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Growing up

I was born in 1923. I spent my entire childhood with my older sister in *Makarska,* and it was the nicest childhood that one could have. We were always on the street; we only went home to sleep and eat. I was the only Jewish boy and my sister, the only Jewish girl. (There were also Ela and Ester, but they were very young. They now live in Israel.) When we played with the other children, there was no difference between us.

Until elementary school, my childhood was very pleasant. I went to kindergarten, but enrolled late. This caused me to experience my first fear of school and that fear lasted my entire life, whenever I had to learn something. I had a good teacher. Classes were divided between rich and poor children, working-class children. As a Jew, I was in the working-class classroom. We all got along well in this classroom, much better than among the rich children who were always jealous of one another. In the fourth grade, Vito Marinovic, a French teacher, came to Makarska. He was an *Ustashe* and humiliated me. I resisted, but he prevented me from passing the class and I failed the grade. At the school meeting the next year, the teachers' board decided to throw me out of school. Some other girls and boys were punished along with me. I immediately turned to the secretary of the Communist Party in Makarska, who found a way to get me into another school, and I was able to finish elementary school. We fit in to life in Makarska and got along with all the youth there. We lived in the Marineta neighborhood**,** and all of the kids from that part of town socialized together. There were no differences between us. We each had a nickname. I was Jozi, from Joseph. One Hungarian woman called me that and some one else heard it, and the nickname stuck. Every month we played a new game until the swimming season began. We did not have toys like today. We would aim at a flat stone until we hit it and it fell over. We played “klic pic” – we hit smaller sticks with a bigger one, and the one that went furthest won. We played hide and seek. We all played together and there were never any fights between us. We were divided only by the different areas of the city. We also played war between different parts of town, and would throw stones at each other in jest. We played football with a ball made from socks. All of this was until it was swimming season. Since the beach was for foreigners, we swam on the side. We had a rowing club where I went for years. We had a four-man boat and one helmsman. When we were a little older we enrolled in the “Sokol” athletic club, where we learned volleyball and practiced on different apparatuses. We also learned how to present ourselves in public. Life was very dynamic. We all

gathered on the seafront. When we were older we started to get involved in politics and before the war we joined the anti-fascist youth group. In Makarska, 90 percent of the citizens were anti-fascists.

My father and mother met each other in *Sarajevo*. Jewish women in Sarajevo went to dances. My paternal grandmother had instructed my father that, when he went to the dances and shakes hands with a girl, he should touch the palm of her hand. If her hand is smooth, she is lazy. If he feels calluses, if it is rough, a worn hand, then she is a hard-working woman. That is how the love between my parents began.

My father was a recruit in the Austrian army. My mother remained in Sarajevo. World War I was a difficult time. My father, who did some smuggling, helped my mother's whole family, because my grandfather Sabetaj had already died. In 1919, at the end of the war, my parents married. They immediately moved to Dalmatia. The decision to move to Makarska saved us. We survived the war untouched. In Makarska, we were entirely equal with the others, even in 1941. I was in prison – but as a communist youth, not as a Jew.

My maternal grandfather died in 1912, before I was born. My grandmother Bojna lived a very difficult life in Sarajevo and her sons had to support her. She always had things to do. She was very thin and quiet. My clearest memory of her is that when she finished her work, she would knit socks. The next day she would undo the socks and make new ones, day after day. When we visited Sarajevo, she would make *dilece*, a famous Sephardic dish. She knew Hebrew letters and would use them to write everyone's name or make a *Magen David*. She always wore a *tukada*. She spoke Ladino and Serbo-Croatian with the children.

I was one of nine grandchildren. One sister was married to a tailor named Sabataj Moric. My aunt Klara lived in *Belgrade* with her sons Sabataj and Moric. Aunt Sara lived in *Tuzla* with her two children; they were killed before the war. The eldest son had three children: Djusta, Sabetaj and Braco. Djusta and Sabataj were saved.

