
Ana ŠOMLO

THEY DIDN'T KNOW THE WAR WAS OVER



Ana Šomlo was born in Negotin on March 27, 1935. Her father, engineer Imre-Miroslav Šomlo, was the head of the Technical Department and her mother, Budimka Smederevac-Šomlo a Serbian language teacher at the Negotin Secondary School. Her elder sister, Milana-Beba Šomlo, was in the third year of primary school and Ana in the first when the war began.

Her mother was a Serb, born in Vršac on December 7, 1907. Her father was born in Budapest on December 18, 1899. His family moved to Vršac, where Ana's grandfather, Samuel, was the first veterinary surgeon, while her father remained in Hungary to complete his studies.

She graduated in Oriental languages from the Faculty of Languages of Belgrade University. She spent two years of post-graduate study in Jerusalem. She worked for about ten years as a journalist for the current affairs program of Television Belgrade. She has published articles in a number of newspapers and magazines. She also edited the magazine "RTV Theory and Practice" and has written a number of novels and short stories. She translates from Hebrew, and lives and works in Israel.

Very soon after the Germans entered Negotin, they threw us out of the house. Many neighbours and friends approached us in the street,

inviting us into their homes and bringing us food. One of my father's colleagues, the engineer Mita Pantić, took us in and put us up in his little garden house in which there was neither water nor electricity. The following morning my sister Beba went out into the street with a bucket to fetch water from the tap. She came back in tears, telling us that some boys had spilt her water and threatened her, shouting: "Jew, Jew!"

I took the bucket from her hand and went to the tap where the boys were still standing. I was holding a stone in my hand and, when one of them came up to me, I threw it at him. I grabbed the bucket, half full of water, and poured it on them. And I shouted at them: "You're Jews, we're not." They were confused and let me take some water. I came back to the yard, very proud, and told them how I had thrown the water at the boys. My mother said to me: "Ana, you are a Jew, your father's a Jew, but you shouldn't be ashamed of that because the Jews are a wonderful, ancient and clever people and you can be proud of that."

A few days later my teacher, Ljubica Krstić, sought Mother out and warned her, with all good intentions, that I should not boast about being Jewish and tell people in school that I was proud of that, because it could cause trouble for us. Mother immediately told me to be careful about what I was saying and where I was saying it. I couldn't understand this. On the one hand she had explained to me that I should be proud, that I came from an ancient, clever people, and on the other hand she had told me I should be quiet, because it was dangerous to talk about that.

It struck me as odd that Father was at home all the time. Up until then he had usually been out in the field somewhere, where a road or bridge was being built, but now he would sit at home all day long, deep in thought. He was a very serious and quiet man. I remember once, before the war, when he suddenly returned home from some trip and immediately went out again, to the office. When Mother returned from school and asked: "What's new?" I told her "Father was here." Knowing that he was out in the field she asked: "What Father?" "Well," I replied, "the gentleman with the black hat who comes here every day." From that point on, in our family and among our friends, my father was known as the gentleman with the black hat who came there every day.

One day two German soldiers burst into our little house to arrest him. Father took his small suitcase, the one he usually took on trips and began to pack his shaving kit, his pyjamas and towels. Then he bent over and put his foot up on a little chair and wiped his shoe. The

German shouted at him and kicked him. Father staggered for a moment, stood up, looked at him, then put his other foot up, cleaned that shoe and told me to pour water over his hands so he could wash them. The German looked at him in astonishment. It seems that Father's calm had confused him.

Mother was desperate. She soon learnt that Father had been taken to the camp in Zaječar, the only camp for Gypsies and Jews in Serbia. She immediately left, in deep snow, to look for him. She told my sister and me to think of something and to manage somehow to get to some friends, to Dr Mitrović, which was where we stayed until she returned. At this time there were no telephones. We knew neither where Mother was nor when she would return. Fortunately the camp manager was a *Volksdeutscher* from Vršac, a former student of hers, who allowed her to visit Father and to take him food and clean clothing. Even later on she used to travel there often to visit him. I think he was in that camp for a little more than a year. One day when I was returning from school, I saw a grey man in a torn suit. When he walked up to me I wanted to run, I didn't recognise him, he had changed so much. It was only when he smiled that I recognised him and ran into his embrace. He had grown very old and thin: I can just imagine how difficult it was for him. He had always been very elegant. Even at home he wore black striped trousers and fine shoes, he never wore slippers. Now he looked miserable. Mother told him that he had to flee immediately, to go to friends in the countryside, because her former student had let him out for two days only, but Father refused to even discuss it. He just kept reading the papers all day long. Friends came to visit him, they kept trying to persuade him to leave Negotin, but he wouldn't. A few days later they took him away again.

