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*Kosta TIMOTIJEVIĆ<sup>1</sup>*

## HIDING OUT THE WAR<sup>2</sup>

The story of Dr Fridrih Pops, his wife Ružica  
and the people who helped them

*Dr Fridrih Pops, a founder and former president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, died on May 25, 1948. He became president after the death of Dr Hugo Špicer, the creator of the federation and its first president.*

*Dr Pops is a major figure in the history of Yugoslavia's Jewish community. He spent the second world war in and around Belgrade with his wife, Ruža. This in itself was so unusual and brave that many stories emerged, blending truth and imagination. Belgrade journalist Kosta Timotijević was the son of Dr Pops' daughter Olga and it was he who finally recorded the true story of the Jewish community leader's life in occupied Belgrade. Each line of this story shines with the writer's love and respect for his grandfather. The publication of this story is the community's gesture of respect to the memory of Dr Pops.*

The main factor in the survival of my grandfather and grandmother, Fridrih and Ruža Pops was no doubt sheer luck. But they themselves also did a great deal to ensure their own salvation. Despite his usually irascible temperament, my grandfather was exceptionally cool in dan-

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gerous situations (probably because of his brachycardia which doesn't let the heart climb up the throat). My grandmother was a very rational woman and not given to panic. As far as I know my grandfather lost his nerve only once during the war, when he learnt that my mother and I had been arrested. He began packing a bag, planning to go to the Gestapo to have us released. My grandmother talked him out of this, insisting it would only make things worse for us because then it would be clear to the Gestapo that we had known he was hiding; he would only be sacrificing himself and aggravating our situation. But this combination – his courage and her sound logic – would not have been enough had it not been for the people who helped them to hide and survive, often putting themselves in danger in order to do so.

Stories like the one about them hiding in an empty tomb are not true. During the occupation they lived an almost normal life, with certain deprivations, remaining in a kind of voluntary house arrest.

After the bombing in April, 1941, they headed for the coast, getting as far as Ostrošac on the Neretva river. Then my grandfather decided to return to Belgrade because "I have to be with my people, the ones who need me." This was one of the ill-considered decisions which diluted the advantages of his coolness. In Belgrade the Gestapo met him with open arms and escorted him to a camp in Graz. He was released at the end of June, 1941. As soon as he arrived back in Belgrade my mother immediately sheltered him and my grandmother, thus avoiding another arrest, one from which he would not return.

At the beginning of the summer they spent a month or so at 11 Cara Lazara Street with Milovan Pulanić and his wife, a Viennese Jew whose name I have forgotten. This was more ducking than hiding. A man named Boskowitz was arrested towards the end of the summer, and so Pulanić suggested that they move to Dr Živković's sanatorium under Mt Avala. I think Pulanić also made the arrangements. At this point they were still using their real names, as were some other people who were hiding in Kraljica Natalija Street (now Narodnog Fronta Street), where the Maternity Hospital now stands. They stayed there only a few days because someone (we never discovered who) recognised and reported them. A complete stranger came to my mother one day and said "Hide your parents, they are to be arrested today." She dashed to the sanatorium and took them out to a waiting carriage through a side exit as the Gestapo troops were entering the main gate.

From then on they lived under the names of Jovan and Ruža Zečević, with false documents which showed they were refugees from Trebinje, living at 20 Lomina Street, at 13 Trstenjakova Street in Rakovica with Alojz Čeper and his wife, or at 21 Bulevar Oslobođenja (now Bulevar JNA) with Ruža Baršonj. They stayed at each of these addresses two or three times in rotation. No one wanted them to stay too long at a time because of the danger of blackmail (of which more later) or of them being recognised. From the late autumn of 1943 until the Easter bombing of April 16 and 17, 1944, they lived on the top floor of the Izvozna Bank in Terazije. It was this which gave rise to the legend that they hid right in the middle of the Gestapo headquarters. From then until the liberation they lived as refugees on the outskirts of the city, first with my mother and me and a lot of other people at the house of Stela Petrović (née Nahmijas) at 2 Svetoandrejska Street in the area known today as Šumice, and later in a specially built hut nearby, in what is now Konjarnik.



