

# Vladislav Rothbart

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Novi Sad

Serbia

Interviewer: Sonja Radulovic

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*This interview was told by Smilja Rothbart, the wife of Vladislav Rothbart. She remembers very well the stories that her husband told her immediately before his death about his life and his and his last three years in Israel. She lives today in their very nicely furnished apartment in Liman 4, in Novi Sad. We are preparing the interview in the living room; she is showing me her husband's photos and a beautiful sculpture of a mother with a child in her arms that is the only remaining object of her husband's family from before World War II.*

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## My family background

Vlada's [Vladislav's] grandmother from his mother's side, Fanni Rothbart, was married to Leopold Wollner. Her father was Jakob Rothbart and mother Tribele Hauser -who died at the age of 103, but I don't know exactly which year that was. Fanni was born in Budapest, I do not know what year. She was a checkroom attendant in the Budapest Opera House and was very proud of it. When she would complete her job, that is put the coats off of all the visitors, she would get into the hall and listen to all the operas that were in the repertoire. She considered that she was, for that reason, more educated and cultured than other women at that time.

There is another interesting anecdote in connection with Grandma Fanni Wollner. Namely, when Vlada's father Maxim Rothbart would be out of house, busy with his obligations at work, Vlada's mother Irena and Grandma Fanni would stay in the house with the children. (Grandma was in charge of the children.) When father would forbid something, would not allow something or give, she would always have in her kitchen apron a pocket, some money of hers, and she would give that to the children.

Grandma and Grandpa Wollner spoke Hungarian. In regards to Leopold Wollner I only know that he was an electrician at a power station. Grandma Fanni was killed in Auschwitz in 1944.

Vlada's grandpa and grandma from his father's side, Joseph Rothbart and Fanni Rothbar [It is possible that the two grandmothers were relatives -that is why Rothbar is the maiden name of one and the married name of the other- although this is not verifiable.] were born in Slovakia.[Editor's note: Slovakia came to existence in 1993. In the 19th Century the later to be Slovak lands were parts of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.] Grandpa was a butcher

and had his own butchery. Grandma was a housewife and was very religious, shaved head with and wore a wig. They both strictly observed all the rules and customs, had a Jewish way of life and are kosher food in the house. In Slovakia they lived a very modest life. They spoke mainly German and Yiddish. They had 6 children, 5 sons: Maxim, Artur, Sandor, Juld, Emil and a daughter Kamila.

Grandma Fanni Rothbart had a constant habit, whether needed or not, when grandchildren would come to her, she would, spread some jam on a piece of bread and prepare cocoa. There was no chance that grandchildren would go home without eating and drinking. She insisted on that always. Rarely she prepared anything different.

Vlada's grandmas and grandpas were not members of any political or other organizations, they were only loyal to the Jewish Community. They were regularly present at all holidays and services in the synagogue. Of course in synagogues they had their own honorary places. They would give very big donations for the Jewish Community. It was, in some way, a matter of prestige. It was normal for them. Grandma Fanni Rothbart and grandpa Joseph Rothbart were killed in Auschwitz.

## Growing up

Vlada Rothbart was born in 1925 in Subotica in a quite strange time and in a strange family. I say strange time because it was 7 years after World War I ended. That area was an area where Hungarian was spoken. At the end of World War I Backa [Voivodina] [1](#) and some other areas became part of Yugoslavia.

Vlada, in the first days of his life, felt double isolation, first because he was Jewish and second because he was Hungarian speaker. He was not only isolated as a Jew but he was not desirable as a person whose mother tongue is Hungarian.

Vlada's family consisted of father Maxim Rothbart [born in 1886] and mother Irena Rothbart [nee Wollner, born in 1919] brother Paja and sister Vera. Allegedly great grandpa came from an Orthodox family.

Vlada's mother [Irene Wollner] was born in Pest [Budapest]. Both, his father and mother, as Vlada remembered, had completed commercial college. They spoke German, Hungarian, Serbian and Yiddish. They dressed conventionally. They married in synagogue. Back then Jews married that way. They didn't want to have a civil marriage. [Editor's note: Ever since 1895 in Hungary civil marriage has been obligatory and the religious one optional.]

Father Maxim Rothbart was very religious. He would go to the synagogue whenever he could. Mother Irena Rothbart was from Pest, more exactly from Ujpest [2](#) Father would not even touch anything that was not kosher, but he would bring home ham. 'Let his wife and kids still eat something nice'. Mother would go to the synagogue, but she was not an orthodox Jew. To the kids she gave food that was not kosher and she has eaten that type of food herself.

Vlada's mother was much younger than her husband. She was also a real beauty. She didn't work, but devoted herself to her family and particularly to the kids. Vlada was specially attached to her, among others also because he spent much of the time in his youth with her. With his mother he would go for afternoon walks, mother would take him to the seaside and other picnics and father would always work and didn't have that much time for the kids and the family.

Mother always dressed nicely, she always had nice silk dresses with decorations and had always nice stylish hairstyle. She always supported the children and kept their side. Vlada's father in the beginning didn't like that his son was learning to play the violin, so Vlada hid this from his father, but mother knew all the time he was playing and was hiding it from her husband. Father was, beside other things, very rational, and was hard on spending money. When it was necessary to buy coats for the children, he would always suggest buying for elderly son Paja a new coat and that for the younger son Vlada we should turn the old father's coat and sew from it. Mother never allowed that and managed to persuade the husband to buy for Vlada as well as for Paja identical new coats.

Vlada's family belonged to a Neolog [3](#) community. His father was a member of the executive board of the Jewish Community. It means that he was in charge for religious issues. Vlada's family had a friend from the Orthodox community, but their friend didn't wear the traditional Orthodox dresses. Vlada's family lived at a place where they couldn't build a sukkah, so at Sukkot he would always go to them to sit for a while in their sukkah.

In front of the children the parent never talked about anti-Semitism. It was known to exist though. So to say, every month a man would come to sell a photo of King Aleksandar [4](#), and every time would Vlada's father open the door and buy a photo, Vlada would ask him, 'Why are you father buying a photo when we already have 5-6'. Then his father for the first time told him, 'My son, it is a must because we are Jews and we have to'. When King Aleksandar was killed, it was quite unclear and unpleasant for Vlada, and especially for Vlada's father since such a killing was being suspected.

