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*Ivan BRANDAJŠ*

PRISONER OF WAR NO. 6708  
(KGF 6708)



**I**van Brandajs was born on July 27, 1913, the son of Zemun lawyer Dr Lav Brandajs and Hana, née Binder.

When he returned from captivity to Zemun, he worked as a law clerk in his father's office. At the end of 1948, when his father moved to Israel with his wife, his brother Pavle, with his wife Nada and son Jovica, Ivan took a job at the Yugoslav League of Physical Education where he worked as secretary of the Rowing Association and, from 1952, as secretary of the Yugoslav Olympic Committee.

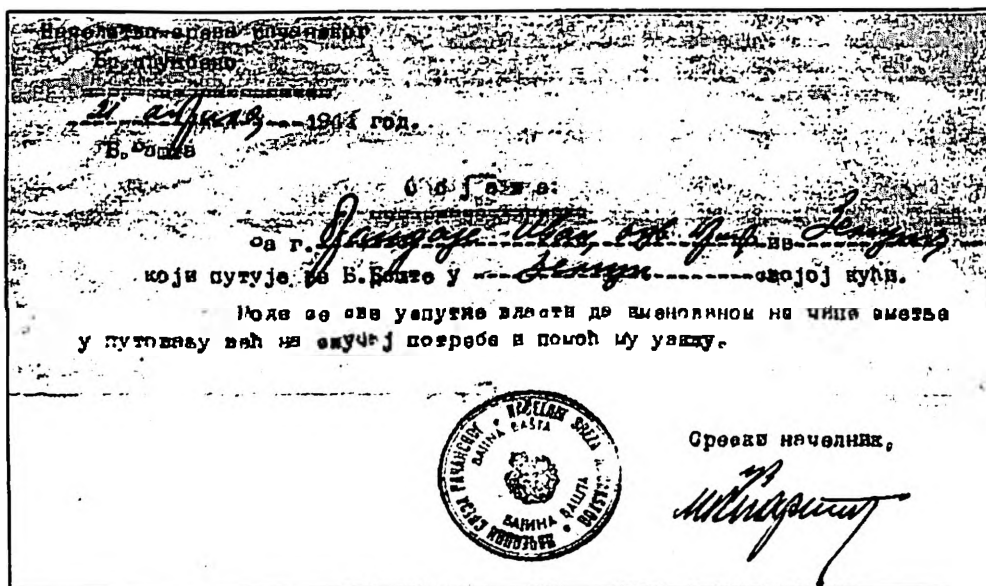
He then moved to the Yugoslav Foreign Trade Bank in 1957 and, after that, transferred to the Yugoslav Bank for International Economic Cooperation, where he worked until his retirement.

Before the war began in 1941 he had not been particularly active in the work of the Zemun Jewish Community. When, in 1948, Aleksandar Frank was elected president of the Community, a post earlier held by his father; Ivan Brandajs became vice-president and later was himself president of the Community. From 1952 he was a member of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia and remains active to this day as an honorary member.

Within days of March 27, 1941, it was obvious to everyone that Hitler would not calmly ignore the military coup which overturned the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's membership of the Tripartite Pact. The mobilisation of reserve troops began immediately. And so, on April 1, I too was summoned, as a reserve army officer Class IV (rank of second lieutenant) to report for duty at Suhoputna station in Ljubovija.

The station's task was to supply the army units which were crossing the Drina River from Serbia into Bosnia and back with the food needed for the men, for the draft animals (horses and oxen), vehicles, clothing and footwear and anything else that was needed.

When I arrived in Ljubovija there was only a station officer there, no warehouse for food, uniforms, footwear and other materials. Only the station commander, an elderly reserve captain, had arrived before me.



*Facsimile of travel documents allowing Ivan Brandajs to travel freely from Bajina Bašta to his native Zemun*

In order to have at least something to give to the army units coming our way, we received permission from the division command which, if I'm not mistaken, was in Valjevo, to take bread from the town bakeries and give them a receipt with the Suhoputna station stamp instead of money. We got food from the local stores.

We also had some unexpected problems in carrying out the tasks with which we had been entrusted. So within a few days a cavalry unit

arrived from the north, from Vojvodina. Because the spring ploughing season had begun in Vojvodina, the horses were taken straight from the fields, unshod. In return for receipts, we had to collect from the town, along with the stores, the number of horseshoes and nails needed and mobilise ten or so blacksmiths from the area to shoe the horses, so the unit could continue its journey the following day.

In the meantime the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had capitulated and had virtually lost the war already. So we headed towards Sarajevo, hoping that we would reach the sea and leave for Egypt, England, France or some other Allied country.

However we got only as far as Bajina Bašta, where we learned we couldn't go any further, so we had to return to our homes. We were given adequate notice for this from the head office of the Rača County, dated April 21, 1941.

Somehow we managed to get to Obrenovac and because the Germans were already there they put us in some building and the following day transferred us to Pančevo, via Belgrade, and put us in a barracks.

