

סָנְסִיקְיַסְטָן  
SANSKI MOST  
דְּרוֹנוֹנְטָה  
DERVENTA TRAVNIK  
בֵּיְלִינָה  
BIJELJINA  
זָאוּידּוּבִּיצִי  
ZAVIDOVIC  
וְאֶגֶּרְבָּן  
ZAGREB

טוֹזְלָה  
TUZLA

וְלָסְנִיצָה  
VLASENICA

זְנִיצָה  
ZENICA

וִיסּוּקָנוּ  
VISOKO

זְפִצְ'ה  
ŽEPČE

וִיְשֶׁגְרָד  
VIŠEGRAD

וִישְׁגָרָד  
BEOGRAD

מוֹסְטָאָר  
MOSTAR

סָאיִיבָּו  
SARAJEVO

בְּלָגְרָאָד  
BOSNA AND HERZEGOVINA

BEOGRAD

WE SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סְקוֹפִּיה  
SKOPLJE

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## *Ješua ABINUN*

### I STAYED ALIVE BY COINCIDENCE



*Ješua Abinun was born in 1920 in Sarajevo, where he lived permanently until 1941, in a Sephardic family with four children.*

*Together with his father and brother he was taken from Sarajevo on 25 October 1941, first to a labor camp in Sarajevo, via the Sarajevo collection camp, to the Jasenovac concentration camp, where his father and brother were executed. His mother and two sisters were taken in 1942 to Jasenovac, and were allegedly executed while being transferred via Gradiška to the Đakovo camp.*

*Of the four children and the parents, Ješua was the only one who survived the war. Numerous members of his greater family perished in the Holocaust.*

*He has a son and two grandchildren living in Toronto, Canada. With his wife he is living in the retirement home „Zenta“ in Split.*

In Sarajevo my father had a carpenter's shop, and mother was a housewife. We were a middle class family. One sister's name was Simha, we called her Sidica; the other was Regina; the brother was Santo, nicknamed Šani. My brother was a sales assistant, and I was a frisseur. The older sister finished her apprenticeship and worked as a tailor, while the youngest Regina (born in 1930) in 1941 was still practically a child, only eleven years of age.

Mother was caring for everyone, she did the household chores, while father worked in the shop. We children, once we grew up, had decent lives.

We all worked: my brother, I, my sister, so we could afford a good life. We did not have our separate apartments, but we had a rented apartment in a building in the center of the city. That was how it was until the war broke out and until the German occupation. After that, as is well known, the situation in Sarajevo became very difficult for Jews.

Before World War Two, father would regularly every morning go to his shop and work until evening. We, children, took his lunch to him. And we did our schooling until we too started to earn for our living.

When he finished school, my brother had a permanent job. He did additional work as well, designing and arranging shop-windows. I worked until 1941 at Marindvor, for a friseur master who, by coincidence, was also later to be an inmate in Jasenovac. He was also on the run with me. And he was killed.

Life was good, we lacked nothing. Everyone was working. It was a big family; there were my father's and mother's sisters, and their children. We were all very close. The family cult was strong. And, there were grandmother and grandfather. When grandmother died, grandfather was alone, and he married again. We always visited grandfather and he visited us. Sephardic families attribute great importance to family.

We celebrated the holidays together, we went to the synagogues. Strict care was taken to have everything ready in time and do nothing on the day of the holiday. On Saturdays we observed the Shabbat, at times to a greater and at times to a lesser degree. I must admit that we were not very religious, but we did cherish the Jewish tradition and observed the Jewish holidays. As children we loved all this, and continued as adults. Still we cherish those days and gladly remember them. We still sometimes mark those days, thanks to our organizations, communities and friends.

It was a numerous Sephardic family with many members, practically all of whom perished. I must say that until 1941 I faced no problems on the grounds of being a Jew. We lived absolutely normally with people of other ethnic and religious communities, exchanged visits, maintained contacts, and exchanged visits for holidays.

There was a Jewish primary school in Sarajevo which we attended, and continued in the public secondary school. At school we had religious education. I cannot remember the teacher's name. Hebrew was not taught. We knew Espagnol, which we learned from our parents. Mother spoke only Espagnol and it was spoken at home quite a lot, so we children also acquired the language well. But, that was not the contemporary Spanish; we spoke Judeo-Espagnol, although we do understand the modern Spanish as well. Wherever I went abroad, and I was fortunate that as a friseur I did travel a lot across Europe, the knowledge of Spanish helped me.

My family originated from Spain, but father was born in Sarajevo. Grandfather, supposedly, also came to Sarajevo from somewhere else, but I do not know when. Mother came to Sarajevo from Travnik. They all originated from Jews who were expelled from Spain 500 years ago. They all dispersed, and a great number of them came to Sarajevo.

