

# Vera Erak

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Zemun, Serbia

Interviewer: Klara Azulaj

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## My family background

My name is Vera Erak and I was born in 1925 in Zemun. My father, Ilija Erak, was born in 1890 in Zemun; and my mother, Edith Erak (nee Bondy), was born in 1903 in Zemun.



We lived in Zemun in a beautiful one story house, which, unfortunately, did not have a garden, only a small courtyard. It was a three-room house and my governess and our maid lived with us. My parents had a mixed goods store where they both worked, so that the governess took care of me and we had a maid that cooked and cleaned the house. I remember that we had two big dogs, Dobermans, who were my best friends. When the governess had work to do in the house, she let me stay in the courtyard with them because they took care of me and followed my every move. We did not keep kosher, but we celebrated all Jewish holidays. Mother regularly went to synagogue, and when I grew up a bit she regularly took me with her. My father, even though he was not a Jew, respected my mother's desire to observe the Jewish regulations, and to raise me in that spirit.

My maternal grandfather and grandmother were Ashkenazic Jews. Grandfather Markus Bondy and his parents came from Hungary. He was born in 1866 to a very prosperous family. When they moved to Zemun, they bought a one story house and a big store. Very quickly he became widely known as a capable and honest merchant. He had a fancy-goods store and in it he stocked quality goods which came from Paris, Vienna and Budapest. Grandfather Markus attended the Commercial Academy and he spoke German, Hungarian and French perfectly. I do not have any pictures of him, but my mother described him as a slim dark man with a thick black moustache. As a respected citizen, he was elected to be a deputy in the Magistrate of Zemun in 1912. Documents concerning this are on display at the Native Lands Museum of Zemun and Surroundings. At the outset of World War One, my grandfather enlisted in the Serbian army, voluntarily, because he was a great patriot. Unfortunately he was captured by the Austro-Hungarians and taken to a prison in Prokuplje, where he died of typhus in 1916.

My mother's mother, Minna Bondy (nee Weiss) was born in 1880 in Vrpolje, Croatia. She was a blonde and was considered one of the most beautiful girls in Zemun. When she married my grandfather Markus, she helped run his store. Since the store was very big, there were always two assistants and two trainees. While she was in the store, their four children were watched by the governess, Olga, who at the same time took care of the entire house with the help of one maid. In the family they celebrated all the holidays. Grandmother and Grandfather also went to synagogue.

Grandmother Minna was considered a big benefactress. Every Pesach she dressed poor children from head to toe, regardless of whether they were Jews or not. She had a bad gallbladder and had it operated on at the Zivkovic sanatorium in Belgrade. Soon after that she developed a blood sugar problem and died of complications from diabetes in 1920. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery. The cemetery caretaker was a German named Geringer, who described my grandmother's funeral. He said that a large number of the citizens of Zemun came to pay their respects. Incidentally, it is because of Geringer that the Zemun cemetery was protected from destruction. In the old part of it are the remains of the grandmother and grandfather of Theodore Herzl. The remains of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies killed at Sajmiste (editor's note: a German run concentration camp just outside Belgrade) are also buried there.

The eldest of my grandparents' four children was Jakob, nicknamed Zaki. My uncle Jakob was born in 1901 in Zemun. He attended a Jewish elementary school and a gymnasium in Zemun and he graduated from the Economics Faculty in Belgrade. He worked as the commercial director of the Ta-Ta commercial company in Belgrade. He lived as a tenant. At the outbreak of World War Two, a proclamation arrived which stated that everyone had to register in their place of residence before 1918. Jakob registered in Zemun, and at the same moment they took him into forced labor. He worked on cleaning up the debris from the bombing of Zemun (from the German air raids of April 1941). In mid-1941 he was taken to the Jasenovac concentration camp, from where he did not return.

After Jakob, Robert Bondy was born in 1902 in Zemun. He went to a Jewish elementary school and then to a commercial secondary school. He was employed by the bookstore owner and publisher Geca Kohn as a traveling salesman. At the beginning of the war in 1941 he was taken to forced labor in Zemun and from there sent to Jasenovac. From there all information about him is lost. (Editor's note: according to the memoirs of German-born Kafka and Herzl biographer Ernst Pawel, who spent the late 1930s in Belgrade, it was Kohn who brought Europe's best literature to Serbia and ran a penny a day lending service. Kohn and his family were murdered in Sajmiste).

