

# Judita Jovanovic

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Belgrade

Serbia

Interviewer: Rachel Chanin

My parents were Jews who lived in Subotica before the war, but they didn't meet until afterwards, when both returned to Subotica to find that many of their relatives and friends had been killed.

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## Family background

My maternal grandfather, Martin Rozenfeld, was born in Janoshalma, Hungary. He was deported from Backa Topola and was probably killed in Auschwitz. He had six brothers and one sister. His sister married a man named Goldner whose family had a factory in Serbia that made cooling equipment—refrigerators, freezers, et cetera. They had an ad in the first issue of the Politika newspaper advertising their equipment.

Grandfather Martin had a hardware store in the center of Subotica with two of his brothers, Ignac and Sandor. The store was successful and the family was quite well off. Ignac, the youngest brother, was the only one in the hardware business who finished university. I don't know what he studied. Sandor changed his last name to Barzel, which means "metal" in Hebrew or Yiddish. He died in the 1960s in Subotica.

My grandmother, Aranka Rozenfeld (nee Span), was born in Szikszó, Hungary in 1892, and died in Belgrade on March 7, 1981. She had six sisters and one brother. Her brother Andor moved to Mexico before the war. When he left for Mexico, his parents, Adolf and Laura Span, sat shiva (mourned) for him and never mentioned his name again, because his wife, Kato, was not Jewish; perhaps there was another reason as well.

One sister, Elizabeta, married my grandfather's brother, Ignac Rozenfeld. Elizabeta and Ignac travelled a lot. Before the war broke out, they were thinking about moving to Mexico. They deliberated too long and then were unable to leave. Ignac survived the war itself but died in 1945 from a war-related condition. After the war, Elizabeta took their three children to France as soon as she got passports, and then to Mexico, where they settled.

Another sister, Ica, went to Palestine before World War Two and survived the war there. She came back to Belgrade after the war and married Aca Stajn. The two of them returned to Israel, where they lived the rest of their lives. They had no children, but Ica acted as a mother to Vera, my mother's sister, and her children.

Before World War Two, my grandmother's third sister, Alice, moved to Mexico, where she met and married a Hungarian Jew. In 1945, they left Mexico for political reasons and returned to Budapest. In 1956, her husband was arrested in Hungary for political reasons. After this he became the general director of a large pharmaceutical company and then the Hungarian General Council in Bonn. They had two sons, Misi and Petar, who live in Budapest and the U.S., respectively.

Marika and Ancsa were two of my grandmother's sisters that I heard about for the first time from my cousins from Mexico.

Grandmother was a housewife with great talent in the kitchen. She wrote several cookbooks, including the Jewish Women's Cookbook, in Hungarian. One of her kosher specialities was a special parve (non-milk, non-meat) bechamel sauce that was made from soup and flour and could be used with fleischig (meat) meals.

The family was formally observant of the Jewish religious practices. A typical Neolog (Conservative) family, they kept kosher at home and observed the holidays. I believe that the Rozenfeld family was considerably more observant than my paternal grandparents, the Biros.

Mother had her first introduction to the non-kosher world in the late 1930s, during a business trip with her father to Kragujevac. Grandfather took my mother to a local restaurant where she was introduced to rolovana djigerica, grilled pig livers wrapped in bacon. Of course, she was instructed not to mention the discovery of this culinary delight to anyone back home.

My mother Eva Biro (nee Rozenfeld) was born in Subotica in 1923. She had a sister, Vera, who was born in 1931 in Subotica. A brother, Imre Rozenfeld, was born in Subotica in 1926. My mother spent much of her childhood outside her hometown. As was the custom among the well-to-do in Subotica, Martin and Aranka sent their daughter to finishing school in Switzerland. There she learned French and German, among other things. She left this school without finishing and returned to Subotica. For a while she worked as an accountant at her father's hardware store. In 1939 she went to London to attend a business secretary course with another Jewish girl from Subotica. When the Germans invaded Poland, my grandfather insisted that my mother return to Subotica. Meanwhile, her friend's family told their daughter to stay put. They joined her in London.

My grandfather, Imre, was born in Kisber, Hungary, in 1885. He changed his name from Mirko Bohem to Imre Biro in order to ease his assimilation into the local life. My grandmother Ilona Biro (nee Mendelssohn) was born in Budapest in 1891. My father, Zoltan Biro, was born in Budapest on March 30, 1912, and died in Belgrade on April 2, 1998. His father worked for the Yugoslav railroad and was stationed in Vinkovci, Yugoslavia at the time of Zoltan's birth. My grandmother did not want to give birth alone in this town where she didn't know many people, so she returned to Budapest, where her family lived. She gave birth in her parents' apartment in Budapest and remained there for a brief time before returning with her newborn son to Yugoslavia.

