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SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

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*Drago AUSLENDER*

WE WERE UNAWARE OF WHAT WAS COMING



*Drago Auslander was born on 4 May 1929 in Vinkovci, Croatia, of father Mavro and mother Erna, née Deitelbaum. Until World War Two he lived in the village of Ivankovo, close to Vinkovci, and there was another Jewish family there. His grandfather probably had origins in Hungary. Father Mavro was engaged in wholesale of grains and was working about 100 acres of his land and land of his brother Jakša and sisters Herma, Irma and Ružica, the land inherited from their father.*

*Until World War Two he completed his primary school in Ivankovo and two years of grammar school in Vinkovci. During the war, in the period 1941–1945, he did not attend school. After the war he continued his education in the Osijek Partisan Grammar School, matriculating in 1948. Subsequently he enrolled to study at the Faculty of Agriculture in Zagreb and was subsequently employed as engineer of agriculture at the Croatian Livestock Selection Centre in Zagreb, working there continually until his retirement in 1993.*

I would first like to say a few words about my direct and greater family. My father had a brother, Jakša, who was a doctor in Vinkovci. He had a wife Greta and daughter Elizabeta, nicknamed Liza, born in 1930. They all survived the Holocaust. The uncle and aunt died after the war and their daughter, my cousin, is living in New York. My father's oldest sister, Herma, was married to the Belgrade attorney dr Hercog. During the war they fled to Hungary and survived the Holocaust.

My father's second sister Irma, married Kraus, lived in Osijek. She was married to Emil Kraus who ran the Osijek swimming grounds „Dijanabad“. They had two children. Son Zdenko was taken in 1941 from Zagreb to the Jadovno camp, where he perished. Daughter Mira was married to an active army officer. They were living in Belgrade and they survived the war. Aunt Irma was at the concentration camp on the island of Rab and that is how she was saved, while her husband Emil was taken in 1941 to Jasenovac, not to return. The third sister, Ružica, married Binder, lived in Zemun, where they had a wood and timber trading business. They had two children: son Paul and daughter Anica. At that time Paul was thirteen and Anica eighteen. They all perished at the Sajmište camp in Belgrade (the Zemlin Fair Grounds concentration camp).

My mother's father Josip Deitelbaum was about 82 when he was liquidated in 1942, during the liquidation of Jews from Vinkovci. He was raised in the strict patriarchal spirit, very religious. In his old age he was mostly preoccupied with his garden. While younger, he had a textile trading business, first in Bošnjaci, and subsequently in Vinkovci. My grandmother Gize-la was about 78 when she was taken to the camp and perished. My mother had a brother, Hugo Deitelbaum, married to Giza. They had a son, born in 1927. All three of them were taken in 1942 to Jasenovac where they perished.

My mother's oldest sister Olga, married Brihta, lived in Belgrade. She perished during the Holocaust, suffocated in the infamous suffocation trucks locally known as „dušegupka“. Her son Zdenko survived the Holocaust and after the war went to Israel where he subsequently died. The other sister, Helena, married Jung, lived in Osijek. Her husband was a well-known horse tradesman. They had three children. Their oldest daughter Lilika managed with the last such transport in 1940 to immigrate to the Palestine, while the two sons stayed in Yugoslavia. The older of the two, Leo, ended up in Hungary and was taken in 1944 to Bergen-Belsen. He survived the horrors of the camp and went to Switzerland and after the war was over he returned to Croatia. The younger one was with the parents. They initially fled to Mostar, after which they were transferred to the island of Lopud, and subsequently to the island of Rab. That is how they survived.

My mother had a third sister Ema, married Grin, whose husband died before the war. She lived in Vinkovci with her parents and had two sons. The older son Oto had just matriculated, while the younger Egon was in secondary school, he was sixteen. In 1941 they were taken to concentration camps in Croatia, where they perished.

From those days I remember that we had house servants and three coachmen who worked at the estate. We had another man who was engaged in farming and assisting my father in the grain trading business. Our house was big and prosperous, full of life and located in the centre of the village.



Farming produce was traded in the yard every day. There were wage workers who worked for my father. Mother also helped. We had about ten horses. There were two maids. The family was well off.

My mother's father went to the temple in Vinkovci every day. The rest of the family was not religious, but for holidays we regularly went to the synagogue. My father's parents had died in 1932 or 1933 of consequences of being attacked by Čaruga, a well known bandit, who attacked the house one night. Brandy was made in our house. As he was not satisfied with what he got, he beat up my grandparents so that they never recovered and died.

I actually felt anti-Semitism for the first time in 1941 when the Germans entered Ivankov. It happened at around 1 o'clock at night, when the army stormed the place on motorcycles. The population of Ivankovo at that time consisted of about 50 percent Croats and the same share of native Germans, locally known as "folksdojčer". They were enthusiastic about the German arrival, and our neighbors who were native Germans welcomed them with „Heil, heil!“. My mother, father and I were watching this from behind window shades and listening. It was then that we realized that hard times had come for us.

As far as I can remember, prior to this my mother and father had not thought about fleeing our place and house. There was an overwhelming sense of fear, but still I think we were not sufficiently aware of what was in store. Since father was living in good relations with everyone in the community, people naively believed that father would be saved. Ivankovo was a big village and Croat neighbors collected about two thousand signatures appealing that no one should touch my father. But in 1942 the infamous Ustaša Ivan Tolj came to Vinkovci and an overall hunt for the Jews began. About a month later there were no Jews left in the area. He managed to exterminate all Jews from Vinkovci and the wider region. Ivan Tolj was arrested in 1945, tried and publicly executed in Vinkovci.

Yes, in those days of general turmoil we were not aware of what was in store for us. It was only after the mass arrests of Jews by Tolj that our eyes were wide open! I remember the Sunday, 3 May 1942, when a friend of the family came to our home around midnight, knocking at our window. He told us:

„I am coming from Vinkovci. I saw it, they have taken everyone away! I saw your relatives. Try to save yourselves!“

The next day, 4 May, was my birthday. My Bar Mitzvah. Mother and I packed, took with us some food, and at four in the morning with a horse wagon, fled to hide with our friend Ilija Zelić at his farm. Father had not come with us. I do not know what he was thinking, but he said that he would be coming after us, in the evening. However, around seven, as I later found out, they came to get him and took him to the collection site in Vinkovci,

from which he was taken to Jasenovac. He never came back. Ilija Zelić was arrested, as they supposed that we were hiding in his farm. The next day, however, we moved on to the village Tordince. That was where his daughter in law had parents. We stayed for eight days with them, in hiding. However, since Ilija was arrested, his son came and said that they could no longer hide us and that we had to leave. Dressed as farmers, my mother and I started on foot towards Vinkovci.

We arrived to Vinkovci, and living in Vinkovci there were my father's brother, his wife and child. The uncle was a doctor, at that time mobilized in Bosnia, where many Jewish doctors were engaged in fighting endemic syphilis. We could not stay with them, since they were in great fear that we could get them at risk. In the meantime, my mother went to her parents' house. There was nobody there. She came back and said:

„I have no way out of this. I can see no way for us to save ourselves. We will go and report ourselves for a camp!“

I refused this idea which offered no hope whatsoever, saying that we will not surrender ourselves and that we would keep on fleeing. That is how we decided to go to Osijek. It was about five o'clock. In the meantime we were trying to persuade some carriage drivers to take us to Osijek, but none of them dared to do it.

Since we left without any money and without passes, we headed for Nuštar, on the road Gaboš-Ostrovo. At about seven in the evening we came to a village – I cannot recall exactly, but possibly it was the village Tenjski Antunovac. There was curfew and we could not keep moving on. We spent the night in a house there, and at four in the morning we continued, afraid that the owners could report us. We got out without saying goodbye or thank you. We continued going by carriage and on foot, whichever was possible. In any case we managed despite the Ustaša guards to get into Osijek. Once in Osijek, out in the street, my mother ran into one of her sisters living there whose family had not yet been taken away. Somehow we got to her home, but since Jews in Osijek were at risk we had to keep moving.

