
Dr Paja CINER

ROLL-CALL OF DEATH IN TAŠMAJDAN



Dr Paja Ciner was born in Bela Crkva in 1922, to father Dr Max Zinner, a lawyer in Bela Crkva at the time, later in Vršac, and to mother Irma, née Szigeti.

He has lived in Belgrade since the age of fifteen. He lost his father very early, before he turned twelve, and his mother perished as an inmate of the Sajmište camp near Zemun.

In Belgrade, as an excellent student, he was exempted from the matriculation examination when he finished secondary school. After the war he graduated from the Belgrade University Mechanical Engineering Faculty. He experienced all the atrocities of war and persecution of Jews, saving himself by fleeing Belgrade via Kosovo and Albania to Dalmatia, then staying in Italian camps until he returned to the country and joined the National Liberation Army. In 1977 he was awarded a doctorate in the field of automation. Until 1970, he worked at the Military Technical Institute and was later a lecturer and full professor at the Technical Military Academy in Zagreb and in the mechanical engineering and naval architecture faculties at the universities in Zagreb and Ljubljana until his retirement in 1983. He was very active in social and professional organisations.

He lives in Belgrade with his wife Olivera, née Janković.

My youth and my expectations of life were brought to a sudden and cruel halt by the outbreak of war and permanently marked by the tragic events which ensued. This is not only my experience, it is also the tragic collective experience of the Jewish people. The very few who remained alive were left with traumas and scars which time cannot heal.

My memories of warm family life interrupted by the death of my father and, later, by parting from my mother and her murder, go back to the days when I was a young boy. Because my parents had already lost two children before I was born, they paid close attention to my health, which wasn't enviable given that I was so thin. In gymnastics classes I was always the last in line, but when it came to studying I was among the first. One world collapsed for me when my father died two days before my twelfth birthday although, financially, mother and I were secure. I was fifteen when we moved from Vršac to Belgrade and I enrolled in the Second Boys' General Program Secondary School. The *Anschluss*, the Czech crisis and the beginning of the war were of decisive importance to me in spurring me to seek answers to many questions I was asking myself. I spent the summer holiday after my matriculation purposefully reading Marxist literature and establishing connections with progressive youth.

The *Numerus Clausus*, which awaited me at the door of the Engineering Faculty at Belgrade University, was yet another confirmation that I had made the right choice. As an excellent student I was exempted from the requirement to take the matriculation examination. However I was admitted to the faculty based on the merit and authority of my father. He had been president of the Jewish Community in Bela Crkva for one term and of the Jewish Community in Vršac for a number of years. I took part in student movement activities with the same passion with which I attended lectures and classes. This culminated in my taking part in demonstrations against the signing of the pact with the Axis on the evening of March 26 in Belgrade. Luckily I managed to evade arrest. That night the coup was carried out against General Simović and the following day, March 27, all of Belgrade was on its feet in general rejoicing.

I was in the streets at the time of the bombing of Belgrade, in the morning of April 6, 1941. My best friend, Ivan Singer, and I had set off to the USSR Embassy to welcome the signing of the Soviet-Yugoslav pact on non-aggression. Late in the evening of April 5, one of our col-

leagues, a member of SKOJ, informed us about the apparent signing of the pact and the planned assembly outside the Embassy.



*Maks and Irma, Paja Ciner's parents,
about 1912*

full of fear, threats, horror and despair and we too were caught up in this. Convoys of German Army vehicles, German commands in public buildings with huge swastikas, German military slogans in the streets. Bilingual notices and orders such as "... under threat of death sentence a ban is enforced ...", "... a death sentence has been executed on ... Jews and communists ... in retaliation for ...", and, all this insanity was embellished with the refrain "*für Juden verboten*" – "forbidden for Jews". One of the many bilingual orders demanded, under threat of a death sentence of course, that all adult Jews report for compulsory labour by April 19, 1941 at the latest.