We had quite good lives under those conditions. The most frequent Jewish family names in Sarajevo were: Abinun, Papo, Altarac, Kabiljo, Montiljo... there were so many people with the same family name that we had to have at least one nickname to be able to tell which family we are referring to. There were cases that people would have the same family name and the same father's first name. My family, Abinun, were nicknamed Foli. I cannot explain the meaning of that nickname. There were also names like Juso Kokošak, or Dani La Vaka. Vaka means a cow, and the name was added because he worked with meat products. There were also some humorous nicknames. Such as Juso de la Kurva, which implied something unethical. People did not mind their nicknames. Without them you would not be able to tell families apart, whether it was this Abinun or the other, since there were ten more of the same name! We children did not have these nicknames.

After the war there were many mixed marriages in Sarajevo, while this was not the case before the war. The tendency used to be to marry another Sephardic Jew. Among the Sephardic Jews marriages were also arranged. Care was taken to avoid someone from an affluent family marrying a poor person, capital was to stay in the family. There were match-makers who went around and arranged marriages. There was also coercion; I know of such cases, that a girl would be forced to marry a certain man. She did not love him, she loved someone else, but ... there were such cases.

In Sarajevo there was a Jewish organization Hashomer Hatzair, and a strong working class Jewish organization „Matatja“. „Matatja“ had an amateur section which organized performances and entertainment events. It gathered talented amateurs. „Matatja“ mostly gathered working class youth, while „Kenu“, within Hashomer Hatzair, gathered Zionist youth, which was preparing for immigration to Palestine. Both organizations were mostly for Jewish youth. But we also went to „Sloga“, an organization in Sarajevo which gathered the youth of other nationalities, and also organized performances and entertainment events.

I was for many years a member of „Matatja“, until 1941.

Zionism did not attract me. We were a working class family. There were some progressive Jews who had influenced us in somewhat different ways. To be honest, they introduced us to communist ideas, while in „Ken“ the youth was educated only for immigration to Palestine. Among our peer groups we would engage in discussions about these issues. At that time we

were sixteen, or seventeen, or eighteen, or twenty, and actually we did not have our own opinions. In 1945 we were not strongly convinced that we should go to Israel. We enjoyed the same standard of living, no one asked if you were a Jew or not. And it was like that until 1948, very few people thought about leaving for Israel. After the Informbiro Resolution, and what followed, a significant number of Jews left for Israel.

Being craftsmen, we did not have capital, nor did we own our homes. My father had a workshop, and always two or three workers; but, we never had to worry too much about how much we would spend on food, clothes or other needs. What we had could always be stretched to cover everything, but we had no capital. There was a practice to prepare dowry for the daughter's wedding. So we, as well, had everything ready for our sister that she would need once that she was to be married. There was a big chest to which the purchased goods were neatly put, including textiles, all in bundles ... we called it *dota* (dowry). Those Jews who had capital, houses, several shops, or were engaged in trading, were considered rich.

In 1941 my sister was nineteen. She had a boyfriend, a Jew, who was with me in the camp, but the circumstances prevented the marriage. At that time I was twenty-one, she was two years younger. None of us married before 1941. We were all still living together: sister and I, father and mother.

For high holidays the family would get together at home and in the temple. Certain foods were always cooked for the specific holidays. On Yom Kippur we observed the fasting. For Passover we would have the Seder and father read from the Haggada the exit of Jews from Egypt, we ate unleavened bread, matzot. For Purim the tradition was different and there were parties, children would go costumed from house to house, say some rhymes and get some money, giving children money for Purim was a tradition. There were many Jewish families in the neighborhood where we lived. And nearby was the Bjelave neighborhood, again with numerous Jewish families. I also knew about Predimaret, which was home to many Jews. And there was a place, Kurtiziku, where people would buy toys for children for Purim.

I never sang songs, I did not have a voice for signing, but I enjoyed listening to Sephardic romance songs. There were some people who were very good at singing, not professionals, but they would sing for our inner circles, like in „Matatja“. I very well remember the song „Adio, kerida“: „La kerija mas ke me vida“. I forgot the rest, it has been a long time since, but I still like to hear it to this day. Before the most recent war conflicts in former Yugoslavia, there was a US group performing at the Sarajevo Jewish Community, with a program of Sephardic music. There was a signing society „Lira“ in Sarajevo, which toured Europe signing that music.

We loved the Ladino language in our family. We mostly spoke it among ourselves. There were also people of other nationalities who worked with the Jews and knew and spoke Judeo-Espagnol, mostly in trade. Knowing the language was a help to me when I travelled abroad for hair-styling competitions. There are many words of contemporary Spanish that we did not know, because the Ladino was somewhat archaic, the Spanish of the fifteenth century, but it was helpful wherever I travelled.

