
Rahela ALTARAS

BY THE GRACE OF GOOD PEOPLE



Rahela-Seka Volah was born in Bijeljina on March 15, 1927, the daughter of Blanka (née Pinto) and Izidor Volah. She had a sister, Sarina-Lotika and brothers Jakov-Bata and Ašer. Of her large family, only her mother and her brother Ašer survived the Holocaust.

She was discharged from the Yugoslav Army in November, 1945, before working in the Executive Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia until 1951. For the next six years she worked in various capacities for Yugoslav Airlines. In 1957 she began work in the office of the president of the republic where she stayed until November, 1964. From then, until her retirement in July 1982, she worked for the Federal Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, serving in Stockholm, London and Gothenburg.

Rahela Altaras has a son, Goran, now married to Vladislava, and one granddaughter.

My parents settled in Bijeljina, Bosnia, in 1924, and we lived there until the war broke out. I was one of four children. My sister Lotika was killed during the war, as was my brother Jakov-Bata. My father was killed in Jasenovac, the Ustasha camp. Only my mother, my younger brother Ašer and I survived the war. My father was a machinist and had a workshop which catered not only for people from Bijeljina but also

for those from all the surrounding villages. In this way my father acquired many friends and was well known and respected, as was the entire family. We lived this way in Bijeljina until the war broke out in 1941, when Germany occupied this part of Yugoslavia and it became part of their Fascist creation, the self-proclaimed Independent State of Croatia.

Immediately after the German Army and the Ustashas arrived, my father, as a Jew, had his workshop seized. This had been well-equipped with modern tools and machinery. We were left without any means of support, so our friends secretly brought food to us. My father also repaired machines and tools in secret, and my mother took in sewing. Our movements were restricted and my older sister, my older brother and I were barred from continuing our schooling. My younger brother was still too young for school. Later we were thrown out of our house and all our belongings were confiscated. I'll never forget any of the ways in which we survived that terrible war, but two events still stand out in my memory: my father's arrest and internment in the Jasenovac concentration camp where he was tortured and killed, and the way in which my mother and we children were saved from the camp and certain death.

It was August, 1941. My older sister, Lotika, was extremely sick and we were all very worried. Our neighbours were trying to call the doctor for us and so we waited. Then there was a knock on the gate. My father opened it but, instead of the doctor, there were Ustashas there who immediately bound his hands and said they were taking him to prison. He begged them to at least allow him to say goodbye to his wife and children, especially to his sick daughter. When my father came into the room where my sister was lying, he kissed her. She began to scream "Where are you taking my Daddy?". These words ring in my ears, bringing tears to my eyes to this day. I don't even remember whether he kissed us all as the Ustashas hustled him out.

The next day we heard that all adult Jews in Bijeljina had been arrested and no one knew what was going to happen to them. My mother packed some clothes and sent me to the prison to deliver them to my father. I was thirteen years old at the time. When I arrived at the prison, they told me to go to the railway station because the Jews who had been arrested were being transported to the concentration camp. I ran to the station and saw them being herded into cattle wagons. I searched for my father and he must have seen me while he was being pushed into a

wagon. He somehow managed to appear behind a small, barred opening and, looking sadly at me, blew me a kiss. That is the last memory I have of my father.

Nor will I ever forget the night of August 2, 1942. I'd just fallen asleep when I felt someone shaking me briskly. Waking up I saw Rista Ristić. He was very agitated and shouting "Hurry, hurry up, get up and get out of here, the Ustashas are rounding up all the Jews left in town and taking them to the concentration camp!"

My terrified mother got my brothers dressed and then gave us rucksacks which were ready in the closet, already packed with the things we would need. We ran from the house with my aunt across the street to our neighbour, a Hungarian. He and his wife took us in and hid us. Within half an hour the Ustashas were in front of our house, banging hard on the door and windows, shouting, swearing and furious at not finding anyone. They searched a number of houses in the area but, luckily for us, they didn't come into the house of our Hungarian neighbour.



At Vitniki Kiseljak spa, near Zvornik, where Rahela (back row, fourth from left) spent time with her family, 1935-6.