One day after the bombing I left Belgrade with Ivan. We headed for Bosnia, assuming that defence would be organised from there. Seven days later, in bombed-out Sarajevo, they refused us when we wanted to join the volunteers, so we set off south. We arrived in Mostar, which was as far as the train went. The Ustaša had taken over the airport. There was a general exodus to Nevesinje. There in Nevesinje we learnt about the capitulation of the Yugoslav Army. Fearing Ustaša ambushes on the way to the coast we decided against attempting to flee the country by ship. Instead we made a great mistake by deciding to return home: I to Belgrade and Ivan to Vršac.

A scarred and occupied Belgrade was waiting for us,

My first “workplace” was the site of a demolished building on the left side of Makenzijeva Street. We were to dig up and remove the remains of those killed in the bombing. The bodies were already in a state of decomposition. My specialty was the disinfection of bodies with quicklime. The stench was unbearable. I paused to breathe in a little fresh air out in the street. Two German soldiers were passing and a powerful kick from behind put me back in the hole. The humiliation was worse than the stench. In Zeleni Venac a bomb had cut a vertical cross-section of three floors of the building we were clearing, that’s how I remember it. I have forgotten the others. We were also cleaning the streets, I remember being in Cvijićeva Street. We also beat rugs in the court park.

We were young, determined to persevere, we encouraged one another with jokes, endured humiliation with internal resistance, dreamt the impossible. We used our free time to gather in youth organisations, monitor events and maintain our faith in the future and in victory over evil.

When the war began I had the desire not to be killed on the first day so I could see what war was like! I saw too much of it, and in the shortest time possible and in the most tangible way! The bombing of Sarajevo caught Ivan and me (during our first flight) in a meadow in Potekija, two hundred metres from a railway line which was being targeted by aircraft. The bombs were buzzing and one was making an increasingly deep roar which ended in an ear-splitting explosion and darkness. The next moment it seemed to me, and was probably the case, that I was high above the ground. There were tiny people below me running around in chaos. “So this is what death is like,” I thought, before falling heavily on the soft ground next to Ivan who was half-buried under a mound of earth. It wasn’t death, but it had missed both of us by a hair’s breadth.

July 27, 1941, was my second birthday, because this was the day I came closest to death. I can take the credit for salvation myself, or at least it should go to my command of German and a bold decision at a crucial moment. The day before a rumour had spread among Jews, although there had been no official notice, that an *appell*, a roll-call, would be held that day in Tašmajdan. You never knew with these roll-calls whether you were falling into a trap by attending or whether, if you didn’t go, they would hunt you down in the streets later. Because of the way it was scheduled, unofficially, on Saturday for Sunday, the lo-

gical conclusion was that the trap lay in not going, so we all hurried to report. My first suspicion that I had made a mistake in coming was aroused when they sorted us according to status: students, teachers, merchants and so on. My suspicions grew when I heard that a young Jewish man had sabotaged a German truck. Just before they began counting us, the name Almozlino was read out loudly with the order to report, and everything was clear to me. I made the firm decision that if my name was called I would escape at the first opportunity. I had a fifty-fifty chance of success, as opposed to a certain zero in front of a firing squad. I was standing in a group of students, between my school friend Josip Rex and his younger brother, Tibor. (They both survived the Holocaust and lived in Hungary after the war.) Every fifth person was taken out of the group. The first Rex was fourth and I, as fifth, was taken out of the group while the agent was taking out subsequent fifths. While this was happening I was standing off to the side and talking to a teacher from a group standing next to us. He tried to reassure me, saying they must need a certain number of labourers for some job and I had no reason to fear. I remember telling him that, unfortunately, I knew very well what it was all about! Then, suddenly, I thought of my mother: what a blow this would be for her! And then I remembered my early decision and, when the agent began taking those of us who had been selected to the German commandant, I slowly began lagging behind while I assessed the situation. At that moment I heard: "*Fünf ist genug einer ist überflüssig,*" (Five is enough, there's one too many), at which I immediately turned around and quickly went back to stand between the two Rex brothers. Behind me I heard the agent ask: "Who was... ", but he didn't finish the question. I suppose he noticed that I had already gone but that he also had enough people, the required number. As for whether the agent had selected an additional person by chance, or my talk with the teacher was the reason for this, I have no idea. The following day I read in the newspaper that "... in retaliation ... for ... 122 Jews and communists have been executed ...".

