

Rafael–Ratko Altaras

## THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION GAVE HOPE FOR SALVATION

*He was born on March 28, 1923, in Belgrade, to father Avram and mother Regina-Gina Altaras. He had sisters Flora, Mazal, and Tončka-Tomislava, and brothers Josef-Joško, Isak-Ića, and Leon-Juda.*

*All members of his immediate family perished in various camps. Besides him, only his sisters Mazal-Matilda and Tončka-Tomislava survived.*

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*Photo*

*Ratko Altaras*

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*From the very first days he joined the units of the National Liberation Struggle, in which he participated first as a fighter and later as an officer. He was awarded the “Commemorative Medal of 1941.” He took part in all seven enemy offensives and experienced the hardest and bloodiest battles in them. He was also wounded in fighting against an SS division whose combat composition consisted largely of Bosnian Muslims.*

*After the war he completed the Higher Military Academy and served in the army in many responsible positions. He remained in the army until his retirement as a colonel in 1974.*

I began elementary school in 1930 in Dušanovac, after the construction of our house in Tetovska Street was completed and finished it at the school near the Smederevo Djeram (Gate). I attended the Second Belgrade Gymnasium up to the lower graduation examination (today the building of the newspaper *Politika* stands on that site).

At first, while I lived in the city, it was easier to get to school. But after we moved again to Tetovska Street, it became quite difficult, because I usually walked from our house on Pašino (Leka’s) Hill to the gymnasium. Later, after I met Jewish youth in Dorćol, I often made that longer journey even twice a day.

I do not remember exactly, but I think I was fourteen when my best friend from the gymnasium, Mića Nahmijas, persuaded me to start coming to Dorćol and socializing with Jewish boys and girls. Before the war, the majority of Belgrade’s Jews lived in Dorćol and the surrounding area.

Thus, I began visiting Dorćol and spending a great deal of time there. Through Mića Nahmijas I met many friends. I found it interesting and pleasant to be in their company, although at first I felt somewhat like an outsider. The group I joined was called **Hashomer Hatzair** (translated from Hebrew: *shomer* – guard, *tzair* – young). It was a legal Jewish Zionist youth organization. As far as I remember, there were three youth organizations in Belgrade: the society “**Akiba**,” the Zionist organization **Tehelet Lavan** (meaning *blue and white*), and the aforementioned Hashomer Hatzair.

Later I often thanked fate that Mića had taken me to Hashomer rather than to Tehelet Lavan, as will become clear later.

I liked that group very much, their way of life and their games. I became so interested that I spent every free hour in Dorćol. In the first days I felt somewhat uncomfortable; until then I had not socialized with Jewish youth. This feeling was intensified when I soon realized how little I knew about Judaism, its history, customs, and other aspects. In my parents' house I had not been raised in a strict Jewish spirit or traditions. It is true that my father maintained and observed some customs, but only superficially and with rather little explanation. The Jewish youth in Dorćol knew much more.

Even now I think that my knowledge of Jewish history, traditions, customs, and religious characteristics is rather limited, despite the fact that before the war I spent four years in the company of Jews.

The two Zionist organizations mentioned differed greatly in their fundamental orientations, as far as I can now judge from memory. **Tehelet Lavan** was more right-leaning in its orientation. They also supported the departure of Jews to Palestine, but advocated the creation of a state based on capitalist principles and a purely Jewish state. One could say that its orientation resembled the later postwar policy of Begin in Israel.

**Hashomer Hatzair**, on the other hand, had a completely different orientation. It was an organization founded on Marxist views and Marxist ideology. It too advocated the migration of Jews to Palestine, but proposed that a **binational state** be built there — *Medina duleumi* (translated: *medina* – state, *leumi* – nation), a state of Jews and Arabs living there together, constructed on a socialist basis, with its foundation in collective life in **kibbutzim** (collective agricultural communities).

In his book *“The Jews of Yugoslavia 1941–1945: Victims of Genocide and Participants in the National Liberation War,”* Dr. Jaša Romano writes:

“The idea of founding organizations of Hashomer Hatzair originated in Poland after the First World War and was soon accepted by Jews in all European countries. It was a Jewish youth organization with a program based on Marxist ideology, which envisioned a solution to the national and social questions of the Jews. In that connection, these organizations physically and psychologically prepared Jewish youth to go to Palestine, where they would participate in reconstruction and in building a socialist society within agricultural organizations — kibbutzim.”

