

Filip David's testimony given on May 3, 1997, in Belgrade

Now we will hear the testimony of Filip David, a professor at the School of Drama in Belgrade, who was born in 1940 and whose life was saved by the Serbian villagers in the village in Vojvodina. That village was a part of the Independent State of Croatia, whose plan was to liquidate all the Jews. His father left him in the village and went to join the Partisans.

This interview was conducted by Jasa Almuli, a journalist from Belgrade, for the USHMM in Washington, D.C., as a part of the Jeff and Toby Herr collection.

Let's hear Filip.

A: Well, I would like to start with my parents. My mother was born in Kragujevac, and she has Sephardic origins, and her entire family lived in Kragujevac. She was raised in a patriarchal family. Coincidentally, she met my father, who was also a Jew, but he was Eschenez, born in Galicia, but spent all his life in Sarajevo. They met during some Jewish gathering in 1934 or 1935. There had to be a lot of love involved in their relation, since my father was from an aristocratic family, and my mother was from a common middle class Sephardic family. Even though there was not a lot division before World War II, my father had a lot of problems from his father's side.

Q: Well, your mother is from a well-known Judic family, too. One of her sisters was married to the famous Dr. Eliah. One of her brothers was a pharmacist in Kragujevac, and he was killed along with Dr. Eliah in the beginning of the war by the Germans.

A: Correct. But the Eschenazi and Sefardic Jews had their differences, including cultural differences, language, etc. The history of the Sefards is very strange. They came to this region from Spain, running away from the inquisition. Mostly they came to Bosnia, and to some parts of Serbia, predominately southern Serbia. Here, they closed themselves in their own communities. They were preserving their language and their culture, and they closed themselves very much. Since they closed themselves for that long period of time they did not have a strong cultural development as the Eschenazi did. So a significant difference existed among them, but my father and mother got married any way.

Q: Did I understand correctly that the family of your father lived in Vienna?

A: Correct. Some parts of that family lived in Vienna, but the majority of my family lived in Lamberg. That was a town whose name was changed often, because it was under the control of

different people. Russians, Poles, and Austrians, they all had control over this city. However, my family had close ties to the Freud family. My father was a friend of the well-known Sigmund Freud, who often consulted him, when my father had some problems. We still have the telegram that the Freud family sent after my father was born. So my father's side was connected to the aristocratic Austrian Jews.

Q: What was your father's father?

A: I do not know. But let's go back to 1934 or 1935 when my parents got married. My father was a judge, and his first job was in Pec. It was a territory of today's Kosovo. We spent some time there, and in 1938, my father was transferred to Sremska Mitrovica.

Q: Where is Sremska Mitrovica?

A: Sremska Mitrovica is about 80 kilometers from Belgrade, in the province of Vojvodina. North from river Sava and under Fruska

Gora mountain. That mountain was the only one in the region, and it has a crucial role in the moments that followed. At the time of the bombardment of Belgrade my family was still in Sremska Mitrovica. What followed was the occupation of Yugoslavia, and Vojvodina came under the Ustashes control. Since father worked in the court, in the beginning, it was not that bad. But soon after when the anti-Jewish campaign spread around, it was suggested to my father that there might be some problems.

Let me go back. When the war was declared on Yugoslavia, the old Yugoslav army started mobilization. My father applied right away and he was sent to the front. However, that army capitulated soon after, and he came back. Prior to that, the Germans came to Sremska Mitrovica, where they broke into Jewish apartments right away. They took most of the furniture from my apartment, while mother was in there by herself. At that time, I was only one year old. Soon after my father came home, another mobilization took place. This time the Germans were taking Jews to the working squads to load wire on some boats. It

was very hard work. My mother one day came to see what was he doing. She spotted him being very thirsty, and she went to the neighboring house to get a bottle of water. The German soldier who was observing the work got very upset and started yelling in German. Even though my mother spoke German, she answered him in Serbian, but some one from around translated what she said, which upset him even more. In his rage the German soldier ordered her to come tomorrow and to be prepared to work on the cleaning of the boat.

At that moment, my parents got very scared and they decided to leave for Belgrade. Using his connection within the court, my father received permits for him and my mother to enter Belgrade. They needed a permit in order to enter Belgrade which was already in different country. The next morning they were on their way to Belgrade.

Let me explain this. Sremska Mitrovica was a part of the Independent State of Croatia, which was a fascist creation, while Belgrade was under the German control and their occupying zone.

But the decision to move to Belgrade was not that good. They did not have any relatives in Belgrade, not even a place to stay. They were poorly accommodated in Belgrade at that time. A letter from father's friend came from Sremska Mitrovica where he promised him that if he returned my father will be able to work and very soon retire. He would be receiving a nice pay check, good enough to survive. My father and mother were not sure what to do for a long time, but in the end they decided to go back to Sremska Mitrovica. Father got his job, and stayed there no more than 15 days, and after that he retired, but he never received a paycheck. At that time, the Germans started deporting Jews to the concentration camps, as well as to force them to wear the yellow band. My father and mother never wore a yellow band. But at that time a doctor who had German origin helped my parents by offering to move them to his house in Fruska Gora and to live there for while.

