
Pavle MINH

FOUR YEARS IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH



Pavle Minh was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1924. Several years later the family moved to Belgrade where he completed primary school and seven years of secondary school, until the German occupation began in 1941. After the liberation he studied for two years in the Mechanical Engineering Faculty of Belgrade University and then spent two years studying shipbuilding in Zagreb.

In the spring of 1951 he moved to Israel and worked in the electrical power plant in Haifa. From 1953 to 1955 he continued his education in Genoa (Italy), finishing at the end of 1955 with a doctorate in naval architecture. From 1956 to 1958 he worked in the navy in Haifa and then in the Traffic Ministry in the Port Authority as a naval construction engineer – a position which developed into that of chief naval construction engineer with responsibility for international relations. In the course of this 32 years work for the Ministry he coordinated state supervision of naval construction for the Israeli flag, beginning with German war reparation ships and ending with modern ships for the transportation of vehicles and containers. He represented Israel at many conferences within the International Maritime Organisation.

He retired in 1989, continuing for several more years as technical advisor to the Port Authority in Hadera and the Ministry of the Environment. He has also translated several books, including a book about Haj-Amin el-Husseini by Jennie Lebel which he translated from

Serbian into English, and the technical documentation of the Elit chocolate factory from German into Hebrew.

He is married with two sons, a granddaughter in New Zealand, a grandson in South Africa and two grandsons in Israel.

In the spring of 1941, I turned 17. I lived in Dedinje with my parents, my father Aleksandar and my mother Alisa, and attended the Second Boys' Secondary School in Poenkareova Street. Dragiša Cvetković, the prime minister, travelled to Vienna on March 24 to add Yugoslavia's signature to the Tripartite Pact (Germany, Italy, Japan). That evening, Radio Belgrade played Schubert's Symphony in B minor, the "Unfinished", which I had heard for the first time three years earlier when Hitler annexed Austria.

The next day Yugoslavia joined the Tripartite Pact. Riots began in Belgrade. Special editions of newspapers were burnt. Yugoslav and British flags were being flown along with pictures of Hitler on a gallows. On the afternoon of March 26, a large group from my secondary school set off to the Second Girls' Secondary School, passing through Terazije. Because we were joined by several hundred more students from other secondary schools, we returned to our own singing the anthem and cheering the king, Yugoslavia, and the army. Many residents joined us and so this long procession arrived in the centre of the city. Awaiting us there were gendarmes with batons and they finally dispersed the whole mass demonstration.

On the following day, General Simonović took over power in a military coup. We then all began to prepare for the war which would inevitably follow these events. We exchanged addresses in case of evacuation, because some of my friends were planning to take refuge in villages, while our fathers faced the dilemma of whether or not to join the army. My father decided to go despite not having received a notice for mobilisation.

On the morning of April 6, the bombing of Belgrade began. We were sitting in the basement looking from time to time at the city in flames and smoke in the distance. The bombing went on for two days; we had no water or electricity. Large numbers of people began a stampede from the city towards the outskirts and our house filled up. A few days later, all our illusions of any kind of front vanished – the Germans entered the city. Some German officers came and occupied a room in

our building, and attached a notice to the door which read that the whole building had been requisitioned for the *Wehrwirtschaftsstab* (War Economy Staff).

On April 16, the notorious order for all Jews to report to Tašmajdan appeared on the streets of Belgrade, along with the warning that was to become routine: anyone not reporting would be shot. My family and I responded to the call and were in Tašmajdan by 7.30 a.m. After long hours of waiting they distributed yellow armbands with the sign *JUDE-JEVREJIN* (Jew) and told us to return the following day, when we were given identification papers with various stamps in them. They divided us into groups of forty. Labour began on April 21. Each group was led by a fireman. We were clearing rubble, taking out the dead, digging toilets and doing other kinds of work. A few days after this my father returned from the army which had fallen apart in the face of the German invasion.

One day I was part of a German "show". They had caught us, dozens of us, Jews returning from compulsory labour. Pursuing us with dogs, shouting and threats they took us to an old palace in the centre of the city and forced us to climb over the fence. In the garden of the palace we carried bricks from one pile to another, in double time, while four or five soldiers swore at us and beat us and a crowd of citizens gathered on the footpath across the road and watched this "performance" in silence. They dismissed us late. It was close to curfew, so I spent the night in the city with a friend, Bubiša Simić, because I didn't have time to return home. When I did reach home the next day, I heard that my Uncle Adolf had committed suicide - from the beginning he had seen the future as dark and hopeless and when we were in Tašmajdan he would say that he would like the Germans to kill him.

