

# Judita Sendrei

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Subotica

Serbia

Interviewer: Klara Azulaj

[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[Post-war](#)

## My family background

My name is Judita Sendrei (maiden name - Bruck). I was born on March 4, 1927 in Subotica. Our family lived in my paternal grandmother Janka Bruck's (maiden name - Kantor) house. There we had a big yard with a small greenery. In the building there were two separate housing units. I lived

with my parents in one section made up of four rooms and washrooms and toilets. My grandmother Janka lived in the other part. My grandfather, Lipot Bruck, was employed on a homestead that he managed. Unfortunate events led him to fall off a horse and die in Subotica on May 27, 1920. We had a permanent cook and housekeeper who lived with us in the house.

My grandmother Janka kept a kosher home. My grandparents were not Orthodox but they celebrated all the holidays. My father, Matija Bruck, read the Hagaddah at every Seder. Our Hagaddah was in Hebrew and Hungarian. We lit candles on Shabbat, made challah and prepared a festive meal. My father, grandmother and mother each had their own seat in the Neolog synagogue. We fasted on Yom Kippur, and I remember that our cantor sang so well that there was not enough room in the synagogue when he sang Kol Nidre. Rabbi Gersan led the service. We lit Hanukkah candles.

My father, Matija Bruck, was born in Bacsalmas, Hungary on December 21, 1890 and died on January 11, 1961 in Subotica. My father came from a very poor family. He used to tell us how he went to another Jewish family's house for lunch every day. It was known exactly which family he would go to on which day. He suffered a great deal during his education. After graduation, he went to Berlin where he enrolled in medical school. However, during the first anatomy class, even before dissecting the corpse, he fainted. He quickly realized that medicine was not for him and he



transferred to chemistry. During the days he attended classes and tutored children and in the evenings he studied.

After graduating from the university, he found work. In the meantime, he noticed that the grapevines on his father's small parcel of land produced very weak grapes. Experimenting in the different laboratories where he worked part-time to gain experience, he invented a material for protecting grapevines. He did not have enough money to pay for registering the patent, which was called "COSAN," so he went into partnership with a friend who paid the money for him and with whom he later shared the dividends equally. He received the dividends continuously until 1934. With the arrival of Hitler, the dividends were discontinued. They still use his patent all around the world under different names, and today they are still producing it in the "Zorka" factory in Sapac, Yugoslavia.

From the proceeds of the dividends he bought a 30-hectare vineyard in the Backa vineyards, a house in Belgrade on Sava Kovacevic Street (with 14 apartments) and a villa in Palic, where we spent our vacations. My father was a great lover of Palestine and he traveled there for the first time in 1934. He was a socialist at heart. Upon his return from Palestine, with great animation, he told us of his impressions, especially about kibbutzim which he liked very much.

My mother, Magda Bruck (maiden name - Nemenyi) was born in Pancevo on August 18, 1905 and died in Subotica on February 1, 1977. She came from a rather well off family. She met her future husband when she was very young. My father was already a student, and there was a 15 year age difference between them. After primary school and four years of secondary school, she was sent by her parents to a boarding school in Vienna for future housewives, with the hope that this would distance her from Matija. But this did not prevent the sweethearts from seeing one another. Whenever Matija was passing through he would visit her at the dormitory presenting himself as her uncle. Their love was culminated by their marriage in 1926 in the Subotica synagogue.

My maternal grandfather and grandmother, Miksa and Ilona Nemenyi, owned a store in the center of the city that offered a selection of goods for sale. Their son Djordje, who was 4 years younger than my mother, owned a fabric store. He worked there until 1942 when the Hungarians took it from him. Djordje married Hedi Rozenfeld in Backa Topolo in 1940 and they had a daughter named Agica.

My grandfather, Miksa Nemenyi, died in his own home in July 1927. The stress of his death caused my mother Magda to develop Kushing's disease, an illness affecting the pituitary gland. In the course of six months Magda, who until then was distinctly thin, became very fat. One of the consequences of this illness was frequent fainting. My father took Mother

to Vienna and Berlin looking for a cure, but in vain. During that time, I stayed with my grandmother.

## Growing up

When I was six years old I went to a preparatory grade in school, because I did not know Serbian, since we only spoke Hungarian and German at home. The school I attended was the Queen Marija Elementary School, formerly a Jewish school. Many Jewish teachers worked there. When I graduated from primary school, I went to gymnasium for three years. In 1941 when the Hungarians came, my father, through some connections, succeeded in enabling me to stay in school even though a recently enacted law only allowed a small percent of Jews to continue going to school. In the school there were teachers who came from Hungary, and in most cases they were anti-Semites. They noticeably lowered the Jewish children's grades. Our friends in our grade would make fun of us. The Catholic priest, Ciprus, treated the Jewish children the best. During religion lessons, Jewish children were forced to go outside regardless of the weather conditions. But Priest Ciprus allowed us to remain in the classroom if it was cold outside. Private Jewish religion classes were taught well and in detail by Professor Vadnaj. In addition to Jewish history, he also taught us to write and read Hebrew.

