
Eduard ŠAJER

THE STENCH OF THE CREMATORIUM¹



Eduard Edo Šajer was born on April 13, 1922, in Avtovac, near Gacko, to Adolf and Hermina, both of whom were killed in Jasenovac in 1942. He had five siblings: Moris (1914), who was in Jasenovac from November 16, 1941, until 1945 when he was killed; sisters Mancika (1909) and Regina (1915), both killed in Jasenovac in 1942, brother Albert (1924), killed in Jasenovac in 1942 and brother Viljim, who was imprisoned in Germany from 1941-1945 and died in 1953. Germans killed his

aunt and her son in Čačak in 1941.

From the liberation of the country at the end of the second world war until his retirement, Eduard Šajer served as an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army. He now lives in Niš with his wife Mileva (née Radonjić). They have two daughters, Gordana (45) and Hermina (37) and four granddaughters.

This account is based on an interview conducted by the former president of the Jewish Community in Belgrade, Jaša Almuli, with Eduard Šajer for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

I was born in Avtovac near Gacko and lived in Sarajevo until 1941. There I completed my training as an electrician. My father died in 1932, leaving my mother with five children. Together with a group of

Communists and politically active young people I was arrested on August. 5. 1941, by the Ustasha police led by Jure Francetić who later commanded the notorious Black Legion. After an investigation, my elder brother and I were imprisoned in the infamous Theological College prison in Sarajevo. There I remained until the escape of Vasa Miskin, Isa Jovanović and Nisim Albahari, when we were transferred to the holding cells of the court while the well-known Zagreb police agent, Cividini, and Viktor Tomić continued the investigation of our case.

When Jure Francetić left to become commander of the Black Legion his position as head of the Ustasha police headquarters was taken over by a notorious criminal, Viktor Tolj. He gave the order that there were to be no further investigations and that all prisoners were to be dispatched to Jasenovac. We were bound with wire and escorted under guard to the military camp where we were loaded into livestock wagons.

We reached Jasenovac on November 16, 1941. Whenever the train stopped along the way, the Ustashes would rush into the wagons to steal whatever money, rings and watches they could. Our whole bodies were bruised from their beatings by the time we arrived at Jasenovac. There we were lined up and forced to run from the station to the Ustasha headquarters. Anyone who fell was executed on the spot. We were sorted by nationality, Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, Moslems, Croats, Serbs, women, all put into separate groups. The women were later taken to the camp and all the Serbs were killed. In front of the camp there was a barrier which was lifted for us by a Jew named Maestro who I knew from Sarajevo. We then came to a gate with the sign "Labour Camp No. 3 – Jasenovac" and they lined us up in front of the headquarters. The camp commander was an unfrocked priest called Brkljačić. Now we were divided up again: Croats and Muslims were to sleep above the brickyard, the Sephardic Jews were sent to 3A and the Ashkenazis to 3B. There were a number of Croats employed in the camp as clerks. Every hut had its own warden and these now took us to the shacks. On our way we saw inmates looking like skeletons smeared with mud, no longer human.

As soon as we arrived in the shacks, the other prisoners gathered around asking us for food, but we ourselves had not eaten for days. Some of them came closer, looking us over carefully in the hope that they might find someone they knew and get some news about their families. The shacks were built of wooden planks, the earth floors sodden

and muddy under the leaky roofs. There were no bedclothes. We spent our first night freezing with cold. Later we went from one inmate to another to see if anybody had frozen or died, so we could take their blanket. Later still, someone else would steal them from us in their turn. The work was onerous and gravediggers would drag away the corpses of those who fell during the day. We could see huge pits being dug within the camp itself where the many inmates who died were buried. Some of these succumbed to hunger or disease and others were killed by the Ustashas. Each Ustasha was a symbol of power: they strutted through the camp armed with leather whips, knotted wire cables and iron bars. If one of them saw something he didn't like, if a finger was pointed at someone, he would immediately kill the prisoner. Our work included building a barbed wire fence around the camp and driving piles into the ground for sheds to be built on. The place was called Lonjsko Polje and it was often flooded.



Edo's mother Hermina, killed with her father in Jasenovac, and his father, Adolf, who died in 1932.

