

Avramovic, Avram
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Abstract

Avram Avramovic was born in Beograd, Yugoslavia in 1909. He discusses his early family life, the beginnings of war in April 1941, and his mobilization into the army. He went to Užice, Yugoslavia, returned to Beograd, worked as a forced laborer removing bombed out buildings, and boarded a ship to go to Split Croatia. He lived in Split under the Serbian name Alexandric, joined the local partisans, and was integrated into a partisan unit, the Third Battalion Biokovske(?) Brigade. They traveled to Hvar island and to the island of Vis, and were then given instructions to go to the island of Brač. Avram was sent to Bilac(?), Croatia, and then to Beograd where he demobilized himself. He worked at reunification offices in various locations, and was then remobilized as an officer in Pirot. He married, traveled to Israel, Italy, and Argentina, and visited Yugoslavia many times.

I

- 1.02 Avram Avramovic was born in Beograd (Belgrade) in 1909. His father was Moshe and mother Rochelle [nee Alkagljaj]. His father was drafted in 1914 during World War I. They lived with economic problems. They stayed in Beograd for a while, then they went to Meštrovića. When the war broke out they ordered that all men register, and Avram's father complied immediately.
- 1.04 Avram was five years old at the time. He remembers one day his father came to visit the family but within an hour or so he was notified to report to the command unit of the Serbian army. Avram remembers it as if it were today. He accompanied his father to the train station. The family never saw him again. They believe he died during the forced retreat marches in Albania.
- 1.05 His father was a Great Serbophile. That is probably the reason that he added a Serbian name (Aserovic) to his regular name. Avram may have inherited his father's love for Serbia. When World War II broke out in Yugoslavia, Avram wanted to join the army, but his mother, as a war widow, was able to keep him out.
- 1.07 Avram completed four years of gymnasium, then went to commercial school. He did not participate in Jewish community activities. His first love was sports - he played football. Before the war he worked for a long time with his uncle in a sports factory.
- 1.08 Alkalaj was a well-known Jewish family in all Yugoslavia. Coming from poor origins, all of the many sons received advanced education and later held high positions, such as Chief Rabbi of Yugoslavia, or jobs at the Yugoslavia Bank. Avram was a secretary at this bank, where he eventually became a manager.
- 1.15 When the war came to Yugoslavia (in April 1941), Avram had just been mobilized into the army. There was plenty of confusion. He was able to help some people hide or escape, including his cousin Alkalaj, the chief rabbi of Yugoslavia. Several days later Avram reported to the army command. Although he was an infantry soldier they put him with the

artillery. By then it didn't matter... the German Stukas airplanes were bombing, and the Yugoslav military was collapsing. Avram came to Užice and with a little money he bought some civilian clothes from a peasant. As a civilian, he was able to return to Beograd. In Beograd the German command had already issued orders for all Jews to register. Avram complied and was immediately taken to work as a forced laborer to remove bombed-out buildings. He registered with the Jewish police who assigned the work. There was a German guy who before the war would come to sell things and who claimed that Avram was not Jewish... he was different. The German advised Avram to carry a sign: "Arbeiter dans Dushe Soldaten" (workers are German soldiers). Life was not too bad until the big explosion of a German ammunitions depot. After that the Jewish workers were lined up for the selection by profession, every tenth person, for 'elimination'. In one of these Avram was number 12, but even if he was number 10, Egon, the German officer in charge, would intervene so he could keep them as his laborers. Later they learned that Egon was an Austrian who had studied at the Beograd University before the war. He was mentioned in other interviews as 'agent provocateur'. The other laborers were sent away and later executed by firing squads near Jauce(?).

