

Sara Alkalaj's testimony given in Belgrade in 1997

It follows an interview with Sara Alkalaj prepared for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and its Jeff and Toby Herr collection. Jasa Almuli conducted this interview.

Sara Alkalaj is one of Belgrade's few Jewish women who survived the Holocaust. In the summer of 1941 she ran away from Belgrade and moved to Pirot and from Pirot to Macedonia and from Macedonia to Albania. Her testimony is more impressive since she was a member of the Zionist organization Hashomer Hatzair. This organization had two factions. One of them was more communist-oriented and planned to join the Communist Youth and the partisans, while other faction wanted badly to go to Palestine.

Sara, please:

We are from Dorcola in Belgrade, which was the famous and predominately Jewish part of Belgrade. It was near the river Danube. We lived nice and harmoniously, we belonged to Jewish minority, but we lived closely with everyone and without differences.

Q: When were you born?

A: On January 20, 1921. Everything around was nice. We had this organization, our gymnastic team, planned trips, very often we went to the countryside, etc. We had parties in the Jewish community and planned a trip to Israel.

Q: Tell me, what was your father?

A: My father was a photographer and he had his professional shop.

Q: Where did you live?

A: We lived at Dorcolu in Banatska street. We lived close to the Danube and a couple of different beaches. Our life was a lot of fun. It was fun all the time until April of 1941, when the war and its destruction surrounded us. I remember the first day of bombardment of Belgrade. We were forced to leave the city and hide in its suburbs. We went to my sister and pick her kids up and ran away from Belgrade. We went to the Jewish family Poljokan and hid there for the time of bombardment. A week after that the Germans had already entered Belgrade. Some of us from the Hashomer organization got together in our attempts to organize trips to Israel. However, we reached only Uzice, and the Germans were already all around so we could not go any further. We returned to Belgrade. Belgrade was occupied by the Germans, so the life of Jews became horrible. We had to wear our yellow bands, so our freedom of movement was completely restricted. The heavy bombardment cut the water system, so we had to go out and get water. But that was risky because we could be caught by the Germans. Our Serb neighbors let us get water without waiting in line, so that reduced the possibility of getting caught. We were getting together in order to find the way to reach Israel. We looked for any possible way to escape this situation in Belgrade, as well as looking for away to join the prtisans. A man from the Communist Youth came to our organization to help us organize.

Q: From the Council of the Communist Youth?

A: Yes, a person from the Communist Youth came to our organization and try to prepare us for the escape.

Q: Who was that?

A: Jurica Ribar. Yes.

Q: Were you at that meeting?

A: No, I was not.

Q: Who was there?

A: Ten of them.

Q: What did he say?

A: He said that they were about to help us escape from Belgarde. They would do it by helping us join the patisans. But, within our organization the thoughts were divided. Half of the Hashomer looked for the way to reach Israel.

Q: Who was against?

A: Some individuals.

Q: Could you recall some of them?

A: There was Salman Holnik?

Q: Holnik!

A: Yes, Holnik and Bravar, too. He is in Israel now. Albert Alkalaj was against, too. There were several of them.

Q: How many of you joined the partisans?

A: I will mention some of them. It was Josif Majer, Jole Arueti, Beko Demajorovic, and other names I can not recall.

Q: What happened with you?

A: I remained in Belgrade for some time.

Q: Did you join the Communist Youth?

A: I joined the Youth. I participated in communist propaganda, placing posters on the walls. We from Dorcola, we had to go to the different part of town in order to not be discovered. It was very dangerous because people would be killed right away if discovered.

Q: Who was with you?

A: There was Jana Poljokan with me.

Q: What was with her?

A: She was the only one whom I knew, and whom I believed. It was very important in these days to believe people close to you.

Q: What happened to her?

A: She was in the partisans when the Chetniks captured her and brought her back to the Germans.

Q: When was that?

A: It was in 1942 or 1943.

Q: What was her name?

A: Her name was Poljokan Paula, but we called her Jana. Some other people who decided to join the Partisans from Hashomer were Valter Kohen, Erih Kohen, and his younger brother.

Q: What happened with them?