In the family we heard many stories, anecdotes and proverbs that were passed on orally from one generation to the next. There were many proverbs and jokes and Judeo-Espagnol. For instance, if you wanted to tell someone that you do not understand, you would say: „No li digas al loku, ni munču ni poku“, meaning: „Do not tell the fool either too much or too little, he will get it wrong!“ Or: „A fly cannot get into a closed mouth“, meaning „keep your mouth shut and you cannot go wrong!“

Generally, the Jews fit in well into the Bosnian context, with its specific humor. We lived in harmony with all communities, our neighbors, everyone preserved their own traditions and respected those of others; I must say that it was true tolerance. That was so until 1941. But then the situation changed. It was unfavorable to know a Jew, be with them in the street – that is all common knowledge now. Traders in Bosnia learned the Ladino language from Jews. There were Muslims engaged in trading, in the Baščaršija or Predimaret districts, who spoke Ladino better than I did. They knew everything, as they had to attract clients and do everything to please them.

In the wake of the Jews leaving (and especially the time of their persecution), the businessmen of Sarajevo regretted the fact that the Jews were leaving for Israel, aware that the trading would no longer be the same without the Jewish traders. Jews were very capable traders: both in buying and in selling. I remember an outstanding businessman, he was a Partisan veteran, he said that the trade in Sarajevo would not easily be recovered without the Jews, without the international contacts which they had had.

My father wanted me to be a carpenter, work together with him in his workshop, whereby he wanted to tie me to himself for life. I thought that things were going too slow for me, that it was stopping me from going the way that I wanted to go, and I openly told my father „I wish to do something else“.

So, I went to the hair-styling business. That was what I was doing until 1941, when a commissioner came and took over the shop from my master friseur. That master friseur by coincidence was together with me later in the Jasenovac concentration camp, where he was killed during an attempt to escape. He used to have a very nice shop in Marindvor. His name was Rafael Levi.

The commissioner was the typical alcoholic. He got the shop for nothing and he threw me out right away. After I survived the Holocaust and came back to Sarajevo, I found the shop of my master, it was still intact and would have been returned to him had he survived. His sister came, and the cooperative which we established purchased the shop back.

I was without the job only in 1941. It was in May or June, I cannot remember, as soon as the commissioner came. My master friseur, for whom I worked, was among the first to be taken away. His family was also taken away with him. It happened suddenly, overnight. Commissioners were assigned to Jewish shops, under the authorities of the Independent State of Croatia. The power was also German, but the Ustaša exercised it. From the Great Temple they took whatever they wanted or could take away. They even removed and took away the tin of the roof. I was in Sarajevo at the time and I saw: they were taking the tin away because it was of special quality. Fear and panic set in.

The commissioner came in the morning:  
„Out! Out!“, he shouted.

Not a single Jew could get a job in Sarajevo. They were all fired, and the capital and shops were seized from those who had them. It was like this: the then authorities served the order, whereby the then owner was instructed to leave the shop, saying that the shop no longer belonged to him but to the one who came with the order. So, the commissioner came to our shop as well, with the order stating that the shop of the Levi now belonged to him, not to Levi any more. That was allegedly legal. No one came of his own will, without the order of the authorities. The authorities were strictly Ustaša. What followed was: moving around with the yellow armbands, arrests, rounding up. It was first the outstanding and rich people who were taken away. So, right away, about fifteen or twenty of the most prominent Jews were taken to Vraca (among them, I think, was also Avram Altarac, the initiator of the synagogue construction initiative) and they were executed there. That was the beginning of mass persecution and liquidation of Jews, confiscation of their property, and deportation. Initially, they were taken away in smaller groups, to the first camps: Jadovno, Kruščica near Travnik. Later, the deportations became massive.

My master friseur and his family were taken to Kruščica near Travnik. Some were taken to Kruščica, others to Jadovno. I saw how they were arrested in the streets. Before the arrests, they were taking us for forced labor: cleaning the streets, digging the trenches. There is a photograph, it was exhibited at the museum in Sarajevo after the war: Jews pulling the huge roller machine for paving of the streets. After 1945 the photograph was exhibited in the Jewish Community. I was taken for forced labor, in settlement

Svrakino Selo, next to the Skenderija center. We were digging, and we were guarded by a policeman. People were beaten when they could not or would not work. I was not beaten, I could do the work. I was young and strong, twenty-one, and this continued until October, when massive deportation to camps began. My transport, I think, had several hundreds of people in it.

First they took away the men, all of them to the military barracks used as the Sarajevo camp, after which they were loaded onto sealed wagons and sent directly to Jasenovac. The barracks were later, after the war, called „Maršal Tito“, and the buildings are still used as military barracks. That was where people were rounded up. They would come at night. We had backpacks ready, as we knew that they would take us away. Where to run? Some managed to go to Mostar, under fake names, or under veils. There were men who put on Muslim women's clothes to get away. And there were cases that a person would get a Muslim name, and a pass, in return for money. For instance, someone would go to Mostar and get there a pass under a Muslim name, for the person to leave town as a Muslim. Whoever got to Mostar was practically saved. Mostar was under Italian rule. They had a different attitude to the Jews. The pass was not cheap. Possibly we had enough money to get the passes, but we were not into it, we were not thinking about it, as it was three of us. We were also naive in thinking that we had our trades and we would be working somewhere and thus stay alive. That was naive. We believed that both the Germans and the Ustaša needed craftsmen and trades. However, they needed no one, they were massively taking everyone away. Without asking who was who. Whoever had something, it was confiscated. For instance, when we arrived to Jasenovac, they took away our money, rings, all that we had.

