

SOFIJA ZORIC-DEMAJO

I am Sofija Simha Zoric-Demajo. I was named Simha because I was born on Simhat Torah, October 17th, and in that manner I was given a nickname. My official name is Sofija.

When I was young, about five or six years old, I went with my mother to Pirot [*where my grandfather lived*]. My grandfather had a big white beard, big strands of amber rosaries. He sat on the second-floor porch, terrace, playing with the rosaries, and all around there were grapes and green grass. I did not know my grandmother as she must have died before I was born. My maternal uncle who at that time was in gymnasium, went on to become a pharmacist and studied in Zagreb. My other maternal uncle Zak was a merchant and had two shops in Nis. I remember one [*maternal*] aunt named Ester but I do not remember the rest of them. They were not married. They were beautiful and my uncle was handsome. My [*third*] uncle was a *haham* in Pristina. My uncle's wife wore a velvet and silk hat, a special Jewish hat which is still modern today. We called her aunt Bulisa. They had three children. The boy was called Majer and lived in Skopje. He was most likely killed by the Germans or was taken to a camp in Germany, Austria or Poland.

I remember my father's family. My father's mother died during childbirth. He was born in the seventh month of her pregnancy and after a certain period my grandfather needed to get married immediately to take care of my father. Only when I was older did I learn that my grandmother was not my father's birth mother, but he respected her, whenever she wanted something he did it. After my grandfather died she always asked the eldest son for help, my father. He took care of his brothers and sisters and if needed he helped them. My aunt, Marijeta, fled with her husband to Paris. The youngest aunt married a merchant in 1941. We did not see one another, she hid and I hid. An aunt had a shop in Obrenovac and later in Ub, with her husband. My uncle wanted to study art in Budapest, but he was young and spent the money set aside for his studies without restraint and returned a photographer. He ended up in Obrenovac. There was a polemic about this, but I was just a child and did not understand what had happened. I had an aunt who we called Branka, I can not remember her Jewish name. I do not know what happened to my uncle's sister in Paris from '41 onwards as we never got any mail from her. The same thing is true about the cousin in Skoplje. Other aunt was called Rakila. My aunt Rakila and her husband died. My paternal uncle Mihajlo, the photographer, died, only one daughter and a son remain alive. He lives in Ub and she in Belgrade.

My father and mother met in Belgrade when she came to visit and live with her brother. They met and married. My father was a widower. He had three children. The eldest sister was Sol Suncica, then brother Samuilo Sima and sister Sarina Jelena. She considered to be like their birth mother and she took care of them. Then my brother, Tuvi Dikica, was born. We did not know until we were older that we had two different mothers. I was named after their mother Sofija, and my mother handed over my upbringing to my elder sister, and she raised me [*Sofija's mother was ill and knew that she will die*].

My sisters were older than me but they brought me up well, as mother left my upbringing to them. To this day I remain faithful to this upbringing. I never spoke a bad word, never raised my

voice, not even to those younger than I, even though I am 89 years old. I was always mild natured, I was not a nervous person, I did good deeds. Even though many blackmailed me during the German occupation [*those who knew that Sofija was a Jew*], I forgave them after the war.

I went to the »Janko Veselinovic« elementary school on Dusanova Street. My teacher was Estera Ruso, she also taught the Orthodox children: Veroslava Jugovic, I cannot remember all the names but there were Jewish and Orthodox children in the same class. Her [*Estera`s*] husband was a worker in the Belgrade municipality and always visited us and brought us chocolates and pralines. Our teacher was lovely, beautiful. Instead of handiwork we learned drawing. Our drawing teacher was a Russian refugee. We had a mixed choir and every morning the teacher gave us an egg to drink, so that our voices would be clear. She taught us honesty, discipline, work habits. Our rabbi, Dr. Lang's, daughter also studied with us. She was my friend. I think she lived on Jewish Street, they had a house. Even though I lived near Tasmajdan, I went to her place, we socialized. In the II Women's Gymnasium we had religion lessons, Jewish. Dr. Lang came and gave us the religion classes. Before the war I socialized with Reom Aserovic, Bertica Davidovic, Greta Levi, Dr Lang's daughter.