We worked from early dawn until late in the evening. Food was a turnip broth with no salt or fat and sometimes we would get some runny polenta gruel. People fell ill and died in massive numbers. We contin-

ued this way until work begin on a dyke intended to protect the camp from flooding. We had only rudimentary tools: spades and pickaxes. Those too exhausted to work were simply killed and we survivors think that about twenty thousand bodies were buried in the dyke.

The grave digging detail usually consisted of about forty men. It was the only permanent working party. The rest of us would be assembled every day in front of the command post for the Ustashas to select their victims and decide what would happen. The wardens, the working group leaders and supervisors would then take the inmates off to work. There were convoys of Jews and Serbs constantly arriving from Bijeljina, Brčko and other places. When they arrived, the prisoners who had arrived earlier would be executed and the new ones would take their place. They set up a Serb block, 3C, headed by a man called Slobodan. They organised forestry groups, building groups and others, including groups to work in the sawmill, the brickyard and the chain foundry, which also produced Ustasha daggers and knives designed to rip stomachs open.

The older inmates were persuaded to apply for work in the apartment buildings of Đakovo, Sunja and Sisak, where the conditions were better. Those who applied would be executed the same night. They were taken out of the camp and packed into wagons for this illusory trip, their journey coming to an end at Broćica where they were murdered. There was an infamous Ustasha orgy at the end of 1941, at Catholic Christmas: selected prisoners were murdered and their bodies buried in pits which had been prepared for them.

On the Serbian Orthodox Christmas Eve² of 1942, a passing Partisan train opened fire on the camp. The following day, in front of the Serb block 3C, the Ustashas used sledgehammers to slaughter more than two hundred prisoners in retaliation. Later they cleared out the village of Gradina to dig mass graves there.

One day I was passing by the camp headquarters when I saw, among a group of prisoners, my younger brother of whom I had not had any news. When they were settled into the camp I managed to have him put with us.

The worst work was in the forestry and grave digging parties. After working for some time the gravediggers would be killed and a new

² The Serbian Orthodox Church observes the traditional Julian Calendar, thus Christmas Eve is celebrated on January 6 by the modern calendar.

group set up. I somehow managed to be transferred to the chain foundry because I was a tradesman and had worked as a locksmith. All the working parties had to send reinforcements to the grave-digging party in proportion with the number of those killed, so one day I too was sent out to dig graves. We went to Broćica, digging graves there and among the last inmates brought out to be killed I saw my younger brother: he was murdered with a sledgehammer before my eyes. We usually tied a belt around the leg of the bodies to drag them across the mud to the grave pits. I carefully picked up the body of my brother, now weighing barely thirty kilograms, carried him to the pits and buried him. When I walked into the shack after we returned to the camp my other brother looked at me; without a word we hugged each other. "I know," I said to him. He echoed my words. That was the first of my family whom I was to lose.

The dyke protecting the camp soon broke, the Strug River, a tributary of the Sava, overflowed, flooding Lonjske Polje and the camp, leaving Settlement Three under water. Only the high ground with the sawmill, the brickyard and the chain foundry, together with the watch-towers, remained above the water. There were just over a thousand prisoners still in the camp. At this time, the engineer Pićili, a first lieutenant who later became camp commander, designed a primitive crematorium. As they poured in poison from the brickyard and lit the fire, the stench of burning human bodies spread across the camp. Many Jews I recognised from Sarajevo were all burned alive this way, among them Cantor Vajs, Žiga Levinger, Professor Štajner, and the father of Ilija Goranin, a commander of the Romania Partisan unit, later proclaimed a National Hero.

When the water receded, the killings resumed in Gradina. In April, 1942, a rumour spread that a new farm was to be established in Ferićanci. There was already an agricultural estate in Bistrica and other villages in Gradiška. I didn't believe the story, but an inmate from Ogulin told me that one of the Ustashas, a compatriot of his, had told him that I should apply for a job as a coachman. I told him that I'd never even been near a horse in my life. However the situation was now so bad, with massive numbers dying of starvation and even cases of cannibalism, that it was better for me to try. I had heard of the Bistrica camp, so perhaps there was something in it. One day they lined thirty of us up and told us to collect our things. I took my mess bowl and a torn blanket to cover myself with. The head of the farm complex was a barrister from Zagreb, Rafo Gaon. He sent three people to fetch a loaf of bread each, three frozen potatoes and a slice of bacon and then the