A: They died in Partisans.

Q: What did happen to the rest of the people that you mentioned?

A: They all died. There was Moll Comfit who died too, and I do not any of them who survived.

Q: What was the agreement with Jurica Ribar. Was it true that they requested that after joining the Partisans and after the end of war, they are free to go to Israel?

A: That is correct. However, after the war we were able to go only in groups, not individually.

Q: Could you recall what happened with the rest of the Hashomer organization? I remembered Blinka.

A: Well, Blinka Baruh reached Nis, when she was caught, and taken to the Auschwitz.

Q: She might be left in Nis?

A: She might.

Q: Could you recall anyone else?

A: There was Konfino Vukica, and she died while being in the partisans in the battle in Montenegro.

Q: For how long had you been in the Communist Youth in Belgrade?

A: I had been there since June, when they informed me that Joska was arrested.

Q: Who was Joska?

A: Joska Levi was a member of the Communist Youth from Hashomer, and he was arrested in Belgrade. Since my mother heard the news, she was afraid that now the entire circle could be discovered if he disclosed. So we packed only the basics, and moved away from home.

Q: What happened to your father?

A: At the beginning of June he was captured and taken to the prison Topovske Supe.. At that time he was already 70 years old.

Q: Here on the picture next to him was his sister?

A: Yes it was her Sara. I got name after her.

Q: Were you able to visit you father?

A: No, there was no chance.

Q: You had three brothers. What happened to them?

A: All my brothers were mobilized to the Yugoslav Army. My brother Mosa, who was a jurist, went to the prison, while the other one, Moma

Alkalaj, successfully escaped. My third brother escaped the prison, and went to the partisans.

Q: Which one?

A: Hisak. He beat the German soldiers very bad. He hit him because the German soldier started beating an old man, so my brother first beat him and then ran away to the partisans.

Q: Isa?

A: Isak.

Q: What happened to him at the end?

A: From there he went to the partisans?

Q: Was he a communist?

A: No, he was not. He left the partisans and went to Macedonia, where he was captured by the Bulgarians.

Q: And then what happened?

A: A group of Jews were captured by the Bulgarians and transported back to Belgrade, where they were delivered to the Germans. The Germans took them before the firing squad and killed them in Jajinicima.

Q: So, Isak was killed. Mosa was in prison, and happened to Solomon?

A: Solomon immigrated to Albania. From here, he went to Macedonia, then Greece, and finally to Albania. I met him there by accident. I had no idea that he was there.

Q: Well, describe the situation when your mom packed your stuff and the two of you left the apartment, since friend of yours were captured!

A: We went to the rail station, and from there wherever. The aim was to reach Pirot. We had someone there. We did not have ID, not even train tickets. We caught the train to Nis. There I met Blinka Baruh. From Nis we found a connection to be transferred to Pirot.

Q: Pirot was occupied by the Bulgarians?

A: Correct. It was occupied by the Bulgarians.

Q: Tell me. How was the trip from Nis to Pirot?

A: It was so scary. I was shaking the entire trip. We did not have permits, and we took our yellow bands off. I was young and strong, but I was afraid for my mom.

Q: Where did you stay in Nis?

A: With a Jewish family.

Q: Where they family or friends?

A: They were Jews who were not captured yet. We stayed there for a month.

Q: Did you report to the Jewish community?

A: No, we stayed with the friends.

Q: Could you recall anyone?

A: I really can not. The only one I remembered was Blinka, since we were spending every day together. There we found a man who was going to take us from Pirot to Bela Palanka. Bela Palanka was a borderline between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. We were supposed to walk there, but we found some coach. My mother was old and ill, so the villager took us with him.

Q: What was your sister's name?

A: Her name was Elan.

Q: Your brother-in-law?

A: His name was Hajn Avramovic.

Q: What did he do?

A: He was a dentist.

Q: Was he originally from Pirot?

A: He was born in Pirot.

Q: Where did he live before that?

A: He lived in Belgrade.

Q: Why did he move to Pirot from Belgrade?