My mother kept the religious traditions at home. Friday evening she laid down a special tablecloth, plates and napkins. It was father's ritual Friday nights to place a small present under each child's plate. The table was set, first duck eggs were cooked in onion skin, and then father would cut an egg into four parts and divide it among us children as an appetizer. He took a small glass of rakija [*brandy*], because he did not drink a lot. In general our Jews were not alcoholics, rather every day or on holidays they had a small glass of rakija, or wine, or spritzer. Then mother prepared pastel with meat, all was covered with a special cloth and when father came home from the synagogue she would pick it up and give us an egg and eventually some other small thing, naturally the food was kosher. There is not a big difference between Jewish and Serbian Orthodox food, peas, potato puree and meat, etc. are regularly eaten. Pastel was a must on Shabbat evening, Friday night. Everything I am talking about was for Shabbat evening, how it was for Friday night dinner. The next day father went to synagogue. I remember very well that for Yom Kippur we got a quince with cloves punched in it from mother. This was so that we could fast and not eat until the sunset, but I do not remember if we were allowed to drink water. Then we ate naturally kosher again. For Pesach my mother had a big trunk with metal handles, there she kept pots, cutlery, plates and other dishes which were used only for holidays, then she took those plates out and they were kosher. For Purim we dressed up as jesters, as men. Costume parties were organized for children and adults in the Jewish community. Later, even though I married a Serbian Orthodox man, I made pastel for my children, I made ruskitas wreaths from walnuts [*cookies made by Sephardic Jews for Purim*], and after liberation since my sister volunteered in the women's section a Mrs. Danon always made ruskitas and sent me some because I was burdened with three children. My children loved those holidays, of course we celebrated their father's holidays as well, but they respected my holidays also.

My [*parents`*] house or home was spacious, we had nice rooms, nice furniture. At the beginning when I was born, we lived it seems to me on Jewish Street, but we quickly moved to 45 Kralja Aleksandra where the »Madera« restaurant is today. This is Tasmajdan. My mother was in the Jewish goodwill society, they organized various tea parties, each time at a different person's house, they sang, danced and collected contributions for the poor. The Jewish poor were not

noticeable, because they were given to discretely as were the sick or those who were to be married. People gave what they could and what they knew to give. Contributions were given with songs, someone sang a song and gave a contribution. Every time wherever they went they brought cakes, made tea, hot chocolate and mother always participated in these goodwill actions. At home we spoke [*not only*] Hebrew [*and*] Ladino [*but*] Serbian [*as well*] and we spoke it correctly. We went to school and socialized. We did not think about religion, my girlfriends were Orthodox and Catholics. My friend Marija, for instance, married a Catholic priest, we did not think about what religion we were and we helped one another in school. There was no anti-Semitism at that time, maybe political but not amongst friends.

My father was a merchant and he had a shop on Kralja Aleksandra Street, on Tasmajdan, near the Saint Marks church, with suits and various other things. My father closed his store when he felt he could not longer compete with the younger and more promising people. He closed the store and lived on the interest which he had, I do not know exactly how. In our family, it never happened that the children would know what the parents did and how they got by. Elder brother had a furniture store on Tasmajdan, also on Kralja Aleksandra Street, across from the law faculty. [*He*] had the store until the Germans came to Belgrade and confiscated property. He was wounded during the bombings. He was treated but the Germans captured him and sent him to forced labor in Smederevo, Belgrade and the surrounding ruins until they locked him up in »Topovska Supa« [*camp*] at Autokomanda and later in »Sajmiste« [*camp in Belgrade*]. I heard that one or two Germans when he bent over to pick up bread beat him on the head and the rest of his body with shovels. I do not know if it is true, but I never saw him again. He was probably killed at the end of 1941. Younger brother, two and a half years older than me, finished secondary technical school, but like every young Belgradian he thought he needed to learn a trade as well. Father wanted him to be in the store, but he did not want to. He wanted to finish the typesetting trade and work as a typographer, engraver and typesetter. He worked for a man named Horovic, and then for [*the newspapers*] »Vreme«, »Politika« and I do not know where else. When the Germans came to Belgrade, they captured him and sent him to slave labor until November, December when the whole group was taken to forced labor, either in Germany or Austria or he was killed in Banjica or in mobile gas chamber, we never found out. His wife and two kids had to register at Tasmajdan, it seems to me in November when it was already deep winter, and the kids were from two to three and a half years old. They confiscated their three and a half room apartment, and they locked them up in "Sajmiste". What happened to them only history knows. They blackmailed us to send packages, we sent them, whether they received them or not is a question of the humanity of those people who blackmailed us.

My eldest sister loved singing and studied with Ms. Vinaver, who was a professor at the Music Academy. She taught her both piano and singing. She finished the humanities faculty. She knew many languages: French, English, German, Italian, Bulgarian, Serbian and Esperanto. She worked as a correspondent for a Swiss-Serbian bank until she married lieutenant colonel Gradimir Spasic. He participated as an academic in all wars, and received the rank of lieutenant colonel, he passed through Albania, he was wounded and spent 24 hours in the snow and some time before the war he was in the military hospital in a full body cast. He was in Kraljevica in all the sanatoriums and finished in a military hospital.

