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*Silva USKOKOVIĆ*

IN A DESERTED VILLAGE STABLE



*Silva Avramović was born in Belgrade on September 15, 1923, to Šemaja and Matilda (née Stefanović). Her brother Josif was killed on August 24, 1944.*

*After returning to Belgrade in October, 1944, she continued her education studying at the Faculty of Economics at Belgrade University. She married pharmacy student Milutin Uskoković. Their happy marriage resulted in two daughters, Sonja a pharmacist and Dragana, a clerk. She has three grandchildren.*

I remember my father, Šemaja, my mother Matilda, my brother Josif and I enjoying a happy life with a standard of living above the average. We had a house in a pleasant part of Belgrade at 26 Kajmakčalanska Street. My father was a merchant and had a shop at 2 Nikole Spasića Street. My mother stopped working when they married and devoted herself to the household and raising me and my brother Josif. He was a little older than me and we both went to the same school. When the war began we were startled and confused. My father went out to a military drill and came back dressed in peasant costume. He immediately got identity documents for us with false Serbian names. Like other Jews, we gradually began preparing to flee. Early one morning once everything was arranged, we left the house, locked the door, kissed the mezuzah and our suffering began.

We went by train to Kuršumlja. All of us were carrying a toilet bag and our new identity documents in false names, some money, a sweater and a change of underwear. My father gave each of us a slip of paper with an address.

We got onto the train, each of us in a different compartment. Whoever of us remained alive were to go to the address our father had given us. I got off the train in Kuršumlja, trembling with fear as I wondered whether all of us had arrived. Thank God, all four of us were there and I thought we were saved. We went to the house of Stanoje Stefanović, my father's friend. When he saw us, he threw his arms around my father. "Šemaja, my brother," he greeted him.

"Forget that name," my father replied. "I'm no longer Šemaja, I'm Nikola Petrović now." We spent a week there, among good people, happy and free from fear. But then Kosta Pećanac, the Chetnik leader, announced that Jews were to be expelled, so we left Kuršumlja, unhappy and downcast and set off for Pristina. We had the misfortune to be arrested when we reached Podujevo. However some deal was done, which I didn't know about and a guard let us escape later. We fled in the middle of the night and travelled to Prokuplje, where there were no Germans. Instead there were Bulgarians. One day, half an hour before the beginning of the curfew, our landlady came into our room.

"There's a Bulgarian man looking for Vera." That was my new name on my false papers. Frightened to hear a Bulgarian was looking for me and even more frightened by the look my father gave me, I followed the landlady out. The Bulgarian soldier told me that the Germans would arrive the next day, a penal expedition which would take all Jews off to camps. We didn't know what to do. There were eight Jewish families altogether in Prokuplje. Our landlady tried to comfort us and one of our new friends, Ilija Joksimović, advised us to flee. Ilija's sister offered to take us to the nearby village of Jugovac.

The village was ten kilometres away. There was no road, so we walked along gorges through the ravines under Mt Jastrebac. We stayed in Jugovac in a deserted stable, with bare earth beneath our feet and a view of the sky through the roof. We were all dressed in old and shabby peasant clothes and lived by doing odd jobs, tilling the soil in exchange for food. We were lucky in that at least we had bread. The peasants prepared good meals for us, their hired help. I was sorry for my mother who had only corn bread while my father and brother and I had a decent meal as part of our working day. Once we went out to dig

up corn. This was something we knew only in its boiled or grilled form. Now we saw some short, spindly stalks with green leaves. My father had always advised us to be at the end of the line, watch what the others were doing and then copy them. We usually went out to the field as soon as it was light in the morning. One day there were twelve of us workers. I was at the end of the line, with my brother in front of me and my father in front of him. It was the first time I had ever held a shovel and my hands were covered in calluses. I straightened up to wipe my hands and glanced at my brother and father. Then I saw the other workers behind my father, looking at us and smiling. I signalled my father and he raised his head as all the workers burst out laughing. "What are you doing, Nikola, you're digging up weeds!"

"Well, I thought it was time everyone had a laugh," said my father quickly.

That evening he told me had been terrified because if they saw that we were no good at this hard farm work we would have no bread. There was a great deal we didn't know about village life, but we were fast learners.

Soldiers would often come before dawn, surrounding the village. Everyone would be up straight away, as every household had a dog and they would bark as soon as someone came into the village. One day Nedić's troops came and surrounded the stable where we lived. A man in uniform came in and barked at us "We know you're Jews. You've been in hiding for a long time and you've lived long enough. We're going to take you to the Germans now." Then he left the house.

