Bojana JAKOVLJEVIĆ

THROUGH KAVAJE AND FERRAMONTI

Bojana, Bojka to her friends, was born in Belgrade in 1922, the first of three daughters and one son, to Samuilo, a mechanical engineer and Rebeka Jakovljević (née Amodaj), the owner of a highly regarded dressmaking business in Palmotićeva Street. She also had a younger brother.

Despite the war, she completed the senior level of secondary school in June, 1941, in Belgrade and Kotor. From July, 1941, until the autumn of 1943 she was held in a refugee camp in Ferramonti in southern Italy. In June, 1944, she joined the National Liberation Army on Vis and, in October, returned to Belgrade as a correspondent for the state news agency, Tanjug.

Over the next four years, Bojana studied Yugoslav literature and French at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade University. As a teacher of French at Belgrade's Second Grammar School she won the respect of philologists, educators and students. She finished her career as a senior education inspector. She had an excellent command of four foreign languages and published a large number of literary and professional translations from these.

Bojana sat on the boards of the Jewish Community of Belgrade and the International Council of Jewish Women. From 1993, she lived in Tel Aviv, where she worked as editor-in-chief of the Bulletin of the Association of Yugoslav Jews. She died in December, 1999, leaving two sons, Mića and Nenad, and four grandsons.

The ship, with its cargo of Jews from all over Boka Kotorska, set sail from the Tivat shipyard for the open sea on July 25, 1941. There were about two hundred of us, men women and children of all ages on the deck of the once luxurious Kumanovo.

Bojana (right) with her mother Rebeka, her brother, and her sisters, Nina and Olga. Herceg Novi, July 11, 1941

We had been arrested over the past few days and nights by the Italians, who now occupied Montenegro and Boka. We had fled to the coast from the German and Ustasha persecution of Jews in Belgrade, Vojvodina, Bosnia and Croatia and now there was nowhere left to run. All the roads and paths on the mountains of Orjen and Lovćen above Boka were blocked and had been under fire since the Partisan uprising which had erupted in Montenegro on July 13, 1941. The Italians took us in groups by trucks and motor launches to the Kumanovo in Boka Kotorska. Dozens of locals had already been arrested and were now held under the deck. There we stayed, on board in the shipyard, for three days while the boat was repaired and painted in dark green camouflage colours. The repairs weren't entirely successful however and the boat listed heavily.

As we sailed towards the mouth of the bay, we watched anxiously, all overwhelmed by the same chilling suspense: when we leave the bay will we turn right or left, or will we sail straight out across the Adriatic Sea? At the many gatherings and meetings of camp survivors over the fifty years since the war, we each learnt that all the others had been racked with the same anxiety: if the ship sails left, towards the north we will be sailing towards disaster, into the hands of the Germans or the Ustashas, if it heads south they will throw us into prison in Bar or Uljcin. We had already heard the rumours about the prisons in Montenegro while we were in Boka. The least of all evils would perhaps be straight out towards Italy, but this was probably an empty hope.

The ship sailed south from the bay. We were all relieved, but our fear of the worst was replaced by the anxiety of uncertainty. Where were they taking us? What lay in waiting for us?

I don't remember how long it took us to sail to Durres in Albania. I remember only that we were counted as we left the boat and the humiliating feeling of being loaded into trucks as though we were numbers. I have an indelible memory of the high barbed-wire fence with guard towers on both sides of the gate through which we entered the concentration camp. As we entered the fenced area it was as though our bodies felt the pricks of the barbed wire. Our disgust and humiliation when we saw the huge, dilapidated and dirty shed with no doors or windows was even more painful. It had probably been some kind of warehouse or storage building. We stood horrified and bewildered in front of the demountable shelves of wooden slats, not comprehending that these were our beds and that we were to settle ourselves and our luggage into them – women and children to the right, men to the left, with no partition between them. The appalling lack of hygiene remains my worst memory. For drinking and washing, each person stood in a queue each day to be given one mess pan full of water doled out from a tank. We would sit on the dusty floor beside the shed wall eating a meal of gruel from our mess kits and every night cleaned out bedbugs and various other pests in a feverish struggle to reach the level of hygiene we needed to stay healthy. Despite all this, our feet were soon covered in boils, leaving many of us with permanent scars. The other abominations, the stench, the worst of the unhygienic horrors have been suppressed in our memories. None of us mentioned them at any of our post-war reunions, wanting only to forget such things.

