

# Suzana Petrovic

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**My name is Suzana Petrovic, nee Hacker. My earliest memory is of my grandfather, Karolj Karl Hacker, and his wife, that is my grandmother Berta Hacker, nee Goldgruber. They lived in Pancevo, but their origins are from Kovacica (an ethnic Slovak village in Vojvodina) where great-grandfather and great-grandmother lived. I do not know anything about them except their names, which appear on the family tree.**

[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[After the war](#)

## **My family background**

Grandfather Karl sold large agricultural machines and grandmother was a housewife. They had three sons and four daughters. The eldest son was my father, Ernest, the second Bela , the third Samjuel or Sam. The sisters were Marija (married name Varga), Irma , Jolan and the fourth I do not know exactly what her name was. She died very young, at 16, so I do not remember her nor do I know anything about her from stories.

All the children were born in Kovacica. Concerning my paternal aunts and uncles, relatives from my father's side of the family, I know something about Bela Hacker who lived in Novi Sad. He was married to Melita, both were taken to Auschwitz. Unfortunately he did not return; she returned and went to Israel, she married again, had a poultry farm and died there. They did not have children.

My other uncle Samjuel or Sam, was the youngest of my grandfather and grandmother's children. He was killed in Pancevo by the Germans at the Jewish cemetery while trying to escape and flee to Belgrade.

Of my aunts I remember the eldest, Marija Hacker (married name Varga). She had three children: Djordje who was killed during the war, Lilika the youngest was in a camp, survived the war and went to Israel, and then there was Steva who lived the longest of all of them. For some time he was the director of the post office in Belgrade and died of a heart problem.

Joli or Joland also lived in Novi Sad. She was married to a man named Lang and they had a son, Ervin, who lives in Israel. He worked until his retirement at the airport as a telegraphist. Aunt Irma, who the youngest of the children except for the one that I said I have no information about who died, she was first married in Bacska Topola to a doctor. From that marriage she has a son Djordje who was a dental technician and who died a few years ago in Loznica.

Aunt Irma divorced and married in again in Budapest to a rich factory owner who had a factory that made parts for motor bikes. She lived the longest. She survived the war in Budapest while the rest were all killed in the camps. She lived to be eighty some years old and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Budapest.

As far as I know, grandfather Karl, grandmother Berta and Marija from Belgrade were taken to Sajmiste and killed there, while aunt Jolan and Bela were killed in Auschwitz, Samjuel was killed in the cemetery while fleeing. Naturally, my father was also killed which I will speak about a little more.

My mother Ilona Hacker (nee Frid) was born in Szentes, in south-eastern Hungary. Her parents were Karl Frid and Jolan Klajn and they lived in Szentes. Grandfather was a clerk, a bookkeeper in a big company and grandmother was a housewife as were all women at the time. My mother was the eldest daughter and she had a younger sister, Elizabet, who was also married here in Yugoslavia to a man named Slezinger. They lived in Zenta. He was a wheat merchant, and she was a housewife. I have two cousins from that marriage, they both survived the war in Yugoslavia and afterwards went to Israel. One died three or four years ago. He was a rather successful painter and the other is still alive. He was a surveyor who lived in many places around the world but mainly in Ghana, Africa, but now lives with his family in Israel. That would be my closest family.

Concerning grandfather and grandmother, my memory of them is a little fresher because when there was the infamous raid in Novi Sad in January 1942 my parents sent my brother and I to live with her parents in Szentes thinking that we would be safer there, so that I spent two years there until we went to the camps, which I will talk about later. This would be everything about my mother's family.

My paternal grandfather and grandmother came from a rather religious family, one distant relative was even a rabbi. They cherished the Jewish holidays including Shabbat. My father was very religious and the last letter that he wrote from the Russian front, he constantly mentioned God and in fact was looking for help from God. They observed all the Jewish customs to a great extent. Concerning clothing, they wore urban dress.

Pancevo was a relatively small place, but since it was close to Belgrade one could feel that influence. Looking at photos they had something modern in their manner of dress. Except for the fact that they observed the Jewish holidays, I do not remember other things because I was too young. I cannot even remember what the house looked like inside. I only know that it had a big

garden, a big storage area where grandfather kept the machines he was selling and that the house was big because they had a big family, which got together during the holidays. With respect to language grandfather and grandmother spoke German, maybe Yiddish, while all the children in addition to German spoke Hungarian and Slovak because they were born in Kovacica which was still a Slovakian village. But primarily German and Yiddish were spoken in the family.