We stayed in Osijek until 1 June 1942. That is when my uncle Marcel Jung, at that time working for a company trading in horses, took me to Đakovo. There was an animal fair in Đakovo on that day. He took me to his friends, family Surovi. They had a metal-working shop and a “locomobile”, which in previous years used to provide energy for our corn drying plant. In autumn that machine would be working for my father's business and that is how this friendship started.

The Surovi family took me on as apprentice in their metalworking shop. Of course it was a great risk for them. In Đakovo, about 35 kilometers from Ivankovo, hiding me was a great risk for them. I feared that someone from Ivankovo could see me, report me, and I would be taken away. My mother, in

the meantime, went from Osijek with her nephew, son of her sister Helena, to Mostar. Aunt Helena and her husband followed them afterwards.

Until June 1942 we went every day to the location Tinjska Road, where we were building a camp. The day before the camp was closed (meaning that those who were there at the time building the camp could no longer get out), I went to Đakovo and thus saved myself. I stayed in Đakovo until September 1942. Since there was risk for me to stay there I sent a message to my mother, then in Mostar, to send someone for me as my stay in Đakovo was a danger. It was not so only for myself but also for the Surovi family. At that time Đakovo was a collection camp for Jewish women and children, mostly from Bosnia.

For work reasons I used to pass every day by that infamous mill, where on daily basis dozens of women died. The camp was in the Đakovo mill, which was adjusted for that purpose, although the conditions in it were abominable. Typhoid was widespread there. Victims were buried in the Šakovo cemetery which is still there. Each grave is known individually. At that time, while still a child, my wife Bjanka was detained there. Her mother, grandmother and aunts perished there. But she, as a child, was saved. We did not know each other at that time. We knew where the women inmates came from, because already in 1941 we provided assistance to them from the Vinkovci and Osijek Jewish Community.

One September day a woman came from Mostar to take me back to Mostar with her. Under the pretence that I was her son, doing apprenticeship in Đakovo, I moved with her to Mostar. The journey was difficult. At that time there were already Partisan diversions on the railway, and there were constant controls. To make things more difficult – in Slavonski Brod – the woman who came for me and I had lost each other! Out of the great fear which I felt, I had not even remembered what she looked like. And she had the tickets for both of us. It happened in a single moment: as the place was very crowded, she sent me ahead, to take a palce for us, and she would follow. And in that crowd we lost each other. The train patrol asked me on a number of occasions to present my documents, which were with her. I walked through the train, from one compartment to another, looking for my alleged mother. Luckily, she recognized me and we could present our documents.

We arrived to Mostar. My mother did not dare meet me at the station, but waited for me in a nearby alley. Mostar was under dual administration, by Italians and Ustaša. My mother had also come to Mostar illegally, with a counterfeit personal document and a pass. She herself was not safe there – after eight days she was arrested by Ustaša. Fortunately, thanks to the intervention by the president of the Mostar Jewish Community, Mr. Hajon, who had strong links with the Italians, she was saved.



When the Italians started their withdrawal from Mostar, they took the Jews with them. So, we ended up in Dalmatian settlements: some in Kupari, or Mlini, or the island of Lopud... We got to Lopud and were put up in the then closed hotels, surrounded by barbed wire. We were not to get out but we were allowed, under guard, even to swim. I still remember that we children would often go through the wire and take a swim on our own.

We stayed in Lopud until March 1943, the time when the Italians collected all the Jews and transferred them to the island of Rab. It was a true concentration camp, surrounded by barbed wire. The discipline and regime was much stricter, the food much worse, the treatment was stricter too – but there was no killing. The situation was much more difficult for the inmates in the island of Rab. Many perished there, as in the autumn of 1942 there was flooding, and they were accommodated in tents. Many people died due to those storms and floods.

