

Retracing Our Father's Escape Route

By Robert Sachs

July, 2013

This past May my brother David and I had one of the most memorable experiences of our lives, retracing our late father's escape route from Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia during World War II. On an overcast day, just before Memorial Day, Sefik Gusic, the English-speaking driver/guide arranged by JayWay Travel of Pelham, NY, picked us up at The Esplanade Hotel in Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia. Built next to the railway station in 1925 for travelers on The Orient Express, the hotel has been fully restored by Regent International to reflect the luxury of travel of a bygone era. With such famous prior guests as Louis Armstrong, Maria Callas, Pablo Casals, Ella Fitzgerald, Charles Lindbergh, Richard Nixon, Nikita Khrushchev, Queen Elizabeth and the Kings of Spain and Egypt, the Esplanade has had a storied history.



Esplanade Hotel, Zagreb, Croatia, 2013

Following World War II The Esplanade was a place where Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito would come to celebrate New Year's Eve. But on a much darker note, the hotel had served as the Gestapo's and German Armed Forces regional headquarters from 1941-45 during the Nazi occupation. So it was with more than a touch of irony that David and I set-out from The Esplanade on May 23, 2013 to retrace our father's escape route from occupied Yugoslavia nearly 70 years earlier. Our desire was to see the towns and villages where he had walked, evading Nazi patrols, on his path to freedom.

During WW II our father, Monroe Sachs, served as a B-24 Liberator pilot. Like many who returned from that war, he chose not to talk about it. I was 19 and David was 20 when Dad died in 1968. With his passing, at age 49, went any opportunity for us to learn from him details of his six-week ordeal after his plane was hit by enemy fire and crashed while returning from a critical bombing mission over Germany. Shortly after the war, Monroe married Norma Gantz. She was just 21 and had been a childhood friend of his younger sister Betty. From Betty, Norma knew that Monroe had been reported to his family as "missing in action" in early 1944. But since Norma was just 16 when Monroe enlisted and he six years older, it was only after the war that he took notice of her. Even to Norma who would become our mother, Monroe spoke little about his combat experience. Like so many returning veterans, he preferred to look to the future which would include marriage and a family, moving from a starter apartment to a ranch house in New Rochelle, NY, and going into business, first working for his father selling children's clothing and then for our maternal grandfather, selling lace and embroidery.



Monroe Sachs, 1944

It wasn't until a fire in the attic of our mother's house -- 30 years after Dad's death -- that we found some personal papers he had stored in a steel box. Miraculously, his military records and medals were among the few things in the attic to survive the blaze. From the contents of that box we learned some of what had happened to Dad and his crew when their plane crashed in Nazi occupied Yugoslavia. Over time we gleaned more details from US Army records that are now available online. Another great source of information was The 450th Bombardment Group's website: <http://www.450thbg.com>.

From these various sources we knew that at about 8:45 a.m. on February 25, 1944 twenty-nine B-24s from the 450th Bombardment Group took off from Manduria Air Base near Bari, Italy. Their mission, as part of what would become known as "The Big Week" of WW II, was to bomb the Prufening Aircraft Factory in Regensburg, Germany.

Lt. John Giraudo piloted one of the US B-24s. Dad was the co-pilot. Three hundred miles from the target, 15-20 enemy aircraft attacked the formation. Farther north, 25 or so enemy aircraft made an aggressive attack, shooting down one of the B-24s. Then, as the bombardment group reached Regensburg, another twenty-plus enemy fighters attacked the American squadron. At 1:00 p.m. the B-24s reached their target and dropped 64 tons of 1,000 lb. bombs on the aircraft factory. After dropping its load, Dad's plane, carrying nine airmen in addition to Lt. Giraudo and himself, was pretty badly shot up. Somehow they managed to maintain formation for almost two hours until engine failure forced the crew to abandon ship over Yugoslavia. About 2:45 p.m., another US aircraft reported seeing 10 parachutes in the air.