Mother's parents lived in Szentes, a small town, not a big city nor a village. They lived in the center of that small town in an L-shaped home. The house had entrances on two streets, built half in village style half in small town style, with a large terrace and 4 or 5 rooms. Most of life was spent in one room, the rest served more or less as decoration. They were a middle class family-- neither rich nor poor. The daughters were educated in the sense that my mother's sister finished secondary school for girls, as it was once called, and my mother finished the gymnasium. She wanted to study at the university, but that summer she married and nothing came of her studies. Grandfather was a bookkeeper in a big textile department store and grandmother was at home and took care of the house. There was a wonderful, big garden filled with fruits, flowers, a chicken coop. My parents sent my brother, who was ten years older than me, and I here every summer because it was on the River Tisza and it was a pleasant place for relaxing. Grandmother had a big pantry and always fed us well. In contrast to my father's family they were less religious. Naturally they went to synagogue for all the big holidays and they observed all the holidays, but they were not religious to the extent that my father's family was.

My mother was born and lived all her life in Szentes, Hungary until she married. My father is from Pancevo (Pancsova in Hungarian) and born in Kovacica (Antalfalva in Hungarian). Their rapprochement and how they got to know each other is a rather interesting story. Namely, my father liked to dress well, to enjoy himself, to live well, he spent most of his part of the inheritance supporting that life style. He was supposed to go to Arad, Romania, to marry a rich Jewish woman. They sent him there and he went, however as the story goes, the young woman in question had money but not looks and my father who was, as I said, a fop, liked all things beautiful including women, and this woman did not suit him.

In the meantime, my mother graduated from gymnasium in Szentes and wanted to study pharmacy. She went to a pharmacy to get some experience before the university. There love developed between her and the pharmacist's son. However, the pharmacist was a Hungarian (not Jewish) and this sparked problems between the sides. In those times, mixed marriages were rare and the pharmacist did not want his son to marry a Jew nor did my grandfather and grandmother want my mother to marry a Hungarian. To somehow break them up they sent my mother to Arad, Romania for the summer to her aunt's, that is grandmother's sister who lived there.

Naturally the young people went out at night. My mother was very beautiful with long wavy black hair, big black eyes, and beautiful in the way a twenty year old woman should be. My father noticed her on the first night, he secretly followed her home and already the next morning a bouquet of flowers arrived which was so big it barely made it through my aunt's door. Love was born on both sides, since my father was also very handsome and funny—a genuine character. They fell in love with one another and were engaged immediately. Neither set of parents had any idea what was going on. My father returned home, and naturally instead of a rich bride he came to tell them that he was going to marry a young beautiful girl who had a very small dowry but whom he

loved.

His parents were worried, but in the end they had to accept this and after a few months, a wedding reception was held in my mother's house in Szentes. It was a big and lovely wedding, which took place in the synagogue. Afterwards they went to Pancevo, to father's family, where the next year my brother was born. They spent two or three years in Pancevo in my father's parent's house. After that, my father, who finished a two year mechanical engineering college either in Prague or in Budapest, received a job in Skoplje, Macedonia, to represent a company that sells big electric turbines, agricultural machines. He was the director there and they lived there for sometime. In 1934 they moved to Novi Sad, where they were remained until the raid in 1942.

## Growing up

I was born in 1935 in Novi Sad. We always lived in the center of town. We changed apartments from smaller to bigger or from bigger to smaller, based on how my father's work advanced or declined. We belonged to a middle class intellectual urban family. My parents were part of Jewish life in Novi Sad. My father and mother had permanent seats with a plaque marking them in the synagogue. Father, since he came from a religious family, continued to observe Shabbat, go to synagogue, celebrate the holidays, fasts and the like. That was up until he was taken into forced labor.

Our apartments always had three to five rooms. My brother went to elementary school and then gymnasium. He studied painting and violin.

I was a little girl and I went to an English kindergarten. I had a governess because immediately before the war father's work was going well and it allowed us all these things: I went to the English kindergarten, had a governess and a girl who took me on walks. Before the war we were a family of considerable means from every perspective. I do not remember details because I was young but looking at photos which were saved I see that they socialized mainly with Jewish families and there are photos that show that my brother participated in the Purim parties that were organized by the Jewish community. As a youth he was involved in Jewish events around the synagogue and Jewish youth.

## During the war

Until the war they lived without any special problems. When the war broke out, during the time of the raid, when the oppression of the Jews began, then complications arose and my parents moved us to Szentes, thinking that it would be safer there.

