

Olivera Djurdic's testimony given in Belgrade in 1997

We will hear a testimony of Olivera Djurdjic, whose origins are in the famous Jewish partisan family. Her mother and sister died in the partisans during the World War II. She joined the partisans herself when she was very young.

This interview was conducted for the USHMM and its Jeff and Toby Herr collection.

Now, we will let Olivera introduce herself and her family.

My name is Olivera Djurdjic, maiden name, Gutman, and I was born in 1927 in Uzice. Uzice was a small town in western Serbia with a population of 8,000 people. Today, it is a city of some 60,000 people. My father came to Yugoslavia in 1916. He was a doctor who graduated in Vienna. He came from a poor family that lived in Galicia. My mother was from a very rich

family and graduated from medical school in Vienna. My father came to Yugoslavia with the Austro-Hungarian Army to Zlatibor.

Q: Where is Zlatibor?

A: Zlatibor is 35 kilometers from Uzice. That was a famous place for its natural medicaments, well-known in medicine, especially known for the curing of the thyroid. My father was a military doctor. He was a decent, calm man, who left a very nice impression on the local population. In 1918 at the time of the withdrawal of the Austro-Hungarian military, he was asked to stay by the local people. They even wrote a request and signed a petition in order to keep him there. It was a very small and primitive region where a doctor was very needed. My father went back to Vienna and married my mother. She was his sweetheart since high school. From Vienna, the two of them packed themselves up and came to Zajetina village in 1921 and stayed there until 1923. My mother specialized internal medicine, while father was a physician.

Q: It must be that people loved him a lot?

A: He loved those people as well. Even before he was taken to prison he refused to leave Yugoslavia and that region. He received a rank of a

Yugoslav officer, and on the basis of many signatures that he received from the locals, he was able to obtain a citizenship.

Q: Were these locals aware that he was a Jew?

A: He never had any problem. They all knew that he was a Jew, as well as my mother and the two of us children. But he was loved by this people, and he was loved as a doctor who helped them a lot. Imagine, he moved from Vienna to a small village at Zlatibor, and established his family there. In 1923, he moved from this village to Uzice, where he was given a position of the workers' physician.

Q: That was a medical protection of the workers?

A: Correct. That was Belgrade's hospital with its clinic in Uzice. He got a job to work as a local doctor. My mother had a job in the local emergency room. Sister Vita was born in February of 1923, while I was born in 1927.

Q: Were there any other Jewish families in Uzice?

A: We were the only Jewish family who permanently lived in Uzice. The rest of them just passed by or lived there for a short period of time. There

was Rachel Hajon, a professor of French from Bijeljina, and she died in Belgrade.

Q: She survived the war?

A: Yes, she did. Another Jew who lived there was Martin Spricer who married a local Serbian woman from Uzice. They both died, but he died just recently. The only Jewish family that I remember to stay little longer in Uzice was the Fenja family. They moved to Pozarevac on the eve of war. They were veterinarians. They survived by hiding in the woods of Serbia. Fenja was a Hungarian Jew who was a well-known veterinarian, who was saved by the people who loved him, too. You were not able to have any kind of Jewish community in Uzice. It was very hard to organize ourselves because there were very few of us. My father was an atheist, while my mother was not. I can recall that my father allowed my sister and I to take Orthodox Christian religion classes in school. Along with the children of Uzice, I was going to church and sang in the church choir. Once they asked what was my nationality, I said that I was a Uzice woman. I really did not know my origins until the beginning of the war. I did not experience any antisemitism in Uzice. The first time was in the beginning of the war when my family was attacked by the Ljotic's groups. These groups were pro-

German-oriented. But as soon as we were attacked by them, the entire city came out to protect us. They especially protected my father.

Q: These people were writing against your father?

A: Yes, but the entire city was on his side. A professor who wrote an article against him was forced to leave Uzice and to pay to my father a reimbursement for the insults. My father gave that money to one poor woman from Uzice.

Q: What was the atmosphere like in Uzice during the rise of Nazism?

A: I can not say too much about that period of time, because I was too young. But I remember the existence of the Communist Party, the Liberation Front, the Youth Communist Party, etc. I remembered that my father said that it would not be possible to live without communists. My house was the center that brought most of the intellectuals together. My mother was one of them.

Q: What did happen when the Germans attacked Yugoslavia?