I remember that the organizations competed with one another, and there were even physical confrontations between them.

Between 1974 and 1981 I visited Israel five times, and I saw that the majority of Hashomer members remained faithful to their prewar convictions. All kibbutzim of this organization formed before, during, and after the Second World War retained their socialist orientation. They continued to be atheists and opponents of a capitalist social order. Begin wanted to dissolve the

kibbutzim but failed. Although small in number (only about 3 to 3.5 percent of the population), they had considerable influence and were economically and politically strong. I visited several kibbutzim and saw that none had a synagogue. They celebrate holidays, but without religious emphasis.

I write somewhat more about Hashomer because I was under its influence precisely in the most critical years of my life, from the age of fourteen to eighteen. I also wish to emphasize that its practices in shaping character and outlook on life made it much easier for me later to quickly adapt to and accept everything I heard among the partisans. The influence and views of the SKOJ (Communist Youth League) and the Communist Party were not foreign to me; it was as if I were hearing something already familiar to me in essence — though now under wartime conditions, in a different environment, in the struggle for liberation and for a socialist social system, for the resolution of national and social questions. All this pushed aside my earlier dreams of going to Palestine.

The Jewish youth gathered in Hashomer were divided into groups according to age. With each group of children, one of the older members worked as an instructor and caretaker, spending time with them in games, entertainment, and many discussions about various issues that might interest young people.

Lectures were also held on problems concerning Jewish identity, various social issues, music, literature, art, and many other topics, of course in accordance with the level of understanding appropriate to children of different ages. I remember that there was an unwritten rule that every member should read as many books as possible; it was almost a competition. At that time we focused especially on the publications of Nolit, on more progressive literature with social themes.

We also had various sports competitions. We went together to the opera, to cinemas, and sometimes to lectures in the small hall of Kolarac University. For example, my first knowledge of historical and dialectical materialism came from several lectures on the subject delivered by Žak Finči, now a university professor in Sarajevo.

All these and other activities we experienced through play and entertainment, in a very free and democratic spirit, which made life in Hashomer very attractive. Special attention was devoted to friendship, solidarity, and good interpersonal relations. Antisocial behavior by individuals was closely monitored; those who could not adapt to the collective life were removed from the organization. This was not unusual considering that members were being prepared for collective life in kibbutzim.

Once a year we went camping. For three weeks we lived under tents and took care of everything ourselves. We called these camps moshav (settlement). During those days there was an intensive cultural and sports life. One year I placed second in a cross-country race among about a hundred young participants and received a large chocolate bar as a prize.

At these camps we met youth from all over Yugoslavia. Two years before the war I met Irena Atijas from Banja Luka, a student of a technical secondary school. I liked her very much. I visited her at her home (Fra Grge Martića Street No. 5), and she visited me in Belgrade.

I remember obtaining the book *“The Development of Society”* by Filipović. I typed out sections of the book and sent them to her by mail in Banja Luka. Now, when I think back on it, I wonder what childishness it was — something for which I could have ended up in prison! After the war I tried to find her and learned from neighbors that, as a member of SKOJ, she had been captured by the Ustaše and slaughtered.

What I am about to write now may seem foolish and ridiculous today, but it is true. And it is not so strange if one considers the ultimate goal, collective life in kibbutzim, although by today’s standards it may seem unacceptable.

The unwritten rules of behavior for members of the KEN (meaning “nest”) of Hashomer Hatzair were: not to drink alcohol, not to smoke, not to dance, not to go to taverns or brothels (which existed in Belgrade before the war, especially in Sarajevo Street), not to play cards or gamble. In short, all such behavior was treated as a sign of petty-bourgeois mentality.

If a young member developed affection for a girl in the organization, it ended only in naive and innocent contacts. That was the way things were, however unlikely it may seem today.

In order to prepare the youth for departure to Palestine and for life in a collective production community, efforts were made to encourage them to choose working-class or agricultural professions. The prevailing opinion was that a state could not exist without workers and peasants, yet among Jews there were almost no farmers anywhere in Yugoslavia, and perhaps in most European countries as well.