CONFIDENTIAL

HEADQUARTERS
720TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (H) AAF
OFFICE OF THE SQUADRON COMMANDER
A.P.O. 520, U.S. ARMY

27 FEBRUARY 1944

STATEMENT SURROUNDING DISAPPEARANCE OF MISSING PERSONNEL.

ON 25 FEBRUARY 1944, FIRST LIEUTENANT MONROE SACHS, O-796441, AC, WAS THE CO-PILOT ON A B-24-H TYPE AIRCRAFT, (NO. 42-64443), ON A COMBAT MISSION TO BOMB THE AIRCRAFT FACTORY AT REGENSBURG, GERMANY.

THE FOLLOWING IS A STATEMENT CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LIEUTENANT SACHS AND AIRCRAFT.

" ON 25 FEBRUARY 1944, OUR GROUP WAS ON A MISSION TO BOMB THE AIRCRAFT FACTORY AT REGENSBURG, GERMANY. AFTER LEAVING THE TARGET AREA, OUR FORMATION WAS ATTACKED BY ENEMY FIGHTERS, THE AIRCRAFT (NO. 42-64443), IN WHICH LIEUTENANT SACHS WAS THE CO-PILOT HAD ONE ENGINE FEATHERED, HOWEVER THE PLANE MANAGED TO KEEP UP WITH THE FORMATION. AFTER THE ATTACK LIEUTENANT GIRAUDO SUCCEEDED IN RE-STARTING THE FEATHERED ENGINE, HOWEVER THE PLANE WAS APPARENTLY DAMAGED SINCE IT KEPT SLIPPING TO THE LEFT, SOON AFTERWARD TEN (10) PARACHUTES WERE COUNTED LEAVING THE PLANE. MY CREW SAW THE SHIP GLIDE INTO A MOUNTAIN AND EXPLODE. THE COORDINATES WHERE I LAST SAW THE PLANE WAS 45°00'N-15°50'E, THE TIME WAS 1445 AND THE ALTITUDE WAS APPROXIMATELY 18,000 FEET."

/S/ JOHN E. MALARKEY JR.
/T/ JOHN E. MALARKEY JR.
2ND LT., AIR CORPS,
NAVIGATOR.

Six crew members landed uninjured near the village of Pistaline and after evading German patrols were picked up by Tito's Partisan forces. Four, including Lt. Giraudo, were not heard from and feared captured. Later it was confirmed that they were POW's. One crew member was reported to have been seriously injured by enemy fire. He was believed to have died in the crash. Conflicting military records list five POW's.

After evading German patrols, Dad was among the six crew members rescued by the Partisans. Four of the them, including Dad, were routed via the small villages of Kladusa, Slunj, Dresnik and Vrhovine to Bogdanovic, where they were reunited with the other two. The six reportedly arrived in Bogdanovic on or about February 29th and stayed there until the 14th of March.

My brother and I hoped to get a sense of the villages our father passed through. The logical place for us to start was the Bosnian village of Pistaline, near where the B-24 was reported to have crashed. But Pistaline is so small that it is not even on most Bosnian roadmaps. Fortunately, Sefik, our driver/guide, felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to try to help us find what we had come for. Though born fifteen years after WW II, Sefik was quite knowledgeable about the role the Allies played in liberating Yugoslavia from the Nazis. And having gone to war himself, protecting Sarajevo during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Sefik knew first hand the human toll.

So when Sefik set out to meet us, instead of taking the highway from Sarajevo to Zagreb-- about a four to five hour drive--he drove back roads for more than 12 hours--hoping to find Pistaline and the other villages where Dad and members of his crew had walked. Using an old map of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sefik located Pistaline. And when he arrived in this rural hamlet, he spotted a white-haired man who "looked about the right age" so he stopped to ask him if he remembered anything about a B-24 that crashed near the town almost 70 years earlier. Though just 12-years-old in 1944, Emin Hadzipasic said he remembered quite clearly. Back then, he said, there were only four farmhouses in the village. And Dad's B-24 had, in fact, crashed less than a mile from his house. Indeed, several of the American flyers had even come by his house.



