

Leon DAVIČO

FROM BELGRADE TO CANADA AND BACK



Leon Davičo was born in Belgrade in 1926, the son of Samuilo and Luiza Davičo, née Flores. He began his education at the Kralj Petar Primary School and the State Comprehensive School in Belgrade. He completed his university studies in Montreal, Canada. After postgraduate study in Paris, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Britain's Durham University at the beginning of the 1990s.

His brother, Edi, was executed in 1941. His father died in 1958 and his mother in 1984. He married his Berlin-born wife

Gaby 44 years ago and they had two sons: Slobodan-Bobby and Saša.

He was for many years a correspondent for Politika in London, Paris, Berlin, Istanbul and Rome; he was founder of Politika Ekspres and spent twenty years in the United Nations as director and spokesman for UNICEF, UNESCO and the UNHCR. He is president of the Association of Foreign Journalists in Switzerland and the Swiss Press Club in Geneva.

I was fifteen years old when the Stukas destroyed thousands of lives and cut short many an infancy and adolescence. I had the ideas of a fifth form student at the Belgrade Comprehensive School, a wonderful family and a good life. I wasn't conscious of either what had

happened or what was to follow. I was a member of SKOJ, the Communist youth organisation, and was caught by the first bombs exploding in Hadži-Prodanova Street where, as a good boy scout, I was delivering mobilisation notices. I took shelter in the cellar at my close friend and schoolmate Milivoje Popović's place, and returned home to Uzun-Mirkova Street at about noon. Twenty-four hours later, Joca Almuli, in his officer's uniform, visited us in the shelter at the Stock Exchange and advised us to leave Belgrade as soon as possible. We followed his advice and, travelling by train or bus, arrived in Valjevo the next day. There we called on Dr Isak Eškenazi who was head of a local hospital. He gave us the same advice: get as far away from Belgrade as possible.

In Valjevo, my nineteen-year-old brother Edi reported to the local military authorities, was given a uniform and left with his unit. We met him again in Belgrade ten days later. As for us, my father and mother and I, together with my Uncle Hajnrih, an old defender of Belgrade, continued on our way towards Sarajevo. We stopped along the way several times because of the danger of aerial attacks. At one point we had to jump from the bus into the forest, from which the Chetniks, hidden behind the dense growth, were shooting high in the air, presumably in the hope of bringing down a German plane. One aircraft was hit but, unfortunately it was not German but ours! We slept at Vlasenica with a very hospitable Muslim host and, after a number of unexpected turns, arrived safe in Sarajevo where we discovered in the very first hotel that German troops were about to enter the city. After a sleepless night we went to the railway station and boarded the train for Belgrade. There were no seats available and we had to stand all the way.

When we returned to our apartment, my mother began to weep. Two rooms had been taken over by German officers and the others had been stripped. The Wehrmacht had done their job well, leaving only the piano where it stood. We lived on the fourth floor and the lift was only big enough for a violin. The only happy moment was when Edi arrived. His unit had surrendered and been taken captive. If only he had gone with them!

Edi was immediately sent to forced labour at Smederevo, my father was arrested together with his brother Josif, and I was assigned to forced labour in the German veterinary regiment command, in the Royal Guard building. My father and Josif were detained after being

denounced by the janitor, Mornau, at 45 King Petar Street, where my father had an office. He was accused of having financed the March 27 coup, which was of course preposterous. He was released two months later. At the end of June we were at Tašmajdan, where the notorious Egon¹ presided over a meeting where about a hundred Jews were arrested and executed in retaliation after some German military trucks were set on fire.

It's of interest to note that about fifty years later I was invited to Graz and faced this same Egon who was finally to be brought to justice. What a miserable wretch! "I was only a dentist and in Belgrade I was an interpreter for the officer in charge of the Jews," he whined. Justice had eventually caught up with him, but painlessly: he died a natural death a few weeks later.