We went to Sarajevo once a year during the school vacation. We stayed with grandmother Bojna. It was a house across the street from Hotel Europe. It had huge rooms with rounded windows; once it was probably a warehouse. When you entered there was a hallway, and between the apartments there was a wooden terrace. It had a big kitchen and pantry. In one corner there was a water pot where we got our drinking water. Above the bed there were pictures and details about when we were all born. The beds and closets in the bedrooms were carved. Everyone would gather around the big table. Above the table there was a luster with the lamps that we lit for *Shabbat*. Once I was there for *Tu B'Shvat*, we sat around the table, passing around shoeboxes with fruit. I visited to Sarajevo with my mother and sister; my father would stay at home and work.

I was extremely close to my sister. When we came to Belgrade in 1948, they found a shadow on my lungs. At that time, I was with my sister and her daughter Blanka. Even though it was dangerous because of the illness, my sister said she could have another child, but she couldn't have another brother. When she died, I went crazy from sadness. The relationships in our home were such that we were very close. That is how it was in general in Makarska. My sister always took care of me, she gave me pocket money, and I followed her when she did not have a boyfriend. We shared everything. She, in contrast to me, seized life, as if she knew she would die early.

My father was a merchant and my mother a housewife. We owned the shop that was registered in my mother's name because my father did a little of everything. He finished one year of Jewish school and then spent nine years in the Austrian army. He spoke German, Hungarian and Ladino and learned them all while he was in the army. The textiles sold in the shop were mainly supplied from Sarajevo, and my father also sold seasonal goods, souvenirs. Since the shop was not big enough, we opened a larger store in which they sold many souvenirs, especially in the summertime. They did not sell any kinds of ritual items in the store, only those things that were used by the people of Makarska and those from the surrounding villages. There were a lot of confections, pants, jackets and coats. My father brought the merchandise in trunks from Sarajevo.

The store functioned until 1941, when we emptied all but a section of it. At the beginning of 1942, we received orders to hand over the store keys to the municipality, which would take over the store, since the confiscation of Jewish property had begun. The day before I had to turn over the keys, I opened the store and permitted the young people to take whatever they needed, to empty the store, leaving only one piece of each item. Afterward, the municipal authorities took the keys and sealed off the store.

We changed apartments in Makarska three times: the first time to Marineta, the next time to an apartment on the seafront with big rooms, and finally to a three-room apartment with an attic on the main street. The furniture was modern. In a separate space, there was a workroom.

Mother had a prayerbook in the house. My father prayed when he woke up. At home, my mother made the traditional foods for the holidays, which she learned to make growing up in Sarajevo. She made *ruskitas*, *fritulikas* and other pies. My father and mother observed the holidays, but they did not raise us in that manner. For *Yom Kippur* and the fast, my father would take me to the synagogue in Split. We would be there until 10 or 11, and then go to the seafront and look at the boats. We read the *Haggadah* on *Pesach* and we made sure that there was no bread in our house. Nonetheless, the most important thing for me was to play outside with my friends.

In Makarska, I went with the other children to the Catholic church. When my *nona* from Sarajevo heard this, she came to Makarska to admonish me. Then I acknowledged that this was not for me. Once, I got a stomachache from eggs that I got from the friar.

Among the Jewish families in Makarska, there was one family that lived next to us, and we occasionally socialized with them. This was the Albahari family, and they also had a shop. Mr. Albahari died from a heart attack in Vienna in 1931 or 1932. When his wife returned from Vienna, everyone came to our house the first day to mark the death. I remember this because I was playing downstairs in front of the house when my sister threw hot water out the window on me while she was making coffee for the guests. I still have a scar from that. Albahari had two small daughters, Sida and Ela, and I think his wife's name was Mazalta. Mazalta's sister lived with them so she would not be alone. In 1941, they went to Split. After the war they went to Israel, and Mazalta's sister went to America.

