

# Dusanka Necak

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Serbia and Montenegro

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## My family background

Grandmother Serina and grandfather Mor Bergel, mother's parents, lived alone. We had our own house which my aunt and uncle shared with us. Grandfather was born in 1847 in Senta, and grandmother somewhere in Banat, now part of Serbia. They lived alone. They had their own nice house and I spent most of my time with them.

Grandfather was a merchant. He worked in his own shop where he sold cereals and breads. He had also a bakery in Senta, and traded abroad. The employees in his shop were Hungarians; no members of the family worked there. The customers were Jews, Hungarians and Serbs, but mostly Jews because there were a lot of Jews in Senta at that time, three Jewish communities. Grandfather gave credits to everyone; he was really a good man.

In the morning on the way to school I would visit the whole clan. First, I would stop to see grandfather and grandmother where I would get a dinar or two. Then I would visit my uncle Andrija, mother's brother, who had a pharmacy on the other corner; there I would get another dinar or so. Then I would go to school; across the street there was a Nestle shop where I would eat chocolates.

They spoke Hungarian and German at home. Grandmother spoke more German and grandfather more Hungarian but he knew German. At home we spoke Hungarian. Mother spoke a lot of French with my aunt from Budapest as she also knew French.

My grandmother was a beautiful woman, simply beautiful. I should be so lucky to have some of her beauty. She was a housewife and never worked in her life. She dressed the same as they do today, but I remember that my grandmother never wore short skirts, only long skirts. And hats, of course. Grandfather had the look of a tough guy. He dressed like everyone else. He always wore a hat on his head. In the winter he wore a "Gromby" coat, and had a coat for the spring as well.



Grandfather went to the synagogue for Yom Kippur, as far as I know. Grandmother was the most religious member of the family. She kept Shabbat, ate kosher. We celebrated all the holidays in her house, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Purim, Rosh Hashanah. We ate particular dishes on certain holidays, but I don't remember the names. I remember only one special dish she used to make, cholent. That was delicious. On Yom Kippur they always went to synagogue for the whole day, from morning to night. We, children, also went. When I was 15 or 16, I had a friend who was at the university and was already, in those days, a Communist. He always laughed at me and wondered why I went to synagogue. I only went to synagogue for Yom Kippur to sit a little bit with my family and friends. "How can you believe in that sort of thing?" he would ask me. "Where is that God? Did anyone see him?" "Don't talk to me, please. Keep it to yourself," I said. Believe it or not, I met him later in life. He was a doctor. He wrote to me once, and at the end of the letter he wrote, "With Tito in victory-your Aleksandar." I wondered if he was crazy. He was just like that.

My grandparents' house was divine. It was a big two bedroom house with a living room, a salon, a dining room and a big hall. Grandmother's house was nice. Ours was actually bigger, but grandmother's was nicer. The house was heated by tile stoves which worked on wood. It was wonderful. They had two servants.

They were never active in politics. They did not know anything. For a long time I also did not know anything. Since my husband was an officer, we were not allowed to be involved in politics. I did not even know when elections were. After the war, actually during the war, I got involved in politics.

I remember that the Kohn family lived on one side of my grandparents; they were also merchants and had a big textile store. When I was 15, my grandmother very much wanted me to marry one of them. "No chance. I wouldn't think of it. God, grandmother, what is with you?" I would say. He was a good and honest man, but he was not for me. And that is how this idea for my marriage ended.

That was one neighbor. On the other side there were Hungarians, across from them Serbs, some Lolins. There was not even a little anti-Semitism. We never talked about who was what. We all socialized together and visited one another: Serbs, Hungarians, Germans. They were guests in our house for our holidays, and we went to them for their Christmas, I even went to midnight mass. There was no difference.

Grandmother did not have anyone and grandfather had a brother in Senta. He was also a merchant. My grandfather sent people to wash him, and then he did not speak with my grandfather after that. Despite that I remained in good relations with him. Here's the story of how grandfather made a big mess. He was incredibly funny and he loved to joke around. He found some people who washed corpses, and he said to them, "You know what, this and that guy died" and he gave the address, "go and tell them that you came to wash the corpse." This was his brother. When his brother heard this he was sick. When he learned that grandfather was behind it he never spoke to him again. I went to visit him, but they never spoke.

