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*Vilhelm-Vili VAJS<sup>1</sup>*

## SERBIAN NAMES – A TICKET FOR LIFE



*Vilhelm-Vili Vajs was born in Niš in 1925, to Rudolf and Luna, née Albahari. His father was an agronomist with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia Railways, in charge of arranging flowers and greenery at railway stations and along railway lines.*

*Before the war he attended schools in Čačak and Niš. After the liberation of the country he completed electrical engineering school in Zagreb.*

*He moved to Israel with his parents in 1948 and now lives in Haifa.*

Because of my father's work I finished primary school in Čačak. My teacher, Dragoljub Jevtić, didn't want me to be singled out by the other children in a class where I was the only Jew, so he called me Vilotije Belić. He translated my surname from German to Serbian so that I would be the same as the other children. Because I was very fidgety, my teacher declared me a *harambaša* a chief *hajduk* or brigand. and, again so that I would be no different from the other children, told me I should celebrate St George's Day as in the epic poem *Đurđev danak, hajdučki sastank* (The brigands gather on St George's Day). So from that time to this day I, Vilhelm-Vili Vajs, the little *harambaša* Vilotije Belić, celebrate St George's Day.

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<sup>1</sup> Vili Vajs' testimony was recorded by Jasna Ćirić.

In the 1940-41 school year I enrolled in the first grade of junior technical secondary school in Niš, but was expelled the same year because of the *Numerus Clausus*, the limit on enrolment of Jewish students in schools and universities. After that I enrolled in the Ninth Boys' Secondary School in Belgrade, just before the second world war began. During classes, history teacher Miodrag Milošević explained the political situation in the world and Hitler's intentions. He once told me "Listen, Vajs, you'd better know that Hitler's not joking with the things he's saying; he's going to kill you all!"



*Vili Vajs with journalists in the offices of the Niš Narodne Novine during his visit to Niš in 1995*

And then, on April 6, 1941, the war and the German occupation began. I returned to Niš. The hunting down and mass persecution of Jews began soon afterwards. They began implementing the plan for "the final solution for the Jewish question". We had to wear the Star of David on yellow armbands and on our back and chest. This was the beginning of hell for my family which, up to then, had lived a peaceful and untroubled life.

The Germans summoned all Jewish men over the age of fourteen to work at the barracks near the Pantaleja Church in Niš. We also had to attend roll calls at the Park Cinema. In the beginning we worked all day long and went home in the evening, we even received salaries for the first two weeks. And then the Germans no longer allowed us to go

home! Every day after the work was over they'd line us up, take every fifth man out of the line and kick and whip them. I remember they beat Nisim, a well-known Niš trader, until he collapsed, because they were annoyed by the expression on his face. They didn't know whether he was smiling ironically at them or his face was contorted with pain.



*Facsimile of two of a number of false documents: Vili Vajs' employment record and his mother's identification document, issued in 1941 and 1942 in Leskovac in other people's names*

One day at the Velosipedska Barracks in Crveni Krst, while we were loading cannons into wagons, it was my turn for a beating. I was beaten brutally. It was then that I decided to escape and no longer attend the roll calls. I hid in a wagon between two cannons and, when the train started and left the barracks, I jumped off and headed through the field towards my parents' house in the King Petar II Colony. Battered and bruised as I was, I managed to get to the Pantaleja cemetery. I hid there all night. In the morning, exhausted, I refreshed myself with food that had been left on the graves after memorial services.



*Vajs in Niš in 1995,  
sightseeing in the city*

I finally arrived home where my parents greeted me with great concern. And then came the order that we all had to have identity cards. I went, with five dinars in my pocket, to the Matejevačka tavern, where the son of the village chief was writing and issuing personal identity cards. So I got an identity card in the name of Dragoljub Radojičić (I used the name of a friend of mine from Čačak). My mother and father also got identity cards in this tavern in the names of Aleksandar and Marija Vojisov. According to the names in these false documents, I wasn't their son.

Then our flight from the Fascist terror began. The first stop was Leskovac. We registered at the Employment Office and applied for work, as Serbs, in Germany. We were placed with the family of the coppersmith, Cakić. Not long after that, my father and I left for Maribor and then I continued on by train towards Germany. Mother stayed behind in Leskovac. In the train, near Maribor, a girl recognised me and said "There's a Jew with us." We immediately jumped off the train and somehow managed to get to Maribor. Then we went to Graz in Austria where we got jobs as Dragoljub Radojičić, an electrical fitter, and Aleksandar Vojisov, a gardener. Shortly after that we called mother to come and work. She joined us in Graz and we were there until the war ended.