We were all in tears, kissing one another as my mother divided up the corn bread left over from the previous day. Another officer came in and, with a broad grin, asked why we were weeping. "If you're taking us to hand us over to the Germans so they can kill us because we're Jews, isn't that reason enough for us to be crying?" my mother answered.

The officer then embraced my mother, telling her "Listen to me. I have secret orders to keep you hidden. Not even my colleague out there knows about this."

The soldiers formed up together again and left. In the meantime the whole village had gathered around, everyone shouting "Keep your hands off our refugees: they're good people!"

The young officer embraced my father and addressed the peasants. "I'm from the same place as these refugees. Take good care of them, because it's not easy being away from your home."

For the time being, at least, we were still alive, thank God. We kissed one another and my father read a prayer. But the same night a Partisan commissar from a detachment which had been in the area for a long time took my father away and interrogated him. He suspected my father was a spy and wanted to know why one of Nedić's officers had hugged him. They held a meeting at which my father was accused. After a long discussion they sentenced him to death. There was a Partisan, a woman who had been a Communist since before the war, who took our side. She spent the whole night trying to prove to them that Nikola Petrović was a Jew, that he was an honest man and not guilty of anything. She reminded them that my father had told them who we were as soon as we arrived. If he had always been honest and sincere, why shouldn't we believe him now? Thanks to her intercession the Partisans finally released him and once again we all remained alive.



*Silva with her mother, father and brother.*

We were still in the village when 1943 arrived. One day in the spring of that year I went into Prokuplje with the village women to go to the market. We bought eggs, potatoes and onions. I also had to go to the pharmacy because my mother was ill and, as I came out, a man in uniform approached me and asked to see my identification. I was always delighted to show my papers, knowing they would find Vera

Petrović there. However this soldier tore my identification up without explanation and threw the pieces to the ground. I felt as though he had torn my heart apart. "You're under arrest," he said. When I asked him why, he replied that I'd find out at the station. At the station they read me the indictment.

"You were fighting near the village of Blace and wounded this officer. He has identified you."

They took me to prison and, after endless interrogation and much humiliation they handed me over to the Germans. I spent several days with the Germans in Prokuplje before they sent me to the Gestapo in Leskovac. I arrived about noon, escorted by four German soldiers. People in the street stopped and stared at me, my eyes were full of tears. They took me to a solitary confinement cell, but took me out repeatedly for interrogation. Once they put the barrel of a revolver in my mouth: I thought I was going to die. By now I had no more tears: my eyes were dry and my heart was bitter as I said over and over again "My name is Vera Petrović, I have nothing to do with Jews and I'm not a Partisan."

I had to scrub out the cell every day and then do the German soldiers' laundry. They were looking for healthy and strong young people to carry corn bread from the bakery every day. It came in a huge baking pan, so there were usually two of us to carry it. The Serb baker would always look at us with pity in his eyes.

One day my mother, who was ill, arrived in Leskovac. By this time I had been with the Gestapo for eight months. My mother knew no one in Leskovac and had no money. When night fell she huddled on the pavement, waiting for the next day when she planned to visit the prison. People passing by looked her over, thinking she was a beggar. Then a middle-aged woman stopped and asked her if she was all right. My mother begged her to go away, not to draw a crowd. The good woman insisted and took my mother into her house, the house in front of which she had been sitting. She made her some tea. "Madam, you're obviously ill, but I can see that you're also under a great deal of strain," she said.

"Yes," my mother admitted, "my daughter has been in the Gestapo prison for eight months."

"I'll try to help you," the woman replied. "The camp commandant lives here and he is courting me." My mother became very alarmed at this and wanted to leave, but the good woman calmed her down. "Please stay, it's Easter tomorrow and they'll allow visitors into the camp."

The next day, as we were taking our daily half-hour walk in the prison yard, the command came over the loudspeaker: "Partisan Vera, leave the circle!"

When I left the yard I saw my mother and with her the woman, who hugged me and gave me some cakes. This was incredible for me. I thought I must have been dreaming or that I had lost my mind, gone completely crazy. The woman hugged and kissed me, whispering to me that everything was going to be all right. Finally the woman began speaking to one of the Germans and my mother came to me. I whispered to her quickly that we could see each other near the bakery. I told her where it was and what time I would be there. With the Germans everything was as regular as clockwork.