Senta had 30,000 residents, and in my opinion it was a nice place. There were a lot of Jews in Senta. I can tell you there were a few thousand. We knew each other, not everyone, but we socialized with some. We would go to their house and they would come to ours. Jews did not strictly socialize with other Jews. We also socialized with Hungarians. We socialized with the Hungarians the most. There was no anti-Semitism at all, not from any side.

There was a beautiful synagogue in Senta which the Hungarians destroyed during their occupation. 1 It was not a very religious synagogue. Behind the synagogue, there was a perfectly nice section of Senta where the orthodox Jews lived. They lived there and did not socialize with us or anyone else, only amongst themselves.

One day someone asked me, "Do you know what is new?" There was an orthodox Jewish girl named Regina who went with me to elementary school. It is a wonder that they let her go to gymnasium, because at the time they did not go to elementary school. However, she was in the first or second grade of the gymnasium. I remember her. I was already married when someone asked me, "Do you remember that Regina?" I answered, "Yes, vaguely." "She married and ran away to Belgrade with a Serb." I came to Belgrade and saw her by chance at the green market. She had a wonderful husband, a Serb from Pirot. He went to Israel every year to visit her family. He loved it there. Her family remained in Senta. They did not move. They had disowned her so she did not go home anymore. Nonsense for such a thing.

In Senta at that time Jews were usually doctors, lawyers, dentists. Very few were merchants. When I started school, there was still a Jewish elementary school. But, I did not enroll there, I enrolled directly in the Serbian school and I went straight through to the Serbian gymnasium. There was a Hungarian and a Serbian gymnasium and that Jewish elementary school which later disappeared; I do not know what happened to it. There was no interest. The orthodox Jews did not let their children go to school. In my school there were other Jews. More or less they were all rich, well-situated. I do not remember that there were poor people there. They lived well.

I don't know a lot about my father's parents because they died when I was very young. I remember that they were not as wealthy as my mother's parents. They also lived in Senta. They were religious, but not orthodox.

My mother, Tereza Hacker, was born in Senta, in 1895. In general she did not work. We had two girls working in our house, a cook and a maid. She would wake up in the morning and start from the beginning of the day to dress up. A tailor would come to make new dresses. At home mother played, read, guests came over, she went to visit friends and they made little parties in their houses. Both my mother and my aunt, Andrija's wife, lived well. They traveled a lot; they went to Paris, Prague, Egypt, Berlin and every year to Karlovy Vari.

Once I remember I had to stay at home. There was a ball in Senta. I came on vacation and I was always running around the garden barefoot and I stepped on a nail. Naturally, mother became hysterical and I immediately received a tetanus shot. That night they went somewhere, my aunt and I went to sleep. She was so beautiful, unbelievably so. Even though I was very young, I sensed that something was not right with her. Mother sent someone to check on me. She told him to knock with a stick if he could not reach the window. And he knocked with a stick. My aunt slept in the fourth room from me and she heard the knocking. I came out, went to her and she was beside herself, hysterical, "God, what is that?" She was nervous, she shook and trembled. In general, I told my mother something is not right with her.

My father, Halman Hacker was born in Senta in 1878. There wasn't a book that he had not read. He had an enormous library. He even had books in German because he studied in Berlin. He spoke German and Hungarian (my mother also spoke French). They read a lot. And there were books that were borrowed. We always had a lot of books and were always buying magazines. My father taught

in gymnasium so he did not have time in the mornings or the afternoons.

He was an excellent student in a Catholic high school in Szeged. When he finished high school he got a scholarship from the Catholic Church for further studies. He went to Berlin to study classical philology and finished his education there. At the beginning of his studies a professor noticed how brilliant he was. He moved into this professor's apartment, and in return he helped around the house. He finished his PhD there in Berlin. Although he was sent by the Catholic Church, he kept the Jewish traditions while he was there, and later when he came back to Senta.

In Senta he did not have anything to teach. It was suggested that he teach mathematics and so he taught mathematics in the Gymnasium of Senta. At some point he also taught Hungarian, because at the time there was still a Hungarian gymnasium. He was also the secretary of the Jewish Community in Senta.

