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*Vukica KAJON-STUPAR*

FRIENDS ALWAYS COME TO THE RESCUE



*S*ara-Vukica Kajon-Stupar was born in Višegrad on October 20, 1911, to father Isak and mother Hana, née Levi. She had a brother, Rafael, who was three years younger.

*Her parents, two aunts, a cousin with her two children and many members of her extended family perished in the Holocaust.*

*She completed pharmaceutical studies in Zagreb in 1935.*

*She lives in Belgrade with her husband, Voja Stupar. From her first marriage to Nikola Rikov she has a son, Zoran, who holds a master's degree in economics and lives in Switzerland with his wife Slobodanka and his son Nikola.*

When I remember my family from before the war, I think I spent the least time in it. My father had a shop in Višegrad. Like all other Jews, we lived modestly. All the Višegrad Jews were more or less traders. I think that only one of them, Isak Papo, was wealthier. My family life wasn't governed by strict religious customs, but we did observe all the major festivals, especially the Sabbath. Father read all the prayers appropriate for each particular festival. We children usually didn't understand them, but I particularly liked it when they would say, at Passover, "*Ken tijene amber ke venga i koma*" (All who are hungry, come and eat). Then we would open the doors and if anyone wanted to

come in they would. Whenever I think of our festivals I feel that there is no great joy in them except for Purim, but my memory always returns me to Passover.

Višegrad was a lively little place in Eastern Bosnia where a not inconsiderable number of Muslims and Serbs lived. There was no feeling of anti-Semitism. During the economic crisis in 1933, my father helped a Muslim farmer, a friend of our family, a great deal. Many years later, he helped us too, when we needed it.

I completed only four years of primary school in Višegrad before my father sent me to Sarajevo for further education and it was there that I matriculated. My brother also completed secondary school there. When he was old enough for college, he didn't want to study, but joined the business with my father. They began working with leather and this was better, because retail trade wasn't really something one could live from.

I can't say anything bad about the attitude to Jews in Sarajevo during my time at the secondary school. I also had a close Muslim friend there. When his girlfriend came from Paris, he asked me if she could stay with me and, of course, I agreed. After secondary school I enrolled in the Faculty of Pharmacy at Zagreb University because at that time pharmacy was not taught in either Sarajevo or Belgrade. While I was studying in Zagreb I took my meals in the Jewish refectory. This was a very good situation for me because I had three meals provided a day. In the second year and later, I no longer went there for breakfast because I was losing too much time. The atmosphere in the refectory was pleasant and there were a lot of us of various affiliations, both communists and non-communists. Payment at the refectory depended on the financial status of the student and there was a special committee in charge of determining this. One person I remember from the canteen was Herbert Kraus, who was older than me. I didn't socialise with him but we all respected him. With his posture and thoroughly considered stance on everything, he earned the respect of all of us and his opinions were always held in high regard. I also remember, just as I was finishing my studies, Eta Špicar coming to the refectory. At the time she hadn't begun coming regularly, but later she and her husband, Alfred Najfeld, would come regularly. The cook was Mrs Rausnic. I remember many incidents from that period, both pleasant and unpleasant. Sometimes, because of my exams, I couldn't go in for lunch, even for Passover. There were even times when I went hungry, and I wasn't the only one. To this day I don't understand how I managed to study and finish

college. There's no doubt that my parents made many sacrifices to put me through school and had to give up many things. Still, if I hadn't had the scholarship from La Benevolencia, it's unlikely that I would have persevered. I should also note that a cousin of my mother and the husband of one of my cousins helped me out later on.

After I completed my studies I returned to Višegrad although I didn't have a job there. For a while, in Rogatica, I stood in for a pharmacist named Papa. At the time this was a sleepy provincial place, but I took all that in my stride and was quite alright, even there.