Ustashas led us away. There was a wagon waiting for us at the Jasenovac station and we set off for Ferićanci. We passed through Vinkovci and reached Osijek where we had to change. As we left the wagon a mob of people from Osijek descended on us, hurling stones and insults. The Ustashas opened fire to disperse the mob and they responded by throwing broken bricks. An Ustasha unit arrived and escorted us to a factory in the city. We found out later that it was a *matsot* factory and there we spent the very night of Passover. The Ustashas had meals and drinks prepared for them and we were allowed a few morsels. They gave us some bread and everyone crammed their pockets, but the greatest surprise was yet to come when we were given some *matsot* balls and real food. Then we moved on, carrying three great sacks of food with us. When we arrived in Ferićanci there was no livestock or anything else, but within three days the Ustashas had plundered the neighbouring Serb villages, bringing horses and other animals and so we began to establish the farm. One group worked herding cows and sheep. One group of prisoners tended a herd of cows at the local priest's



*Brother Albert and sister Regina, killed in Jasenovac in 1942,
and brother Moric, killed during the breakout from Jasenovac*

farm and managed to establish connections with the local people who, in their turn, put them in touch with the Partisans. While we waited for the Partisans to mount an assault on the camp, seven prisoners managed to escape on their own. In Ferićanci we managed to contact some locals and we expected the attack to come. But someone within the group

betrayed us to First Lieutenant Susić, the camp commander, and within five hours we had been loaded into locked wagons and dispatched to Jasenovac.



Jasenovac. Prisoners doing forced labour in the wickerwork group

When we arrived at Jasenovac we were surprised to find the camp encircled with barbed wire. They didn't herd us in there, but into a wire-fenced yard behind the camp. We wondered why we were there, but our experience had taught us to expect that the night would swallow us. At about 5.30 a.m., an Ustasha soldier named Bonzo arrived with a big German Shepherd dog. He was Luburić's favourite, a notorious murderer and cutthroat. He recognised one of us, a man called Grinberg from Zagreb who had been in the camp in Gospić, then in Slano and Krapje. "What are you doing here?" he asked him.

"Mr Bonzo, we're waiting to be allocated to work," Grinberg replied.

Then Bonzo barked at the guard: "Open up! These are old camp inmates," and told us to join our working parties, saving our lives.

Before we had left for Ferićanci an international commission of Italian officers, Croatian home guards, Germans, Ustasas and priests had come to the camp for an inspection. The ground was still covered

with snow, but the shacks were tidied up and even the infirmary was working. Prisoners would be taken to the hospital by day then taken away and slaughtered at night. When the commission arrived, the Ustashas rounded up healthy people from the village and dressed them up as prisoners. The commission left, convinced that the inmates were being well taken care of. Before they had arrived the food improved, they cooked us beans with pieces of beef. Now that they had a good supply of stolen cattle, so the prisoners ate as much as they could. After the inspection there was a dreadful situation: diarrhoea, dysentery, death on a massive scale. The prisoners had been dying of starvation, even devouring the bodies of their dead fellows, but now it was the sudden overabundance of food which decimated the camp.

In the meantime, work began on building a new dyke. Prisoners from the wire-fenced 3C block were brought in chains and worked till they dropped. Once the dyke was completed, those 3C prisoners who remained were no longer fed. Notice boards were put up: "Typhoid, keep away". The last eighteen inmates remaining alive were transferred to Gradina and locked in a house which stands in the town to this day. When they opened the building they found only one corpse still intact: the others had been completely devoured.

In Gradina they ploughed, sowed and harvested while I worked as a coachman. Many of the prisoners who went there to work never returned but we coachmen were lucky because they needed us to bring the horses back to the village of Mlaka to work. Before we left we were shackled and chained because three of the prisoners had run away and so, in Mlaka, we worked in chains. Now came the beginning of what we later called the Kozara Saga: the massive internment in the camp of elderly men and women and children. For days on end long columns of people arrived from Srem. In 1942 Jews were brought from Slavonski Brod and Osijek, then the women arrested in 1941 and 1942 in Tuzla, Doboj and Sarajevo. Some of these were kept in the camp while others were killed straight away. They brought in massive numbers of Gypsies from Srem and finally, in 1942, the women from Đakovo were interned and executed.

