
Chaim MEJUHAS

VOYAGE INTO UNCERTAINTY*



Chaim Mejuhas was born in Vienna on June 21, 1920, to Nissim and Gisela (née Rosenblich). He had one sister, Lili. Eleven members of his immediate family were killed in the Holocaust: his father, mother, grandmother Anna Rosenblich, his uncle Avram with his wife Kamila, his uncle Joshka with his wife Matilda and their son Heinrich, and his uncle Benko with his wife Ela and their son Chaim.

After finishing secondary technical school in 1939, Chaim Mejuhas was employed in the Utva factory where he worked on construction of the Vrabac and Čavka gliders. After the war he worked in the research and development division of the Military Aviation and Air Defence Command. In 1947, as a young and talented professional, he was sent to the Mechanical Engineering Faculty of Belgrade University for further education. During this time he worked on building an aircraft with the engineer Bešlin. From 1954 until his retirement, he worked in the Aviation Technical Institute. Colonel Mejuhas was a member of the small team of designers which built the first Yugoslav jet aircraft, the Galeb. As project

* This text is an edited chapter from a long manuscript written for the author's grandchildren. Prior to this text, a chapter was published in *The Jewish Almanac* 1971–1996, pages 457–474. The events described, in part, occurred in western Macedonia, under the Albanian, i. e. Italian occupation and partially in areas under Bulgarian occupation.

coordinator he worked on the Kraguj, Jastreb, Orao and Super Galeh aircraft. Many of the projects on which he worked, including the Pčela, the Pelikan, the BAC 311 and the M 10 were never completed, despite his input as a talented designer.

He also lectured at the Mechanical Engineering Faculty of the Mostar University. His creative input was a significant contribution to the Aviation Technical Institute's winning of the AVNOJ Award, presented by the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia.

Chaim Mejuhas invested a great deal of his wealth of talent in invention and construction. From his youth he conceptualised, developed and completed many unusual projects. These included a mechanical ditch digger with a far greater capacity than those of the time, machinery for constructing dikes and a new kind of snow plough for highways and airport runways. To the day he died he nurtured an unrealised dream of producing electricity by harnessing the power of wind at great altitudes.

His first wife, Vera Mejuhas, died young after bearing him a son, Marsel, and a daughter, Vesna, both of whom are married and who bore him a total of four grandchildren. In his later work he had the support of his second wife, Zorica.

Chaim Mejuhas died in early 2001.

In this chapter of his reminiscences, first published in the *Jewish Almanac*, Chaim Mejuhas paints a vivid picture of his experiences in Belgrade under the German occupation: forced labour, arrests, internment in the special police prison, the behaviour of true and false friends. The pain of these days was alleviated only by his romantic and innocent love for his future wife, Verica. He was able to escape from Belgrade eventually only by the pure chance of finding in the street an Italian passport in the name of Miroljub Pančetović of Kičevo.

I had to decide where to go: to Kičevo, where I could certainly expect to find someone who knew Miroljub Pančetović, or to Skopje where, as well as the Bulgarians there were also Germans, or to Tetovo. I settled on Tetovo, arriving the next morning. I headed with my suitcase towards the centre of the town, with no idea of where I was going. In this way I came across a tavern where I spent the night. I had planned to find a job, any kind of job. But this was the domain of the Albanians. Here, as in Belgrade, they were station porters, even woodcutters, and

no one needed anyone else for physical labour. I began wandering the streets, looking into the stores and workshops. There was no industry which needed a technician and I knew no trade. While I was wandering around, two men passed me carrying grappling irons for climbing wooden poles. Suddenly I had an idea: the power station! I caught up with them and asked where I could find it. They were kind enough to take me to the headquarters, to the supervisor, a man called Boss Aleksa. "We don't have any jobs going, but I'd like to help you as much as I can, so that you don't have to wander around. I can employ you as an apprentice, with no salary. The director's away on a trip and when he returns he'll throw you out, but in the meantime we might find you something else." I was surprised at his saying "we might find." This meant that a man who had just met me for the first time in his life was going to help me. I couldn't understand why the director would throw me out if I was working for nothing.