A: Well, they moved in May to Pirot, because my brother-in-law got beaten right in the beginning by the German soldiers. He walked on the street with his yellow band, when they started beating him. He came home and decided to stay in his hometown of Pirot, where he felt it was more secure for them.

Q: Did you have a permit to cross the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border.

A: We did not have anything. We crossed walking.

Q: Who showed you the way?

A: Local villagers.

Q: Were they aware that you were Jews?

A: No, they thought that we were Serbs.

Q: How did you get around in Pirot without a permit?

A: Well, my brother-in-law had some connections in Pirot, so he managed to get visitor's permits. We stayed there until 1943.

Q: Was there anti-Jewish campaign in Pirot?

A: No, not at all.

Q: Did you live at your brother-in-law's home or individually?

A: We lived with him.

Q: Was he able to work?

A: He worked the entire time.

Q: Did you have enough money to live?

A: Well, it was very hard. We had two little children. We made the agreement with our landlord that in the case that the Bulgarians entered the town, to hide the kids and then send them back to my sister-in-law in

Belgrade. My sister-in-law was a Christian, so they would be safer. At that time we made connection with the Liberation Front and made plans to join them. However, the Bulgarians entered the city and captured some of the communist activists, who were also our connections with the Liberation Front. They were Bojana and Laza Konfino, as well as other nine people.

Q: Who arrested you?

A: The Bulgarians. But by paying them off, our parents successfully got us out of the prison. Only two people out of the entire group died. The rest of us were freed.

Q: Who was there?

A: Mostly Serbs.

Q: Were you beaten?

A: Yes, I was. I was beaten very badly.

Q: What did you admit?

A: I said that I was trying to save myself, because I was a Jew, not because I was a member of the Communist Party. Most of us escaped. Laza was sent to prison in Bulgaria.

Q: Who was with Laza Konfino...

A: Who survived. After the war he returned, graduated in chemistry, and worked for Galenika.

Q: Is he still alive?

A: I think he is not.

Q: What did happen to Bojana Konfino? Did she survive?

A: Bojana is Rudi Bravadela's wife. She is in Israel. They released us from the prison, and after a week they came on March 11th, 1943 at five o'clock in the morning and picked up all the remaining Jews in order to transport them further.

Q: Who came?

A: The Bulgarians. Soldiers and police all together.

Q: Did they deport only the Jews from Serbia, or all of them?

A: There were all Jews.

Q: How many of you were there?

A: I can not recall the exact number. In the beginning, they captured the Jews from Serbia, and not the Bulgarian Jews. Only the Jews from just liberated territory.

Q: What about Macedonia?

A: The Macedonian Jews were taken on the same date. They came and read the list with the names. My mother and my sister hid in our landlord house, along with the two children, while my brother-in-law and I stayed there. We were captured and taken with the rest of people. They tried to go back to Serbia, but now as the refugees from Bulgaria. They came to Bulgaria as the refugees from Serbia and returned from there as the Serbian refugees from Bulgaria.

Q: Serbia?

A: Correct, as the Serbian refugees. But they were discovered and taken to Auschwitz. My sister dropped a note from the train that they were taken to the Auschwitz, and the railroad worker saw the note and brought it to my sister-in-law.

Q: How did they know that they were taking them to Auschwitz?

A: Because they were told so.

Q: What happened to you?

A: We were taken to the Gymnasium. We were locked there for more than a week. No one could come or leave. There they took our valuable things, money, jewelry, etc. Then we were transferred to another building.

Q: Where did you sleep?

A: On the floor. Before we were taken to another building, I sneaked out and left our gold and money in one of the classrooms. Later, when we were transferred to this building I found my things that could help us later down the road.

Q: Did you have any food?

A: Very limited.

Q: Water?

A: Not at all.

Q: What happened to your brother-in-law?

A: He was in a different room. He was away. I was in the room with the mother of my friend.

Q: What was her name?

A: Matilda Konfino, mother of Bojana Konfino.

Q: Was Bojana in the same train?

A: No, she was already in Sofia. Her father and his two daughter escaped in front of the raid. The mother did not make it. They caught her. Three of them reached Sofia.

Q: Who, Bojana?