At that time in Subotica ruled a far right organization ORJUNA, [the Organization of Yugoslav nationalists] [5](#). Since the official explanation was that Hungarians killed the king, ORJUNA went its rage by circling the city on bicycles. [Editor's note: The Hungarians in interwar Yugoslavia –contrary to the Macedonian IMRO and the Croatian Ustasa- did not maintain separatist and terrorist organizations. These accusations, even if existed, were false and without any bases. The king himself was assassinated by the Croatian Ustasa, and that was not a secret for the contemporaries.] On gridiron would sit someone with a sling and smash store windows of Jewish and Hungarian stores and the windows of Jewish apartments. That was the time when in Vlada's apartment window-blinds would close.

Vlada remembered that his father, who was an Austro-Hungarian reserve officer and who spent some 3-4 years in Siberia in captivity, had his revolver, official, that he, of course, kept against the law. He remembers that in those ORJUNA times, after the killing of the king, his father went to a meeting of the Jewish Community one evening, but he turned back from the stairs and put the revolver into the pocket. Mother was sitting the whole time up until father returned from the meeting. That is what the atmosphere was in the country in which officially anti-Semitism didn't exist.

In Subotica father forbade Vlada and his brother Paja to go to the Zionist organizations, regardless of their father being religious and an active member of the Zionist organization.

After Vlada's 11th birthday, in 1936 they moved to Novi Sad. Vlada started school and his father told him he should learn everything twice better than the other kids, 'because we are Jews, we have to know more and better, because you kids will be most likely graded more strictly by the teachers because it appears as we are not very likeable to them'.

In Novi Sad they lived in the very center of the town. Vlada's father founded his private company that was engaged in international freight forwarding. His father was a customs freight forwarder and in his company he had 3 employees: Joca Banjanin, a Serb, Matija Simerling a Jew and a German, a 'Volksdeutscher' <sup>6</sup>. They 3 worked well together. Vlada's father, Maxim was very reserved, a cold employer, and also reserved with the family and with the children. He was overloaded with his office duties and mainly he spent the whole day on the job, and in the afternoon he stayed in hotel Putnik. There some official businesses would be concluded. In contrast to father Maxim, mother Irena would stay home, devoted to kids.

Vlada's family could have been considered an upper middle class one. They were well-off, they had a big 5 room apartment, a housemaid, their own tailor, driver, laundress and everything of their own. They had enough money to travel every year on a holiday, afford to send their kids to different summer vacations, to send them to Bled [an alpine holiday resort, today in Slovenia]. Every year mother Irena took the kids to Opatija and Crikvenica for a vacation. [northern Adriatic coast-towns, today in Croatia] They were, we could say, well-off. It was never talked in the house about any financial crisis.

The apartment was a 5 room apartment and there was a small room for the housemaid, who lived there, very nice furniture, especially the living room that had a wonderful black dresser with engraving and mirrors beautiful armchairs, rugs and curtains. Of course the other rooms were nicely furnished. It could not be said that there was a big library in the house. There were mainly father's official books about international freight forwarding there were some religious books, of course the Bible, different prayer books, since one could not go to the synagogue without prayer books. All the books were locked and the kids had to ask father for the permission to get books for reading also the children books were in a closed case. Only the encyclopedias were unlocked because father told them that they could use them whenever they want. The kids were normally told that they had to study and read a lot, so Vlada and Paja were well-read.

At that time it was a custom that the children doing their bar mitzvah sang only the beginning of the bracha, or a part of it or, mostly, the end of the bracha, and the Torah portion was read by a competent religious official. Vlada remembered that his father had forced his brother in 1936, while still in Subotica, to learn the entire bracha by heart, so he was the first and the only one among the kids who sang it completely. When it was Vlada's turn, 2 years later in Novi Sad, he also had to do it, and it was a big pleasure for him since he had a talent for music, especially for singing.

Vlada remembered that after bar mitzvah, where he had sung the whole bracha, cantor of that time had come to his father and suggested to teach him free of cost to become a cantor and opera singer. But cantor of that time said that if he ever employs Vlada as a cantor or singer 5 percent of his salary would be his. Vlada's father Maxim Rothbart replied to him, 'if I want to teach my son singing, I will pay for it, but I won't get into this kind of arrangement'. It was in 1937 and if Vlada had gone for it, he may have never studied at law school.

Paja, before the war, attended secondary school, he was very intelligent and capable, he was considered to be an excellent student and a good Jew. He was religious exceptionally observed all Jewish holidays and customs. He spent a lot of his time in the synagogue, it was partially his profession. Every morning before the school he would lay tefillin and pray to God.

In regards to Vlada, he was religious but was not too much overburdened with it. He practically replaced the music for religion. It was his preoccupation, and he mostly dedicated his time to it. Paja's and Vlada's sister Verica was at that time still a child. She was born in 1934 and she came as to say, as God's gift in the house (little sweet sister and loved). She was little and with her the brothers played a lot and had fun. They would take her for a walk, talked with her... She was an object of love and fun in the house.

Paja had been until the war attending secondary school in Novi Sad. Vlada attended the School of Queen Maria. Officially it wasn't a Jewish school but more than half of the kids were Jewish here, so it was almost like a Jewish school.

Vlada was some kind of a big musical hope of Novi Sad. He played the violin. He started playing at age 13. At age 14 he played with Novi Sad philharmonic orchestra. He was 15 when in secret, secretly from his teacher learned Beethoven's Violin concert and played it for his birthday. Vlada told me that the teacher had first started crying and then scolded him.

Vlada attended the first high school for boys in Novi Sad, which was called Gymnasium of the Blessed King Aleksandar I. It was a custom that in January, on the day of Saint Sava [7](#) be held 'svetosavska beseda' [Saint Sava's speech]. It, with speeches, didn't have any connection, here there were chorales, recitations and different attractions, among others, every year one and that the best violinist and pianist took part in that program. Then he was told that because he was young he could only play the following year and that it would be for sure since there was nobody better than him. It was agreed to play Beethoven's F major romance. It was known who would be following him; it was also known who would be turning the pages of the sheet music for the pianist.