After this incident it was clear to me that this was a struggle for life itself and that I mustn't allow them to kill me like a sheep. At about this time I was admitted into SKOJ (the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia). Admission was a demonstration of great trust in a person, and the assumption of responsibility. I immediately signed up to join the Partisans, something I had decided on earlier. Our group met by prior agreement at the railway station on August 21. To our surprise the group

leader said he was unable to go because of appendicitis and introduced us to a comrade we had not seen before, saying she was his deputy. This would have all been more or less alright had she not taken us off the train in Kijevo instead of in Ripanj where our contact was to meet us. We decided to proceed on foot, in groups of two or three, taking different routes, to Resnik and from there to get a train for Ripanj. However when we reached Ripanj, the contact was not waiting for us. In order not to appear obvious at the station, with rucksacks on our backs, we went to a nearby cornfield to decide on what to do while the deputy returned to Belgrade to get in touch with our contact. On our way we passed German soldiers deployed along the road. As the second half our group were to arrive on the afternoon train, we decided to wait for them and get in touch with their contact. We decided that another comrade and I would go to the station to meet the contact. It turned out that our group was to be their contact. This meant that neither we nor they had a contact. We took this group into hiding with us along the same road. During the night we came to the conclusion that the best solution was to return to Belgrade on the first train in the morning and re-establish contact. We were lucky that there wasn't any special control at the station in Belgrade, which was not the case for passengers on the following train, who were searched. Later we learnt that there had been some disclosures during that period, so our network had been broken.

This failure really rattled me. The main question now was when we would establish new routes for departure. And in the meantime, how many other people would find themselves in more danger than me, and further delay me getting another chance to leave? I had become fair game again, with little chance of a new departure. I had to return to compulsory labour because my sick leave, which I had taken to cover my flight, had expired. Raids, arrests and executions continued at the same pace. At that time I had a close encounter with an arrest in Dorćol, where I was caught up in a raid. As I came out of a house where I had attended a meeting, I saw German soldiers approaching from both ends of the street. I could hardly return to the house because I would have put the people living there in jeopardy. I was saved by a vacant lot across from the house which I had spotted, so I managed to escape the trap. Jews arrested in raids were taken to the Topovske Šupe camp, which had supposedly been set up to accommodate Jewish men brought by force from Banat. However it quickly became a proper concentration camp for all Jews. Groups of about a hundred people would be taken from the camp,

supposedly for labour, but this was labour from which they never returned. It very soon became clear to everyone what was happening and what going to Topovske Šupe meant. It meant extermination.

One Saturday at the end of October we were at our workplace when, at about noon, our supervisor, a German non-commissioned officer named Konrad, told us that after work, at 3.00 p.m., the Gestapo would come to take us to Topovske Šupe. Because of this, he said, he would allow us to finish early in order to go home and pack our things for our departure. Camp meant death, I knew, so I certainly was not going to return to work! I didn't go home for my things, instead I hurried to find Ivan's father, Dr Josif Singer (he had treated me when I was a boy because our parents socialised together and were close friends). At that time Ivan was living with Dr Eškenazi, the head of the Jewish Hospital in Belgrade, for home care. I went to Ivan. Dr Eškenazi's daughter, who was about the same age as us and worked as a nurse in the Jewish Hospital, was also there. She found Ivan's father and he consulted with Dr Eškenazi. Together they declared me terminally ill, a young man unfit for work who should be allowed to die at home. (Dr Josif Singer saved his son Ivan and me but, unfortunately, failed to save himself or the rest of his family. Dr Eškenazi and his family survived the Holocaust.) So I largely escaped the immediate danger hanging over me thanks again to the fortunate circumstance of having come across a person, rarely found among the Germans, who saw that we Jews were human beings and warned us about what lay in store for us. However I was crushed by the knowledge that the Gestapo had decided that all able-bodied Jews should be incarcerated that day in a concentration camp. A concentration camp from which Jews were shipped off to "labour" from which they would not return. We were intended for immediate liquidation. So we had to flee as soon as possible, because tomorrow might already be too late. But where to? And how to flee?

