
Bonka DAVIČO

FASTER THAN DEATH



Buena-Bonka Davičo, née Demajo, was born in Sarajevo on June 16, 1920, to Moric and Estera, née Papo. The family moved to Belgrade in 1928. She attended the Kralj Petar primary school and the Kraljica Marija secondary school in Belgrade. Before the second world she married lawyer Jaša Davičo. She went through the war saga with her whole family, from Dubrovnik and Montenegro, through Italy, Spain and Portugal to London. Her daughter, Svetlana, was born in Madrid.

Bonka Davičo had a long career as an announcer on Radio Belgrade, after beginning at the New Yugoslavia radio station in London in 1944. She was an active participant in the work of the Jewish Community in Belgrade and its Women's Section.

She died in Belgrade at the beginning of 2003, and is survived by her daughter, Svetlana, one granddaughter and two great-grandchildren.

It was March 27, 1941. We were all celebrating and cheering "Better war than the Pact!" But the next day, March 28, my father left for Zagreb. People there were already expecting Germany to attack Yugoslavia.

Father returned on March 29 and told us "You have to leave Belgrade immediately." I had just married Jaša Davičo. He had been mobilised and was stationed in Stracin, on the Bulgarian border.

I was married on December 1, 1940. People were already afraid that there would be war, but I didn't believe it. Everything was wonderful for me, I was happy. My husband, Jaša Davičo, worked for the Pančevo glass factory as a lawyer. I lived in Belgrade with my father, my mother and my brother, who was three years younger than me. Father would travel to Zagreb on business because he worked for the Riunione insurance company whose head office was there. When he returned on March 29 he said "Listen, I don't think this is good: you should get going and flee Belgrade. I can't." He was a captain in the reserves and had to stay in the city.

So, on March 30, my mother, my brother and I left for Dubrovnik by train. We arrived there the following day. It was very cold, almost unbelievably cold for Dubrovnik. On April 6, we heard on the radio that Belgrade had been bombed. This was horrifying for me because I had left the city thinking that I'd be coming back in ten, fifteen, twenty days' time. Because of this I had only brought a small suitcase and by some miracle – perhaps I had some kind of presentiment – I had also taken three photograph albums and very few clothes. We waited and worried about what would happen to my father. In my eyes my father was a great hero. During World War One he had crossed into Albania, where many soldiers and children had lost their lives. In April 1941 he was captured in Sarajevo. He managed to escape while they were escorting prisoners. This happened in the Muslim part of the city. He knew a Muslim, a friend of his sister who lived in Sarajevo. He hid in his yard and so managed to save himself from falling into German captivity. The Muslim helped him a great deal. He managed to get him a pass for Dubrovnik. He arrived there dressed as a Turk, with a tarboosh on his head and found us.

NO PEACE ANYWHERE

We lived peacefully in Dubrovnik for a short time, in hiding with another two or three Jewish families who had also fled there. When we heard that Croatia would become independent, my father said we must move again. And so, hurriedly, we packed and left for Mon-

tenegro by taxi. There I saw Germans for the first time, the first and only time: they were coming down from the hills into Dubrovnik. That was also when I saw the Ustashas.

We set off from Dubrovnik, where they were welcoming the Germans warmly. We set off by taxi for Petrovac-na-moru, but after about twenty kilometres or so the taxi driver refused to go any further so we completed the journey to Petrovac on foot. This was a very difficult, exhausting walk over many hills and through woods. When we arrived we found accommodation in a hotel whose name I don't remember. In Petrovac we found another two or three families, including Dr Čelebonović with his son, Aleks, and Mirko Demajo with his wife.

My husband arrived from Belgrade at the end of June. Marko Nikežić lived with his whole family in Bar and we asked his father to bring my Jaša to Petrovac. Before that he had been living in Belgrade, wearing the yellow armband and clearing rubble as part of a forced labour gang. We all stayed at the hotel in Petrovac until the uprising began in Montenegro.

The first land conquered by the Italians in Montenegro was Mala Plaža, the small beach in Petrovac. We were all captured there, taken to a hotel and locked up. These were the *camice nere*, the Black Shirts. Here for the first and only time I saw my father's distant cousin, Aleksandar "Saša" Demajo, a lawyer from Belgrade, the father of Moric Demajo. He was wearing traditional Montenegrin costume with a Montenegrin cap. He was standing next to the hotel. I heard then that they arrested him on the very spot we were standing. Later we heard that he had been shot in Cetinje.

Before that, as soon as the Italian Fascists walked into Petrovac, the *camice nere* lined all of us up in the house against a wall. There were about ten of us, together with the hotel owner, Sava Petrović, and they told us they would shoot us. A number of the Black Shirts went to set fire to the village, and we waited to be shot. We could hardly wait for them to open fire and put an end to our suffering. But the Black Shirts came back and said "We couldn't kill anyone over there, there are too many women and children. Leave these ones alone, too. Lock them up and we'll see what we should do with them."