My sister Jelena Sarina finished gymnasium, married and was a housewife. She married Jug Nikasinovic, in 1922 or 1923. He was the head tax board in Smederevo and there they had a son Djordje. They moved immediately to Belgrade, lived in Belgrade and there they had a girl Sofija, Sonja. They moved to Zemun where he was also the head of the tax board. They hid there. The NDH [Independent State of Croatia] was in control there so it was somewhat more secure than where we were since we were under German control.

In 1934 or the end of 1933 my brother socialized with my future husband and that is how I met him. He fell in love with me and I liked him somewhat, we dated for a month or two and in 1934 we married on November 1 [*Sofija's husband wasn't a Jew and family easily accepted it*]. He was employed as Djordje Vajfert's financial director. He had a good salary, Djordje Vajfert had the Kostolac mine, actions in Borski mine, Trepca mine, breweries, etc. Djordje Vajfert died, and Dr. Granberg, his nephew inherited everything. During the occupation he helped us, and he succeeded somehow to change my name, falsify papers and erased Demajo and put Dekic, so that to some extent I was able to save myself.

I had my first daughter, Radmila, when we lived at 14 Francuska Street, on September 10, 1935 on my husband's birthday. I gave birth at home, then you could give birth at home because midwives and doctors who took care of me were good. My second daughter Ruzica was born on November 24, 1937. The same midwife and doctor did it at home. I did not go to the hospital because I was delicate, I liked that they were around me and I gave birth at home for which I had the possibility. The children were born healthy, they advanced, but in 1941 the war broke out. We lived at 1 Zelena Venac, in the »Serbian Doctor's Society« building, then we moved to Zahumska Street, I think number 37, when the war broke out. As soon as Russia declared war we fled, because I began to receive messages to register at Tasmajdan, because I am Jew by origin. If they had had found me I would have been killed like the rest of them. I registered, but then I regretted this, both my husband and I, because then I began receiving calls for forced labor. Luckily, my brother did a good deed for a woman who worked in the Belgrade municipality. She was responsible for registration and either she had the registration files or had access to them.

My husband and I decided to commit suicide, and the children too, so that we would all be dead at the same time. He acquired something, I think that they were cyanide capsules. We lived in the »Serbian Doctor's Society« building and he kept their books for free. I suppose that one of the doctors recommended or acquired them, I do not know how, those pills or whatever they were, in any case we decided to do it. In the meantime we were visited by my eldest brother who came to see how we were, to see if we were going to move, to escape and what we would do. We told him that I received the calls. He met with that woman from Belgrade municipality for whom he did something good and she risked her life and ripped up my file. She could not do that for him because that would have been too much, but my file was ripped up and I did not get any more calls. In the meantime we found a small house on the periphery and hid there.

We fled to the periphery, the beginning of Konjarnik, no one knew us there and they thought that we had fled from town to spare our two children from the bombings, the constant Achtung, Achtung. They thought that we were rich and then we had to pay off a lot of people to leave us in peace. I did not go out in the town, I was not permitted, my husband got all the things that were necessary, the neighbors and the milkman also helped us to some extent, so that we managed, we

hid in a dug-out, we slept a little in bed, but in general we managed to withdraw enough until liberation. Dr. Granberg helped us with groceries, as he provided for the miners and staff who worked for him.

On the periphery we were to some extent secure, some who knew me needed to be paid off to be quiet, so that they would not tell. My husband's colleagues and their wives all helped me to survive. They visited us secretly, they sent various necessary things for the children and me. My husband did not tell me, but I felt that there were some people who blackmailed us. He paid them off, how I do not know, somehow we got by. The Germans only knocked on our door once, that was in 1942. They were looking for a man also named Dusan but with a different last name. Before that I had given birth to our youngest daughter Brankica, Branislava, and I was still weak in bed. My husband got up to open the door and I laid covered up to my head. He told them that I had just given birth and was unable to get out of bed. When they saw the confusion they left but we were shocked and were unable to eat for a week nor were we able to sleep peacefully fearing that they would come back. I gave birth to Brankica with an unknown midwife, a neighbor who helped me went to get her, she knew her. I gave birth very quickly, without complications as if God himself knew that he needed to help me. The child was born healthy. Before liberation friends found us an apartment at 72a Strahinica Bana. When half of Belgrade was liberated and the area where we lived, Konjarnik, was not liberated, somehow we managed to arrive on foot across the bullet fire to Strahinica Bana Street and we were there until liberation, in October.