Older members went during the summer to rented rural farms where they trained in agricultural work. These preparations were called hachsharot (training). A good number of the younger members chose crafts. Perhaps this also influenced my own decision to study precision mechanics.

After the war I learned that there had been members in Hashomer (among the older ones) who were members of SKOJ or the Communist Party, assigned to work and exert influence within Hashomer. This was kept secret, but their work was not at all difficult, considering the general nature of our upbringing and behavior.

I learned my trade under Slavko Jovanović, one of the first precision mechanics in Belgrade. He was a friend of my father and took me, after my lower gymnasium graduation, as an apprentice. Working there as a journeyman was Nisim Konfino, and as a master toolmaker there was a man named Karlo, whom we had already recognized as a progressive-minded person even before the occupation.

His attitude toward apprentices was very patient and considerate, and sometimes he would say something about the life of workers and the work of trade unions. When the Germans entered

Belgrade, he no longer came to work. He disappeared, and I never heard anything about him again.

Because he was my father's acquaintance and friend, master Slavko wanted to protect me from persecution as a Jew. He obtained a permit stating that I was indispensable to the work of his workshop, so that I could remain there rather than being sent to various forced labor assignments imposed on Jews. However, even that did not succeed, and I soon had to stop coming to the workshop.

After the occupation of Yugoslavia, Hashomer could no longer operate publicly. Nevertheless, we remained connected in some way. We discussed the new situation and met in small groups while it was still relatively easy to move around Belgrade.

We heard that discussions were taking place between our older members and the committees of SKOJ and the Communist Party about merging the Hashomer organization with the SKOJ organization. Later, in the partisans, I realized how naive that idea had been. Neither SKOJ nor the Party allowed any kind of "collective merging"; membership could only occur individually.

At that time, however, we experienced it as if we had joined SKOJ. Something was indeed happening. Many Hashomer members were accepted into SKOJ and already in the first days of the occupation participated in various actions: burning newspapers, collecting funds for the "Red Aid," distributing bulletins of the Soviet Information Bureau about events on the Eastern Front, writing slogans, burning occupation vehicles, and many other activities.

I believed that I was already a member of SKOJ. I was in a group that lived above the Smederevo Gate area. The group included Binja (Benjamin) Mandil (who later died as a fighter of the First Proletarian Brigade on Durmitor in 1942), Šošana Baruh (who now lives in Israel), my cousin Jole, and myself.

Our activity was brief and limited. Soon afterward, Binja and I left for the partisans, Šošana went into hiding somewhere, and my cousin Jole was arrested and killed.

Illegal work did not suit me. My nature was rather open and emotional — as the saying goes, "speaking from the heart rather than from the mind." Such a disposition did not suit clandestine work, and I constantly asked to be allowed to go to the forests and join the partisans. That was not easy to obtain.

Belgrade was surrounded and strictly controlled. Establishing connections for departure to the partisans was extremely difficult. If such a connection were entrusted to someone unreliable and exposed, it was very hard to reestablish a safe route out of Belgrade.

Before my departure to the partisans — as I mentioned briefly earlier — I had been in the camp in Smederevo, I think for three or four weeks. The rest of the time I spent on labor details in Belgrade, which we went to under German guard and according to their schedule. I remember that my last forced labor assignment was cutting down trees around the King Aleksandar school on Topčider Hill, so that the German post in the school would be safe from any potential actions

by Belgrade's patriots. The very next day, once I had everything arranged, I left for the partisans, and I told the group leader that I was going to a medical appointment, so that my departure would not be discovered immediately and my family would not be persecuted.

One of the members of Hashomer who were organized was Vivi Levi, a dental technician. He informed me when and how I would leave for the partisans. He provided me with a false identity document on which I only needed to write in a false name. To keep my initials, I signed myself as Ratomir Atanacković (throughout the entire war I kept only the page with my photograph and my signature). I was told that on September 13, in the morning, I should come to the tinsmith's workshop run by the father of my apprentice Nisim Konfino, hide there, and at noon come to the corner of Dušanova Street and what is now King Petar Street (until recently called 7th of July Street), receive a package (it contained medical supplies), and at two o'clock in the afternoon board the train to Obrenovac. When I reached Mala Moštanica, I should wait a moment until the train moved on and the conductors boarded, then — as if I had been late — get off the train and immediately go to the hillock opposite the railway station. Along the way I would not know anyone, nor show that I knew them. And so it was.