My grandmother Minna and grandfather Markus's youngest child was my aunt Greta Bondy. She was born in 1905 in Zemun. She attended a Jewish elementary school and continued her studies in a commercial school in Belgrade. She spoke German, French and English. Before the war she worked as a secretary in a private firm. From 1938 to 1941 she lived in a rented studio apartment in Belgrade. She did not marry. I liked to visit her during my vacations. Her apartment was nicely furnished. She had central heating and hot water in the apartment, which were not common in those days. When the war started, she and her friend Edith Weiss (who was not a blood relative despite the last name), went to Vrpolje to stay with her uncle Weiss. He was my grandmother Minna's brother, but I cannot remember his name. He was a lawyer and the owner of a mill called Roza Paromlin.

We received information that at the end of 1941, Greta was taken to the Djakovo concentration camp (editor's note: run by the Croatian fascist Ustasha) from where she did not return.

My mother, Edith, was the third child, born in 1903. She went to a Jewish elementary school, and after that she attended a school for girls. She played handball. She went to a boarding school in Vienna in 1915, where she studied music and painting for a year. In Vienna she learned of the death of her father Markus, and she came back to Zemun in 1916. After the death of her mother, Minna, she went with her sister, Greta, to her uncle Weiss in Vrpolje. The two of them helped him in his law offices and his mill. She stayed in Vrpolje until 1925, when Ilija Erak came to her uncle's to ask for her hand in marriage.

My father Ilija Erak was born in Zemun in 1890. He attended primary school and commercial school in Zemun. When the war began, he was a member of a youth organization for resistance against the Austro-Hungarian government and for the liberation of Zemun. In 1915 when that organization was discovered, the Austro-Hungarian government published a list of names of its members who should be captured. Among the names was my father's. To avoid capture, he headed for Serbia, together with his parents, who did not want to separate from their only son. My father enlisted in the Serbian Army in the Moravian division. At the same time a refugee convoy for civilians was formed, which my father's parents joined. When the Serbian Army met their demise, the people from the refugee convoy and the army pulled back through Albania together. When they passed through the Albanian mountains and came to Skadar, my father's mother, my grandmother Zorka, died from exhaustion and hunger. In 1915 she was buried in the Skadar military cemetery. The day after the death of his wife, my grandfather Stojan woke up entirely gray-haired. The military and the people from the refugee convoy continued towards the Adriatic Sea, and embarked on boats which sailed towards France. When they arrived in Marseilles, my grandfather Stojan, unable to get over the death of his wife, took ill from grief and died. He was buried in 1915 in the military cemetery in Marseilles.

While they were passing through Albania, the detonation of a bomb ruptured my father's eardrum, so that he became deaf. Because of this he was unable to continue with the military, so he stayed in Grenoble and continued his education. He attended the Commercial Academy, and to fix his material situation, he worked at the same time in a sawmill. While he was working there, a saw cut off part of his right thumb. He received cash compensation, and when he finished the Commercial Academy in 1919, he used that money to return to Zemun. He settled into his father Stojan's house, and he bought a mixed-goods store right across the street from the building where my mother, Edith, lived. Very quickly they met each other. They date their love back to those early days. When he found a place to live, he sought after Edith in Vrpolje to ask for her hand in marriage.

In January 1925 they married. The only person who was against the marriage was my uncle Jakob. He could not accept the fact that his sister was married to a non-Jew. He never again went to visit his sister, and he never met me.

Because of my father Ilija's bad health, we moved to Dubrovnik in 1928. My father sold his house and store, and with the money he received he bought an apartment and two stores, one in Dubrovnik and the other on the island of Lopus. The license for both of the stores was issued in my mother's name. My parents sold souvenirs in their stores, and all sorts of things that were useful to

the many tourists. They sold handmade fabric rugs, Konavljanski embroidery, Turkish coffeepots, bathing suits, photo equipment, etc. During the summer, the store on Lopud worked at full capacity. My mother Edith ran it. During the winter the store was closed, because there were few tourists. The Dubrovnik shop was run in the summer by my father Ilija and in the winter by my mother. After a short period my father took up photography, and he opened a small photo laboratory.

