
Debora OSTOJIĆ

IN THE SAJMIŠTE CAMP



Debora Kabiljo was born on April 6, 1915, in Derventa, to Blanka (née Atijas) and David Kabiljo. There were four other children in the family, brothers Jozef and Samuilo and sisters Sarina and Rifka. Only Debora and her brothers survived the Holocaust.

She studied law in Belgrade and at the end of her third year, in 1936, married Milan Ostojić, who died in 1973.

After the war she lived in Belgrade until 1947, then in Prijedor before moving to Sarajevo in 1949. When war broke out in Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1992, she moved to Belgrade where she now lives with her daughter.

She has a son, Kamenko, and a daughter, Gorjana, and four grandchildren.

I was a prisoner in the Sajmište camp in Belgrade. As far as I am aware I am one of the very small number of surviving witnesses to the suffering of Jewish women and children in this Nazi camp. Although I am now more than eighty years of age, many of the events and people live in my memory to this day and I have already written a great deal about them.

I was taken to Sajmište on December 9, 1941, among a group of Jewish women from the camp in Banjica. I had been in Banjica as a political prisoner, together with my husband and a group of prisoners

from Smederevska Palanka. It was there that I heard that they were opening a camp for Jewish women and children and at first I couldn't believe it.

One day the Banjica camp commander, Vujković, burst into our room with several Gestapo and begin to call out Jewish women, which made me think that the camp must have been built. My four-year-old son was still in Smederevska Palanka, all alone in a strange world so, little suspecting what kind of camp it was, I registered to go there, although I had not been called for it because I had the surname of my Serb husband. It seemed like a good opportunity to be with my child and I couldn't imagine that a camp for women and children could be worse than the notorious Banjica where I was rotting away as a political prisoner. But one day in Sajmište was enough for me to realise the kind of hell I had landed in, and I immediately gave up the idea of bringing my son there. So now I was no longer with my husband, who was still in Banjica, nor was I with my child, who was staying with strangers.

Some of the other Jewish women in Banjica were political prisoners like me. These included Olga Alkalaj¹ and Frida Berman from Bosanski Brod, who was in the camp under the name Mila Radunović-Laban. Others said they had ended up in Banjica by being handed over to the Gestapo by people they had paid to get them out of Belgrade. Among these were mother and daughter Loni and Roza Ast, a Mrs Dajč², whose first name I don't recall, but she told me that her husband was a timber merchant. There was also Gracia Gabaj.

When we arrived at the Sajmište camp several of us were put into a large pavilion, which was almost full while the others were taken to a smaller pavilion, in which Jewish women and children from Niš were later housed. They immediately transferred us to the quarantine block where we had to sleep on a fence which had been laid on the ground. There were also Gypsies with us.

Fifteen days later they returned us to the pavilion and put us in the regular dormitories. There were 46 dormitories on three levels. The bot-

¹ There is a street in Belgrade named after Olga Alkalaj.

² This was Augusta Dajč, the wife of engineer Emil Dajč who accepted the painful and arduous duties of representative of the Jewish community in Belgrade during the German occupation. Their daughter, Hilda Dajč, a medical student, worked in the Jewish hospital then voluntarily went to the Sajmište camp, believing that this was where she could help the sick.

tom level was a metre above the ground, the second one had stairs leading up to it and the third was a kind of terrace with no railing. It was the only floor on which you could stand upright. The pavilion was paved with large stone slabs. The ceiling was high and the windows were small, and had remained broken since the bombing. Because of this it was very cold, although there were a few stoves which would be lit when there was wood. The wood, just like the bread, was carried by the women over the frozen Sava River.

Food was mere subsistence rations: a piece of bread or corn bread the size of a box of matches. For lunch there was a thin soup with beans, cabbage or potatoes and often there was not enough to go round. The potatoes were frozen and would rot soon after they were thawed. We ate them, nonetheless, and would soon get diarrhoea. The recovery from this was slow and difficult. The ablutions in the camp were a few taps and improvised toilets overflowing with faeces. All of this indicated that the camp was to be liquidated in the near future.