*Dr Fridrih Pops, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia until May, 1948.*

There is no doubt that most credit for them being successfully hidden must go to Dr Alojz Čeper. He was a Slovenian refugee and a clerk in the Ministry of Transport, which, after the Muslims left, was full of Slovenes. He and his wife, who was also a Slovene, were given a small house in the railway colony at Rakovica where he would occasionally hide other people as well, people from the underground and people being persecuted. I'm not familiar with his revolutionary history in the pre-war days, but he was obviously a capable, highly skilled and ruthless conspirator. Through his frequent business trips to Hungary, he maintained the connection between the Hungarian Jews and the Belgrade Jews who

were refugees there, and their relatives and friends in Belgrade. He would bring gold and dinar payment orders from Ginka Munk (before

the war her married name had been Edenburg, later she remarried as Kazes). These were the main finance for my mother's activities in sending parcels to prisoners and helping a number of people without means to survive.

As well as all his public and clandestine business, Čeper always had time to organise my grandfather and grandmother's move from one base to another. He proved especially cool during the first attempt at blackmail, at the beginning of 1941. Thanks to an indiscretion, someone whose name I don't want to mention discovered that the Pops (alias Zečević) family was in hiding and sought a reward by reporting them to the Gestapo.

Apparently the Gestapo handed the matter over to the special police (the Nedić police), who "found Jovan and Ruža Zečević, respectable refugees from Hercegovina," and probably reported that the denunciation was untrue. The long grey beard my father had grown as part of his new identity, and the fact that they were calm, proved convincing on a number of occasions.

Roza Barsony, with whom they were staying at the time, discovered who the informer was. Čeper easily found the man's address in the Central Registry in Obilićev Crescent where you could get any address for five dinars. He paid the wretch a visit and scared him to death. He told him that falsely denouncing people was a serious crime, punishable by being sent to a camp or even death and that if he was to utter the name Zečević again he would be taken care of "the way we do it – and you know what that means." He didn't exactly say that he was from the special police or the Gestapo, but he dropped dark hints to that effect. The man didn't say a word and after the war he vanished from Belgrade. To this day it's not clear to me why Čeper was so involved with the old people. It certainly wasn't because of any Party directive and he as a person seemed utterly un sentimental. He stayed in Belgrade for a short time after the war before going to Ljubljana where he became a minister or an assistant to a minister in the government of the republic. I don't know whether he's still alive, but if he is he must be extremely elderly.

Roza Barsony, a Hungarian from Horgos, was married to a man named Jovanović who died in prison. When Čeper brought the Zečević family to her the first time she had no idea who they were but it was clear to her that they were in hiding because they never went out into the street and would wear dark sunglasses to go into the yard, even

when there was no sun. She must have begun putting two and two together when my mother used to go to the Barsony's apartment to visit, but she asked no questions. In time she herself became involved in the conspiracy, serving as a courier and performing many invaluable practical services for purely unselfish reasons. This illiterate woman had a natural nobility and dignity. After the war we maintained a close and everlasting friendship. She never sought any kind of repayment for the services she had rendered and spoke about the events of the occupation with an easy humour, as though they had been something amusing in which she had personally played a rather comic role. She died about ten years ago.

Milovan Pulanić, who had headed the Zagreb bureau of the Avala agency before the war, moved to Belgrade after the declaration of the independent Banovina of Croatia, because the ultra-nationalist True Right Party had begun openly threatening him. His wife was a Jew and he had studied in Vienna and had a broad network of connections through the Freemasons. At the beginning of the occupation he devoted himself to helping Belgrade Jews flee to Italy, Hungary or Turkey, persuading the hesitant to go and hiding the ones who stayed. He first sheltered my grandfather and grandmother in his apartment at 11 Cara Lazara Street, in a building which Haim Melamed had owned until the war. Later he was involved in their change of identity, visited them in their shelters, cheered them up with Jewish jokes from Vienna, courtered messages, money and food and encouraged and supported them when my mother and I were in prison in January and February of 1943. He deserves respect not only for the obvious practical services he performed, but for helping my grandfather and grandmother maintain their morale and their positive attitude. After the war he was editor of the economic service of Tanjug, the Yugoslav state news agency. He died in about 1970 in a sanatorium in Istria. His wife died soon after the war.