I planned to flee by joining the Partisans. Ivan took a different approach – leaving the country using false documents. There were many offers for these on the black market, for a great deal of money. Even if one had the money, it was difficult to discriminate between honest people offering these services and swindlers who took from many people the last money they had by demanding advance payments. Because Ivan was staying with the Eškenazi family who were preparing for their own departure, he had the opportunity to see many

offers they considered and so gained valuable experience in choosing the best option.

Jewish men were subject to all measures of repression, persecution, internment in camps and execution, but their wives and children were left in their apartments, free and in peace. This gave the women a feeling of false security in the sense that nothing worse could or would happen to them than those restrictions which had already been applied. Some of the men were also taken in by this base ploy. Unfortunately Ivan's father also fell for it, believing that, on the basis of having been highly decorated by the Germans in World War One, he could secure the right to depart legally for himself and his family. I was also included in this fantasy as a fiancé of Ivan's sister, Ana. However he fell into the trap of one of the many raids, was taken to Topovske Šupe and perished with the others. The last little money he had was stashed away with friends, earmarked for the purchase of false documents for Ivan and his flight to Split, to the Italian zone of occupation. He believed that fleeing to Hungary was not a secure solution and, later, this was proven to be true.

My dear mother spent all the money she had managed to save on documents for me, firmly assuring me that she would not be exposed to any danger if she remained in Belgrade. She consciously sacrificed herself for her son and we both knew that. My only comfort is the fact that I managed to call her from Priština, as we had agreed, and that she knew her sacrifice had not been in vain. I saw my mother for the last time at the house of friends, on the afternoon before my departure, because I did not sleep at home on the night before I left. Even now, sixty years later, I still see the same image: I was standing in the middle of an empty room without furniture (a parquet floor was being laid), still daylight; on my left there was a white door, half-open, Mother standing in it, looking in my direction but already on her way out.

I had an employment record book issued by the labour exchange in the name of Pavle Šicarević which I had obtained through the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia when I was preparing to leave to join the Partisans. Ivan had a baptismal certificate from the Catholic Church in the name of Boris Sojka. Its original owner was using a different surname which he had acquired when his mother remarried. So the Church's refusal to recognise divorce made it possible for Ivan to obtain a new identity. Taking advantage of the experience gained while staying with the Eškenazi family, Ivan had chosen the best. As well as

having documents, it was also necessary to have protection against any traps, to have an escort in dangerous places, to be instructed on how to behave before and during the trip, in other words to have everything properly organised.



Berta Sigeti, Paja Ciner's maternal grandmother; died in a ghetto in Budapest in 1944

A day before we left, my school friend Boris Magulac (he was killed as a Partisan on the Srem front), checked in our bags at the left luggage office at the railway station and brought the receipts home to me. The first danger point was arriving at the railway station. For this reason, when our train left, Bora was at the station again so he could call my mother and tell her we had cleared the first hurdle.

We also met our escort, Branko, and agreed with him on everything in detail, as well as when and where we would meet near the station before the train left. He would buy the train tickets, retrieve our bags from the left luggage office, board the train

with us and travel with us as long as necessary. He would hand us over to the conductor who would take us to a safe hotel for the night in Niš. The next day we would continue on our own to Kuršumljija, that is to the Kuršumljija Spa. The document itself was a *lasciapassare* (pass) issued by the Italian Embassy in Belgrade and verified by the German occupation authorities for our return to Split which was, allegedly, our home. We were supposedly in Belgrade as students at the university and were returning home to our parents.

We were advised against sleeping in our homes on the night before our departure and took this advice. Our acquaintances who agreed to take us in for the night were not exactly comfortable with this, and were very frightened during the evening and the whole night. Unfortunately we had arrived at their place just before the curfew so we were unable to leave.

