Gabi DELEON

BORN THREE TIMES

Gavrilo-Gabi Deleon was born in Belgrade in 1927 to father Leon and mother Loti, née Kajon. He had two elder brothers, Ašer-Bata, who lives between Paris and Belgrade, and Elijas-Eli who died recently. He graduated in mineralogy in 1951 from the Belgrade University Faculty of Natural Sciences and earned a doctorate from the same university's Faculty of Mining and Geology. Until 1971 he worked mainly for the Institute for Raw Nuclear Material Technology in Belgrade. Since then he has lived and worked in Sydney, Australia, in various industrial and academic institutions in the field of applied mineralogy.

For a number of years he was a member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia and in this capacity in 1958 he attended the congress of the World Union of Jewish Students in Jerusalem, the first Yugoslav representative to do so.

He is married to Ana, née Vajs, of Subotica, a technology engineer. He has a daughter, Rut, and a son, Ivan.

In the old Serbia and Yugoslavia there was only one Deleon family, that of my grandfather, Ašer Deleon, a Belgrade merchant who died immediately after the first world war. There is no record of any earlier history of the family. My father, Leon, had a brother Gavrilo for whom I was named. He was one of the first doctors of law in Serbia. He also

had a sister, Matilda. They all grew up and lived in Belgrade. My father was known in Belgrade business circles as a representative of the Slovenian and Austrian steel, wood and timber industries. Gavrilo died of tuberculosis during the first world war while Matilda disappeared during the Holocaust as an inmate of the Jewish camp at Sajmište.

My mother Loti, née Kajon, came from one of the many well-known Kajon families in Sarajevo. My father and mother met in 1913 during a tour of Belgrade's Serbian-Jewish choral association in that town.

Until the war began in 1941, my brothers and I attended school in Belgrade. Ašer was a student at the Belgrade University Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry. Eli was a secondary school graduate and I was finishing the third year of secondary school. Our family didn't lead a particularly strict Jewish religious life. Jewish traditions and the most important festivals were respected to some extent, but we were very actively involved in the activities of the Jewish community in Belgrade. My father held office several times in the Jewish Community. He was president of the Potpora humanitarian association and a member of the B'nai Brith lodge. My mother was an active member of the Jewish Women's Association before and after the second world war. At the time of her death she was deputy president. Because of all this, in the years preceding the war, many refugees passed through our house, mainly people from Austria and Czechoslovakia who were in transit through Yugoslavia and whom the Jewish community wanted to help. So anti-Semitic pogroms in Germany and other European countries with pro-Fascist regimes were a frequent topic of conversation in our house. It is interesting that contact with the broader community of Serbia and Yugoslavia was nurtured in our house, particularly on my father's side of the family, based on the romanticist patriotism and traditions of the Serbian people. For example, one detail which has remained in my memory: when I was twelve years old, under the influence of my friends, I mentioned the possibility of joining Hashomer Hatzair. My father was against this, saying it was more important for me to remain in Sokol, which I had been a member of for a number of years.

The war interrupted this comfortable life and even safer childhood.

During the April bombing of Belgrade, the family was together. After the first morning attack we fled the city centre, in which we lived. In search of safer parts of the city we passed suburbs then quite unknown to me, Voždovac and Kumodraž, and the area now known as

Šumice. It was then I experienced my first surprise and disappointment of the war, one which has followed me all my life. I came across rural people, in the midst of panic and confusion, selling drinking water from wells to refugees fleeing a city in flames. As a child I couldn't understand this. In two days, my father, my mother and I, as the youngest, were on a train for Sarajevo where my mother's extended family lived. People were counting on resistance to the aggressors to be mounted somewhere closer to the country's borders. At the same time my brothers, although they had not been conscripted, were heading south in search of an army unit they could join.

We arrived in Sarajevo a day or two before the city was bombed. The first German troops came in after this and the capitulation of Yugoslavia followed immediately. Because they hadn't managed to find a unit willing to enlist them, my brothers also turned up in Sarajevo during this time.

Within weeks of the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, a series of drastic racist regulations and decrees were proclaimed. Many limitations were imposed on Jews, together with various personal humiliations in the form of yellow armbands, confiscation of property, a ban on conducting independent businesses, a ban on education, individual harassment and the desecration of synagogues and monuments. In contrast to the Independent State of Croatia, the Italian occupied zone seemed safer for Jews. At the end of May, Father went to Ljubljana to employ connections of his in order to move us there. From there he returned to Belgrade in an attempt to move his sister Matilda, a bedridden rheumatic, to Slovenia. However, while there he fell into the hands of the Germans who took him, along with hundreds of other Jewish hostages from Belgrade and Banat, to the Topovske Šupe camp. I no longer remember how, but he managed from there to get a short written message to us in Sarajevo. It ended "Pray for us." It is obvious that if he did not know with certainty the fate that awaited them, he at least sensed it. The testimonies of a handful of inmates who survived, and the existing historical documents, confirm the liquidation of this group of hostages.

