

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGREB

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

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WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

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YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

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Regina KAMHI

I DRIED DIEPERS ON MY BREASTS



Regina Kamhi was born in Sarajevo on 29 December 1915, of mother Rifka, née Altarac, and father Isak Levi. No one of her immediate family survived the Holocaust.

With her husband Aron Kamhi, engineer, she had two sons – David and Isak, and an adopted son, war orphan, Šlomo Zupković, who is living in Israel with his wife and three children.

David is a full-time professor at the Sarajevo Music Academy; he has a son and a daughter, both living in Israel. Isak, doctor of technical sciences, a civil engineer, a citizen of

Israel, is living in USA, with three children.

Regina Kamhi was working for a number of years in the Ministry of Social Policy in Sarajevo. She developed comprehensive activities within the Jewish Community of Sarajevo and the Red Cross. She is co-author of a book on Sephardic sayings and wisdom. She has received a number of awards and decorations, and for her activity within the Jewish Community she was awarded the Megila of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.

She is presently living in Zagreb in the „Dr Lavoslav Švarc“ home.

I was born in Sarajevo, a city with a relatively high number of Jews, mostly Sephardim, where the specific Sephardic culture and a somewhat unique social life were cherished.

Already as a girl I was a member of the Hashomer Hatzair, led by Dona Konforti, married Kon. We met every Sunday with Dona Konforte and she would take us for outings and picnics around Sarajevo. She taught us songs

and told us about people preparing to go to the then Palestine. She gave us blue and white bags with Magen David and advised us to save for *Keren Kajemet*. We listened attentively and, although very young, remembered the pleasant outings with our Dona, always anxious for the next one.

I was married in 1935 in Sarajevo to a civil engineer Aron Kamhi, nicknamed Aroniko. Already while in grammar school he was our *madrih* for the oldest group of *Ahdut hacofim*, in Sarajevo called „Alef“, back in 1925 and 1926. Aroniko wanted to go to Palestine but his father prevented him, wanting him to first do his university studies. He graduated from his studies in 1933 in Berlin. After Hitler's coming to power, he returned to Sarajevo, and worked there as civil engineer until 1941. When the Independent State of Croatia was proclaimed, he was taken for forced labor, from which he fled and joined the National Liberation War in 1941. He survived the war and died in 1971 of consequences of a traffic accident. After the war he was employed at the Ministry of Construction and afterwards worked as director of the Design Office for Roads and Bridges.

After I was married I was member of the WIZO Management Board, chaired by Pepica Pinto. After 1933, when Hitler got to power, many German Jews came to Sarajevo. WIZO members immediately became active in receiving the refugees and assisting them in whichever way they could. Some of them moved on, and some stayed in Sarajevo like for instance dr Leopold Kaufer with his family. Later he joined the Partisans, survived the war, and worked in the Military Hospital in Sarajevo as a doctor.

Sarajevo was bombed on 6 April 1941 and very soon the German troops stormed the city. I was pregnant and we were hiding in the shelters.

On 12 April 1941 a group of Jews was executed before a firing squad in Vrace neighborhood. Lists were being made of Jewish apartments and Jews in the center of the city. These lists were used in September 1941 when they started rounding up Jews to be deported to death camps. My whole family lived in the center of the city, in Aleksandrova Street 18 and Šenoina 20. The house consisted of two parts and had ten apartments and five shops. The house was built by my grandfather more than fifty years before that time, after the design by an architect from Vienna. My grandfather, Juda Altarac, was a goldsmith jeweler and was nicknamed „Juda il saatči“ (Juda the watchmaker). Practically my whole family lived in those two houses. In one of the apartments on first floor lived the family of Fanika and Melko Goce-Gučetić. They were nobility from Zaton, near Dubrovnik, and they came to Sarajevo on business. When in September 1941, at night, Ustaša and culturbund people came to the house, they got everyone from the family out of beds and took them in their nightgowns and pijamas to concentration camps, from which none of them ever returned. Family of Goca Gučetić heard the

screaming and crying of my family when they were being taken away, but could not help because they would be taken away as well.

I had my son David in 1936. In summer 1941 I was pregnant and marked with the yellow armband which I wore like all the other Jews. One day as I was going to buy some food, a boy kicked me with his foot in the street, calling me „Ćifutka“ (derogatory term for Jewess). A passer-by chased the boy away and escorted me to dr Jelka Knežević-Švarc, a gynecologist. Dr Jelka Knežević took me to the Koševo hospital right away and together with dr Bokonjić she admitted me to her department.

