Josif PAPIĆ

A VICTIM IN WAR AND PEACE

Photo

Josif papic

I, Anđelija Papić, wife of the late Josif Papić, will recount what I know about how he survived fascism and the Second World War. I must admit that he told me little about that part of his life — it was a subject he did not wish to discuss, as it caused him too much pain. However, the years we spent together from 1951 to 1993 revealed many secrets to me. I was also helped by encounters with people from Višegrad and acquaintances from Banja Luka, both his own and those of his family.

Josif Papić was born in 1926 in Višegrad. He was the third child to his father Isak Papo and his mother Jozefina, née Levi. Just before the war began in 1941, the immediate family of Isak Papo was living as follows: the elder daughter Zlata, a qualified pharmacist, was married to Duško Pajić, a forestry engineer, and lived in Živinice; the younger daughter Estera was studying medicine in Belgrade; son Josif was a gymnasium student in Banja Luka; wife Jozefina was in Sarajevo receiving medical treatment due to health problems; and only Isak remained in Višegrad, in the family home, at his work.

At the most difficult moment — the war had begun and the Germans had occupied Yugoslavia — the family was scattered and needed to be reunited, but how? Estera did everything in her power. She went to Banja Luka, took her brother Josif, and brought him to their father in Višegrad. She also contacted her schoolmates from Sarajevo, who agreed to collect her mother from the hospital and escort her to the train for Višegrad — and the problem would be solved. But the relief was short-lived, as news soon arrived that the Sarajevo–Višegrad railway line had been "cut" and that their mother could not return home. Her friends in Sarajevo comforted her and promised to hide and protect her mother. Perhaps this would have come to pass, had mother Jozefina not refused to go to their shelter. She instead went to stay with her own family, Isak's brother and his wife who lived in Sarajevo, reasoning that whatever fate befell them would befall her too. Tragically, a few days later the Ustasha took them all to Jasenovac.

Despair consumed Isak; without his wife he was lost, and his children barely recognized him. Estera took over all the household duties to make life at least a little better for her father and brother. The youth members of SKOJ — the League of Communist Youth — of which Estera was an active member, were preparing an uprising in Serbia. They wanted her to join them. They came to Višegrad and asked her to come with them. Out of love for her father and brother, she refused to leave. She thought she would join them as soon as she had taken care of her father and brother. Estera did not realize what times had come — plans fell apart day by day, and so did hers. She neither secured the safety of her father and brother, nor went off to war. The next day, the Germans came for her and took her away — first to the Kerestinac camp, then to Gradiška, then to Jasenovac, which she did not survive.

Father Isak, uncle Nino, aunt Nina, and Josif set off as refugees toward Montenegro, which was under Italian occupation. They moved from place to place, sometimes welcomed warmly and sometimes not. In one of those places, Zlata and her husband Duško joined them. They were together only briefly. Josif got to know some families with connections to the Partisans and was determined to join them. His father objected, not believing his son — barely 17 years old — could endure a war. But Josif left anyway. The Partisan units he joined fought across Montenegro.

When Italy capitulated in 1943, part of the Italian army formed the "Garibaldi" Brigade. The Partisans joined forces with them in a common struggle against the Ustasha and the Germans. Josif spoke Italian, and so the Partisans transferred him to the headquarters of the "Garibaldi" Brigade as a liaison and interpreter. While the war was still ongoing, he learned that his father, uncle, and aunt — already exhausted from years of fleeing — had been taken by the Germans to the Auschwitz concentration camp. He did not know what had become of Zlata and Duško. Was it possible that Zlata had been saved by her married surname, Pajić?

The end of the war found him as a Garibaldino. The army disbanded; everyone went back to their own people, back home. Josif could not bring himself to leave the barracks. He lacked the courage to face the truth, dreading the question: *do I have anyone left?* There was a certain routine and order in the barracks, and he adapted to it. Yet despite everything, he understood that it was not his place. Under normal circumstances, when he had had his family and dreamed of the future, he had never imagined himself as a soldier. His commander understood Josif's situation and advised him to go back to his home, face reality, and return if he found nothing better waiting for him.

Josif went to Višegrad, his hometown. He came to the family house — and found police there. It was no longer his home; it had become a police station. The authorities and the locals were astonished that anyone from his family was still alive. Josif, still just a boy of 19 left, disappointed and sad. He bore no resentment over the police station, since he himself did not know what he would do alone in a looted house. But he still had hope. His father Isak had once bought a house in Belgrade, intending to move the whole family there when Braco — Josif's nickname — came of age for university. The house was large; there would be something for him too, especially since his father had kept the entire first floor for himself. The building had been looked after by a lawyer named Mirko Jevđević.