While my brother was in gymnasium (high school), he joined a secret communist youth group. They were engaged in causing as much trouble as they could to the Hungarian occupation forces, and they threw nails under their trucks. It turned out to be a rather large group of Jewish youth, and they were all arrested and two were given the death sentence, the rest were given between three and seven years in the Csilag prison in the center of Szeged. This is how they survived the war and the deportations.

On strange fact is that the Hungarians running the prison allowed the boys to celebrate the Jewish holidays. After all, they were only children of 16-17 years old, and they allowed mothers to come

and bring them food for the holidays. I went with my mother and the mother of Vlada Rodbart (they had a daughter the same age as me who was killed in Auschwitz) and we went to Szeged and brought food the big holidays.

This is an interesting detail: my brother had a rich stamp collection, postal, numismatics, which my mother took to Hungary thinking that it would be more secure there. She also took the family jewels, fur coat and that violin which was not a Stradivarius, but of very fine quality. She took everything to grandmother, considering that they lived in a house. Grandfather, not wanting to dig up his prize garden, did not bury them. Instead he put them in the attic behind a beam. While they were in the camps, drunk Romanian soldiers broke into the home which had been bombed, as were all Jewish houses, and all was burnt inside. When grandmother returned from the camp she found only the remains of the fire. For instance, the diamonds burned slowly and turned to dust when they were touched, because it is coal by its chemical structure, and the fur was like hair. The fire slowly smoldered because no one extinguished a fire in a Jewish house, it was not allowed or they did not want to. All the jewelry was destroyed. Maybe if it had remained here it would have survived. In any case, it was all destroyed.

My father was taken, in 1942 to a work battalion, Munkasi, they were called then in Hungarian, to the Russian front from where he wrote the last time in January 1943. He wrote from near Kiev. Mother from time to time managed to send him packages and letters, however from January 1943 no letters nor information arrived and after the war she heard from one of the rare survivors that he died but it is unknown how. Winters were severe there, did he die from cold? Some told us that one group went to clean mine fields in front of the German soldiers so that the Germans would not step on the mines instead the Jews would. Which means maybe he died of cold, maybe he stepped on a mine or simply wandered off somewhere.

When they took my father away my mother tried as much as she could to continue his work, but then in April 1944 all the Jews of Novi Sad were deported.

Luckily she was not deported to Auschwitz, rather to Austria where she was put in forced labor digging irrigation canals. Then she was taken to Theresienstadt where we were reunited.

For my early childhood, again I return to Szentes where, as I said before, we were taken when the January 1942 raid occurred. My brother was captured, I remained there and I finished the first, second and third grade of elementary school. The fact that we spoke Hungarian and Serbian parallel in our house helped ease the situation. My father knew German since it, or Yiddish, was his mother tongue. However in Novi Sad we no longer spoke German at home. Since mother was born in Hungary it was normal Hungarian and Serbian were spoken at home. From that side I did not have problems when I went to school in Szentes.

Since these were already the war years, as a child I went to Jewish school, because we were divided. That Jewish school did not have special grades, since it was a small place with not very many students. Throughout the villages all four grades were together. The teacher, who was also a Jew, had to know who to teach what to and what material to ask which students about. We were all practically in one space, but that was four grades. I learned to write Hungarian and grammar and I only continued with Serbian in school after the war, when I came back from Theresienstadt. In Szentes we learned to write and read Hebrew, all connected to Jewish history and customs and

naturally general history and subjects. I was there until March 1944, when all the Jews, not only in Szentes but also in other places, were taken to the ghetto.

The ghetto in Szentes was isolated from the rest of the town. We took the minimal amount of things, clothing and I even brought my dog with me. So to me, this was simply like moving to a new place, but we could not move around. We were there a month, until the end of April or the middle of May, when there was a decree that all the Jews from that area of Hungary were to be deported.

First we were deported to Szeged, since Szentes was nearby. We were deported to a brick factory where we were held temporarily, and from there the transport to the camps began. For those who lived in Hungary, at least in that area that I know, deportation did not go in the direction of the infamous camps, rather the deportation went to Austria even though we were taken in cattle wagons, closed and sealed.

As I was born on July 1, I celebrated my 8th birthday in the transport. I received a cookie from a woman on the train for my birthday. That is the one birthday present that I remember, all the other more expensive and more valuable presents given to me over the years I have forgotten. We were without water, without the possibility getting out to take care of our physiological needs, there I received that cookie. There were eighty of us in that small wagon; around me people died. There was not enough room for us all to lay down so we laid down and stood in shifts. There were many different and old people who died there; they took ill and we did not know where we were going. The trip lasted a fairly long time and finally when we arrived at the destination we were happy because we saw that we did not arrive at one of the big camps, rather we arrived at a small place in Austria called Wiener Neustadt, 60 to 80 km from Vienna.