A: My father was mobilized to the army right in the beginning. He even received from his uncle who lived in New York an affidavit to move to the

United States of America along with his family. But my father refused to do so. He went to the partisans and organized the first-aid brigade that was the essential logistic to the partisans. He came one day back to Uzice with his unit and wanted us to go to Italy. He thought that the Italian occupying zone would be less dangerous for us than the German ones.

The same night, the Germans entered Uzice and three of us were captured. My father was captured by the Germans in Rogatica near Sarajevo, but soon after he was liberated since he was a doctor. He returned back to Uzice where he was in the beginning selected to the doctors' team to work for the Germans. But right there, one of the locals who was a member of the Ljotic's organization disclosed him as being a Jew because my father claimed that he was a Serb in order to survive. The Germans prohibited him to work and to see clients. He had to report three times a day to the local German command.

Q: That man referred to your father with the insult calling him Chifut.

A: He referred to him with the insulting name Chifut. My father was called to come to the forest and join the partisans. But he refused because my mother, sister and I would be killed right away. So, he stayed. Later he was deported to the Slovenian prison where he was treated as a Yugoslav

officer, and not like a Jew. That helped him much more in his war years. He was an educated doctor, and the Germans treated him little different, because they could have some help from him.

Q: What happened to you? Did you need to wear a yellow band?

A: We all had to report. My mother and sister wore yellow bands, while I was only 13 years old, so I did not. But the people of Uzice were so protective and tried to assist to us as much as they can.

My mother was an interpreter in the beginning, but after a while she stopped doing that. The things seemed to be bearable until the attack the Germans undertook against Russia. From that moment they started arresting all of the people they suspected were communists. Among the first, my sister was arrested. Some of the locals disclosed her, and the Germans came and took her away. In the beginning, she was in the German prison, but after 20 days under the influence of the local authorities, she was released on the premises that she was not a communist. She was transferred from the German prison to the Serbian prison. The Germans took our house for their own needs, and we were deported to Zlatbor in the concentration prison. The father of my friend Dragi Djokovic, came one day and offered my mother and I to stay with him and his family. So from June 21, until September 24 of 1941, we

stayed in his house. Afterwards, the partisans regained the power in Uzice and we returned back home.

Q: How did Germans allow you to go to his house?

A: The Germans let us go because the entire town of Uzice was a guarantor for us. There are so many nice words I could say about people from Uzice, as well as their protection of us right before the war.

Q: Tell me the atmosphere when the partisans liberated Uzice?

A: Uzice was an extremely communist town, where the organizations were well-organized and -managed. Zlatibor organized several partisans' battalions that participated in its liberation. I was even involved in some medical assistance. Both Djokovic's daughter and I were involved. But my sister had a high-ranking position within the Communist Youth organization. She was a secretary in the Communist Party. On September 23, the Germans handed the governance of the city to the Chetniks, who were their collaborators. I do have documented facts for that.

Q: Could you please explain the Chetniks movement?

A: The Chetniks were the nationalist royalist movement that verbally was against the Germans, but in the field they heavily collaborated with them. They wanted the king to return, and they fought their war against the communists.

Q: Why didn't the Germans stay in Uzice?

A: Well, having in mind a numerous number of the partisans' units all around Uzice, they could not survive there. The entire region was well-organized into the partisans' units throughout Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Pozega, Arilje, Ivanjica, etc., so they had to leave. I can not guarantee this since I was only 14 but these are my thoughts.

Q: The Liberation Front against the Germans started in June of 1941?

A: Correct. In Serbia on July 7, the Liberation Front officially emerged. Ever since its beginning, they had progressive ideas of not questioning your nationality, only your willingness to fight Nazis. They did not care which nationality you were, only that you fight the Germans. They did so many good things in the beginning and were the only force that protected common people.

Q: Did the partisans and Chetniks collaborate?

A: In Uzice they had a separate commands. I do recall that Tito was twice in talks with General Draza Mihajlovic, where they agreed to cooperate, but at the end the Chetniks would always go on the other side. I remember if the Chetniks did not cheat on our agreement the partisans would have liberated Kraljevo without any problems.

Q: The Chetniks always took a different way?

A: At Tresnjica where the Chetniks attacked the partisans and when the open confrontation between them started. From that day the Chetniks and the partisans entered the real war. On September 24, the partisans entered Uzice and created the Uzice Republic.