Anastasia Styepanovna Buhbinder was Russian, the wife of the watchmaker Ignjat Buhbinder from Balkanska Street. Her husband had been taken away in the early summer of 1941 (and was probably already dead), so she was put in the care of her late husband's apprentice, Šišić. By then he was an independent watchmaker and jeweller (his shop stands today in Moše Pijade Street next to Centroprom). Through this connection she sold jewellery and ducats, first ours then, later, what Čeper brought from Budapest. I think she found the apartment in Lomina Street for my grandparents, because she lived nearby.

She herself wasn't actively involved in their affairs but always knew where they were living and visited them from time to time. She was always loyal and friendly. She died three or four years ago at a very great age.

Dr Vandel Tasić, then married to the writer Frida Filipović, née Grajf, from Sarajevo, the sister of Dr Mario Grajf, had not been one of our friends before the war, although we knew each other from Vrnjačka Banja. We became friends when we were submitting applications to the Jewish Commissariat, or whatever it was called, at Tašmajdan, for the release of Jewish women married to "Aryans", so that they were not sent to the Sajmište camp. Tasić became involved in the conspiracy some time during 1942 when my grandfather, who had chronic high blood pressure, had one of his occasional attacks of bleeding. After that he would pay them regular visits, giving medical assistance and warm human attention, as though they were his closest friends. He knew who they were, although he never acknowledged this either by word or gesture and strictly observed the convention of their Zečević identity. His prompt interventions helped my grandfather to survive. Even after the war he continued to take care of my grandfather until he died. Vandel Tasić died during the 1970s.

One of the most useful mediators for acquiring false identity papers, *Ausweise* for travelling and so on, was Nikola Kolarević. He had been a police officer before the war and now held some kind of honorary post in the city council, where he had good connections, as he did in the police department, including the special police. His fee was nominal: the amount he had to pay the inside contact from whom he would get the documents. My grandfather and grandmother got the papers they needed from him, as did many other Belgrade Jews including the wife of Ruben Rubenović, Mica Demajo (née Baruh) and some others who never used the papers. Kolarević put himself in a great deal of danger for very little money, if indeed he made any profit at all. His motives were obviously more noble than pure greed. After the war my mother, Tina Aladžem and probably a few other people he helped made statements which ensured that he was not pursued as an enemy collaborator, but neither were his good deeds ever properly acknowledged. He died in an old people's home in Kovin in the early 1970s.

Tina Aladžem (née Parenzan) was an Italian and the wife of Miša Aladžem who had been a merchant before the war and spent the war years in Spain. She was the connection through whom we met

Kolarević. She was personally involved in hiding a number of Jews and later, after the capitulation of Italy, assisted Italian officers who wanted neither to cooperate with the Germans nor to be imprisoned. She was one of the sources of funding for Operation Survival. I don't know where she got the money, I suppose she had gold. Her husband died while he was abroad, so she moved to Trieste after the war. The last news from her, in about 1970, was a letter which helped Kolarević get some kind of small pension just before he died. In her letter she described his good deeds, almost declaring him the organiser of the resistance movement in occupied Belgrade.

Another man, about whose motives there was a degree of suspicion, but who I think should be acknowledged as selfless, was the Slovenian businessman Viktor Jamnik. There is no doubt he was a business associate of the occupiers, because he was logging the woods on the Danube river islands for the Germans, but he was also the main source of finance for survival from 1943 on. He gave my mother unlimited access to a bank account, never asking who the money was for and with no concern about whether it would be repaid after the war, simply saying "Easy come, easy go." He didn't ask about my grandfather and grandmother, although we came to the conclusion later that he must have know about us, or at least suspected, because after the bombing of May 18, 1944, when Neimar and Pašino Brdo were destroyed, he suddenly appeared in our refuge bringing building materials and builders who built a cosy two-room hut in two days in Generala Milutinovića Street in the area now known as Konjarnik. He often visited my grandfather and grandmother, addressing them as the Zečević family (there was a tacit convention that everyone addressed them by that surname; even my mother and I called them Uncle Jova and Aunt Ruža). All the time he continued to support them lavishly. By the end of the war we owed him millions of Nedić dinars. He disappeared suddenly on the eve of the liberation, contacting us after the war from Johannesburg. He thought, rather realistically, that he would not have been forgiven for his business dealings with the Germans, despite all the good he had done.