At the beginning of the winter holiday Vlada received the program for the Saint Sava's speech. At his big surprise he was not on the program, and that the same romance was to be performed by some Branko Jeremic, who attended the 5th grade. Vlada told me that he was not bad, but that Vlada was far better than him. Then Vlada asked his music teacher, some Mita Pernic, who he was very close with, 'what is this'? He remained silent for some time, and then he said, 'You know what, I will tell you, but don't tell anyone that you heard it from me. On teacher's council, there are two teachers', he also said which ones, 'they stood up and asked if it is necessary that some kind of plays for them at the Saint Sava's concert. And it ended as that'. It was already in 1940. People were afraid and why would they support some Vladislav Rothbart? For Vlada it was not a musical blow, but a national one. Vlada considered it a clear anti-Semite provocation, because the Yugoslav government had been more and more approaching Hitler.

It was the atmosphere of Novi Sad, the atmosphere of a cultural center that was not burdened with something that is today called 'gorstacki element' [mountaineer element, barbarian element]. The majority of Serbs, intellectuals, spoke there Hungarian, German and French. The majority of Serbian intellectuals were educated either in Vienna, Paris or Pest. It was an irrational thing to be chauvinist, when you are everywhere, at everyplace surrounded with people of different nations.

He became a member of the SKOJ [8](#) in September 1940, at the age of 15, though he has never got engaged in politics. About Marxism, about proletariat he knew nothing. He only knew that in the SKOJ organization he was not a Jew but a comrade. And it seemed to him that this motive prevailed at many others.

## During the war

On 13th April 1941, when Hungarians entered Novi Sad [Hungarian Occupation of Yugoslavia] [9](#), a Jew was killed, some Lacika Cerni, a very wealthy man and a drawing-room communist. He was killed because Hungarians claimed that he had been a Chetnik [10](#) activist.

During the massacre [Novi Sad massacre] [11](#) they were very lucky since the military police didn't come to them, only a police patrol came the third day. They were not that notorious as the military police. Brother Paja told him that their mother had kept, since the first day of the massacre, a huge pot with hot water on the fire. When the police entered the house, she immediately asked them, 'Would you gentlemen, drink a hot tea?' The temperature outside was minus 32 degrees centigrade. The policemen happily accepted it, drank themselves fill with tea, stood up and left.

However the police was not bloodthirsty. The most bloodthirsty was the military police, then the soldiers who were drunk, but the police was mainly fair. It was a professional force. Maybe they were even traffic policemen.

In the Novi Sad massacre nobody, from Vlada's relatives, was killed even though he had only few relatives. After the massacre Vlada's family fled to Pest, more exactly to Ujpest where they rented an apartment. Paja there didn't continue the school but stayed at a locksmith where he studied locksmith trade.

About the Novi Sad massacre Vlada didn't have anything else to tell me since then he was in the Csillag prison [12](#) in Szeged at that time. He could only tell me that on that day when the massacre had ended, or a few days later, a jail teacher visited them. The teacher told the guard that they had been lucky for not being there because they would have been all killed.

Vlada got to the jail because in 1941 he had been a member of some regional SKOJ leadership. The secretary of the leadership was Franjo Kardos, a Jew. Another member of the leadership was Ilza Zeilinger, a Jew. The third member was some Lacika Kuzmanovic, also a Jew, then it was Vlada and there was some Nada Kuzmanovic.

In Novi Sad there was a planned action for smashing Pifat's store window. It also went down in history. Pifat was a Croat from Petrovaradin [a town in Srem, across the Danube, with considerable Croatian population]. In Novi Sad he had a tavern, that was full of anti-Soviet and mostly anti-Semitic elements. The SKOJ organization decided to break it. Vlada was also anticipated for that team however he got sick and could not be present. In that action among others took part: Pavle Katic, a Jew, Nikola Timar, a Jew, Ivan Haker, a Jew, in addition two more people who were not Jewish. Kardos, as a regional chief, circled the place in order to see what was happening and according to him this company got afraid. They, in fact, delayed the action, because they had realized that an officer was coming, Kardos didn't see that, he grabbed from the ground a half brick, hit the window. That officer ran after him. Kardos started to run and ran into a café bar. The officer follows him in, approaches a waiter and asks him who entered the last. The waiter points and Kardos together with a friend get arrested.

Kardos later on tried to commit suicide at the investigation by throwing a brick in the air and then stood under it. But the brick didn't fall on his head but on his beard. From him they asked nothing else but to reveal the codes of his contacts. He had revealed the codes and then started the big

arrests in Novi Sad and here also Vlada was arrested, 29th September 1941.

For two month he was on investigation in the department of Hungarian counterintelligence. That they beat him, they did. He lived through. After 2 months, together with a group, they transferred him to the prison in Szeged. There, in the month of June, they sentenced him to 6 years of imprisonment.

Vlada worked on 2 books from that period, one was: Ne zaboravi druga svog ['Don't forget the comrade of yours'] and is concerned solely with the Szeged prison. The second book: Jugosloveni u madjarskim zatvorima i logorima ['The Yugoslavs in Hungarian prisons and camps']. This one you find also in Yad Vashem. In 1941 in the month of June, when they also sentenced Vlada in Szeged, there were 12 trials. It was about groups of 20 to 60 people. From all of those verdicts he found only 3-4.

I would start with this that Vlada weighed 85 kilograms when he had arrived to the prison, and that he left it weighing 55 kilograms. He told me that the taste of the food was so awful that there they had a rule that if somebody faints goes for several days to the prison hospital. There they would revive him somewhat.