It was a small picturesque place where there was a factory. A large group of us were put up in that carpet factory. I was there with my grandmother and grandfather. Grandfather worked carrying carpets even though he was almost 70 years old. Grandmother mended socks probably for soldiers on the front, and she knitted with all the other women. Our whole group was from Szentes and we got to know one another. We were put up in something like an attic, with sloped roofs and windows that looked into the sky. We were on straw mattresses which were infested with fleas, bed bugs and other pests but again we were happy that we were here and secure and that we would live to see the next day. We children went to some other factory or big building, this faded from my memory and there we brought lunch in big containers to all the Jews who stayed in that factory. That was our children's duty. The rest of the time we spent playing, we did not take that time seriously.

Naturally every night airplanes flew by and since the end of the war was growing nearer, the bombing came quite close. We waited in that manner until sometime in May, practically a year from the time we left for the camps, when they took us again, put us in wagons and took us to Theresienstadt, or Terezin, in the Czech Republic.

We were put up in those big military barracks that were all over Theresienstadt. It was an old Austrian army fort. Even after the Soviet Army liberated us, we were kept in these horrible barracks for a while. Our immune systems were weak, there was a big mass of people and bad food. Diseases and infections were spreading and we remained in quarantine.



The thing that is most touching is that my mother, who had been in a work camp in Austria, had also been brought to Theresienstadt, and she was working as a volunteer nurse (even though she did not know anything about medicine).

She wore a band which allowed her to move between the quarantined buildings. One day, a few days after we were liberated, she came across a woman. She told my mother that she remembered her when she was still a child, and she said to her that her daughter and parents were there. My mother was shocked.

She found us and she immediately took me and somehow smuggled me into her barracks because they were a bit better equipped, there were medicines and better food. I contracted pneumonia and immediately I received American penicillin. Problems concerning the transport home arose, because the majority of people in Austria were from Hungary or Vojvodina. We received a specific time period when we had to start home, but grandmother and grandfather had to go to Szentes and mother and I to Novi Sad. Since all the tracks were bombed we traveled five or six hours and then we transferred to another track. In general the whole trip, which today would take 18 hours at the very most, took us three weeks. On the journey we contracted lice and scabs and toward the end we traveled by horse drawn wagons, but this time, we were no longer sealed off, we received water to drink and food to eat, and we could go to the WC, to get out when the train stopped.

We were allotted a small place to stay in the car, as was everyone, and our place was near the door. Since my pneumonia still had not passed, my grandfather laid against the door to protect me since I was fragile. When I woke up I wanted to wake my grandfather but I saw that he was dead. This is something that very seriously influenced me.

There, in Galanta where the Jewish community was already formed, they took grandfather off the train and buried him according to the Jewish customs. Afterwards grandmother went to visit his grave.

We continued the trip. When we came again to the border between Yugoslavia and Hungary my grandmother got off at Szentes thinking that she would find her house and all the things that we hid in it, but as I said before she found it burned, so that she was alone, homeless and broke in Hungary. We went to Budapest with that transport before we went to Novi Sad. In Budapest aunt Irma Hacker, from my father's side of the family, lived and she still had her apartment and all her things, because she was not deported. She fed us, dressed us, we were literally infested with lice and scabs, she brought us back to order.

## **After the war**

When we returned at the end of June 1945, we learned that my brother had survived the Csilag prison, that in 1944 he and his friends escaped. They joined the partisans and they fought on the Sremski front, which was on the Serbian-Croatian border. After waiting a year we understood and we heard that my father was no longer alive. That left four of us, which for a Jewish family, was quite a large number.

When we returned, we did not find anything left in our apartment. Someone else was living there and our things had been taken off in all directions. For a while, we lived with a Hungarian family who had saved all my mother's papers. Soon we received housing in the Jewish community

building, right next to the synagogue, where my mother and I remained until I finished my university. We shared a flat for a while with another Jewish family, and my mother got a job working in the community kitchen.

Even when she had the opportunity, she never wanted to move back to her apartment and she died in her flat in the Jewish community center in 1973.