We left Belgrade on November 21, 1941, in the morning while it was still dark, jumping into the train as it left the station. Our escort was so late that we were both desperate, thinking that we had been conned after all. Branko claimed that one of his family members was ill and that this was why he was late. He bought the tickets on the train from the conductor, paying an extra fee. In all this rush, Ivan managed to spot Bora at the station, so we knew that our mothers would be informed. When I think about all this today, I'm not sure whether Branko arriving late might not have been part of the plan, in order to reduce to a minimum the time we spent hanging around the station. When the carriage, which had been packed when the train set off, emptied out a little at stops along the way, Branko managed to talk to the conductor and disappeared soon after. At the station in Niš, the officer at the exit stopped us because we didn't have train tickets. They were with Branko. Terrified at the possible consequences we began to search in our pockets. In the pocket of my coat I felt a round, metal object – a yellow pin, compulsory for Jews. My legs turned to jelly. At that moment the conductor appeared and explained to the officer that he had charged us for the tickets, proving this with his signature. When he took us with him he explained to us that he would take us to a hotel, as Branko had asked him to. It is possible, although by no means certain, that Branko had forgotten to give us our tickets through sheer carelessness. However in this way, although it was frightening for us, it was possible for the conductor to do his part of the job discreetly, without us talking about it, and take us to a particular hotel in Niš. We filled in the forms and paid for the room in advance and they brought us dinner to our room so we would not have to go to the restaurant.

Our company at the Kuršumljia Spa was diverse, not the least what one would expect in a spa, either in appearance or mood. It included a Jewish family we knew well from Vršac. The border with the Italian zone of occupation was temporarily closed. One night our entire company was taken to the Serbian police station. We were standing in line, horrified, because this could have been an ignominious end to a well-devised endeavour. I heard, right beside me, a conversation between the two gendarmes taking us in. One of them said: "The one on the right (that was me) looks to me like a Jew, but the other one (Ivan) doesn't." These police officers obviously kept what they knew or suspected to themselves, because we all received "pass grades".

Soon after this check, the border was reopened and we set off in a horse-drawn cart. In Podujevo we spent the night in Albanian lodgings because, for our taste, there were too many German soldiers at the hotel. The next day, in the same transport and with the same driver, we continued on to Priština which was already part of the Italian zone. At the border crossing our documents successfully passed the test. This was partly because of the merry atmosphere we created by our attempts to hold a conversation in Italian.

We took this cheerful mood with us, it was overtaking us more and more. Was it possible that we had really made it and escaped from hell? Well, the world is not only about threats, persecution and violent death! There's also life in the world, simply human life for living with all its joy and sadness. We were young again, full of joy, optimism and faith, rejoicing in life. However the border with hell was too close for us to give up on our original destination – Split and the sea. We travelled with the help of truck drivers who were carrying cargo to Skadar. Frozen, but happy, lying on tarpaulins, we passed through the most beautiful mountainous regions.

After travelling through these rugged areas we reached Skadar. This was already far enough from the threatening hell, warmed by the coastal sun and it seemed to us that we had reached a small haven. The little money we had brought with us was rapidly melting away, so we decided to look for employment. We didn't find a job, but an agent found us and took us straight to the quaestor, the Italian police chief and his assistant. We spoke French, because the quaestor was fluent in that language. He explained to us that we had entered Albania illegally because we didn't have Albanian visas. He accepted our explanations and, once he and his assistant had inspected our documents, he stamped Albanian visas on them and signed them on the spot. And so in this way we got our first visa with fake documents. We were fortunate in that both police officers looked at the documents separately, that is they each inspected one of our documents. This way they failed to notice that the numbers on both documents were blurred and unclear. However this did not escape the eye of the receptionist at a hotel in Dürres when we arrived there the next day to continue our journey to Split. In Dürres we discovered that the next ship for Split would not leave for another week. The fact that idle people who have achieved unexpected success are capable of the most blatant stupidity is something we proved to ourselves while we were waiting for the ship to sail.

The kind *quaestor* in Skadar had suggested to us, among other things, that we go to the Italian Embassy in Tirana for financial assistance to cover our travel expense to Split. No sooner said than done! It was incredibly lucky for us that the officer in charge of this wasn't at the Embassy so his associate advised us to leave our documents and return in an hour when he would be there. So Laurel and Hardy cleverly left their documents there. We had taken only a few steps into the street when we realised that the Italian Embassy was the only place in the whole of Albania, and probably beyond, where they were sure to discover the documents were fake. We returned in a panic and managed to get our papers back, with the excuse that our bus was leaving early. We had confirmation of the joke "Speak Serbian so the whole world understands you," in Dürres when we asked a shoeshine boy where we could spend the night. Because we spoke neither Albanian nor Italian, we asked him in German, French, English and Hungarian. When I finally exclaimed: "Is it possible that he doesn't understand anything at all," he just looked at us and said: "Well, why don't you speak Serbian so I can understand you!"

