

Tugomir Brukner-Bruno

SILENCE FROM MALJEN

Tugomir Brukner-Bruno, a graduate engineer, was born in 1932 in Belgrade, where he lived and worked. With his wife Svetlana (maiden name Džimić), a graduate lawyer, he has two sons.

His father Ivan, a ship captain, was a prisoner of war in German captivity in the Osnabrück camp. He survived the Holocaust, but lost his mother, sister, two brothers, and sister-in-law in the Jasenovac camp. Tugomir's brother Bogdan also survived the Holocaust and, as an archaeologist and academic, worked in Novi Sad until his death.

Brukner is also a distinguished visual artist. He held solo exhibitions at the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade and at the Synagogue in Novi Sad.

Personal

With the deaths of both parents and my brother, the circle of Holocaust witnesses in our family was closed. As the last witness, I remained, with my modest testimony limited only to my own experiences.

Speaking about oneself, or publishing one's own story, I perceive it as a kind of devaluation of personal intimacy. The Holocaust was testified to by surviving victims and many other individuals, and existing documentation was sufficiently convincing even without my contribution.

Gratitude

In contrast, another dimension prevailed within me, one related to gratitude toward the people of a remote Serbian village at the foothills of Mount Maljen. These honorable people from the Arsenijević family, united in a family cooperative of fourteen members, included me as their fifteenth member during the most difficult times of the German occupation. They deserve to be remembered. At that time, I was only nine years old.

Wanderings

Through occupied Belgrade passed German uniforms, as well as those of Serbian volunteers of Dimitrije Ljotić. Nedić's green rural guard was also present. Perhaps others as well, whom I did not yet know. This created unrest and fear among the citizens. Jews were marked with yellow armbands and the Star of David. When encountering neighbors or friends in the street, they were met with long looks and deep silence. It was forbidden to speak with those who were marked.

My dual origin did not exempt me from the Holocaust; I inherited it through my father. I no longer had playmates. Thus, I came to know a loneliness that suffocated me. In return, I transferred my affection to books and certain objects, which for me took on the form of something alive.

A period of my wanderings and hiding in remote parts of Belgrade began—Crveni Krst, Marinkova Bara, and Čukarica. In one neglected courtyard in Crveni Krst I came upon a dirty, striped kitten. I was enchanted and left breathless with excitement. I pressed it to my chest and listened to its gentle purring. Problems arose when it was decided that I should be evacuated from Belgrade to safer areas for me, somewhere in the interior of Serbia. Against the will of the adults, I took the kitten with me.

I left Belgrade. We arrived in Užička Požega. That day became, in many ways, dark and burdensome for me. On the dilapidated building of a tavern-hotel stood the sign of the owner, "Steva Burlić." The rainy day did not prevent peasants and townspeople from flocking to the livestock market. It was market day. Nearby, a small bridge spanned the Skrapež River. At that time, I could not have imagined that I would cross that bridge and continue wandering deeper into the interior, deeper toward the hills and mountains whose peaks merged with the sky. Wading through the muddy street, we headed toward the railway station.

We saw a group of people pressing around the last car of a recently arrived narrow-gauge train, the "ćira." A horrific sight awaited inside the car, which contained dismembered bodies of slain members of Draža Mihailović's units. People, wailing, searched among the bodies of the dead for one of their relatives.

This was my first encounter with death, one that became permanently etched in my memory.

Over time, Požega became a transit point for various military factions formed in Serbia. They fought either among themselves in fratricidal conflicts or against the common enemy—the Germans and the Ustaše. This was the reason I was often moved to nearby safer places, mostly the villages of Glumač, Milićevo Selo, and others.

PHOTO

The eldest brother of Tugomir's father Ivan, Dragutin-Karlo, his mother and the middle brother and his wife were killed in a cruel way in the Jasenovac camp

In the autumn of 1942, we found ourselves in the village of Gorobilje and were accommodated with the Tomić family, honorable farmers. I stayed in Gorobilje somewhat longer than in the previous villages.

I had long since acquired the habit of eavesdropping on the news that adults exchanged among themselves. There was talk of executions of civilians, of the Sajmište and Banjica camps, and especially of the deportation of Belgrade Jews by the Germans. Like an echo, fear and a fateful awareness of my Jewish identity penetrated ever more deeply into me.

I learned that after the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, my father had been captured by the Germans in the rank of reserve frigate lieutenant and deported to a German prisoner-of-war camp.