In memory of the days when he was a poor boy and went to strangers' houses for lunch, every Sunday my father would invite two boys to come for a meal. His house was open for every visitor. I remember one time when members of a male choir, about thirty of them, fleeing from Germany to Palestine, came for lunch. Frequently in 1942 forced laborers from neighboring estates ate lunch with us. As a shnoder (Editor's note: Yiddish for one who gives charity), he always paid in advance and anonymously.

During the (Austro-Hungarian) monarchy, there were many Zionist organizations in my country (Subotica was then in the Empire). Especially active was the Women's Society which held various meetings, and organized games. B'nai Brith also functioned and young people participated in Hashomer Hazair or as they called it the "Ken."

## During the war

The moment the Hungarians entered Subotica in 1941, we could no longer gather in the Ken (Jewish youth club). This was when the president of the Jewish community was Dr. Zoltan Loran. My friend Alisa Francuska and I suggested that we get some wool and that we knit winter things for those people who had been taken into forced labor brigades, as many Jews had been then. This knitting usually was arranged around a lecture on culture.

On March 19, 1944 the Germans arrived in our city and I had to start going to school wearing a yellow star. My father convened a family assembly and asked his closest relatives if they wanted to try and save their lives by converting to Catholicism. I was the most vocal with my answer. I said that it was not even a consideration: "Never! I will remain a Jew until the end."

Very quickly after that my father was taken to a camp in Backa Topolo, and they put the whole family in the ghetto. After a short time they were loading us into wagons headed for Bacsalmás, Hungary. My grandmother was put in a hospital, and my mother and I took shelter in a mill where we slept on the bare ground and I contracted an inflammation of the lungs.

Through one young soldier, to whom I gave my ring, I managed to send a letter to my father to tell him where the family was located. My father in turn used the first opportunity to volunteer to register and to set out in our direction, towards the first wagon. Quickly we were transported to Szeged and later to the Strashov camp. In the meantime, my paternal grandmother Janka died, and Ilona, Hedi and Agica were taken to Auschwitz. According to the story of a witness, my maternal grandmother Ilona and little Agica were immediately selected for execution, and my aunt Hedi was on the side that was supposed to be taken to forced labor, but little Agica cried and was searching for her mother, so that Hedi voluntarily signed up and moved to the side that was taken to death. My uncle Djordje returned from forced labor in October 1945. He married for a second time. In 1946 he and his wife, Anika Hajduska, had a son named Beni. Uncle Djordje moved with his wife and son to Israel in 1948, where they had a daughter named Mirijam.

From the moment that my parents and I arrived in the Strashov camp we were no longer separated. We went from there to the work camp in Austria, where we awaited liberation. A little on foot, a little by horse drawn carriage, and we managed to make our way to Bratislava. While filling out a form at the repatriation office for registration, I came across the young Pavel Sendrei. When he heard my last name, he asked me if we had relatives in Pecuj, and it turned out that we were some sort of relatives, but not by blood. I was always hungry, and Pavel took me for meals whenever he could, sometimes even three times a day. So that he could in some way repay him, my father would invite him to Subotica when time permitted. Pavel came to visit my parents in 1946, and in May 1947 he and I married.

## Post-war

Immediately after our marriage, I went with Pavel to Czechoslovakia. On April 24, 1949 we had a daughter, whom we named Sonja. In 1956 the Jewish community received an invitation to a reception with the Israeli ambassador in Prague. Out of all of the members of the Jewish community in

all of Czechoslovakia, my husband Pavel and I were the only ones who accepted the invitation. All the others were scared to reply. At the reception we met the ambassador's secretary who had moved to Israel from Czechoslovakia in 1938 and who my husband knew from before. He informed us that the JOINT was helping, as much as possible, elderly Jews who had survived the Holocaust, but that the money could not go through the Jewish community, but rather was distributed through individual volunteers who were ready to help. We accepted this work and did it until March 1957 when the Czech government arrested us on spying charges, and later claimed that Pavel and I undermined the Czechoslovak Republic, because we anonymously sent money to Holocaust survivors.

Pavel was imprisoned from March 29, 1957 to March 29, 1959 and I was imprisoned from March 29, 1957 to November 29, 1957. It was so terrible in prison, that I prefer not to think about that period. I'm sorry not to speak about it; I cannot. After serving our sentences, life was very hard for us in Czechoslovakia. I very much wanted to return to Yugoslavia because my mother Magda lived there. I spoke with Pavel and he accepted my suggestion that we move to Yugoslavia, that is to Subotica, in December 1962.

After a year, I found work as the head of reception at the Palic Hotel. Later on the hotel changed its name to the "Patrija." I worked in that position until July 1980 when I became the acting director of the same hotel, holding that position until my retirement in 1983. Between 1983 and 1993 I volunteered in the Subotica Jewish community doing administrative work. When there are interesting cultural events, I very happily go to the Jewish community.