After a difficult farewell with my brother, mother, and father — we all wept — I safely made my way from Bulevar Revolucije (King Aleksandar Boulevard) 224 to the workshop, which was located about fifty meters from the intersection of Dušanova and King Petar Street, on Dušanova Street. I spent some time there — I don't remember exactly how long — until after noon. I prepared myself and hid. Everything I could put on my body, I put on, so that the only thing left for me to carry would be the package I was to receive. I had on multiple undershirts, underwear, sweaters, and other items of clothing. At the appointed time I arrived at the meeting place and received my final instructions and the package from Vivi Levi. I was gripped by considerable fear. A false identity document, a package of medical supplies, a Jew without a yellow armband — somehow I made it safely to the Senjak station (I was also afraid of the surprise raids, of which there were no small number in Belgrade). At the station I spotted an older comrade from Hashomer. He was dressed in peasant clothes and had a crate of chickens beside him. He was dark-skinned like a Gypsy — no one would have said he was Jewish. Since I was heading into the unknown, I felt great joy at seeing someone familiar. I wanted to approach him. He sensed this and signaled me not to come near, not to acknowledge him. It was Haim Haravon — "Haravule," as we called him — by then already a courier between the operational headquarters and the PKKPJ (the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia) for Serbia. I later learned that he, along with a group of female comrades he was leading to the partisan detachments, was captured by the Chetniks and handed over to the Germans, which led to all of their deaths — at Banjica or Jajinci.

The journey to Mala Moštanica was extremely tense. I felt as though it was written on my forehead where I was going and what kind of document I was carrying. At one point I was asked for my papers, to my great anxiety, but everything went smoothly. The Germans used patrols of Ljotić's or Nedić's men to help escort the trains, I don't remember exactly which. It was they who checked my documents. Young-faced, with the surname Atanacković — it passed without trouble.

As planned, on the hillock at Mala Moštanica a group of twelve Belgrade residents had gathered, all leaving for the partisans through the same network. I remember only one of them. It was Miša Šterk, a pre-war underground activist, who was immediately appointed to the duty of political

commissar of the Posavina Partisan Detachment. No, first he was appointed company commander, and he was killed in 1942 as a company political commissar.

On September 14, through many relay contacts and overnight stays in some village, well hidden, we arrived at the Posavina Partisan Detachment at around noon. We were assigned to squads and units, I received a rifle with about ten rounds of ammunition — all of which I had to clean of the rust that had formed on it. I had never held any weapon in my hands before. I cleaned the rifle and the bullets with the help of the older men.

That is how my life in the partisans began, lasting until the end of the war, May 18–20, 1945 during which time I rested from fighting for only a brief period (about seven days), in Šekovići, after the Fifth Offensive. All the rest of the time I spent in operational units.

I have already said that parting from my parents and brother was more than difficult. Throughout the entire war I never cried, only once did my eyes fill with tears: in the winter of 1942, as I walked one night in a column of partisans, sinking in snow almost to my waist, I thought about my loved ones who had been left unprotected in Belgrade. I wondered what they were doing, how they had experienced my departure to the partisans, whether the Volksdeutsche family of our neighbors had denounced them and whether because of that they had been taken to a camp. I thought about all of this, in the column, at night, and I wept so that no one could see me, no one could have understood my feelings and my grief. That was the only time I wept, in secret.

Shortly, a few weeks after arriving with the partisans, there was an opportunity to send word to my family through people who were going to Belgrade. I wrote, on a small slip of paper, although it was forbidden, a few sentences to my family, saying that I was alive and well, a message after my departure to the partisans. I don't know whether my family received that note; if they did, it may have made things at least a little easier for them. Whether they received it or not, I never found out.

