Eduard Tauber

- Edo Tauber's testimony was prepared based on an interview conducted on November 9, 1995, in Makarska, for the purposes of the project "Survivors of the Shoah."

Photo
Edo Tauber

GOOD PEOPLE SAVED THE FAMILY

He was born on October 12, 1926, in Sarajevo, to father Rudolf and mother Bončika (née Danon). He had two brothers – Lelo and Isa.

After the end of the Second World War, he lived in Sarajevo, and in 1960 he moved to Split, where he still resides. He served for many years as president of the Jewish Community of Split.

From his marriage to Matilda (née Altarac), he has a son, Leon.

I was born in Sarajevo on October 12, 1926. I lived in Sarajevo until February 1942, when, due to the persecution of Jews, I had to flee the city and went to Mostar.

Family circumstances and the environment in which I lived before the Second World War

In Sarajevo I lived with my maternal grandmother, my parents, and my two brothers. At home we spoke the language that was then called Croatian or Serbian. My mother spoke Spanish, that is Ladino, with my grandmother when she did not want us children to understand what they were saying, and she spoke German with my father.

My grandfather was originally from what was then Czechoslovakia. During the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy he came to Bjelovar, where he served as a rabbi.

After the First World War, my father moved from Bjelovar to Sarajevo, where he met my mother, who had come from Maglaj with her mother and her brother Rafael Danon.

Two of my father's brothers went to Budapest to serve in the army, married there, and their two daughters survived the horrors of the Auschwitz camp and still live in Budapest.

My father was a craftsman and owned a small hat repair shop. We lived with difficulty, as this trade did not provide enough income to support our six-member family. There were periods when no one brought a hat for repair for seven days in a row.

We celebrated all Jewish holidays. My brothers were members of the Jewish organizations Hashomer Hatzair and Ken (a Zionist youth group), and we mostly socialized with Jews.

On King Peter Street, many Jews lived. Our neighbors included the Papo family, Švarc, Kabiljo the plumber, Kurtz the hatter, and others. There were many craftsmen (locksmiths, barbers, and others), as well as wealthy merchants, industrialists, sawmill owners, and owners of textile and sock factories. I still remember that the Salom brothers owned textile stores; Altarac and Baruh had a hardware store; Cajhner owned sawmills; Kiršler built houses. Wealthy merchants had their own palaces, such as the Altarac Palace, Solomon Palace, and others.

I spent my childhood in Sarajevo. I attended the Jewish elementary school and then enrolled in a civic secondary school, which I attended until 1940, when, as a fourth-year student, I had to leave. Like many Jews, I was unable to continue my education because at the end of 1940, even before the war began, the government in which Korošec was Minister of Education passed a law restricting further schooling for Jews.

I began working as an apprentice in Altarac's hardware store.

The Beginning of the War

The beginning of the war brought the bombing of Sarajevo, so my family hid on the outskirts of the city, believing it would be safer there.

Immediately after the establishment of German and Ustaša authority in April 1941, a curfew was introduced and Jews were forbidden to go out after 6 p.m. Soon afterward, under threat of severe punishment, Jews were required to wear the letter "Ž," that is, an armband. During the curfew, confined to our homes and courtyards, in fear of the growing danger, people said that an uprising would soon occur and that the German occupation would not last long. As a fifteen-year-old, I listened to these conversations and began to believe that I too should do something, that I should fight. In the hardware store where I worked, I took a pistol, naively believing that one should arm

oneself and fight. The manager discovered me and I spent a month in prison. It was probably because it was only the beginning of the war and I was just a child; later, similar acts were punished much more harshly.

Already in April 1941, all Jews were ordered to report to the police under threat of summary trial and the death penalty. In Sarajevo, Jews were rounded up by the Ustaša and the police, likely on German orders. There was also extortion. A group of prominent Jews would be imprisoned, and the Jewish community was asked to pay ransom in gold and money for their release, though it was uncertain whether they would be freed even if the ransom was collected.

About twenty days after the arrival of the German army, the first group of Jews was killed at Vraca, among them the wealthiest Jews of Sarajevo. Avram Majer Altarac, in whose shop I worked, was also killed.