Not long after that, Mother's brother, Milan Smederevac, appeared. He and mother decided to take us to Vršac, where life was easier and, apparently, less dangerous for us. Our surname was Hungarian, Mother's family was Serb and they had already taken all the Jews from Banat into camp so they hoped that we would pass unnoticed. So my sister and I continued going to school. Our grandparents took care of us, but we missed our parents. Beba returned home at the end of the school year in 1942, and I began the second grade of primary school in Vršac. However, I was unhappy, I was crying at night, so I too returned to Negotin. Mother managed to move to some apartment. It wasn't as nice as our house, but we were able to organise ourselves better than in the

little garden house. They again let Father out of camp on the condition that he remain hidden. His friends, Dr Mitrović and Judge Sofronjević used to come over at night. Our neighbour, Granny Polka, warned Mother that it wasn't nice to have male visitors to the apartment at night during curfew. After all, she was a teacher, what would the students think of her, and the neighbours were also gossiping about her. No one apart from our closest friends was allowed to know that the visitors were actually coming to see my father, rather than my mother. Again Father wouldn't hide somewhere out of town so again they took him away. Mother used to visit him in Zaječar and Beba and I would sleep at Dr Mitrović's house. His sons, Srđan, Aca, Ika and Žil, were wonderful boys. They took us sledding and played with us. I adored them, as I also adored their mother, Aunt Mica. Sometimes we were also with Judge Sofronjević and his Greek wife, Fana, who liked us a great deal. One day Mother told us suddenly that we had to organise ourselves as best we could, because she had to travel urgently to Zaječar as the camp there was to be closed down.

This time the camp manager, her former student, did not see her, but they told her that all the inmates were going to Belgrade. Someone hinted to her that they would all be killed there. Mother managed to get on the same train they were travelling on. She sat next to Father and kept telling him to jump off the train and run. However he paid no attention to her. At that time the trip to Belgrade took two days. When they reached the city they took the prisoners to the German command. Mother was sitting in the waiting room, completely beside herself, and they were calling out the names of detainees and taking them into an office from which they did not return. They called Father and she sat there, rigid, not knowing what to do. Father suddenly appeared and called her over saying they would leave. "Where to?" she asked. "What do you mean where to? I'm free, I just had to get my documents. The camp commandant in Zaječar, your student, told me that I had to travel to Belgrade for documents and that I would then be released." Mother couldn't believe that she was hearing this with her own ears. "Didn't you know that?" he asked in surprise. "That's why I was wondering why you wanted me to jump from the train when I would be free. It didn't occur to me that you didn't know I was to be released."

And so they both returned to Negotin. Of all the Zaječar inmates, only Father and an engineer named Levi stayed alive. The others were all shot the following day. Father finally realised that he had to hide. He

went to Štubik, to some friends of his, villagers who occasionally worked on road construction. The family of Mita Todorović took him in and took care of him. Their house was in a little wood, a few kilometres from the village. Mita's son Žika used to go to Negotin occasionally and from there he would bring us letters from Father, tucked into his villager shoes, and would also take him clothes.

Alle Juden haben sich am 19 April d. J. um 8 Uhr morgens bei der Städtischen Schutzpolizei (im Feuerwehrkommando am Taš-Majdan) zu melden.

Juden die dieser Meldepflicht nicht nachkommen, werden erschossen.

Belgrad 16-IV-1941

Der Chef der Einsatzgruppe der Sicherheitspolizei und des S. D.

Сви Јевреји морају да се пријаве 19 априла т. г. у 8 час. у јутро градској полицији (у згради Пожарне команде на Ташмајдану).

Јевреји који се не одазову овом позиву биће стрељани.

Београд, 16-IV-1941 год.

