

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

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

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*Dr Lucija RAJNER*

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LONG BEEN GONE



*Primarius mr. sci. dr Lucija Rajner was born on 2 August 1934 in Belgrade, of father Ladislav Rajner and mother Antonija Rajner, née Piringer.*

*She finished her education and graduated from the Medical Faculty of Belgrade, after which she completed her medical residency and specialized in pneumophysiology, and completed post-graduate studies in cardiology. She practiced medicine in Belgrade, in the Belgrade Institute for Pulmonary Diseases and Tuberculosis, where she founded the Cardiology Department, and later worked at the Institute of Pulmonary Diseases of the Clinical*

*Centre of Serbia in Belgrade, where she retired after full years of service from the post of head of department and the title of chief physician – Primarius. From her marriage to Dušan Pirec, doctor of economics, she has a daughter, Vesna, also a doctor, a specialist in psychiatry and Ph.D. of medical sciences, who lives and works, with her family, in Chicago (USA).*

*Lucija Rajner has been actively socially engaged in medical associations of Belgrade and within the Jewish Community of Belgrade.*

I was born in Belgrade in a big family in which it would only seldom happen that there would be less than ten or more sitting together at the table for a meal. In my grandfather's and grandmother's family (whom I called "otata" and "omama"), apart from four sons of whom my father Ladislav, called Aco, was the oldest, there would always be others – friends

or colleagues. They were all young people, just making their start in life. In that home I was the only child, the first grandchild, the beloved niece ... And I felt very well in the warmth they gave me ...

However, I am not writing these lines for my own sake, although by coincidence I survived numerous hardships of life from my earliest childhood, of which there has never been a shortage until the present day. Despite all the hardship I am still living today. These lines are for those other people that I hold dear but who have been gone for a long time. That is why I will begin my story a bit from afar, from the past.

The family of my paternal grandfather, Alojz Rajner, comes from regions which used to be part of the then Austria-Hungary. By coincidence they changed their place of living in areas that were later to become Yugoslavia (initially called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and the region later had different names).

The predecessors of my grandmother, Marija Jelinek, originate from the regions of sunny Italy. They also changed their places of living and ended up in the regions of that same Yugoslavia. That is how my grandmother and grandfather met and had their family.

They, too, changed places of living, staying the longest in the region of Slavonija – in Slavonski Brod, later in Sarajevo, and finally in Belgrade, where many of them ended their lives but not by natural death – they perished by the force of monstrous times.

To get back to my story.

My father was the oldest of the four Rajner brothers and was the first to get married. After a long romance with my mother, Antonija Piringer, and despite many transitory obstacles and prejudices (my mother was not a Jew), they concluded the marriage in which I was born. My father was a lawyer, a director of a private commercial company. I grew up under very good circumstances of a bourgeois family of those times. Doctor, engineer of tech-



*Parents of LUCIJA RAJNER'S father,  
ALOJZ and MARIJA, née JELINEK, in  
Sarajevo, around 1908*

nology, economist, senior professional – director in foreign trade, director of a major private company: those were their professions. The sons, one after the other, built their own families and left the father's home. Uncle Ernest, an engineer of technology, went to Zagreb, married and his name was for many years linked to what was to become the pharmaceutical company „Pli-va“, or at that time „Kaštel“. The close links among the others who stayed in Belgrade and the connection through the grandfather's pleasant home in Zardarska street were daily traditions that lived on until the fatal 1941. Directly before World War Two, uncle Egon, as a young doctor doing his military service, was arrested right away. He survived as a prisoner of war. Subsequently, as an intern specializing in neuropsychiatry he lived and worked in Sarajevo and Tuzla, where he passed away surrounded by his family.

The other members of the Rajner family who stayed in Belgrade were not as fortunate.

Since at that time I was a child of six and a half I cannot be certain about the accuracy or the sequence of the events that I will describe.

Right after 27 March 1941, shortly before the war, father was summoned as reserve to military service. I remember very well the bombing of Belgrade on 6 April. That terrible morning I was alone with my mother when through the window of our apartment in Jovanova street I saw the numerous planes dropping upon the city the plentitude of ellipse-shaped objects, which made the whole building shake and everything around us was thundering. Somewhat later, I remember this well, the whole neighborhood was enveloped in a cloud of smoke and flames. It seemed that the Jovanova street was on fire for days on end. We did not flee anywhere – we spent all the time in the basement of our building, with the few neighbors who likewise were not ready to leave. Were not ready or had nowhere to go.

I cannot say accurately how many days later, but soon afterwards, I heard that the house of my *omama* and *otata* in Zardarska street stayed intact, although the library in its direct vicinity was burnt down to its foundations. All members of our family in Zardarska street were alive. Uncle Ivan too with his family was not hurt. I remember the bare streets of Belgrade of those days, full of ashes, remnants of fire, the dead bodies, the damaged buildings. