Nada and Vlado SALZBERGER

THE OSIJEK FLYING SQUAD

Nada Salzberger was born in Našićka Breznica on January 14, 1923, to Milka (née Klingenberg) and Josip Grinvald. Her mother Milka and sister Aleksandra (Sanda) were killed in the Holocaust. After the war she worked as a clerk, first in the Karlovac post office and then in Zagreb's First District. During the time of her husband's career in Lučani and Belgrade she was a housewife.

Vlado Salzberger was born in Zagreb on January 25, 1922, to Hermina (née Asher) and Herman Salzberger. His mother, father and sister Mirjam (Mirica) died in the Holocaust. After the war he worked as an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army, before studying in Zagreb. He then worked as an engineer in the Milan Blagojević company in Lučani. He was subsequently assistant director of Milan Blagojević and Hemko in Belgrade.

They have two sons, Fedor (Feđa) and Branko, four grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

There was a flying squad operating within the Jewish religious community in Osijek between October or November, 1941, and May, 1942. After that there were no longer enough permanent team members

in Osijek and the work of the community itself had changed. It was no longer possible to work in the Đakovo camp and the flying squad no longer existed. The building site at the Tenje settlement then became extremely important, as did the job of moving the Osijek Jews there. Soon after that, the Jews were deported from the settlement to German concentration camps in occupied Poland.

While the flying squad was in operation, the Jews in Osijek and the surrounding areas were living in extraordinary circumstances. Several groups of men from Osijek and the majority of those from the surrounding areas had been dispatched to the camps, although nobody knew then that they were death camps. Most of Osijek's Jewish residents, and especially the women from the surrounding area, stayed there for about nine months after the first groups were dispatched with no new deportations. Of course their circumstances had completely changed. Each apartment now housed several families and Ustasha agents had installed themselves in every shop and every company. Independent professionals and tradesmen were mostly barred from working and Jews were forbidden from moving around without wearing identifying symbols. Then a curfew was imposed. There was an ever-present feeling of some impending catastrophe, although this was never actually formulated. Together with all the new day-to-day problems, we thought constantly about those who had been abducted: family members, cousins, people we knew and Jews in general. We stayed in touch with some of them through the permitted forms of mail, postcards and parcels. There was constant harassment in the streets, especially by Germans. Then the rumours began to spread about the killing of Serbs and about the victories and operations of the Partisans. Although these events were happening far away, we heard about them from the announcements of courts martial and in some areas from the illegal Partisan, Communist Youth and Party news sources, all of which could be gleaned from the Ustasha's own newspapers.

The long gap between those first convoys and the mass deportations of the Osijek Jews may be explained by the ethnic make-up of Osijek. Apart from a certain proportion of Serbs and Jews, the town was largely a German-Croat mix. Osijek was the centre of Croatia's German ethnic community. Although Croats were in the majority, they regarded the activities of the Germans gathered in the *Kulturbund* as a serious provocation. The Croats wanted to decide when the mass transfer of the Jews to camps would begin. However this would have been seen by the

Germans as an expression of independence by the Croats in resisting the German plan to deport them as soon as possible. In the event, a new and decisive factor emerged, probably by the end of 1941, when the Jewish community in Osijek and Jews from the surrounding area agreed to take responsibility for financing the Đakovo camp. It should be noted here that the Đakovo camp, because of this, was treated much less harshly and that this continued until the Ustashas took over the camp in April, 1942.

Vlado and Nada Salzberger in Osijek, 1941-42.

The leaders of the Jewish religious community were completely different from those in peacetime. Earlier there had been a more or less Zionist management, but now the people had changed completely. We didn't have any kind of list of community members, but in our day-to-day contacts we saw who was there. Nor did we know anything about the Croatian Ustasha authorities' criteria for approving the make-up of the Municipal Council. No one in the council was under any illusion that their position would make their fate any easier, although at this time we were not aware of the kind of catastrophe that lay ahead. We remember that some of the people involved were the chairman, Dr Miroslav Friedman, who was a lawyer, another lawyer, Dr Slavko Klajn, timber expert Vlado Grinbaum, industrialist Andrija Rip, mill proprietor Julio Sternberg, cinema owner Hari Vajngruber, the pharmacist Hecht, the mill boss Mautner and Viktor Bek. There was no one in

the community who wasn't active, or at least we don't remember anyone. Together with the community members, the husband of a teacher from the former Jewish primary school, Albin Levi, was always there, acting as a kind of caretaker for the community premises.