At the beginning of May, we had an unexpected visit from Prince Đorđe, the elder brother of King Aleksandar, who had spent a number of years in a mental hospital near Niš. He was now free and they brought him to our place with two valets, two cooks, two chauffeurs and a gendarme. The five of us were crammed into four rooms and the whole house was at the disposal of the prince. I continued to go to compulsory labour until the middle of June when I was exempted on health grounds.

In July the prince and his entourage moved to another building nearby and we moved to an apartment in the city, in Birčaninova Street. And so, after ten years, we left the house in Dedinje which, for my par-

ents, had been the pinnacle of success in life. From this point on everything began to go downhill for them and they both lived in a small one-room apartment until they died, my mother in 1967 and my father ten years later.

And so August came. I was mainly staying at home. Sometimes my friends came to visit (they had finished the seventh year of secondary school while I, of course, had not), but I rarely went out, for fear that they would take my "sick leave" away from me and force me back to labour. We had planned to go to Rtanj in Eastern Serbia, the greater part of which was owned by the Minh family, but this did not eventuate: after an attack by the Partisans, the Germans took over the mine.

On September 14, they caught Father in the street and took him to the camp at Topovske Šupe with another five hundred or so Jews. Mother visited him the following day, taking him a blanket and food. Twenty-four hours later they allowed him to go home. On October 8, there was a general review of all "sick leave" and my father and I were given "jobs". From that time on we worked until 6.00 p.m. every day. One day we again found ourselves in Topovske Šupe. They took us there directly from labour.

Along the way the guard treated us with two litres of wine and, at about two p.m., we arrived in the camp. All Jewish labourers were brought in during the course of the day so there were about twelve or fourteen hundred of us. I found my father immediately. We slept in stables and in soldiers' apartments on a thin layer of straw on the ground, pushed up against one another. We went to labour from the camp. After a few very exhausting and unpleasant assignments, I managed to get myself into Father's group, near the railway station where the work was easier. Each day, from midday to one p.m., women came to visit us at work. In the camp we were allowed visits on Wednesdays and Sundays, from nine to eleven a.m. and from two to four p.m. We were given food in the camp: in the morning some hot and bitter barley substitute, at midday in the evening a warm meal (two or three spoons of beans, potato and cabbage) and, in the later afternoon, 100 grams of bread. Because of this, Mother brought us food from home. People were accommodated in two large buildings, in which there were stables downstairs and soldiers' apartments upstairs. There were also offices, a storage building, a kitchen, a watchmaker's shop, a barber shop and a woodwork shop, all incredibly primitive of course. We got up at six, usually even earlier, and went to bed at eight in the evening. From the

very first day inmates were prone to the psychosis of fear and desperation and there were several cases of suicide. Every few days one or two hundred people would be taken off in a transport, but we did not know where. From October 39, we no longer went to labour.

About ten days later, about a thousand Gypsies were brought in. These were gradually taken away from the camp over the following few days. Many of them came with musical instruments; the day after they arrived they organised a band and, in the yard of the barracks, they played their farewell concert which included, among other things, the overture to the opera *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini. After the concert the Germans smashed their instruments and burnt them on a huge bonfire while the trucks drove a large group off to an unknown destination.

From the report of Oberlieutenant Walter to his superiors, I learnt after the war that groups of Jews and Gypsies were shot dead somewhere north of Pančevo on October 27 and 30, 1941. The report contains a number of interesting facts. The execution was carried out very rapidly, about a hundred people in forty minutes; the Jews went to their death calmly and collectedly, while the Gypsies were whining and shouting; the German officer, at the end, noted that the execution itself does not cause immediate psychological problems for soldiers but that these emerge later, in the evening, when they are thinking calmly about everything.

I arrived at the camp quite calmly, a little dizzy from the wine. I soon became accustomed to the lice and the lack of space, to sleeping on the hard floor, to coffee made of barley and to the cabbage. In the early days I was in a bad mood because of the hard work and exhaustion. The reading out of names for transport tore at my nerves in the beginning, as did the shouting and screaming of the SS soldiers. I got used to the transports and the soldiers. When we no longer worked we would sit in the carpentry shop where we would be warm and could heat our lunch on the stove. After we were released from the camp at the beginning of November, Father and I travelled by wagon to arrive home about half past one, and we washed and changed our clothes.

I have never known with certainty who freed us from the camp. There is one version according to which it was Ljilja Podkaminer, through Egon Zabukošek, but I also heard another version – that the German commissioner who had been appointed to manage the Minh brothers' Rtanj mine had asked that my father be set free temporarily so that he could "hand over" the mine to him. The third version, which my

father confirmed through an official statement after the war, was that his old friends, the Roš brothers, had intervened.