Pistaline, Bosnia, 2013

Confirming that Pistaline was where the plane had crashed, Sefik continued to drive the route that a British Intelligence report said crew members had traveled. With only one exception, Bogdanovic--the town where the Partisans had hidden six crew members for 15 days--Sefik was able to retrace the 200-mile route Dad and the other American flyers had walked.

When Sefik picked us up in Zagreb, he shared with us his "discovery," so we set out to see if we too could find Mr. Hadzipasic, the man whom Sefik had met the previous day. While there are now several hundred houses that dot the surrounding hills, Pistaline today remains quite rural in character. When we got to the barn where Sefik had spoken with Mr. Hadzipasic, the latter was not there. But soon another man came by who offered to take us to Mr. Hadzipasic's house. Not reticent, Sefik went up to the door. By good fortune, the 82-year-old farmer had just returned from working outdoors. Sefik introduced David and me to him, and with Sefik serving as translator, I explained that we were the sons of an American pilot whose B-24 had crashed near Pistaline in 1944. We shared with Mr. Hadzipasic a picture of Dad in uniform. Soon Mr. Hadzipasic's 78-year-old wife Fatima and an adult daughter joined us in the yard. After asking them if it would be okay to take some pictures of their family, the Hadzipasics kindly invited us inside for coffee. Having never been in a Muslim home, we followed Sefik's example and removed our shoes before entering their kitchen, which had a small table and wood burning stove.

As we sat around the kitchen table, we got Emin Hadzipasic to recount what he had told Sefik the day before. And as he did, he recalled there being about a foot of snow on the ground the day of the crash. Though Mr. Hadzipasic did not recall Dad specifically, he did remember that two or three of the American airmen had come to their house, which in 1944 was about 100 feet from where we were sitting. We inquired whether there were any remains of the plane? He told us that during the civil war that tore Bosnia and Croatia apart during the 1990s, "gypsies" unfortunately had stripped the wreckage of any metal that still existed. However, for David and me, meeting Emin and his family was a wonderful connection with our father's past. Emin was the oldest living person in Pistaline and his recollections created an instant bond.



Fatima and Emin Hadzipasic



Emin, Sefik Gusic, and David Sachs

From Pistaline we continued on to Bas Krupa, where the Partisans were reported to have picked up the American flyers, and then through several small rural villages in Bosnia where Dad and three other crew members had been routed.

Later that afternoon we crossed the Bosnian border back into Croatia and Sefik dropped David and me at Hotel Jezero in Plitvice National Park where we spent the night. Our plan was to try to retrace the rest of Dad's route the next day so the three of us agreed to meet at nine the following morning . While David and I dined at our hotel, a popular destination for park visitors, Sefik went to a nearby hotel where he was staying and spent the evening seeing whether he could find out anything about Bogdanovic, the village that he'd been unable to locate thus far.

When he picked us up the next morning, Sefik told us somewhat excitedly that the manager of his hotel had put him in touch with a policeman who believed that Bogdanovic was near Vrhovine, a village about 20 miles to our west. Since Dad and his crew were reported to have spent 15 days in Bogdanovic, it was critical for us to find. When we got to Vrhovine, a small hamlet itself, Sefik stopped the car and knocked on a farmhouse door. The people inside told him that we were on the right track. Though there are not any road signs, they said Bogdanovic was just a mile or so down the road. As we drove where we'd been directed to go, Sefik stopped the car one more time to ask a farmer the name of the village.



The farmer told him that it was called Gornje Vrhovine or "Upper" Vrhovine. Soon a second farmer came by so David and I got out of the car to introduce ourselves and through Sefik explained why we were there. Showing the farmers a picture of Dad in uniform seemed to break the ice. Soon the first farmer said, "My name is Bogdanovic. " And then the second farmer said, "My name is Bogdanovic." This kind of reminded us of the old TV show, "To Tell the Truth," in which the three contestants each claim to be the actual person. But as we were about to learn, just about everyone who lives in the village today shares the Bogdanovic family name. Sefik asked who is the oldest person in the town? We were disappointed to learn that a 100-year old townswoman had died just seven days earlier. Sefik then asked the farmers whether there was anyone else who might remember events in the village during 1944. The first farmer said there was a woman who he thought was about 80, and offered to take us to her.

