

BISER, Šerif  
Former Yugoslavia Witnesses Documentation Project  
Bosnian  
RG-50.586\*0001

Box 1, Tape 1

In this interview, Šerif Biser, born in 1925 and a native of Derventa, talks about the exile of Jewish families in Sarajevo, his involvement in the antifascist movement, and his subsequent arrest. He describes the life in the Jasenovac concentration camp and explains how he continued with anti fascist activities after his release in April 1944.

[01:] 00:30:00 – [01:] 09:22:14

He begins by introducing himself, giving his name, birth year and place as 1925 in the town of Derventa (in present-day Bosnia); notes he was in secondary school when the war in Sarajevo began in 1941; says that in 1942, he joined the antifascist movement and in 1943, was arrested and sent to Jasenovac; says that his sister **Nadja [Nadija]** fought in the People's Liberation Army "Narodnooslobodilačka rat," (NOR) from 1942 until the liberation; says he was a secretary of the school branch of the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia "Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije," (SKOJ); says that many of his school colleagues were members of the SKOJ; describes how every day at least one Jewish or Serbian pupil or a member of SKOJ was missing from class; says he lived at 2 Hajduk Veljkova Street together with five Jewish families: **Alkalaj, Atrias, Kohn, Papo, Altarac**; says that Jewish families were arrested during the night and their belongings were left unattended; talks about the treatment of Jews under the Ustaše regime (yellow badges, arrests) and his motivation for antifascist involvement; says that the Jewish neighbors asked his mother to look after their valuable belongings and jewelry until they returned.

[01:] 09:22:15 – [01:] 17:52:14

He describes how the daughter from the **Alkalaj** family visited his mother in 1947 and collected her family's belongings; describes how the abandoned Jewish apartments were eventually inhabited by the Ustaše officials' families; says that many wealthy Jewish families lived on his street and that they were all gradually arrested; says that 10–15 soldiers participated in each arrest; says that the arrested families were taken away in trucks with few personal belongings; describes the friendly attitude of the Ustaše regime towards Muslims; describes how the antifascist movements got stronger and lists their main activities: collecting money, medicine, and clothes for the partisans, contacting comrades in the free territory, recruiting new members, distributing leaflets, informing the public; talks about his arrest in April 1943 and transport to the concentration camp without a trial; says that the arrested pupils were mostly Jewish and Serbian, but there were also some Croats and Muslims who were members of the SKOJ; says he was arrested after a colleague of his was tortured and disclosed other members of the SKOJ; says that

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the arrests were conducted by the Ustaše Surveillance Service “Ustaška nadzorna služba,” (UNS) and **Tomičić**—chief of the UNS political section in Sarajevo; says he was sent to Stara Gradiška.

[01:] 17:52:15 – [01:] 26:33:03

He says that after the arrest he was first kept in Beledija’s investigation prison; names some of the cellmates: **Muhamed** [*surname inaudible*], a pharmacist from Bjelave; [*first name inaudible*] **Kamenica**, a medicine student; **Jusuf Sabljaković**; [*first name inaudible*] **Mumanović**, a medicine student; **Ismet Šehić**; **Franjo Šertl**; says he was beaten by the police but did not give them any names; says that they were particularly interested in a person with the nickname “Crni” (Black) who organized SKOJ and Party meetings, but he did not know anyone by that name; after the War he found out that “Crni” was in fact **Džemal Bijedić**; says he did not know many SKOJ members because anonymity was a very important security measure; names his closest associates: **Mehmed Džinić**, **Muhamed Šabanović**, **Fehdagić** (first name unknown); says they communicated by using nicknames: Biser was Pepi, **Džinić** was Rosi, one of the others was Radnik (Worker); says that the tortures in Beledija were only conducted by the Ustaše, not by the Germans; describes the journey to Stara Gradiška: from Sarajevo to Okučani by train, the rest of the way by bus; says that 200–250 people were transported all together; says that the train was stopped by the Germans near Kakanj because they wanted to retaliate for the earlier partisan attack in which the bridge was destroyed and some German soldiers were killed; explains the standard retaliation procedure: for each German or Ustaše victim, 50–100 prisoners would be executed; says the Ustaše refused to turn the prisoners over to the Germans because they had strict orders to transport them to Jasenovac, but finally they agreed to single 50 prisoners out and have them executed [*Biser did not see the execution, but he heard the shots*]; describes the arrival to the concentration camp and the assignment of tasks: **Nijaz Salihodžić**, captured at the Battle of Kozara in 1942, was responsible for assigning new inmates to their duties; names members of the secret party cell that operated within the camp: **Roler** [*probably surname*] from Zagreb, **Emerik Blum** from Sarajevo, **Muhamed Đuda**, and **Remzija Omanović**; says that **Salihodžić** assigned tasks based on the secret orders given by the party cell, which means that more reliable inmates got better jobs; explains that the reliability was judged by the inmates’ behavior during the questioning in Sarajevo.

