
Aleksandar KERENJI

OBSESSION



Aleksandar Kerenji was born in Novi Sad on June 6, 1940, to father Stevan Santo, born 1910, and mother Piroška, née Singer, born 1911.

He was a year and a half old when he lost both his parents. Together with another 27 members of their immediate and extended family they were shot on January 23, 1942, in a pogrom carried out by the Hungarian Fascist forces, known as the Novi Sad Raid¹.

He finished secondary school in Novi Sad and graduated from the Medical Faculty of Novi Sad University. He works in the Institute for Oncology in Sremska Kamenica as an internist-immunologist in the Laboratory for Immuno-Biology of Tumours. He is an assistant professor in the Oncology Department of the Novi Sad Medical School.

The events about which I am writing began to obsess me more and more, only after the age of 40, but so strongly that I relive them even in my sleep. Finally I realised that it is my duty to write about everything that happened and also to find sources which speak of it. Because, if I don't write about this, it will be as though none of the thirty or so of my

¹ In this incident, 1,246 people, 809 of whom were Jews and 375 Serbs, were shot dead and their bodies thrown into the frozen Danube.

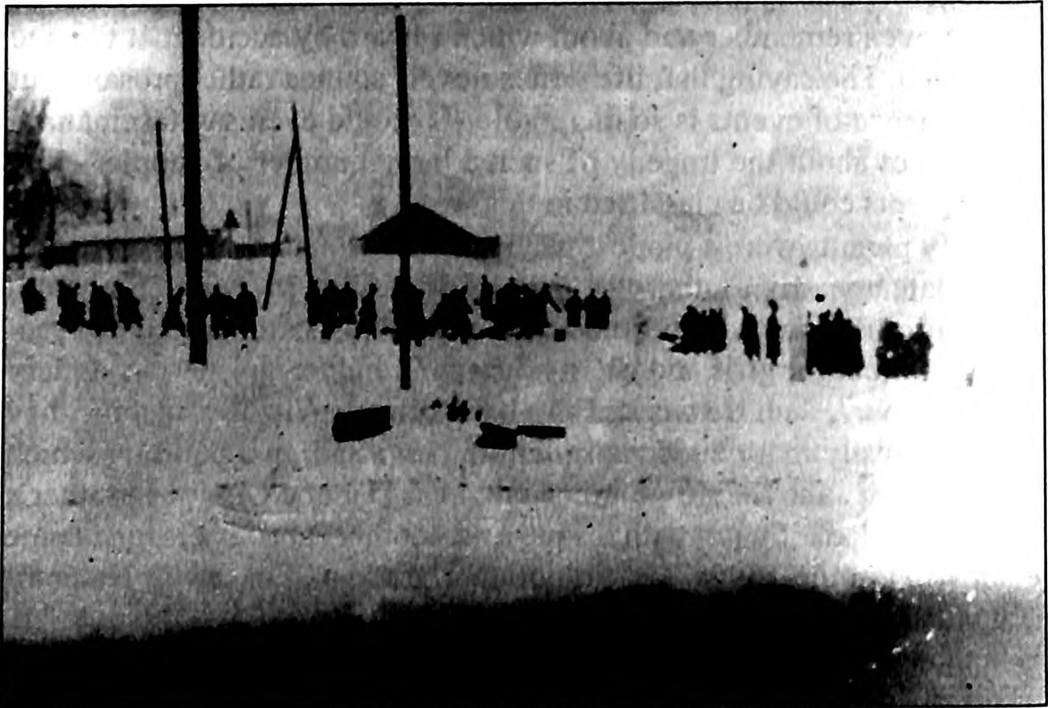
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direct ancestors ever existed. To my regret, while the witnesses to these events were still alive and I could have found something out from them, I didn't know that anything like this had happened.

Now, after years and years of searching, of touring museums, registry offices, of reading records of births and deaths, and discussions with people who could tell me a little more about all this, I have tried to put together a story which should be reliable. A story of horrors which I don't even remember and about which I heard by accident at the age of sixteen. The saying that life writes novels sounds rather prosaic, but the sequence of events is so incredible – I would even say fascinating, were it not about the tragedy of such a large number of people – that these events could be classified in this way.

My parents were a modest young couple who had a child at a relatively late age: my mother was 26 and my father 36. Mother's health was frail, she reportedly suffered from tuberculosis. She completed secondary school for girls and was a housewife. Father finished secondary school in Novi Sad. He worked as a bank officer. With that income they lived modestly in a rented apartment in Novi Sad, in a building which is still called Jakovljević's Sanitorium, near Danube Quay. My father's father, Dr Aladar Santo, with his parents, brothers and sisters, had come from Kula in the 1890s. My grandfather graduated in law in Hungary and was, until 1918, the deputy public notary of the City of Novi Sad. Whether he changed his name from Steinbach before or after taking this position I do not know, although it would not be surprising at that time if pressure had been put on him to change his surname in order to advance in the service. His name and surname, together with his rank in the first world war, during which he was decorated for war service as were many members of my family, are documented in the gold book of Hungarian Jewish military veterans published in Hungary before the second world war. Unfortunately none of this saved him from being shot. I can only imagine the horror, the surprise and the disbelief when my father, my uncles and my grandfather realised that, in spite of all their civic loyalty and honourable contribution to the society, insane people had decided to dispose of them summarily. My grandfather had five brothers and a sister. After the war, in 1918, Grandfather was retired. (I still have a photocopy of the pension cheque with his signature and the signature of his sister, my great aunt, as one of the few pieces of material evidence that they ever existed.)

