
Samuilo KALDERON

MY DARKEST DAYS IN OCCUPIED BELGRADE



Samuilo Kalderon was born in Belgrade in 1905 and was one of the few Belgrade residents who spent the entire occupation, from 1941 to 1945, in the city under someone else's name. From the end of the war to the day he died he worked for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. He died in January, 1986. Left without family or relatives, apart from a nephew in Slovenia, the Federation became his home and the people working there his family. Together with his other great love, opera, they peopled his solitary life. His name was recorded in the Golden Book of Keren Kayemet for his extraordinary diligence, conscientiousness and devotion to the Jewish community. He gave this written account of his life in hiding during the German occupation to the Jewish Historical Museum in the 1980s.

As soon as the Germans arrived, they gave orders for all Jews to report to the police in Tašmajdan. Entire families reported and had to give their exact residential address. At that time my family consisted of my mother Bukas, my sister Debora Pardo (née Kalderon), my sister-in-law Ermoza Kalderon (née Kario), my brothers Aron, Moša and Leon, their children Nela, Paula and Isak and several cousins. I managed to avoid reporting with the rest of the family who were extremely

concerned and kept berating me, saying they would all be executed because of me. I told them I didn't want to be in anyone's records while I was alive and, if I was caught, they could do whatever they wanted to me.

When my family was taken away to a camp, I left home and fled. Nobody dared take me in because I was a Jew, so I hid in a half-built building next to the Cvetko tavern. I came up with an idea of how to obtain documents in the name of a Serb, my best friend and schoolmate who had died in 1938. I knew where he was buried so I went to the cemetery and copied the information I needed from his headstone: name and surname, date of birth and the names of his mother and father. Then I went to the City Administration and told them that I was Đorđe Marković and that I needed new documents because they had been burnt in the bombing. They gave me an application form and then I had to go to some building near Kalemegdan where there was a library after the war. I asked for an identity card in the name of Đorđe Marković and managed to get it. I immediately started looking for a roof over my head. I was lucky enough to find a room at 84 Gospodara Vučića Street in the apartment of an old lady with two other tenants, refugees from Croatia. One was a butcher and the other a horse trader.

I didn't get a job and avoided public places, fearing someone might recognise me. Mostly I went from one tobacconist to another buying cigarettes, although I didn't smoke, and selling them to peasants at the market for 1,500 Nedić dinars a pack. Out of that money I paid my rent and bought food.

One time I decided to go to my apartment at the Cvetko tavern by tram. The tram was full and among the crowd of people there was a man who recognised me and said "Hello, Moša!" All the passengers turned and stared. I replied that I didn't know him and told him he must have been mistaken, that I was not the person he knew. I managed to save my neck by getting off at the next stop, but he also got out of the tram, insisting that I was Moša. I barely managed to get away from, telling him to leave me alone because I didn't know him.

One very nice day in September, 1943, I went to Kralja Aleksandra Street, saying that I was looking for a job, as I did every day. But this time there was a major raid there and the agents caught me as well, confiscated my identity card and my registration and ordered me to report to the Eighth police precinct at noon. There were about ten of us there, the clerk of the court called everyone in one by one and eventually it

was my turn. I didn't know he was the clerk of the court, which seriously offended him and was enough for him to sentence me to thirty days in prison. At about midnight I was transferred to the police station with the others and put into a hall full of prisoners. I was afraid I would meet some prisoner who would recognise me but, fortunately, I remained Đorđe Marković. Because I was ill, I was not sent to work, but I had to clean the building, emptying the buckets and washing them out. The rest of the time I would lie, hungry and ill, curled up on the floor. After thirty days they released me and I returned to my rented apartment. Unfortunately my landlady, fearing the authorities, had cancelled my registration. Again the problems began. I had to return to the police station to re-register and provide documentation for my absence in the form of my prison release papers. I continued buying and selling cigarettes to earn a living. I even went all the way to Ripanj to buy corn flour and bring a couple of pieces of firewood. Seeing that I was an honest man, unlike the other tenants who were drunks and people with problems, my landlady was very pleased to have me, and so I shared every mouthful with her.

One of my worst experiences while I was hiding under someone else's name in occupied Belgrade was when I was drafted. I went to the office near Tašmajdan where everyone had to register. Because I was afraid I would have to have a medical examination, I first went to seek the advice of someone I knew, a cousin of Moni Lazar, who worked in the police station. He told me that if they asked me why I was circumcised, I should say that I had had syphilis and the surgical intervention for that made it appear that I'd been circumcised. At the medical commission there was a German officer present and the physician was required to consult him on the condition of each recruit. When I was asked by the physician I replied as Ninković had advised me and was given a certificate saying in Serbian on one side and German on the other that I was ill, and so I was exempted from military service.

The next day I had to report again to the City Administration where the Military Department was located. When it was my turn, the clerk who took my identity card recognised me because he was from Dorćol and went to his boss. Then I was called in and the chief asked me "Is it true that this colleague of mine knows you and that you are a Jew?"

"If I was a Jew, do you think I would come here and report?" I replied. "This clerk of yours has mistaken me for someone he knows." The chief then called the clerk back and asked him if I had documents

in the name of Marković and a registration form in the same name. I added that I also had a certificate confirming that I was ill. The chief then turned to the clerk:

“He has all the documents and also a certificate saying he is ill. Put him on the list in the column of people who are ill,” he told him. With that I was released, but I was now very worried because the clerk had my address and could have reported me to the Gestapo. He would receive a reward and I would be arrested. Luckily, and probably because his boss advised him not to, he didn’t do it.

The difficult days of occupation, hunger and hiding took their toll and I fell seriously ill after the liberation. My landlady, with whom I had lived all through the occupation didn’t know about my religion, but her neighbour on the other side was a Jewess married to a Serb and immediately after the liberation she told my landlady I was a Jew.

Immediately after the liberation I began work for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. No one in my family survived the war except one nephew, the son of my late brother Leon, who had left with his Slovenian mother for Maribor where they both saw the liberation.

I visited my former landlady a number of times, bringing her presents and helping her. She died less than two years after the liberation.