Brkljačić, who had been camp commander when we arrived, was succeeded by Father Majstorović, a Catholic priest who committed hideous crimes in the villages surrounding Banja Luka. Ljubo Miloš liquidated the Đakovo camp.

After the Gypsies were liquidated, unknown to us they brought in Catholics from Perušić, settling them in Gradina as free men, wearing Ustasha caps. They helped with grave digging, sorting and even killing. Later they established what was known as the bell tower, cramming prisoners into this building which consisted of a packaging assembly and a prison. It took its name from the adjacent shed full of bells looted from the demolished Orthodox churches.

The well-known Sarajevo painter Danijel Ozmo made sketches of inmates working on the dyke and managed to get them out of the camp through Safet Filipović who, after the liberation, was the Bosnian minister for internal affairs. They were later published in the journal of the People's Liberation Struggle under the title "Working on the Dyke". Ozmo was imprisoned in the bell tower, interrogated, tortured and tied, barely alive, to the bells, where he died.

In 1942 another commission came and the whole performance was repeated. They reached the conclusions that this was just a labour camp. Some of the prisoners were even taken to the Zagreb Commercial Fair



Happier days. Sister Mancika, mother Hermina and brother Albert (all murdered in Jasenovac), brother Moric (who died in the camp breakout), uncle and aunt Roteštajn (also slain in Jasenovac).

to display the carpentry, locksmith and brickwork products manufactured in the Ustasha labour camp of Jasenovac. Some of the inmates wore the insignia of a corporal, roaming the camp with a cane in their hand, ostensibly to keep order. Among them were a large number of criminals. All of them were Ustasha informers and some of them were even Ustashes who were being punished. The time soon came when it was enough to merely point a finger at someone to have them killed.

The year of 1943 was a little easier. Two new buildings were constructed, one of them outside the camp itself but within the complex. This housed the tailors and shoemakers workshops. In the other building, opposite it, the women were housed. The warden of the women's camp was Nada Luburić-Šakić, the sister of Maks Luburić and wife of Dinko Šakić, the commander of the Jasenovac camp. She was notorious, an outright criminal, with her own special means of torturing the women prisoners, who lived in much more difficult conditions than did we men. I saw this for myself, when I went into the women's camp as an electrician. The starving women were kept in stinking rooms with no ventilation. Nada Šakić herself selected individual women for Ustasha orgies and abuse.

Until 1942, killings were carried out in Gradina, at Granik and on the bank of the Sava where they would cut the throats of prisoners or crush their heads with sledgehammers and quarter their bodies with axes. Masses of bodies would drift down the Sava. When they became snagged, grenades were thrown to dislodge them and the corpses would float on down to Belgrade and beyond.

In 1943, three inmates escaped: Zlatko Vajler, later to become a colonel, a well-known Zagreb sportsman named Levi and a Serb whose name I can't recall. The other inmates were greatly heartened by this but we were soon to suffer for it: all of us were put in chains. I continued working as a coachman in Mlaka and worked the land. We all had open sores from the rubbing of the fetters.

After Vajler escaped, the Croats and Moslems were taken to Gradiška and the remaining Jews and Serbs transferred from there to Jasenovac. There were tailoring and shoemaking workshops in Gradiška and the living conditions were much better than in Jasenovac. A calmer period now ensued as the convoys left for Gradina. Šakić became camp warden. For the first time religious services were organised in the camp. One of the buildings in the village was remodelled as a mosque for the Moslems. They now had their own Ustasha first lieutenant, who wore a fez with the Ustasha emblem. The Catholics were

given the carpentry workshop where Majstorović and Brkljačić occasionally celebrated Mass. This was accompanied with music as there were many well-known musicians among the inmates. These included the Samlajić brothers from Zemun, the Sarajevo violinist Jahijel Finci and Volner the accordionist. Sometimes the musician inmates would give concerts, creating a distraction to ease the fearful tension in the camp as everyone wondered who would be killed next and when it would happen. One day they brought Volner in dead. He'd been stabbed repeatedly, butchered in fact. We later discovered that he had been taken to a wedding party in Dubočica and, after he had played, the drunken Ustashas took to him with their knives, claiming he had attempted to escape.