In any case Tašmajdan was the signal for us to run for our lives. Edi decided to join the Kosmaj detachment together with a group of Jewish Communists including Bora Baruh, an outstanding painter, and Maki Štern (Dr Maksim Štern), one of the few Jewish survivors from this detachment. Edi, who was a member of the SKOJ City Committee in Belgrade, joined the Partisans on August 2, 1941. My father, my mother, my school friend Žak Semo and I travelled to Split seven days later with forged papers. We saw Edi for the last time two days before his departure. Edi embraced them, saying "Listen, we have a total of 140 years between us and we've lived happily together for many years. Now we have to face hard times. For three or four years we won't be happy. After that we'll all be happy together again."

During a skirmish at Venčane in September, 1941, Edi, operating a machine-gun despite his severe nearsightedness, was wounded in the head and taken prisoner. He was tortured in Banjica, but did not betray anyone, and in the early days of October was executed at Jajinci. His happy life ended in his nineteenth year. Subconsciously he was ready for it, because he was always in a hurry to learn something new. He read a great deal, learned to speak perfect German, French and English; he was a born writer, a wonderful friend and brother. If, after the war ended, I returned to Belgrade, I did it, consciously or

¹ It was established many years later, in 1990, that the surname of this "Commissar for Jews" was Sabukoschek. The retaliation followed an attack by Elija-Guta Almoslino on a German soldier riding a motorbike.

subconsciously, to honour the memory of my brother. May he rest in eternal peace.

Documents for my father, my mother and myself were made out in the names of Emilio, Luisa and Leonardo Davini, born in Split. They cost my father a packet. I have never seen so many counterfeit stamps on an identity document. Signor Siciliani, who sold us these papers, obviously had good connections. My nanny, Sister Anna, a German from Wuppertal, took our luggage to the railway station, put it into a compartment and waited for us to arrive and board the train. There wasn't much sleep to be had and, while we were in Zagreb, Žak and I went into the city but rushed back quarter of an hour later, horrified by the sight of the Ustasha hordes.

We arrived safely in Split and moved in with a family who had a son in the Partisans. We established contact with a local SKOJ group whose leader was a young man who later became Yugoslavia's ambassador in Helsinki. His name was Zlatko Sinobad. With my new comrades I joined demonstrations against the introduction of Italian language in schools in Split and was arrested. A few days later I was interned, along with my parents, at Borgotaro in the province of Parma. There were about twenty of us on the ship to Trieste and later in the train on the way to our internment. The men were manacled but the women and children were not. The Italians classified me as a child.



Leon Davičo during his school days

The year in Italy passed rather quickly. We would go to the municipal offices in this pretty town each morning and afternoon to report. The authorities treated us very correctly and the locals, who had never seen a live Jew before, gradually opened up to us. Although

contact with the locals was strictly banned, within a month we were going to somebody's apartment every night after curfew to listen to the broadcasts from London and Moscow and passing the news on to the other internees.

The only villain in Borgotaro was the secretary of the Fascist Party, Signor Molinari. Not long after we arrived he called us to his office to tell us that we were not permitted to fraternise with the Italians or to go outside the boundaries of the town. He threatened us with heavy penalties if he discovered that we had been listening to the radio or been out after curfew and so on. "If we catch someone contravening these rules," he said, pointing his finger ominously at a litre bottle on his desk, "the penalty is this castor oil, which you will drink until you are dead!"

Our consolation was to go and listen to the prohibited radio stations in the home of his first assistant, Frigieri, and in the fact that Signora Molinari, a licentious blonde, found the young Jewish boys rather attractive. This applied mostly to Daki, Buba and me. Daki was David Levi, now living in America, Buba was Demajo, Bonka's brother, and among the internees were Bonka and Jaša Davičo; Oskar and Ruta with their son Kolja (who were moved there from the Ferramonti camp); Dr Amar and his family; Dr Solomon Davidović, his wife and daughter; Dr Žarko Almuli; the composer Enriko Josif, who could walk all day humming or whistling Ravel's *Bolero*; my father, my mother and my Uncle Josif with his wife Cecilija. Moric Demajo was also there with his wife. In the beginning we were all together in the Appennino Hotel, but when families of Italian refugees from the Allied bombing began to arrive we were allowed to take private accommodation in the village.

In Borgotaro we made many friends with whom we have remained in contact to this day.