- 1.25 Avram continued working like that until October. The German commissar, Josef Puff, who took over Avram's uncle's store, had two daughters who worked in the store. One day one of the daughters overheard the German Gestapo saying that they would come that night and take Avram. She ran to Avram's mother and told her what she had heard. Avram went to sleep at the house of his sister, who was married to a non-Jew. Avram had earlier obtained a passport and his brother-in-law took him to the train. Here Avram tells how various Jews had been trying to get him to join the Chetniks (Serbian nationalist paramilitary organization), but he didn't trust the Chetniks. He was later proven correct when the Chetniks betrayed the partisans near Užice. Avram, who had no interest in politics, was trying unsuccessfully to join the partisans. On the train, a fellow asked Avram to join the partisans by jumping off at a point where the partisans would meet them. Avram declined because he wanted to go to Beograd to see his mother and sisters one more time. Later Avram learned that those who had jumped from the train were betrayed by the Chetniks and were caught by the Germans and executed.
- 2.00 Back to the story of his brother-in-law at the train. The partisans set dynamite under the tracks and the train blew up. There were 72 dead. Avram was on the third train, which went to one side while the rest were blown up. He had several broken ribs and he was suffering. The Chetniks came and together with the Germans they collected the wounded and took them to the hospital. There were too many Chetniks and Germans around, and Avram wanted to get out of there. A young girl arranged for him to be released from the hospital and taken to the train station. Since he was all bandaged up, the Chetniks and the Germans took pity on him ('he was a victim of the murderous partisans'), and gave him some food and helped him board the train for Skopje. In Skopje the Bulgarian police came and asked who was Jewish and who was Serbian. Avram stated that he was Serbian. The Serbians were put under stricter guard than the Jews, to be returned to Beograd. Avram spoke to a gypsy in the group and asked him to take a note to his relative in Skopje. His cousin came with the car and after bribing the guard, was able to get Avram into the car.
- 2.08 On the next day, November 30, the Bulgarians issued an order for all newly arriving Jews to register. Avram decided not to register. The 52 others who registered were returned to Beograd where they were immediately shot. Avram stayed there for a while, but then decided

to go to Kosovo. At the border they were stopped by a joint guard of two Bulgarians and two Germans. Avram was traveling with an Italian fascist passport. With him was a friend by the name of Karic. The German guard asked if they were Jewish. Karic produced a bar of soap, which the German guard immediately pocketed. Karic started yelling in German at the guard, calling him a thief and saying that he would report him. They were taken to the Bulgarian guard house where they bribed the guards with 500 leva each to let them cross into Italian-held territory. It started snowing. At first the Italians wouldn't let them come through, because it was past the 5:00 pm curfew. They had to convince the Italians that they were 'buena gente', good people, and finally the Italians let them pass through and provided an escort for part of the way. Avram and Karic walked on through various towns, Uroshinac(?) and Prizren, until they arrived in Shkodër in Albania.

- 2.18 An Italian officer recognized Avram from the officer's prior diplomatic service in Beograd and told Avram to get on the highway and hitch a ride with Italian military trucks to the port and leave the area, for his own good. Avram followed the Italian commander's advice and after various delays succeeded in boarding a ship for Split, in Dalmatia.
- 2.20 Avram remained in Split with a new name, Alexandric, a Serbian name under which his friend Karic had him registered with the Italian authorities. One day a German ship with German workers arrived in Split. Karic knew that his family had been taken by the Germans. The Bulgarians had betrayed all non-Bulgarian Jews who had come there to seek shelter and handed them to the Germans. One day, while Karic and Avram were sitting in an outdoor cafe, one of these German workers was passing by. Karic, knowing that the German had killed his family, jumped up, grabbed the German by the throat, and proceeded to curse him. This was pretty stupid, since the area was full of fascists. All of the Jews in the area ran away in fear about the possible consequences. Karic was able to escape through the narrow streets of old Split, and through his acquaintance with Proto Urukalo(?), a Serb-Orthodox priest of Split, he was able to board the ship and go to Italy, telling Avram that he would sign him up for University of Teruzia(?), which he did.
- 2.25 Avram describes the problem he experienced with the Jewish community. A professor Calderon, at the communist office, refused to give him the stipend that all of the Jewish immigrants in Split were receiving. Avram responded by threatening to shoot a fascist, and all of the Jews in the area would suffer the consequences. Avram tells about a nighttime visit by the Italian police to question him about his application for travel to Italy. He explained that notwithstanding the war and expenses, he wanted to go to study Italian. They seemed to be satisfied.
- 2.26 Two days later Italy capitulated (September 1943). Avram listened to 'Radio London,' which told the Yugoslavs to disarm the Italian army. He stopped the first Italian officer who happily handed him his revolver.
- 2.27 The Jewish immigrants started moving out of Split towards Mosor Mountain, intending to join the partisans. Avram started out but then turned back and joined the local partisans. He was assigned to a unit to defend Split. When the Germans or Ustashi started sending mortar fire, all of the partisans in Avram's unit disappeared. They were just young kids, fifteen and sixteen year old boys and girls. Avram continued his march towards Mosor or Bikovo(?) where he finally was integrated into a real partisan unit – the Third Battalion Biokovske(?) Brigade. He was then sent to the 26th Division where there was heavy fighting. Avram was