Шеф групе полиције

One of the many German orders issued on posters which, for Jews, meant a summons to execution sites and certain death

away. When we passed the Bukovo Hill, bearded Chetniks appeared from the woods and stopped us. They wanted to take our things. They asked us who we were. When Žika said we were the children of Budimka the teacher, they let us pass and didn't take anything. One of them told us he was a former student of Mother's. I was terribly afraid.

We were welcomed very warmly in the house of the Todorović family. Living there were Mita's wife Kruna, Rada their daughter-in-law and two children, three-year-old Dragan and Čeda, who was still a

One night, a colleague of my mother, Siba Đorđević, came to us. The curfew had already begun and people were not permitted to be in the streets, but she had learnt that they would come for my sister and me the next day because, under a new law, children of mixed marriages were being taken to camp. Mother quickly prepared us and, at dawn, while it was still dark, we went to the end of the town, to a tavern where the villagers who came in from the surrounding villages for the market would gather and wait for day to break. Mother was looking for someone to take us to Štubik, but she didn't succeed. Instead she sent a message to Žika that we were waiting for him. So he came with a horse and cart to pick us up. We set off straight

baby. This was the first time I'd ever been in a village house. They slept on rag carpets. There was only one iron bed, which they let us use. There was almost no furniture. They kept their clothes in chests. However they were very good and kind to us. Rada was seventeen and already a mother of two. Another two families lived in this wood and we played with their children.

One evening we were awakened by shouting and by the light of a fire in a house not far away. The Germans had set fire to the barn. We dressed quickly in the dark. In pyjamas and odd shoes, I just pulled on my small coat and went down with the others to the dry creek near the house and we were still there when the dawn came. We didn't dare go back to the house, but instead set off through the woods to the neighbouring Vlach village of Malajnica. There we were taken in by the local teacher. We spent the next night in a classroom with other refugees. The Germans burst in during the night. They were looking for someone and inspected us all closely with a torch. Father stood up and started explaining something to them in German. We were all dying of fear. They took him outside. He was explaining the way to them. They might have realised that he was not a villager but a Jew and killed him. However they just took his leather coat and let him go.

We realised that we couldn't stay long at the school so we headed up the mountain. I don't know whether this was Miroč or Deli Jovan,



Ana Šomlo at a promotion in the Tanjug Press Centre in Belgrade

but we found shelter in a cave. We ate wild grapes and some leftover corn from fields. We were terribly hungry. We wandered around the woods. Once a shepherd took us into his hut and put a bowl of milk and bread on the table. We had no toiletries, only a small pair of scissors. We didn't have any soap, or a comb. I cut the lining inside the pockets of my coat and, with no one noticing, stuffed a few pieces of bread into the lining. Later, when we were some distance away from our host's hut, I proudly took my loot out to boast. Father slapped me on the face, the only time in my life he ever did that. The autumn had already begun and we had had nothing to eat for three days, so I shared the bread with my sister. Father wouldn't touch it. We met some people who were also looking for shelter and, together with them, we went in search of food. We were crossing the Zamna river, which was so narrow you could cross it over a log. We were all crawling across, only my sister was walking upright, with her arms stretched out, like a circus performer. As I watched admiringly, she fell into the river, deep in the gorge beneath us. She surfaced quickly, completely wet. Father took off his flannel coat and was wearing just a shirt. It was drizzling rain and we were afraid that he would catch a cold.

It was strange that none of us caught a cold that autumn. My sister and I were sensitive and delicate. At the change of season, when autumn was ending and winter beginning, we would usually have bronchitis but now, in these harsh conditions, we didn't even catch a cold. There was shooting around us. We were walking down a path through the wood. Suddenly a canon went off above our heads and we all fell down because of the pressure. A teacher who was in front of my sister accidentally kicked her as he fell to the ground. From the ground she was shouting: "Father, I've been hit by a canon".

"Be quiet!" Father shouted back at her. "If it had hit you, you wouldn't be alive!" Father took care of us but he didn't know how to be gentle. Once I put my head on his shoulder while he was sleeping beside me in the cave. Just as I'd snuggled up to him because it was warm and I felt safe, he put my head down on the rag carpet. "Because of the lice," he explained to me, and I understood him.

Again we found shelter in a cave. By now it was impossible to find food. The snow was falling in big flakes. We were unbelievably starved. Suddenly I heard sheep bleating and I drew my father's attention to it. He left the cave. I heard him talking to a shepherd who was taking his flock of sheep back to the village. He politely asked the man to give us

something, anything to eat. He told him that we girls had not even tasted food for several days.