The two young men who had brought me to Boss Aleksa were working on maintenance of the Tetovo power grid. The first couple of days I went with them, learning the job. Under their guidance I soon got the hang of it, but they wouldn't let me work by myself. After two weeks, Boss Aleksa called me in and told me that the director had returned and I couldn't stay. However, he added, I wasn't to worry because he'd found me a new job.

He took me to an electrical workshop, to Master Serafimović. It was only after the liberation that Master Sima, as he was known, confessed that Aleksa had been certain from the moment he met me that I was a Jew. But throughout the entire war they kept up the pretence that I was Miroljub Pančetović from Kičevo. Had it not been for them and their unobtrusive help and protection, it is unlikely that I would have been here to write about all this. Master Sima explained to me that apprentices were unpaid but that when and if he made any money out of my work he would "fix me up". And so I began to learn, and ply, the electrical trade.

After a month I began to have problems with the Italian police, the *Questura*. The director of the power station, a Russian émigré from the first world war, denounced me as a Communist fugitive from Serbia. The Italians interrogated me, asking why I'd come here instead of to Kičevo, why I hadn't reported to them. This was all accompanied with slaps and blows from a club. They were surprised by my excellent Italian. Finally the inquisitor said: "There's a simple way to solve all

this. Is there anyone who can confirm that you are Miroljub Pančetović?"

An idea occurred to me and I said: "Yes, of course. I know a very important man, a man by the name of Konte M. He's one of the directors of a large factory. Would it be enough if he confirms who I am?"

"Certainly," replied the inquisitor, "then everything would be fine."

As I remember, I then immediately wrote a letter which went as follows. "Dear Mr Konte M., I trust you remember me. My father is the owner of Motor, the Belgrade company. I was an apprentice in your factory last year, under a plan you prepared personally for me. I'm now in Tetovo and would like to travel to Italy to be employed in your factory. Would you be so kind as to reply to me by registered mail, addressed to Miroljub Pančetović, Tetovo. Yours sincerely, Miro." In less than two weeks, to the surprise of the police investigator, a letter arrived by registered mail. They still regarded me as suspicious, but I got no further summonses for investigation.

Somehow the winter passed. When I had no work, I spoke to my neighbour, a photographer. One day he said to me "You're a technician, you must know something about radios." I confessed that I had never repaired a radio but, nonetheless I decided to try and I succeeded. A few days later he found me a new customer and I managed to repair this set as well. That was how I began to work. It took enormous patience, along with nerves of steel and a great deal of persistence, but there was hardly a radio device that I couldn't repair.

Then I met a young chap called Žika Marinković. He was a typesetter but, like me, there was no work for him in Tetovo. His father had died and his mother set about fortune-telling to support her son and daughter. She could also cure some illnesses with herbs. She didn't charge for her services, but she received gifts which enabled her to keep her family alive.

Žika wasn't used to not working and he was preparing to leave for Skopje to find a job. He was keen to have company for the trip. Skopje at the time was under Bulgarian occupation. It was not difficult to cross the border illegally. Žika was from Tetovo and knew how to slip out of the town unnoticed. We moved through the side roads, silently, listening and lying low whenever we needed to.

When we arrived in Skopje we wanted to find identity cards so that our documents were in order. It was customary to report to the Tetovo-

Gostivar brotherhood where, on the basis of our Albanian identity cards, we would be given a referral to the Bulgarian police. On the basis of this they would then issue Bulgarian identity cards. They received us warmly into the clan as young people “who had returned to their homeland,” and gave us referrals to the police station located across the road, walking us to the door. At the station the officer asked me for my name. In Tetovo I had been known as Miroljub Pančetović and this was the name in my Albanian identity card. Because of the Bulgarians in Skopje, I was advised to use the surname Pančetov. So now I told the officer “Miroljub Pančetov.”