In Makarska there was a Levi family, a husband, wife and two children. The daughter married in Split and the son was Moric Levi, who at one time was the secretary of the Jewish community of Belgrade. They never socialized with anyone. No one ever came to their house; they lived absolutely isolated. They never came to the cafes; they had no friends; they called one another

“Mother” and “Father,” which was always very funny to us. They fled to Split to be with their daughter during the Italian capitulation. They were all killed in the Sajmiste death camp.

In Makarska there was also the Bilbaum family. They were a husband and wife who had no children. They educated the wife’s nephew, Mara Klemina, who worked with them. When they died, after the war, there was a question about where to bury them. Since my father had already died, Mara Klemina asked my mother if their names could be on our family monument.

There was another Papo family in Makarska with an adopted daughter, Klara. Mr. Papo was the director of finance in the Makarska district. They left before the war, but I do not know where they went. She married a doctor, Levi, and lived in Belgrade. The two of them are both buried in the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade. This Dr. Levi helped me after the war in the hospital during my treatment for pneumonia. In Makarska, there was also a Jakov Fiser, who made doughnuts. He was killed at Banija.

After finishing elementary school, I went to Sarajevo to a technical secondary school. During this time, a law was passed that Jews could not go to school, so I had to leave in the middle of the year. However, through the Party, which was quite strong, I went back to Makarska, and the Party found a way for me to continue in a technical school in Split, which I finished. While I was still in school, I became a member of the Federation of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia, and later in life this would help me greatly. The Party took care of me.

My father socialized with workers and people who worked on the waterfront. When the war began, they helped him a lot.

During the war

In 1941, all people who were considered suspicious were captured. I was among the 40 communists. The Ustashe were in power and, because I was a Jew, they contemplated liquidating me. The Italians, however, did not allow it. They released me from prison last. In the summer of 1941, I was in prison and I remember that it was Ante Pavlevic’s birthday. The *Red Berets* came from Zagreb. That night they captured all the leftists, and I was among them. We were first taken to the Sokol dormitory**.** When they brought me to the room where the Ustashe were, there was a beaten-up man from the camp whom I knew. Since they had just ripped me from my bed, I was sleepy and confused when the Ustashe asked me what I was. I said I was a Croat. The prisoner heard that, but he did not say anything. Had he, I am sure they would have beaten me until I could no longer stand. Filip Torkar, the most prominent communist, and I were in prison the longest. They started to intervene on behalf of my release. My mother went to the head of the town, who said there was no one to get me out of prison. While there she met our friend Milan Kovic’s father, Kreme, a high-ranking official, who offered to get me out of prison. They let me out of prison, and a few days later I fled to Split. I was lucky that the Ustashe had not yet become well organized and that when permission was requested for someone to go to Split that person received it.

I was in a dangerous situation again, this time in Makarska in 1942. I was on a bench when I was approached by an anti-fascist with whom I had worked illegally. I sensed he was acting strangely. I left him and went toward the beach, and he followed me. I sat for a while on the beach, and then I changed clothes and went swimming. When I turned around, I saw him with two carabineers on the

spot where I had been. I swam underwater as far as I could, and made it to the other side of the shore where they could not see me. I asked a friend to get my things and take them home, if there were no carabineers. I swam a little further and got out, and went to get my things from my friend. I immediately went to the village of *Batinic*, above Makarska, a little below *Biokovo*. When I arrived, I explained what had happened and said I could not return until the situation improved. I told a partisan that I thought the young man was an Ustashe agent. The partisan said they had been looking for this person. In the middle of the night, the partisan went to Makarska, where he found the agent in a café, but he could not get to him.

The partisans in Batinic had made bunkers that were covered with boards and beams. You could lay in them, but not stand up straight. There were two holes so air could circulate. I spent two nights there. On the third night, they said the Ustashe agent left Makarska. I then returned to Makarska. The agent knew I was in an anti-fascist organization.

The Party had a man who was an officer in the gendarmerie. He was a Serb and his wife was a Croat. Through a third person, he informed us when there would be a raid so we always knew. Once I hid in the deck of a boat from *Hvar* for seven days.

