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*Breda KALEF*

## GRATEFUL FOR THE MUSIC



**B**reda Kalef was born in Belgrade on December 7, 1930. This well-known opera singer made her debut in the Belgrade Opera in 1960 and was a full-time member of the company until the end of her career. She played all the leading mezzo-soprano roles and achieved an international career. She performed as a guest on every continent except Australia and in virtually all European countries. She made her debut with Placido Domingo at the Tel Aviv opera, singing Carmen. She is one of the founders of the Belgrade

*Jewish Community's Braća Baruh Choir and has performed with them three times in Israel, at the Zimriya international choir festival. She has also toured US cities and many European countries with the choir.*

*She lost 26 members of her family in the Holocaust. She was an active sportswoman and was Belgrade and Serbian table tennis champion.*

I was born into a family in which the traditions of the Jewish religion and life were strictly observed. My large family would gather for all the religious festivals. My childhood was full of joy, harmony and love.

As well as attending primary school, I also went to Jewish kindergarten and to religious classes in school, where I learnt to read and write Hebrew, Jewish history, and to recite religious and national poems. This

was the beginning of my “art” career, because I was involved in virtually all performances held in the big auditorium of the Jewish Community.

Unfortunately, in 1941, when I was ten, dark clouds began to hang over my family. Immediately after the occupying forces entered Belgrade, all able-bodied men were rounded up into what they called the “labour brigades” for Jews. The members of the first brigade, which included all my male relatives, were shot, down to the very last man. The women and children were left behind, unprotected, and so easy prey for the occupying forces.

My father and grandmother were in the Jewish hospital, because my father was in a wheelchair and my grandmother was by this time rather elderly. They were taken from this hospital in special vehicles with gas chambers and, from that point, all trace of them was lost forever. The occupying forces sealed our house with all our belongings in it, leaving us in the street with nothing and, of course, with no means of support.



*The Kalef family shop in Kolarčeva Street in Belgrade*

My sister and I were hidden in the suburbs of Belgrade, at first in Košutnjak and, later, we were taken in by the nuns of the Catholic Convent in Banovo Brdo. They told their superior, the convent’s spiritual director, Andreja Tumpej, the story of our fate. He was a wonderful, noble man who took us in, obtained false documents for us and so saved us. Thanks to these documents we could enrol in school and continue a normal life because no one knew us there.

At that time I wasn’t known as Breda Kalef. My real name was Rahel Kalef but, with false documents, I had become Breda Ograjenšek, an illegal refugee from Slovenia. Under this name I enrolled in the regular school in Banovo Brdo and this made it possible for me to

attend normal classes like all the other children. At first, in school, there were some embarrassing moments when I would not respond to a teacher who was calling me by my new name. I would just sit there until a friend would warn me, thinking I had fallen asleep.



*(L) Breda's grandmother Mazal in a Jewish national costume and (R) her grandfather Jakov and grandmother Mazal in Serbian national costumes*

Mother went to a neighbouring village and worked for a family who took her in. In compensation for the work she did she was given potatoes and maize flour. With no material means of support, I was forced to go into the woods, in deep snow, to gather firewood so that we could at least warm ourselves up a little. While doing this I was always in fear of being noticed by the forest ranger. For food I would pick nettles and that, together with the maize flour, was our staple diet.

As our place of residence up in the attic was close to Čukarica railway station, I would steal coal from the wagons at night, despite their being guarded by German soldiers. I dreamt for years, and occasionally still do, about those courageous and almost crazy activities of mine as a ten-year-old girl and, in a nightmare, I used to remember running with a full bag of coal under bursts of fire from the German guards.

I would also cross the Sava river by boat to Ada Ciganlija to gather dry wood for heating. I was a witness to dreadful sights on the river,

because there would be massacred bodies floating downstream. Ironically, I would count them, without it ever crossing my mind that some of my nearest and dearest could be among them.

There was a man living in our neighbourhood who made and sold handbags in the city. One day I summoned the courage to ask him to take me in to learn the trade so that I could earn some money. He looked me up and down, looking at my little child's hands, my skinny legs, then he frowned for a while, shook his head and, in the end, took me on. From then on my day began with rising early so that I could join the queue for my ration of cornbread, then walking down the tracks of the narrow gauge railway which ran from Čukarica to the city, to the shop in which I was learning the trade and working. After finishing there I would go quickly back so that I could attend afternoon classes in school.



*Encounter with an old friend and partner on many opera stages:  
Breda and Plácido Domingo, Toronto, 1999*

Čukarica suffered a terrible fate during the Allied bombing. The carpet bombing razed the buildings above the racetrack to the ground. At the very last minute my sister and I jumped into a ditch which, after the bomb fell, was partly covered by earth, so we managed to survive it with only slight injuries.

We used to call our attic residence the dovecote. It was badly damaged. When we finally managed to get close to it we found human bodies torn to pieces by the bombs.

The occupation was long and difficult. We waited impatiently for liberation which, after so many years of misery and general suffering, was finally on the doorstep. While the battle raged between the Germans and Russians, we sheltered with our neighbours in a basement. One morning, as the bullets flew past and the bombs turned everything into flames and mowed everything down with shrapnel, some Russian soldiers, obviously drunk, ran into our hideout, saying they were looking for German soldiers. At one point they even suspected us of hiding them and they angrily ordered us all to line up, planning to shoot us. At that moment an explosion was heard outside the entrance of our hideout. The Russian soldiers ran out after the Germans, leaving us behind in shock. This explosion had obviously saved us and this was how our long-awaited liberation began.

When Belgrade was finally liberated we returned to our empty house which the Germans had plundered. From the whole house, we were able to use only two rooms. We still lived a very hard life. There was neither any income, nor any help. The soup kitchen began operating at the Jewish Community, so I would go there and be given a ration for myself, as a child, but I would take it home to share with my mother and sister.

I survived all these horrors, and I am certain that they made me stronger, that they made me capable of living the life which lay ahead of me.

Music helped me free myself from everything I had lived through and to partly forget the storm of occupation which took practically everything from me, the music to which I devoted myself with all my being and to which I am endlessly grateful for saving my sanity.

At Yad Vashem, I raised the issue, with the appropriate documentation, of awarding the Medal of the Righteous, to the Catholic priest, Andreja Tumpej. My petition was approved and the medal was presented posthumously and accepted by his relatives.

I put up a marble plaque in the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade, recording the names of all my family members who were killed. I wanted, in this way, to gather them all in one place, because to this day not one grave has been located. By doing this, I kept the solemn promise I had made to myself.