
Arni VAJNINGER

LIFESAVING DEPARTURE FOR SWITZERLAND

Arni Vajninger was born in Leipzig, Germany, to father Salamon Vajninger and mother Rahel. He had a brother, David, who was two years younger. He lost his father early, he was arrested by the Nazis in 1938 and sent to a concentration camp where, along with thousands of other inmates, he was killed at the beginning of April 1940.

Arni Vajninger was one of the boys who, thanks to the Youth Aliyah, reached Nonantola and so survived the Holocaust.

He lives in Israel.

My father Salomon Vajninger and my mother Rahel went to Leipzig from Eastern Europe after the first world war. The Nazis arrested my father on September 1, 1938, and sent him to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he was killed in April 1940, along with thousands of other inmates. I was thirteen at the time and was given a chance to leave Germany with the *Jugend Alija* which was organised by Recha Freier. My family decided that I should join this children's transport to Palestine.

I left Leipzig in October 1940, and met children from Hamburg, Berlin and other cities on the train. We were travelling to Vienna. There we managed to find a man who smuggled us over the border into Yugoslavia. After climbing mountains, we arrived in Zagreb, a safe sanctuary. Unfortunately for me, I fell ill and was unable to continue

the journey to Palestine. I had to stay in Zagreb while the other children left Yugoslavia and reached Palestine. While I was recovering in Zagreb, I met Armando Moreno and Joška Indig, two young *madrihim* in the Zionist organisation.

However, once the Nazis attacked and occupied Yugoslavia in 1941, all roads for fleeing the country were closed. Armando Moreno assembled a group of children and took them to Belgrade a few days before the war began, while Joška Indig stayed behind in Zagreb. They both tried to find a way to save us. Through contacts with the Italian Jewish community we managed to leave Zagreb, which by this time was under Ustaša rule, and head for Ljubljana. There we found accommodation in a hunting castle, which at that time was occupied by the Italian Army. But fighting soon began in this territory and we had to leave.

With the cooperation of the Italian Jewish community's DELASEM (*Delegazione assistenza agli emigranti*), it was made possible for us to reach Nonantola, a place in the province of Modena, in central Italy. We were provided with accommodation at Villa Emma. This was a large house, earlier owned by an Italian Jew and uninhabited at this time. In Nonantola we made friends with the local population, who were kindly disposed to us and helped us. Armando Moreno, who was very active at this time in saving children, assembled another group of children from Yugoslavia, so we formed a *hasharah*.

In September 1943, Italy capitulated. The Nazis soon occupied northern Italy, including Nonantola, while the Allied forces came ashore in southern Italy and began advancing on Rome.

The people of Nonantola did everything in their power to hide most of the children. All the same, the direct presence of the Nazis was a sign for us that we had to seek salvation by moving to safer territory. At that time, for us, this meant Switzerland. Before we made a final decision on what to do, a group of children tried unsuccessfully to cross the Swiss border and returned. Several of us, together with Armando Moreno, decided to try crossing into Switzerland from Italy. And we succeeded! Thus, in October, Armando, another four boys and I arrived, via the Alps, in Cernobbio, a place on the Italian-Swiss border. Our connection was safe. The man who waited for us at the border showed us the way and cut the barbed wire for us at a safe spot, so our group of six, led by Armando Moreno, reached Swiss soil and found safety there.

There were still many obstacles to be overcome, but for us our departure for Switzerland saved our lives.

The war atrocities passed and left, on the few Jews who survived, traces and consequences that we cannot forget as long as we live. When everything calmed down, later on, our paths diverged. Still, as circumstances had it, after many years, in the USA, we met those with whom we went through all those difficulties together. We were in constant touch with Armando and his late wife and had warm relations with them.