Once he filled in for my mathematics professor and taught my class. I did not know what to call him, he was my father and my professor. I mainly kept quiet. In elementary school, I remember this well, first we learned syllables and then we would repeat at home what we had learned at school. One night, after hearing how badly I read, I heard my father say to my mother that I was an idiot. He did not understand because he worked with older children. At first I laughed, but then I thought about it, "Maybe it is like that. He is a professor and has experience with children; that is why he said it." Years had past, I had walked a lot with my father and on one occasion I asked him, "OK, father, why did you say that I was an idiot that night?" "Forget about that; I said it because you had a hard time reading."

My parents were not very religious. Mother fasted on Yom Kippur and father went to synagogue, and respected Shabbat. I remember that in my room there was a window with a big windowsill where he would light the candles and then bow and pray. Then I would ask what he was doing. He said it was Chanukah and the candles were lit. Father was more religious than my mother; he kept these holidays, and Saturdays he did not write at home. When I worked on Saturdays he would tell me that I should not do that on Saturdays. My son says that it was a real wonder that such an intelligent man did not teach me more about Jews. Today when I think about it I come to the conclusion that he thought there was no use from all of that. He did not teach me therefore I did not learn anything.

We celebrated all the holidays at grandmother's. We wore masks on Purim. In Senta we also celebrated Easter. On that holiday the Jews sprayed cologne water or perfume on girls. It was a custom among the Hungarians that on Easter young boys sprayed girls with perfume. The Jews also did this. Serbs did not do it, only Hungarians and Jews sprayed one another.

My parents' friends were a mix of Serbs, Hungarians and Jews. There was no distinction; there were many mixed marriages. During my grandparents' time there were no intermarriages. When I was a kid there was already a lot of intermarriage. One day I went home with the rabbi, our rabbi was Doctor Svajger. At the time everyone looked old to me. He was fifty like my father. On the way, we spoke about a Jewish girl who married a Serb and converted to the Orthodox religion. He said to me, "So what!! You know what that means. You were a goose and now you are a fish. She is still what she was even if she changed religions a hundred times."

Later when I married I converted to Orthodoxy. By then my father was no longer living. I do not know how he would have accepted that, he probably would not have accepted it well. I was thirteen when he died. When rabbi Doctor Svajger died we went to his funeral. When we came home that night my father said, "I did not feel well at the cemetery and if you had been there, it would have been easier for me." "God, dad, I was standing right across from you. I was looking at you the whole time, and you did not look at me." The next day when I came home he had fallen unconscious. He had pneumonia but there was no penicillin so they had to bring down his fever with leeches. He died in 1929 in Senta. He was fifty-one years old.

Mother had a brother Andrija. He and his wife had no children. My aunt could have had children but she did not want them. She told us, "I want my own life to live, to travel, to go where I want. I do not want to have to worry about them." She was selfish from my perspective, but anyway she did not want children. And father had a sister Berta. She had a salon in Senta, she sewed. She was poor and did not live well. Whenever I went with father to visit her it was strange. Her husband was a Jew who died soon after they got married. They had a daughter Kati who did not work. I always said to my father, "Why don't we help them since we are well-off and they are so poor?" "Those stories are not for you," he would say. My mother probably did not have good relations with her. They never came to our house, but I went to their place. I was sad for them.

## Growing up

I was born on February 25, 1915 in Senta. I went to Serbian elementary school and then gymnasium. There was a Jewish school there at that time, but almost all the Jews went to Serbian schools; a few of them went to Hungarian schools. Only orthodox Jews went to Jewish schools. I finished the fourth year of the gymnasium and then stopped going to school in Senta. I went to Zrenjanin to the "Mesinger boarding school". I was there for a year and finished the fifth grade. My mother moved to Subotica and took me with her. I almost finished the gymnasium in Subotica. Then I married in the eighth grade, much to my mother's dismay, as she wanted me to study medicine. She had nothing against my husband, she just thought that I was too young. My husband was an officer and got transferred very often, so he wanted us to get married right away. We went to Zagreb and were there for a very short time before moving to Prilep. We returned to Zagreb again after Prilep. There I went to the gymnasium to finish my education. In school they did not even know I was married. I graduated, and after this I was finished with school.