My father spent most of his childhood moving around, because of his father's job with the railway. When he was born they lived in Vinkovci. After that, from 1914 to 1918, they lived in Subotica. There, they lived close to the train tracks. My father liked to watch the trains go by. One day, at the end of World War One, his curiosity got the better of him and he wandered off to watch the trains for longer than usual. He was mesmerized by the Moroccan soldiers returning from Thessalonica through Subotica. He spent the day watching these dark, strange-looking soldiers passing through

his town, and he lost track of the time. When he returned home at 7 pm, his parents were distraught. Once they saw that he was safe, Grandfather gave him the worst beating the child was ever to receive.

When my father finished primary school, they moved from Subotica to Mostar. He completed high school in Mostar and then enrolled in law school at the University of Zagreb, where he lived in the student dormitory. I don't know whether this was a Jewish dormitory. If there was a Jewish dormitory in Zagreb at the time, he certainly would have lived there; if not, he lived in the regular dormitory.

He shared a room with a Jew named Tibor Szekely. Tibor was a fascinating character who happened to look like a short version of Lenin. He finished law school but never practiced as a lawyer. Instead he became a professional traveler and anthropologist. He wrote many books, many of them travelogues, and knew many languages. In his later years he became the director of a museum in Subotica. He died in the 1980s in Subotica.

My father finished his first year at the University of Zagreb and then transferred to the University of Belgrade, because his father had planned to retire and to move to Belgrade that year. However, Grandfather's retirement was pushed back one year, so Father spent his second university year in the King Alexandar dormitory in Belgrade on Revolution Boulevard. The next year his parents were in Belgrade and he lived with them in their apartment on Charlie Chaplin Street. During his studies, my father was an active member of the leftist students' organization, but I do not know whether he was a member of the Communist Party before the war.

He finished his law degree in Belgrade and then served in the Yugoslav Army from 1934 to 1935. His service included completing an officers' training course. After leaving the Army he began his apprenticeship with a Belgrade law firm.

### **During the War**

Father was mobilized in 1941, shortly before the Germans invaded, and soon after he was taken prisoner in Pristina. He escaped from the camp in April of 1941 and fled to Belgrade. He returned to his parents' apartment but found it empty and blocked off. When the Jews in Belgrade had been forced to register at Tasmajdan Park, my grandparents had escaped to Subotica, where they remained until they were deported in 1944.

When my father saw that his family was no longer in Belgrade, he hoped that they had escaped, and went to look for them in Subotica, where he stayed with them until 1943. During this time he worked as a brush maker at a workshop.

In the summer of 1943 he was taken to a forced labor camp in Prigrevica near Sombor, and subsequently to Bor to work in a train station. In Bor he was with Jewish prisoners from all over Vojvodina.

In September 1944, the Germans left the camp and the prisoners began escaping. Father fled to Zajecar with friends from the camp. They spent a month in the forest until the partisans came, then accompanied the partisans back to Belgrade, entering the city on October 22. He left Belgrade with the partisans and continued on northwards to Subotica. There he found that most of the family and

many friends had been killed. His parents had been deported in 1944. It is known that Ilona was killed in Auschwitz. It is assumed that Imre was also killed there, but no records concerning his death have been found.

My mother was deported to a labor camp near Vienna with her sister, Vera, her mother, Aranka, and Aranka's sister, Elizabeta and her three sons, Ivan, Pavle and Peter. After liberation they all returned to Subotica.

At the beginning of 1942, my uncle Imre Rozenfeld was in high school in Novi Sad. On January 20, the day before the raid on the city, a Hungarian army officer from Subotica recognized him as Martin Rozenfeld's son and ordered him to leave Novi Sad and return to Subotica, thereby sparing him from what was to happen the next day (editor's note: the Hungarian Army carried out a pogrom against Jews and Serbs). But two years later Imre Rozenfeld was executed in Budapest for his activities in the resistance movement. Grandfather Martin did not survive the war either.

After the war, my grandmother Aranka Rozenfeld continued to live in Subotica. However, her life was not the same and she had trouble adapting to her new conditions. Prior to the war she had been quite rich and lived a very comfortable life, and she could not accept the poverty the end of the war thrust upon her.