When the Ustaša arrived, they appointed commissioners in all Jewish shops. Nothing could be removed without their permission. Some of these commissioners soon became very wealthy, as they controlled the businesses and effectively became their owners. No commissioner was appointed to my father's hat shop because it was considered worthless and therefore uninteresting.

At first, Jews believed that nothing would happen to them, since they had harmed no one. Fear spread when we saw Jewish transports departing more and more frequently, although at first we did not know their destination. Jews were usually gathered in the Benevolencija building, crowded into small offices until there were enough for a transport. Later we learned that the transports were going to Jasenovac.

At the beginning of 1942, very few Jews remained in Sarajevo. Most had been taken to the Jasenovac concentration camp. My family remained in Sarajevo purely by chance. As mentioned, we lived on King Peter Street, in the very center of the city. One night we heard banging on the doors of neighboring houses and shouting. Neighbors told us that the Ustaša were coming to collect Jews and take them to the camp. My family—my grandmother, father, mother, and the three of us brothers—packed our belongings and waited with our luggage for them to come.

Two agents in civilian clothes and two uniformed Ustaša soldiers arrived. One of the agents asked whether we were ready to depart. My mother asked whether her mother, who had a different surname, was also on the list. The agent asked for our names and searched for them on the list. After checking, he said that we were not going because our names had been crossed out. That night all the Jews from King Peter Street were

taken to the camp. My family's lives were saved by two lines that had crossed out our names.

I assume this was because my father, as a hatter, had worked before the war with a man named Tolja, who later became police chief and likely crossed our names off the list.

Escape to Mostar

After this event, my family fled to Mostar. We escaped using passes issued under other names, mostly Muslim names. First my parents fled to Mostar, then my brothers, and finally I did. Our grandmother did not succeed in escaping; she was taken to Jasenovac and never returned.

As a Jew in Sarajevo, although I was only fifteen, I was in a sense mobilized, assigned to forced labor. When the Ustaša deported Jews to the camps, they confiscated their valuables and movable property. Furniture was taken to one of the two Jewish temples, and Ustaša who were allocated the apartments of deported Jews would come there and select what they wanted. Once they chose furniture, another boy my age and I would carry it to their newly assigned apartments.

There were four policemen in the temple; one of them liked to drink. The Ustaša to whom we delivered furniture did not know that I was Jewish and occasionally gave me tips. With that money I bought brandy—sometimes also spicy peppers, which he liked—and gave them to that policeman in order to gain his favor. I believe that because of this he found me sympathetic, which later proved decisive.

When I was preparing to flee Sarajevo, I received a pass under the name Edhem Tabaković. At the railway station, police controlled access to the platform. The policeman checked passes before allowing passengers to board the train. On the day I fled to Mostar, the policeman on duty was the same one to whom I had bought brandy and peppers. He asked, "Edo, where are you going?" When I replied that I was traveling to Mostar, he simply said, "Go ahead."

The pass in the name Edhem Tabaković was obtained from the brother of a neighbor, who had secured it in his own name; it seems someone later altered it to bear my name.

My parents and brothers also obtained passes, which they paid for. I did not pay for mine. My mother traveled to Mostar disguised as a Muslim woman, her face covered and dressed in Muslim clothing.

A Muslim man procured passes for my parents in exchange for money, which they obtained through a loan from a Muslim neighbor. That same neighbor offered to keep some of our more valuable belongings. She was a close friend of my mother. When the occupation of Sarajevo began and Jews were being taken away, she would call each morning: "Bončika, are you still there?" Before leaving Sarajevo, my mother left her sewing machine, a carpet, and some smaller items with her. After the war, the neighbor returned everything.

This same neighbor saved another Jewish family and later received from the State of Israel the Medal of the Righteous for her courage. When conflict began in Sarajevo in 1992, she and her family went to Israel, where she was given a house and a pension, but she died a few months later. Her name was Zejneba Hardaga.

When we arrived in Mostar, we felt freer because the Italians were there.

To survive in Mostar, I engaged in small trade. I sold soap, cigarette paper, and flints for lighters at the market, which I bought from Italian soldiers. My parents baked lamb liver, which I sold in cafés. We lived with a woman of Serbian origin who took us in, and in return we prepared meals together.