Before 1940 I never saw Jewish refugees in Sarajevo. I did hear that there were some from Germany, or from Vienna, that some did come as refugees, specifically to Zagreb. But to Sarajevo – possibly a couple of such families. That was what I heard, I did not see them. They say that in Zagreb there was quite a number of families from Vienna, already in 1939 or 1940. They had fled to Zagreb thinking that they would hide, but the same destiny awaited them there. We knew very little about what was happening with the Jews in Germany. Even what we did hear, we did not believe. Regretfully, we wrongly believed that as people of our trades we would have a different treatment. However, the Germans were intent of exterminating the Jews, and that would be it, no more of them. This intention of the Reich was wholeheartedly embraced by the Ustaša who enforced it even better than the Germans.

When I was taken away, I think it was 25 October 1941; we were at home, in the place where we lived, in Cara Ismaila street. The agents and the police came and took my father, brother and me. We had our backpacks

ready with the basics, because that was all that we were allowed to take, thinking that we were to keep what was ours. But they took it all. All the men from our neighborhood were rounded up at the same time, so it was a big transport of fathers, sons and grandsons. The women were taken away later, to Gradiška and Đakovo. My mother and two sisters were taken away in 1942. They were deported to Jasenovac in biting cold. Since there was no room to take them in, they were taken to Gradiška and they were told that they would be taken further to Đakovo. However, it is said that they were all liquidated along the way.

And we were taken to the barracks; within the barracks compound, there were rails, so wagons could approach. That was where we were packed into wagons, without toilette, without anything, and closed in. I think we travelled in the sealed wagons a day and a night. Inside, people relieved themselves, did everything. Some elderly people died on the way. In front of Jasenovac, we stood for a long time. It was dreadful. Then we were taken inside the Jasenovac camp. At the entry to the camp, everything that we had was taken from us: watches, rings, backpacks. It was Ustaša who did this, soldiers in Ustaša uniforms, with the big „U“ sign on the hats. Their formal name was Ustaša supervision service. The service consisted mostly of rural people, except for commanders. The Ustaša were mostly from Herzegovina. Dressed up, well fed, they were cruel in the way in which they treated us. I could hear from their talk and their songs that they were from Herzegovina. I knew exactly, and later on we heard who was from where. They mostly came from Široki Brijeg and Imotski.

Entry to Jasenovac camp did not only mean taking away of our belongings, but also beating. Different types of humiliation. For instance, they ask: „Who has got good handwriting?“

Being naïve, some people volunteered. Then they are taken to clean toilets. Then, they force us to run to village Krapje. Beating us along the way. Whoever could not run was killed.

While in camp Krapje every morning at 4 AM we went to work and came back very late. We were building an embankment, because there was risk of the rising Sava river flooding Jasenovac. It was dark when they took us there and also practically dark when they took us back. The food was some kind of porridge. The conditions were horrible. As the water level was rising, they had to transfer us to Jasenovac proper. Whether it was November or December, I am not sure. I think it was November when my brother and I, together with a big group of inmates, were transferred at night to Jasenovac.

It was the first snow. The winter 1941/1942 was very cold. The Sava river had frozen, it was that cold. And we were in Jasenovac, the part called *Ciglana* (Brick Factory), owned by a Serb, who managed to flee, where we

were put in the attic, right above the brick baking furnace. We were told that that day we would not be working, due to the extreme cold. However, since they were a bit drunk, they came with iron rods. I know that it was 14 November. They were randomly beating whoever was closest. My father was killed right there, my brother was wounded, while I managed to get out and hide and was not affected on that occasion. That was the beginning of one big liquidation campaign. Quite a number of people were killed there and then with the strong iron rods. Whoever was hit did not survive. There was no system at all in that cruel onslaught. They just stormed the room in which we were and started hitting. On that occasion I was not beaten, but my brother was, and he had to go and see a doctor. They bandaged his arm. I remembered the date; it was the day my father was killed.

There were things so terrible that they seem unbelievable. For instance, at that time they needed wood for fire, as heating fuel. I think it was in December. They forced us to go to the forest to get the wood. They tied us up as horses and we would, in pairs, pull the wood for 3–4 meters. Whoever could not pull, was beaten up and left there, in the forest, where he stopped. I remember that well. It was abominable.