So the four of us got into Sefik's car and drove several hundred yards to an old stone farm house where the farmer introduced us to his neighbor--soon joined by her cousin, a man about her age. Shortly we found ourselves seated around the woman's kitchen table. She offered coffee or rakia, the local plum brandy. Since neither David nor I regularly drink coffee, and despite the fact that it was only 10:30 in the morning, we decided to try the rakia. The woman quickly produced three shot glasses for her visitors and a bottle of the home-brewed clear liquor. And as we sipped the rakia, we learned the mystery of Bogdanovic.



Bogdanovic family members, 2013

Bogdanovic had, in fact, been the name of the village. During 1944 there were about 30 houses in the village. The village became a Partisan base and two thirds of the homes were turned over to Tito's guerrilla fighters. The woman and her cousin, just 10 and 8 at the time, did not have much contact themselves with the Partisans. But they distinctly remembered seeing British and US airmen with the Partisans, and they had a clear memory of Marshal Tito staying overnight in their village. Because the inhabitants of Bogdanovic had aided the Partisans, they feared Nazi retribution. So to make it harder for the Germans to locate their village, they took down the road signs that were there before occupation and started calling their town "Upper Vrhovine."



Upper Vrhovine, formerly known as Bogdanovic

To this day the village goes by the name "Upper Vrhovine." But the village cemetery tells its true heritage, with many of the gravestones bearing the name, "Bogdanovic." Again, David and I felt a special connection with our father, knowing that he had been hidden by the Partisans in Bogdanovic for two weeks during March of 1944.



From Dad's military records we know that with the aid of the Partisans he and five members of his crew traveled from Bogdanovic to Korenica, Udbina, Martinbrod (all in present-day Croatia) and Drvar and Petrovac (part of present-day Bosnia) during the latter part of their 200-mile, six-week, ordeal.

One of our 88-year-old mother's few recollections of what Monroe told her about his war experience is that he and his crew would hide and sleep by day, and walk under the cover of darkness at night. But from a February 17, 1945 *Cleveland Press* article, we also had Dad's first person account of a unique encounter he had towards the end of his time in occupied Yugoslavia: "I and seven other American Air Force officers who were making their escape were led up a steep ravine toward a mountain top...About every 15 feet, an armed guard was concealed in a niche. Suddenly, we faced a house, which looked something like a hunting lodge. You couldn't see it until you were practically on it. Those of us who were armed were required to leave their weapons on the porch. A minute later we were inside, looking at [Marshal Josip Broz] Tito. It seemed unbelievable. He sat behind a large mahogany desk. We saluted and he immediately beckoned us to sit down. Tito was a dark, powerful looking man, 45 to 50 years old. He is one of those whose strength of character is immediately impressed upon you...His hair was curly and black with some gray. He was smooth-shaven but looked like a man who could quickly raise a heavy beard. On first sight, he would strike you as being fierce but he spoke gently, in a deep, quiet voice."

Tito offered the men flaky cigars and rakia before settling down to an hour-long discussion of the war. In clear English Tito spoke slowly and deliberately, asking the men about their equipment, planes and the base from where they'd taken off. "He was the perfect host...seemed to know exactly what a bunch of tired-out Yank flyers would want after being shot down in a foreign land," Dad later recounted.



Marshal Josip Broz Tito

According to a British Intelligence report, the meeting with Tito took place in Drvar on March 20, 1944 where the American flyers also were introduced to British Major Randolph Churchill, the 32-year-old son of the British Prime Minister, who was in Yugoslavia as liaison between the British government and the Partisans. Among our father's papers is a piece of Yugoslav paper money known as a Kuna or "short-snorter" signed both by Tito and Randolph Churchill.