The most harrowing punishment for the inmates were the roll calls, when the number of prisoners to be killed in retaliation for any particular infraction was determined in front of the headquarters.

The sanctions imposed after the Vajler escape included shackling the inmates who went out of the camp to work. The Jews and Serbs from the tailoring and shoemaking workshops in Gradiška were transferred back to Jasenovac which now became a liquidation camp. Of course that's what it had already been: there was less killing in Gradiška than in Jasenovac. I worked in fetters as a coachman in Mlaka. Once, when we were resting the horses, the Ustashas selected ten coachmen to take the horses to the Sava to drink. We heard gunfire and then the Ustashas appeared, driving the horses back, shouting "Chetnik mother fuckers! Think they can escape from us!" Four of us were ordered to dig holes on the bank of the Sava to bury the ten bodies. The Ustashas had some kind of quota of how many prisoners they should kill each month.

When it was time to spray the maize, the horses were led by women and girls who beat them, making the horses twitch. This caused our fetters to cut into our legs opening up painful gashes. This went on for three or four months before we returned to Jasenovac. In the meantime they had murdered Volner because of his alleged attempt to escape. In retaliation for this, they singled out sixty prisoners, including the Samlajić brothers and other musicians. The men they selected were intellectuals, I suppose because they gave them the most problems. After this the quiet days ended and the roll calls and slaughter began again.

During 1943 the forestry group was often sent out of the camp to work and many times these inmates would never come back. One group, which included a number of older men, managed to kill several Ustashas. Among them was a man from Zavidovići, called Musafija, who later told

me how they had killed four of them: they hauled the felled tree trunks with oxen and had agreed beforehand that they would take the Ustashas by surprise and kill them. Seven of them then ran away, including Musafija, whose son, Hajndrih Musafija worked as a tally clerk in the brickyard, keeping records of brick and roof tile deliveries.



Jasenovac, *Danijel Ozmo, watercolour*

There was another incident when a group of prisoners went to the forest to cut trees for power poles. Among them were six electricians, including Moric Romano, who later died in Israel. There was a cowherd tending cattle nearby and a cow got astray among the prisoners. The cowherd asked the Ustashas if he could come to drive it out. He got permission and, while among us, casually asked the prisoners if they would be working there again the next day and one of them said we would be. The following day, when they arrived by truck, they were suddenly surrounded by Partisans and there was an exchange of rifle fire. Several Ustashas were killed, some were taken prisoner and the Partisans set fourteen camp inmates free. I found it later that this was a Slovenian unit under the command of Geca Bogdanović. They were from a brigade commanded by Radojica Nenezić, who was later pro-

moted to general. This was a shocking blow to the Ustashas. They immediately sent units out to find out what was going on. Captain Knežević was killed and a large number of wounded were brought back to the Ustasha hospital in the village.

Four or five days later the leader of the farming complex, Rafo Gaon, summoned me and, when I entered the office, said to me: "This is Mr Markić, you're to go with him. Get your personal things." I told him I had no personal things. I knew that Markić was a high ranking cutthroat and that if he'd come for me I was finished. "Go and get them straight away," he yelled. I had a mess kit and a torn blanket under which I slept, these were my only possessions. As a coachman I slept in the stable because it was safer than the shack, from which they took people and killed them in massive numbers.

The prisoners who happened to be in front of the stables at the time lowered their heads, they were sure I was about to be executed. He took me towards the sentry box and as we approached he barked: "Turn right!" So I knew he wasn't taking me for execution. I headed towards the passage and then I heard: "Not there, into the tunnel!" I thought that they must have started the crematorium in the brickyard up again. He took me to the electrical workshop. The boss there was a real expert named Singer, a German émigré. "Singer, here's an electrician for you," said Markić.

Of course I was delighted to join the electricians, this was some kind of security, but I was amazed that Markić knew I was an electrician. There was a man there from Zenica, Remzija Rebac. "We managed to get you here," he told me.

The farm complex in the camp managed to provide food and medicines to Partisan prisoners who had been forced to work in the clay pits. These were a series of huge pits full of water from which earth was dug to make bricks. The men worked there in fetters. They looked wretched, but somehow we managed to keep them going by getting them extra food. Most of them were Partisans who had been taken prisoner during the battles on the Sutjeska River. They were brought to the camp, put in chains and thrown into the clay pits to die.