*The Kabiljo family before the Holocaust.
(Debora third from left in back row).*

Everything about life in the camp was horrifying. Some women were beaten and had their hair shorn. One of the most distressing incidents was when a group of boys were beaten because they had crawled under the wire and gone to Zemun to get some food. When they returned in the evening the Germans beat them brutally and returned

them half dead to their mothers. These criminals were certain that no one would leave the camp again. They already had plenty of experience in handling prisoners. First they would torture them with hunger, then frighten them with repeated roll calls during which they had to watch other prisoners being beaten or being forced to have their hair shorn. In this way they soon reduced us to apathy and despair. We had only one wish: that the end, our death, would come as soon as possible.

One of their most successful techniques was the psychological trick of spreading false rumours. One of these was that we were to be sent to Poland to work. Many saw this as salvation for themselves and their children. We needed only to wait calmly and patiently. Some women were telling fortunes from cards or beans and everyone saw a journey with everything going well. There was indeed a journey ahead of us: all this time the gas chambers were being prepared.

My most distressing memories are of the children in the camp. In the block next to ours there was a woman called Mrs Mandil, whose first name I don't remember. She had a young son who had just begun to talk. The first sound I would hear every morning was the child crying "Mummy, bread..." When the rations arrived and his mother gave him a slice of bread the crying would continue "Butter, Mummy, butter..." I don't know how his mother managed to calm him down, but to this day his heartrending crying rings in my ears.

The older children are also ingrained in my memory. They would gather in the middle of our pavilion, playing and singing:

*Ašafan, see we can
Play all day and win.
More, more, a little more
We'll jump out of our skin.*

They would stand in a circle, jumping two by two as the others clapped. The pairs would change all the time. But, as time went by, the song was heard less and less and more and more softly.

There was a small first-aid clinic run by a Jewish doctor whose name I've forgotten and there was also an office. A camp prisoner called Mile Demajo worked there. Because I was married to a Serb, they told me I should ask Demajo about the possibility of being released. When he heard that my husband was in Banjica, he told me not to tell anyone about it, but to remain silent and wait. Mr Demajo

was very highly regarded and I had an extremely good impression of him. He was a wise and gracious man. Sadly, he ended the same way as all the others in the camp.

I remember a beautiful young woman in advanced pregnancy who eventually gave birth in the camp. She wasn't Jewish but was married to a Jew and had applied to go to the camp herself because, she said, she wanted to be with her husband and his people.



*Debora Ostojić on the eve
of the war.*

Gracia Gabaj³ was also very young. She told me that she had left her two-year-old daughter Jenny with the Lukić family who had a picture framing shop. When she found out that I was leaving, she asked me to visit her child and ask the Lukić family not to change her name. As soon as I was released I went to visit the family but they were not at home. They were probably in the neighbourhood because there was a nicely-dressed girl playing in front of the house. When I asked her name, she replied that it was Nada Lukić.

I was wondering what to do, to keep looking for the Lukić family or, as the child was obviously well looked after, to leave her in peace. I decided to

take this latter course, thinking that Gracia would easily find her child if she ever came back. I didn't know at that time what the fate of the people in the camp would be. I don't think many people could have had any idea of what was to come. The Lukić family had no children of

³ Gracia was a young Jewish woman from Thessalonica who married Haim Mika Gabaj in Belgrade. Her husband was mobilised on the eve of the war and killed in the first battles in April 1941. Because she had no news of him and expected him to return, she remained in Belgrade with her two-year-old daughter Jenny, while her mother-in-law left Belgrade together with her two daughters, sons-in-law and four grandchildren. All of these were saved and took up residence in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Gracia was killed in the Sajmište camp. Jenny survived, thanks to the love and care of Mrs Lukić. She too now lives in Buenos Aires where she has raised a family. She has never forgotten her saviour whom she visited regularly in Belgrade and helped until the end of her life.

their own. After the war I went in search of any surviving members of the Gabaj family, but found no one.