Two days later we were sent through Vršac to Timisoara and then by train to Hungary and on to Trier, in the area where the borders of France, Germany and Luxembourg meet. Here officers were separated from the non-commissioned soldiers and the other ranks. After a few days the officers were transferred again, this time from west to east and, after two days' ride, to the officer camp Oflag IV-D, in a place called Hoyerswerda.

We knew that we had arrived in Saxony, but we didn't know that we were in the Lausitz province. Various tradesmen came to the camp from nearby places every day. We and they were surprised to discover that we could communicate and understand one another so well and soon we realised that they were Lusatian Sorbs<sup>1</sup>. So, for example, when we asked them where they were from they would reply "*Tam prez horou je naša vaš,*" which we could understand as meaning "There, beyond the woods, is our village." The German guards had no idea what we were talking about.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sorbs are a relatively small west Slavic people, living as a minority in the region known as Lusatia in the German states of Saxony and Brandenburg (in former GDR territory). They are also known as Lusatians, Wends, Lusatian Serbs or Serbs of Luzice

We stayed in the camp for almost three months and were then transferred to the Hohenfels camp, where we remained only a short time. At the beginning of the winter we were transferred to Oflag VIII-B in Nuremberg which, before the war, had been used for accommodation for members of the Nationalist Socialist party when they came to attend Party assemblies.

There we met up with comrades who had been in other camps, so there were about two hundred of us Jewish officers there. They included the following members of the Zemun Jewish Community: Zlatko Band, Srećko Bihali, Oto Bihali-Merin, Ivan Binder, Ivan Brandajs, Fric Farhi, Bertold Hercl, Leopold Hercog, Leo Klopfer, Herman Kon, Teodor Rozenberg, Rihard Semnic, as well as brothers Dragutin and Oto Šilinger and Dr Albert Vajs, who had moved from Zemun to Belgrade earlier. In addition to the Jews, we also found a number of non-Jews from Zemun: Nikola Blažon, Ozren Karamata, Sava Šujica and Živko Vujnović.

This came in very handy in the second half of 1942 when almost the entire Jewish population of Zemun had been taken by the Ustashas to Jasenovac and Gradiška. It was only through our non-Jewish friends that we were able to obtain any information about the fate of our families.

In February 1942, the Germans ordered all Jews to wear yellow stars with the word *Jude* (Jew) on their uniform. This order was withdrawn after a short time, but we Jews were separated from the others and put into separate barracks. At the end of 1942 we were moved from Nuremberg to Oflag VI-C in Osnabruk.

There were another two hundred or so captured Jews there, bringing our total to about four hundred. At the demand of General Milan Nedić, more non-Jewish officers, suspected of being leftists, were separated and a special camp, Camp D, was set up with four barracks.

In the autumn of 1941, we began receiving special letter forms which we could use to contact our families. In this way I kept in touch with my parents until the summer of 1942, when I received a letter written by my father. The letter came from Karlovac, and the name of my school friend from the Zemun Secondary School, Đuro Bajer, who was director of a bank in Karlovac at the time, was on it as sender.

My correspondence with Đuro lasted until the end of 1944 and then stopped. When I returned home at the end of August, 1945, I found my parents in Zemun and learnt that, after the Zemun Jews

were taken to Jasenovac and Gradiška, the Catholic parish priest in Zemun, Monsignor Prohaska, gave my father the identification documents of a couple from Split. With these, my parents set off by train to Split, which was in the Italian occupation zone. When they reached Karlovac they learnt that traffic with Split was cut off because there were battles being fought on the part of the railway line going through Lika and northern Dalmatia.

As they stood on the railway line trying to find a solution, Đuro Bajer walked up to them. He knew them because until we finished school in 1941 he would often come to our apartment. He immediately found an apartment for them in Karlovac and got them new identification documents. They stayed in Karlovac until the end of 1944 and then returned to Zemun. During their time in Karlovac, Đuro helped them with everything.

When he learnt that the Ustashas were arresting Jews, my brother Pavle crossed over the balcony on the back of the building into the apartment of our neighbour, a naval officer called Draksler, who gave him a uniform, accompanied him to his official car and drove him to Belgrade, to his brother-in-law's apartment. He stayed there until he managed to get new documents from the Commissariat for Refugees. These described him as a refugee from Croatia. With the help of friends he managed to get to Mokra Gora, near Užice and was there when the war ended. My sister Hedviga managed to move in with a friend of hers, the daughter of an Orthodox priest in Veliki Bečkerek, where she remained until the liberation. Towards the end of 1941, we began receiving food parcels from our family and friends on the *Paketschein* system of a coupon for each parcel. We also received parcels from the International Red Cross and other donors.

For us the most valuable parcels were those from England containing cigarettes from Rothmans of Pall Mall, on which the donors were named as "Peter K. Djordjevic" or "Marija K. Djordjevic" (King Petar II and Queen Marija).