In school I adored physics but hated mathematics. God really punished me; all my life I was a bookkeeper and worked with numbers and yet I truly hated mathematics. One day my boss said to me, "Since you are on duty this afternoon organize the whole card catalogue." I had no idea how to do this. The next day he yelled at me; I thought I was such an idiot. How did I not see that they were different bills and that they could not go together. I enrolled in night school here-where, in Belgrade?. I went two and a half years, I passed the state exam, and that is how my job became clear to me. Until then nothing was clear to me.

I speak German, French, Hungarian and Serbian. I learned French privately. I played the piano for eight years but I was not interested in it at all, although I liked music very much. A friend of mine from Argentina, when she visited me a few years ago, played so nicely and we went together to classes. I did not have talent.

In school there were no differences between the Jews and the others except for the religious studies classes. Orthodox priests always came and worked with the Orthodox children. The Catholic children usually went to the Hungarian gymnasium, although there were a few of them with us. They had separate religious studies classes. Doctor Svajger, our rabbi, came to us Jews. I do not really remember what he taught us. He taught us about those holidays. He was a very tolerant man. He was not strict and did not give out bad grades so we did not need to know anything. He did not ask a lot from us. He knew my father was religious. He came to visit my father, they were friends.

When I went to school in Subotica I had to go to synagogue. The religious studies classes were there. But I did not go to even one class. At the end of the year I needed a final grade; my mother was very ambitious for me. She wanted me to be a good student. "You are not allowed to bring home fours; I want all fives!!" At the end of the year I did not have a grade from religious studies. The rabbi asked me why I did not come to the classes and I answered, "to be honest, it does not interest me at all." "How is it possible that it does not interest you?" "Are your parents Jews?" "Yes they are. I do not have a father. He died. I live with my mother. She is religious but I am not interested, and that is why I did not come." He gave me a three. That was my only three. I never went to religious studies classes. The classes were full of children, but I did not go. When I saw that I would make misfortune for myself I went to beg.

There were no organized gatherings of young Jews in Senta. I know I had friends and my mom would play bridge with their parents in the evenings and she would take me along with her. They also did not go to synagogue but they observed some holidays, nothing special. Neither in Subotica nor in Senta, nowhere did I see a specially organized holiday celebration. No one was all that interested in these things. That is why there was no difference among us. There was no anti-Semitism. We were all one - Hungarians, Serbs.

I was the only child in the whole family. Sometimes I really liked it, everyone bought me things. I didn't have Bat Mitzvah since my father died when I was 13. Where we were this was only for boys not for girls. Every holiday was special because we celebrated them at my grandparents' house. They celebrated the holidays according to the rules. On Yom Kippur, when one did not eat the whole day, we went to their place after church [*synagogue*]. Those were big dinners. Also for Purim and Pesach we went to their house. We ate matzot. There was a matzah factory where we lived. The orthodox Jews had a factory that made matzot. We ordered from them, and they delivered them to us. Then we, the children, competed to see who could eat the most. We never ate kosher. I heard the most about kosher food and kosher behavior nowadays.

In that time I had a good friend Klara Rotmiller [*nee Donat*] who moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina. We went to the same school in Senta, though she was a year older than me. She married a very rich man from Brod in Vojvodina. She died six years ago. Her two daughters live in Argentina. One of them, Mirna, was here. I have good friends in Melbourne, Australia, too. My friends were also Laci Donat, Klara Muller, Viktor Deutsch, Laci Zentai. During the winters we went sledding and ice skating on the lake. In the summer we swam all day on the Tisa. I had a small boat, we went skiing on the water. Mother taught me to swim when I was five years old. I was an excellent swimmer. We went to dances in Sokolan where they had wonderful dances. In Subotica officers came to dance with us in the gymnasium, there were dances in the afternoon. We went to Chok, a place near Senta, where we would be invited or where we would go to steal fruits from the trees. The owner of

the whole place was a wealthy Jew named Lederer, a friend of ours. During the war his estate was “bought” by Goehring. For vacations we went to the seaside, sometimes to Krk or to Italy with my mother. We traveled by train.