Except for Vlado Grinbaum, whose wife was Catholic, and Albin Levi who escaped death with his wife and now lives in Jerusalem, all of these community members were sent to Tenje and then on to death camps. Some of them, like Andrija Bandi Rip, as far as can be seen from his letters from Tenje, had already been dreadfully mistreated during their short stay there.

At first the flying squad was not as highly organised as it became later on. In the beginning, we would go to the community centre and do whatever jobs, mainly outdoor physical work, were needed. As problems evolved and the workload grew, there were a number of disagreements between some members of the Community Council and the young people who felt that their elders were not giving them enough respect. So about the middle of November 1941, there was an open discussion between the young people and the council members. This resulted in the team being formalised as an organisation and from then on relations with all the members of the community were very solid and efficient.

The first permanent make-up of the flying squad was small, consisting of high school graduates Ivo Šoten, Vlado Salzberger and Riko Frei, locksmith Zvonko (Levi) Šmit, carpentry apprentice Zvonko Drajziger, Franjo Weiss and Muki Haberfield. Herman Haberfield joined a little later. There wasn't any kind of pre-war plan in this lineup. They were young people who met more or less frequently, brought together by their day-to-day assignments. I don't remember any conflicts. Even when more members joined the team because there was so much work to do there were no problems, although some of them were older than the others. It should be mentioned that the flying squad was given its assignments and then would distribute them among the members to carry them out. We helped with the increasingly frequent moving of Jews into shared apartments, with setting up a Jewish soup kitchen, providing supplies for the camps, collecting assistance to be sent to the inmates of the Jasenovac camp and many other tasks.

In the middle of December, 1941, we began preparing to speed up the reception of female inmates into the Đakovo camp. When this began, one of the flying squad's most important jobs was to renovate

the mill of the Đakovo diocese which had been earmarked for accommodating Jewish women and children from Bosnia. It was our job to make it suitable for accommodation. The female inmates arrived while we were still working and we finished the renovation with the help of the younger ones. This was a big job which involved building beds on every floor of the mill, fencing in one part of the ground floor, building separate premises for the administration and an office, as well as hygiene facilities and outdoor latrines.

Members of the flying squad which operated in the Jewish Community in Osijek from November, 1941, to May, 1942.

The flying squad paid special attention to welcoming that first group of women and children, and others after them. While the cooks prepared hot drinks and food, the team members would wait for the women as they arrived by train and take them to their accommodation. Many of them were elderly and literally had to be carried to their beds.

Most of the team members were young people of about nineteen or twenty. They treated the women arriving from Sarajevo, Olovo, Travnik, Žepče and other places as though they were their own mothers, sisters and grandmothers. The behaviour of the small children who, although they were tired and hungry were innocently playful and naughty, made a huge impression on us. All of this seemed to give us renewed strength.

Then followed a period of heavy work both at Đakovo and in the community centre in Osijek. At the camp we worked on improving the living conditions and organising accommodation, on helping with setting up for a basic medical service, on establishing a kindergarten and such things. In Osijek we were now also working on collecting assistance for Đakovo. A large number of children were transferred from the camp to Jewish families in Osijek and the surrounding districts, including Našice, Vinkovci and Donji Miholjac. Juliška Kraus was particularly involved in this because the children often needed to be taken to the place they would live.

It was soon obvious that the flying squad, now also known as the Đakovo team, would have to be expanded. Dragutin (Hajim) Kon, Eli Goldštajn, Švarc (Rojbek), Zdenko Volf, Janoš Kon and Nada (Rahel) Grinvald joined the team. A large number of girls, working independently of the flying squad, helped out with collecting clothing. These included Ljerka Adler, Mina Fišer, Melanka Inselt, Bek, and a girl from the Đakovo camp called Lola Atijas. From the work at Đakovo we also remember Zlatko Vamošer, Vlada Kraus, Branko Polak and Branko Mautner, who helped out when it was most needed.