During the war I served in the following units: the Posavina Partisan Detachment, the Belgrade Battalion, the 2nd Proletarian Brigade, the 19th Birčanska Brigade, the Jahorina Partisan Detachment, and the 20th Romanija Brigade.

With these units I passed through parts of Serbia, Sandžak, Montenegro, Eastern and Central Bosnia, and I also reached Dalmatia (near Knin). Given that in this year (1985) there has been a great deal of terrorism, I wish to state the truth: that partisans never took hostages or killed innocent women, children, or the elderly in order to force Chetniks, Ustasha, or other collaborators with the occupier to surrender from their strongholds. As can be seen, I served in several units, passed through a large part of Yugoslavia, and nowhere did I witness violence on the part of the partisans.

I became a member of SKOJ (the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia) immediately upon joining the partisans, although I had thought I already was one. In the Belgrade Battalion, the SKOJ leader was Vera Crvenčanin, who after the war became an actress at the National Theatre and married Skender Kulenović. The political commissar of the battalion was the writer Čedomir Minderović. The battalion commander was Miladin Ivanović. I don't remember the others. I only also remember the company commander, he was Pavle Ilić, an officer of the Royal Yugoslav Army, and the company political commissar was a comrade we called "Korošec"; I believe he was killed in the fighting for Sjenica in December 1941.

After some time, I don't remember how long, perhaps a few months, I was informed that I was a candidate for admission to the Party. One detail: in order to justify my candidate status, I went into battle against the Ustasha at Strmica, near Knin, in 1942, with a wounded leg wrapped in rags, it was not in keeping with "custom" for a party candidate to miss a battle.

I was admitted to the Party on February 1, 1943. The Fourth Enemy Offensive had just begun; I was on guard duty, immediately before the units moved toward Eastern Bosnia, and so my admission to the Party was communicated to me verbally by the cell secretary Petar Vujović. There was no time for meetings, but the cell's decision had to be announced.

Since I am already mentioning Strmica, let me also say that after the capture of the Ustasha stronghold, we were each given a little wine, the first time in my life I had drunk it. Afterward I felt quite ill, and with considerable difficulty, though no one noticed — I managed the march and the ascents over Mount Dinara.

It should also be said that the partisan units in the first months of the war were filled with many workers, students, and intellectuals, fighters who were, for the most part, at least several years older than me; I was eighteen at the time. Admission to the Party in the first months of the war was considerably stricter than in later years.

After the Fifth Offensive, I think sometime in August 1943, I was appointed to the duty of company political commissar in the 19th Birčanska Brigade. Shortly afterward, I was appointed party organizer of the First Battalion of the same brigade. The commander was the legendary Đorđo Simić. I remained in that position until the beginning of 1944, when I was summoned to the headquarters of the 27th Division and informed that I had been assigned as political commissar of the Jahorina Detachment. The briefing and work instructions were given to me by the division's political commissar, Zarije Škerović (now a retired general). On that occasion he warned me about the Chetnik and other influences that Jahorina had been exposed to, particularly from Sarajevo. I asked whether I could take up the post under a different name. The commissar agreed, and so the order was written out in the name of Ratko Pavlović. I thought at the time that I would find it easier to work if it was not apparent that I was Jewish. The propaganda was full of claims that the National Liberation War was being led by Jews and that they would destroy our people. I have kept the document of appointment bearing that name. Until the end of the war, the units knew me as Ratko Pavlović, though in the higher commands my real name was known. When, at the end of 1944, questionnaires were filled out for those entitled to the "Partisan Commemoration 1941" medal, the questionnaire was completed under my real name — Rafajlo Altaras.

I remained with the Jahorina Detachment for just over two months. When it was merged into the newly formed 20th Romanija Brigade in May 1944, I was returned to the duty of deputy political commissar of the First Battalion of the 19th Birčanska Brigade.

At the beginning of September 1944, Rade Jakšić, a party official in Eastern Bosnia, summoned me and informed me that I had been assigned to take up the duty of deputy political commissar of the 20th Romanija Brigade and party organizer of the brigade. Although I resisted, I ultimately accepted the assignment. And so on September 5, 1944, I joined the brigade and took

up the new duty, in which I remained until July or August 1945, when I was transferred to the position of personnel instructor in the political department of the command of the 6th Sarajevo Army, which was then only just being formed.