### **After the War**

In the 1960s, she went to Budapest and quarreled with the Hungarian authorities until they granted her a Hungarian pension. She believed that she had a right to this paltry sum because her son had been killed as a Hungarian resistance fighter. The pension was so small it hardly seemed worth the effort. She traveled as much as she could, and frequently returned from trips weak and ill. She spent much of these journeys arguing with people she met, and was even known to go on a hunger strike from time to time. At home she practiced yoga and worked on her books.

Vera did not get along with her mother, which was probably the motivation for her abrupt marriage, at the age of seventeen, to Istvan Pirnicir and their subsequent aliya (emigration to Israel) in 1948. In Israel they changed their last name to Or and had three children: Ruben in 1948, Gabi in 1956, and Daniella in 1967. The family still lives in Israel.

As I mentioned earlier, Elizabeta left Yugoslavia with her three sons after the war and settled in Mexico. Her husband, Ignac Rozenfeld, survived the war but died of a war-related illness immediately afterwards.

My parents married in Subotica in 1944 before moving to Belgrade. In Subotica my father worked for a military court in 1944 and 1945. In Belgrade, he worked as a lawyer and then held the position of judge on the Economic Supreme Court of Belgrade. After retiring he worked as an international trade arbitrator.

Mother worked for the Ministry of Information. Her boss was Veljko Korac, Zarko Korac's father. Her knowledge of many languages—Hungarian, Serbian, French, German, English—was extremely beneficial in this position. In the 1950s she left the ministry and opened her own photo news agency called Jugo Photo. This was the first photo news agency in Yugoslavia and was extremely well-known. In the late 1950s, it merged with Tanjug and became known as Photo Tanjug. My

mother was the director of this agency until her retirement.

I was born in Belgrade on January 26, 1950. I have an elder sister, Jelena Blumenfeld, born in Belgrade on July, 4 1947. Her nickname, Murci, was given her by our maternal grandmother, Aranka Rozenfeld. It comes from the Hungarian word for grumpy and was said to suit Jelena's mood and personality immediately after her birth. This name was used at home and in the Jewish community, but in all other places she was known as Jelena. I believe that their friends in the Jewish community did not know, and maybe still do not know, that Murci's real name is Jelena.

Throughout our early childhood, Jelena and I spent a lot of time at our maternal grandmother Aranka's house in Subotica. During these extended visits we would speak mostly Hungarian, and when we returned to Belgrade we would continue speaking Hungarian. So, before beginning school we spoke mostly Hungarian, and after that, almost none. This was an unsettling irony for our mother, Eva. Although it was her mother tongue, after the war she tried to limit the amount of Hungarian she spoke, in protest of the horrors that Hungarians had committed against the Jews. Her commitment was overcome by nature, and she and my father continued to speak Hungarian at home. She remained committed to the idea that her daughters should not speak Hungarian, and hearing us speak Hungarian after trips to our grandmother's house frustrated her. It can be assumed that she was pleased when we began school and ceased speaking Hungarian. Today, I do not speak Hungarian, but I believe that if I were in a Hungarian-speaking environment for a few days, I would once again pick it up.

Jelena and I grew up aware of our Jewishness and had contact with the Jewish community, but our family was not observant of any of the Jewish practices. Our religious observance was limited to the Purim and Hanukkah social celebrations in the Jewish community, although we did have friends from the community. Our grandmother, Aranka, was more observant. While I do not remember spending any holidays with her, I'm sure that Grandmother observed them to some extent, including lighting candles and fasting on Yom Kippur.

I completed the university in Belgrade with a degree in pharmacology and currently work as a pharmacist in the Jewish community. I was married to Nebojsa Jovanovic, a journalist for the Tanjug news agency, who died of cancer in 1998. We have two children, Djordje and Jelena, who live with me and our golden retriever, Benjamin, in Belgrade. Djordje and Jelena are students at Belgrade University, and in their spare time, Djordje practices and performs with his rock band and Jelena gives aerobics classes.

My sister Murci currently lives with her husband, a Jew from Subotica, and their two children, Adam and Lily, in New York City, where her husband does research in a NYU laboratory.

Many members of my parents' families were killed during the war. Some escaped by leaving Europe before the outset, some survived. Today, I have family in Yugoslavia, Europe, Israel, the U.S., Mexico and elsewhere.