The officer’s fist struck me like a bolt out of the blue. Suddenly he became an animal. The punches came thick and fast, as did the questions. “Who are you? Who are you staying with? Who is your connection here?” Then he stopped, saying “That’s enough for today, but you’ll soon start talking.”



From Chaim Mejuhas' identity card, 1941, and, (R) in 1945.

They took me to a large cell where the prisoners put compresses on the wounds I had received. The first night in prison was terrible: apart from the exhaustion from walking, the hunger, the beating and the fear of what was yet to come, there were bedbugs which bit mercilessly, so that I was unable to sleep. The next morning I was taken to be interrogated again. There were three men, they tied my hands together and put a plank of wood beneath my knees, which they then lifted onto the arms of the chair so that my head was hanging down and the soles of my feet

facing up. Then they took a club, a chain and a belt and began taking turns to strike me. It's unbelievable how much a man can endure, even when he thinks it is impossible. I screamed in pain. I fell, I crawled, I was punched, I walked along the bloody trail of my wounds, I crawled around in a circle, but everywhere the belt came after me. It lasted an eternity. I could not believe that this was happening. I was crushed, not just physically but psychologically. I told them my real name, that I was a Jew, where I was from and, finally, I asked the investigator what would happen next. He shrugged his shoulders and said: "Nothing. We'll return you both to Albania."

The other two investigators took me to my cell, carrying me on a chair. There Žika and the other prisoners took care of me and made compresses and bandages from the tails of their shirts. After ten days I began gingerly to stand on my feet and to calm down. Finally, after two and a half weeks, the investigators summoned me and Žika and said that we were not wanted in the new Bulgaria and that they would take us to the border and send us back to Albania. Returning meant illegally crossing the border along the same route by which we had arrived. We moved at night, under guard, through side roads towards the border crossing. The border guards showed us where we could cross the border without encountering an Albanian patrol.

The soldiers left us and we moved on through the dense wood until we came to a clearing. We walked for some time across the clearing and then heard the command: "Halt. Lie down!" We lay on our stomachs and then the beating started, until the border guard was tired and then he asked: "How much money do you have?" We replied that we had no money as we had been in prison and spent everything. He was furious at this and began to hit us again. Finally he told us "Get lost!" He didn't need to tell us twice: we jumped up and ran towards the edge of the forest, where we fell on the ground, exhausted and in pain.

We waited for the dawn so that we could find our orientation more easily. In the morning we saw the road to Tetovo not far below. We reached Žika's house at about noon, and that was the end of our arduous trip to Greater Bulgaria. Žika's wise and good-natured mother accepted me as she did her own Žika, without saying a word. She knew that I had nothing and said that I would help her when I earned some money and if not, then I would not go hungry anyway, but would share what they had. I resumed work with Sima, who started to work out what my work would be worth, and I accepted this new scheme. By some

miracle I had more than enough work and the pickings were good! Each repair was a challenge for me. Although no one had ever taught me how to repair radios, I became something of an expert.

After my return from Skopje, I forged a connection with followers of the National Liberation Struggle. Sima and I gave a monthly contribution to a member of the Youth League of Yugoslav Communists. By letting Sima find me work and collect the payment, I earned much more and lived so well that I was able to give much more to Žika's mother than she needed. I wanted to repay her kindness and, in return, she treated me like a second son. This good woman, sadly, was killed by a stray bullet in an exchange of rifle fire at the time of the Italian capitulation.

The Orthodox population was delighted at the fall of Italy, but in fact it made the Albanians more powerful. It would be a month before the Germans arrived in the region and, in the meantime, there was a wave of Albanian violence aimed at the Orthodox people. It was clear that I needed to get out of Tetovo, meaning that I needed to hook up with a Partisan unit.