Q: Was he a member of the German minority?

A: Yes. He was friend and he helped my family a lot. My mother left me a whole bunch of these notes where she described various situations from this period of time. She explained this doctor as a friend who was a bridge between the partisans and the German minority who were against the Hitler's regime. His name was Dr. Lendler. So we spent a certain period of time in his house in Fruska Gora. That was a place where the liberation movement was initiated. There were a lot of plains in Vojvodina, so the partisan movement had to hide in the forests of Fruska Gora.

Q: What was the reason for the rise of the partisan movement in that region?

A: I believe that most of the population was pro-communist-oriented. Even though my parents were not ideologically oriented, they accepted the partisans and their ideas because they had no nationalistic program, and their plan was self-survival and - defense from the Germans. We were instructed that the best thing for us would be to move to the neighboring village of Mandjelos.

We had a better opportunity to hide. My mother was supposed to pretend that she was a wife of a local villager, and that they had only one child and it was me. Also, she pretended to be a Serb woman. My father joined the liberation forces right away, and he was spending most of the time on the front line, and he would come back to the village at the end of the day. Early in the morning he would leave again, and we would stay and pray for his safety.

Q: Could you recall the name of this villager?

A: No, I can not

Q: What name did your mother take?

A: Yes. Ruska. Her name was Ruska. Her real name was Rosa, but they call her Ruska. She a had pretty common name.

Q: Did she have any kind of ID?

A: Yes, she had. She also had some last name that I could not remember right now.

Q: What was your name?

A: My name was Filip, but they called me Fica. That sounded more like a Serbian name.

Q: Was the house where you stayed isolated or not?

A: It was the house at the end of the village. But the most important thing of all was that the entire village kept that secret very well. They did not to disclose anything. There were so many raids at that time, and so many possibilities for us to be discovered, but this village kept our secret firmly.

Q: Did the villagers know that you were Jews?

A: Certainly. But still these raids were a big problem. The Ustahas would search the village very often. They used to shut us in the school, church or some other public place and then search. Once my mother tried to hide, but the Ustasha discovered her and

forced her to walk to Sremska Mitrovica along with me and my little brother, who was just born in 1942.

Q: Was that Misa?

A: Yes, that was Misha. I remembered that walk that was a long and exhausting walk. I was little and tired. My mother was holding me and carrying my little brother. She would tell me stories so I would not be concentrated on my pain and my tiredness. We came to Sremska Mitrovica and we were put in the camp. Some of the people inside were very helpful because they shared their food with the mothers with small children. They also tried to protect them from the Germans by hiding them within the crowd. They made groups of people, classified by age groups. The oldest ones were killed at the first moment. One of the German soldiers came and told us that they could kill us all, but they would spare our lives so we can go back and tell our husbands in Fruska Gora that they should surrender. That was a warning. I still have a picture in front of my face of some of these people. I remembered so many

faces. After the war I received first award for the article that I wrote based on the memories of this experience.

Q: Which army arrested you that time?

A: These were the Ustashas. However, it was a synchronized operation between the Germans and the Ustashas. They closely collaborated during the entire war. It was very hard to make any difference.

The next time, my mother did not want to wait for the Germans or Ustashas to come. She decided to run to the forests of Fruska Gora and hide there. She took me and my little brother to the forest. They hoped that the Germans would come, search, and leave, but unfortunately, they stayed around Fruska Gora. We could not go back. Over night they had points well guarded and it was not possible to go through the siege. However, one night, people decided to break the siege along with the partisan forces who were with us. Since we had to be so quiet to pass the Germans, they ordered to my mother to go to the different side,

because she could not control me. I was crying, because I was tired. Finally, the commander let my mother go in different direction, while the rest of the people went through the siege.

Q: Did your father go along with you?

A: Yes he did. Father took my little brother, and I walked with my mother. We spotted the Germans about 20 meters ahead. They started fires and said something loud in German. We walked quietly and passed without being spotted. The night before they agreed to meet around the mill. The next morning only a few of the men showed up, and the rest were caught in a tarp and killed. We were some of a few who survived because we took a different way.

Q: Your entire family was saved?

A: Yes. That was one of the situations when I could have gotten killed. So this is what happened. My mother and father did not know where to go. They were standing next to the agricultural

property, whose owner was Mr. Pero, and my parents knew him from before. He invited them to stay and hide in his house. They waited until dark, because they were scared to move during the day. They walked through the corn field to his house, pet his dogs for a moment, and entered his house. We hid under the roof, and the next morning we heard a horrible shooting. Later, my parents went out and asked a local villager what happened. He told them that Mr. Pera was taken by the Germans because they found partisans hiding in his place. Actually, all they found was the military bottle for water, so they took Mr. Pera with them. That was the bottle that my father left downstairs, and because of that they took Mr. Pera away. They did not find us, so we survived, once again, a close death.

Q: That was such a danger?

A: I have to tell of a mystical moment. My parents were atheist, and they did not buy many of the stories, but after this my mother changed her views.

Q: So, where did they go?

A: Well, once everything was over, they went back to Mandjelos. The Germans left from there, and once they left everything was quite for the next several months. People came back from the forest and continued their lives until the next emergency. My mother returned to Mandjelos, as well.

Q: What about your father?

A: My father went back to the forest because the remnants of the partisan unit that survived the Germans' attack created a new unit. In the forests of Fruska Gora, it was quite easy for the partisans to hide and organize and then to attack from the hidden places. In 1943, the partisans decided to leave over river to the forests of Bosut. It was in Slavonia, where the partisans continued their fighting.

But the story that followed is one of the most remarkable stories I ever heard. I wish that I have a written proof of this story, because this story has its unbelievable course.

In the village where my mother lived, there was a woman who was able to read your destiny and to pray for the ending of the war. One time, my mother was invited by some other village women to come and join them in the prayer. She decided to go and see what was happening there. Once she came there, she saw women sitting in the circle and praying along with others. She was telling the future for each of the participants, and in a moment, she pointed a finger to my mother and told her that her entire family will survive the war as long as her husband will carry the golden cross. My mother heard the story and left. My father was upset in those days because the Germans undertook many raids in the region. He decided to come and see us, along with a soldier who followed him. After certain period of time of riding his horse, my father offered to his companion to ride the horse, while he walked next to him. Shortly afterwards, he stepped on the golden cross that he found on the ground. He took the cross and put in his valet. When he came home, mother told him for this interesting story and told him what the woman told her. At that moment he took the

cross out and showed to my mother. Both of them were very amazed and they did not know how to explain this strange happenings.

It was something unbelievable. The similar events happened right before the end of the war. The German army was significantly losing on the battle fields. The Germans were capturing most of the population and took them to different prisons. My mother stayed at home with the children, while my father was with the partisans. One day the Ustahas were deporting some of the local population to the prison, and my mother and us were among them. The Ustasha kept forcing my mother to walk faster, because the partisans were after them. My Mom told him at one moment that he can kill her if he wanted, but she was unable to walk faster. She expected the worse to happen but at that moment that Ustasha told her to hide in the nearby bush and to stay there, but to remember that he saved her life. He thought that at the end of the war he could use her testimony to defend himself for his committed crimes.

So she stayed there not even believing that the Ustasha just let her live. She did not believe that the selfish interest of the Ustasha just saved her life and lives of her children. After the war, she never found that Ustasha, even though she looked for him. He might have been killed later on. My father was one of the first soldiers who entered Novi Sad, which is the capital of the Vojvodina province.

We came to Novi Sad and found some apartment which the Germans left.

Q: What rank did your father have after the end of the war?

A: Before the war he a civilian. But after the war he had a rank of captain. He continued his career as a judge in the Supreme Military Court. In 1997, he moved to Belgrade where he got a job in the Supreme Military Court in Belgrade.

Q: Was he a member of the Supreme Court?

A: Yes, he was.

Q: Right before he died?

A: Correct.

Q: Which rank did he have before he retired?

A: He was a colonel. He had one of the highest ranks in his field. I would like to emphasize that a large number of my family members died during the war. Out of 50 relatives from my father's and my mother's side, I assume only five or six survived. Most of them were killed by the end of 1941. My mother was in contact with her relatives in Kragujevac, and some of her relatives, as well as her father and two brothers were killed, and the rest was taken to the prison where they died. No one remained alive.

Q: That was Judic family?

A: Correct, Judic.

Q: Do you think that the Serbian people deserve all this criticism and the sanctions from the international community?

A: I do agree with the German philosopher who said that only the collective responsibility exists. I do believe in that, because it is our collective problem that we chose these political leaders.

I think that is the collective responsibility of the Serbia people of being unable to elect different leaders. Most of the individuals have to be brought before the court so that justice will be satisfied.

Q: What do you think about the Croatian share in this war?

A: It was obvious that nationalism was everywhere. But the leading Communist Party who had all of the military power represented the Serbian interests. The entire story ends up with people without homes, their family members, with many dead.

Democratization did not happen in Serbia. Serbia was supposed to be a leader of the entire region, but it turned to be stopper. The entire region was well-connected. So the nationalism was kind of chain reaction.

Q: How do you see the Jewish position here in Serbia?

A: I spent my childhood and entire life here and I never felt any Antisemitism. Even though that historic base exists from the nineteenth century, I felt very comfortable living in Serbia. Lately, some tensions exist, created by the Serbian media and stereotype that some international hatred live against the Serbs. If so, then there should be some kind of international organization who initiates such hatred must exist. The international agency has to be connected with the Jews. So that is the parallel drawn here in Serbia that provokes these disputes. Once again, this is my country, I am part of this culture, I speak this language, and I did not leave this country like many of my friends, unsatisfied with the current political atmosphere in Serbia. We all have to have the right to speak, to write, and to protest if necessary. I never hid my views, and I always had support from my friends all around the world.