
Vera KARAOGLANOVIĆ-KROTIĆ

THE FEAR REMAINS FOREVER



Vera Karaoglanović-Krotić was born in 1933. Her father came from a large and wealthy family. Her grandfather David and grandmother Veza, née Finci, had six children. All of them were born and lived in Belgrade.

Two of her father's brothers, his father, mother and two sisters with their children perished in Belgrade in 1941. Only one of his brothers, Sima, survived, because he was captured as a Yugoslav officer and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in

Osnabruck, where he was protected by the Geneva Convention.

Vera's parents, engineer Isak Karaoglanović and Anka, née Ninković, had two children, Miroljub, born in 1931, and Vera. Her father had a printing business called *Zaštita*, which was the only source of income and on which, as a communist, he often used to print party material. Because of his communist affiliation he was tried and arrested before the war, in 1935. And so, because of the illegal printing of *Student*, he was again arrested in 1939 and, shortly afterwards, taken to the notorious prison in Bileća, where he served time doing hard labour with Moša Pijade, Rodoljub Čolaković and others. When the prison was closed he joined the National Liberation Movement in 1941, but was caught the same month after being denounced to the police and shot in Skela, near Obrenovac.

Her mother had a large family in Zemun and, at the end of 1940, she moved with the children to Zemun to be with her family.

After the war, Vera completed secondary school at the Nikola Tesla Technical Secondary School and in 1952 was employed at the Boris Kidrić Institute in Vinča. This department later moved to the Mihailo Pupin Institute in Belgrade, where she worked until her retirement. She has two children, Gordana and Milan. Gordana lives in Toronto with her husband Pavle Lebl and their two sons. Milan is unmarried and lives in Zemun. Vera was widowed five years ago.

I remember April 6 because of the confusion of the adults and my own immense fear. There were aircraft flying overhead, bombs falling and people were saying it was a military exercise.

That first day a bomb fell in the vicinity of our apartment, right in the middle of the street. There was a huge crater left there. Of course there were bombs falling all over the city but, for me, this crater was and is a symbol of force which permanently instilled in me a feeling of fear and insecurity.

One day during this time my mother met Father's eldest brother Jakov (Žale) and proposed that everyone pack and that, with the help of her connections, she would get them across the Danube into Crvenka. But Uncle Žale wouldn't hear of it. He believed that nothing could happen to Žale Karaoglanović.

My mother had a lot of family and friends in Zemun through whom she managed to get documents for us in her maiden name. So during the occupation we had some protection. They only once came to the courtyard in which we lived looking for Jews, probably following a tip-off, but then a neighbour of ours, a *Volksdeutsche*, came to our help. She came out of the house and explained in German that it was a mistake. She knew about our situation, because she knew Mother from before the war. We felt safer after this. Still we didn't know whether the next time she might be prepared to retract this statement. Fortunately they didn't look for us again.

During the occupation we couldn't use Father's printing company. Because we were Jewish, the occupying force had taken everything and seized the family's assets, which were not small. And so our mother was left with no means of support. For some time she worked for a printing company in the main street of Zemun which was owned by a childhood friend. She helped my grandmother, with whom we lived. She would go to nearby villages and bring food, some of which she sold

and some of which she kept for us. My brother, who was ten at the time, would gather firewood. He walked with our grandmother to Banovci, Surduk and other villages to help carry firewood and food.

Our *Volksdeutsche* neighbour was a decent person. She helped as much as she could. Sometimes she would sit my brother and me at her table and we would have lunch together. She had no children of her own. She would also sometimes bring something for Mother. After the war she stayed in Zemun and, even when we had our own families, we would visit her and pay our respects.

During the war my brother and I finished primary school in Zemun, with frequent interruptions and without any pleasant memories.

What remain with me always are fear, the sound of air-raid sirens, Stukas diving, the whistle of grenades, the thunder of bombs, hunger and cold. That is what my childhood consisted of between the ages of eight and twelve.

For a while, my mother and brother would go and wait for the deep carts full of bodies which were being driven from Sajmište to the cemetery. I could sense something, there were whispers in the house, but I never asked – I don't know why – what exactly this was all about. Later, after the war ended, I heard that these bodies were Jews, possibly even those closest to us.

After the liberation, to our great joy, Father's youngest brother Sima returned from captivity and was there for us in the role of a father, a guardian. He first reinstated our family surname, then sent my brother to Czechoslovakia for schooling, and I enrolled in the Zemun Secondary School. Our dear Sima took care of us until we were adult, and even after that.

Thanks to the Jewish Community, I was always decently dressed, even in primary school. And just before I turned eighteen, I became a member of the Braća Baruh Choir, with which I spent the nicest part of my life.