Thanks to his connections with the director of the French glass company St Gobain, my father managed to obtain a Canadian immigrant visa and a Spanish transit visa, so a year after the beginning of our internment we were able to leave Italy. In Rome we boarded a hydroplane with blacked-out windows and, after a rather unpleasant flight, we reached a country where the lights were not turned off every night and where, despite its Fascist regime, there was no curfew. The very first evening in the Marineda, our Madrid guest house, an ominous incident occurred. A stranger passed our table and said

Dobro veče, “Good evening” in Serbo-Croatian. We fell silent and retreated to our rooms. The next day, during breakfast, I made enquiries about who this spy might be. The waiter swore that there were no other Yugoslavs in the guest house and then our spy appeared at the door. Passing by our table, he again said *Dobro veče*. The waiter then explained that what we had heard was “*Que aproveche!*” – Spanish for “bon appetit”.



Edi Davičo, Leon's brother, killed in his nineteenth year in Jajince in 1941

In Madrid, after a scandalous beginning, I resumed my education at the French lycee. In order to pass the admission test I went to the lycee, sat at the desk and began drawing triangles, because the question given was “What is the classical height? Give examples.” For a whole hour I struggled to invent all the possible and impossible situations involving the height of a triangle or square until the examiner, passing my desk, stopped me.

“What are you doing on this paper,” he asked.

“I’m drawing triangles and marking the height...”

The examiner interrupted me with the logical explanation that this was a

test of the French language, not mathematics. The problem was that my grasp of French was very poor and I had confused the words *hauteur* (height) and *auteur* (author)

“We had better send you to the first grade instead of the second, so that you will have time to learn the French language,” said the cruel examiner as he conducted me to the door.

So I spent the next six months in the first grade, learning to distinguish between mathematics and French literature and acquiring

new friends and new experiences. At my first bullfight, when General Franco was in attendance, I refused to raise my arm in the Fascist salute. I was arrested but released after explaining that I had come from a country which was occupied by troops which used the same salute.

In May, 1944, my father, my mother, Albert Flajšman and his wife Ela Almuli, Moreno and Rea Talvi and I boarded the Portuguese ship Serpa Pinto at Porto, bound for Philadelphia. The ocean was calm and the voyage was very pleasant. At last we were on our own ground! From the clothes hangers in the cabin cupboards we learned that we were on board the former Yugoslav ship Princess Olga, which the Portuguese had somehow acquired and renamed Serpa Pinto.

Two days before we docked in Philadelphia, we had an encounter with the Germans, our first since we had escaped Belgrade. A German submarine stopped us. A score of bearded sailors in black uniforms climbed aboard and examined the passengers and their papers. Having established that all the passengers were of Allied nationalities and that, in addition, most of them had Jewish names, they decided to sink the ship. They gave us twenty minutes to take to the lifeboats. I was obviously not quite aware of the danger because I first went to my cabin to fetch the new suit I had bought in Madrid. But this suit saved our lives because we used it to stuff the hole in our lifeboat, which was damaged as it was lowered into the sea. My mother, who could not swim, had fallen into the sea and my father and I held her by the arms for hours, while a shark circled around her and the boat. Presumably these sharks, which were found there in large numbers, had selected juicier victims because, after nearly three hours, and with the help of the sailors from other boats, my mother was hauled aboard. Since that day she has never again suffered from sea-sickness. The whole incident had a happy ending. The submarine surfaced again and the captain of the Portuguese ship informed us over a loudspeaker that we could return to the ship because the submarine commander had received orders not to sink us. Back on board our ship there was a roll call and it was discovered that the ship's doctor, the cook and a Polish baby were missing, presumed taken by the sharks.

In Philadelphia and, later, in Montreal, we were targeted by journalists. This was the beginning of a four-year sojourn in Canada as immigrants. It was there that I began and completed my university

study (economy and political sciences) before returning to Yugoslavia in 1946. There my friend Vule Mićunović, invited me to a lunch at which the two of us were served an omelette made of thirty eggs. The following year I brought a Canadian student brigade to do voluntary work on the Šamac-Sarajevo railway line. I am still in contact with some of those volunteers. I finally returned to Belgrade to live in 1948, a few weeks after the Cominform Resolution.