“What are you doing here?” he asked father. Father explained to him that we were hiding from the Germans.

“What Germans?” the shepherd asked. “The Russians crossed the Danube at Prahovo two months ago. The war is over. Negotin has been liberated for quite a while.”

We couldn't believe this because we could hear gunfire all the time, but he told us that this was the Partisans and Chetniks fighting each other and that we could freely return to Negotin. He gave us a little food. We set off on foot to Negotin. Along the way we came across upturned carts, dead horses with legs in the air. Once we came across some children whose grandmother had been blown to pieces by a mine and they were trying to collect her. We stopped to help them. “Here's a hand,” someone shouted.

“And here's the right leg!” someone else added. The grandmother was gathered up in a laundry basket. It all seemed like a morbid game which we weren't even aware of. The only feeling we had was hunger. We saw some cans and other food which had fallen from a German cart, but Father wouldn't let us take anything, fearing that there were mines. I don't remember how long it took us to get home, but I know that it was late in the afternoon and I climbed up on the door handle to peep inside through the tiny window in the door. I saw Mother lying down and weeping.

I began trembling and shouted “Mother!” She stirred, but she thought that she had dozed off and dreamt that someone was calling her, so she began weeping even more. “Mother!” I shouted, and she suddenly jumped up and opened the door. I fell from the door handle and ran into the house. Mother was looking at me in astonishment.

“For God's sake!” she cried out. “You're alive?” She was hugging me. Then she turned to Father: “I heard that they saw you hanged. I had lost all hope that you were alive. Where have you been?”

Father explained to her that we had not known that the war was over, that Negotin had been liberated. She couldn't understand this. “How is that everyone else knew, but you didn't?” She began shouting at him and berating him. Then she put her hand on my forehead, saying “My child, look at you, how dirty you are!” I reassured her, saying that I wasn't dirty, it was lice. She shuddered. She couldn't believe it, but I picked them from my forehead and showed her how they crawl. They had eaten my ears, there was no skin on them, only cartilage. Mother

immediately put water on the stove to heat up so that she could give us a bath. She spread newspapers on the table which we shook the lice onto, after which they crawled all around the room. Mother rubbed my head with gas, from which I got "sweet wounds" which is what they used to call festering boils. It took quite some time to get rid of the vermin. But none of this was so terrible – as long as we had a roof over our heads and food to eat. We were overjoyed, but not for long.

News started arriving about which of our family members we had lost. My father's brother Pišta had perished, along with his wife, Piri, and their children, Vera and Janči. It was not until later that we learnt that father's younger brother Aca had also perished in Jasenovac, with his wife and children. We decided to move to Vršac. We set off for Banat one day on a Russian truck. First we stayed with my grandfather in Vršac, then a year later moved to Pančevo where my parents found jobs. We were greatly surprised and happy when my father's sister, Olga, returned to Subotica with her husband Endre. Ildi had also been with them in Bergen-Belsen and Mauthausen, as was my grandmother, Gizela Šomlo, while we had lost hope for Ivan. However one day he too arrived. He had survived Auschwitz, alone, as a boy. It was only many years later that a list was found of those shot in Sajmište. It included the names of their parents, Ida and Feri Ivanji.

My grandmother, who had been a big woman, weighed about thirty kilograms when she returned from the camp. She soon became very sick. She was delirious, calling her children. But she survived and recovered, physically at least. Whenever the doorbell rang she would think that one of her children or grandchildren had returned. She would stare into people's faces, asking them what their names were. Finally she realised that no one else would be returning and began to suffer deeply, but she was also very collected. She followed political events, listened to the radio and read the newspapers. She gave birth to thirteen children of whom only two outlived her.

In 1957, when I went to Israel to study, she wrote down the addresses of her relatives and friends. She knew them all by heart. They wrote to one another. Two years later, when I returned, she asked me for all the details of life in Israel. She died two years later at the age of 91.

In Yad Vashem I wrote down the names and details of all our relatives who perished in the Holocaust. Medals of the Righteous for Mita Todorović and his wife Kruna were accepted by their son Žika and daughter-in-law Rada, who remain our great friends to this day.