The ship berthed at Split at four in the afternoon and the curfew began at six. Fortunately Ivan had good and dear friends who took us in immediately and without hesitation. Thanks to them and their connections we managed to legalise our status in Split and to earn a living. However this idyll did not last long: in July 1942 we were arrested in a raid. Up to that point Jews who had been arrested would usually be sent into confinement in Italy. Hoping that they would do the same with us, we revealed our true identities to them. We were wrong, because they threw us into the Scipione di Salsomaggiore concentration camp in the province of Parma. In July, 1943, the whole camp was moved to the Ferramonti di Tarsia concentration camp in the province of Cosenza. This camp virtually fell apart after the British Eighth Army landed in southern Italy on September 3, 1943. We left the camp on September 5 with a group of inmates who had chosen to return to Yugoslavia and join the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia.

The First Overseas Brigade of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia had formed in Bari at the time and we immediately joined. I was deputy commissioner of the Second Company of the Second Battalion of the brigade when, on the morning of December 2, 1943, we boarded our ship, the Bakar, to transfer to Yugoslavia at night. In the winter night I found a warm spot to lie on the upper deck beside the

hatch to the engine room. Looking at the starry night and hearing the sound of aircraft, I was thinking to myself that these were “our guys” returning from a bombing raid because there had been no air raid siren. When the first bombs fell and the sky turned red, the siren also began. “Their guys” had been flying behind “our guys” and, with this trick, managed to make hell in the port full of ships. I saw that all hell was about to break loose, so I sought shelter on the lower deck. A huge piece of steel fell where I had been lying. “Jude” had managed to escape from them once more!

We disembarked from the Bakar in Starigrad on the island of Hvar. The beast once hunted out was returning to his homeland, but armed and in the ranks of the liberation army. From Starigrad the unit transferred to Grohote on Šolta, from where it would carry out a landing operation on the shore. However during the very execution of this task the vessels were redirected to Brač because the place for landing was now in danger from the enemy. In Nerežišća on Brač, I suffered a bad bout of malaria, which I saw as a souvenir of my sojourn in the swampy area of Ferramonti. From Brač we sailed to Vis where I ended up in the hospital in Komiža and then in Podhumlje. Between my bouts of illness I was a translator in a British surgical team, assigned to our army. Following my recovery I moved to the Naval Command’s division for communications with the Allies in liberated Split.

After the war I asked to be demobilised so that I could continue my engineering studies. Instead I was sent, in December 1945, to work with the Military Mission of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in Germany, in the Repatriation Division in the British Zone. I was first a secretary and then assistant department head until the end of 1948 when, after my repeated requests, I was returned to Belgrade. At the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering at Belgrade University, as an active officer, I first studied part-time and later as a full-time student. I graduated in 1954. Until 1970 I worked in the Military Technical Institute in Belgrade, developing hydraulic systems for mechanisation and automatic control. I underwent specialist training in France and in the USA. As a tenured professor and head of the Automatic Control Department of the Technical Military Academy in Zagreb, I taught classes in hydraulic and pneumatic devices, automatic control, and mechanical elements of automation. I was awarded a doctorate in the field of automation in 1977. I taught subjects in this field to graduate and post-graduate students both at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and

Naval Architecture of Zagreb University and at the Engineering Faculty of Ljubljana University.

I retired in 1983 with the rank of colonel and continued teaching as an associate professor. I was chairman of the committee for the professional conference of the Yugoslav Association for Electronics, Telecommunications, Automation and Nuclear Engineering (ETAN) from 1967 to 1981 and, from then until the break-up of Yugoslavia, I was a member of the presidency and, for one term, president of this association.

My wife Olivera, née Janković, transformed my solitary state into a warm home.