The Đakovo camp deserves a separate story for itself, but we would like to emphasise the commitment of Lev Kister to a number of activities. Within the Jewish camp administration, together with the manager, Vlada Grinbaum, special mention should be given to Ladislav (Eli) Grinbaum, Dr Ladislav Lederer and Dragutin Glasner, who ran the camp administration. There were also a number of people we didn't know from the surrounding Jewish communities who helped with supplies for the camp: Samuel Grinvald from Vinkovci, and another man from Vinkovci by the name of Špiler who, whether or not he deserved it, was rumoured to be a police informer.

As noted above, the arrival of the female camp inmates, those helpless, elderly and middle-aged women bowed with concern for their missing sons and husbands, the young mothers with children and young

girls, provided an emotional spur for the team to commit themselves fully. Because of this, a strong mutual respect sprang up between the women and the young members of the team. There was a group of girls who played a significant role among the inmates. They had previously been in the progressive Sarajevo Matatja group and became the soul of some of the camp activities. This mutual respect was perhaps best expressed in the celebrations prepared jointly in the camp itself for the anniversary of the March 27 demonstration.

The question arises of how it was, given this highly aware group of young women in the camp, the strong connections with the outside and the activities of the flying squad, that nobody fled the camp. From our personal experience we know that the people from our circle who worked with the underground resistance were not actively recruited for the Partisans. The special treatment received by this camp and the extraordinary ignorance about the real nature of other camps, together with the fact that all the younger women were together with older ones in the camp also contributed to them not wanting to jeopardise the whole camp, which an escape would have done.

The typhus epidemic caused by the rapid spread of lice through the camp came as a serious blow and a challenge for both inmates and those who worked with the camp. Such things were almost inevitable in a camp overcrowded with inmates from various places in Bosnia, along with the arrival of women from the Stara Gradiška camp who were probably already infected. We well remember Dr Laci Lederer's valiant leadership of the hygiene team, but even he finally had to confront the inevitable epidemic. The nucleus of the flying squad took part in the disinfection operation, together with a number of older people from the camp administration, the municipality and some hygiene professionals form Đakovo. Those taking part risked catching typhus from their unavoidable exposure to lice during their contacts with the patients. All of our work was voluntary, but particular emphasis was laid on this for this operation, although not one of us young people refused this duty when asked.

The vast ground floor space was set up to accommodate the infected and those who had developed symptoms. There was no time to build bunks; instead, beds were set up with mattresses on the floor. The patients had to be moved from everywhere in the mill, from all the floors. The majority of the women were very elderly and most were not capable of taking even a single step from their beds in remote parts of

the building. Ivo Šoten, who was in charge of the transfers was a real sight, carrying them in his arms and on his back down the stairs to their new accommodation. The lice crawled onto him but, tirelessly, without halting, he continued. He had a kind word for each of the elderly women. He was full of energy when it was needed and could always coax a smile from the distressed and frightened women. An older pharmacist, Heht, was given the job of scalding clothing and other articles to disinfect them. This middle-aged man devoted himself to running for each new pile of louse-ridden clothes, always being careful to keep the fire burning under his cauldron, battling to put as much of this clothing as possible through the disinfection process. He was certainly aware of the danger these clothes presented to him but, zealously, he kept going, not letting this threat hinder his selfless work.

At the beginning of April, 1942, the idea came up among the flying squad people of somehow recording events in the camp. The plan was to keep the documentation, or perhaps to send it to the International Red Cross, or make it available when the Ustashas were put on trial, as no one doubted they eventually would be. The idea of taking photographs was also agreed on, so Vlado Salzberger took his camera back from the person who was looking after it for him. Everyone knew that Jews were not permitted to have cameras. The camera was smuggled into the camp with the knowledge of Vlado Grinbaum, and Salzberger spent several days busily taking photographs. Secrecy dictated that only a small number of the inmates should know about this, most of them young women from the Matatja group. They frequently formed a human screen in order to shield the photographer so that the most typical features of the camp could be captured: the overcrowded accommodation, the unhygienic conditions, the inadequate number of latrines (no permission had been given for extra latrines) and so on. In the evening, the camera was kept in the camp office, accessible only to the volunteers and inmates who worked for the administration. It remained in the camp until the team's last day there, the day before the Ustasha suddenly invaded.