At that time in the German Reich, only soldiers on the front line received cigarettes, while civilians and soldiers in the rear, even guards in the camps, got them only on special occasions and in very small quantities. And so, with the help of just a small portion of the cigarettes we received, we managed to obtain parts for a radio receiver which our experts made (and which could be quickly assembled and taken apart) so that the captives in charge of gathering international

news could listen to broadcasts from Radio London, the Voice of America and others and put together a new bulletin which was distributed in all the camp barracks.



*A parcel coupon (paketschein), which entitled the inmates to receive food parcels*

We soon organised a cultural life in Camp D. The best experts held lectures in their own fields. The lectures of Dr Albert Vajs were particularly interesting.

Language classes were also organised. Rabbi Herman Helfgot held a course in Hebrew, Maks Vajs, Lav Zaharov and Ženka Kozinski gave Russian lessons. Oto Gros gave classes in English and Ivo Doran in Italian. People also learnt German, because correspondence with our families was allowed only in German.

A theatre was also set up, mainly organised by Milan Goldšmit Zlatarić. We got some musical instruments from the Red Cross so an orchestra was assembled, led by Rafajlo Blam and Minja Balog.

In August 1944, after the Allied forces had landed in France, we were transferred to the Strasbourg camp, into underground fortifications inside the Maginot Line. We stayed there for only about a month and were then taken east by train, because the Americans and the English were approaching from the west. After four days of travel we arrived in Oflag 65 at Barkenbrugge near Danzig.

We stayed there until January 1945, when the Red Army advanced through the east and from the south, through Poland. It was obvious the Reich was collapsing, so the Germans sent us back to the

west, to Stetin on foot and from there further west by train, to the Dutch border, to the Alexisdorf camp, one of the first concentration camps in Germany. When we arrived the camp had been empty for quite some time. We stayed there for about a month and a half and were then sent back east. In mid-April 1945, we arrived in the city of Nuremberg where we crossed the bridge to the east side. We weren't more than a kilometre past it when the Germans blew up the bridge, which we took as a sign that the English were on their way.

At that time the Germans didn't dare take us anywhere inhabited. The orders were for us to sleep in the woods. It was obvious to us that the Allied forces were close, so about a hundred of us continued on further from the direction the column was moving, at a right angle from our previous course. At dawn we saw German Army columns hurrying towards the north. We came across a few captured French soldiers who were working for German farmers. They gave us food and let us sleep in their barracks, while they prepared for their trip home because it was obvious that the road was not open for them.

The next day an English unit appeared so we too were freed and could move around in the area between Lenzburg and Hamburg.

We soon established contact with officers from the Yugoslav People's Army who arrived with the Russian Army to organise the return of our prisoners and internees to Yugoslavia. Because there was no possibility of travelling by train or car at the time, late May and June 1945, we had to wait for about a month until they had replaced the



*A caricature of Brandajs by a friend  
from captivity, 1941*

demolished bridges with pontoons and until enough returnees were assembled. Thus it was not until the end of July that we reached the Austria-Yugoslavia border. We arrived in Zagreb by train. In the Jewish Community there we were given information on who had contacted them so far to report having survived. My uncle, Ivan Binder, and I discovered that our families were in Zemun, while Herman Kon was told that his parents had perished in Jasenovac.

Not all our comrades returned to Yugoslavia. Those who learnt that their relatives had found salvation in other, non-Communist countries immediately went to join them, while others went to Palestine.

A group of about three hundred reserve officers who returned to the country made a strong contribution to the revival of Jewish life in the communities and in the Alliance of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. I shall name here only those who, as far as I remember, agreed to work in the Alliance and its institutions: David "Dača" Alkalaj, engineer Herman Ast, Dr Nikola Balog, Ivan Brandajs, Dr Andrija Gams, Naftali Bata Gedalja, Dr Milan Goldšmit Zlatarić, Dr Ladislav "Laci" Kadelburg, Aleksandar Levi, engineer Stevan Levi, Moša Mašijah, Ruben Rubenović, Dr Emil Sarafić, engineer Ervin Šalamon, Drago Šilinger, Aleksandar Dov Štajner, Slavko Štern Zvezdić, Maks Vajs and Dr Albert Vajs.

When, in mid-August 1945, at the break of dawn, we found ourselves at the Zemun railway station, Herman Kon, my uncle Ivan Binder and I were at a loss because we had no idea where our families lived. Herman Kon went to the apartment of some acquaintances. Of about three hundred members of the Jewish Community in Zemun before the war, including the surrounding areas as far as Pazova, only about thirty people remained. The others were either with the Partisans or in exile. A problem arose in connection with the accommodation of the returnees and resumption of the Community's work. I undertook to act as secretary of the Jewish Community. When my parents, brother and sister moved to Israel in December 1948, Aleksandar Frank took over the duties of president of the Zemun Jewish Community and I became vice-president of the Community and a member of the Main Board. Later I also became a member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.