As an electrician I was able to get into the Ustasha hospital where most of the doctors were Jewish. They pilfered food and medicines and we managed to smuggle them into the camp. Luckily for us the camp had a train to carry bricks and lengths of timber from the sawmill. A forestry locomotive hauled the wagons to the standard gauge track. As we came back from work, a Jewish engine driver from the forestry rail-

way in Zavidovići would always meet us. He would pick up the things we were carrying, on the pretext that they were too heavy for us. It was a risky business for him.



Šajer on April 22, 1945, after successfully escaping from the camp he had been in since 1941.

The camp inmates were always concerned that someone would try to do something forbidden, or try to help someone escape. Our organisation operated under extremely difficult circumstances. Before the electricians were liberated, the Partisans set fire to the power plant in Dubica and three prisoners were sent from the camp to repair it. Two of them were electricians and the third was an ordinary prisoner. When convoys of new prisoners arrived we would always approach them and if we recognised someone we would ask him his occupation and he would declare himself an electrician. So among us there were people who had never had anything to do with the trade but were allocated to the electrical workshop. They would dig holes for the power poles.

Čučo Papo from Visoko was a highly skilled tradesman who had worked as a foreman for my boss, David Finci, in Sarajevo. Finci was shot dead on August 3, 1941, along with the first Jewish hostages in Sarajevo, because the peasants in Ilijaš had mined the railway track. Čučo Papo was one of the three who went to repair the power plant and all three of them escaped.

In 1944 the camp commander was Dinko Šakić and the days of slaughter returned. The Ustashas forced the prisoners to find gold for them, which they did in the belief it would save their lives. The Ustashas also organised a group of people to search for gold among the prisoners.

There was a man called Kajmaković in the Serb shack, 3C. He was a farmer from Janja who made butter. Through our connections a fair quantity of the butter found its way to the women's camp until the Ustashas found out about it. Kajmaković was sentenced to fifty blows with a club. They ordered one of the blacksmiths to deliver this beating but he refused, saying: "I can't do that. You can kill me, but I won't do

it!” So one of the Ustashas beat Kajmaković with a bullwhip. He lived another three days and was then killed. Two days later they killed the blacksmith who had refused to carry out the beating.

In 1944 there was a burglary at the camp, the electrical workshop was broken into. We had a number of apprentices, these were boys of about fifteen, the sons of Ustashas, who were supposed to be learning the trade. In fact they did nothing except play cards and beat prisoners. From time to time they took part in the killings. There was one boy, Jukić, from Slavonski Brod, about fifteen years old. He slaughtered and slit throats along with the Ustashas. There were various spare parts in the workshop, where they made rifles and batteries, and among other things there was a high voltage box. The boys were bored so, out of curiosity, they opened the box and inside they found a plan of the minefield. It had been Remzija Rebac’s job to sketch a plan of the minefields in a hidden block leading towards Graplje, marking them out to be used in the event of a Partisan attack, because that was the easiest side to attack Jasenovac from. On one side there was the Sava, on the other the railway, elevated about two or three metres, while the third side facing Košutarica and the forest beyond, was occupied by bunkers. These boys had enough education to know what they had found: they took the draft to the commander.

There was a Jewish veterinary surgeon, Lev Matej, working on the camp farm. The Croatian artillery was based at Dubica and he used to go there with a corporal to treat the horses. In this way he kept in contact with the Communist Party committee in Dubica. As soon as the Ustashas discovered this, they sent orders by telephone for Matej to be arrested in Dubica. His companion, the Ustasha corporal, committed suicide. Among those they arrested were two Jews, Hajndrih Musafija and Druker. The rest were Serbs and Croats, 21 men altogether. To this day I don’t believe that Matej betrayed anyone, but that it was those boys who were responsible.

They took blow-torches and welding rods from our workshop, branding people with them until they confessed. Emerik Blum found out what was in store and managed to escape from Gradiška because if he had not he would have been killed. They set up a gallows behind the bell tower and hanged 21 prisoners in front of everyone. Among them was Mile Bošković, who was later proclaimed a National Hero. He begged Šakić not to have him hanged, because he was Montenegrin, but to be shot instead. Šakić obliged him personally: he ordered him to lie

down and fired two bullets into him. When Remzija Rebac was led to the gallows, a murderer from Lika by the name of First Lieutenant Frković came up to him and said "Come on Remzija, confess something." Remzija's confession was to spit at him, at which Frković sprang up and pulled him down, hanging him.