Then I got a job in Sarajevo. It was there that I met my first husband, Nikola Rikov, whose father was the main cantor in the synagogue. His name was Salamon Rikov. My husband, Nikola, was a second lieutenant in the army and, in this capacity, he was captured in Doboј in 1941, when the Yugoslav Army fell apart. My husband was taken prisoner of war. He was held in Osnabrück as an officer. Once the situation over there had settled down a little, letters began arriving. We corresponded as much as the war situation allowed us to. He returned after the war but soon fell very ill and died at the age of 42. There's no doubt that



*Vukica Kajon with her parents and her brother Aleksandar in Višegrad at the time when no one sensed the evil soon to come*

everything he lived through had had a very adverse effect on him. Before the war he had a mother, a brother, a sister-in-law and an uncle, but when he returned he found none of them alive! He was a very good man. My husband's mother and father were Russian Jews who fled from Russia to Hungary in 1905 and my husband was born there in 1910, in a place called Siklos. He had begun to study economy but had interrupted his studies after his father died.

When my husband was captured, I moved out of my apartment intending to live with his mother, Cecilija. My mother-in-law lived in a building which also housed the Protestant church. Because they had lived there for years, they were on good terms with the Protestant priest. They didn't denounce my mother-in-law and her family, so they lived there very peacefully for a long time. A respectable Muslim, a manager in the insurance company where my husband's brother Jakov worked, assured my husband's older brother and his wife that no one would take them from their apartment. However there came a time when the manager was away on business and both he and his wife were taken away and they both perished.

I worked in the pharmacy until 1942, when they appointed a commissioner. From the first days of the war I had been giving anything I could collect in the pharmacy to a Muslim friend of mine. This included all kinds of medical supplies, bandages, cotton wool and whatever medication was available. I also had two girlfriends who were taking medication for the National Liberation Movement. They told me once that lice had appeared somewhere so I collected creams to deal with this plague and sent it to the Partisans through an illegal contact. I myself had no intention of joining the Partisans.

I wore a yellow armband but only once had an unpleasant experience because of this. Two men seized me from the street for compulsory labour. I was supposed to peel potatoes. However the woman in charge wasn't happy with the way I worked at this job so she fired me. I never went to compulsory labour again.

As a precaution, I didn't live in my mother-in-law's apartment in Sarajevo, because I couldn't count on the protection of her Protestant neighbours. I hid with a Croatian communist girlfriend who was married to a Muslim. While I was hiding this way in Sarajevo, a cousin of mine from Mostar sent me a fake identification document and so I used this to travel to Mostar. That year, 1942, I lived as a refugee in Mostar with Erna Kajon, with whom I shared good and bad. Before the war she had worked for Putnik. Given the circumstances, it could be said that we were alright in Mostar. I had no contact with the Jewish community, nor did I wear a yellow armband. Mostar was under Italian administration and I was fleeing to where the Italians were. I had cousins in Nevesinje, so I stayed with them for a while. When I heard that Višegrad had also come under Italian rule, I still had no idea what had happened to my parents and brother, so I went to Višegrad to see them.

Among our close acquaintances in Višegrad was an engineer named Duško whose wife was Jewish. We socialised with this family all the time, and they were on good terms with an Italian lieutenant who was a teacher. The behaviour of this Italian lieutenant is a testament to the importance of even short-term friendships and acquaintances in difficult times. One summer evening he called out under the window of the building we lived in. Duško went straight down, the lieutenant told him that all Jews should pack and leave Višegrad because the Germans were coming to town. And so we left Višegrad and went to Prijepolje, in Sandžak.

We found accommodation in a small rented apartment. I gave a woman there my fake identification and she managed to bring my mother-in-law to us. Because we also had to flee from there, my rather elderly mother-in-law stayed on with a younger cousin of mine who was unable to come with us because he developed an unexplained stiffness in his legs. His name was Joži Demajo and he was a SKOJ member from Sarajevo. I was counting on them to save themselves, but they didn't, neither he nor my mother-in-law. The Germans captured them and from that time we never heard anything of them again.



*Vukica with a group of Partisan fellow-fighters in Slavnik, October 1944*

From Prijepolje, we somehow got to Berane, a town in Montenegro. We lived there for quite a long time, right up to when the Germans arrived there as well, after Italy capitulated. The little money

we had we spent on living very modestly. We rented an apartment with a family with whom we got along nicely. In order to survive, they had a cow and hens and they would give us something too. I remember our hostess saying to my mother one day that we must have a lot of money because we ate so well. My mother replied that we didn't have a third of what they spent on food, that we had much less, but that they didn't know how to make the most of what they had. Mother taught her many cooking skills for the preparation of food.

