
Dr Sabetaj Robert-Puba ALBAHARI

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Dr Sabetaj Albahari was born on January 1, 1925, in Dobož, Bosnia-Hercegovina, to Leon (Jehuda) and Mirta (Mirjam), née Altarac. He is married to Mari-Lou, a psychiatric social worker. They have three children, Albert Scott, Susan Miriam and David (Davičo) Johanan, and nine grandchildren.

Dr Albahari is a psychiatrist, but his hobby is flying. He practised in the United States of America where he flew his own light aircraft for 36 years. The family lives in the city of Princeton in the state of New Jersey.

My grandfather, my father's father, was a jeweller and money-changer during the Turkish occupation, which is how he earned the nickname Saraf. He was from Tešanj. There he collected taxes for both the Turkish and the Austrian authorities. My father told me that, according to my grandfather, our ancestors came to Tešanj from Izmir, via Ruščuk (Ruse, Bulgaria). They fled Spain after the expulsion in 1492 and, in the opinion of Professor Cecil Roth¹, probably took as

¹ Sir Cecil Roth, former president of the Royal Academy of Science in London. In connection with the origin of the surname Albahari, Professor Roth also pointed out to the author of this testimony, with some reservations, the possibility that it could be of Arab origin. In Arabic the word *bahrija* means a sea or a lake, any large body of water, thus "Albahari" could mean either "sailor" or "fisherman".

their surname the name of the place in which they lived, Albuhera, five kilometres south of the city of Bajadoz, near the Portuguese border.

Grandfather Sabetaj married twice, so my father grew up in a large family. He had four brothers and five half brothers, three sisters and four half sisters. My father also comes from Tešanj.

WE JEWS SHOULDN'T LIVE

When I was one year old, the family moved to Dubrovnik because my father was appointed manager of Lav Odijela (Lav Suits), a shop owned by the Kabiljo brothers from Sarajevo. We could have lived quite comfortably and peacefully there had it not been for frequent anti-Semitic incidents. One example, when I was in the third grade of primary school, happened when Rabbi Daniti told me to leave the class while the others had religious instruction. My classroom was on the ground floor so, when I was outside, I could clearly hear the Catholic priest say that we Jews had "killed their Lord God on the cross" and because of this should not live! When I returned to the class, my classmates rushed at me, attacked me, beat me and spat on me. I managed to defend myself by pulling out a knife used for sharpening pencils and wounding one of the pupils, the leader of the bullies. This caused a scandal in the city. The incident drew a reaction from Belgrade which ruled that this priest could no longer teach. In an effort to calm the situation down to at least some degree, signs appeared in the school "He's my brother indeed, regardless of creed".

Before the war, in March 1941, we took refuge in Tešanj, in my grandfather's house. The greater part of the family was already there. However, when Yugoslavia fell, my father, my mother and my little brother Avram returned to Dubrovnik, and I followed them twenty days later with my sister and my Uncle Josif. As we were passing through Žepče we ran into Auntie Rena with her two small children at the station. We were unable to talk to her. We could see that tears were running down her face as though she wanted to say to us "We'll never see one another again!"

As soon as we returned to Dubrovnik, a commissioner called Brkan was appointed to father's store. He belonged to a notorious Ustasha group which also included Glavan and the high school teacher, Kaštelan. They were the most brutal murderers: during the

day they would go to Trebinje and the surrounding areas to “remove” Serbs and, in the evening when they returned, they would go to the Franciscan church for confession. They next day they would again go to slaughter Serbs in Trebinje, ruthlessly wiping them out, regardless of gender or age. Once I saw an Ustasha bragging in front of the Church of Saint Vlaho, talking about how he used a bayonet to cut children from the wombs of pregnant Serbian women, and he showed a pot full of Serbian eyes which had been gouged out. Atrocities like these can hardly be forgotten.

Father was arrested as soon as he returned to Dubrovnik, along with another 150 Serbs. This group was taken the next day by truck to a place near Gacko to be executed. However they were saved by luck because the truck broke down and they were kept in prison for a day or two. After the Italian commander of the Second Corps, General Guiseppe d’Amico, intervened, all those who had been arrested were released. As soon as he returned home, my father said that we should flee to Split. With the help of a Dubrovnik Italian, Lieutenant Sevilotti, an officer in the occupying Italian army, my father obtained a pass for all of us to travel to Split. He immediately sent me and my sister to my Uncle Aron, and they also came a month later.

KADISH FOR 45 MURDERED FAMILY MEMBERS

We didn’t register with the authorities in Split, because my father kept insisting that we cross into Italy as soon as possible. In the meantime I was caught by the Black Shirts on the beach in Firule because I was swimming with my friends on a Fascist holiday when swimming was forbidden. They whipped us and beat us with rifle butts and made us shout “*Viva il Duce!*”, “*Viva la Dalmatia italiana!*”, “*Viva il fascismo!*” After all this, with the help of some acquaintances and some money, father managed to organise our travel from Split to Trieste by ship in November, 1941.

When we reached Trieste, my father insisted that we immediately go to the temple because he wanted to make contact with the local Jewish community. His plan was for us to get to Spain. However, when we left the temple there were two lines of Black Shirts, about a hundred metres long, waiting for us. Blows rained down on us as we passed between these lines. We stayed in Trieste for no more than

three or four days and were there in *confino libero*, free confinement, in Bologna until the fall of Italy.

We lived quite peacefully in Bologna. But after the fall of Italy, when the Germans arrived, we were forced to hide in stables and caves, always hungry. There was constant danger of Fascist raids, and of the Gestapo, because of whom we were unable to flee south to join the Allies. Once we happened to be spending the night in a farmer's stable when the Germans stopped there. This was two weeks before the liberation of Bologna, on April 25, 1945. An elite parachute unit was retreating northwards when the Allies broke through the rear line of defence before the breakthrough into the Po Valley. We were horrified and confused, not knowing what to do. We realised that there was nowhere to escape to, that we should stay where we were and wait for the end of the war which was drawing close. Because my mother spoke good German, we made contact with the Germans. They were surprised that we spoke German so well and asked for an explanation. As we all had false Italian names, we said that we came from Trieste, which was once under Austro-Hungarian rule.

About ten days before the liberation, an SS detachment came and wanted to take me to Germany to work. However the parachutists defended me and, when the SS men left, they gave me an armband with a swastika which read *Dolmetscher* (interpreter). This almost cost me my life after the liberation of Bologna, when a patrol of the Garibaldi Brigade was wiping out Fascists and their sympathisers. I was caught and even lined up against a wall to be shot as a collaborator. Fortunately I was saved when American troops arrived and began introducing the long-forgotten law and order.

The following day, as we walked through the city centre, my father and I saw a soldier in a British uniform. On his left shoulder he had a blue and white flag with the *Magen David*. We were overjoyed. The soldier was a member of the Jewish Brigade which was part of the British Eighth Army. Father and I kissed the *Magen David* and wept for joy because it was at this moment that we knew that we were really free. When we had fled Dubrovnik we had kissed the *mezuzah* on our way out of the house and now, in Bologna we kissed the *Magen David*.

The war had ended and, with it, the lives of 45 members of our family. What remains is the pain in our souls and a certain guilt: why

did these innocent people perish and not me as well? Only God, if He exists, can answer this question which has haunted me all my life.

Because they have no one but me to remember them, I say *Kadish* for all our murdered people, although I know neither the place nor the date of their execution.

Zihrono livraha!

I ke todos tengan buen ripozu i ke sejan in gan Eden, Amen.
(And may they all rest in peace and may they be in Heaven, Amen.)