At the same time my father went to Slovenia, my brothers left Sarajevo for Boka Kotorska, which was in the Italian occupation zone. For a full year we had no news of them at all.

Alone in Sarajevo, in the circle of our extended family, my mother and I tried to live some kind of normal life. Despite the anti-Jewish regu-

lations and constant harassment, there were no harsher reprisals and pogroms until the end of the summer.

At the beginning of September, 1941, about four hundred Jews, men, women and children, were unexpectedly interned. This coincided with the arrival of a notorious Ustaša official – Francetić, as far as I remember – accompanied by senior SS officers. We didn't know whether the internment was in retaliation for the first armed Partisan operations which were happening near the city at that time. By coincidence I happened to be spending the night with relatives in Marin-Dvor when a sudden raid was carried out, as it was in other parts of the town. We were all taken to what was then known as the Kralj Aleksandar barracks and put in warehouses there. At this point no one had any idea why we had been interned or what our fate was to be. On the fourth day we were all lined up so that Ustaša officials and German officers could walk between our lines. There was a young woman among them. As she passed my cousin and saw her with her husband and her children (seven and three years old), she stopped and said "Lori, why are you here too, and with the children?" It emerged that this was a woman from Sarajevo (I no longer remember her name) who had once been an intimate friend of her brother who had fled to Dalmatia and was now a companion of the Ustaša official. At her insistence, they separated my cousins and me from the others. Later, after quite a lot of persuasion, they let us go home. A few days later they allowed other women and under-age children to return home but sent all the men over sixteen to concentration camps in Croatia, from which no one returned. A few months later all the remaining Jews in Bosnia-Hercegovina, women and children included, were shipped to various concentration camps in the Independent State of Croatia, mainly Đakovo and Jasenovac, where they were killed. This is why I see this release from the Ustaša-German prison as my rebirth.

The following weeks passed with vigorously seeking a way to flee Sarajevo for any part of the Italian occupation zone. At the end of November, with some luck and courage, my mother managed to purchase false identification papers in fictitious Muslim names as well as travel passes and bus tickets for Split. We managed to get to the border of the Independent State of Croatia without serious problems. However in Metković, where we were crossing over into the Italian occupation zone, the Croatian border guards were suspicious about our documents and took us in at the border station. They insisted we tell them what the

origin of the documents was. For some time we refused to admit to anything, but the pressure became ever stronger and more cruel. It was alternating swearing and blackmail, with agents taking turns: the shouting and threats became stronger and our weeping all the louder. In the middle of this nightmare a young Italian lieutenant suddenly appeared on the first floor of the building asking what was happening and why a woman and a child were crying. When it was explained to him that the people in question were in possession of false documents, and that they were believed to be Jewish fugitives from Sarajevo, the young lieutenant ordered that we be brought immediately to his office on the floor above. There, with no Croatian police present, he explained to us that the situation was clear to him and that he would try to help us. He told us that he was the military commandant of the place, that the Croatian civil administration and the Italian military command were located in the same building and that, from that point on, we were under his protection. And so I was born for the third time.

That evening we were accommodated somewhere in the town, under guard, and the following morning we were taken by bus to a prison in Split. Through a combination of circumstances the prison was crowded with young patriots and Partisan sympathisers charged with the assassination a day or two earlier of an Italian army band which was passing through the town. (We learnt much later that several of them were executed for this). With the help of bribes we managed to send information on our whereabouts to our cousins in Split, together with a plea for them to do something. Everything which happened from there on was out of our hands. On our fourth day in prison, Mother and I were suddenly released and taken to the office of the Jewish-Italian organisation DELASEM. From there, together with a large group of Jewish refugees from all over Yugoslavia who had taken refuge in Dalmatia, we were taken under army escort aboard a boat which sailed for an unknown destination the same evening. The faces on board this ship were unfamiliar. I remember only my close friend Hari Štajner from Belgrade, and his mother, who had somehow reached Split. The next day we were in Sušak, from where we were taken by train to the town of Citadella, close to Vicenza in northern Italy. There we were divided into smaller groups of what they described as civilian war internees and these groups were scattered in villages and small localities in northern Italy. We were with another three people from Belgrade: a young couple named Nahmijas and an elderly gentleman whose name I don't