There were exactly 192 of us Jews accommodated in our shed. The other five or six buildings were already full of Montenegrins, most of them women with children and the elderly. We calculated that there were more than a thousand male and female inmates altogether in the Kavaje camp. We soon managed to learn through various channels, mainly the people who were sent from each shack on kitchen duty, that the Montenegrins had been rounded up from villages which the occupiers believed to have harboured Partisans during the July uprising. During August, trucks would arrive almost every day with new inmates, those suspected of collaborating or sympathising with the uprising, together with whole clans, most of them women and children.

Some of the male and female students from our Jewish group somehow managed to find out the first details about the uprising and the first, sad news about the victims who had been shot in Montenegro. This information came across the barbed wire between our shed and the Montenegrin sheds from Montenegrin women who had been studying in Belgrade and taken part in the March demonstrations in 1941.

Among our group there were three doctors who had brought small amounts of medicine with them. We managed to smuggle some medicines across to the Montenegrin women, some of whom were seriously ill. Two of these later became ambassadors for the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and one of them told me a quarter of a century later in Belgrade that she would never forget the Jews who saved her life in the camp in 1941.

The most striking event I remember was the arrival of a prominent Jew, a Belgrade merchant, in front of the camp gate. Together with his wife and son he had managed to escape the Germans and crossed through Macedonia to reach the Italian-occupied zone and Albania. To our surprise, the guards allowed some of us, on the pretence of being cousins, to go and talk to him at the gate. They returned, with horror on their faces and tears in their eyes, and passed on the terrible news of the first hundred Belgrade Jews who had been taken from the "assembly point" in Tašmajdan Park and shot. We learnt about the ever more harsh measures being taken against Jews and Gypsies in Belgrade. We heard about the terrible explosion in Smederevo, where no one knew the fate of a Jewish working party who had been there on forced labour. They also told us that Belgrade had been stunned by the news that we had been deported from Boka Kotorska by the Italians, thus cutting the rescue channel for Belgrade Jews. They had no idea at that time where we had been taken. I don't know how this man from Belgrade found out where we were in Albania or how he found us. A few more families and individuals from Belgrade followed in his footsteps and made it to Albania. The majority of them managed to survive the war and the German occupation after Italy capitulated in September, 1943, by hiding in Albanian villages.

October 1941 heralded a severe winter. We froze in our doorless and windowless shed; we would wrap ourselves in layers of clothes and trudge through the puddles of dirty water and mud around the shed. We stopped making the weekly trips to the shower tent which we had enjoyed in August and September, despite having to return afterwards to the pigsty of the camp. At that time we had no idea of the kind of showers to which the Germans took the Jews in their death camps.

Finally, on October 23, the camp commandant called an assembly, took a roll call and told us were heading off "across the Adriatic" to his wonderful country where we would experience the "centuries-old Italian humanity." We took these words with a grain of salt, but we were happy to be leaving the disgusting camp, despite not knowing where we were going. The Montenegrins were returned to their homes in October so, by the time we left, the camp was almost empty.

After three months of "camping" in Kavaje we were loaded onto an Italian ship in a convoy in the same port of Durres where we had disembarked at the end of July. I remember a girl who didn't want to clean the mud from her shoes when we left because she wanted to take some Balkan soil with her into her uncertain future. Once again we were loaded as numbers, with no names or tickets.

Throughout the voyage we were filled with the icy horror of our conflicting feelings: one the one hand we wished that the Allied forces would sink this Fascist convoy, on the other we feared this might actually happen to us. We knew that there was no possible way of letting the Allied pilots know that we were *internati civili di guerra* (civilian prisoners of war) while our ears were pierced by the wailing of alarm sirens. We had no life jackets.

We were unloaded in Bari and passed through columns of Mussolini's Black Shirts who shouted at us and ran their fingers across their throats. I suppose they were telling us we deserved to be slaughtered. They calmed down a little when the men and boys had passed and they saw there were an even greater number of women and children in line.

We were immediately packed onto a train. I don't know how, but some of us managed to get our bearings and realise that the train was headed south, towards the heel or toe of the Italian boot.

Our first impression, our sighs of relief when we saw the better conditions in the Ferramonti camp after our three months of deprivation and discomfort in Kavaje soon gave way to tedium as the days stretched on and on. The image of the Ferramonti camp which remains in my memory is of regular rows of white-painted sheds, with each two sharing a communal toilet. This was a blessing after the unhygienic horrors of Kavaje. We stood in queues for water at the taps in some of the barracks, we stood in queues outside the kitchens for our food to be doled out of cauldrons, or for our rations in front of the storehouse in the case of those families who could prepare food on a brazier in their miniature "apartments". In the mornings, there would be a crowd waiting for the Red Cross to distribute mail censored by the Italians. The memories of the large recreation area are more pleasant than those of the few square metres we had around the shed in Kavaje. We started to learn Italian, and other languages, individually or in small groups. This was voluntary, but we did it out of necessity, just in case. The boys from the various barracks also played football.