We stayed in Mostar from February to September 1942. Then we heard that Ustaša were coming to Mostar to collect Jews and that the Italian authorities had permitted it. Jewish refugees in Mostar began fleeing to Split and Dubrovnik. Together with Jakica Levi, I fled to Nevesinje. There I encountered the Chetnik commander Jevđević, who had once been a member of parliament and whom I knew from Sarajevo because I had delivered his repaired hats to the Hotel Europe. I told him I was the son of Tauber the hatter and asked whether I could work to earn food. He replied, "You are a Jew. If you Jews had given us money, I would now be driving you around Nevesinje in a car." I answered that we had no money. He said he had to verify that the Partisans had not sent us. I told him I did not even know who they were and that I was fleeing from the Ustaša. He gave us some food and found work for Levi and me in the kitchen.

After some time we heard that Ustaša had indeed come to Mostar to collect Jews, but the Italian army did not allow it, so they returned to Sarajevo. Jakica Levi and I then went back to Mostar. A few days later, Italian soldiers gathered all the Jews in Mostar and took us to Metković. We sat on the shore all night, and in the morning a boat—likely a trabaccolo—arrived and took us to the island of Hvar.

Stay in city Hvar, island of Hvar

We were interned on Hvar from September 1942 until May 1943. According to some information, our stay on Hvar was made possible by the International Red Cross, which paid the Italian authorities one dollar per day for each Jew. Thanks to this, we were treated correctly, were well accommodated, and had decent food. A book titled *A Dollar a Day* by Danko Samokovlija describes this.

We were housed in Hvar, Stari Grad, and Jelsa. My family was in Hvar, accommodated in a hotel. My parents had one room, and the three of us brothers stayed in another. We were allowed to move about until 7 p.m., when curfew began. An Italian soldier would come to the hotel, count us, and lock the doors so we could not leave until 9 a.m. the next day.

One day Italian soldiers gathered all the Jews from Hvar, Brač, and Kupari and transported us to the island of Rab.

The Camp on the island of Rab

On Rab we were placed in a real camp, surrounded by barbed wire and guards. We lived in barracks measuring 5 by 5 meters, with twenty people sleeping in each.

Nearby was the so-called Dubrovnik Camp, which had brick buildings.

Each day we received a small piece of bread weighing about 200 grams. For lunch we were given a liquid in which a few grains of rice or beans were occasionally visible. We cut the bread into small pieces so that it would last until evening.

Life in the camp was hard.

We were required to work. We left the camp only when collecting food, escorted by Italian soldiers. We had no contact with the outside world. We occasionally had contact with the camp where Slovenes were held, and from them we received information about world events. There was also a political organization in the camp, with communist party and youth cells.

I performed physical labor—carrying food, cleaning latrines, helping in the kitchen. I was sixteen and was not considered mature enough for political work. If my older brother was involved, he did not tell me for security reasons.

We learned of Italy's capitulation when Italian soldiers inside and outside the camp began celebrating and firing weapons in joy. Within about half an hour we organized ourselves, went to the Italian soldiers, and took their weapons, which they willingly

handed over. We left the camp singing. The camp was located in Kampor, not far from the town of Rab. We believed the war was definitively over and that freedom had finally arrived, but Germany continued the war.

Within days, the Rab Brigade was formed, composed of younger Jews. The elderly and those unable to move remained on Rab or left for Senj, Banija, and Kordun as refugees.

Those who remained on Rab and could not evacuate were killed when German forces arrived. Those who survived were either those who joined the Partisans or those who managed to survive in refugee columns. Refugees moved from place to place depending on military developments.

Before joining the Partisans, the Jews from the Rab camp had no combat training. On Rab I fired a few shots; that was all the training I had. Later I became accustomed to sleeplessness, lack of food, and other harsh wartime conditions.

With the Partisans

I served in the Rab Jewish Battalion. My brothers were also in the Partisans, while our parents were in a refugee column. The entire family was separated.

In one village I saw a dress hanging on a line to dry and recognized it as my mother's. I entered the house and asked whose dress it was. They said it belonged to a small Jewish woman who had left two days earlier. My mother was short, so I missed her by two days.

My unit was supposed to go to Slovenia, but the Seventh Offensive began. Near Generalski Stol, close to Karlovac, our unit was attached to the first Partisan unit encountered—the Seventh Banija Division. Jews from the Rab camp were distributed among brigades and battalions. As a result, I was separated from my brothers. I saw my eldest brother for the last time then. We said goodbye and never saw each other again. He was killed near Glina, in the village of Jabukovac.