There were other similar incidents. After the first time I was captured, I was frequently on the run and hiding, and I was always prepared for that. I had a lot of luck. One time I took some confidential material and the gendarmerie followed me. As if I had a sixth sense, I did not leave from the house where I delivered the materials. Instead I jumped the fence in one, then another, garden and from there I escaped. The neighbor told me that two gendarmes waited for a half-hour for me to leave.

Through a connection, I escaped to Split, which was under Italian control. My parents also came there. We stayed there until mid-1942 before returning to Makarska, where things were peaceful. Our house was being used as the headquarters of an illegal movement. My sister was connected to the Party already back in 1936. I was the leading organizer of the secondary school youth, and my sister was on the anti-fascist women's board. Suddenly they began transferring Jews from Split to Makarska and *Baska Voda*. There were many Jews there – a great many from Bosnia and Serbia. In December 1942, the Italians were supposed to hand over control to the Ustashe. All the Jews from Makarska were gathered and interned on the island of *Brac*. There were Jews there from Belgrade; I remember the Vari and Albahari families.

The Ustashe knew which boat we were taking, a big boat called "Jordan." During the night, they broke the motor. We all boarded, and control was gradually passed from the Italians to the Ustashe. Major Fenga from *Bari* came on another boat, which towed us to Baska Voda. There were about 80 of us. The man who maintained the Ustashe warehouse called my father before we boarded and gave him beans, flour and polenta, knowing that we might be without food for a long time. I later found this same man in a partisan camp and helped liberate him. Nonetheless, I never *wore a "Z."*

We arrived at Baska Voda, then *Sumartin* on Brac. All the Jews were kept in a hotel that was under construction. From here I was able to make contact with the Party. They arranged for metal beds to be sent from the village for us. The Italians gave us food. There was a bakery in the village in which we were permitted to bake bread. The Italians gave us flour. None of us were tormented. I became

a member of the Committee in the village. The Jews who were imprisoned around Brac and *Knin* were transported to Sumartin. There were about 130 of us.

In May of 1942, big boats arrived and transported us to Split, where a big ship with Jews from *Dubrovnik* and the surrounding area were waiting for us. We were transported to *Rab*. My family – my mother, sister and father – were with me the whole time, until the departure for Rab, when we split up. My mother and father went to one village, and my sister to another. I was in *Lika,* in two villages, Ponori and Goric. I remember there were about 30 Jews there. We lived normally for as long as it was liberated territory. At the end of 1942, the German offensive began, and we received orders to move out of there. I visited some Jewish families, but none of them wanted to go. A month and a half later, we were still there. The Germans let them move around freely so that they would feel at ease and the Germans could see where they had buried their precious possessions. After this, they all finished in Jasenovac.

While I was still studying in Split, the Communist Party bought me Italian identity papers. The false papers enabled me to move around freely. On Rab, there was a real concentration camp, with wires, towers and barracks. There were two camps, Brac and Dubrovnik, which were separated by wires. Dubrovnik had brick barracks and we had wooden ones. When we arrived, they gave us jackets with black boxes, so it was known we were Jews. On the other side of the island, there was a camp with Slovenians. In the camp they did not mistreat us; we even organized ourselves and had our own police. There were three groups of us, one went out during the days on reconnaissance, and the other two groups at night. Every hour we went to the fence of the Dubrovnik camp and lit a match as a sign of peace.

With me in my group was Mimo Atijas. Our friendship lasted 50 years. I was the best man at his wedding. Once we stole a typewriter from the clinic and when there was a shift change among the carabineers, we moved it from one barrack to another. Ernest-Simko Spicer, a writer from whom we sought advice on everything, and his wife were with us, too. The Italians even took us swimming, and in the Dubrovnik camp there was a school where one could hear lectures. This lasted until September, the time of the Italian capitulation, when we along with the Slovenians took control of the camp. We were in the camp another 10 days. We were well organized. I was in charge of the hospital. We started to leave – some went to the partisans, some remained on Rab and were captured by the Germans. I was very weak and unable to walk. I found the secretary of the Federation of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia and remained in the Committee until the end of 1943, when a decision was made that I go to *Istra*.