A few days later they invented some imaginary Chetnik organisation which was supposed to include the head of the kitchen, a Serb from near Rogatica, and some other people I knew. They hanged them all. They asked the kitchen man "So, what do you say, chief?" "I'll fuck your mother's mother when you come up here!" he replied. Later, as a deterrent, they executed a number of electricians and telephone operators on the pretext that they had been listening to news broadcasts.

Once the news came through that Belgrade had been liberated, the killings of Jews and Serbs became more frequent. On their bodies they hung placards reading "Greetings to liberated Belgrade".

At the beginning of 1945 work in the chain foundry was stepped up. Railway tracks were carted in vehicles and dragged to Gradina by a gang of more than two hundred men, the huge barrels of oil were taken away, graves were dug up and the bones burned in order to obliterate every trace. There were huge fires blazing all over the place, so that the whole neighbourhood stank. The camp itself was being liquidated. On April 13 a swarm of aircraft attacked the camp, destroying the workshops, the power plant, the command building, the clay pits, the brickyard and the chain foundry. As soon as the aircraft left, the Ustasha sentries secured the exit towards Novska, through which they feared the inmates could try to escape. On April 21 they lined us up in front of the command building, in front of a sentry box, in fact, because the building itself had been destroyed. They ordered us to bring our personal effects. Panic swept through the prisoners and a large number were subsequently hanged. There were shelves in the camp for tiles to dry on. Now they were stacked high with the bodies of the hanged prisoners. The two Bek brothers from Ludbreg, one 17 and the other 14, were hanged with their arms around each other.

There was a friend of mine, a mechanic from Knin who had been arrested in Zemun. I noticed he had something bulging under his shirt. "What's that?" I asked.

"I've got you some wire, so that you can hang yourself," he replied. I told him that I wouldn't hang myself. When I turned back he was no longer there. He hanged himself behind the workshop.

They forced us towards the shoemaking and tailoring building as hundreds of female prisoners walked towards us. When they reached us they began to sing "Farewell to you, Comrade," raising their hands and waving to us. The Ustashas were beside themselves with rage, all they could do was beat us. The women were taken away and slaughtered. We were pushed into the building, almost numb with fear.

After a little while someone came and told me that Ante Bakotić, the leader of the chemistry group, was looking for me. During Pićili's time they had brought large cauldrons to the camp. There were experiments in producing soap from human bodies, but they were a failure because we were just skin and bones. At the end, there was only water. Bakotić gave us a lot of help: he got some industrial tallow from the chemistry group, filtered it and used it to enrich the food of our comrades shackled in the clay pits. After a number of the Party comrades had been executed, he took over as leader. Now he told me "We've decided to break out. At the signal we'll kill the Ustashas. We'll head for Gate Five. Even if only a hundred of us make it, it will be worth it!" A little later the Ustashas arrived in pairs and escorted the group leaders out, probably hoping to discourage us from trying anything.

Some time after this there was a burst of mortar fire and the camp was soon ablaze. About ten shacks, the infirmary and the kitchen were all on fire. At about nine we heard the signal: "Let's go, comrades!" We surged forward. In the meantime we had armed ourselves with shoemaker's hammers, saws and other tools. We'd also executed about five criminals for fear they would betray us. We wrested a few weapons from the Ustashas and pushed through towards the four-post gate, which looked like an upturned table with a chest – the sentry bunker – sitting on it. From the gate itself two heavy machine guns rattled without pause. Some fell, others pushed on. It was my bad luck to run up against my older brother. He was gravely wounded and shouted "Leave me, I'm done for!" And then at one point, when the pile of bodies was in the way of the machine guns, our friend Gile Ristić snatched a machine gun. The Ustashas fled into the bunker and about 150 of us managed to run out of the camp. Once the Ustashas came to their senses they started throwing grenades and the way out was again blocked.