Dr Jelka Knežević and dr Bokonjić regularly visited me and moved me from first to second and third class so that I would not be recognized by Ustaša, because raids happened all the time. They were taking away Jewish women from the hospital, pregnant, old, sick and powerless. Hiding in this way, in the night of 18 October 1941, I gave birth painlessly to my son Isak-Kika, because the psychological pain and fear were stronger than the pain of delivery itself. My son Kika was born weighing 2.3 kg. After his birth Marica Odobašić, my maid for many years, took me to her home in Zembiljeva street and kept me there in hiding. My friend Seka Trumić was bringing food for me, along with another friend Fahrija Hrasnica-Fadilpašić who was assisting. My mother or anyone else from my family did not see the baby boy Isak, because they were all taken away in September 1941 to death camps. None of them returned.

Fifteen days after delivery, I was given counterfeit documents arranged by our friends who managed earlier to flee Sarajevo and go to Mostar. It was Ćučo-Josip Albahari and Mirko Levinger. They wrote a note on a small piece of paper: „Try by all means to avoid showing the documents because they are counterfeit.“

My dear Marica Odobašić got for me the traditional Muslim women's dress (Muslim women wore a scarf over their head in order to cover their face, and a small hat). She was seeing me off at the station as I was leaving with two children, David born in 1936 and Isak-Kika born two weeks earlier. I had put on a wide fitted coat and beneath it two sets of clothes. I also put two sets of clothes on my son David, and for the baby Isak-Kika I had several diapers under his white carrying pillow. I had a note stating their names and dates of birth and data about parents, in case that I were to be arrested. I kept telling David „Your name is Džavid“ (Muslim name), because I was dressed as a Muslim.

I arrived at the old railway station at the last moment, at 6 PM, just before the train for Mostar was to leave. At the first check point I yelled at the train ticket collector and the man from culturbund: „Let me through, I will miss my train!“ „Go, woman, the hell with you“, they said. Thus I avoided the need to present my documents. Somehow, I got to the Mostar train, I sat down in the train with my children and the tears just kept coming from excitement and fear. David asked me: „Why are you crying, mom?“ I answered: „My tummy hurts“.

In the compartment next to me there was a man with the red Muslim cap on his head. I placed my son David on the seat directly across from me, in order not to be revealed. When the control came, I instinctively turned in the opposite direction, opened up my big coat and covered myself with it as if I was breastfeeding my baby Isak. The man with the red Muslim cap told the controls: „Don't you see that this *hanuma* (the term used for Muslim women) is breastfeeding, come later.“ The train was overcrowded and the controls did not come back. Again, I did not have to show my fake documents. It seemed as if the man and I were husband and wife, he with the red *fes* on his head and I with the veil over my head. He asked me: „Why are you travelling at night?“ I told him I was visiting my sick mother in Mostar.

At midnight we arrived to Mostar. There were Italian soldiers at the railway station. The civilian administration was exercised by the Ustaša, while Italians exercised military functions. At that time the president of the Jewish Community in Mostar was David Hajon. After we arrived to town, in the early hours covered by curfew, I had to sit at the railway station until 6AM for the curfew to be over.

The number of Jewish refugees in Mostar was increasing to the level that the Italian authorities could no longer control them, and for this reason they made an agreement with Jewish representatives that a significant number of Jews would be transferred to the island of Lopud in September 1942 and detained there. The year after they were transferred to Italian concentration camps on the island of Rab, eight kilometers inland of the shore, in settlement Kampor. The camp was fenced with high barbed wire. Across the fence was another fenced camp, with detainees from Slovenia. They sent us under the shower, for disinfection reasons as they said, and distributed us to the yet unfinished barracks, with separate parts for women with children, and separate for young women and men. Throughout my time in the camp I struggled with food for my son David and the still small boy Isak-Kika, despite the fact that we received help from the Jews from Mostar. They could bring along some supplies, both food and clothes, but not sufficient for all the children, and the social team that was set up among the camp detainees tried to provide for the smallest children. This team was led by dr Lav Singer, and members included Valika Štajner, Zimerman, Lilika Kamhi, Salamon and others. Covertly detainees were organizing first aid courses and collection of clothes and shoes for the future Rab battalion.