A: Bojana, her sister, and father.

Q: Did they survive?

A: Yes, they did. They are in Israel.

Q: They made it in Sofia as Bulgarian Jews?

A: They stayed there at their cousin's house.

Q: That one must be brave!

A: Yes, he was.

Q: Was Rudi Agravaneli on the same train?

A: He escaped by jumping out of the window.

Q: How did he jump out?

A: He was young, strong, and skinny enough to find his way out.

Q: Was that before the train stopped?

A: No, once the train stopped he jumped out and ran away.

What we did was try to hide after we were allowed to go in the bathroom. We hid behind the train, while others were in the bathroom. We saw the railroad worker in the little shack on the side of the railroad. Three of us entered this room, my mother took a roll of money and gave to the rail employee. There was more money that he would make in three or four months. She asked him to buy three tickets to Sofia and hide us in his office until departure.

Q: Was this man Bulgarian?

A: Yes, he was. They accepted a plan and hid us under the roof. But for a quite long time they did not show up. I started screaming from the roof. At that moment his wife showed up. She said that they were planning to hide us in the village. I said no village, we want the ticket to Sofia. She said that is too dangerous, but I knew that they would kill us and take our money. So I told her if she or he does not buy tickets, I will go out tell everyone that we were Jews and that this family tried to take our money and hide at the time when that was prohibited. They would be killed if such thing would be discovered. She immediately sent her husband to buy us tickets. So, with these tickets we caught the train at nine o'clock to Sofia.

Q: Did anyone control you on the train/

A: No, not at all. I was like her guardian. She was pretending that she was very ill and I was the one who was taking her to the doctor in Sofia. Once the Bulgarian soldiers came to us, I asked them to be a little quiet, since my mom pretended that she was sleeping, and also because my Bulgarian was so bad they could discover us. We reached Sofia and stayed with some relatives. We stayed there for a week.

Q: What happened to the rest of the Jews from the train?

A: I really do not know. As soon as we stepped out of the train we hid, and anything after that I do not know.

Q: I heard that they were put on the rafts and brought over the Danube?

A: I know that Lon Palanka was on the Danube.

Q: So you stayed at your relatives' for seven days?

A: Yes, in Sofia.

Q: There you found Bojana and her father?

A: Yes. We stayed at their relatives' house. They helped us receive the necessary paperwork to buy tickets and leave Sofia. We bought tickets to Skoplje, and left on the same day.

Q: Who traveled to Skoplje?

A: Bojana's mother, father, and sister.

Q: What about Rudi Bravanel?

A: Well, after he escaped the train he came to Sofia and traveled to Skoplje.

Q: Did you have fake paperwork?

A: We received some paperwork. We reached Skoplje. From Skoplje we had to go to Urosevac.

Q: Who was your contact in Skoplje?

A: Bojana's father arranged everything.

Q: How did you travel from Skoplje to Urosevac?

A: We walked.

Q: Where did you hide your money. You walked during the night and hid during the day?

A: Just like that we traveled for five days and five nights. It was very hard. We used to collapse every once in while. We reached Urosevac where our guide took us to his house and gave us some bread to eat.

Q: Four of you?

A: No, six of us.

Q: Did you tell to the Italians that you were Jews?

A: Yes, we did. There were no problems with the Italians, but the Albanians who were just guards in their prisons, they were awful. They used to scare us by telling us that they were taking us to back Serbia. They would mistreat us almost every night. It was very hard.

Q: Were they the Albanian SS?

A: I believe they were. We spent the entire month there, and then we were transported to the Albanian countryside.

Q: To the countryside?

A: Correct. In Kuvaja.

Q: Is that in the center of Albania?

A: Correct, it is very close to Tirana.

Q: Did the Italians give any financial support?

A: No, nothing.

Q: Were you allowed to leave that camp?

A: No. We had to have a permit to leave the camp.

Q: Did you have to report to the police station every day?

A: Only men had to.

Q: How many of you were in Kuvaja?

A: There were a lot of us.

Q: Were there Jews from Serbia and Macedonia?

A: Correct.

Q: Were you allowed to work and make some living?