Families were accommodated in barracks with partitioned rooms, no larger than ten square metres, where there was room for several folding beds, a small table and a small brazier. Men and women without families were in separate barracks, dormitories with forty camp beds in each. There was a curfew (*coprifuoco*) and we were forbidden to walk around from the evenings until the morning, but many made visits in secret, especially young couples, risking being thrown into a camp prison cell (*camera di sicurezza*) for a few days if the supervisors on duty caught them. We soon discovered a few kindly supervisors who would close their eyes to this kind of infraction. As for the real Fascists, the Black Shirts, we stayed away from them as much as possible.

The camp authorities were often unpredictable, full of strange Italian contradictions: the camp was built on a swampy, mosquito-ridden field but they would give us quinine to protect us against malaria. They had a policy of reuniting families and relatives, releasing individuals and families from the camps and confining them in villages throughout Italy (*libero confino*) for this purpose. In this way many people managed to reach their "uncles" or "aunts" although they had no relatives anywhere in the country. The authorities believed the sham relationships, even though the people had different surnames. At the same time, for reasons known only to themselves, they would intern families living in open confinement and imprisoned individuals for illegally crossing the Croatian border (into Pavelić's "independent" Ustasha state from which the Jews were fleeing, in fear of deportation to the death camps). Along with Jews they would also intern citizens of other countries and territories then occupied by Italy, such as Greece, Dalmatia, Slovenia and the south of France. The two largest groups were brought in 1942. The first was a hundred Orthodox Greeks from Tripoli, which was an Italian colony in Libya before the conflict with Allied troops in north Africa, and the second was about three hundred Jews from Austria and Czechoslovakia, transferred from internment on Rhodes. The odyssey of this group was a story fit for a novel. In Ferramonti they were known as "the people from Rhodes". After the *Anschluss* and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1938, they set off on boats and a barge down the Danube, finally reaching Kladovo. Only one or two groups managed to pass through the Bulgarian and Rumanian border controls on the Danube after Kladovo. They were on a boat flying the Bulgarian flag and bearing the Bulgarian name "Penčo". The Italian name, "Stefano", had been painted out and the Italian flag lowered. This happened towards the end of October, 1940. All the other groups that followed later on ships and barges, about eight hundred Jews, most of them from Austria and Slovakia were sent back up the Danube and the Sava to Šabac, because the Romanian authorities would not permit them to sail any further. They managed to live there, by various means, until the war began in Yugoslavia in 1941. After the war we learned their tragic fate: the men were shot in Zasavica together with the Šabac Jews in 1941. The women and children and the elderly were taken from the Šabac camp in the freezing winter to the old Sajmište camp in Belgrade and none of them left it alive. The Vienna Jewish Community built a memorial to them in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade.

The first group from Kladovo on the Penčo, the majority of whom were Jews from Czechoslovakia, were allowed to pass by the Romanians. After a long and arduous voyage down the Danube to the Black Sea, then through the Bosporus and the Dardanelles, they reached the Aegean Sea. There they were shipwrecked, but the majority were saved and transferred to Rhodes. After the wartime break-up of Greece, the Italian occupying authorities moved them to Ferramonti.

There were just over two thousand permanent inmates in the camp, but between 1940 and 1943 perhaps two or three times that number passed through. Most of these were Jews, but there were also citizens from other countries and occupied territories, even a small group of Chinese civilians who had been captured on board ships.

An old monk took care of the Christians in his chapel and tried to convert some of the Jews to Christianity. I don't know whether he succeeded in this, although I have heard that some used this as a ploy to win themselves a brief respite from the unhappy Jewish fate and take refuge in Catholic monasteries.

When a group of Greeks from Tripoli arrived together with an Orthodox priest (I think he was a bishop, in fact), we Jews suffered an extremely humiliating incident, something the Italians did not usually indulge in, unlike the Germans and the Ustashas. The Greeks were assigned to an unfinished barracks, but refused to enter, spending the whole night and the next day in the open. The camp commandant, Paolo Salvatore, was a Calabrese nobleman who always wore civilian clothes and behaved with tolerance. He was senior in rank to the commander of the Fascist militia in the camp, a hardened Fascist and Black Shirt. But this Fascist now ordered us Jews to move from our barracks into the unfinished ones, saying "They can finish them by themselves if it's so urgent". When the Jews invoked the unwritten rule of first come first served, which had applied in all previous cases, he said "The Greeks have rights because they are Greeks, but you Jews have no rights because you're Jews!"