Because I had been denounced by the Gestapo director of the power station, I had to go into hiding. I didn't even dare to go home, so Sima found me a place in the attic of a local family. There I stayed in fear and trepidation, because anyone hiding someone without papers was liable to be shot or, at least, taken to a camp. Not only my life was in danger, but also those of the people who were trying to help me.

Finally Sima contacted me: "You're to leave on Friday morning." I was to head towards Gostivar. Friday was market day and there would be a lot of people and carts. I was to leave Tetovo on foot and sit in a horse cart, following another in which would be Mirko, who I had already met. In Gostivar I was to follow Mirko and go into the same house as he did.

We stayed in that house until an Albanian came and told us he would be our guide. We would travel in single file, some distance apart, on a road along a mountain range leading to the Bulgarian border. On top of everything else, I became separated from both our guide and Mirko. I walked, hungry and tired, through a dense and tangled forest which was home to many wild animals. I suppose I walked for more than ten hours. Evening fell and there was the smell of snow in the air. I banged on the trees with a stick, whistling, thinking the forest must end somewhere. Suddenly I heard: "Who's there?"

"Miro."

“Miro, step forward, the rest of you stay where you are.”

“I moved towards the voice, not seeing anyone, and asked: “Who are you?”

“The Yugoslav Army, in the homeland,” came the reply.

Then I saw him, wearing a black beard and moustache and a soldier’s cap with the Yugoslav coat of arms and the eagle. He told me that Mirko had arrived and that they had been waiting a long time for me, then took me to the camp where I had something to eat. They slept in trenches, on beds made of dry branches and it was very cold. I had the uncomfortable feeling that something was crawling along my body and neck. I scratched and found a tiny white louse under my nail.

They took me to the commander’s trench to talk to me. I don’t remember what we talked about. What I remember is that there were about forty people in the unit, completely cut off from the world, always on the edge of starvation and frequently on the move.

One day they summoned me and said: “You say you’re a technician: try to fix our radio transmitter.” I told them that I was self-taught and that I had no tools or spare parts. They decided that I should make a list of the tools and instruments I needed and send this to Sima with a letter, then everything we needed could be here within a week. Once the equipment arrived I worked for three days and finally succeeded: we could pick up Radio London and heard that the Germans were losing on all fronts. The radio operator also managed to connect with the headquarters somewhere in Serbia and we received an order:

“Set off for Serbia with the entire unit.”

“How, in which direction?” we asked.

“Report to the German major at Skopje airport. He’ll provide you with a route map.” It was the last contact via radio.

The next day the commander called the whole unit together, told them what the orders were and said that he would not cooperate with the Germans. The men were seized with disappointment and uncertainty. But then, at the beginning of July, 1944, we learned that a Partisan reconnaissance patrol wanted to make contact with the unit, so a delegation was appointed to negotiate with them. They agreed that the brigade command would take in everyone from our unit and that we would be treated on an equal footing with the Partisans, both in terms of responsibility and in acquiring weapons. This deal was met with delight and we headed off to our rendezvous with the Third Macedonian Brigade.

I was assigned to the youth detachment. From hiding and fleeing along the mountaintops and forests, we were soon joining the battle. We attacked the Germans retreating from Greece, along with Bulgarian garrisons and scouts. We attacked Prilep and seized the German garrison with all its weapons, trucks, passenger vehicles and motorcycles. Among the trucks we found just what we needed: an auto workshop with tools and spare parts for all possible repairs.

The captain kept me with him and together we formed the First Macedonian Motor Brigade. Vlado, the captain, was commander and I his deputy. Anyone who could drive was enlisted in this brigade. I was in charge of organising the technical services, maintaining the vehicles and refuelling. There was plenty to do in the workshops, with the vehicles breaking down frequently as the convoy of people and equipment moved along village roads in order to avoid the larger and better-armed German columns.