While we were sitting in the camp, my late Aunt Liza – Adolf's widow – interceded with a general in the City of Belgrade Command, who told her that he could not confirm whether we had been shot. This caused my mother a serious nervous breakdown from which she never recovered.

After the camp there were three attempts to flee: first my father paid an enormous sum of money to some gang who were smuggling people out of Serbia, but either they were caught or they reported this to the police themselves.

Serbian police, including a Jewish agent, came on November 13. They searched our apartment, arrested all three of us and took us to the prison at the top of Aleksandrova Street. After several days of interrogation they allowed us to go home.

On November 18, there was another unsuccessful attempt to flee. Another gang: we were sitting in the waiting area of the railway station with our luggage, and then they told us that they could not take us across the border that evening because the German guards they had bribed were not on duty. We returned to our apartment in a taxi, during the curfew, but the Tuvi family, who were also waiting, were caught by the Germans and all perished.

The third attempt succeeded: some school friend of my father's interceded with the Germans and the Italians and got us genuine passes with Italian visas. And so, on the evening of November 27, 1941, we set off by train, in a sleeping car, for Sušak, via Zagreb.

We arrived in Sušak in the evening and were met by a baggage handler who took our suitcases to a hotel near the post office. We went to bed soon after dinner and fell asleep. The following day Father tried to obtain permission to cross the bridge into Italian territory, but they refused him at the *questura*. We were afraid that they would expel us into the Independent State of Croatia and certain death, because we didn't believe that our special documents would guarantee our safety there. A few days later we were given the address of the Medved family, an apartment which was reached by stairs under the footpath. After we hid there for a day or two, they put us on a bus for Kraljevica, which was in the Independent State of Croatia but under Italian military administration. We didn't know what awaited us there, but we were in fear of the Ustaša and the home guards. Instead we were met by local women who

carried our baggage on their heads to the Praha Hotel on the Oštro Peninsula. At that time there were only refugees staying in the hotel: two women from Vienna, the Poper family who were also from Vienna, the Karfunkel family, an innkeeper from Lika with his wife and two sons. All of them had fled to Kraljevica through Zagreb. From our room there was a wonderful view of the sea and the coastline – first the lighthouse then, further on, Bakar, Rijeka, Učka and the whole of Istria, while the circle was completed by the islands of Cres, Krk and St Marko. Here we spent the winter and the spring: during the winter I went to Branko Polić, a refugee from Zagreb who lived in the city with his parents and had a piano. Branko was later best man at my wedding and now lives in Zagreb. In the spring, we began to swim and this took up more and more of my day.

In June, 1942, we managed to move to Villa Capponi, right beside the sea. Time passed very quickly during the summer, with swimming; many of the Kraljevica locals would come to our beach, especially the young people. As the days grew shorter with the coming of autumn and winter, I filled them with household chores, going into the city, playing the piano at Branko's place and in Grabrovo and especially by studying, reading and thinking about life's problems. In November the Italians took all Jews to a newly established camp. Because we had arrived in Kraljevica later and were not registered anywhere as Jews, we managed to stay out of the camp.

And so another winter passed and 1943 began. The year was like the previous one, at least until the autumn. On September 8, Italy capitulated and, from that point, everything changed completely. The Italian Army left and the Partisans came. I responded to the call for general mobilisation and, a few days later, found myself in the woods, that is the hills above Kraljevica, in an Italian uniform with a red star on my cap and a rifle from which I never fired a single bullet. While we fresh Partisans gathered in the hills, the Germans dropped leaflets which read that "SS divisions are coming over the hill with a torch of freedom to expel the communist gangs." For the first time in my life I felt that I too had a rifle and, around me, an army which would either repulse them or at least inflict great losses on them. This feeling was completely different from the silent and passive fear in which we had awaited the Germans in the spring of 1941.