Later, after the end of the war, in conversations with my father, he told me that he had been held in Osnabrück, in the punishment barrack “D,” together with other Jewish officers. There he cooperated with Oto Bihalji-Merin, Aca Levi, and others in an anti-fascist group. The book written by Ženi Lebl, titled *Jews from Yugoslavia, Prisoners of War in Germany*, published in 1995, describes important events from the camp and includes a list of the prisoners’ names.

Milje

At my age it was difficult to assess how long I remained in Gorobilje. Over time, even there the situation became dangerous. Skirmishes between Chetniks and Bulgarians brought new unrest.

From time to time, the thunder of Bulgarian artillery could be heard, stationed in Požega. Soon a Bulgarian punitive expedition followed. I had to be urgently evacuated from Gorobilje.

Upon leaving that village, responsibility for me was taken over by a family friend, Milje. He came from the village of Družetići, located at the foothills of Mount Maljen. He was a member of the Arsenijević family from the same village. Traveling with him, under these extraordinary circumstances, lasted about two nights and one day. The journey on foot to his village was an ordeal that had to be endured. We were not alone. Several other villagers joined us, who for reasons unknown wished to escape the existing surroundings.

PHOTO

Father's sister Mira, Tugomir's aunt, also perished in Jasenovac

During the journey little was said or asked. A tacit solidarity prevailed within the group. Milje appeared thoughtful, burdened with worries, yet he knew how to instill calm among people when needed. We often took breaks because of me. At night we slept in small groves, and Milje protected me from the cold with his woolen coat. People took the meager food supplies from their village bags and shared them with us and among themselves.

There was, however, something we all feared. We passed through areas where gunfire and hand grenade explosions could be heard from afar. This was a sign that fighting was taking place somewhere nearby, though we knew nothing more about it. We saw dogs running in panic, probably torn from the chains of some farmyards. For us, this was a warning sign that such places had to be bypassed at a wide distance. New efforts and hardships lay ahead for me. Fear kept me on my feet.

The group gradually dispersed. Each person turned off the common path and continued in their own direction. I continued with Milje, all the way to the small town of Kamenica near Čačak. His village adjoined the town, which we reached while there was still daylight. From then on, the village of Družetići would be my refuge until the end of the war, though at that time I was not yet aware of it.

Milje was unmarried and lived in a dilapidated little house together with his hard-of-hearing grandfather Rajko, who welcomed us enthusiastically into his solitude. His household bordered on poverty. The only bed in the house was used by Grandfather Rajko, while Milje and I slept in the attic, on cornhusks covered with a woven blanket.

Life under these conditions had to be organized. While Milje left at dawn for the fields and returned at dusk, Grandfather Rajko and I took care of the poultry and a few sheep, grazing them around the house.

Without help in farming, things were difficult for Milje, and Grandfather Rajko and I were of little use for heavy labor. Torn from my native environment and caught in an instinctive struggle for survival, I was overcome by deep despondency. Milje understood this and sympathized with me, but he could not help me.

Ljubivoje

One afternoon, I believe it was a Saturday, an elderly peasant of dignified bearing visited us, about fifty years old. Milje approached him, took his hand, and kissed it. Following his example, I did the same.

“This is my father, Ljubivoje Arsenijević, who lives with his family and the rest of the kin at the other end of the village,” Milje introduced him.

Addressing me, Ljubivoje explained that everything about me was already known to him, but he believed it was no longer good for me to remain alone here with Grandfather Rajko. I should move to his house, where I would have, among other things, children to keep me company. My initial apprehension toward Milje’s father gradually disappeared, mostly because of his gentle expression and manner toward me. From that point on, everything became easier.

War events brought no improvement. I now lived in a rural family cooperative distinguished by its considerable size. Ljubivoje lived in a joint household with his brothers Adam and Gvozden, their families, and their father Arsenije, an old Salonika veteran who had endured the Albanian

Golgotha during the First World War. In total, fourteen people lived in the cooperative. I was the fifteenth member.

The pillar of the cooperative was Ljubivoje who, as the head of the household, held it together with his authority.

This otherwise hospitable household had been impoverished by the war. There was no longer any abundance. Food and clothing were scarce, and above all salt and sugar. Winters became long and harsh. Rural households were plundered by various armed military factions passing through the area. We went hungry. My status within the cooperative became increasingly unfavorable. In moments of crisis, there was speculation about my future fate, since my presence could expose the household to danger, and at the same time I represented one more mouth to feed amid the existing scarcity.