As soon as the Ustashas went away, we also left the town, just as day was breaking. The place in which we'd been living was on the very edge of the town. Bent double, we crawled through the undergrowth and waded through a cold brook which ran through there. All the time

we prayed to God that no one had seen us as they would have informed the Ustashas immediately. After wandering for several hours, exhausted, we came to the houses on the outskirts of the village of Zagoni. The villagers invited us in and gave us something to eat. We told them what had happened, but didn't tell them straight away that we were Jews. In those days there were many refugees of other nationalities as well. It was only later that they found out who we were but, in the meantime, they had come to like us and none of them would ever have dreamt of betraying us.

We first stayed with the Lukić family, in a little room in a shed in the yard. There were other people who also helped us, especially the Travarić family. Later they put us in the ruined house of a priest, in the churchyard, again in a shed, and there we stayed until the end of December, 1942. I'll never forget what happened on December 19 that year, when a German reprisals squad arrived in the village and stationed itself right there in the churchyard. They put their horses in the half-demolished barn, right next to our little shed. They spent the whole day there, while we lay silent, expecting that any minute someone would burst through the door, find us and kill us. None of us even dared to cough; my mother and my aunt were shivering from shock. At sunset the Germans left the village and the villagers, who knew we were there, came running to see what had happened to us. They were delighted to see that we were still alive.

At about that time Partisan units, among which was the Eastern Bosnia Sixth Brigade, defeated the Chetniks on Mt Majevisa. Sixth Brigade fighters made it down to the foothills of Majevisa, where our village of Zagoni lay. This was our first encounter with the Partisans and it was an emotional moment to meet Jews from the brigade: Dr Roza Papo, the first and only woman general in the Yugoslav Army, Nisim Albahari, proclaimed a National Hero after the war, and a woman called Blanka whose surname I don't remember. The Partisans rapidly liberated Bijeljina as well and held it for two or three months. We went to Bijeljina with them. My sister Lotika remained with the brigade and I joined another unit. My mother and aunt, together with my two brothers, were sent to the rear command. My aunt later fell ill and was left to convalesce with a family in the village of Čadavica. My elder brother Bata (Jakov) was sent to a command post in Trnova where he was deployed as a courier, liaising with the surrounding villages. Sometime in the summer of 1944 he found himself close to Čadavica and took

advantage of the opportunity to visit our aunt. It was there that the Chetniks caught them both and killed them. I have never discovered where they were buried.

My sister spent some time with me in the 17th Majevisa Brigade before moving to the 16th Vojvodina Brigade in the spring of 1944. We met a number of times during the sixth enemy offensive. I heard later from her comrades that she fell ill with typhoid and was transferred to the base on Majevisa along with the worst cases among the wounded, from where they were to be evacuated to Italy. The first group was evacuated and planes were expected within a day or two to collect those who remained. However, before this could happen, the Ustasas discovered the base and killed everyone they found there. I have never managed to discover the location of my sister's grave.



Rahela (with grenade on belt) with her mother, brother and two friends from the unit in liberated Tuzla, 1944.

I continued fighting in the 17th Majevisa Brigade, in the 28th Division and then in the 38th Corps Headquarters. There my immediate superior was Moni Finci. Death awaited us at every turn as we fought without pause against the Ustasas, the Chetniks and even the Germans.

But despite this I felt free; I wasn't thinking about death but about the day when we would liberate our country. For me, that happened on April 6, 1945, when my unit entered Sarajevo.

In 1945 I married Ratko (Rafailo) Altaras. Our son, Goran, was born in Sarajevo in November 1947. He graduated in food technology from the Sarajevo University. He married a colleague, Vladislava, and they have a daughter, Ana, who graduated in psychology from the Faculty of Philosophy.

My mother lived with my younger brother Ašer in Banja Luka after the war. She died in 1964 and was buried, as all of us wanted to be, in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade. My brother Ašer stayed on in Banja Luka until 1996, surviving the horrors of the most recent war there, before emigrating to Israel. He now lives in Jerusalem.

After the war, at our request, the Yad Vashem awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations to Rista Ristić. In Bijeljina, in 1942, he saved my mother Blanka Volah, her sister Bukica-Sarina Montiljo, my sister Lotika-Sarina, my brothers Jakov-Bata and Ašer and myself. Risto then also saved all the members of the Jewish families of Haim and Bukica Levi, Mojsije Altarac and Merikado Levi.