remember. We were taken to a small village called Rosa in the province of Vicenza, where we spent the next few months with only minor police supervision. I still remember our reception at the railway station of this tiny village: the commandant of the local *carabinieri* station with two assistants, the parish priest and sexton welcoming five civilian internees – a young couple, an old man who had great difficulty moving around and a mother with an underage son. As they took us from the station to the little village down a road about two kilometres long, from the pitch black, with only the outline of an unusually tall church steeple, the piercing and melodic voice of a child, an unforgettable sound, suddenly echoed the then popular Italian song "*Mamma, son tanto felice.*"(Mama, I'm so happy.) Was there something symbolic in this? It wasn't clear to anyone in the group, not to us who had just arrived nor to those who had welcomed us, where we had arrived or why. Nor was it clear who these people were who were suddenly introducing changes to the routine daily life of this tiny village. Jews were more familiar to the locals from New Testament quotations than as human beings. Before this, probably none of them had had the opportunity to meet a single one of us. We were accommodated in a church building and monitored every day by the *carabinieri*. We were not allowed to do any work nor have any contact with the locals and I was not allowed to go to school. We were only allowed written contacts. At first this was adhered to strictly, but gradually it loosened and was forgotten. I remember feeling lonely as I watched, from the distance, the village children playing football in the church yard while I was not allowed to join them. Despite the ban, some people wanted to make things easier for us during the unusually harsh winter of 1942 and had the tacit approval of the village police commander for this. This applied particularly to the family of the local café owner, Baggio, who cordially welcomed us into her home to warm ourselves up. Acts such as this which, at first, may seem insignificant, over the difficult and dangerous years, instilled in me great faith in human kindness.

Through my father's Slovenian business friends in Ljubljana and their Italian connections, we managed to learn that my brothers were interned in the concentration camp in Ferramonti, in southern Italy. This was an admirable act on their part, not just as a demonstration of friendship but particularly as an act of civil courage. Our friends from Ljubljana, Slave Simončič and his wife Vera, who was of Czech origin, would visit us from time to time and give us the money Father had left

behind in Ljubljana. At the same time they contacted their Italian business friend and extreme anti-Fascist Acchile Ceccarelli from the little town of San Benedetto del Tronto on the Italian Adriatic coast. He took it on himself to have my two brothers released from camp and their status changed to that of civilian internees. Thanks to the legal regulations on reuniting the families of war internees, he succeeded through personal intervention in the ministries concerned in getting them out of the camp and reunited with my mother. And so, sometime in the summer or autumn of 1942, mother and three sons found themselves back together in one place in northern Italy. This humanitarianism of Acchile Ceccarelli, a man who had never met my father and whom our family had not met before our arrival in Italy, is worthy of recognition. We never discovered, not even later, whether and to what degree there was risk involved in his efforts to secure the release of my brothers from the camp. To do this he had to travel to Rome a number of times to personally ensure that the request was positively resolved. In addition, when they were released from the camp, he took advantage of their journey from the far south to the north of Italy, where we were interned, to first take them into his home and feed and dress them decently so they would be looking better when they met Mother. It sounds incredible, but it is true, that all of this was done spontaneously, without the least personal gain for him.

For me personally, the reunion with my elder brothers was extremely important. In their camp, on the initiative of the internees themselves, there had been some kind of educational classes organised for children of school age. Now they shared this experience by passing it on to me and, later, to a broad circle of child internees in the place we lived. My elder brother Ašer taught us literature, French and history, and my middle brother Eli, mathematics, physics, chemistry and geography. The knowledge I acquired in this period made it much easier for me to fit into the normal school program immediately after the war, in both Italy and Yugoslavia.

At the end of 1942, we moved to the nearby village of Sandrigo, in the same province, Vicenza, where we joined a rather bigger group of civilian internees from Yugoslavia. I remember the family of the Belgrade merchant Maclijah, who had a son and two daughters, and the two Mandil sisters with a small child. There were also another two families, one from Belgrade and the other from Kranj, whose names I don't remember. At this time there was increased tension for Jewish and other

internees in Italy because the fortunes of war had begun to change to the advantage of the anti-Fascist coalition. This became particularly obvious in the period following the fall of the Mussolini government in July, 1943, and the final capitulation of Italy in September the same year. I remember the long and largely unrealistic debates during those months on whether there should be an attempt to flee to Spain, which was, officially at least, neutral. In our family we decided that we had a better chance of a speedy return to our home country if we were closer to it and rejected the idea. We were deeply attached to our country and, by this time, there was quite a lot of information on the resistance against the occupying forces. Both my brothers wanted to join the liberation movement as soon as possible, particularly Ašer who, even before the war, at Belgrade University, had been in close contact with the leftist student movement. But even more than this, we had heard nothing about Father so we wanted to find him and clung to the hope that we would find him alive in Belgrade. We spent the months leading up to the capitulation of Italy expecting major changes every day.