Josif arrived in Belgrade and found Mirko, who was overjoyed to see him but also full of apologies — he had allowed the father's apartment to be divided into two units and let some families move in. He begged forgiveness; even he, their great friend, had come to believe they were all dead. Mirko said he had seen no point in keeping the apartment — already looted during the war — sitting empty while families had nowhere to live, as Belgrade had been devastated by the war. Josif forgave him and consoled him: *"Don't worry, Mirko — I would have done the same thing in your place."*

Josif returned to the barracks. With a heavy heart he recalled the final days of their time as refugees. He had come to understand that hardship shared with others is easier to bear than loneliness in freedom. The barracks were full of people with similar fates, and at that time they

offered comfort to the wretched. He became a peacetime officer. He was transferred from place to place, from one branch of the military to another, as needs dictated. He began receiving a salary and no longer had to sleep in the barracks; he could rent a room. These transfers eventually brought him to Bela Crkva, where he met me — his future wife, Anđelija Stojkov, a gymnasium student.

In Bela Crkva, alongside his full working hours, he privately studied for and passed his gymnasium exams — at the time, the eighth grade and the final matriculation. He had completed the earlier grades in Belgrade, also privately and alongside work. He was an excellent student. From Bela Crkva he was transferred to Banja Luka, and then to Belgrade. Throughout all that time we corresponded and rarely saw each other, as I lived in a border zone that required special permits to enter. Love was not considered a sufficient reason to be granted one.

In Banja Luka he worked and regularly submitted applications to study at university. He was rejected. In Belgrade he continued applying and was again rejected. He was moved from post to post and eventually ended up as a court recorder in a military tribunal under General Jakić. This general, pleased with his work, asked where and when he had obtained his law degree. When Josif told him he only had his matriculation certificate, and that his requests to be allowed to study had been repeatedly denied, Jakić , surprised but well-meaning — recommended Josif for university admission. He finally became a full-time student at the Faculty of Law. It was a great joy for both of us. He studied diligently and sat his exams regularly, earning top marks of 10 in everything. By June 1951 he had already completed his first year. I finished my own matriculation. We would finally be able to marry — we had received permission from the military, though not from my parents. Without their consent, I came to Belgrade to live with him in a rented room.

I soon became pregnant and we got married; and when the landlady found out about my pregnancy, she evicted us. The director of the military student dormitory assigned us a room on the sixth floor with no lift. Worried about my pregnancy, Josif sought a better solution. We moved to another student dormitory and got a room on the third floor, with a shared kitchen and toilet. Our son Dragan was born there in 1952. The baby had its needs, we had little, and we needed to settle down. These problems weighed on Josif more than on me. I had nothing to wear, having gained ten kilograms. Aunt Ruta sent me two dresses. Josif was sad and wanted to lift my spirits — he took me in front of his house (which I had not known about), showed it to me and said: *"When I sell this house, my son and my wife will want for nothing!"* Not understanding what he was talking about, I told him he could have sold one on Knez Mihajlova Street instead — we would have gotten more money for it!

He persuaded me and I believed him. We sold nothing. I felt it would be immoral to sell something one had not earned.

Some months later, Duško came to visit us from Banja Luka. When he saw how we were living and how little we had, he suggested that the house in Višegrad be sold as uninhabitable (a new police station had been built in Višegrad, and his house had been given to one of their officials instead of being returned to us). The house was sold, and from our half we bought a small bed with a mattress and blanket for the child, two lengths of fabric for coats, and material for six

shirts. Josif continued his studies while I took a break. When he graduated, I began studying mathematics at the Higher Pedagogical School. I graduated in 1957 and found employment. We somehow managed to get an apartment. Josif prepared for his bar exam and, being the first to sit it after the war, passed with top marks. I worked in a school, my state exam awaited me, and naturally I too passed it with top marks. It was time for a second child. Planned and done — in 1959 we had our son Mladen.

Josif found military life difficult and wanted to leave, but worried that his income might be lower elsewhere. Naturally, I was in favor of him leaving the army — after all, there were times when we had had far less! He left the military and things went well. He became the Head of Education and Culture for Belgrade, then Secretary of the Belgrade City Assembly, Secretary of the Standing Conference of Towns, Secretary of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and Administrative Director of Centroprodukt office in Milan. Everywhere he worked, he worked professionally and with integrity. But good deeds are not always repaid in kind. Our family paid a heavy price as a result of the 1974 constitution. Papić had been a member of the constitutional commission, disagreed with the draft constitution, and thereby gravely offended Kardelj. Dolanc, Kardelj's right-hand man, ruthlessly punished those who were disobedient. Many people suffered in Serbia during that period, but each in a different way, so that the public would not take notice. Josif was forced to resign from his position. In defending himself against the accusations, he only incurred their displeasure further.

The esteemed and respected Pavle Savić, an academician, upon learning of Papić's fate, took him on as his secretary at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. In this way Papić rejoined public life. The family began to live normally again. I worked at school, our children were doing well. Dragan, our elder son, was an outstanding architecture student and was winning awards at various design competitions. Our younger son Mladen was an excellent pupil and well-liked at school. Everything seemed good. Josif continued to defend himself and prove his integrity, but this displeased those in power. They punished us even more severely — we lost Mladen too. Only then did Josif truly understand what kind of country he was living in. To protect the remaining members of the family, he stayed silent and did not argue back. He worked at the Serbian Academy of Sciences for as long as Pavle Savić remained president of the Academy. Afterwards he went to Milan as Administrative Director of the firm Centroprodukt. While working for that company, he died on a business trip on the 22nd of April 1993.