Using the treatment his doctor prescribed for his kidney stones, my father had a full recovery. Every morning he had to drink two small glasses of sea water and one small glass of olive oil. He never had any other problem with his kidneys.

## Growing up

I began elementary school in 1932. The school was called Pucka School. In Dubrovnik there was no Jewish school. After elementary school I enrolled in the first grade of the gymnasium.

My parents regularly went to synagogue. We observed all the holidays. I remember that the Jewish community and the synagogue were well attended. The rabbi, who was also the ritual slaughterer, came from Trebinja. The president of the Jewish community was a prominent merchant called Tolentino (editor's note: the last native Sephardi Jewish family in Dubrovnik, survived into the 1930s. Their house was actually attached to the synagogue, and they entered by a secret door. Their father was the city's last rabbi, appointed in the early part of the century. His three children, one daughter and two sons, never married, and ran the synagogue service each Friday night and Saturday morning until they died).

Already in 1938, intolerance towards Serbs and Jews had begun in Croatia. On one occasion the windows on my father's store were broken. My family was no longer able to survive in Dubrovnik and we accepted an invitation from my mother's distant cousin Josef Kronstein who lived in Novi Sad and owned three movie theatres named "Apolo," "Odeon," and "Rojal." We moved to Novi Sad in 1939 and my father accepted an offer to run the Rojal movie theater. I enrolled in the second grade of the gymnasium. I had a lot of Jewish friends. Lia Stark, Egon Stark, and Vera Schlosberger were my best friends. Vera Schlosberger survived the war and became a famous pianist in Yugoslavia. Egon Stark was president of the Jewish community of Novi Sad until not long ago. He held that position continuously for almost 10 years.

## During the war

We lived quite normally until the outbreak of World War One. The Hungarians issued a declaration that all residents of Novi Sad who had moved there after 1918 had to immediately return to their birthplace. On April 30, 1941, my father, with two suitcases, my mother and I went on a ferryboat to Petrovaradin and there we embarked in a wagon. On May 1, we arrived in Zemun. My father's cousin, Pavle Todorovic, who had a pastry shop on Main Street, took us in. After some time we became subtenants.

Every day my mother and I had to go to register at the Kulturbund. The Kulturbund was the German Cultural Federation and was backed by the SS. They were very strict. We had to go regardless of the weather conditions, and we waited if necessary through the hardest of rain storms so that we could sign in. I remember that Rudikka Teibl and Albrecht controlled us. Rudikka

Teibl, whose father was the owner of a big hotel in Zemun, and Albrecht, whose father had a well-known furniture store, were members of the Kulturbund. They were both only about 20 years old, but they were famous for their brutality. They greatly mistreated the Jews of Zemun, who had to come to register at the Kulturbund everyday. Rudikka and Albrecht wore red suits and armbands with swastikas. We wore a yellow arm band with a star of David on our arm. We stayed in Zemun until August 1941, until the moment that we heard that the border with Croatia would be closed. We knew that they intended to collect all the Jews, and that is why we moved to Belgrade. In Belgrade we registered in the Commissariat for Refugees. To hide my mother's Jewish name Edith, my father registered her under the name Zorka Erak. After two days we went by convoy to Pozarevac. The Commissariat for Refugees lodged in the Hotel Balkan, and then with Mrs. Agica Jankovic. We lived with Mrs. Jankovic free for some months and she treated us very correctly. She was not a Jew, but she treated us as if we were her family. Not wanting to be too much of a burden on her, we rented a small room.