[01:] 26:33:04 – [01:] 36:13:15

He says he worked as a toilet cleaner in the camp hospital, where he had access to food and there was no danger of torture; explains that the Ustaše hospital was a valuable source of information concerning the Eastern Front and the partisan activities; says he forwarded information to **Jusuf Sabljaković**, the secretary of the secret party cell; names other members of the party cell: **Remzija Omanović**, **Muhamed Đuda**, [*first name inaudible*] **Kamenica**, **Ismet Šehić**, and **Franjo Šertl**; describes the partisan occupation of Bosanska Gradiška and the unsuccessful attempt to invade the camp in 1943–44; mentions the execution of **Salihodžić**; describes the mass execution of prisoners in Gradina after the Battle of Kozara; says that the prisoner **Fari Jajanović** witnessed the execution of 300 newly arrived prisoners; mentions he was tortured during the questioning in Sarajevo, in the UNS building on Albaharijeva Street and also in the camp; describes death threats and random killings committed by the camp guards.

[01:] 36:13:16 – [01:] 39:40:00

He describes the forced agricultural labor; describes the execution of **Salihodžić**; mentions **Runjaš** [surname], an extremely cruel Ustaše official; says he did not see the killing, but the next day he cleaned a cell in which he found **Salihodžić's** clothes; claims that prisoners who worked in the camp administration witnessed the execution.

Box 1, Tape 2

[02:] 00:30:00 – [02:] 08:31:19

He describes the prisoners' unsuccessful attempt to force their way out of the camp on April 22, 1945: 1,200 prisoners started going for the exit, but the guards shot most of them; only 35–40 survived; names **Abinum** [probably surname] as a potential witness, says he now lives in Split; names **Zahid Bukurević** as one of the survivors who managed to escape; once again, talks about the unsuccessful attempt of the partisans to free the camp; describes the two camp hospitals, one for the prisoners, the other for the Ustaše; describes the visit of an international commission that investigated the living conditions in the camp.

[02:] 08:31:20 – [02:] 17:50:10

He says that the disposal of dead bodies was most often assigned to Roma prisoners, who were subsequently killed in order to keep everything secret; describes the successful escape of **Salim Rasulović**, an acquaintance from Sarajevo; describes the successful escape of **Remzija Omanović**, **Esad Kapetanović** (an engineer from Prijedor) and **Tatek** [surname]; describes the escape of **Emerik Blum**, **Jusuf Sabljaković** and another unknown prisoner at the end of 1944: notes that only **Blum** survived and escaped; talks about his own release in April 1944 and the return to Sarajevo; explains how he smuggled documents from the camp (reports from the secret Party cell and a list of prisoners that ought to be exchanged).

[02:] 17:50:11 – [02:] 26:19:18

He describes how he contacted **Hamdo Misilović** [**Misinović**, **Misirović**], a former camp prisoner, and gave him the documents from the camp; describes how he continued to communicate with the party cell in Jasenovac: each prisoner was allowed to receive one parcel each month, and he used them to send secret party documents; says he joined the partisan army in March [probably 1945]; describes the Vraca memorial park in Sarajevo; talks about crimes committed in Sarajevo after the arrival of **Vjekoslav Luburić**; mentions **Seka Radulaški**, a former school colleague, who was killed during that time; describes how he joined the partisans: he went to Banja Luka and contacted **Kemo Đuzel**, a former prisoner from Gradiška, who then helped him to join the army.

[02:] 26:19:19 – [02:] 34:55:06

He names the cruelest Ustaše officials in Jasenovac: **Luburić, Ljubo Miloš, Runjaš, Gagro, Vasilj, Majstorović, Filipović, and Bosak**; says he followed the trial of **Miloš** in 1947, but was not called as a witness; compares the Holocaust with war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992–95; sums up the arrests of Jews in Sarajevo at the beginning of the war; describes the Ustaše uniforms; says he witnessed the arrests of the families **Alkalaj** and **Kohn**; sums up the escapes from the camp; says that the escape of **Remzija Omanović, Esad Kapetanović** and others was planned by the secret party cell, and that **Rasulović** escaped independently.

[02:] 34:55:07 – [02:] 42:02:00

He talks about different estimates concerning the number of victims in Jasenovac; says that former prisoners conducted their own analysis based on the size and number of daily transports, and estimate that there were between 250,000 and 300,000 victims.

He shows documents to verify certain aspects of his testimony:

[1. A letter:] He shows a letter from the camp in which the secret party cell confirms the receipt of parcels containing secret party documents.

[2. His release form:] He shows a release form, in it, he guarantees his loyalty to the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).

[3. An article by **Fadil Hadžić**:] He shows an article that was published in Vjesnik in 1957, discussing the documents he smuggled when he was released from the camp:] gives a short description of the Nazi and Ustaše propaganda that celebrated the NDH and condemned the uprising of partisans in 1941.