I saw my middle brother once more during the war. We arrived in a village called Točak. While seeking accommodation, I entered a house that was full and lay down on some beams outside. The person next to me was restless, and I told him to calm down. Then I recognized my middle brother. We did not sleep that night. We talked until morning. After parting the next day, we did not see each other again until 1945.

In late November or December 1944, we fought near Cazin, close to Bihać. We were surrounded, and I was wounded. Several former members of the Rab Battalion were killed in that battle. During the attempted breakthrough, unable to move, I hid under

corn stalks. There I was found by Ustaša forces loyal to Huska. Huska had once been a Partisan but defected with his followers to the Ustaša, mostly among the Muslim population.

They asked who I was. I remained silent. I assumed that if I said I was Jewish, they might kill me. They placed a rifle under my chin and fired. One of them said, "Give me a knife," and I felt him cutting my throat. I lost consciousness and lay there for two days until local council members found me and saw that I was still alive. These council members were peasants who organized civilian authority in villages on behalf of the Partisans.

They offered to send me to the hospital in Plaški. I was transported on straw, transferred from cart to cart—wooden carts drawn by horses or oxen—from village to village. From Plaški I was transferred to another hospital in Turanj. Dr. Kajefeš stitched my flesh without anesthesia. I screamed terribly.

Hospital in Italy

I was sent for treatment to Italy. By truck I was taken to Senj or Novi. From there a small boat transported me to Vis. I could eat nothing except milk and soup, and even that only while lying down, otherwise it would spill out. When there was no milk or soup, I went hungry.

On Vis we were examined by Dr. Milan Zon, who determined to which hospital each wounded person would be sent. I was assigned to a hospital in Taranto. We were transported to Italy by a Red Cross ship. After the camp, Partisan warfare, and improvised hospitals, the ship appeared luxurious to me. It had cabins and abundant food. Although I could not eat because of my wounds, it meant much to see it.

I arrived in Taranto and was then transferred to Barletta, where there was a British hospital performing transplant surgeries. I remained there from March 1944 to February 1945. I underwent at least one operation each month because my wound was severe. They transplanted bone from my hip and tissue from my abdomen. These were difficult procedures. I believe there were about eighteen operations, and there would have been more had a dispute not arisen between the British and Yugoslav governments over landings on the Adriatic coast. As a result, all wounded were returned from Italian and British hospitals. I was sent back although I was not healed.

Dr. Bati, who operated on me, said he regretted that he could not complete the treatment and invited me to come to England one day if possible, so he could finish what he had begun. After the war I tried to arrange further treatment in England, but

they required confirmation from a hospital in Belgrade that the necessary operations could not be performed there. That confirmation was not granted.

After leaving Italy, I came to Split, where I stayed ten days, and was then transferred to a rehabilitation home in Dubrovnik, where I remained until July 1945.

After Sarajevo was liberated, my parents came from the refugee column to Dubrovnik, and together we returned to Sarajevo.

When I returned to Sarajevo, everything seemed beautiful to me. I had dreamed throughout the war of returning and living in freedom.

I later went to Belgrade for treatment and returned to Sarajevo in 1946, where I lived until 1960, when I moved to Split. In Sarajevo I was active in the Jewish community.

In 1954 I married and later had a son.

My wife, Matilda (née Altarac), daughter of Leon and Flora, was born in 1932. As a child she was imprisoned in the German concentration camp Bergen-Belsen and survived. After the war she worked in Valjevo and Sisak.

In Split I served for many years as president of the Jewish Community. In that role I was able to assist Jews from Sarajevo who fled in convoys in 1992 from the besieged city. At the same time, I watched with sorrow as they were forced to leave their homes for an unknown future, some for the second time in their lives. Many were people I knew; some were relatives.

Younger people left for Israel, Canada, and Spain. Older and less mobile individuals were housed in Makarska, where, with the assistance of the JOINT organization, they received material support. Some remained there for two or three years before being placed in retirement homes in Split and Zagreb. I cared for them and tried to help, remembering the days when I too was fleeing and when even the smallest assistance meant much.