The carabinieri were bringing drinking water in truck-tanks, and we were standing in line with our bawls in hand for a liter of water and some food. The quantities of water and the brief showers, the insufficient and inadequate food, and poor hygiene conditions resulted in my children starting to have health problems. We often had to re-use the same water. I used to

dry the washed diapers for Isak on my breasts – that is how it was until the capitulation of Italy in September 1943.

Partisans from the Velebit mountain region arrived immediately after the Italian capitulation, they liberated the camp, held a meeting and invited the former detainees who wanted to join to go to the liberated territory. The majority was transferred to the liberated territory, through the heavy storm, by fishing boats to Sv. Juraj, because at that time Senj was bombed. We moved only by night to avoid being caught by Ustaša. The old and the sick who stayed behind in the camp were murdered by the Germans who took control of the camp. The young girls went along with the Slovenians to join the Partisans within the just established Rab battalion. We walked on foot to Otočac, the location of the Croatian Partisans' HQ. In Čemernica we were further distributed across the liberated territory.



Regin's friends during the days when no one anticipated the forthcoming evil

Čemernica was the collection centre. I was tasked with taking the Jewish group of children from the camp. We were to be transferred to El Shatt, in Africa, because the fighting was still fierce and there was need to save the children. Another group of children was led by Rikica Ovadija. All children were taken at night to the airport for boarding, but they returned back disappointed, because there came another group of wounded fighters who had to go first. We, too, returned to the base with the children at night. That is why ZAVNOH (the National Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Croatia) decided to once again establish children's homes and a children's hospital in the back of the liberated territory.

I did not have enough milk for Isak, he constantly cried due to hunger. While still in camp, in the barrack where a number of us slept together, I

would hold Isak at night against my breasts so as not to disturb other inmates. There was no milk coming, and he wanted it, he sucked and cried, so that my nipples were in scars and bleeding. Even now I can hear his crying sometimes at night.

In the liberated territory there was a doctor from Zagreb, dr Gustav Jungvirt, pediatrician. With the help of Partisans, he set up a secret hospital in a village for children from the camps and other children. My children were severely ill. They had whooping cough, scorbout, itching and vitamin deficiency; Kiko and Bulkica Kamhi – tuberculosis. My son Isak, although already in his third year, could not talk. He would utter inarticulate words: „Jaš, johu.“ Only David understood those words: they meant – I need to pee and I am hungry. I was concerned that he would remain dumb, but it was a consequence of my psychological trauma during pregnancy. My niece Bulkica Kamhi, daughter of my brother-in-law Hajim Kamhi, was just as sick. Isak and Bulka were practically on their death-bed. Dr Jungvirt saved them with my blood (zero blood group), which he took from me and gave them as transfusion two times. After that the children started to recover from their illnesses, scars, scorbout, the whooping cough. Bulkica's eye which was closed due to TBC re-opened again. To our great joy, thanks to the commitment of dr Jungvirt and other hospital staff they survived.

After the liberation in 1945, at my request, I was seconded to the Ministry of Social Policy in Sarajevo. I took my son Isak to anti-tuberculosis infirmary, where he was examined by dr Sveto Teofanović, who continued his treatment and gave us further advice. As soon as the first streptomycin medicines arrived Dr Moni Levi, general, gave it to us.

Minister Mastilović, Zehra Muidović and dr Smilja Kršić, department managers in Social Policy, and subsequently dr Tošo and dr Draga Ilić helped me in treating my son Isak-Kiko, approving for me paid and unpaid leave of absence.

Gradually, I taught him to speak. First, I took him to Trebević. There his process accelerated, so at the advice of dr Sveta Teofanović and dr Drago Ilić, I took him to the village Reljevo near Sarajevo, where the climate was more moderate. One woman from the village got for me six fresh eggs, I soaked them in lemon juice, punctured the shells and added some chocolate and sugar, mixed it with the yolk and fed him with this mixture. I continued to do so after my return to Sarajevo. Initially, he could not stand it, but over time he slowly started to recover along with the fish oil and cod intended and distributed my means of rationing coupons for patients suffering from TBC. Thus, my Kiko-Isak started slowly to exercise and gradually developed into a handsome boy. Fortunately, all the hardship did not leave consequences on the future development of my sons.