The story begins in 1941 when, following the capitulation of Yugoslavia and the entry of Fascist forces into Novi Sad, they banned Jews from working. My parents moved in with my grandfather, Aladar Santo, at 63 Miletićeva Street, partly in order to save money and partly so that the family would be together. My aunt and her family also lived at the same address in Miletićeva Street.



Twenty-seven members of Aleksandar Kerenji's family were killed in the infamous Novi Sad Raid on January 23, 1942. The photograph shows Hungarian soldiers throwing bodies into the frozen Danube

Through a combination of unfortunate circumstances, Miletićeva Street was the main focus of Fascist crimes and their rampage during the “cold days” of 1942. In the well-known Novi Sad Raid on January 23, at 8.30 in the morning, my entire family (my great grandmother Fani Steinbach, grandmother and grandfather Aladar and Emilija Santo, my father and mother Stevan and Piroška Santo, my Aunt Klara and her husband Endre Goldstein – a total of 27 members of my family) were taken into the street and shot, some of them thrown into the Danube. My father's body was allegedly found in the Uspensko Cemetery.

By a great miracle, my aunt's son and I remained alive. Some say that our parents hid us under pillows (this was the morning and people

were caught in their beds), others say that we were hidden behind the heating stove. I have never discovered which of these is the true version. I was a year and a half old and my cousin two and a half. We were found by Hungarian soldiers when the order to stop shooting had already been given so, wet, in nappies, half naked, we were taken to the City Administration Office where we were recognised by relatives and friends who had remained alive. I learned from eyewitnesses that a Hungarian soldier gave me water and bread in the City Administration building because we had been waiting there all morning. This is where the paths of my cousin and I separated for life. I ended up with the Kerenji family (my mother's sister was married to Dr Kerenji, who was saved by a patient of his who was a member of the Arrow Cross – the Nyilas) and my cousin went to relatives in Budapest. There, after the death of our aunt who had taken him in, he went to another family. Many years later, in 1956 he fled the revolution in Hungary and settled in Venezuela. He died there in the street, suddenly, in 1976. He left a wife and two children with whom even now I have been unable to get in touch, despite my constantly searching for them. To my regret it was only after my cousin's death that I learnt he had existed.

On my mother's side, my grandfather and grandmother perished in Auschwitz. My grandfather's brother remained alive in Budapest, but his son, whom he had hidden in a hospital, was shot on the very last day by a member of the Arrow Cross, in a street which was being liberated by the Russians.

Having lost my parents, I came to the Kerenji family, my closest relatives on my mother's side. I don't think anyone could have welcomed me with more warmth, goodwill and kindness than did the Kerenjis. Dr Stevan Kerenji deserves even more credit for my general education and upbringing than my aunt. I have him to thank for everything I know and am able to do today. The day after my parents were shot, the Hungarian authorities immediately issued an order to Dr Stevan Kerenji that he was to manage the property of my parents – the late Stevan and Piroška Santo – with “neutral” supervision of this management. There was, of course, no mention of me. Because of this the Kerenji family was justifiably concerned that I, as an orphan, would be taken at the first opportunity to a collective centre and the procedure which would follow that was common knowledge. For this reason, they took great care to keep me hidden. In the spring of 1942, Dr Stevan Kerenji, as a physician with a Hungarian diploma, received orders to

travel to Hungary to do compulsory labour as a doctor (Hungarians were going to the front because the doctors who were in compulsory labour were defecting to the Russians). He took me with him. Of course he took me without documents. There was always the danger of him being stopped for a document check, with all the potential consequences for his family and for me. Because of this I seldom went out into the street or the light of day.

In Hungary, Dr Kerenji worked in a little village called Igar, close to Székesfehérvár. Word spread in the village that he was a good doctor and a good man, so the locals accepted him fondly. The local policeman (*csendő*r) protected him whenever possible. Unfortunately, in 1944, by order of the then government, all Jews had to go into concentration camps. Dr Kerenji was interned with his family in Budapest (in a ghetto according to some stories), from which he managed to escape with his family by bribing people. He returned to Igar and again worked with the knowledge of the local people, until the Russians arrived. However, just as the Russians entered the village, the front moved again and the Germans returned to the village. The policeman I mentioned earlier was hiding us in a basement right next to the SS headquarters and military court. Dr Kerenji had syringes with morphine ready in case the Germans burst into our hideout. Fortunately this didn't happen and the Germans finally left the village. It was by chance that Dr Kerenji happened to be the first witness for the local policeman when the Russian units entered the village and this saved both the policeman's life and the lives of his family.

The world sometimes really is a small place. During the 1956 revolution in Hungary, the son of the Igar policeman fled across the border to Yugoslavia and was sent to the refugee centre at the Bor Mine. I remember well on this occasion that Dr Stevan Kerenji packed two suitcases full of clothing and footwear and a suitcase of food which he sent to the Bor Mine. Not long after that the son emigrated to Australia.

And so, when I look back, I do not have even the most basic facts about at least three families of my ancestors – my father's, my mother's and the Kerenji family. (This is not any problem at all in other families – you go to the registry and get a certificate from the register of births and deaths and you make a family tree). There's only a monument beside the Danube where the names of the members of my immediate family are engraved. The problem is that until 1895 registers were kept in religious communities and these books were systematically burnt and

destroyed along with the Jews during the war and even after it. I am trying to find this information because this is the only thing I can leave to my children about their ancestors. I tour museums, registries, archives. I look for documents, certificates from registers of deaths and births. I am trying to save from oblivion what can be saved, to find pictures and piece by piece to put together a story. With a little luck, perhaps I will be able to repay my ancestors, at least to some extent. Until then, every January 23, when everyone leaves the commemoration which is traditionally held on this day, and when there are no longer any people on the Danube Quay, I visit the monument to the victims of the Raid and I remember my nearest and dearest.