I met my husband, Dusan Necak, at a school dance. He came to the dance. He went with Jewish girls a lot and they called me all the time to go to these parties. Rich Jewish girls were often making parties and inviting officers. He was born in 1910 in Lika; and his mother and father died soon after that. By the time he was three he had no parents. He had an elder brother, however, he realized he could not raise a small child. From Lika he went to Fiuma (*now Rijeka in Croatia*), a command post, to live with an uncle. He was an Austro-Hungarian officer, and his aunt, I think, was Hungarian or half-Hungarian. He spoke Hungarian and German excellently and Serbian so that we did not have a problem with language. My mother did not speak Serbian only what she learned from us. My husband grew up there in Fiuma. He finished gymnasium there, then he transferred to the Commercial Academy in Belgrade, and then to the Military Academy.

We got married in Senta, in a church. I had to convert to Christianity because of the marriage, but I never became religious in that way. That is when I changed my name from Suzana Hacker to Dusanka Necak. My mother didn't complain because he was a non-Jew, only because I was too young. They got on very well, Dusan and my mother, he even sent postcards to my mother for Yom Kippur, postcards that only she understood.

We had two children, Marina was born in 1936 on the 24th of May in Prilep, and died six years ago, in 1996. Sasa was born in 1938 on the 3rd of February in Novi Sad

I was already married and living in Prilep when Hitler started. My husband hated Hitler from the bottom of his heart and considered him to be an absolute monster, a degenerate. However, in Senta he was not spoken about a lot. My mother was with me later in Belgrade and I said, “Mom, I greatly fear the Germans will occupy you in Senta”, they had already been under Hungarian occupation but no one touched them, “and take you to some camp.” I had no idea. I thought that they would have to go to some forced labor, however, unfortunately there was no forced labor, they were taken straight to Auschwitz. More or less everyone from Vojvodina.

### **During the war**

In the beginning of the war, as smart as I was back then, I went to register myself. My mother and grandmother were my guests at the time and I registered them as well. Then someone told me that the Germans were gathering people from their homes. Then I sent my grandmother and then my mother home to Senta. Then I got to know this family, a wife and husband, Jews, who lived near Terazije, above “Dusanov Grad”<sup>2</sup>, in Belgrade. One day I was their guest. While sitting at their place at lunch with Sasa, my son, a German officer came in with one of those boards on which was written “Feldgandarmerie” [*Military Police*], that they used to carry during the war. When I saw him I thought I would fall through the floor. When he left I said, “Are you people normal, why did you let such a person into your house?” They answered, “Leave him alone, he is a good man. He pulled our file from Tasmajdan.” [*the files for all the Jews were in an office in Tasmajdan, in the center of Belgrade*] So, they did not look for them. The next time I came to their place, I said, “Tell him to pull my file as well” and I gave them all the information. He pulled my file and that is why they did not look for me.

I don't know what happened to him later. He left and who knows if he is still living. He saved the two of them and me. He really did pull my file so that they did not have any information about me. I don't remember his name, not now. We used to call him Hans, but I do not remember his full name. I detested them, especially those with the boards.

While the Germans were around I did not work anywhere; I was in an apartment where my husband's family had a nice one floor villa. When the Germans entered Belgrade a man named Djoka Djordjevic told my mother, "You know what Tereza, go home to Senta, we will find someone to take you and leave your daughter here. I will take care of her." I lived with them together with my children for the first year of the war, until the Germans rounded up the Jews. Then we moved to another Djordjevic family, and from them in 1942, we went to live in my apartment on Zorina Street, also in Belgrade. Then I already had very few things; I had sold everything of value, pictures, rugs to the Hungarian embassy, that was how we supported ourselves. In 1942, I went to a post office to register for my father's pension. In the postal form I wrote I was Jewish. When the clerk saw that, he took me in the office and tore the paper up. He said that I should never write that again, anywhere, because I could get hurt.