FLEEING THE EVIL, HELPED BY THE GOOD

We spent ten days in the hotel before they took us, in chains, to a prison in Bar. I was interned in the women's prison in Bar for four months. In fact this prison was in the secondary school building. There I shared my suffering with Montenegrin women who were so brave that their company somehow managed to distract me from our grave fate. We were there when, four months later, they moved a group of Jews to the island of Korčula. We also spent about four months on Korčula. In the beginning we had to report to the *Questura* every day. Later the women were not required to do so and only the men had to report.

The Pelješac Peninsula is just across from Korčula, only two kilometres away. This was already the Independent State of Croatia. The Ustashas often came to Korčula by boat. This caused my father a great deal of concern. He always looked ahead so he decided to find a way for us to cross over to Italy. Marinka Arneri, a Korčula local, and her father, a great Yugoslav lawyer, helped us. He somehow managed to obtain documents for one group to go into Italy into *confino libero*. We got permits to go to Bolgo Valditaro, in the province of Parma, a village in the hills where we lived for about six or seven months. I have to say that the Italians really welcomed us, they were wonderful. I even think we may have been the first Jews they had seen. They didn't know who we were or why they had brought us there. I was pregnant. They knew this and every day in front of the door of our little room I'd find eggs, vegetables, cheese, a small chicken, so that I would have something to eat. I certainly couldn't say that we were starving, but things weren't easy for us. Six months after we arrived, people began expecting Mussolini to fall. And so again my father decided that we should somehow cross the border and go somewhere else, to England, anywhere as long as we didn't stay in Italy. A Jewish lawyer who lived in Parma, Otto Lenghi, helped us. Through him we again managed to obtain *lasciapassare*, travel permits, for Rome. We stayed in Rome for two months, in hiding because the Germans were still there. After two months, with the help of Catholic Jesuit priests who were helping anyone who was being persecuted, even Jewish refugees, we managed to prepare for departure. We again managed to obtain documents and set off for Spain. General Franco was in power at the

time. Things weren't easy for us there either because we didn't feel free. I frequently saw German soldiers in the streets, mainly passing in cars. General Franco was in an alliance with the Third Reich, although he did not take part in the war.

MADRID, LONDON, BELGRADE

We lived in Madrid for four months and I gave birth to my daughter Svetlana there. With the help of the then Yugoslav Embassy and charge d'affaires Ljubiša Višacki we moved to Lisbon where we waited for a month to get documents for London. The Hajas organization helped us. We arrived in London by plane on April 1, 1943.

In London the procedure of questioning and accepting refugees usually took nine days. For women this waiting period was pleasant because they were accommodated in a beautiful castle. Of course we also had guards there and couldn't go anywhere. Things were much worse for the men, who were in a real prison. However my husband and I were released from confinement the same day we arrived in the Royal Patriotic School procedure. After this we lived in Harpenden, a small place outside London. *Politika* journalist Miša Sudžić, who stayed with his family in London throughout the war, helped us to settle in. They were already living in a small house and we also moved in there. Soon after this, General Vladimir Velebit came to London to set up and manage the new Yugoslav diplomatic office. As far as I know he was entrusted with this office by Josip "Tito" Broz. When I met him he asked me if I wanted to work, and I gladly accepted. He told me "There are two possibilities here: one is to work in the Red Cross, and we also have a radio station here which produces news from London for our citizens every second day, it's called Free Yugoslavia." I chose the second option. The director of the radio station was Krista Đorđević. I worked there as an announcer until the end of the war. After the war ended I wanted us to return to Yugoslavia as soon as possible. My husband went there a year earlier by plane and landed by parachute somewhere near Valjevo. There he took part in the fighting. Later he was badly wounded in a place called Sesvete, near Zagreb. He was treated in Zagreb, in the Rebro Hospital. He barely survived. He was one of the first to walk into liberated Belgrade. I waited for quite a while longer to leave London for Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, that day final-

ly arrived and we boarded a ship in Southampton and set off for Bar and from there to Split, also by boat. I arrived in Belgrade on November 15, 1945. My husband was waiting for me in the apartment in which I had lived before the war. During the war years, the apartment had been occupied by a woman, a Gestapo lawyer, who even left some of her things behind, but many of our belongings were missing. My husband, my daughter and I moved in.

As soon as I returned to Belgrade I got a job in Tanjug as an English language translator. Not long after that, applications were invited for an announcing job at Radio Belgrade. As I had done this work in London, I more or less knew the job and so I applied. I remember that once Vasiljević, the then director of Radio Belgrade, had listened to me doing a radio program during his visit to London and said to me "Please, when you return to Belgrade, come to Radio Belgrade."

I began working for Radio Belgrade in September, 1948, and was an announcer there for exactly 31 years, until I retired in 1980.