The Uzice Republic was the largest liberated territory in the entire country. The High Command and Tito were there, as well as the major battalions from that region. All three of us, my mother, sister, and I, involved ourselves in serious work within the Uzice territory. My mother and my sister worked in the local hospital. They learned a lot, and became very helpful nurses. I stayed in town and worked in the cultural centers, which organized many cultural, political, and entertainment gatherings. Even Tito and his assistants spoke at one of these gatherings. My mother and

sister worked very hard. They treated one of our friends, Joza Baruh from Belgrade, who was a student when wounded, and his arm had to be cut off. Later he died. But in November, the Germans and their collaborators undertook a large offensive on Uzice and its surroundings. The partisans had to withdraw and leave this territory. They moved to Sandjak, while the wounded ones stayed in Zlatibor's forests. My sister went with the partisans, and my mother and I stayed with the wounded ones. We moved to Zajetina.

On November 29, the Germans entered Uzice, and they continued their offensive in the direction of Zajetina. We received the urgent warning that we have to leave. Most of the people left, but some of the badly wounded had to stay. We heard that they were found by the Germans and killed. There is a marked spot where the killing took a place.

Q: How many of the wounded soldiers were killed there?

A: Several hundred, I believe.

Q: Were not you able to evacuate them?

A: There was no chance to be evacuated. The Germans drove over their bodies with their tanks.

Q: When did you enter the partisan unit?

A: I joined the third Sanjak's proletariat brigade. We merged into one brigade along with the second proletariat brigade. I was a nurse in that brigade. Later they gave us some little rifles and guns, too. I was very young, only 14 years. I was a child who needed a time to adapt for such a rough time. But I received all this time from those people in my brigade. In the third offensive I was withdrawing along with the people from Sandjak. We were supposed to go to western Bosnia. We had to go there and solve some merging problems, as well as reunite with some large partisans' battalions from that region. My mother stayed with the fifth Montenegrin brigade. The high command sent the order to my commander to send me home because my mother requested so. I did not mention that she did not let me go, but I ran away along with the units. The order came that I had to be sent back to my mother, but my commander succeeded in keeping me. My father thought that we were all dead because he found some of the German reading material where they published the names of the killed people.

Q: During your life in the partisans and your constant marching throughout Yugoslavia?

A: I am not able to recall all their names, but certainly I met many of them. I remembered Herbert Kraus, then Gojko Nikolic. I knew Reva Rot, who was a pharmacist, and who had two more brothers with the partisans. I knew Dr. Herlinger, Schlesinger, and Beltheim. A friend of mine was Joza Baruh who died in Uzice. All of three of the Baruh brothers died in the partisans. I knew so many other nationalities. There were many Muslims that I knew and that were with the partisans, as well as many Croats.

Q: So, your mother stayed in Montenegro, while you left to western Bosnia?

A: Correct. I went to western Bosnia and participated in all major battles. Jajce, Mrkonjic Grad, Glamoc, Petrovac, Drvar, Livno etc. My mother came with her brigade, but soon after went to Bosanski Petrovac. I kept in touch with her from time to time.

Q: Did you meet your sister Vita any of these days?

A: I met Vita in the fifth offensive, and after that we never met again. The Ustashas killed her.

Q: Were you in Jajce during the conference of the Anti-fascist Council.

A: I was in the hospital training given by the High Command in Jajce at that time. I participated in some of its sessions. It was a free territory, and it was on the eve of the fourth offensive.

Then we moved to the eastern Bosnia, where I got typhus. I was a nurse in the third Sandjak's brigade. With my brigade I stayed under siege, surrounded by the Germans and the Chetniks. There were a lot of casualties in our units. The Chetniks captured most of us, while killing most of the hardly wounded soldiers. They brought us to the open space where they started selection and the liquidation of many of us. The commander was Miso Stanar, who was from Uzice and who was an officer of the old Yugoslav army. I believe that he remembered my last name and my family because the only ones spared of death were Mileva Bosnic and I.

Q: What kind of last name is Stanar?

A: That is a Bosnian name.

Q: You said that he secretly worked for the partisans, who then did kill all of the partisans?

A: Other Chetniks did. He tried to save as many people as he could, remain not discovered.

Stanar wanted to take to the forests because they were expecting the Ustashes to come to this region. I refused to go with them because I thought that the Chetniks were the same as the Ustashes. He took me to the local village and ordered the locals to wash me and dress me in the same clothes as the local villagers. Especially, he ordered those people to help me clean lice from my hair.