Bakotić had given me the job of cutting the telephone lines if I managed to get out, so that the Ustashas couldn't call for reinforcements from around the camps and the bunkers. I stopped at the first pole and wondered what to do. The rest were all running as hard as they

could. Did I have to climb that pole while the Ustashas were using all their weapons to fire on us from Gradina? Then I remembered that I was a member of the organisation. What would happen if I lived? Would I be called a coward for not doing my job? I climbed the pole and cut the line with shoemaker's shears. Now I didn't care whether I'd be shot or not, I'd accomplished my mission.

Beyond the camp wall there was a dyke with a bunker on it. The village of Košutarica was beyond the rim of the bunker, at the edge of the forest which faced the camp. I could see my comrades, well ahead of me in the distance. Many of them dived into the Sava, which was in flood. It was cold and raining and most of them drowned. I know of only one man who managed to swim across. His name was Čedo Huber. I met up with four others: Fridman from Zagreb, and the others were Jovica, Slavko and Arso. For three days we wandered, starving and chilled to the bone, but I felt neither tiredness nor pain, not even aware that I was treading on thorns. At long last we reached Jablanac after having swum seven times across the Strug River which meandered through the forest. At Jablanac we heard machine gun fire and headed in the opposite direction, arriving at a broad spread of pasture. There was a house there where we sheltered overnight. It was cold and we had nothing to make a fire with so we emerged stiff and sore in the morning. Then we caught sight of a farmer who had come to plough the field hanging his lunch bag on a tree. If we stole it he would raise an outcry and there were Ustashas nearby. He approached us and asked us if we were from the camp. "We're Montenegrins, we're running away from the hospital," we told him. He told us that we were close to Gradiška and then left us. We wanted to reach Papuk and hurried towards the railway line but it was swarming with Germans, Ustashas, civil defence guards and Chetniks. We returned and ran into the farmer again. This time we told him we were inmates from the camp and surrounded him, tree branches in our hands, just in case. We asked him why he had asked us if we were from the camp.

"I was sent from the Srbac command," he replied. "There are five of us field men, they sent us to shelter those of you who made it out." Then he showed us his identity papers and with relief we saw the five-pointed star on them. He took us to a dugout cabin, opened it and told us "This is where you'll hide. Our runners have used this place to rest during the day since 1941. It's never been discovered so, if you hear anything, just stay calm. I'll try to get you some food, but not before morning."

He was gone for three days. We ate leaves in the forest, we had already been half-dead with hunger when we escaped from the camp. We immediately decided who would keep watch in the bushes in case anybody approached so that we would have a chance to flee. During the night we heard someone walking around, an uneven gait, first a thump then a normal step. It was an old man. When he fell we picked him up and saw that he had only one leg and was walking with a crutch. When he asked us who we were we replied "You can see we're not enemies, because you've come to this shelter."

"I have two sons with the Partisans," he told us. "The Ustasha are preparing to flee, they're going to kill everyone in the village. I've already been hiding here for a couple of days. I'm a Partisan committee member."

The next morning we were brought some food by two women. About half an hour later we saw the old man walking across the field shouting "Freedom, comrades, freedom!" I saw some kind of an army, although they didn't look very military. They were wearing the kind of peasant shoes they wear in the Pirot area and their clothes were worn and patched, just like ours. This was the 21st Serb Division, formed in the Toplica area. We enlisted in the Fifth Serb Brigade. When we arrived and they saw us, half dead as we were, they brought us bread and bacon, but just then an officer with a pistol intervened.

"Don't touch that!" I thought Hitler had arrived. But then he explained: "Comrades, you mustn't eat this now, because of your stomach, your bowels, the diarrhoea. We're going to make you some tea."

Most of us who had escaped from the camp joined the 21st Serb Division. It was a warm welcome. Some of us were sent to hospitals, and the older ones were sent home. Although I was weak I wanted to fight and wouldn't accept anything else. When we arrived in Celje I recognised a lot of the Ustashas from Jasenovac and managed to save a number of home guardsmen who had been forced to wear the Ustasha insignia.

The war cost me my mother, two sisters, two brothers, both of whom died in Jasenovac, and many more distant relatives. From Celje I went to Niš where I completed my service. And there I was married. I have two daughters and four granddaughters. They are all I have. Everything else I lost in 1941. I had a house in Neum, but when Tudman came to power I lost even that. Now I'm back to where I started. I'm retired and now live on my pension.