Olga Alkalaj came with us from Banjica, where she was also a political prisoner. She had been tortured in Banjica and arrived at the Sajmište camp in a very poor state. I knew her from Banjica and also through Frida Berman. Sometime in January I came down with pneumonia and the doctor in the camp clinic gave me some medicine and later a lemon. I took this to Olga Alkalaj who was still recovering from the torture in Banjica. When I received a letter from my husband, passed to me by Mrs Ruso, who had been working on the ice that day, I went to the small pavilion to read the letter to Olga. In it, my husband told me that he had been released from Banjica with the whole Smederevska Palanka group and that he had submitted a request to the authorities for me to be released from the camp as the wife of “an Aryan”. Olga was delighted that I was to be released. When I told her I would stay there if I knew that everyone would be released, she told me “Go, just go! No one is going to get out of here.”

The case of Blanka Levi from Zenica was interesting. Her married name was Milanović and everyone called her “the Seventh Day Adventist”. When Blanka and the other Jews from Niš were brought to the camp, Blanka’s husband was away from home. My cousin, Rifka Baruh (née Atijas) from Niš was in the same pavilion as Blanka. She knew that I was to be released soon and asked me to go to the Adventists in Belgrade and tell Blanka’s friend to let her husband know where they were, because he had no idea what had happened to her. In the meantime they started call-ups in the camp in which people were taken out and gassed in trucks. Blanka didn’t answer any of the call-ups, she just sat, reading the Bible and praying. Everybody kept encouraging her to apply but, thinking that this was for transport to Poland, she would say “I don’t want to die in a foreign country. I want to die here and I’m not going to go anywhere.”

Convoy after convoy left and Blanka just sat and read her Bible. Finally, at the eleventh hour, just before the camp itself was demolished, her husband arrived and rescued her. Blanka didn’t know at that time who had sent the message to her husband, and nor did I know for whom I was doing it. By a strange coincidence I met Blanka more than forty years later. In a chance, spontaneous conversation in a train compartment, Blanka and I discovered our connection. This was the first

time we ever met, in 1985. Blanka was from Zenica and lived in Banja Koviljača after the war.

Margita Olujić and Frida Radunović-Laban were rescued before us, both of them also being married to “Aryans”. Three of us (Ružica Petrović, myself and a third person whose name I don’t recall, although I know she had a patisserie at the entrance to the Academy of Science) were informed on February 24, 1942, that we were to be released. I remember that the convoy from Niš arrived the same day. But because a lot of the female inmates had asked us to deliver messages, we decided to spend another night there and leave the next day. This was also an opportunity to give our food rations to those who remained to suffer in the camp.

Loni Ast asked me to contact her son Izidor Ast in the Shaar Haamakim kibbutz in Palestine, which I did immediately. Her message was about some valuable items which she had left in the care of someone named Injac who worked in a fabric shop in Knez Mihailova Street and lived in Cara Uroša Street. Izidor Ast didn’t call me. He apparently sought me many years later, but I was no longer living in Belgrade. Later I heard that he had been killed in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Among the newcomers from Niš, there was my cousin Rifka Atijas, the daughter of Isidor Atijas from Bugojno. She was married to Baruh, a surveyor from Niš. She was together with her cousin, Rifka Salom, the daughter of Kuća Salom from Bugojno. She was also married to a surveyor from Niš. She had her one-year-old son with her, but had left her daughter with her grandmother in Bugojno.

I remember one day a sister of Dijana Levi from Banja Luka called me. I also saw Flora Levi, the daughter of the cobbler Levi, also from Banja Luka, who was there with her mother-in-law.

I also remember a woman (I don’t recall her name) who had a house at the beginning of Vojvoda Babunski Street, immediately behind the Babunski tavern, next to the tram stop across the street from Lion.

I remember, I remember... The memories are painful and they will burden my soul forever, because there is nothing to compare them with except “the scar on the soul borne by anyone who has ever lain in prison” (Crnjanski, *Migrations*).