On the day of the capitulation the majority of us internees in Sandrigo decided that we should leave the place. At that time, the Allied forces were already penetrating deeply from the south of Italy and the Germans from the north, trying to replace the Italian troops which were falling apart. Because of this it was decided that we would be safer trying to cross the front than going over the Alps into Switzerland. The president of the village municipality issued us with identification papers as Italian refugees from the north.

Those days were the beginning of the country's total collapse. The Italian Army was falling apart, its members just wanting to get to their homes as soon as possible. The Germany Army was occupying more and more cities. We thirteen former inmates took a train for Rome with no idea how far we would get, and found ourselves between the advancing Allied troops and the occupying German Army. Through a combination of circumstances the train arrived at the main railway station in Rome at night, during a curfew, at the exact same time as the German armoured forces arrived, occupying the city. In Sandrigo, Italian friends had given someone from the group the address of their cousin to whom we could turn for help in finding temporary accommodation. Because the railway station was packed and we were exhausted from the long journey, my brothers and I crept into a wagon on a side track and fell asleep. We suddenly awoke to find we were moving. It was dawn

already and we were in a train which was leaving the station. My brothers somehow jumped from the train, but the other passengers held me back at the door, fearing I would kill myself. I was on a train travelling in an unknown direction, with no personal documents and no train ticket. I learnt from the passengers that we were travelling eastward, toward Avezzano. I kept telling them the story I had learnt by heart, that I was a refugee from the north who had come with my family to Rome, and that I had to join them. The station master was waiting for me at the first stop with the information that my family was waiting for me at the station in Rome, and made it possible for me to return without a ticket.

At first glance I saw no one from our group on the platform at the Rome railway station. Then I suddenly noticed my brothers, who were pretending not to know me. It was clear to me that everyone else had scattered, in case I had been caught as a fugitive internee and followed by the police or the Germans in order to get to the rest of the group. After passing through the station in several directions and making sure that no one was following me, by brothers came up to me and took me to the northern outskirts of the city where part of our group had accommodation. For the first few days we lived in complete isolation, doing our best to remain unnoticed. We did not go out at all. Eventually, as the youngest of the group, I was given the role of courier and supplier for several families scattered around the city. I very quickly got to know the city really well, and thus was easily able to deliver supplies. We all believed that this was a temporary situation and that the Allied troops would soon manage to get through to Rome. However the reality turned out to be very different. Almost nine months would have to pass before they arrived. Naturally this extended sojourn in the city called for a different way of solving problems. First it was necessary to obtain authentic identification papers. At that time these were not difficult to obtain, because these documents were issued on the basis of statements from two witnesses. And these were easy to find, for cash, in any institution. So right up to the liberation of the city, we had a new surname – Deluca. We also found new accommodation.

We had many difficult episodes in Rome. During the raids on Jews in the autumn of 1943, we sheltered in the basement of the building we lived in. I don't know how much use this would have been if our neighbours, who had some idea about us, had been inclined to denounce us. We also went out into the streets with the neighbouring residents during the frequent short daytime or night bombing of the city. We were parti-

cularly insecure whenever my elder brother Ašer was absent, taking part in Partisan operations out of town.

However, in spite of the difficulties and dangers, our months in this city had the result of alleviating tension and ignoring the dangers which lurked on all sides. For most of us, Rome was a special experience. Even under occupation, the city could offer certain pleasant moments. I particularly remember the extraordinary but infrequent performances at the Rome Opera, which we attended, despite the risk involved. After two years spent in villages in northern Italy, these were special experiences.

I was still in Rome for the liberation from Fascism at the beginning of June, 1944, when the British and American troops entered the city. We thought we were just one step away from the end of the war and our return home. However it would be another year before this happened. My brothers immediately joined the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia while I was in Bari and Brindisi in southern Italy with my mother until the end of the war. At the end of May, 1945, we came to Belgrade, by way of Split and Zadar. There we faced the reality that Father had disappeared in the Topovske Šupe camp, he was probably executed in Jajinci, and his sister and part of his extended family from Belgrade had disappeared in the Sajmište camp. More than half of my mother's large family from Sarajevo perished in the Holocaust.

My most impressive memory from the period just after our return is that of my mother's encounter with a stranger, a clerk in an institution. When he heard her last name and learnt about my father's fate, he approached her and said: "Madam, I used to have contacts with your husband. I want to tell you that we have all lost in him an extremely honest man." Never before or after in my life have I felt so proud.