

Hana Gasic's Mother, Flora Kohen



This is my mother, Flora Montiljo. She is pictured here in the late 1930s, shortly before she and my father, Menahem Montiljo married. They married on January 29, 1939 in both civil and religious ceremonies in Sarajevo. My mom wore an intricate white dress with a long train to her wedding. A few years later, during the war, she was forced to sell the dress and the long train for 4 kilos of corn flour and a chunk of soap. My mother was born in Sarajevo on December 31, 1913 to Klara and Rafo Kohen. My mother was the youngest of five sisters and one brother. Since her mother died when she was thirteen, her brother was a very important figure in her life. For this reason she was very shaken when he was arrested at the outset of the war and was never heard from again. Two of her other sisters were killed. While she did not know for certain, my mother believed that they were taken to the Djakovo concentration camp and executed. Each year she and my father would go to the memorial services there and at Nova Gradiska because she felt that her sisters'

remains must be in one of these places. Her two other sisters were spared because they married non-Jews before the war. One sister, Ela, married a Catholic, converted, changed her name to Jela (though we always called her ?Aunt Ela?), and lived through the war and the rest of her days in Uzica, Serbia. Her other sister, Rivka, also converted, but to Islam. She survived in Sarajevo, where she worked as a laundress for Germans and others. Her husband died in an accident during the war. Afterwards, she and her children lived on the first floor of our small house on the outskirts of Sarajevo. After the war my mother rarely spoke of her experiences during those years. She kept those memories stored up inside and only shared them when pressed. My mother was a diligent housewife and a caring mother. In a secondary school oriented towards future housewives, she honed her embroidery skills and was an expert embroiderer of sheets and men's shirts. Before the war she could not spend as much time sewing as she would have liked to because she had to help out in the family business. Her father, and then her brother, had a butcher shop in Sarajevo. Amongst other things, my mother was responsible for making the deliveries. Later, she would help my father with some of his piecemeal tailoring projects. She took an active role in our local community and was a figure of authority amongst the women in our neighborhood. Many of the women in our neighborhood, mostly poor Muslims, could not read or write. When they needed to have something read or written, my mother was always their first address. She took great effort to impress upon them the need to learn to read, and to educate their children. In her own understated way, she made an impact on our small world, our poor neighborhood in Sarajevo. My mother, like many of her family members before her, spent her whole life in Sarajevo. She could not live without my father and she resigned herself to follow him, dying six months after he did, on October 30, 1981.