We learnt later about the fate of the camera. When the Ustashas made one of their first inspections of the camp, they took Dr Čeleda, a physician from Đakovo. When they visited the camp office, one of the younger inmates surreptitiously pushed the camera into his hands, because she trusted him, and he took it out of the camp. An attempt to

find the film from the camera after the war came to nothing after it was reported that Dr Čeleda had been killed.

The flying squad's last day in Đakovo was April 16, 1942. The team set off for the camp as usual, taking the usual precaution of sending two members ahead to check the situation. They found Ustasha guards and machine guns positioned at the camp entrance instead of police. This was the end of the flying squad's activities in the Đakovo camp, but they continued operating in the Jewish community in Osijek. The team was deeply disturbed, not only by the disastrous arrival of the Ustashas at the Đakovo camp (and the consequences of this were still not known with any certainty), but by the frequent deportations and summonses to forced labour, especially in the Tenje settlement.

Nada and I had to leave Osijek suddenly on May 11, 1942. We had managed, with my father's help, to buy travel passes illegally from a local government clerk in Našice. However, because we became involved in the activities of the flying squad, and given that we both had large families who had no possibility of fleeing, the passes lay unused until May 10.

That day we were returning together from forced labour in the Tenje settlement. We were in a group with Kalman Kon (who after the war was known as Kalman Vajs) and another three or four young people. In the ensuing incident, which has been described elsewhere, in front of a crowd of people in the street and others watching through their windows, Kalman physically fended off a group of German *Hitlerjugend* and was subsequently arrested. He attempted to escape but was captured again, then tortured and beaten in the command building of the Volksdeutscher Einsatzstaffel. That same evening I learnt that the Ustashas had been at the Jewish soup kitchen investigating the incident and had threatened to use their weapons, insisting that there had been a girl in the group with Kalman. They got Nada's name, so later in the evening I went to fetch her and took her to some people we knew well. The next day, thanks to the skilful driving of the taxi driver Bolvari, we managed to reach Našice where my parents and sister lived and where our travel passes were valid. Ten days later we left Našice and, after a dramatic journey, reached Mostar.

We stayed in Mostar for about a month, looking in vain for work and living on assistance given by the Jewish community. While we were there we heard that my parents and my sister, together with everyone else from Našice, had been sent to Jasenovac. At the end of June we

began hearing more and more alarming news about the arrival of Jure Francetić's Black Legion of Ustashas, so we left Mostar. Our travel passes were valid for Crikvenica, and we arrived at Omiš by ship from Metković. In Mostar, the Italian military headquarters had added a rider in our passes forbidding us to go to Split because it had been annexed by Italy. Omiš was the last port before Split.

We stayed in Omiš from the beginning of July to the beginning of December 1942. Until the beginning of October we were free, under the protection of the Italian authorities. But in October, together with the other Jews in Omiš (there were only six of us), we were imprisoned in a building under an Italian army guard. It was there in Omiš that we received our last letters from Nada's mother and sister who told us about the deportation of the Osijek Jews to the camps. This was the last we heard of Nada's mother and sister and the rest of her large family.

At the beginning of December we were transferred to Sumartin, on the island of Brač, where a camp for about 150 people had been set up in an unfinished hotel. We were accommodated in rooms with furniture made of boxes and dressed in clothes taken from locals. There we spent about six months of our life in the camps. The kapo there was Franjo Špicer who, in reality, was the writer Erwin Schinko. He had been selected by the camp inmates and was very popular, especially among the younger inmates, for his optimism.

In about the middle of May, 1943, we were moved from Sumartin to the island of Rab, along with the inmates of other camps in places held by the Italians. A large camp for Jews was established there in which Franjo Špicer was again chosen as kapo.

When Italy capitulated, a Jewish Rab Battalion was founded, as the logical outcome of the lively underground activity in this camp.