We were wearing the same clothes that we came in – they did not take away our winter coats. You wore whatever shoes you had. It was terribly cold, and no place to get warm. The camp became full, and the Ustaša started liquidating inmates to make room for those who kept coming. The camp could take about 2,500 to 3,000 people. And new inmates kept arriving. The Ustaša were not bringing in only Jews, they rounded up whole Serb villages, with children in cradles. There were also many Roma. The Roma had a choir which entertained them by singing, and once they finished the performance the Ustaša killed them. Then the second group, and the third ... So they were killing the Roma, as well as Serbs, Jews and others.

Two of my uncles were there, of similar age as my father. It was said that those who cannot work would be transferred to another camp. And the work to which we were assigned was awful. We could not take off our shoes at night, because the winter was so ice-cold that the shoes would freeze overnight and we would not be able in the morning to put them on. So, you slept with your shoes on. These elderly people naively believed that they would be taken to some old people's homes. Contrary to their belief, the Ustaša loaded them on trucks and took them for liquidation.

I somehow managed not to be there where they would find me. In the brick factory, where the brick furnaces used to be, there were some kind of indents, like booths of a sort, in which about six of us would sleep. But, we did not sleep on our backs, rather we slept on the side, so that we could all fit in. While we were doing so, they would not come looking for us. They did

not think that someone could be sleeping there. I stayed there until leaving for Gradiška.

When they were asking for shoemakers and other craftsmen for Gradiška, they did not ask for friseurs. I applied as shoemaker. But, once I was there, a barber shop was opened.

In the camp there was a kitchen, a barber shop, tailor shop, ironing workshop, disinfection service – this was so both in Jasenovac and Gradiška. There were several working groups: outdoor workers, forest workers, farming group, etc. The Jasenovac camp had its economy, and people worked, for instance as coachmen, or feeding horses and doing other work.

We used to get up very early. When I was with the outdoor group we went to cut wood in the forest. Everyone had to do one meter of cut wood and pile it up neatly. I could never accomplish as much. They could have killed me, but I joined a group of three villagers, who were skillful in this work, so I was the fourth in their group. This way, jointly, in the course of the day we would get four meters of wood ready. We could not go back before it was done. The food that we got was almost nothing: carrots, or beat, or potatoes cooked in water, no salt added. Bread was distributed seldom and in very small quantities.

Roll calls and checks were performed every morning. If someone was missing, it was a must to determine where that person was. It did happen that someone would escape. Those were individual escapes. And they sometimes claimed that someone attempted to escape so that they could, as punishment, liquidate the person.

I saw with my own eyes how women and children were tortured and liquidated. I was once watching this from the attic, it was happening at the place called Granik on the Sava river. We were hiding in the attic and we saw them killing women and children. Inside the camp's perimeter, there was *Granik*, the place where boats would approach. There also they would kill the new-comers and throw their bodies into the Sava river. Mostly, they killed by slaughter, seldom with bullets, often also by means of iron rods. They would also throw the children high up in the air and intercept them on knives as they were falling down. One cannot believe something as dreadful, but it was happening. I saw it. We watched it from that attic.

Or you could witness the following: two officers are walking, and two inmates are moving. Then, one says to the other:

„I bet you I will shoot him right in the forehead!“

They place the inmate against the wall and shoot. If he hits the target he wins the bet, or the other one wins the bet if he misses. It happened often. By coincidence or good luck, it did not happen to me!

I remember the names of some Ustaša: Brkljačić, Alaga, the one who survived and was in Zagreb at the beginning of this last war – Šakić, Dinko Šakić. He was camp commander, a cruel and savage man. Such were also Maks Luburić and Majstorović.

I remember what happened when I first returned from Gradiška to Jasenovac. As we were approaching, the bells were ringing for all to assemble. What now? We were told that two inmates had escaped. However, these two (I knew them) did not escape, the Ustaša just pretended and presented it so. So, in retaliation, twenty or thirty people needed to be liquidated. We were lined up. This man Šakić, the camp commander, was there with his Ustaša. And Šakić told his subordinate:

„You know what, let us first have all those who lived with these two and slept with these two, come forward.“

Inmates used to sleep in barracks, in groups of ten or fifteen. I slept in an attic, in the artists' group, while those people slept at the place where they worked. There was a carpentry workshop and they slept there.

„Bring here those who slept with them!“, he said.

And people did come forward; they did not know what was coming. But they were too few, the Ustaša wanted more for liquidation.

„Give me the roll call list“, said Šakić.

I was standing in the line, and he was calling names:

„Abinjon!“

I was second on the list. As he called my name, I was dumb-founded. I did not step forward. Another person was called after me, and he did step forward. Someone reported him, and not me. Šakić said:

„Come forward, you!“

And he got this person out of the line for liquidation. They selected from the list some twenty or twenty-two persons, as far as I remember. They liquidated them the same day, as retaliation for the alleged escape. At that time my brother was in the leather plant, he had already heard that I had been taken away and liquidated. What happened in fact was that I was struck with such fear, my feet became numb, I just simply did not respond. I knew what was to follow, that all those selected would be liquidated, because such retaliation followed every escape. That was how I survived.