At that point, Ljubivoje, in order to cut short any discussion about me, declared decisively, in words and tone, that he—Ljubivoje—would, as the head of the household, be the first to be questioned and held responsible for me before any force or authority, and that his head stood behind mine—and no one else's.

Sitting somewhere in a corner, I listened to all this, speechless and pale. Ljubivoje's words struck the conscience of the household members.

From that moment on, never again was I spoken of in that manner. The behavior of the household seemed to follow the principle: "it happened and should not happen again." Life continued thereafter as before that event. A moral attitude prevailed in the treatment of me as a child who needed to survive the war.

Ljubivoje, as I remember him, was a thoughtful man, shaped more by silence than by spoken words. He never raised his voice to any member of the household and, as head of the family, maintained an equal attitude toward everyone.

Besides Milje, he had two other sons with whom I socialized: Milašin, my peer, and the youngest, little Mikan, who understood little of what was happening around him. Ljubivoje was

both a farmer and a carter. He worked with a team of oxen, Baćko and Jordan, whom he adored and considered as valuable as people.

Sensing my affection for animals, Ljubivoje taught me how to handle and yoke them. I grew very fond of them, and they became my second world.

In the end, Ljubivoje remained for me the brightest figure, connected with all the events around me during the war.

The small town of Kamenica at the foot of the village of Družetići remembers the charred remains of burned houses left behind by German punitive expeditions. It remembers the taking away of hostages who never returned to their homes. The Germans also reached the Družetići hills but avoided entering the wooded terrain. Their machinery was powerless against such obstacles. Moreover, they knew they could encounter hidden rifles aimed at them and waiting.

In such forests I hid as well.

In critical situations, I fled together with Ljubivoje's middle son, Milašin, across the Kamenica stream into the wooded areas of the neighboring village of Gojina Gora, where we waited for the Germans' rampages to end.

I vividly remember hiding with a man named Stanimir in a dugout excavated beneath a forest path, entered by crawling. Lying close together, we listened to footsteps above our heads, and by the clinking of equipment we knew the passersby were armed. The smell of damp earth intoxicated me, and Stanimir's coat, thrown over me, protected me from small earthfalls.

Ljubivoje awaited the Germans' departure hidden in the dense crown of a nearby oak tree. From crouching too long on a branch, his limbs stiffened, and household members had to help him down.

There were very few households in the village that did not have their own shelters in the house or nearby. In the Arsenijević house, beneath the very fireplace on the front side, a dugout had been excavated. When a fire burned in the fireplace above the hidden people, there was concern about how the heat would affect those in the dugout.

Vujka

Vujka, Ljubivoje's wife—gentle in nature but sharp-minded, was the first to come up with the idea that my given name should be replaced with a local one.

“Your name attracts attention,” she would say, “and everyone will see that you are a stranger here.”

Among many suggestions, they gave me the name Milan. From then on, for the Arsenijević family, I existed only as Milan, until the end of the war.

The cooperative consisted of father Arsenije, his three sons—Ljubivoje, Adam, and Gvozden—and their families. All jointly acquired goods were shared, but each brother bore responsibility and obligations toward his immediate family. By the nature of things, I belonged to Ljubivoje and Vujka under their full responsibility and care. Thus Vujka, in addition to her two children, Milašin and little Mikan, also took care of me. She managed as best she could. She knew how to divide every scrap of clothing among us all.

PHOTO

Vujka Arsenijević, with daughter-in-law and grandson (kneeling) and Tugomir's wife Svetlana

I deeply respected her and trusted her completely. I lived and grew up together with her children. I became especially close to Milašin, sharing our secrets in good times and bad.

In the household, an unwritten rule prevailed that every member had to perform certain tasks. I was assigned the role of shepherd, to guard the sheep on the pastures. According to the household's assessment, in the hills with the flock I was best concealed from curious eyes. They instructed me to say, if anyone questioned me, that I came from Vujka's relatives, who were not from this region.

Vujka would wake me at dawn and send me into the hills with the sheep. In the bag slung over my shoulder she put some food, usually a piece of cornbread and an onion. Occasionally, when she could manage it, she added a piece of cheese or meat. She taught me how to milk a sheep,

telling me to do it once I had gone deeper into the hills, because the milk would serve as a supplement to my diet. A previous drought had further worsened food shortages.

Advancing armies also seized food from peasants for their fighters, leaving households with minimal reserves. The Arsenjević household likewise suffered scarcity and often had nothing with which to enrich their meals.