Q: Who were these villagers?

A: These were Serbs. It was a Serbian village whose people stayed to defend their village. They helped me heal fast. In the beginning they fed me slowly, spoon by spoon, day by day, but I finally recovered.

Several days later, I was sitting next to the house I lived in when I heard the military coming. That was the brigade with Milovan Djilas on its lead. He was one of Tito's closest friends and collaborators, as well as the other members of the High Command. They all knew my mother Gutman who was a well-known doctor. Just because of that fact, they let me join them and continue with them. They placed me on the horse, and I was back in the military.

Q: Your mother got hit?

A: Correct. She was hit by a piece of grenade. At that time she was in Kladanj in the brigade of Djuro Klagerina. I was told to go and meet my mother in Kladanj. I was with the hospital in Sehovici, when I was ordered to go and joined my mother. At the moment I was entering Kladanj, the Germans were entering from the opposite side. I arrived when the withdrawal just started. She was very badly wounded. She looked ill and exhausted, but she refused to be carried. She stood up and walked with the rest of the brigade.

It was very sad looking at that brigade. They had many casualties, and many good people died. I was lucky that the same day I left Sehovice and the hospital, the Germans captured it and killed all of the people. I walked with the 7th Croatian brigade, which after a big loss received some of the equipment from the Supreme Command. I was very weak at that time, and I weighed only 35 kilos. I stayed with my mother until she recovered, and after I moved to the operational unit.

Q: Where did you go from there?

A: From there I went to the 12th Krajiska brigade, where I was a secretary in the hospital. I was only 16 years old. From there, I was transferred to Jajce for additional education in the field of medical care. Over there I participated in AVNOJ, which was the Tito's parliament. At that time and later, I was so proud that I was a part of the liberation army who fought its war against the Nazis and their local collaborators. After Jajce, I was transferred to the 53rd middle Bosnian brigade.

My mother was killed on September 24, 1944. I still feel a part of my responsibilities for her death. She was ordered to leave the military and to join our units in Italy, where she would help in the rehabilitation of our soldiers. But she stated a requirement for her departure. I had to go with her. I did not want to leave my friends and to go to Italy. I wanted to participate in the liberation of Belgrade. My mother, at that time, had a captain rank. So I refused the order from the Supreme Command, and my mother did not leave without me. So she was killed by the Chetniks in September of 1944.

Q: How did she die?

A: We were leaving each other and she was crying. I did not understand because most of the offensives were over and the liberation of Yugoslavia

was around. I believe that she predicted that something wrong was going to happen. I left with my brigade, and she was supposed to escort the wounded ones to the liberated territory.

I heard that she was killed by the Chetniks. They were withdrawing and running in front of the partisans, and they were trying to join the Germans in western Bosnia. At the moment they were crossing over the open plain my mother's column with the wounded ones appeared. A friend of mine who survived those moments told me that they killed her right away. We were never able to find her grave, but we know for the sure that she was killed by the Chetniks.

This was the way my mother died. My sister was killed by the Ustashas in 1943 during the 5th offensive. The only one possibly left was my father, but I did not know anything about him. In May of 1945, I was demobilized and sent home. I went first to Belgrade, and from there I was supposed to go to Uzice.

I came to Uzice and went to the local county government to report. I was looking for my father. There I learned the entire story. Through the entire war he was in contact with local people from Uzice. They were sending him packages to the prison, and he kept them informed about his status. He survived the war, and was on his way home when he met a friend

of his who worked for the Gestapo at that time. He told him that all three of us were killed in 1941. My father after surviving the entire war had a heart attack and died. He was buried in Hajesverdi. I never visited graves.

Q: What did you do after the war?

A: I worked for the Ministry of the Internal and Foreign Affairs, and I worked in the Justice Department. Very early I retired, and spent the rest of my life with my family. I have a daughter and a son. My daughter is a doctor, and my son is a jurist.

Q: How do you see the dissolution of Yugoslavia?

A: I have hard time accepting the fact that Yugoslavia is broken. The nationalism was very strong. There are some forces in Serbia that neglect the role of Tito and the Communist Party. They brought the name of Draza Mihajlovic back in use. These people killed my mother and my sister. They were fascist. If Tito was alive this would never happened.

Q: Can we see the pictures right now?

THE END