I do not know whether Šakić personally, with his own hand, liquidated people – he was the camp commander. I do not believe so, or maybe he did it just for the fun, with the pistol. But I know for fact that he was horrible, just as Maks Luburić – that I know for sure. Whenever Maks Luburić came to Gradiška or to Jasenovac, by evening 500 people -Jews, Serbs, Roma, did not make any difference – would have to be liquidated. Right away. I do not know if he killed

them directly, I never saw it. I did see officers killing people around the camp personally; for instance, Alaga or Brkljačić (he enjoyed shooting at inmates). I also know that Majstorović did the actual killing. I did not see it myself, but I heard that he did, that he had a keen interest in liquidation of inmates.

In the camp there was a barrack with Serb children. It was children of six, seven or eight years old, whom they dressed in Ustaša suits and wanted to re-educated them in the Ustaša spirit. And I know that in Jasenovac they sang songs. However, those children also disappeared suddenly, they were liquidated. With respect to liquidation of children I remember one event, which happened when I was in Gradiška. A great number of Serb families had arrived. Under the deal with Germany, the Ustaša had the task to send labor to Germany. Mothers were separated from the children. We watched it, it was sad and devastating. Mothers would not separate from their children, and they separated them by force. A great number of men and women were taken to Germany to work. All of us in the camp were aware that there was the cyclone room. At that time there were about 400–500 children. They were all killed by the cyclone. I think it happened at the beginning of 1943.

One of the senior officers in Jasenovac was Pićili, who constructed the extermination furnace, built by the inmates. However, the incinerated bodies gave such a pungent stench that they had to stop it. For a while, they disposed of the bodies in the brick furnace and incinerated them there.

I never had the opportunity to see the details, but I did hear about the Pićili's furnace being fueled and used for this purpose. It was something like a crematorium, built after the German ones. However, these camps did not have the equipment or the resources like the Germans did, and it was a rather primitive design, so the stench was so bad. People used to say that human bodies were used to make soap. That was a rumor in Jasenovac. It is a fact, however, that the Ustaša liquidated great numbers of people in location Gradićna, just across from Jasenovac, on the other bank of the Sava river. There were big groups taken for execution there, especially at the time before the closure of the camp. Every night there were mass liquidations in the camp itself, in the location Granik, and people were also taken across the river by ferry for execution in big numbers. There were the grave-diggers, always changing. The grave-diggers would dig, throw those killed into the graves, and the Ustaša would then throw the grave-diggers in as well into those same graves. The next day would be the next liquidation, another group of people, another group of grave-diggers. That was the intention – to liquidate the camp in this manner.

At that time I was in the barber shop. With me was a man named Jovo, a Serb. The Ustaša asked for barbers every day. The outdoor works had stopped; the only thing left to do was to liquidate the camp. It was already February and March 1945, it was by that time obvious that the end of the war was near.

They wanted gradually to liquidate the camp, winding it down to smaller scale day after day. All they did was eat, drink, get intoxicated, and kill. And they asked every day for a new barber to go and shave them. After doing his work for the day the barber would be killed. Thus, on 21 April out of the total of twenty barbers that there were altogether only four or five of us remained. That was when our chief, Jovo Jagoda, warned me to get myself out of sight:

„Get yourself out of sight when it is time to go there, because otherwise I will have to assign you to the task.“

I did manage to not be there, so I did live to see the evening of 21 April 1945. There were still about 800 women in the women's camp, while in the men's camp the number was about 1,000. On that day, 21 April, they took all the women away. The women were told to take their belongings with them as they were being moved to another camp. However, the women knew exactly that they were taken for liquidation. They did not take their belongings with them; some were even singing. They knew they were going to death. That evening the Ustaša executed 800 women in the Jasenovac camp alone!

We did not witness the liquidation of the women with our own eyes, but we did see from our built barracks how they were setting on fire the barracks used for women until that time. That evening they wanted to liquidate us as well. However, they could not physically manage, apart from the 800 women, to have us all killed as well. They left it for the next morning.

Tomorrow, however, thanks to our party organization, we manage to break out of the camp. Although unarmed, we took their machine -gun. The Ustaša were firing at us, even threw bombs and, protected by the machine gun we managed to get to the river Sava and escape. Of the 1,060 inmates, in this break-through, only 60 of us managed to get out alive. It was pure coincidence that I was not hit. I cannot say that it was heroism of any kind. We who survived were hiding in the forest for two or three days. There were some villagers who brought food to us in the forest. At that time to XXI Serbian National Liberation Brigade came and we joined it immediately. We were completely exhausted. I weighed about 38 kilograms!