Something about the families of Josif Papić's parents

The Papo family on his father's side originated from Mostar. There were four brothers. One of them stayed in Mostar; from that branch of the family, Isidor Papo — a renowned surgeon — survived the war. I should mention that he visited us twice in Milan. The second of the four brothers lived in Sarajevo with his wife. They were taken to Jasenovac together with Josif's mother Jozefina, and none of them survived the torments of that camp. In Višegrad lived Isak

Papo — Josif's father — with his wife and three children, and his younger brother Nino with his wife. They had no children. As refugees from Montenegro, they were taken to Auschwitz in 1943. Both brothers perished in that camp; only Nina returned, and she died a few years later in a care home in Zagreb.

What do I know about the Levi family, from which my husband's mother came? It was a large family. Only the youngest of Jozefina's sisters, Ruta, survived; she lived in Rijeka. In the postwar years the distance between Belgrade and Rijeka felt immense. The lack of telephone connections, and the mutual demands of work and daily life, all meant that we saw each other rarely.

We saw more of each other only after Ruta retired. She would come and stay with us for extended periods, so we got to know and love each other better. From her I learned something about the Levi family. There were eight sisters and one brother. All the female children received an education; only the brother became a baker. Their mother, in Banja Luka where they lived, had earned the nickname *La Pametna* — "the clever one."

The eldest sister Jozefina, Josif's mother, trained as a teacher in Vienna, found a position in Višegrad, and there met her husband Isak. Another sister was a teacher in some Bosnian village. The remaining sisters were clerks, working in courts and similar institutions. All were married and had children. Ruta was a teacher in Sušak. When the Italians occupied Sušak, they summoned her for an interview. They offered her the chance to change her name and become Italian or Croatian, and in that way continue working. She refused, telling them that her people had lived in this land for 500 years as Jews, and that she had nothing there to change. After some time she was taken to a women's camp in Italy. (I donated the list bearing the signatures of her fellow camp prisoners to the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade.)

She survived the camp, and when Italy capitulated she joined the Partisan units. She came out of the war as a captain in the air force. From conversations with her I learned how hardworking and valuable she had been to Rijeka, working as a teacher and headmistress of a gymnasium, a lecturer at a higher school, and carrying out other duties besides. She married late, after the age of fifty, to Svare Vladimir, a respected citizen of Sušak. It was a solid marriage. Throughout her life Ruta inquired into how members of her family had perished. She learned nothing pleasant. The great majority of them ended up in the Jasenovac camp. She went with Zlata to visit Jasenovac and was bitterly disappointed when she could not find their names on the list of victims. Zlata reacted with great emotion and nearly came to blows with the museum curator.

We took full care of Ruta when we moved to Italy. She visited us many times and would stay for a month or more. When old age and loneliness isolated her, she moved into a care home.

Through the Jewish community and the home we received news of her. She died soon after, in 1992.

Relations between Belgrade and Zagreb were very poor at the time, due to well-known events. We, travelling on Belgrade passports, were not welcome in Croatia. And so, in order to attend

Ruta's funeral, Josif used his friendships with Italians, crossed the border with them, and was present at her burial. He went to the apartment, collected documents and photographs, and left the keys with the neighbors. We never went back there again, and do not know what became of the apartment and the belongings inside.

The last time we were with Ruta, she said she wanted to tell us something about the death of Josif's mother. She said: *"I cannot take it to the grave with me."* She spoke — and it would have been better had she not. Only the sick minds of the Ustasha could have devised the atrocities that Ruta described. In that moment I pitied my poor, shattered husband. Horrified by everything he heard, he simply fell silent.

My first meeting with Zlata

When our son Dragan was not yet a year old, Zlata invited us to visit them in Banja Luka. She was working in a pharmacy. She had been offered the position of pharmacy manager, as she had been a Partisan during the war. The owner was Mr. Bramer — a Jewish man who had returned from the camp alive. She had done her training at that very Bramer pharmacy before the war. Naturally, she declined the offer — she had not gone to war in order to take something that belonged to someone else! She said: *"Mr. Bramer will run his pharmacy best himself."* She continued to work there until she moved to Sarajevo. That pharmacy was later nationalised, but the people of Banja Luka still call it Bramer's pharmacy on Gospodska Street.

Duško also went off to work, and I stayed with the grandmother — Duško's mother — and Zoran, their son, who was already going to school. The grandmother told me about her worries for Duško and Zlata during their time as refugees, about how she had preserved their property, about how she had cared for Zlata while she was being treated for tuberculosis contracted during the war, and about other circumstances of their lives. She said she could never forget the reunion of Zlata with her brother Josif, who had survived. It was a meeting of indescribable joy, bathed in tears.

Zlata and Duško died in Sarajevo during the last war to break out in Bosnia, in the winter of 1992/1993 — without food, medicine, or heating. Their son Zoran, a professor of international law, lives with his family in London.