We have contradictory memories about the outcome of this unpleasant affair. Whenever we've talked about it at our gatherings since the war, many say the Jews were forced to give up the barracks, while many of us remember the Greeks as displaying extraordinary solidarity and refusing to take new barracks in such a way. If my memory serves me correctly, we worked together to finish the new barracks very quickly and the Greeks joined us in the camp as fellow sufferers.

There were various ways of finding out what was happening with the war. The main news source was camp newcomers, then the word of mouth which spread when anyone received news in a letter. I remember us reading Italian newspapers, although I don't know how we managed to get them. We were stunned by the tragic events throughout Yugoslavia, the mass shootings in Kragujevac, Šabac and other places of execution, the suffering and probable killing of Jewish men deported from Belgrade in October, the women, children, elderly and sick taken from all over Serbia to the Sajmište camp in the harsh winter of 1941–42. We heard about the rebellions in the forests and the deportation of Jews from Croatia and Bosnia to Ustasha camps. But we heard no more precise details about all the terrible events of the Holocaust until the war ended, nor were we certain of whether we in Italy would be saved, because there was no rapid end to the war or the Nazi terror in sight at the time.

Bojana Jakovljević (far left) with her sisters, Olgica (fourth from left) and Nina (fifth from left) and a group of friends after the liberation of Rome in the summer of 1944.

There were Jews from almost every European country in the camp and the great majority were not religious. Among those of us from Yugoslavia, almost no one was. There were some religious and even strictly orthodox Jews in the Rosh Hashanah group from Slovakia. They turned one of their small rooms into a synagogue and the devout would come for prayers, wearing the talithot. The authorities didn't forbid this, after all, they allowed Christian priests to hold services for their faithful. In both Kavaje and Ferramonti we fasted for Yom Kippur as a sign of our devotion to Judaism, which now faced a deadly peril. One of the contradictions of the Italians was that although they practised religious tolerance – in other words they accepted the Jewish identity – they demanded the Fascist salute during roll calls (*appello*). We avoided this as much as we could, although disobedient young people would earn a few days or nights in the prison cell for it. Once, the Fascist commandant decided it was a good idea to teach us a lesson with the Fascist salute, saying this should be an honour for us because when we faced the Germans we would have to fall to our knees. We were anxious about our fate when we heard that the Germans had asked Mussolini to hand over "his" Italian Jews as well as all those who had escaped under German occupation.

This anxiety about being handed over to the Germans became real fear when, in the summer of 1942, in the middle of the camp, Mirko Davičo, a Jew from Belgrade who had been a Communist before the war, was caught and led off. We learned later that the Ustashas had demanded that he be handed over to them. After the war we learnt that he had been killed in Jasenovac. Not until several decades later did we discover from the confiscated archives that Mussolini's Fascist Italy, just a day before the capitulation, had agreed to hand the Jews over to the Germans. It was in this way that many people were rescued, because the deportation was only carried out in the north.

As for the food it must be said that, while we were never full, we never starved. We grew so sick of lentils and pearl barley that none of us ever had them on our menu after the war. The Italian national dish of pasta although served without sauce, was among the occasional better meals, while bean soup and frozen potatoes in various forms were seen as festive lunches. Sometimes we would even find a piece of meat in our meal.

The camp administration must be praised for allowing a school to be opened in our language for about fifty children. It was organised by several students and high school graduates. With the help of two teachers among the inmates we passed on as much as we knew ourselves of history, geography, mathematics and natural sciences without the benefit of textbooks. We would read the children chapters from books which individuals in the camp happened to have and there was singing and drawing as well. The children would write their homework in both the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets. Those who returned to Yugoslavia after the war managed to catch up with their generation through post-war courses for students whose education had been suspended by the war. Whenever we met them later as university graduates, they would tell us how grateful they were for the camp school.

Bojana in Belgrade, 1956.

Ferramonti was the first concentration camp liberated by the Allies during the war and many of the camp inmates survived. Because of this a great deal of documentary material has been collected about the camp, which officially was "a concentration camp for civil war internees and Jewish hostages". Two books have been written about Ferramonti by Italian researchers and there are about ten memoirs by Jewish authors.