It is necessary to have a lot of luck; those that remained alive are those that had it. What my father told me is true: One must always be ready to get up and move on. Only those who had a sense of fleeing survived the war. Our father, who spent 8 years in the Austrian army, instilled this feeling in us. He did not even see Germans during the war. Nonetheless, my father was befriended by a German major who came to Makarska when Yugoslavia capitulated, but since we had already moved to Split, the German looked for him and found him in Split. The German asked him what he could do for him, and my father requested that the German bring my uncle Jakov and his family from Sarajevo. But Jakov did not want to leave his apartment; he believed nothing bad would happen. He was killed in Jasenovac with his family. Almost all of our family from Sarajevo was killed. When my father decided to go from Sarajevo to Dalmatia, we did not know it would save us.

In Makarska, no one tormented us until 1942. We survived the camp because we were young. Everywhere we found people from the Communist Party who provided us with help.

In Makarska there was no anti-Semitism. Everything we left in our apartment was returned to us when we came back in 1945. We lived in an old rented house with four rooms and an attic where we did our cooking. My father retired and died in Makarska. Anti-Semitism occurs because Jews separate themselves from the nations with whom they live. In my opinion, there would not be anti-Semitism if they got along with everyone. We create anti-Semitism with our actions. My theory is that one must live with all people. I have friends who are Slovenians, Croats and Serbs. Until now I have never experienced any anti-Semitism or other unpleasantries. When I married Ljiljana, no one in my family complained that she was not a Jew.

After the war

After the war, I worked for the Croatian government in Zagreb. From there, I moved to the Youth Committee. After two and half years in Zagreb, at the beginning of 1948, I was sent to work in the federal internal police in Belgrade.

I came to Belgrade with my sister and her husband. We shared an apartment with Ljiljana, my wife's mother and father. It was their apartment. We had two rooms, and they had three. At that time, little Blanka was born. In 1949 I married, in 1951 our son Bojan was born, and in 1954 our daughter Vedrana was born. At that time, I enrolled in the law school. I passhatteed Latin and the other tests that I did not have in the secondary school and I began to study law. I graduated three and a half years later. I continued to work in the state police. However, at this time, the Rankovic affair surfaced, and I could easily lose my job. I decided to take the state test, to work in the state service, and I began working in the court, first registering cases and mail, and I listened to cases. I spent nine months at the court. In 1968, I passed the bar exam. I began working as a lawyer and after a few months I started to work for the "Dunav" insurance company. I left this company when I understood that the work was not entirely honest. You know, before the war we were all raised in the spirit of honesty. I began to work as a lawyer again, which I still do today.

I do not mix in the life of my children. I speak only when they ask for my opinion. I have good relations with my entire family. A long time ago, my father told me that the school of life is very expensive and a fly cannot enter a closed mouth.

After the war I became a member of the Zagreb Jewish community. However, the community was very tight-knit and I was opposed to this. Therefore, I did not participate very much. In Belgrade, I was in conflict with the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, which did not fulfill its promises and did not help my sister, who died in the hospital. At the same time, the women's section organized the departure of children for Israel. My sister's daughter went to Kibbutz Gat on one of those trips. For that reason I did not belong to the community for a long time. I was insulted. However, I returned to the community because of my grandchildren. I feel coldness toward the community. It is a very cold place. But at the same time, I feel that I am a Jew and that I am a part of those people killed during the Holocaust. My son, Bojan, is not connected to the community, but has a lot of Jewish friends. My daughter Vedrana is active. Ljiljana and I have three granddaughters, a grandson and one great-granddaughter. They are involved in the community.

The only thing I want to be involved in is organizing the commemoration at the cemetery of the Djakovo camp. This is a women’s camp in which 566 women and children were killed and the one grave, among all the camps in Europe, where it is known who are among the dead. The names are there.