
Irena DANON

FROM SAJMIŠTE TO FORT ONTARIO



Irena Danon was born in Belgrade in 1929 to Simon and Rašela, née Varon. She had two younger brothers, Ika and Majkl-Srećko. They all survived the Holocaust.

She attended secondary school in Belgrade until 1941 and later studied literature in the US. She was married to Leon Danon from Belgrade, who died in 1962. They had three daughters.

The turbulent waves of the Atlantic Ocean matched the emotions of the passengers of the *Henry Gibbons* as the boat headed for America. It was August 1944, when President Roosevelt invited a thousand refugees as his guests, to come to the US and escape the atrocities of war. These were the only people allowed to come to the United States during World War Two.

Nobody cared or wanted to save Jews from the inferno. One person did, one young woman, a journalist with the *Herald Tribune*, a newspaper in New York. Dr Ruth Gruber cared enough to risk her own life and save a handful of Jews. She went to Europe in the middle of the war so she could personally bring and escort them to the safety of the United States.

I was fifteen years old and I was one of the passengers on the ship. My two brothers, Ika Danon who was eleven years old and Michael who was two months old, and I, especially, were very seasick and stayed close to my parents, Sima and Rašela Danon.

Before World War Two we lived in Belgrade, in an area called Profesorska Kolonija. My father had a leather goods store and a factory in Terazije. I started my schooling in a brand new, all female school, a secondary school, where we had to change shoes not to mark the floors and had to sit straight in our seats with our arms crossed across our chests. There I studied French, German and all other required subjects. But when Yugoslavia broke the pact with Germany, all the Jewish children, including me, were thrown out of the school.

In March of 1941, we had dinner at a sidewalk restaurant, watched the gypsies dance, listened to the soulful sounds of the violins and watched the youth of Yugoslavia marching in their beautiful SOKOL uniforms, supporting King Petar, who himself was about fifteen years old. Up to 1941, life was good and love was all around. But that evening the air smelled of war. On April 6, 1941, when the Nazis dropped the first bomb on the city of Belgrade, the Post Office building seemed like the safest place to hide, so everyone frantically pushed and shoved to get to the basement for safety.

When we descended to what seemed like the pits of Hell, the basement was already full of clusters of families huddled on the cold, damp, cement floor of the Post Office building. The air was foul and full of dust. Children were screaming with fright and adults prayed. Some softly, and some screaming at God. They each called upon their personal God. Each person reached across their own bridge of faith to the depth of their belief in God. "Shema Yisrael!", "Jesus Christ!", "Shema Yisrael!" were some of the sounds that emanated from the mass of bodies on the floor.

In the basement we connected with my father's brother Rafo Danon, the pastry man as he was known, and his wife Erna, and my father's sister Laura and her little baby. Laura's husband, Josef, was in the army so Laura found herself alone with the baby until she connected with the rest of the family.

As soon as the bombing eased up, my father took his whole family to our milkman's farm, to escape the German Stukas and bombs. From the little village on the hill, just outside Belgrade, the family watched, through tears of terror, their beloved city burn to destruction.

After seven days of bombing, all the families returned to their homes, the ones that the Germans had not destroyed with bombs. Except for broken windows, our house remained standing. And it soon

filled up with friends and family who were not fortunate enough to still have a home.

Shortly after the Nazis marched into the city, all the Jews were ordered to wear yellow armbands with the Star of David. Jews were being picked up from all areas of the city and held in jail cells as *taoci*, hostages, and if a German soldier had been killed during that period, two or three hundred Jewish hostages were taken from the cell and shot on the streets of Belgrade.

One month later, my father was nabbed in the street and placed in a cell as a hostage. During that period of time, I slept in my father's pyjama tops, which totally dragged on the floor. And each night I rubbed the magic mother-of-pearl button which I knew would deliver my father back to me alive. Two weeks later we were hugging my dad and spilling tears of joy.