When he arrived to the prison, in the cell that was anticipated for one person, that is solitary confinement, they threw in 3 straw mattresses and five of them. The biggest shock they experienced was when they noticed that in the corner were 3 straw mattresses covered with 5 blankets, and in one corner there was something that looked like a big pot covered with a black lid. The pot size was about 20 liters. The guard told them that it was kibble. They didn't know what kibble was, but he explained it to them. Nobody among them had ever before relieved themselves in front of others. They agreed that while one of them was on kibble the others should turn their back. Later on they discovered the system for sitting on the kibble. They found a broom and placed it horizontally and this way they could quite well use it as a toilet board.

While Vlada was, with others, on investigation they were under special order of Hungarian counterintelligence. This order included the following: in one big room, one meter away from the wall, there were some jammed straw. Prisoners were sitting on that straw and looked towards the wall. And did like that the whole day. In the evening at 10 o'clock, when it was time to go to bed, that straw was stretched a bit and they went to sleep. They were woken up at 5 o'clock in the morning and it was only to mistreat people that way too. They had to walk one after the other, with their hands on their backs. The walk would take about an hour. It had reached the culmination when they transferred them, the Jews, into the Aszod prison. [small town near Budapest] Then their section chief, sergeant Joska Birkas brought for everybody a box of 100 cigarettes and told them, 'Kids, where they are taking you I can't tell, but it will be better for you than here'. That Birkas was often asking Vlada to help him around some office work.

Entered once some Kolompar, a guard, into a cell and one of the convicts asked him directly if he wants to take out letters past the censorship. For all of them the letters were very important because in them they explained to their families how and what should be smuggled. Kolompar then, in front of some 30 people, took off his hat, took the letters, put them in the hat, and put the hat back on his head. He was sure that nobody among these 30 inhabitants of Voivodina [13](#) would betray him. Of course later on he liked it more and more so he started smuggling food too on the bases of fifty-fifty. The system was the following: Who wants to send to his relative in the prison

food, must send to his daughter's address Vera Kolompar the package. If, in the package, is 5 kg of goods, the prisoner will get 2,5 kg. It was functioning exceptionally, only he forgot too that in every post office there is counterintelligence.

Later on Kolompar was arrested. There was the original letter, whether from the Ministry of Justice or from the Public Prosecutor's Office, I don't know anymore. There is written that it is true that Kolompar was taking in food, but not for the reason of humanity but for the reason of greediness. Vlada, in his book, ended the chapter about this event this way, 'If only there were more of the greedy ones'. For them he was suitable because there were far more guards who would report them immediately, and would not help them.

Later on they left that small cell, they got beds, but the food was worse and worse. Every week they got clean laundry. Then they were changing the laundry biweekly and then later on they left that small cell, they got beds, but the food was worse and worse. And they had the opportunity to wash themselves. And then somebody remembered, and they accepted, so they started cheating themselves by wearing shirts at the right side of the fabric for a week and for a week at the reverse side, and they had the impression that it was more clean this way.

I would like to say another thing about the packages with food. To Vlada and his Jewish friends it was not a big problem, because they shared in the prison everything with everybody. At the beginning they had problems with two Jews, who refused to join the group, because it could provoke anti-Semitism and then 3 or 4 Serbs declared that they would not take a crumb, until these two don't join the group.

The question of being informed in the prison is very important. For example, they in February 1942, before getting accustomed to the prison, had got some news about some big Russian offensive and that the Russians arrived to the place Ostrava. [Editors's note: Obvious misinformation. Ostrava is in the Eastern Part of today's Czech Republic. The Soviets were nowhere close to that in 1942] Why exactly to that place, Vlada didn't know, but a big enthusiasm overtook them. And wherever somebody would slammed the gate, they thought that the cannons were roaring.

They had regular visits. Those who were sentenced to imprisonment had visits every 2 weeks, those who were sentenced to hard labor, every 3 weeks. Once Vlada was punished with a ban for visits for some time because he organized a strike. Namely, they worked on, in a backyard, knitting reed mace. They knitted them into braids resembling girl's pigtails. Their norm was 50 meters a day for one person, and for that they would get a cigarette. For every additional 25 meters they would get another two cigarettes. The job itself, as Vlada told me, was not a problem, but the prison administration made a mistake and set up a low norm of production, and they hung on it for dear life (unyielding). The administration wanted to raise the norm, as all that was produced was for some private owner, so the prison manager would put that money in his pocket. He permanently pressured them to do more. Well now, in the morning they had an hour for walk, from the walk they would go to reed-mace, in the evening from the reed-mace they would go again for the walk. In order to carry out a pressure on them, they canceled the walks to raise the norm.

On the first day when in the prison the sound of the bell announced the time for walks for the whole of the prison and when they started walking, a guard started to shout that there is no walk for them. He warned them to go back, but nobody went back. And he continued shouting at them and asking them who wants to go for an interrogation to the guard commander. No one

volunteered and he grabbed somebody and took him away. After some moments the guard came back and asked: who else wants to go for interrogation'? Vlada said 'I do.'. So at the end 7 of them were in a cell for solitary confinement for 3 days.

In the Szeged prison they had only one nice person; it was Doctor Jenő Frenkel [14](#), the rabbi of Szeged. Vlada told at one time that the rabbi had been an exceptional humanist, exceptionally brave man. The first time they had to receive packages, they all received them except Vlada. The last day for receiving the packages the guard called Vlada. Took him into the room in which a gentleman was sitting. After his beard and cap and his suit he concluded that he was a Jew but not an orthodox one. The guard turned to the rabbi in Hungarian 'Mr. Rabbi, submissively reporting, this is that'. And the rabbi says 'listen son, your father phoned me and told me that his package got returned to Novi Sad. He asked me to bring the package for you. Tell me what you want me to bring'. Vlada, since he realized it was a good man, asks him 'Mr. Rabbi, excuse me but I don't know what you can get'. Then he offered to bring sausages, salamis, cheese... then he said 'but listen I could get bacon too. I know what the situation is here'.

Once the rabbi told him that a group of Jews, communists, came from Pest and they wanted to meet with them and if it was not a problem for them they should come to the synagogue. The synagogue was a room with bars on the ground floor. He didn't remember if they had had Torah or not. Here all the Jews from the prison would gather on Friday nights. Rabbi Frenkel survived the war and died in Israel.