In such hard times, any outsider living with a household would be superfluous. For me, there were always words of defense and justification for my presence. After all, in me they had a loyal shepherd and the belief that they were doing a “sevap”—a good deed.

To make walking with the sheep easier for me, Ljubivoje made wooden sandals for me in summer. They did not last long, and there was no other footwear. I walked barefoot, and the skin on my soles thickened and became marked with bloody cracks.

Accustomed to various hardships, people became increasingly cautious. If armed formations were noticed in the distance, villagers warned one another by shouting from hill to hill, “The army is coming!” This was a signal that all males should hide in nearby forests. People feared possible reprisals, as well as forced mobilization of men and draft animals.

Resourceful Vujka, in such situations, always found ways to dress Milašin and me in some women’s garments and tuck rough distaffs into our belts. Disguised like that, we resembled shepherd girls more than boys.

The Arsenjević family trusted no one anymore.

I have not forgotten certain bright moments that occurred in that house.

On Christmas Eve, the gathered household members fixed their gaze on Ljubivoje. Standing tall by the yule log, Ljubivoje crossed himself devoutly and spoke the words of prayer. Then, turning toward those present, he repeated the ancient custom that the *položajnik* should be a guest who came from outside the household. All eyes turned toward me, for I was the only outsider in the house. I approached the yule log and Ljubivoje.

There were also beautiful winter evenings. Vujka knew that in my modest belongings I had brought several books. Thanks to her, those books were put to the best possible use and helped me express my reading abilities. On winter evenings, when household members gathered in the room, warming themselves while spinning or doing other handiwork, Vujka would hand me a book of short stories by Laza Lazarević and have me read aloud to everyone. Reading by the light of a kerosene lamp, silence would fall over the room. The stories, whose content was very close to their lives, left a strong impression, and my fluent reading aroused admiration in everyone.

Once, in the hills while grazing, a sheep gave birth to a lamb. I had to keep the flock nearby until the ewe recovered and the lamb dried. At that time, customary rights of the shepherd were respected in the village. A shepherd who accepted a newborn animal gained the right to give it a customary name, and this was strictly observed. However, out of some whim, or under the influence of the book *Kenilworth* by Walter Scott, I named the lamb Lord William Pembroke. The new name was received with shock, laughter, and jokes from the household, but it had to be respected. To avoid struggling with the name, a compromise was adopted: the lamb would keep only “Lord.” Thus, the only Lord in the village came into being.

Epilogue

The end of the war was accompanied by mass euphoria that breathed new life and joy into people. My father Ivan survived captivity as a prisoner of war, which lasted four years. My mother and brother survived. The family managed to reunite.

My father acquainted me with the horrific consequences of the war for our family. His mother, sister, two brothers, and sister-in-law were brutally murdered in the Jasenovac camp—five members of his immediate family.

I expanded my Jewish identity with new insights through cultural work in the first postwar youth club of the Jewish community.

I did not forget Družetići. The first to visit me were Vujka and Milje. A strong emotional bond between the Brukner and Arsenijević families was strengthened and has lasted to this day.

Years passed, then decades. I founded a family, became a husband and father of two children. Relations with Družetići did not change, and we practiced occasional mutual visits.

Milje, Ljubivoje's eldest son, married happily and had three children.

Mikan, the youngest son, also married and became the father of a daughter, Slađana.

Milašin, the middle son, also married and had children.

One day I received word from the village that Ljubivoje was seriously ill and wished to see me, together with my wife and firstborn son. We were received there as if we were the closest family.

A telegram arrived unexpectedly. Ljubivoje has passed away. I was later informed by telephone that he had called for me several times shortly before his death.

PHOTO

Tugomir Bruckner: HANDS OF BLESSING - according to the monument from Canaanite period, 13th century BC

Shaken, I arrived in the village with a wreath. The multitude of people who came to say farewell observed me silently. They knew who I was. By Ljubivoje's coffin, beneath a spreading pear tree, his three sons were arranged. Fourth place was left for me, as the fourth son. We placed the coffin on the ox cart with which he had worked during his lifetime. Peace to his weary soul.

Vujka endured for several more years. She considered my wife Svetlana, along with her other favorites, as one of her own. The final farewell with her was inevitable. Together with my wife, we joined her last send-off.

The same for Milašin and Milje.

This would be the end of the story of Ljubivoje, Vujka, and Milje, whose names today are found in the memorial park "Righteous Among the Nations" in Jerusalem.