A: Everyone managed to do something.

Q: Whom did you stay with in Kavaji?

A: I found Omni Solomon's brother. He was there with some friends from Macedonia.

Q: You did not stay with Bojana?

A: No. Those who had money lived in Tirana. When Italy capitulated, my brother and his friends started organizing partisans' brigades and units, connecting them with the Albanians and the Italians. We stayed here quite long.

Q: In which unit were you?

A: It was the protection unit of the high command.

Q: Who else was there?

A: Some other Albanians.

Q: How many of you joined the Partisans?

A: Some of us.

Q: Were you in the battles?

A: No, I was not.

Q: Whom did you fight there?

A: We fought the Balist, the Albanian fascists. I remember that I was lying in a puddle, and Sarina was next to me. It was a time of the hard offensive.

Q: Who was Sarina?

A: Sarina Barho.

Q: From Belgrade?

A: No, she was from Bitolj.

Q: What was his name?

A: Elijahu Baruh.

Q: Where was he from?

A: He was from Belgrade.

Q: Where did you meet him?

A: In Hashomer Hatzair.

Q: Was he with the Partisans?

A: Yes, he was.

Q: Why did you sit in the puddle?

A: I had nowhere to go.

Q: You did not have a tent or something else?

A: No, nothing.

Q: Who was the other girl?

A: It was my friend's Likica's wife.

Q: What was her name?

A: Her name was Sara. Sara Markov.

Q: Was she from Bitolj?

A: Yes, she was from Bitolj.

We were surrounded by the Balists, so we tried to escape that siege. We went in the direction to Kavaja. Far away we saw people being arrested and taken out of their houses.

Q: Who was arresting them?

A: The Balists. They were horrible in Albania. They did some bad things.

Q: These were the Albanians from Kosovo?

A: Yes, they were the Albanians from Kosovo. We walked to Tirana.

Q: Were the Germans there?

A: There were not Germans yet. The Balists were the main factor here. We hid in one house. They were searching everywhere. There were several of us hidden there. One of us was wounded as a consequence of bombardment. I was afraid that they would take him like he was a communist. They were asking for the communists. I told them that there were not communists there. They took me to their station as proof. I met

there all different kinds of people, some Montenegrins. There was a lot of mistreatment going on.

Q: Did you admit that you were a Jew?

A: Yes, I did. I reported to one young Albanian man who studied law in Belgrade and who talked Serbian. I told him that I was a Jew hiding in front of the German soldiers. Some of my friends managed to find a rich man to bail me out. They let me go because they thought that by following me they would get to the communists. They even gave me a coach to take me back because my legs were so sore I could hardly walk. I came back to the place I was before. There I met the Italian soldier, who started bringing me food and taking care of me. He did this every day. He even told me that my relatives are all okay. It was like that until the German offensive started in 1944.

Q: Did you wait until the Germans came to Tirana?

A: Yes. The Germans had not arrived yet. Tirana was burning. We were locked in some space that was not close to the burning streets. Entire city blocks were burning. We stayed in Tirana and then left at the beginning of summer.

Q: How long did you live under German control?

A: Two months.

Q: Did you have any permits?

A: No, we were hiding.

Q: Whom did you stay with?

A: There were my brother and his wife. Also, there were a couple of Jews from Skopje.

Q: Could you recall their names?

A: His name was Romi, and that is all.

Q: You formed a group and left Tirana...

A: We tried to walk out of Tirana.

Q: Was there a German checkpoint?

A: The Germans were withdrawing at that time.

Q: So you were following the Germans?

A: We did not have any plans. We just walked around from one place to another. We ate whatever we found. It was summer time, and after the period spent in the prison this was like a gift. We were totally free, but without the exact agenda what to do next. So we walked like that to Bitolj. Here we stayed in Oleon Franko.

Q: Did you find any Jews living in Bitolj?