But that joy was not long-lasting. For shortly after, my dad was picked up again by the Nazis, but this time no one knew where he was taken or if he was even alive. My mom and I were running every day all over the city inquiring about Jews who were picked up on that date. One day, as we approached the German consulate in Belgrade, my mother saw a young man, a Croat who used to work for the family. He was standing guard. A tall, slender, handsome young man dressed in the black SS uniform, with high gloss black marching boots. On his shoulder he had a large gun with a bayonet at the end. With a sigh of relief my mom approached him. She walked straight to him but, as she opened her mouth to ask about my dad, the young Croat, who seemed to enjoy the power of the uniform, took the gun off his shoulder and started shooting at us. The mother and child, terrified, turned around and, dodging the bullets, ran for their lives. The agony of not knowing where my dad was made life unbearable for me. He was my hero. He was kind to everyone and he was my dad.

After about six months of searching we heard of a group of men who had just been brought to Sajmište. Immediately we directed our energy to the concentration camp at Sajmište.

There were German soldiers everywhere. The skies were grey and pregnant with rain. The air was heavy as the chill October air enveloped the surroundings. The camp was filled with older Jewish men, or at least they seemed old, as they sat on the damp ground, reading their prayer books. Some had ragged blue and white shawls around their necks and just torn shirts without jackets or sweaters.

They must be freezing, I thought. Nobody talked to anybody, yet the whole place seemed like a bee hive, teeming with activities, as my mother and I frantically flew from one person to another asking if anyone had seen or heard of my father. Most people just sped by us, without responding. They moved away as fast as they were approached.

Finally a man, without looking at us, made a motion with his hand and ran away. Two women, mother and daughter, frightened and hoping, followed his sign and came in front of a large barn with holes in the roof and wet straw on the ground. The stench was horrendous.

We entered the barn, holding our breath, while continuing to ask for Sima Danon. An old man told us to follow him. "Here," he pointed to a skeleton-like figure curled up in a foetal position, shivering. He was almost naked and covered with black and blue marks all over. Both of us bent down to look at this creature which looked like a bunch of bones covered with human membrane.

The face looked up. The eyes were sunken into the skull. The hair was dirty, matted and cropped. The beard was long, filthy, red with some grey in it. The image looked over a hundred years in age. This couldn't be my dad, I thought. My dad is only 41 years old. And why was he almost naked? The skeletal figure started to get up with difficulty. A grimace resembling a smile appeared on the skull. I backed off. I was frightened. I could hear my mother's silent screams as she moved closer to the image of a man and reached out. He managed to stand up, draping himself over her body. I felt paralysed. I opened my mouth to speak but no voice came out. I wasn't even sure that I could, or wanted to touch him. My insides were screaming in confusion, with anger and with pain. I wanted my handsome, loving father back.

I couldn't understand what they had done to my dad and why. My father always helped everyone in need. He was such a good man. Why did God let this happen?

I remembered when I took Hebrew classes, that they taught us that God was all powerful and He took care of good people. Then why didn't God stop them from hurting my daddy? Did God take a nap while the Nazis did all this? They must have lied to me. There is no God. If there were a God, He could never let the Nazis hurt us like this.

Yet the reality was that this was my father. They had taken a young, handsome, healthy man and turned him into an old skeleton. I watched my mom kiss his sunken eyes, his dirty beard, his smelly body.

She took off her coat and swung it over his bare shoulders. They both cried, as they held on to each other and onto the precious gift of life while hoping for a miracle.

I decided that there may be a God after all because a miracle did occur. My mom and I were able to bring him clothing and food which, of course, he shared with others, and was able to replace some of the muscle he had lost. One month later, after seeing all his relatives and friends being slaughtered, my dad decided to escape. He said to my mom, while she tenderly caressed his stubbly face "I am a dead man, no matter how you look at it. There is no choice. I have to try for freedom. Remember," he smiled, "God helps those who help themselves." Those words were firmly inscribed into my brain.

In the next few days my dad and my mom and my Aunt Laura formulated the plans and made arrangements for his escape. With bribes of her diamonds, my mom obtained false passports and falsified identities. She arranged for a fiacre to arrive near the camp at five on a certain morning.