One other man who was a collaborator, active in both political and police matters, and yet who deserves mention here because of assistance he gave although he need not have done so, is Ilija "Ika" Paranos. He was a special police chief who thwarted a blackmail attempt. A drug addict who had been admitted to the Živković sanatorium below

Mt Avala met my grandfather and grandmother and learned that they were hiding in Belgrade, then demanded money from my mother in exchange for his silence.

My mother had no experience in dealing with blackmailers. Obviously frightened and unable to contact Čeper, who was away on one of his frequent trips, she paid up (I think it was 100,000 Nedić dinars) and was promised that that would be the last of it. This was sometime in the late autumn of 1942. In the spring of 1943, the same blackmailer appeared again, asking for 250,000 dinars. Čeper was again away and my mother said she had to borrow the money from somewhere. She turned to a man whom she hadn't wanted to involve in the conspiracy, Dr Milutin Ivković, the husband of my younger aunt Ela who had died in 1938. He was shocked to learn that my grandparents were in Belgrade, but his reaction was calm and rational: he told my mother to pay the money and that he would stake everything on a single card. He went to Ilija Paranos and told him everything. They had played sport together before the war and I think that they had known each other since their school days. I don't know to what degree it was from friendship or to what degree he wanted to protect himself after Stalingrad by doing favours, but Paranos immediately ordered the files of Jovan and Ruža Zečević to be brought to him from the Central Registry and burned them in front of Milutin. He then sent agents to wait for the blackmailer as he left our house. It turned out there was a whole gang, so arrested them all, had them beaten and threatened that they would be killed the next time they uttered a word about the Zečević family to anyone. At Milutin's suggestion my mother went to Paranos to thank him and took her mink coat, which fortunately had not yet been sold, as a gift for his wife. Thanking her, he replied: "You know, Madam, we have to help each other. We all get hurt, some of us for being Jews, some of us for being Chetniks, some of us for being Partisans..."

A short time later, on May 25, 1943, Milutin was arrested and executed. After the war there was a story put about from certain malicious sources that he had been executed because of his parents-in-law. Paranos had probably mentioned our case as a mitigating circumstance while he was being interrogated, but the whole issue was later turned upside down. My mother wrote a detailed statement to Tito's State Security Department, then still known as OZNA, proposing that



Paranos be given credit for his behaviour in this case. It didn't help. The denunciations prevailed and he was executed.

While on the subject of people like this, I should mention a man named Franja Galijan. He was a follower of Ljotić, a university colleague of my Uncle Vladimir and, for some time, a legal clerk in my grandfather's office. I mentioned previously that my grandfather and grandmother were in the Izvozna Bank when the Easter bombing began. My grandmother had some difficulty in persuading my grandfather to go down to the cellar, but when they returned to the room after the air raid siren stopped, they found it cut in half by a bomb. They gathered whatever they could reach from the door and went down to Čumićevo Alley with a little suitcase and a bundle and waited to see if someone would appear. We found them there and took them to Terazije where, in front of the deep bomb crater stood Galijan, in his uniform and helmet, directing traffic. Forgetting where he was, my grandfather shouted "Galijan, shame on you! What are you doing in that uniform?"

My mother explained to the astonished man: "Franja, these are Jovan and Ruža Zečević, they're refugees, friends of my parents."

"I see, Madam. Take good care of them!" replied Galijan. I have no idea what happened to him later.

At the beginning of the occupation only two or three people, Pulanić, Čeper and Milan Vladarski, knew that my grandparents were in hiding. But as time went on, the circle inevitably widened to include cousins, friends and even mere acquaintances, all of them good and honourable people. But some of them were walking time bombs, not because of any ill intention but simply because they were talkative. However, this couldn't be helped. All in all it was more a matter of luck than anything else. My grandfather himself became a danger as the first signs of senility began to emerge. In their refuges in Konjarnik and Šumice he began to go out freely for short walks at dusk.

We had begun to relax a little by then, so we let him go to the Cvetko market with a bag so that he could feel useful. Once, while waiting in a line for green beans, he quarrelled with some man and began shouting at him: "Listen, you pipsqueak, I used to be the vice-president of the Belgrade Municipality!" By chance, Tasa Kumanudi was there and recognised my grandfather's voice, although not his appearance.