When Germans arrived in Hungary [19th March 1944] everywhere except in the prisons, the wearing of the yellow star became obligatory. In the prison they didn't wear them, because the prison was not considered as being a street. That day, when the star had to be worn for the first time, Doctor rabbi Frenkel in redingote, top hat, with the star on his coat, came to the prison, put his hands on his back and for hours walked in the prison's backyard. With this the rabbi wanted to show to them that it was not a problem. After 5 or 6 days a new regulation came out according to which even those in the prisons were obliged to wear the yellow star.

Vlada arrived to a plan to cease wearing the yellow star. Every week they would get clean bed linen, so they would take the stars off from dirty things and sew them on clean ones. Vlada has suggested not to sew them immediately but only after a day or two, and if anyone asks them they should say that they didn't succeed in sewing them. One day Vlada said that it is not necessary anymore at all to sew them, but to wear them in the pockets. No one noticed anything, or didn't want to notice, that they were not wearing the stars. The manager held a speech for them in the sense that Horthy has asked for a truce, that they hope that the war is over, that they have to be patient and not to run away. [Horthy declaration.] [15](#)

On 4th April they tightened the regulation that Jewish prisoners must wear the yellow star. On 11th April the Ministry of Justice introduces a regulation that Jews, prisoners can't receive from home any kind of packages. On 8th May 1944 the Ministry introduces an order that in the future the prisoners, Jews can get only 30 grams of sugar and 30 grams of cooking oil monthly, and weekly 100 grams of horse sausages. On 19th June of the same year a new regulation is introduced that said all the Jews had to be gathered in certain prisons and that minor Jews into prisons for minors in Aszód.

Vlada arrived in Aszod with another 8 friends. There were 6 of them from Szeged and 3 from Cegled [small town in central Hungary]. Here there were: Gavra Altman, Nikola Timar, Ivan Haker, Sima Epstajn, Egon Stark and Vlada from Szeged too. From Cegled came Pavle Sefer, Dordje Hajzler and Ivan Blum.

From Szeged to Aszod they traveled by train. 6 of them in a passenger train, all 6 of them tied on a chain. They could barely climb on the train. It was very difficult every time when somebody had to go to the toilet.

While they had a small break at a station, tied with chains and with the yellow star on them, nearby appeared a Nazi policeman, an SS. 'Does anyone speak German here?' he shouted. Vlada then said 'I speak'. He wanted Vlada to ask somebody something. Vlada stood up and the SS only then saw the yellow star on Vlada. 'Mit einem Sau Juden will ich nicht sprechen'. (I will not talk with a Jewish pig). And Vlada said 'you called me, I didn't call you', and Vlada's five friends grabbed him and pulled down. Their 3 guards were more afraid than him.

When they arrived to Aszod they were very hungry and had been told that they would get food when they arrive to the family. It was not clear for them what family means while they didn't see that there existed blocks in the prison and that 2 on each floor. A Block consisted of a room that was a dining room and a living room then there was a bigger bedroom and a small supervisor's room. The supervisor was always present. These blocks they called 'family'. In the prison in Aszod, another unusual event happened. At the beginning of October 1944 the Russians were some 20 km away from Aszod. Later on Vlada read that the Russians had advanced very slowly because it had been the fall with the most rains. He told me that when the Russians approached them to about 4-5 km, they would watch them for weeks, and they could not get to them. And then at the beginning of October, a guard came for Vlada and told him that Toth, the assistant to the prison manager, was looking for him.

When Vlada went to him and he told him 'Listen, you received from your brother from Pest a telegram'. In the letter it was written 'I obtained for you a Swiss passport. Do you want me to send it to you or not'? Since the assistant to the manager has behaved nicely to him, Vlada asked him 'Gentleman, tell me, if this could be of use to me'? And he replied 'It is a smart thing, you only ask him for it. Nevertheless I can not let you out from the prison. He only didn't tell him to run away, because as Vlada told me, from there you could escape, but they didn't have where to.

Those were already troubled times and times of expectations. Unfortunately already the following day they heard new things. The Germans had requested from the manager that the whole prison and the Jews and others be evacuated and handed over to Germans to take them to Auschwitz. And they also threatened him that if they act contrary to the order they would blow up the prison. The manager wanted to hand it over to the Russians.

Then 9 of them agreed that everyone should provide for himself a place in case of escape, but they must not tell each other who would go where. Gavra Altman and Vlada, since they already had had contacts with the workers of the machine gun workshop, they went to their bunker. They had had quite of fun there for several days but a love affair revealed them, a love affair of an engineer's wife and a German lieutenant. Then they were all taken to Vac. It is a town on the left bank of the Danube, some 30 km from Budapest. They were not convicts anymore but suspicious citizens. From there Vlada and Gavra have gone to Gyor in a factory where the director of that workshop

told them that the engineer's wife blurted out in front of her German lover that they were Jews.

They began to move towards the town called Papa, it was about 50 km away. On their way a German military car stopped beside them. The driver asked Vlada if he could wrap his cigarette, because he had been frozen. Vlada then took from his pocket a box of cigarette and gave it to him, but in return he wanted him to take them to Papa. Later on they went to the German airport and worked in some kind of beer cellar where they had to fill in bottles. After that they went again to Papa and then to a Hungarian village at the junction of Czechoslovak, Austrian and Hungarian borders. They have gone to Poland, South Germany, Munich, Nuremberg...

On their way they associated with different people from whom no one talked about their past. Vlada once told Gavra that if he ever writes about that, he would name the book 'The division of people without past'. Even before their departure from Munich, Gavra Altman was added on to the company that was supposed go to Czechoslovakia in order to reserve an accommodation. Since Vlada was leaving for Nuremberg with his company here those two separated. On the way from Munich to Nuremberg Vlada taught the group in the railroad car the song 'It's a long way to Tiperary' and different other songs.

Before Nuremberg they threw them out of the train. They were lining up to go to the town, when at once a huge explosion occurred. They were informed that an arsenal, with shotguns blew up into the air; the ones they had to get. Then they had to go back by walk from Nuremberg to Triol. The first sergeant and Vlada then tried to escape three times. Two times it was unsuccessful but finally at the third time they managed to escape and in a special way they arrived to Regensburg. They were hitchhiking. Vlada has changed very many American camps and at the end arrived to Marseilles, in the camp for repatriated Yugoslavs.