The facts show that not until July, 1943, did Mussolini's Italy formally accept the German demand to deport all Jews to Germany. This included Italian and foreign Jews, those who were free and those were in camps and, above all, those from Ferramonti. The Italian authorities had no time for a more organised mass deportation. Even before Italy capitulated, at the end of July 1943, the camp commandant had tried to reach Rome along the crowded roads together with a representative of the Jewish inmates in an attempt to obtain permission for the release and liberation of the camp inmates. They did not succeed in this. While waiting for news from the north, from Rome, and news about the arrival of Allied troops from Sicily, large numbers of camp inmates managed to flee in great numbers to the neighbouring villages and hamlets, hiding in olive groves and fields.

One Yugoslav inmate, Miša Baum from Sarajevo, took command of a small group of young people who were guarding access to the camp, where about a hundred women and children were still interned.

They survived two great trials. An American aircraft strafed the camp with machine-gun fire before the Italian capitulation, probably suspecting it was some kind of military installation. There were heavy casualties: four killed and fifteen seriously wounded. The other trial could have had more tragic consequences. On the day the Italians capitulated, a German army headquarters truck pulled up in front of the camp's main entrance. A German general stepped out, followed by his batman. He demanded a report on the situation in the camp from the Jewish guards, who were holding a white and yellow flag. They told the German general that there were a small number of inmates remaining, that the arms were for defence against local bandits (who didn't in fact exist) and that there were five cases of cholera in the camp, a result of poor hygiene and starvation. Whether this bluff succeeded or the general was really in a great hurry to continue northwards, we will never know, but in any case he ordered his convoy of vehicles not to stop there. For five days this motorised cavalry roared along State Road 19, which led from Messina to Naples, skirting Ferramonti. On the sixth morning, some time after eight o'clock, the first transport from a reconnaissance unit of the British Eighth Army Corps arrived in front of the camp. Those inmates who had been in hiding returned from the surrounding villages and immediately proclaimed the "Republic of Ferramonti". Jan Herman, a Czech Jew, was elected its first president. He had travelled with the Yugoslav Jews from Kotor through Kavaje on the road to liberation.

Most of us Yugoslav Jews from the Kavaje group were released from Ferramonti during 1942 in the name of "family reunion" and dispersed around various Italian provinces in what they called free confinement. From there our paths were different. A number of families managed to acquire entry visas for Spain and eventually reached Canada via Portugal and Venezuela. On September 9, 1943, the day Italy capitulated, there was a simultaneous exodus of Jews from more than fifty villages where they had been living in pseudo-confinement.

We fled, many of us with false documents in Italian names, mostly south towards the Allies, but some north via the Alps to Switzerland or through Trieste to Yugoslavia.

Some managed to reach the Allies, crossing the Naples-Fodia frontline, before joining the Partisans in Bari or sitting out the rest of the war.

Most of those from the north headed south to Rome, which was invaded by the Germans before the Allies arrived. Hoping that the Allies, whose artillery could be heard from Garigliano, would arrive soon, they spent ten months illegally in the "open city of Rome" under the German occupation until the Allies entered the city on June 5, 1944. More than half of them joined the Partisans in July and August 1944 at the National Liberation Struggle base in Bari. The families returned to Yugoslavia when the war finished in 1945. Some stayed in Italy, eventually moving further abroad. A number of families and individuals succeeding in reaching Switzerland across the Alps from northern Italy and there they remained in some form of internment until the end of the war. Unfortunately, Switzerland didn't accept everyone. Among those who were returned to Italy and handed over to the Germans, via the Fascists, was Rudolf Marton, a student from Sarajevo and one of the Kavaje men. Three members of the Isaković family who were also from the Kavaje group suffered the same fate. They were captured under German occupation in November 1943, as they tried to flee together with other Yugoslav Jews from Dalmatia who had not been in confinement in Ferramonti but in a village in the German-occupied province of Parma. They were taken to Auschwitz and never returned.

Almost half the Jews who returned to Yugoslavia emigrated in the first Aliya after the state of Israel was founded. There they met others who had tried their luck in Italy and France, or even in Chile, but had finally reached Israel in spite of everything. Sadly, some of our Kavaje group did not survive the war.

Rudolf Miler, in his forties and the father of a Belgrade family, died in the camp in 1942 and was buried nearby in the cemetery of the village of Tarsija. From our group, Isak Albahari, a high school student from Belgrade, died at the end of 1942 in confinement in the province of Parma. A boy and girl from Sarajevo who had been in the Kavaje group were killed fighting with the Partisans.