As for Ivan, my brother, he completed school, then went off to the university in Belgrade. He enrolled in geology at the Belgrade university and he stayed in the Jewish dormitory at 19 Kosmajaska Street, where students who were in the war stayed or those that lost their parents or those that did not have where to be. There he spent three to four years. Unfortunately, mother was unable to help him, on the contrary he helped us by sending us cans of food and other food products which the JOINT and other Jewish organizations distributed. At some point he interrupted his studies and he came to Novi Sad where he enrolled in a teacher's college in the mathematics department and he finished it. Afterwards he married and had two children, a son and a daughter who live here in Novi Sad. Ivan died quite young, at 59 years old. He had never gone very far at work, and we knew why. Not long after he finished university, Ivan was so disappointed with the communist party that he turned his party book back in and resigned. This was noticed. His job advancement stopped, even though all his Jewish friends in the party went on to much higher positions.

My aunt, that is, my mother's sister and her family, also returned from Austria. Before WW II Aunt Elisabeth was a housewife and my uncle Lajos Slezinger a grain trader. They had lived in Szentes. Their son Djordje was born in 1930 and Pali in 1932. They went to school in Szentes. When there was the first Jewish emigration to Israel my aunt, uncle and two sons signed up to go and then my grandmother who at the time was in Hungary and did not want to come to us, also signed up to go.

Grandmother lived to the age of 86, which means that she had a nice old age despite all of the terrible things she survived. She died in Israel. My aunt and uncle lived in Herzeliya and died there. Concerning their children, one was a painter with a big family, which he left behind. The other son also had a big family and he is still alive there.

I finished gymnasium in Novi Sad. I wanted to study medicine but the only faculties in Novi Sad were law and philology so I decided to go to Belgrade. I did not manage to enroll in medical school, however, rather the faculty of natural sciences in the chemistry department, which I finished.

My material means did not permit me to live in private housing but the Jewish dormitory still worked and I lived there. I socialized only with the Jewish youth in the dormitory. Since we lived above the synagogue, we became aquatinted with the Jewish customs, generally about Judaism and history. Since I loved to sing, I sang in the choir of The Jewish Community named »Braca Baruh«, until the end of my studies.

Before the end of my studies, I met my future husband. After finishing my studies I came with my husband to Novi Sad, we married and he worked at the chemical engineering faculty as an assistant. Since I was a year younger, I graduated later and then began work at the same faculty in 1961 as an assistant in biochemistry. Until I married and afterwards I continued to live together with my mother in the part of the apartment in the Jewish community building, until I received an



apartment from the university.

In 1967, I had a son Dejan, my only child. My career followed its course. In 1970 I received my master's degree from the same faculty where I remained until I retired. In 1976 I received my doctorate. I was chosen to be a docent, then an associate professor and finally a full professor, that is a normal university career which is an integral part of that profession, until I retired in 2000. During my career I conducted more than a 100 scientific works and publications, I wrote several seminars for students. I had a large number undergraduate, master's and doctoral students. I conducted research on enzymes and a new branch today of popular biotechnology until I retired. After retiring I wrote a book "The Story of Kombua" about a traditional drink. The book, which is not available here but which created a great interest and a wide audience. I wrote the book because for ten years I researched this traditional drink, which comes from the Far East and helps prevent a large number of diseases. That problem is spreading today around the world, a book exists how to use the drink in developed and western and eastern countries and that book is my contribution in the sense that people can use this as a prevention and live happy and long lives.

I spent a good deal of my life in the building of the Jewish community where after the war I finished my schooling and married. I was going to that building, where my mother lived, until her death in 1973. At that time only Jews lived there, but later, non-Jews began to live there as well. Today the office and club of the Jewish community is there as it was before. Since I was in Novi Sad I have always been a member of the Jewish community. I go there today. I even eat there and since there is a rather active social group in Novi Sad I am a member of the women's section. We organize lectures, that is how I fill my time, and all the time I remained connected to this Jewish association.

There were never many Jews in Yugoslavia after the war, and of those, many did not involve themselves or their children in the Jewish community. That was not the case in our family. I can say that Dejan grew up inside our community. He attended children's programs, went to the community camp on the Adriatic at least seven years, became a youth leader, and eventually, in Belgrade, went to work for the Jewish community. I am most proud to say that my son had the first Jewish wedding, conducted by a rabbi in Belgrade, since longer than anyone could remember.

At the end, when I look back on my life, I can say that I am rather satisfied. I had a relatively nice, settled private life. I achieved the maximum in my field of work. I never had any unpleasant experiences because I was a Jew. I never denied it and I never was ashamed of it. I fit into the society in which I lived, everywhere people received me nicely regardless of religious or national affiliation. Except for the Holocaust, which I survived, I never had an unpleasant situation. Taking into account that which I survived psychologically and physically in my childhood I feel good and I think that I can be satisfied with my life up to now.