In the meantime, I was wounded while out on patrol. They wanted to keep me in hospital, but I returned to the unit because there was a lot of work to be done. Unlike the other brigades, my people were always either on the road or in action. The Germans finally completed their withdrawal from Greece and the time had come for a decisive attack on Skopje. The brigade's main task was the transport of other units, so our convoy entered the Macedonian capital while the battle was still raging.

Life in liberated Skopje was a completely new experience, with beds to sleep in and enough food to go round. A new government was to be established, but my role was to organise a huge auto workshop in the city, with strict control of the use of materials, vehicles and fuel.

Around the beginning of November I was told to report urgently to Apostolski, the commander of the main Macedonian headquarters. I had seen him before, but I didn't think he would know my name, so I was surprised when he asked me "Miro, what is your real name?" I told him and then he didn't want to hear any more. He told me that he knew a lot about me and that he had chosen me for a very delicate assignment. There would be a food shortage in Skopje during the winter, the railway connecting Macedonia to Serbia had been destroyed and the roads were bad. We didn't have enough trucks to keep Skopje supplied with flour. Our only hope was assistance from Bulgaria. My mission was to take a sealed letter from him to a Bulgarian general in Sofia. In it the commander asked for Skopje to be supplied with a quantity of

flour, to be brought by the Bulgarians to Kriva Palanka and which I would then transport by trucks to Skopje.

After many difficulties, I eventually reached the general. He read the letter and told me to wait. The next morning he handed me a sealed letter for my commander and said "We can meet your request: Skopje will not go hungry." The next day I handed the letter to Apostolski.

There was a great deal of work ahead of us. I organised a convoy of thirty trucks and thirty drivers to transport the flour. It was hard going because of the general poverty, hunger and anarchy, not to mention the winter. As we made our way from Skopje to the Bulgarian border, I repeatedly checked on what was happening. Ahead lay a three-month struggle for our trucks and drivers against hunger, sub-zero temperatures, snow and exhaustion. That winter I slept no more than four hours a night. I was freezing and hungry, but it never occurred to anyone in the brigade that I too needed some rest and relief. Finally, by early March, 1945, we finished moving all the flour to Skopje.

Early that spring I received my first letter from my sister Lilika. She told me that only she, Stevo and their daughter had survived, that our mother and our grandmother had been taken to Banjica and then by truck to Jajinci, where they were gassed. Sometime before that our father had been held in the Banjica camp and from there was sent to Pančevo. However, when he was not able to move fast enough he was shot and pushed into a ditch beside the road. We learnt of this crime from a witness, a cyclist who had known my father.

I got through to Belgrade and found out that Verica had finished technical school and was on the Srem front with a Partisan unit. The war was still not over and my only wish was to return to Belgrade as soon as possible.

I managed, with enormous difficulty, to get a week's leave. My joy at seeing Lilika again was enormous. Stevo was acting strangely, because he had sold all the stock from the store and wasted the money on self-indulgence. When the funds ran out he found another woman.

Most of all I wanted to find Verica, but I did not succeed. I saw in Belgrade that my whole world from before the war had fallen apart; of my whole family only Lili had survived and all my property and my apartment had disappeared.

It was with a heavy heart that I returned to Skopje.

As the end of the war approached, I was surprised to be told at the barracks that there was a Partisan woman at the gates looking for me. It

was Verica. I cannot describe the joy of this reunion after four years of waiting, fear, hope, doubt and who knows what else.

She was beautiful, more beautiful than ever. She had grown from a girl into a young woman, for me the most beautiful woman in the world.

Immediately after the war she was discharged and returned to Belgrade before coming to Skopje where we took ten days of unofficial leave for our honeymoon. But ten days were not enough to tell each other everything that had happened, let alone to make arrangements for our future.

After the war I finished my studies. I shared the housework and the upbringing of the children with Verica until a terminal illness took her from me. She was only 33.