There he was arrested by American counterintelligence service under the charges that he was a Russian spy. Saved him a Subotica's doctor A. Ivica, who told a story how he knew Vlada's father as a good preference player.

On 18th August 1945 Vlada crossed the Yugoslav border and came to Zagreb. In Zagreb they were questioned by OZN [department for the people's protection]. 'What is your name?' 'Vladislav Rothbart.' 'Are you German?' 'No I am not.' 'Then what are you?' 'A Jew.' 'How come you are alive?' He told them his story. In Zagreb he had stayed for two days in the prison, till, from Novi Sad, didn't arrive a confirmation that Vladislav Rothbart existed. In Zagreb, some time before he had to be released, a journalist appeared. He was looking for inhabitants of Voivodina. Two of them reported, and after Vlada had told him his name he introduced himself and told him that his name was Zelmanovic. Vlada's and his parents were on good terms. He had taken him to his place and showed him the list of those Jews who were coming back to Novi Sad. Since it was the month of August, those who were not on the list, mainly never returned.

## After the war

On the list was Vlada's uncle Emil with his wife and daughter. Aca Kekic, Vlada's friend was in Auschwitz and he told Vlada that when the group from Budapest had arrived, he recognized his mother. He told him that they wanted to take from her the child, Vlada's 10 year old sister, but that mother didn't let them, and that later on they didn't insist. Vlada's mother was then 44 years old.

Vlada's father Maxim, mother Irena, sister Verica, grandmother Fani Rothbart, grandmother Fani Wollner were killed in Auschwitz. From other relatives Uncle Artur Rothbart was killed there. When Vlada was telling me about all that he also told me, 'But, we were not anyway a big family'.

Vlada immediately after the war got engaged into journalism. After that, since he was very capable, he worked with Slobodna Vojvodina [Free Voivodina] and Dnevnik, he was the editor of a column, so it was very promising for him. He, then in 1950 got transferred to Subotica, at that time he had already been a reporter for Tanjug [Yugoslav News Agency]. He was a member of the Communist Party, clearly from idealistic reasons. Before the war he had been a member of SKOJ and in the prison he joined the Party. He didn't need the Party because of his career or any other interests, but solely because of his political convictions.

From the end of the war till the early 1950s many things had happened. Vlada immediately upon his return became a journalist for a Hungarian youth newspaper that was called 'IFJUSAG SZAVA' [The word of youth].

In 1947 Vlada, together with me in the same class, completed the 4th grade of secondary school so here he had met with me. We got married in Novi Sad. I was not of Jewish origin, but later, on the occasion of our trip to Israel I became a ger, I converted to Judaism. I wanted that, and it was necessary and desirable. When we met in 1947, to him it was absolutely not important whether I was a Jew or not, at that time it was not given much importance to that. Unfortunately, he didn't have parents who may have reacted differently to that. There was no one else but uncle Emil who too made absolutely no issue of it.

I was born in Cantavir, my mother tongue is Serbian, the degree of education, completed secondary school. I worked as a social worker till retirement. My parents were so to say peasants, mother would sit at home doing the housework, father worked at railroads. We have two children who were at school in Subotica till 1960 and later on in Novi Sad. It was normally important to get an education and become financially independent.

In regards to his non Jewish neighbors, then there was an euphoria, that the war was over, that we were all there and that it was not important anymore who was Jewish and who was of another religion etc. So there were no problems, all of them who remained in Novi Sad, were happy that someone survived. In regards to the apartment we had lived in, in Novi Sad, was not the property of our parents, so some completely different people lived there. Vlada, in 1947 along with his job as a journalist, completed gymnasium in Novi Sad, the 8th grade, today this is the 4th grade of gymnasium, and that he had been all the time employed as a journalist and then he got married and got 2 children, Verica, born in 1948 and Nada, born in 1956.

In 1948 during the big aliyah to Israel, Vlada was married to me, and I was not a Jew, however I was willing to emigrate to Israel regardless of the parents who were here. Vlada communicated that he fought for this country and that this was his native country, here he was born, wished to live here. After all that he was deeply disappointed, that he had received nothing for his patriotism.

Vlada's political convictions were positive in relation to the regime and the politics that existed then and there were big expectations. There was an opinion that we were looking towards big outlook. However, a large number of people emigrated to Israel, some even to the West, so it meant a big damage to the Jewish community in Novi Sad. It remained ruined. It was terrible that

among those people were many of Vlada's friends who were very dear to him but the hardest thing was that the Jews who were emigrating to Israel had to renounce their Yugoslav citizenship and their property.

About the regime after the war he had a very positive opinion, but as the time went by, the regime and that kind of relations suited him less and less. In regards to social activities like socialist holidays in schools, at work, he normally took part but he was not particularly involved.

After Stalin's death, and not directly connected to Stalin, it was already clear that things were not as ideal as it had been at the occasion of entering the Party in 1948 when the Informburo Resolution [16](#) had been introduced; Vlada came out against the resolution. He considered that normal.

We strived, in any case, to teach the kids about their Jewish origin. The children went to the Jewish Community, they associated there. However, during that time in the Jewish Community there were no lectures that would urge the children to their Jewish identity. It was mainly to socialize one with the other, though the children knew that it was their Jewish Community.

In regards to every day life, it was all boiled down to our duties, since Vlada worked a lot as a journalist, very often on a business trip and away from the house. We had a three room apartment, it can be said modestly furnished, there were also books we bought after the war. Mainly we would go to the theater, not as often to the movies and exhibitions. However, in regards to theaters, we had permanent passes to operas and dramas. In spare-time we mainly went to picnics to Fruska Gora, and for summer vacations together with our children we went to Italy all the way to Rome or to Vienna, Budapest, Prague and of course to the Adriatic sea.