My unit entered Sušak and moved into a school when the Germans were already close to Rijeka, all night a procession of refugees was

passing heading southeast. In the morning, the Germans crossed the bridge over the Rečina, which separated Rijeka from Sušak. While my unit was coming down the Krimeja, there was a column with dead and wounded Partisans coming uphill towards us. We took up a position at Piramida – five or six of us with machine guns and heavy metal ammunition boxes. When the slow-moving German motorcyclists came near to us, with armoured units following them, we withdrew up the stairs to a shelter beneath the school. This shelter, a long tunnel dug into rock, was already full of Partisans from various units. We stayed there a long time, blocked by German fire outside the entrance to the tunnel. Finally the command came for a rush exit from the trap. All of us from the shelter went forward, up the school stairs, through the fire of the German rocket launchers. A few of us carrying heavy loads fell behind and hid in a house to catch our breath, while the unit continued on. At the top of the stairs they fell into the hands of the Germans who were already moving along the Boulevard and mowed them all down. When we realised that we were completely surrounded, the six of us decided to wait for the evening then try to get through to the front lines in civilian clothes and join the Partisans somewhere near Bakar. One girl, an experienced Partisan, went first and disappeared among the houses. Our friend, Princ, from Kraljevica went out after her. A hidden German sniper immediately spotted him and killed him after he had taken a few steps down the meadow. This left four of us: three Kraljevica locals and me. In the evening we took to the empty streets, walking along the coast to Martinšćica and beyond, but we were kept back by shooting from both the sea and the land. It was now dark and we spent the night in some shallow caves near the sea, across from Martinšćica. During the night a small Partisan boat tried to break through to Sušak from the south. The Germans opened fire and circled the rocks with their floodlights, but they didn't discover us.

It was not until dawn broke the following morning that Germans in a bunker at the end of the Pečina settlement discovered us, pointed their machine gun at us and signalled to us to start walking towards them. It was impossible to run, so we set off. They signalled us to go down to the shipyard and wait there. There we spent most of the day, always covered by their machine guns, until they picked us up late in the afternoon, together with their other "prisoners" and took us back to Sušak on foot. There were a lot of us and we were escorted by a small number of German soldiers or non-commissioned officers. My colleagues from

Kraljevica, who knew the layout of the town, decided that on the way we should jump over the wall which separated the Park Hotel from the street. And so the five of us found ourselves outside the hotel, on the other side of the wall. We immediately went down to the changing booths on the beach, hid, and spent the night there, again to the sound of gunfire from the sea. The convoy of "prisoners" had long gone and the streets were empty. The next day some girls from the neighbourhood came and brought us something to eat.

The five of us were looking for work, and we found it: the city gardener was organising the first clean-up of the streets and the clearing of debris, and fed the volunteers from a large cauldron of beans which stood on a fire in the city plant nursery. We slept for a few nights in an apartment belonging to the uncle of one of my wartime friends and after a few more days we split up. The younger ones stayed in the apartment while another Kraljevica local and I slept for a few days in the railway tunnel which, at that time, served as a shelter for many people. My parents stayed behind in Kraljevica, cut off from Sušak by the front which was slowly advancing down the coast. They had heard from someone the "authentic news" that I had been killed in battles around Klana, north of Sušak, and they were in mourning for their dead son. About ten days later the front passed Kraljevica and I contacted them through an acquaintance. I returned to Kraljevica at the beginning of October once they knew that I had survived.

It was clear to me that I could not continue my refugee life with my parents in Kraljevica, partly for financial reasons but mostly because, after the turbulent events I had passed through, I could not return to the vicious circle of nostalgia, idleness and daydreaming. I returned to Sušak where I did some temporary work and found a friend from the Partisans, Luj Margetić, a law student who had fled Zagreb, fled the Ustaša. Together we moved into a loft apartment below the promenade. Because I didn't have the "proper" personal documents, I appealed for help (on someone's recommendation, I suppose) to a civil servant at the police who, without asking too many questions, issued me with a personal identification document with information I dictated to her: I kept my real name and surname, but became a Serb, born in Belgrade. And so I had a new identity and a new friend with whom I lived throughout the war and, later, my whole life. After several temporary positions I was given a job with the city doctor, Dr Vojnović, who had come to Sušak in a cart, hidden in a barrel, fleeing from the Ustaša because he

was Orthodox. The municipality and the local institutions in general consisted of local politicians. Mayor Kolacio was at the helm of the municipal council and the German military administration's input was limited to appointing what they called a counsellor, who was subordinate to the supreme counsellor, whose office was in Rijeka in the building of the former *questura*.