We knew what had happened to our father, although we were never in direct contact with him. He only intermittently communicated with his brother in Vinkovci. From what I heard, he perished in Jasenovac in 1944.

We were in Rab at the time of the capitulation of Italy, on 8 September 1943. We were all rejoicing, even Italian soldiers, not knowing what was yet in store for us until the end of the war. Partisans came from the mainland and the Italians laid their arms down. The Slovenian and our administration took over the camp and we were free. The transfer to the mainland began, every night, in small boats. We were mostly heading towards Senj and Jablanac, to the liberated territory of Lika, Kordun, and Banija. This transfer was organized by the Partisans. Regretfully, not all managed to be transferred. I think that in Rab there was a total of between 3,000 to 3,200 Jews. The majority was saved, but a number of them remained at the island. On 19 March 1944 the Germans landed on Rab and about 95% of those who had not left the island were transferred to German concentration camps. It was mostly the elderly inmates.

We walked on foot to the liberated territory, from Jablanac, via Otočac, Kladaša, Topusko and Banija, all the way to Slavonia. Farmers' wagons would be carrying people's belongings, back-packs, possibly a suitcase if some people had one, while we mostly went on foot. German planes circled above us, so moving during the day was practically impossible. My aunt Irma Kraus, my father's sister, stayed in Rab all the time: she was not discovered and she survived. She remained to stay with a family there. After the war her daughter went to get her in Rab and found her in very poor health. She moved her first to Zagreb and then to Osijek, where she recovered.

The majority of the young people went with the Rab brigade into combat. We were aware that the National Liberation Movement was headed by the Communist Party. We were equally aware that the Germans would

sooner or later invade the island, as it actually happened. All those who had doubts paid dearly for it with their lives. My mother's sister even went to Slavonia, to Papuk, while we stayed in Topusko, Glina, Buzeta, Klasnić.

There were many people in the vicinity of Topusko. Selling what they still had in their back-packs, they on their own managed for food. My mother and I were with a group from Sarajevo, with the Finci family. We moved together: Senj, Otočac, Babin potok, Kladuša, towards Topusko. From Topusko we continued to the village Buzeta, in the region of Banija. We were there with the Finci family in December 1943, at the time of the VI offensive.

It was at that time that my mother got ill, she had joint inflammation. So, one day, when the Ustaša from Glina launched an attack against the Serbian village Buzeta, the whole village took refuge in the woods. I had to carry both my mother's and my back-pack. My mother stayed behind with a woman and survived the slaughter by the Ustaša. She was not able to move. Fortunately, a Partisan unit came and stopped the Ustaša. At night we returned to Buzeta. Finally, in January 1944 mother was transferred to the neighboring village Klasnić which, supposedly, had a doctor.

The Partisan administration arranged for accommodation for us. There was a schedule made and local villagers had to take in refugees into their homes. School buildings were also used for this purpose. We slept on the floors, on the ground.

We were hoping that the doctor would be able to help my mother. However, since there were no medicines available, nothing could help. Mother died on 15 January 1944. She felt that she would not be getting well and she asked Jahiel Finci, in case that she does not live, to take care of me. Thus, after 15 January 1944 I was with the Finci family until my arrival in Zagreb in May 1945. They were very good and caring for me.

After our stay in Buzeta (Banija) we moved to Topusko, where Jahiel Finci was working in the administration of ZAVNOH, and I was the courier. In autumn 1944, after the liberation of Split, we went with ZAVNOH to Split, where we stayed until the end of the war. In Split I was working in the State Supplies Enterprise and I continued working for them after moving to Zagreb. I parted with the Finci family in Split, because they were returning to Sarajevo.

I stayed in Zagreb until the autumn of 1945, at which time I went to Osijek, because my aunt Helena Jung, my mother's sister, with her sons Vlada and Leo had at that time returned to Osijek. In Osijek and subsequently again in Zagreb I continued to study and work.