In the Gradiška camp there was the Tower. In the camp Stara Gradiška there were solitary cells for women, with horrendous conditions. In the Tower there were women of all nationalities. There was among them a commander, Maja, and a senior lieutenant, Vrban. When this woman Maja first time killed an inmate (she shot her, and generally she used to take the inmates for execution), Vrban kissed her, congratulated her and commanded her on having become a true Ustaša. That was what the Tower was like.

From Jasenovac to Gradiška we drove about 45 minutes. The transport was always by trucks. It was a privilege to be in Gradiška. The prison itself was a built structure; in contrast to the barracks of Jasenovac used for sleep-

ing where at times there was even snow inside. It was wooden barracks, and the winter of 1941 was very cold, therefore the conditions were extremely difficult. In Gradiška they also took people for liquidation. When one group of inmates in Gradiška managed to escape, the Ustaša killed fifty inmates in retaliation. They lined them against the wall and shot them. In Gradiška there was a part of the camp, called settlement K, where a group of inmates were in solitary cells, left to starve. These inmates were mostly Croats, communists. They too on one occasion attempted to escape. Their attempted break through was not successful, there were fire arms all around them. They were all killed in the attempt.

The Tower was an infamous women's camp. Women were brought there in great numbers. Jews, Serbs, Croats. Also women with small children. Liquidations happened in a structured, successive and planned manner.

If I could not see the liquidations with my own eyes, there were signs whereby I would know that they happened. First – they would be taken away; second – their clothes would be coming back; third – they were no longer in the camp, and they could not be anywhere else.

I knew that Ustaša did horrendous atrocities. You could not see them; if you saw them you would be killed. As for the manner of killing it included just shooting people on the spot, beating them up, there was a lot of that. One of the infamous camp sections was camp 3C. That was where beastly beating happened. The inmates were constantly inside wires. That was where the most often took Partisans of Chetniks, if they captured them. Or, a person could be thrown there as form of punishment, be sent to camp 3C. And then you just stayed there, you starved to death and never came out. In the camp we could only see individual murders. If you witnessed liquidation, you were liquidated as well.

The camp staff were mostly older inmates who managed the labor tasks, who was to do what. They took the inmates to work assignments, to gather wood, to do construction work, they would call the roll call, check who was doing what. So, they were inmates. And as for the supposed privileges that they had – what kind of privilege could they have had? With the exception of possibly getting somewhat better food and not having to do the actual work. But they were all liquidated as well. None of them, as far as I know, had survived until 1945. I remember when one grave-digger commander, who even enjoyed the great trust of the Ustaša, was liquidated. I also remember the names of some Jews who were camp staff in Jasenovac: Bruner, Klajn, and a person named Leopold, and also Štajner. They were among the first inmates. The only privilege they had was that they possibly received a little more food or bread (getting some bread was a big thing!) and that they did not have to work.

In Jasenovac there was a barber shop for the Ustaša in which inmates worked. And when liquidations happened, the barbers were the first to be liquidated. So, no one could survive. The Ustaša did not want witnesses of their atrocities. If anyone avoided liquidation, it was pure coincidence; it was just that at that moment the Ustaša did not manage to get everyone executed.

During our break through we were getting close to an Ustaša who, out of fear, could not get the bullets out of his shot-gun. They very stunned by our break through. So much has been written about it; I used to buy all the numerous books whatever they came out, and there were many. And many books by survivors. Now much of it is gone. People passed away. Now, in 1996, I am 75, and I still remember certain things. There is a man in Zagreb, he is in hospital now, he used to remember everything. He is in the old people's home, very weak. He memorized names, he wrote, he knew everything much better than I do. His name is Jakica Finci. I did not memorize names.

After the war it was painful for me to give statements about the dead, whose death I did not witness, although I know they are not around anymore.

I was under a great burden after the war making statements about the dead, testifying about the Ustaša. Any time they catch one, you are called in to make a statement about who he was, what he did. I already got tired of all that. Can you imagine what it means to have a family and then remain the only one alive? I want finally to be left alone! It used to be very difficult, always bringing back the tormenting memories. It is not simple, after having your parents and three siblings, to be alone. When I was taken to the concentration camp I was 21, and when I got out 25, completely alone, without anybody or anything. And I had to make these statements, declaring people dead. And then the trials, it was very troubling. Having to prove things. But how can I prove that I saw someone being killed? On the other hand, it is known how many people were brought there. Where are all those people? And when this man (Franjo Tuđman) wrote in the book „Bespuća“ („Wandering the Historical Reality“) – that it was 59,000 – on the other hand we know that in Sarajevo alone there were 11,000 Jews of barely 1,000 had survived.