At 4.30 on the morning of the escape we, my mom and my brother Ike, sat in the fiacre. The two children shaking with fright and cold, did not speak. The mother, with a glazed look in her eyes, prayed. The rain seemed to come down in sheets, concealing the clarity of any and all movements within the camp. As my dad had worked his way up to a camp garbage collector, he availed himself of the luxury of the smelly truck which moved freely within the camp. It was 3.30 a.m. My dad went from one German cabin to another collecting garbage. His heart was beating fast. He had to stop a few times to catch his breath. The garbage truck made its way to the kitchens. Sima was soaking wet as he ran alongside the truck. From the kitchens he took out large metal cans with smelly rotten food leftovers from the Nazis. One by one, my dad emptied the cans into the truck. The stench was unbearable. He was sure that there were human body parts in those cans. When all the garbage was collected, with the rain furiously beating everything in its path, the truck started for the gate. Sima looked around. This was the moment of truth. There were very few guards out, and the ones that were there had their collars up to their ears and hats pulled down almost covering their eyes.

As the truck proceeded towards the gate, my dad dived into the truck bed and covered himself with slimy, smelly refuse which had already begun to decompose. As the truck arrived at the gate of the

camp, Sima peered through the garbage, only to notice a guard at each side of the gate. They stopped the truck. Each guard looked and inspected every car and truck that exited through the gate. Sima dug himself deeper into the slime, which by now was floating in the rain, and held his breath. The slime entered his nostrils, his ears and eyes. The truck reached and stood between the gates. The heavy downpour made it difficult for the Nazis to see. The two guards pulled their coat collars over their ears and faces, looked in the truck where the driver was sitting and motioned to the truck to exit.

The rain, like God's tears, protected and shielded my dad as he took his life to safety and freedom.

When the truck was a few feet away from the gate, Sima jumped out, totally covered with slime, and made his way to the waiting fiacre. The fiacre and its occupants anxiously awaited their visitor, the head of their family. When my dad entered the fiacre, the driver let the sides of the cloth down, protecting his passengers from rain as well as giving cover to the escapee. I threw myself into my dad's arms. Never did I smell anything sweet that smelled so foul.

As soon as the Nazis detected my father's absence, they immediately went directly to my Aunt Laura's home, shot her and her little baby girl and left them to bleed to death on the kitchen floor.

For a month we hid in a Serbian home, while constantly being on guard. Every time we heard a car or a truck, we hid in the basement where the sewer was, while our host closed a trap door over us, threw a rug on it and replaced some firewood over that. My mother was doing out her jewellery continuously, which kept our host quiet for a while, but the fear for his own family eventually won and we had to move on. Serbs were not anti-Semitic like Croats.

Svetislav Spasojević, Ana, Ljiljana and Ilija. We became Christians overnight. But, like Jews during the Inquisition, we crossed ourselves on the outside and cried for Judaism on the inside.

For two years we hid and ran. Always one step ahead of the Nazis. And sometimes, when the people around us started asking questions, we waited for the shelter of the dark night, picked up the few things we had and moved on until we got to Split. There we reconnected with my Uncle Rafo Danon and his wife Erna. Being a baker, Uncle Rafo and my father started making cookies, which they sold to some coffee shops in Split. One time the butter and eggs they bought for the cookies were rotten and rancid. As they cracked the eggs, my father and

uncle looked at each other, smelled the eggs again, stopped for a moment and then proceeded to make the cookies anyway. A few months later, someone reported us for black marketeering. The *Carabinieri* came into our apartment and went directly to a hidden box where we kept the flour and sugar. They took everything, including my dad and my uncle, and carted them to jail where they spent seven months. When my father came out of jail my mother got pregnant.

Somewhere in the distance we could hear the Nazi artillery approaching Split. Italy was weakening, which turned the Nazis into Crusaders. Killing and burning everything in front of them. With what little jewellery my mother had left, we were able to get on a small fishing boat and make our way to Korčula. There we stayed for a few weeks until it became unsafe and from there, with the last of my mother's jewellery, we got another fishing vessel to take us across the Adriatic to Bari in Italy.

There we met up with my Uncle Rafo and his wife again. And of course the cookie dough started rolling again. We found a villa in a small town called Carbonara where we felt safe, at least for a while, and life became bearable again. But while my mother was in the maternity ward in Bari, having her baby, Italy capitulated and the Nazis made their presence known again. The Allies marched into Bari and the Nazis started disseminating their favourite toys, bombs.