Before the Germans arrived in Berane, after Italy capitulated in 1943, I left to join the Partisans. First my mother, my father and I went to Pljevlja. I had earlier packed up the whole pharmacy. Everything I had which was needed, I took with me to the Partisans. Father also joined the Partisans. My mother, who was rather large and had difficulty moving around, and was, moreover, not young, stayed behind there. Unfortunately she didn't manage to save herself, but perished in 1944 in Pljevlja. In order to frighten the Partisans and discourage the National Liberation Movement, the Germans killed the parents of all Partisan fighters. At the time, I had still not learnt about my mother's death. My brother found her among the dead when he arrived in the town with his unit. He recognised her by her clothes and some other marks. He buried her in Pljevlja.

My father also died. For a while he was with us in the Partisans but, because of his ill health, he returned as soon as possible to Berane, to the family with whom we had stayed earlier. Because I was also stationed near Berane with my unit, I came to visit Father whenever I could, walking a couple of hours to get there. Because at that time they were already sending the wounded and sick to Italy, I asked Peko Dapčević, the commander of my corps, to send my father to Italy. He agreed to this. My comrades and I carried him onto a plane, but the effort was in vain. Father didn't survive – he died in Italy and was buried there.

We moved with the Partisans around smaller places. I was in the Main Command for Sandžak and after that went to a unit, the Third Sandžak Brigade. However the chief, Dr Čurić, of the Second Proletarian Brigade wanted a pharmacist. He knew that I wasn't essential to my unit so he called me and I went to the Second Proletarian. I always had work. There weren't any special kinds of medication but we had most of the things needed by the sick. Once, when we were left without anything, the quartermaster somehow got hold of a large bottle of juniper brandy, from which I made compresses until we received proper medicines.

Every war results in surgical procedures, from simple to the most difficult ones. Later on I was involved in this responsible medical work. A surgical team for the whole Army was assembled. A Russian doctor worked day and night, saving the lives of fighters. We were all there together and if getting killed was what was needed – we would get killed. I was only afraid of being wounded, but I was lucky because this never happened. It was our major and constant obligation to care for and attend to the wounded. Whenever we arrived somewhere, we knew it would be calm for at least a couple of days, so we would immediately set up a hospital. The nurses saw to it that beds were prepared and that material for bandaging and injections, everything we had, was put in order. The transport of the wounded created the greatest problems for us. There were many seriously wounded people and being transported in oxcarts over rugged terrain caused them unbearable pain, because of the vibration. There were cases when there was no other way to transport the wounded but for soldiers to carry them. We never left wounded behind.

Two encounters in the Partisans have remained in my memory. The first I associate with the appearance of a man called Kic. I learnt later that this was short for his surmane, Kabiljo. We approached each other immediately. The other meeting is connected with two women. One of them was Nisim Albahari's sister and the other her friend. Although we had not met before, we detected some kind of closeness and approached one another.

I was in Vlasotinci for the liberation. I remember everyone firing guns, singing, rejoicing. I was also there at the time of the liberation of Belgrade. I came to Belgrade with the Partisans and was assigned to work in the Second Army.

Following the liberation I wanted to return to Sarajevo because, in the meantime, my husband had returned from captivity. I asked for a transfer and moved to Sarajevo. When I became pregnant, I asked them to transfer me somewhere and they moved me to a warehouse to work with drugs. Two months after I gave birth they returned me to the Army, where I worked all the way through to 1960, when I moved to Belgrade.

The post-war period could be described as buoyant. We worked all the time and if we weren't working we were in meetings. In Sarajevo I was the head, and in Belgrade Jela Žugić was the head of all the pharmacists. In Belgrade I worked until my retirement in the pharmacy of the Army garrison belonging to the City Command.

From the time I arrived in Belgrade I have been a member of the Jewish community and been active in the Women's Division.