At the end of 1943, the municipal doctor was mainly concerned with former internees released from camps in southern Italy after the capitulation of Mussolini. These were returning to their homes in Dalmatia and Montenegro on foot, first north to Trieste and then via Istria, Rijeka and Sušak. Officially we had two main problems: temporary accommodation and food for hundreds and thousands of former internees. Unofficially we were concerned with getting as many young men as possible "into the woods", in other words to the Partisans, instead of them returning to their homes in occupied Dalmatia and Montenegro. The whole municipal apparatus knew about this unofficial goal, as did the police, the food department, the city doctors and others. We only concealed it from the German and Italian administration so that, ignorant of this, they fed the Partisans, because food supplies could be obtained only with the permission of these authorities. And so my future wife, Tina, and I worked on this together for weeks: deep in our hearts we both sympathised with the masses of former internees and did everything possible and impossible, with the full knowledge of the local authorities, to accommodate them, feed them and send some of them "into the woods". My duties with the city doctor also included care for the institutions, such as the home for the elderly in Orehovica, the city children's centre, the soup kitchens and welfare in general. This was a constant battle to obtain rationed supplies and against the directive of the German occupying force aimed at denying aid to the families of Partisans, living or dead.

The winter of 1943-44 came and went. We knew about the news from Stalingrad. In June 1944 came the Normandy invasion and we believed that the war would end soon. However it lasted for almost another year and in this last year the Allied forces bombed Rijeka, Sušak and the surrounding area on a regular basis. There were days of constant air-raid sirens when we all had to go to the shelters, although there was no major damage. I still managed sometimes to visit my parents, who had stayed behind in Kraljevica and for whom life was hard, with little food. They had to spend entire days outside "shelters"

between Kraljevica and Bakarac, because the English were constantly bombing the shipyard. Then I arrived at the fatal idea of trying to get my parents to Sušak. I looked for an apartment for them, but I had to file a request with the city police. In the meantime, there was a major change among the Germans. Previously they had only been elderly Austrians, who were only concerned with surviving the war. Now *Obersturmbannführer* Vindakijević appeared as head of the Gestapo, a Bosnian, a butcher. the like of which Sušak had not seen until now. He began to carry out various operations against Partisans and their sympathisers, who were everywhere. One morning he personally shot thirteen captive Partisans, on the steps near the Piramida, and drove the bodies in an open cart through the city.

After the war I learnt that Vindakijević had managed to flee to Trieste and, from there, to Venice, where Tito's "long arm" caught up with him. His body was found one night, floating in a canal, riddled with knife wounds.

A Russian refugee from Belgrade named Bilouz, turned up in the local Croatian police. My request for the relocation of my parents happened to come under his nose and he immediately noticed their surname. And so he had an opportunity to prove his vigilance and to seize me, and possibly also my parents in far-off Kraljevica. He gave an order to two agents to arrest me – but my friend Tina overheard this order, by coincidence, from the adjacent room. She immediately called the office boy, Steva, and sent him to me (my office was at the Villa Marija, not far from the police) with a note in which there was just one word: "Run!" That was all that was needed; I didn't ask questions and I didn't hesitate. I phoned a friend of ours in Rijeka and asked if I could hide at her place for a while. Without hesitating she assented. This was a very brave decision because, in Rijeka, she lived with her mother and four sisters. I immediately left everything, I didn't go home, but went straight to Rijeka and stayed with them for a few days. While I was sitting and waiting, my faithful friend and flatmate Lujo prepared for me the most essential things for my flight: accommodation and a job. I was to hide in the house of a friend of ours in Krasica, above Bakar Bay, whose husband we had once hidden in our apartment when he was running from the Germans to the liberated islands. As for a job – there was to be physical labour in the Todt Organisation, some kind of a work service to which they usually sent those who weren't suitable for military service. I tore up all my documents and, during an air-raid alert, I

set off from Rijeka over the bridge and then uphill via Trsat with no problems. In the afternoon I arrived in Krasica, where I was welcomed in the manner customary for underground people and refugees at the time: warmly and without a single question. This was April 11, 1945. Later I really did go to Bakarac for a couple of days and did some digging for the Todt Organisation. From April 18, every defeated army possible was withdrawing through Krasica – home guards, Ustaša, Chetniks and even Germans. Some were making threats, some were just asking for food and water. After a restless night, full of the sound of gunfire, the Partisans arrived on April 19.

I went to visit my parents in Kraljevica, returned to Sušak to Tina and, on May 1, joined the army. After a few more very close encounters with the war, I saw May 8 and the capitulation of Germany somewhere in Slovenia, tired and blistered from the long march, but secure at least in the knowledge that I had survived the deadly danger which had hung over my head in one form or another for four long years.

Of my immediate family, the following perished in the Holocaust: Aunt Grete Steger and her husband Gustav, who had lived in Vienna, perished in Auschwitz. (Their son, Georg, survived the war by hiding on Mt Rtanj); my father's nephew Alfred Herman (he lived at the Rtanj mine and was shot there by the Germans in 1944); my father's brother, Adolf Minh, committed suicide during the first days of the German occupation in Belgrade, 1941.