

## The Kladovo Transport<sup>1</sup>

As early as 1933, and especially after the Austrian Anschluss in 1938, the expulsion of Jewish citizens became one of the main goals of the National Socialist regime. Moreover, first waves of deportations from Vienna to German-occupied Poland also started in October 1939. While pursuing this new anti-Semitic policy, the Nazi government increasingly forced Jews to emigrate from the Third Reich until 1940. (Emigration was not officially prohibited until the fall of 1941). In view of this situation, the so-called Free World more and more rigorously barred its doors to the refugee flow. Especially after the outbreak of World War II, Jews were only able to flee to certain countries overseas or join "illegal transports" to Palestine. These transports became a mass salvation program from mid-1938 onwards. In spite of British immigration restrictions, refugees continued to be smuggled into Palestine from then on. These clandestine transports became all the more important in 1939 because the British authorities froze legal immigration into Palestine in May by way of the White Paper proclamation. After the outbreak of the war, Jews from the Third Reich were strictly forbidden to directly immigrate into Palestine as Jews born in Germany were considered by the British to be "enemy aliens". Only refugees who had already reached a neutral country were able to obtain an immigration certificate and even then only under certain conditions.

In view of the increasingly drastic persecution in Austria, now called Ostmark, and out of fear of new SS deportations, Georg Überall (later Ehud Avriel), the secretary general of *He-Haluts* and representative of Mossad in Vienna, made a grave decision in late 1939: He wanted all remaining *He-Haluts* members in Ostmark to leave the country even though no deep-sea vessels were ready to transport them to Palestine from the Danube delta. For the first time, a group of 120 *Youth Aliya* (JUAL) members also joined an illegal transport. Several hundred persons were first brought to Bratislava. A list shows that 822 people from Vienna, 130 from Berlin and 50 from Gdansk initially joined the transport. In Bratislava another 100 refugees from Prague and Bratislava were added to the group.

In the winter of 1939 the Danube was going to freeze over and the Slovak authorities intended to send the group back to the German border. Georg Überall and Mosche Agami, the Mossad officials in Vienna and Geneva respectively, urged the refugees to continue their trip even though no ship was ready for them at the mouth of the Danube. After a ten-day sojourn the refugees departed from Bratislava on the "Uranus", an excursion boat owned by the Danube Steam Boat Company (DDSG) and decorated with the swastika flag. No sooner had the boat reached the Hungarian border when it was unexpectedly stopped and turned back

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<sup>1</sup> Reproduced with the kind permission of Dr. Stalzer, Exhibition Curator of the Jewish Museum in Vienna and extracted from a press release in 2001 about the exhibition "Kladovo – Escape to Palestine".

to its initial point of departure. On December 13 the trip started anew, but a few days later the passengers were transferred mid-river to three Yugoslav excursion boats – the "Car Nikola"<sup>2</sup>, the "Car Dušan" and the "Kraljica Marija". Sime Spitzer, the secretary general of the Association of Jewish communities in Yugoslavia, had chartered these boats from the Yugoslav national shipping company on Mossad's instructions. The reason for this unexpected turn was DDSG's refusal to continue the trip on the "Uranus" as long as the reshipment at the mouth of the Danube was uncertain.

The voyage on the Yugoslav ships also ended abruptly, however, this time in the tri-state area between Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria. The Romanian authorities prohibited the passage for the same reason. It soon became clear that the weather conditions made a continuation of the trip impossible in the foreseeable future. On December 31, 1939 the ships were directed to the winter harbour in the Yugoslav town of Kladovo near the Iron Gate. In this little town, 54 kilometres from the nearest railway station and practically cut off from the outside world in winter, the refugees waited for the ice to melt. Spitzer had to promise the Yugoslav government that he would be responsible for the group's upkeep. At that time, thousands of refugees from Germany and Austria were also living in Yugoslavia alongside the country's Jewish community of 71,200. Several assembly camps were set up for refugees from the Third Reich.

Cramped conditions, dirt and biting frost made life on the boats unbearable. It would be weeks before the refugees were allowed to spend even a limited amount of time on shore. Finally, the shipping company urged the group to vacate the three steamboats. The refugees subsequently moved on land – some to the village, others to barracks and tents on shore. A malaria epidemic soon broke out in the tents and barracks, which were close to big swamps. Malnutrition, dirt and insect infestations also contributed to outbreaks of scabies and furunculosis. There were also isolated cases of polio, erysipeloid and typhus.

In September 1940 the group was finally able to leave Kladovo. Their trip, however, did not lead them towards the Danube delta, but a few hundred kilometres upriver, to the Serbian town Šabac on the Sava river. The rerouting of the group was caused by a large-scale resettlement of ethnic Germans from Romania overseen by the SS. These re-settlers were transported upstream, also on DDSG steamboats and temporarily put up in reception camps in the Serbian villages of Kladovo and Prahovo. On September 22, 1940 the refugees reached the small town of Šabac. There, older people and couples were put up in private rooms, while the majority of young people were quartered in an abandoned grain mill that had been adapted for these purposes. Although they had to observe some restrictions, the refugees were allowed to move freely about town.

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<sup>2</sup> *Chaya Ides was on the Czar Nichola – see letters from 31st December 1939*

After the refugees arrived in Šabac, their living conditions improved. The transport participants enjoyed greater freedom of movement and a more stable way of life. The various Zionist youth groups gained in importance. They tried to give their members encouragement through a tight social structure, strict discipline and extremely organized daily routines. Even though it was officially prohibited, many members sought to earn some pocket money through employment opportunities in Šabac. In spite of this relief, the refugees were still living on stand-by. Many times their departure was announced and they had to pack their bags and be ready.

In the final months before the German attack on Yugoslavia, the threat of war became more and more palpable in Šabac. Refugees from the Third Reich were still streaming over the borders and the refugee community in Šabac increased to an estimated 1,400 people. Just prior to the German attack on Yugoslavia a small number of the Kladovo refugees were able to escape to Palestine with certificates. Estimates of those who survived range from 200 to 280 people. Most of the transport participants saved were members of *Youth Aliya*, i.e. 15 to 17-year olds. Some adult attendants, a number of older girls with WIZO certificates, and a small number of older people for whom relatives in Palestine had vouched, were also able to flee.

When the German army marched into Yugoslavia, more than 1,100 Jewish Kladovo refugees remained in the Serbian town of Šabac. After the attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 the German regime started a systematic extermination of Jews in the East. The Kladovo Group thus did not stand a chance of leaving Serbia in the summer of 1941. Out of all the Kladovo refugees remaining in Serbia at the time of the German attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941, only a handful managed to escape from the Nazis and survive the war.

When 21 German soldiers were killed by partisans in early October 1941, General Böhme ordered the execution of 2,100 people in retaliation – 100 people for every German killed. 805 Jews and Gypsies from the Šabac camp, which included all the men from the Kladovo Transport, fell victim to this reprisal. In January 1942 the women and children of the Kladovo Transport were sent to the Sajmište concentration camp near Belgrade where Jewish women and children from Serbia were already interned. These former fairgrounds were ill-adapted to serve as a camp. More than 7,000 women – among them the very old, children and new-borns – languished in barracks in the biting cold. Many froze or starved to death, the remaining survivors were gassed inside transport lorries.

It was not until the end of the war that some details became known of the tragic fate of the Kladovo Transport members left behind in Serbia. To this day, some family members do not know exactly how their relatives perished in Serbia.