After liberation, there were a lot of Germans on the roofs, they were shooting, and the children and I did not go out, only my husband did because he had to go to the office. My sister, who before liberation became a widow, moved to an apartment at 2 Ohridska Street near the military hospital, she immediately started working in the Jewish community. I think that Alkalaj was the president, she volunteered in the women's section and social work. She collected food. Jews, who were held captive in the Borska mines were coming from there, a few Belgradians as well, more foreigners, Hungarians, inhabitants from various parts of Vojvodina. Mr. Vegner and she were the main suppliers. In a courtyard, maybe on Cara Urosa Street, there was a large kettle, my sister got sugar, beans, potatoes, onion, etc. others got other things and they cooked in this kettle for the newcomers. When all is said and done there were maybe 1000 Jews from different parts: Zrenjanin, Novi Sad, Sombor, Subotica, etc. But many of them were at the kitchen because they did not have where to sleep, no money, no clothing. From all sides we, as much as possible, collected contributions of clothing, groceries, etc. until the community was formed, the JOINT was established and others sent help. They all helped a lot Belgrade half Jews, Orthodox and Catholics, everyone helped as much as he could and knew how. Later when things were a little more stable performances for the Jewish holidays were organized. My children participated in recitations, ballet, etc.

After liberation in 1945 I met my boyfriends and some girlfriends. My boyfriends were Amodaj, he was the technical director of »Filmske novosti«, Isak Amar, he was the director of the "Terazije theatre". They told me about their lives: from 1941 they were imprisoned, I do not know exactly if they were in Dachau, Treblinka or Mauthausen –but they were with my best man Colonel Jovan Teodorovic. They had a hard life in captivity, but they remained alive. They returned like skeletons. One of my relatives, Isak Aserovic, came back first from captivity and

came to visit me when he learned that I lived at 72a Strahinica Bana. Later, in 1950, he went to Israel, he wrote to me for some time and then all trace of him was lost.

When the mining ministry of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was set up, my husband was the head of the financial section. Until the ministry was abolished he visited mines, controlled the finances, and then moved to the economic faculty and commercial college, where he taught bookkeeping. Later he taught at the faculty part-time and for some time he was the financial director of [*the enterprise*] »Balkan« and for radio and television of Belgrade until he had a heart attack during a meeting.

My eldest daughter finished secondary school and enrolled in the humanities faculty where she studied English, world literature and Serbo-Croatian grammar. She graduated and became employed with the »Tanjug« news agency as a translator, editor and journalist. She worked at »Tanjug« for 31 years before retiring. She was married to Vidojko Velickovic. They have two children, Ana who was born in 1959 and Dusan who was born in 1965. Ana finished the school of social work, finished a master's degree and is currently the assistant director of the Social Work Institute in Hartford, America. Dusan finished the electro-technical faculty and a mathematics college in Hartford. He is employed.

My middle daughter finished the gymnasium she was a secretary in an agricultural bank, and worked for 8 years as a stewardess for JAT. She married Stevan Labudovic and became a housewife. She has two children Ida and Milutin. Ida finished anthropology and Milutin is a photoreporter. He lives with his wife in Jerusalem.

Branislava, the youngest daughter, finished secondary school, then the dramatic arts faculty, film and television and was a leading actress at the National Theatre. She worked 32 years until she retired. She married Velibor Vasovic, a lawyer and famous football player, who was the captain of AJAX in Holland.

My granddaughter, Ana Velickovic-Wittig who lives in Hartford has two children. My great-grandson Robert-Bobi is almost 20 years old. My granddaughter Aleksandra is about 15 years old, and my youngest grandson, Milutin, who lives in Israel with his wife Masa, is supposed to have a son in January. So that I will soon have three great-grandchildren.

I can tell you in general, not as a child, nor as a young girl, nor as a married woman never did I experience in Belgrade, nor while travelling to the seaside, around Serbia, Vojvodina, Slovenia, Croatia, any anti-Semitism. I had friends in Zagreb and in Slovenia, and the majority in Belgrade. We met each other, with those who remained alive after the bombings, we met each other until I became old and now I have to have my grandchildren drive me to see my friends who are Orthodox and Catholics. In general, my father, my mother, my sisters never felt that someone pointed their finger and said we are Jews, a lower race or something insulting. We all considered ourselves to be Yugoslavs.