As for the well-known Jews, I know that painter Ozmo was executed in Jasenovac. I know that some other people known as intellectuals were executed. There was a camp section in Jasenovac proper, called *Zvonara* (the Bell Tower), where the distinguished individuals were brought and executed. There they liquidated just like that, based on rumors. It happened that Maček was there, for fifteen days, maybe a month. I knew the inmates who took him food. No one dared say anything about it.

One year they bombed us in Jasenovac and shouted along:  
„There you go, it is your people who are killing you!“

A man from Sarajevo was killed during it.

Some picture postcards have been preserved that I had given to the Museum after the war. The writing on the postcards stated the first and family name, the group in which you were, and what you were asking to be sent to you if possible. In Zagreb I had an aunt, my mother's sister, from whom I received a package, before she and her family were also taken away. Other people were also receiving packages; we no longer had anyone to send them. People also say that some relief was arriving from the Red Cross, but very little, and it was not distributed to us. A few times we received packages from the Jewish Community of Zagreb, from which the Ustaša would first choose and take out whatever they liked. It was not sent to my name, but the community did send something, it had the contact, it functioned as a Jewish Community. For a while, the Jewish Community of Sarajevo was also functional, but briefly. It seems that later everything was liquidated.

After we broke through from Jasenovac, we were in the forest for two days. There were people in my group who were from the surrounding villages and knew the area. Some fifteen or twenty of us gathered in one place, all from the same break through. One of our group from the local village went to the village and told the villagers that we were there, that we were starved, that we had been starving also in Jasenovac, and that now for two days already we had had no food. The local women brought us some food at night, so that we would have something to eat. And one evening they told us to come into the house and they would give us some warm milk and corn porridge. We went. We set up the guard outside. But when the word came that the Germans were coming, we had to withdraw back into the forest. And so it was for two or three days. Until the XXI Serbian Division came, which let us join them.

I was with Jakica Finci, we were going to the Lipik hospital. The Partisans took our weapons and sent us to the hospital. I stayed in hospital several days, recovered a bit and came to Zagreb. At that time there was the National Commission for War Crimes, and there were many arrested Ustaša who "changed clothes". We recognized them and provided information about who was who among them. For a while we were helping the authorities in this manner to uncover the truth. Later I went to Sarajevo.

When I arrived to Sarajevo I had nothing. Luckily, Emerik Blum was there (he was also in the Jasenovac camp, and had also escaped). He was involved with the new authorities and he helped us get the basic clothes and accommodation, with a friend of his. There was nothing to eat. I came to the Army HQ in Sarajevo, to work, so that I could get some food. Of my whole family, there were a couple of cousins with the Partisans.

Some returnees came back to Sarajevo six months after the war, some a year after the end of the war. Then we established a cooperative, I was one

of the founders. I also worked in the cooperative. The Army was willing to keep me and help me because I had nobody. I refused. Afterwards I took additional schooling, and worked for a time as trade union official. One of my cousins came back; she was a Partisan Veteran, another one who was with the Partisans since 1943 also came back. And for a while I stayed with them. I went back to my craft. Later I married a Croatian woman who had a child.

I returned to Sarajevo in 1945. My whole greater family had perished. Of my more distant family, two cousins came back. One of them was married to an Orthodox Christian. He was killed right away in 1941 and she stayed in Sarajevo. It was the three of us that had survived of the whole greater family.

My father had a brother who had had five sons. They all perished, some in concentration camps and some with the Partisans. No one survived. I survived by coincidence. My father was killed at the beginning, in 1941, in Jasenovac. My brother was in the raw hide plant "Kožara". They, too, in the night of 22 April, organized an escape. Since they were processing hide, they all had poison, made for each one, in case that they get caught. Everyone had the poison in his pocket. A man who survived the escape from the raw hide plant is now living in Israel. His brother was escaping together with me, and was killed, and my brother was escaping with him, was wounded and took the poison. So, no one of my direct family survived. I did. By coincidence. There was no logic to it. Simply, it did not hit you and you stayed alive.

After the war I was an active member of the Jewish Community of Sarajevo, especially after my retirement. While I was still working, I did not have so much time to spend at the community. I was director of the cooperative and had the great responsibility for eight branches and 350 employees in Sarajevo.

But, after I retired in 1981, not a day went by without me going to the Jewish Community.

In 1992 I moved from Sarajevo to Split, where my wife and I are living in a small apartment in the old people's home. If she were in good health, things would be easier.

What most helped me in life was my positive outlook. Without it, I do not know how I would have survived. It sustained me and enabled me to start building my happiness. I never had any difficulties with my wife's first child and the child that we had together. My wife's daughter completed her education and our son completed master studies. My greatest wish was to spend some more time with our grandchildren, but I do not know if that would materialize. They are in Toronto, Canada, where they went as refugees during this most recent war. He also married a Croatian woman. They have two children. His wife is working, she is an engineer, while my son is master of economics. It is only my grandchildren that I miss. I thought that in my old age I would be with the children, but I do not know if that wish will come true.