I mentioned earlier that the war ended on May 18 or 20. That is not an error. In Europe the war ended on May 9; we were engaged in heavy fighting against the Ustasha, entrenched in Odžak near Modriča, all the way until May 18–20.

I remained in the Command of the 6th Army until May 1948. When in 1948 a party organization was formed within the Army Command, I was elected secretary — that is, head of the party bureau. I held that position for about two years. I never concealed the fact that in my youth I had been a member of a Zionist organization. In the biographical section of the personal data cards that were filled out at the time, I spoke openly about this, which did not affect my selection for personnel work or for party functions.

In May 1948, at the request of Adem Hercegovac, who knew me and knew how I worked, I was transferred to Belgrade, to the position of his deputy (deputy head of the department for political personnel in the main political directorate of the Yugoslav People's Army). I held that position until December 1950, when I was transferred to the position of head of the Second Department of the Personnel Administration of the First Army Command, where I remained until my departure for the Higher Military Academy in 1955. My time working in the First Army Command is one of my most successful periods of work. I am most satisfied with that period, as I introduced many innovations into the work of the department that were later adopted and codified for the entire Yugoslav People's Army. That is a long story and this is not the place for it.

I completed the Higher Military Academy with very good results; they say I defended my thesis well (Infantry Division in River Crossing and Attack). I also handled well those assignments that involved the use of tactical nuclear projectiles — which was a novelty in officer training. Perhaps that was the reason why after the Academy I was transferred to the NBC (atomic, biological, chemical) Defense Administration of the General Staff. Apart from four years of service in Skoplje (1960–1964), where I served as head of NBC defense of the Army Command, all the remaining time until my retirement in 1974 I spent in the NBC Defense Administration of the General Staff.

Somewhat declining health, many long years spent reading and editing various manuscripts of combat and other regulations (publishing work was my responsibility), significantly weakened eyesight, and other circumstances compelled me to request retirement, to which I was entitled.

I was promoted to the rank of major, I believe, in 1946. I received the rank of lieutenant colonel in 1950, and was promoted to colonel after an examination on May 1, 1959. I took the examination once; I still keep the examination assignment to this day.

And finally, here is a brief biography, let me only list the heaviest and bloodiest battles in which I participated during the National Liberation War, first as a fighter and later as an officer.

I lived through all seven enemy offensives, and within them the heaviest and bloodiest battles, as best I can now recall, were the following: the battles in Serbia during the First Offensive; the heavy battle at Sjenica with great losses (December 1941); the battles around Nova Varoš and the crossing of the River Lim in January–February 1942; the brutal battle (with great losses on our side) at Gat in Herzegovina in 1942 — reportedly also a great failure on our part, one that was erased from the war chronicles (Koča Popović in his interview with "Duga," December 1985); the battle at Javorak in Montenegro in 1942 (our losses small, but Italian losses very heavy); the crossing of Mounts Bjelašnica and Treskavica (I believe on St. Vitus Day, 1942) and, in a sweeping assault over a single night, the capture and destruction of the railway line from near Sarajevo to Konjić and the elimination of all Ustasha and German garrisons along that stretch of track — my battalion attacked the Tarčin railway station; the battles and liberation of many Central Bosnian towns in a sweep of about ten days: Livno, Duvno, Mrkonjić Grad, Grahovo, Šujica, and others; the exceptionally fierce and bloody battles for the capture of Kupres, a strong Ustasha stronghold, in 1942; the battles for the wounded near Prozor and on Mount Makljen against the Germans and their pushing back from near Prozor to above Gornji Vakuf; the crossing of the Neretva River and days of continuous fighting against the Chetniks and pursuing them to Eastern Bosnia and Montenegro — my battalion crossed second, immediately after the destruction of the bridge, when it had not yet been prepared for crossing; we climbed across the iron bars of the destroyed bridge; the battles around Kalinovik in 1943, when I saw Vivi Levi for the last time in the column of the 1st Proletarian Brigade; between the Neretva and the Sutjeska there were many heavy battles; the Fifth Offensive and the battles on the Sutjeska, of which the bloodiest was for the hill of Košur, whose capture determined whether all the encircled partisans of the Fifth Offensive — the Supreme Headquarters, the National Committee, the wounded, and the units — could break through; after the Fifth Offensive I participated in battles mainly in Eastern Bosnia and partly in Montenegro, on Romanija, Jahorina, Majevisa, in the liberation of Zvornik, Tuzla, Vlasenica, Kladanj, Sokolac, Sarajevo, and other smaller towns; battles against the Germans retreating from Greece; battles against Draža Mihailović's Chetniks who were trying to break through across Romanija and flee from Yugoslavia; battles against the Germans who were breaking out of Sarajevo and fleeing northward along the Bosna River; and finally, to be brief, the heavy battles against the Ustasha at Odžak, their last stronghold, when the war was already over and all of Yugoslavia had already been liberated.