"Short-Snorter" signed by Tito and Randolph Churchill, 1944

That night, with aid from the Partisans, Dad and his crew members continued on, arriving in Petrovac, about 14 miles north of Drvar, around 1:30 a.m. on March 21st. Suffering from "acute exacerbations of dysentery," Dad was treated at a Partisan hospital there. Now in British and Partisan hands, he stayed in Petrovac until the night of April 2/3, 1944 when he and five members of his crew were evacuated by air from there to an American base in Bari, Italy, and to freedom.

David's and my trip to Bosnia and Croatia would not have been complete without trying to find the site of Tito's former mountain headquarters. Less than two months after Dad had been there, German SS and paratroopers would capture Tito's cave in a major air and ground attack which resulted in hundreds of casualties on both sides. Fortunately for the Allies, Tito and Randolph Churchill had already fled.

What remained of Tito's original headquarters was destroyed by the Germans or later burned during the Croatian-Bosnian war in the 1990s. The Bosnian government has since rebuilt “Tito's cave” and preserved it as a tribute to him and his Partisan fighters.



Tito's mountain headquarters, near Drvar, Bosnia, 2013

Late on a rainy May afternoon, David, Sefik and I arrived in Drvar. The deep rocky ravine was too slippery for us to climb but from below we could see the partially hidden mountain lodge and the steep path our father had climbed 69 years earlier.

The lodge is above a municipal park on the outskirts of Drvar, but the area is otherwise unremarkable in appearance. But as we looked up at the narrow gorge, and saw where trees and underbrush partially camouflaged Tito's headquarters, it felt to us as if we were standing on hallowed ground. To think that Dad and members of his crew had climbed the path before us nearly 70 years earlier, and there met Europe's most effective anti-Nazi resistance leader, whose guerilla forces had protected, fed, and cared for the American airmen, and at the same time met the British liaison with the Partisans, who happened to be the son of Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Our dream of someday retracing the route of our father's harrowing escape from Nazi occupied Yugoslavia during WWII was now a reality.

Postscript

After being evacuated by air from Petrovac during the night of April 2/3, Monroe Sachs spent the next month in a hospital at an American base in Italy recuperating from dysentery and jaundice. On May 7th Monroe was promoted to the rank of Captain in the Army Air Corps. Shortly thereafter he was redeployed to the U.S. During the several months prior to the Regensburg bombing raid, he flew a dozen combat missions over enemy-held territories. In addition to receiving American and European Theater ribbons, he was awarded an Air Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster. The 450th Bombardment Group, in which he served, received a Distinguished Unit Citation for bravery and outstanding performance of duty for the February 25, 1944 bombing of the Regensburg Prufening Aircraft Factory.

Monroe Sachs's story is not his alone but the story of a courageous group of airmen, who were part of the 720th Squadron of the 450th Bombardment Group. With 28 other courageous B-24 crews they flew from Manduria Air Base in Italy on the morning of February 25, 1944 to carry out a major attack on the Prufening Aircraft Factory in Regensburg, Germany.

Member's of Our Father's B-24 crew were:

1st Lt. John C. Giraudo (Pilot)*

1st Lt. Monroe Sachs (Co-Pilot)**

2d. Lt. Franklin A. Sherrill (Navigator)**

2d. Lt. Edward J. Pomerville (Bombardier)**

T/Sgt. William C. Brown (Top Tur. Gunner)*

S/Sgt. Frank Gentile (Waist Gunner)*

T/Sgt. John Manak (Fore Gunner)*

S/Sgt. Edwin F. Grzywa (Waist Gunner)*

T/Sgt. Charles F. Barr (Ball Tur. Gunner)**

T/Sgt. Russell C. Privateer (Tail Gunner)**

Pfc. James B. Arlington (Photographer)**

*Taken Prisoner of War

**Rescued by the Partisans

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