Vlada in Yugoslavia had no relatives, the only contacts were with my mother, brothers and sister. The meetings had become less frequent, because the children were small and the duties bigger. The children were raised not too much in a religious tradition, though it had been insisted on that, but the situation in the society was not such that it would be very important. We told them that father was Jewish and that mother was not. We told them what happened with Vlada's family in Auschwitz and with my father and brother who were killed by Chetniks in Serbia. The Christmas and the Easter were not celebrated. In the house it was known when Chanukkah, Yom Kippur were, etc. But without big pomp and celebrations.

The children had no chance to meet grandfather and grandmother who were religious. Vera lives in Novi Sad, she is a graduate lawyer, works in the insurance business and has two children. They are not a typical Jewish family because Vera's husband is not a Jew. The children go to the Jewish Community, they were several times in Israel, daughter Sonja speaks Hebrew and gladly travels to Israel whenever there is a chance.

The life in the family in fact, in the marriage in the family and generally the financial situation, since he had started his life without any inheritance, started to stabilize in 1950 when it was possible to purchase things taking loans and buy more things. Somewhere around 1965 Vlada found some power to travel to his brother in Israel, who emigrated in 1948 and applied to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to get a passport, but had been asked first to spy for Yugoslavia. However, he told them frankly that it was his second country, and that he was absolutely not going to spy in Israel for anyone even if could never travel there so he didn't get the passport nor the

possibility to travel.

At the job, it could not be said that there were any difficulties because of the Jewish origin. It had all lasted until somewhere in 1970 when he got employed with the Executive council of Voivodina and at one point he was dismissed without any explanation. That way, for almost a year he would run from committee to committee, from office to office to Executive council to hear what he had done to be dismissed. And after a long time I managed to find out talking to the president of the Executive Council of Voivodina, who had been a school mate of my brother, and he confided to me that Vlada had been dismissed because he had a brother in Israel. Of course when everything had been cleared up, he was brought back to the job, but of course, not at his old job, that had already been occupied, but to the Provincial Parliament of Voivodina. He worked here for another few years and then retired, disappointed and in his job, and in the Party and in everything. Because of a big nervousness and stress that he had experienced in 1975 he survived a heart attack that he suffered from till the end of his life. He died 8th January 1997. In fact because of that heart disease he died.

He was buried on Jewish semetery by Rabbi Ichak Asiel.

In regards to the children, it could not be said there were problems neither on the job nor for the admission to the university because of their Jewish origin. At that time it was not that emphasized. Then there was still some kind of brotherhood and unity. Two daughters were excellent students so there were no problems at all.

Never Vlada hid his origin because of his position at the job, nor he denied his tradition. Even more, during his job with the Executive Council of Voivodina, he was in a mandate also the president of the Jewish Community in Novi Sad. With the arrival to the power of Slobodan Milosevic [17](#) and his party, the situation for Jewish families, and in general for Jews, considerably worsened. It was not desirable at all to say that you were a Jew, Hungarian nor the second or the third. A danger lured that any neighbor could break into your apartment etc. It happend but not to them. A shortage of medicaments had appeared so Vlada together with me emigrated in 1993 to Israel.

In regards to the life in Israel, there all that was in the best order. We were regularly receiving assistance from the state of Israel. We had good quality health care protection. We have lived in a decent rental apartment in Ashkelon.

We came back from Israel 30.12.1996 because of Vlada's illness and because he wanted to be buried in Novi Sad.

We thought a lot about aliyah to Israel and normally followed the development of the state of Israel. Vlada and I were enthusiastic that the situation has been settling there. At the end the wars broke out in Israel, so the break up of diplomatic ties with Israel effected Vlada's and mine moods. We considered that it would very negatively influence the Jews. Normally, there are a lot of people, anti-Semites, who connected that also with the Jews in the state of Yugoslavia. We could not stay much in contact with our family in Israel. It was not desirable to write letters. At one moment Vlada's brother Paja came with his family to Novi Sad.

After the arrival of Slobodan Milosevic to the power, rises the anti-Semitism in Yugoslavia as the result of that time official politics. At that time more and more members of the Jewish Community

became active again within the Jewish association. Premises of the Jewish Community became cramped for all Jews from Novi Sad who wanted an active involvement in the Jewish life. Several families have activated themselves in the Jewish Community, so there has been done quite a lot on that. Periodically, even today, we receive assistance from the Jewish Community particularly in medicaments and clothing. This increased activity of the members of the Jewish Community was particularly a revolt to the arrival of Milosevic to the power and the intensified anti-Semitism in Yugoslavia during his reign.

## Glossary

### **1 Voivodina**

Northern part of Serbia with Novi Sad (Ujvidek, Neusatz) as its capital. Ethnically it is the most mixed part of the country with significant Hungarian, Croatian, Romanian, Slovakian population as well as Roma and Ruthenian minorities (and also a large German population before and during World War II, which was expelled after the war). An integral part of Hungary, the area of present day Voivodina was attached to the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (Yugoslavia after 1929) at the Trianon Peace Conference in 1920. Along with Kosovo it used to be an autonomous province within Serbia between 1974 and 1990, under the Yugoslavian Constitution.

### **2 Ujpest**

A part of Budapest today. When the modern city of Budapest was created in 1873 Ujpest was outside its boundaries in the north, along the Danube river. Administratively it was attached to Budapest as late as 1950.

### **3 Neolog Jewry**

Following a Congress in 1868/69 in Budapest, where the Jewish community was supposed to discuss several issues on which the opinion of the traditionalists and the modernizers differed and which aimed at uniting Hungarian Jews, Hungarian Jewry was officially split into to (later three) communities, which all built up their own national community network. The Neologs were the modernizers, who opposed the Orthodox on various questions.

### **4 Aleksandar I (1888-1934)**

King of Yugoslavia from the Karadjordjevic dynasty between 1921-1934. In 1929 Aleksandar dismissed the parliament, abolished the constitution and the parties, and became absolute ruler. Although he announced the end of the dictatorship in 1931 and proclaimed a new constitution, he kept the power in his own hands. His authoritarian and centralizing policy brought him the hatred of the separatists, especially the Croatian Ustasha and the Macedonian IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization). He was assassinated by the Ustasha Movement on an official state visit to Marseille in 1934.