suspected because of his new Serbian name. Eventually he went to Hvar Island and from there to Vis Island, an island closer to Italy that the partisans had fortified (to be used by the British to deliver supplies to the partisans and possibly for the invasion). Avram stayed on Vis for a while. At one point of the war the Germans had surrounded a town in Bari(?), which was the site of the partisan's supreme commander. Some high-level people were endangered, such as Tito, Ribnik, and the visiting allied representatives including Randolph Churchill, the son of the British Prime Minister. The British sent an airplane, which brought all of the people to Vis. This caused the Germans to threaten Vis.

- 2.34 On June 1, 1944, Avram was instructed to go to Brač, another island. This was a few days before the allied invasion of Normandy. (Perhaps this was to confuse the Germans about the invasion site.) As soon as Avram and others disembarked, the German big guns from Split opened up. Avram and the rest hugged the ground for two hours. Two German Messerschmitts came and started hitting them. Then, out of nowhere, appeared two British Spitfires. Avram watched as the aerial battle ensued, and within a few minutes the two Messerschmitts went down. But the German fire continued. A partisan close to Avram said to keep their heads down. Avram, in fear, even put his backpack over his head.
- 3.02 Soon a mortar round exploded near Avram. He felt a hit to his head; a piece of shrapnel had hit his backpack and was lodged in a can of food, thus saving his life. Within six days Avram's unit was ordered back to Vis. From Vis, they were ordered to liberate Split.
- 3.05 After the liberation of Split, Avram's unit went to Hvar. His unit was later sent to Biliac(?) where a big battle was raging. Avram remained on Hvar for rest and recuperation. At this point the war was almost over. Avram was sent to Beograd where he 'demobilized' himself. He then worked at the reunification offices at several locations. He was asked to come back to the military as an officer for special training. After a while he was remobilized as an officer. This was in Pirot, where he stayed for two months. At this point he signed up to go to Israel, notwithstanding his commander's plea to remain. When he went to pick up his last pay, they insisted on giving him much more than he expected. Avram took a train and boarded a ship to Ketersh(?) in Bakar and landed in Haifa. He was pulled out of the group and put into the Jewish military. After a short while, there was the agreement with the British (in 1948). Avram remained in the Israeli army for about a year. Then he request to be demobilized – he was 39 year old at that time. He boarded a ship for Italy, then went to Argentina where he had relatives. Then he went to Uruguay for a year and back to Argentina, where he worked for his relatives. He married a Yugoslav girl he had dated occasionally in Beograd.
- 3.18 Avram's entire family perished - his mother, four sisters, and all of his uncles. He was asked about many individuals with whom the interviewer was familiar. Avram tells him that he knew very little. Avram describes the problems involved in his change of name - Avramovic at first and Aleksantic later in Yugoslavia, then back to Avramovic in Israel, Aleksantic in Argentina, etc. Some partisans knew about his names, so he was suspected and almost lost his life. In Argentina, the Peron government did not allow Jews in the country, so the name Avramovich was not helpful. Avram now lives in this metropolis(?) and he travels in Jewish circles, so the name is of no consequence. He has no children, he has visited Yugoslavia very often (in 1970, 1974, 1977, 1982, 1992, and 1995), and his wife has many relatives in Beograd, Ljubljana, Gratz(?) and several other cities nearby.