A: No, we did not find any. There were just we and just we. We spent some time in Bitolj, and then continued to Belgrade. Once again we walked. We reached Belgrade on New Year's Eve of 1945. We came to the train station and I got scared so much. I was afraid whether I was going to find anyone at home. When I came home the only person there was my sister-in-law with her children. I started searching our apartment, but I could not find anyone. I started hysterically crying. I did not know whether my mom called

or any of my relatives. We were not aware what was going on with the Jews during the war. We thought that they were taken to the work groups, but to the gas chambers we did not know. My brother was already walking throughout Europe searching for our members of the family.

Q: Your brother Mosa was in the war prison?

A: Yes, but he was not coming home. I lost my nerves. I wanted to commit suicide. Then I went and joined the partisans' unit that was supposed to go to Srem's Front. I thought if I am going to die, at least I'll contribute to something.

Q: So you joined the army?

A: I was so desperate that I was not thinking reasonably. Mosa was not coming back.

Q: What about Moni?

A: Moni came with me. But people at the drafting committee told me to go home and get some rest because they saw that I was not ready for any kind of army.

Q: When did you get married and whom did you marry?

A: I got married in 1945 and I married Ivo Butkovic, who worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I delivered a child in 1947.

Q: What is his name?

A: Goran

Q: What does he do?

A: He graduated with the degree in tourism, but right now he drives a cab. In 1947, I had a child and applied to go to Israel.

Q: When did you leave?

A: I left in the first group of the Yugoslavians to Israel.

Q: What year was that?

A: That was in 1948.

Q: So, your group was the first one?

A: I left on the boat along with my son who was one year old at that time.

Q: What about your husband?

A: My husband stayed here. We did not get a divorce, but we split up.

Q: So, your relation split

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you work in Israel.

A: I was welcomed nicely in Israel. First I went in Kibucu, but later I moved to Jerusalem. I had some of my friends from home living there.

Q: Did you go to Ama...

A: No I went to Gata. While staying in Kibucu my child had to be in Beta Jaladi. He cried all the time. Later, my friends came to me and told me to go to Jerusalem, and that they have already found me a job at the children's

clinic. In 1958, along with my son, I returned to Yugoslavia. He is very connected to Israel. But I was afraid that he might be recruited to the military, so I took him and we returned to Yugoslavia.

Q: Did you reestablish your relationship with your husband?

A: No. I worked in Tehnopromet, exporting company. I was a clerk.

Q: People from Washington are interested whether this was the Serbian aggression or the civil war? What is the Jewish view on this matter?

A: I do not know what the Jewish view on this issue is, but I could tell you what is my view on this issue. I see this problem as something that came from outside. I am very sad that Yugoslavia split. I believe that the major impact came from the USA, and Germany, who are the major factor of the Yugoslavian dissolution. I am very sad about Yugoslavia, but I am sad for this existing Serbia where nothing seems to work.

Q: Who would you characterize as the internal factor?

A: I believe that the strongest impact was the international community, but Serbia had its part, too.

Q: Do you think that Tito's regime had to do a lot with this?

A: I would say that was a set of things that provoked this eruption. I was not member of the Communist Party. I went to Israel. There was the Communist Party too, but I did not join. Some of the Yugoslav Jews joined them, but not a lot of them.

Q: What would like to say at the end?

A: It was very hard for me to go through this once again. Especially because a large number of my family lost their lives in the concentration camps. Only two of my brothers survived the rest were killed.

Q: Were you active in the Jewish community?

A: No, I was not. I did not have time, because of my child and it was not interesting for me.

Q: You were in Israel once again?

A: Several times, and the last time in 1992.

Q: What does Israel look like these days?

A: It was very hard during the sanctions.

Q: How much is your salary?

A: 600 dinnars.

Q: Is that the entire salary?

A: Yes it is.

Q: How do you handle it?

A: Very, very hard.

Q: Do you have enough for food?

A: You can always improvise with the food.

Q: Do you pay rent?

A: No, I own my apartment.

Q: Does your son help you at all?

A: He has his own family to care about.

Q: Who did he marry?

A: He married a Serbian woman.

Q: Is your husband still alive?

A: No, he died ten years ago.

Q: Where do you live now?

A: I still live in my apartment on Dorcolu. Even though Dorcolu changed a lot in the post-war period I remained here because I was not in the position to change locations.

Thank you Sara.