I was wounded once, in the leg, in battles against a German SS division whose fighting strength was composed mainly of Bosnian Muslims, who toward the end of the war, from late 1944 onward, were surrendering to the partisans in large numbers.

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## **TRANSCRIPT — A LETTER FROM AFAR**

I would supplement my story with letters from Dana Marković-Trifunović, the daughter of the owner of the house where we lived in 1941, on King Aleksandar Street (Bulevar Revolucije 224), who now lives in the United States (230 S. Orchard).

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*"Dear Mr. Rule,*

*Today I received your letter and so here I am writing back to you immediately. Many years have passed and I have forgotten a great deal, but I will tell you everything I remember and know. My father and I heard in confidence from your parents that the Gligorijević family helped you leave for the partisans. After that we had a few problems. They were arrested and suspected of collaborating with the partisans. My father was questioned several times, and I think old Colić as well. My father always defended him and always spoke well of him. Later they moved away to Macedonia (Dana is referring to the Gligorijević family).*

*As for your parents, I don't remember when they were taken away. I remember that we helped them as much as we could in everything. We bought milk and other things they needed. They were only allowed to shop after 10 o'clock, by which time much of everything was already gone. We had to get up early and wait in line to get something to eat. We asked the family that ran the dairy shop to give us more milk or to set some aside for your family. Later that was the Colić family. Their daughter Rada married their son, and they were Russian émigrés. In the neighborhood no one was against your (parents) — we all loved them and felt sorry for them. We couldn't help them. We were sorry that you hadn't taken your brother with you as well... As for your parents' belongings, your mama came to us and asked my father to store some things in the attic. She said: if we come back, at least we'll have something, and if not, give them to my daughter. Father agreed, and I remember there were some new quilts — beyond that I don't know... If my father were alive, he would know more about it... I don't remember when your family was taken or who took them. I know that the Germans sealed the apartment and no one was allowed to enter. The apartment was closed for a long time... it went on for a long time and finally a Slovenian family was given the apartment. Through the Germans and the municipality the apartment was opened and the belongings were taken away. You know — in those times we were not allowed to watch what the Germans or other authorities were doing..."*

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I have shortened the letter considerably. Some of what she states is not accurate. Neither Mila nor Tomislava came for the belongings — I don't believe they would have dared. It is known that Mrs. Mica Car came for things on several occasions, even while my parents had not yet been taken away, and she probably came afterward as well, but was unable to take anything. Mica Car removed the belongings with my parents' knowledge.

Dana Marković misunderstood my letter. She probably thought that I was now, after all these years, investigating where our things had gone. That does not interest me. I only told her that I would like to know whether any paintings made by my father, an amateur painter, might be found. That is why I asked whether she knew who had moved into our apartment, and when and how. I learned that it had been a Slovenian family by the name of Mulavec, and that after the war they had moved to Slovenia — Maribor or Celje. I thought of trying to find them, but gave up the idea. I only wanted to see whether they might have a painting by my father that I could now purchase. However, if Dana understood me to mean that I am now interested in recovering our belongings, then it is better that I not pursue the matter further. I cannot find a single painting,

and there is nothing I can do about it. I should have done all of what I am doing now immediately after the war, perhaps as early as June, when I first came to Belgrade after the war.

I did not manage to find out the date and circumstances of my parents' deportation to the camps, and that was my only goal when I sought out and made contact with our pre-war neighbors.