### **5 ORJUNA (Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists)**

A pro-fascist organization which aimed at creating a Greater Serbia, which would include all territories of Yugoslavia inhabited by Serbs. It was active in the interwar period and dissolved in 1929. Its main target were the revolutionary labor movements and applied terrorist methods against them.

## **6 Volksdeutscher (ethnic German)**

Early 18th century German colonists from southern German states (Baden-Wurthenberg, Bavaria) who settled, on the encouragement of the Habsburg emperor, in the sparsely populated parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – especially in southern Hungary. Thanks to their advanced agricultural technologies and hard work they became some of the wealthiest peasants in Hungary. After the dissolution of the monarchy, following World War I, the territories where most of these Germans lived became part of Yugoslavia (Baranja, Voivodina) and Romania (Banat).

**7** St. Sava: Patron saint of Serbia, founder of the medieval Serbian Orthodox Church. He became a monk in Mount Athos, later returned to his native Serbia and founded several monasteries there. He was consecrated Metropolitan of Serbia in 1219. In 1222 he crowned his brother King of Serbia (Stephen II). He translated religious works, and gave his people a native clergy and hierarchy. He died on 14th January, the date which later became St. Sava Day.

## **8 SKOJ (Alliance of the Communist Youth Yugoslavia)**

The organization was established in Zagreb in 1919 and was closely tied to the Yugoslav Communist Party. During World War II many of its members were imprisoned, others joined Tito's partisans and participated in the anti-fascist resistance.

## **9 Hungarian occupation of Yugoslavia**

In April 1941 Yugoslavia was occupied by German, Hungarian, Italian, and Bulgarian troops. Hungary reoccupied some of the areas it had ceded to the newly formed Yugoslavia after World War I, namely Backa (Bacska), Baranja (Baranya), Medjumurje (Murakoz) and Prekmurje (Muravidek). The Hungarian armed forces massacred some 2,000 people, mostly Jews but also Serbs, in Novi Sad in January 1942. The Hungarians ordered the formation of forced labor battalions into which all Jewish and Serbian males aged 21-48 were drafted. Many of them were sent to the Ukrainian front, others to Hungary and German-occupied Serbia (the infamous Bor copper mines). After the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 the Jews of the area were deported to Auschwitz.

## **10 Chetniks**

Serbian nationalist movement named after the armed irregulars fighting the Ottomans during the Serbian uprisings in the early 19th century. During World War II, after the surrender of the Yugoslav Royal Army in 1941, the Chetnik movement became successful in fighting the Germans under the leadership of Draza (Dragoljub) Mihailovic. The Chetniks at first cooperated with Tito's partisans, however, they turned against them later. Britain and America preferred the Chetniks to the Yugoslav partisans but they switched support in 1944 when they realized that the partisans were more effective. After the war Tito persecuted the Chetnik movement and had its leader, Mihailovic,

executed in Belgrade in 1946.

## **11 Novi Sad massacre**

From 21st-23rd January 1942, a small rebellion near Novi Sad served as a pretext for the slaughter of Jews and Serbs in Novi Sad by the Hungarian armed forces. The action initially started as a fight against the local partisans but later became a retaliation, in which mostly innocent Jews and Serbs were killed. Total curfew was ordered, Jewish homes were searched and pillaged, and their occupants were murdered in the streets. On 23rd January more than 1,400 Jews, including women and children, and 400-500 Serbs, were taken to the Danube and shot in front of the river. The remaining Jews of Novi Sad were killed in forced labor camps and in Auschwitz. The regent of Hungary, Miklos Horthy, outraged by the massacre, ordered an investigation into the mass killing. Those responsible for the raid were tried in court, but the German authorities took them to Germany, where they joined the German armed forces. After the war the Hungarian authorities handed them over to the new Yugoslav government and they were executed.

## **12 Csillag prison**

The oldest prison in Hungary, located in Szeged, South Hungary. It has been continuously in use since 1886. It got its name from the star-like structure of the building (csillag means star in Hungarian).

13 Voivodina: Northern part of Serbia with Novi Sad (Ujvidek, Neusatz) as its capital. Ethnically it is the most mixed part of the country with significant Hungarian, Croatian, Romanian, Slovakian population as well as Roma and Ruthenian minorities (and also a large German population before and during World War II, which was expelled after the war). An integral part of Hungary, the area of present day Voivodina was attached to the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (Yugoslavia after 1929) at the Trianon Peace Conference in 1920. Along with Kosovo it used to be an autonomous province within Serbia between 1974 and 1990, under the Yugoslavian Constitution.

## **14 Frenkel, Jeno**

Rabbi of the Szeged Neolog Jewish community, beside chief rabbi Immanuel Low before World War II. After the war he became chief rabbi of the town and reorganized the Jewish community and Jewish religious life. He emigrated to Israel in 1948.

## **15 Horthy declaration**

On 15th October 1944, the governor of Hungary, Miklos Horthy, announced on the radio that he would ask for a truce from the Allied Powers. The leader of the fascist party, Ferenc Szalasi, supported by the German army, which had already invaded Hungary in March 1944, took over the power.

## **16 Informburo Resolution**

Soviet call in 1948 to overthrow Tito in Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav secret police supervised ideological opposition in the country, and many of those who declared themselves in favor of the

Informburo Resolution were imprisoned in the political prison on the island of Dugi Otok.

### **17 Milosevic, Slobodan (1941- )**

Yugoslav politician, president of Serbia (1989-97) and of Yugoslavia (1997-2000). After the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, he tried to create Greater Serbia by incorporating areas populated by Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. He supported Serbian armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia after the two republics proclaimed independence, and he was widely blamed for the brutal Serbian military aggression and ethnic cleansing in these countries. The three countries signed a peace treaty (Dayton Peace Accord) in 1995. Milosevic became President of Yugoslavia in 1997. During his rule Serbian forces deported hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians, which led to NATO air strikes in Yugoslavia in 1999. In 2001 Milosevic was arrested on charges of abuse of power and corruption and turned over to the UN War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.