I lost my grandmother, uncle and mother in Auschwitz. When the Germans came to take them to Auschwitz, my aunt went to the synagogue where they were locked up. They herded them into freight cars, that is what they say since I did not see it, they gathered them and sent them to the synagogue and closed them in. For days they could not get out. Who knows what they ate. From there they sent them to Auschwitz. At the Vospaus station, they went to Szeged [*Hungary*]. Someone who lives in Australia told me this because his mother was with my mother and aunt in the train. The story goes that she was already so nervous. They were already in a delivery truck naturally. He said that it was terrible. The delivery truck was closed, they could not go outside nor to the toilet. He said it was terrible and cold, and that mother brought only one blanket and she was cold. My aunt did not give her a blanket to cover up with. What is this? I saw that something was not OK with her but I did not think it had gone this far. They arrived in Szeged and that night she killed herself. My uncle was a pharmacist so he certainly gave her some potassium cyanide; he saw that she was finished. That was smart. It was the smartest thing one could have done. She would have suffered even more till Auschwitz, and there she would have gone to the gas chamber. This way she finished life there in Szeged-- a lovely memory.

During the war I was active in the Resistance. I was carrying notes, money, food medicines. I was visiting convicts. In the first apartment where I was hiding, we lived on the last floor. We had a radio, and my friends and I from the Resistance were listening to Radio London and Radio Moscow. Under our apartment was the apartment of SS officers. Once my daughter, who was mentally ill, yelled from the balcony, "Govorit Moskva" as Radio Moscow was on at the time. The SS officers asked the Djordjevic family how she knew something like that to say, but it ended well. They thought of something intelligent to answer. All the people from the group that gathered in the apartment, except for me and one other woman, became members of the Communist party after the war.

Once, in 1941 or '42, I went to buy toys for Sasa to play with. I had a big handbag from my father. On the way home, I realized I had two identical handbags in my hand. I went back quickly to the center to go to all the shops I had visited that day to ask if somebody had looked for the bag. No one had and I went home with both bags. When my friends and I from the Resistance opened the

other bag, we realized that it belonged to a German officer and inside was a list of the people that were about to be prosecuted, killed, arrested. My friends from the Resistance learned all the names by heart, then they burned the lists, and went around to warn the people. They forbid me to go out from the house for a few months because they were afraid that German officer would recognize me on the street.

### **After the war**

After the war, I went with my children from Belgrade to Senta, with the Russians, to see if anyone from my family was there and to see what was left of the house. Sasa started going to school there, and we stayed there for two years. Then when we moved back to Belgrade where Sasa continued his studies, primary school, secondary, university. He finished architectural studies at the university. I started working as a bookkeeper in Belgrade. They called me to join the Communist party, but I didn't want to. Nobody knew that I was Jewish. No one asked nor was it written down anywhere. No one paid attention to this. I told my friends in the company where I worked that I was Jewish, when I was already a widow. I was already a widow when I was 27 years old.

Sasa's peers knew that he was a Jew. He did not have a problem with his friends because of that. There was a woman named Olga Cohen, his philosophy teacher in gymnasium, who called him "Mosica." One day I asked her, "Why do you call him that?" "He is a Jew." "Yes, he is but his name is Aleksandar." She said to me, "He is a Jew and that is why." I told her, "Don't do that because if you do, you will have problems with me." That was it. However, with his friends there was nothing like this. There were some other Jews in his grade. And at the university there were even more.

Until now I never had any connection to the Jewish community. I did not have Jewish friends here. When Sasa was little he asked me if he was a Jew. "If you go by me you are, if you go by your father you are not." He started with all this suddenly, and that is why I was surprised one day during the war in Bosnia. I did not know where he was. Normally we spoke on the phone. No one knew where he was. In the afternoon I saw him on TV waiting at the station for Jews from Bosnia to come. Then I saw him a few times in the Jewish community, then he was already going frequently.

I was very happy when I heard about the establishment of the State of Israel. I thought now they have a country, and it will not be possible for something like what happened during WWII to happen to them again. But I did not see myself there.

### **Glossary**

1. During WWII Hungary occupied the part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia where Senta was. The occupation lasted from April 1941 to October 1944.
2. Dusanov Grad is an old restaurant in the center of Belgrade, in the quarter called Terazije, that still exists.