I remember being in the hospital room. It was night and it was dark. Suddenly the skies lit up. It appeared that daylight had returned in the middle of the night. The bombs followed. The explosions, the detonations, devastation and death. In my mind it was 1941 all over again, when the Nazis first bombed Belgrade. There was no place to run. No place to hide. Everyone just stood frozen in time and space. My mother held her baby, who was born prematurely, so close, almost suffocating him. I held onto the railing of the brown metal bed with both hands and held my breath. It was chaos everywhere. Cries, screams and dust filled the entire hospital. Then the light faded and the bombing stopped, but only for a few minutes. Then it started again with a vengeance. I prayed it would stop while we were still alive. Bari was on fire. Flames were everywhere. Part of the hospital was hit and was destroyed. The maternity ward remained intact. One more time we were protected by His light. It was like God let down a white curtain encompassing us within and protecting us from all evil.

Two months later we hear that President Roosevelt was going to accept a thousand refugees into the United States as his guests. Once again God was with us. We signed up and were accepted.

In Bari we entered a displaced persons camp. From there, the American army trucks drove a thousand refugees, mostly Jewish, who came from all over Europe, to Naples. There we boarded the Henry Gibbons, an American Red Cross ship which was full of American wounded soldiers.

So, under the watchful eye of Dr Ruth Gruber (she was a mother to all of us, even to people who were twice her age), we arrived in America, in August 1944.

First we had to go through a hospital where they sprayed all parts of our bodies to kill the lice.

America, land of milk and honey, we thought, only to realise to our horror that they were placing us into another camp with barbed wire around it. Our minds and bodies were spent and worn. We had no energy to fight or tears left to shed. Some gave up and some were crying and wouldn't go into the camp surrounded by wire. My father looked at me, held me tight and said "The fence works both ways. It will keep us safe in here." I did not understand what he meant but it sounded good, so I got happy. My father could make the most horrible things appear wonderful.

We stayed in the camp for eighteen months and it was great. We had medical care, we had food, we had education, music. American schools and ice cream in the winter as we watched the little pink and chocolate droplets fall onto the pure white snow.



The title page of Ruth Gruber's book about the thousand refugees

There we lived in army barracks where most families had two or three rooms. We decorated the rooms with wallpaper and other things that many people brought into the camp for us. As usual, my father got very involved and decided to take care of the heating in our barracks. The weather was ferociously cold and the wind factor bit into our face and fingers. My father fed the furnace every few hours so that all the families living in that barracks had heat all the time. He also became director of our kitchen. There were a few different kitchens in the camp, including a kosher one, and my Uncle Rafo and my Aunt Erna became the chefs. We had the best food in the world. Besides the regular delicious food, we had pastries from all over the world. France, Hungary, Germany etc. Many people from different kitchens came for coffee and dessert to our kitchen.

After a while the townspeople accepted and befriended us. But when the war was over, the United States Government wanted to send us back to our countries of origin. Again, like Superman, Dr Ruth Gruber came to our aid. She went to Washington, saw President Truman and, after many days and weeks of pleading, was able to arrange for us to go to Canada and re-enter the United States immediately. Five years later, to the day, I became a citizen of the United States.

When the camp was being emptied of its visitors, the Americans asked each family where they wanted to go. We hardly understood the question so, when someone in front of us said "Cleveland," we also said Cleveland. All of a sudden we were being put on a train for Cleveland.

"Where the hell is Cleveland, and what is it?" my eleven-year-old brother Ike asked. We all laughed and were very happy to be in the United States. One year later we left Cleveland and went to New York, where we joined many of the people who were in Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York, with us.

Both my parents died at the age of 62 and my brother Ike died at about 60. My brother Michael (Srećko, is married to the greatest lady and has three super sons. I live in Los Angeles, California, and have three wonderful daughters. I was married to Leon Danon from Belgrade, who had a shoe store called Boston and had one of the first motor cars in Belgrade. The one you had to crank to get it started. My husband died in 1962. I studied writing in college and at the same time I became a real estate broker and had my own office. Now I am retiring from real estate and have just finished writing my first book, and hope there will be many more to come.