"Listen old man, if you're president of the municipality, I'm King Petar!" he said to him, grabbing him by the arm, pulling him out of the

queue. He then literally escorted him back to the hut. My grandfather told us the entire story with great indignation and kept asking the whole day: "Why was Tasa so rude to me?"

Koča Kumanudi wasn't involved in hiding my grandfather and grandmother and probably didn't even know they were in Belgrade until the summer of 1944. He could have learned about it from Tasa or perhaps even through some other channel. After the Ravna Gora congress in the village of Ba, a man appeared at my grandfather's place, saying he'd been sent by Koča Kumanudi, who had been at the congress himself, to tell him that he was seen as being minister for justice after the war. My grandfather replied, quite lucidly, "Not even a rat boards the ship when it's sinking."

After the war my grandfather agreed when the Kumanudi family pleaded with him to defend Draža Mihailović at his trial. He did this not only out of personal friendship (they had been friends since primary school) but also out of his deep conviction that the indictment was politically and legally unsustainable. However he became so disturbed during the trial that Dr Vandel Tasić was concerned that he was in danger of suffering a stroke. Thus he was forced to withdraw.

Zora Vladarski, née Milenković, a cousin of the Kumanudi family, was a school friend of my mother. Together with her husband, Milan Vladarski, a Shell Oil representative, she was actively involved in the first phase of transforming the Pops family into the Zečević family. She put us in touch with Tina Aladžem who introduced us to Nikola Kolarević. Milan oversaw the disguises (growing the beard, changes of hair style) and then took the photographs for the false identity documents. The Vladarski family also helped financially as much as they could throughout the war. Financial help was also given by Merima and Branko Dragutinović and Stana Košanin, who visited Matilda Deleon in the Jewish hospital because Matilda was the aunt of David Anaf, to whom she was sending parcels in prison. They were married after the war. Other financial contributors were Stana Đurić-Klajn (who was also looking after her own husband, Hugo Klajn, alias Uroš Klajić), Rada Banuševac and her husband Milan Dedinac who had been released from detention in 1943 because of his ill health, and several other people who either knew or suspected the truth. All of them, as much as they could, whether with money or with food, helped with sending parcels to imprisoned Jews. The depot for preparing, packing and dispatching these parcels to the railway station was in our kitchen at 40 Jevrejska

Street and everyone brought whatever they had there. In the beginning we were only sending parcels to my father, Dušan, my Uncle Vladimir and two or three cousins. As time went on, friends and acquaintances began sending help for packages. These included Dr Albert Vajs, Ruben Rubenović (whose wife, before she was deported to a camp, left us a significant quantity of linen and other fabrics, as much as she managed to get out of her shop before a commissar was appointed), Rafajlo Blam, Liko Ruso, Đorđe Berger and a number of other people whose names I no longer remember. The cost of this operation kept growing and it's clear that it would not have been possible without the collaboration and help of many honourable people. As I have already mentioned, the main financial support came from Ginka Munk (via Čeper) and Viktor Jamnik, who gave almost unlimited financial assistance.

It must have been clear to most of these good and honourable people that this was their duty. It appears there was consensus about a principle which my mother formulated as follows: "Everyone has the right to survive, and it is everyone's duty to help others to do so. Money exists to be used and it must be obtained by selling belongings, asking for contributions, borrowing from wherever possible. It doesn't matter what is sold or how much is borrowed from whom because, after the war, this will somehow be settled among people of good faith. Survival is crucial and everything else is secondary."

After the war, most of the contributors simply wrote off the loans, some asked for restitution of their property (gold or other property which had been left somewhere to be taken care of), some were satisfied with partial repayments until people were on their feet again, while in some cases, Jamnik for example, all contact was lost so repayment of the loans was not an issue. My grandfather supported my mother's principle during the war, convinced that he would personally be able to repay the loans to everyone. He regretted this later and set aside as much as he could from his pension for loan repayments. I think that the situation in which he found himself after the war did him more damage than everything he went through under the occupation. He had two minor strokes before a third took his life on May 25, 1948. My grandmother survived him, dying in 1961.