensure that each victim's journey to death be as slow and painful as possible.

Because of the great spring floods which burst the dam around the camp, we were moved from Jasenovac to Stara Gradiška.

There we found a situation similar to that in Jasenovac. There was an epidemic of typhoid in the camp. Mass murders and death were daily occurrences. The camp was in an old mediaeval fortress with high walls, so my hope of flight was almost dashed. One afternoon they forced us out into the yard next to the castle itself which was our prison. I overheard that people would be selected for agricultural work. They picked about thirty of us younger inmates who were still holding up. They told us to be at the gate of the fortress the following morning. My parting from my father was extremely difficult and shattering. He told me: "Son, just keep going forward, don't turn back!" I have only him to thank for surviving Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška.

In both Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška, Father cooked food for the inmates, so he would manage to stash away a potato or two which he'd roast in the live coals underneath the cauldron. In the evenings, in the barracks, he would secretly give me some to eat and to put in my pocket so that I would also have food during the day. Without this I would, no doubt, have grown exhausted, and they immediately separated and killed people in that condition.

They then moved us to the village of Ferićanci, where the Orthodox Church had an agricultural estate called Čitluk. The Ustaša had killed the priests and they brought us to work on the land. Later a few other groups of inmates also came to this estate. A large herd of cattle was gathered in the camp, the animals had been taken from nearby Serb villages. I was lucky to be put in the group which took care of the cows. Because of the drought, there was no pasture, so we were trans-

ferred to a more distant Serbian village called Obradovci. The farmers there secretly established a connection with us and supplied us with food. The cattle were divided into two herds, but I had ten dairy cows which I grazed very close to the camp. There were always two Ustaša with each of the two herds, but I was left without any supervision, there would only be an Ustaša coming by now and then. There were thirty of us and the same number of Ustaša.

The idea of fleeing to the Partisans was getting stronger and stronger, all the more so because they were in the vicinity, in the nearby Slavonija mountains. While I was herding the cows, a farmer who was cutting wood in an oak forest whistled to me to call me over. He said he had connections in the Partisans and that he would organise for them to attack the camp. This would be a chance for us to all break free. However the Partisans hadn't come and the grazing was almost over. We decided that our group of seven inmates, who all trusted one another, should organise the escape. We took advantage of the five or ten minutes when the Ustaša weren't watching us, jumped over the wire fence of the pen and, following directions given to us by a farmer from Obradovci, set off towards Krndija. By morning we were with the Partisans, who welcomed us warmly.

We were assigned to various duties. I demanded to go to the front line. I had always been in favour of an active fight against Fascism. The happiest day of my life was when, unarmed and barehanded, I took part in a battle and seized a rifle. Having lived through all kinds of atrocities, our main idea was to be killed with rifles in our hands. And that is exactly how three people from our group died. All the inmates who stayed behind in the Obradovci camp, twenty-three of them, were killed. I was a fighter of the Twelfth Slavonija Proletariat Assault Brigade until the attack on Virovitica in February, 1943, when I was badly wounded as company commissar. I survived a difficult operation. The Fourth Offensive came by while I was in the hospital, so they put the most critical patients in dugouts. There I survived three weeks, lying in the dark, with just a bite of food now and then. Typhoid was raging and, of the twenty of us, only ten survived. After I recovered I was sent to the area command, where I did various kinds of work. Towards the end of the war I returned to my brigade, where I performed the duties of officer-in-charge of the propaganda section. The end of the war came for me in the pursuit of the enemy all the way to Bleiburg in Austria, where we captured thousands of Ustaša.

Because I had heard nothing about my family, I was convinced that I had lost them all. In January, 1943, I wrote to my aunt in Kašteli who was married to an Italian, because I hoped that members of Mother's family, who lived in Sarajevo, had managed to escape to the Italian zone. As the letter went by regular mail, it arrived in Kašteli where, among others, were my mother and my sister Sida. They had saved themselves thanks to the Muslims who gave them burqas to wear and identification papers. Mother had suffered a great deal because she had no news of me and when she received my letter she felt as though she had been reborn.

After the capitulation of Italy, all members of the family joined the Partisans. Somewhere near the end of 1943, I received a letter, with no envelope, folded so that the two pages were tucked into each other. It was my cousin writing to me and among other things she described how she managed to get my address. She was in a Partisan canteen and noticed that one of the senior officers was constantly staring at her. Finally he stood up, approached her and asked her "What is Braco Danon to you?" She screamed, expecting the worst, but the officer said: "He's alive, he's alive, and he's in Slavonija." This was Dušan Brkić. This happened only because my cousin and I strongly resemble each other. In the letter she wrote to me about who of my nearest and dearest was where and, from that point on, I was constantly in touch with my family.

My mother, Dona, was in the Yugoslav Combat Aviation Command and my Uncle Moric was the supply officer for the same command. My uncle was captured by the Germans in an offensive on Livno, and all trace of him was lost from this point. My sister Sida was in the brigade surgical team because she was a medical student. Later, as my mother grew older, she was reassigned to Bari, Italy, where she worked in the Partisan command. My older sister Ina (Sara) went to Serbia with her husband in 1941 to help organise the uprising. It wasn't until 1945 that I learnt she was alive: I was listening to a report on Radio Belgrade about the AFŽ (the Women's Anti-Fascist Front) Congress and her name was mentioned in a list of people who had been decorated.

Immediately after Bleiburg I came to Belgrade and soon met up with my mother and my sisters. Unfortunately Father had not survived the camp.



After the war I continued my education and graduated from the Belgrade University Faculty of Architecture. I spent my working life as an architect and am now retired.

The dreadful events I experienced in the camp left a deep mark on my memories. At night I would dream about my flight from the camp, always with Ustaša behind me, catching me by the legs. My own screams would wake me; I was always wet from the clammy sweat. Once I sat up and wrote down the names of all the members of my family who had perished in the war. There were forty-five people on the list. Most of them perished in the Independent State of Croatia, then in the Treblinka and Dahau camps. It was in this period that I first began wanting to write a book about everything I had been through. I attempted this several times, but did not have the strength to relive everything as I wrote. Finally, after almost sixty years, I had the opportunity, calmly and with the great and wholehearted assistance of my wife Olga, to write a book which I called *The Severed Trunk of the Danons: Memories of Jasenovac*.

*In 1999, Cadik Danon's manuscript about the suffering in Jasenovac won the first prize in the memoir section of a Federation of Jewish Communities competition for works with a Jewish theme. It was published in full in November 2000 by Slobodan Mašić as part of the Nova 165 Library.*