A little later a Serb doctor came and examined me, asking me if I was healthy and whether I had any pain. I told him that I was in good health and had no ailments. I don't know how he translated this to the Germans, but two days later I was released from the camp prison.

I had no identification and no money. I knew no one in Leskovac. Then I remembered our baker and went to him in the hope that he would help me. When I came into the bakery without the German guards he was frightened, thinking that I must have escaped, but I explained that they had let me go. To my joy, he told me that my mother had been there a few minutes before. I thought I was going to scream from happiness. He pointed me in the direction she had gone and I started running, saying over and over again "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elochenu!"

My mother was then only 44, but in the distance I now saw an old woman. "Mother!" I shouted. She turned and we ran to each other, sobbing and kissing without speaking.

We decided to leave for Jugovac and, thank God, reached Prokuplje with no problems. We set off from there, but my mother could walk no further along the rough ground. Again we were reminded that there is a God: a peasant with an oxcart came by and took us to Jugovac. Everyone gathered around to welcome us, my father and brother were both weeping. Happiness settled over our refuge, our stable.

But the happiness proved short-lived and new problems began. The Partisans came and mobilised my brother. They knew he had been in secondary school so they made him a mobilisation officer, which meant he had to go from village to village, recruiting young peasants. It was now August, 1944. My brother came first to the stable and asked

me to wash his military uniform, saying "I'll be out in the field for two or three days."

The nearest village to Jugovac was Pašince. In the village everyone got up at dawn and went to bed when darkness fell, as there was neither gas nor candles. We lay in bed and talked quietly in the dark. All of us prayed we would remain alive and healthy and that the war would end. Suddenly someone called to my father to come outside and people began shouting "Joca's been killed!"

"No," said my father, "he was here, he's just left," thinking they meant another Joca who lived in the village. He pointed them to his house.

"No, Nikola, your Joca's been killed. Joca the refugee. He's here in the cart."

My mother and father were out of their minds. The peasants took him into some house. I was there alone, beside my Joška. There was a crowd of peasants around our stable. Suddenly I heard a sound from his body. I was at once frightened and excited, and began screaming "He's alive! He's alive!"

"No, he's not alive," the older peasants explained to me as they took me away, "It's the sound of the blood draining from his heart."

We buried my brother in the village cemetery, with full honours. Apparently there had been some misunderstanding and shooting among the Partisans in Pašince, the neighbouring village. My brother was the only one who was killed. My father said Kaddish quietly to himself. It was August 24, 1944, and the war was coming to an end.

As soon as Belgrade was liberated in October, 1944, my father managed to find a metal coffin and we returned to Belgrade by train. There we buried my brother again, in the Jewish cemetery.

Here in liberated Belgrade I realised that we had survived the war, that the persecution was over, but more and more often I found myself wondering why we Jews had to suffer so much. Until yesterday we had been forced to conceal the fact that we were Jews, and now I wanted to tell everyone:

*Know, all of you  
You who spent the war in your homes,  
Know, all of you  
You who had it hard during the war  
Know, all of you*

*We Jews were guilty without guilt  
Guilty of living  
And sentenced to death.*

*Know, all of you  
We had no rights,  
Less rights than dogs.*

*Know, all of you  
We who survived  
Savour each day  
Each moment, each instant*

*For  
We walk with our heads held high*

*And  
Freely say  
That we are Jews!*

When we arrived home, we discovered that our house had been sold, and that the buyer was a Serb. As soon as he found out that we'd returned, he came to us and apologised, saying "The Germans were selling the house; if I hadn't bought it someone else would have." Then he tore up the sale contract in front of us and said to my mother: "Think of it as me taking care of your house for you."

Because our home was very large, the Partisan authorities assigned half of it to some fighter. I resumed my education at the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University. I met Milutin Uskoković, a pharmacy student, and we were registered, as getting married was called in those days. In this very happy marriage we had two daughters: Sonja, who is a pharmacist like her father, and Dragana, who works in a bank. I have a grandson, named Milutin after my husband. He lives in the Netherlands and is married to a Dutch woman. I also have a granddaughter, Zorana, who is a fourth-year pharmacy student, and my youngest grandson, Rade. My husband died in 1993. He was a good husband, a caring father and a tender grandfather. He respected my religion and I respected his. Out of respect for my Jewish origins, all my grandchildren attended school in Israel.