In Pozarevac, I continued the fifth grade of gymnasium. Since I spoke German fluently, I signed up at the Red Cross so that I could work on correspondence between the citizens of Pozarevac and the surroundings, including their relatives who were prisoners in different German camps. At the time I was a member of the SKOJ (Federation of Communist Youth). Working at the Red Cross provided me with a cover, because I received a document which stated that as a Red Cross activist I could freely walk around the city from 8 to 12 and from 14 to 18. This gave me the opportunity to do work for SKOJ. However, the organization was uncovered and I and some other members were locked up in a Chetnik prison. The head of the Pozarevac district was the famous Chetnik, Kalabic. (Chetniks formed a non-regular army in Serbia under the control of Draza Mihajlovic, a general of the Royal Yugoslav Army. At the beginning of the war they were important as fighters for the liberation of Serbia from occupiers, but they quickly joined the Germans. Most frequently they went around Serbia in groups of three, and slaughtered followers of the partisans and innocent residents. General Draza Mihajlovic was captured, but he committed suicide before being sentenced.) There they seriously mistreated me. I constantly screamed that I was innocent, that I did not know anything, that I only went to school and that I did not know anyone. Because of lack of evidence they released me.

I finished the 6th grade of gymnasium. In September 1943, I joined the Partisans in the Second Southern Moravian Unit, which on February 4, 1944 became the famous 7th Serbian Fighting Brigade. (The Seventh Serbian Fighting Brigade was famous because its fighters participated in battles from Djerdap to Belgrade. The brigade was among the first to reach Belgrade and its fighters devotedly fought for liberation.) On the 15th of October, 1945, my brigade liberated Pozarevac. We remained there five days, then merged with the 23rd division and went to liberate Belgrade. After almost four years, on October 23 1945 at 5:00 PM I set foot in my liberated Zemun.

## After the war

I did not have any contact with my parents until the liberation of Pozarevac. All the war, my mother hid herself, almost never leaving the house. The neighboring villagers helped her and my father, sometime giving them a kilogram of flour or a little meat. After the liberation of Zemun, I rented a small truck and went to get my parents. We took the few things we had and moved to Zemun to the small apartment we were given. After demobilization I finished my schooling.

After graduation in 1946, I became employed in the military firm Planum. There I met my future husband, Pavle Ruman, and we got married in August 1946. I enrolled in the journalism/diplomacy school. I kept my own last name so that I would not have to change all my documents from Erak to Ruman. At that time you could do this at the time of marriage. We lived in the house of my paternal uncle, Milorad Jovanovic's, who moved to Novi Sad.

Our son Branislav was born in 1947. He used his father's name, Ruman, until he became an adult, and afterwards to fulfill my father's wish he took the last name Erak, because my father did not have a son to inherit his name. In 1951 we had a daughter, Vesna. We had a good marriage, which ended in the tragic death of my husband in March 1952. In the firm where he worked he was hit by a broken high voltage cable and was killed instantly.

After the firm Planum I began working at the Military Post 44/45 as a personal referent. I did not manage to finish the journalism/diplomacy school. I transferred to work in the municipal government of Zemun and in the meantime I had three heart attacks and four bypasses. I retired in 1981 with 39 full years of work experience. They also recognized my three years and nine months of fighting experience.

Even though I was a single parent, with the help of my parents, I managed to educate the children. Branislav attended a two-year electrical college and Vesna a two-year medical college.

My father Ilija worked as the head of Izgradnja's Warehouse, and in 1967 he died of a heart attack. My mother worked for a short time as a clerk and then dedicated herself to the home. She died in 1983.

After the war I helped to rebuild the Zemun Jewish community. Its first president was Albert Weiss. Working together, we gathered information concerning the Jews from Zemun who did not return from Jasenovac, and that list was given to the curator of Jasenovac. After that, Albert Weiss went to Nuremberg as the representative for Yugoslavia on the prosecuting committee.

Aleksandar Frank became president of the Jewish community, and he maintained this position for a long time. The Jewish community entirely revived itself and my children went with the other Jewish youth every summer to Hvar, Korcula, etc. In 1990 I organized the women's section in the Jewish community, and I am still the president of that section. In 1995 I helped to establish the youth section.

Parallel to my work in the Jewish community of Zemun, I also work actively at the Red Cross. I am the recipient of many awards for my humanitarian work.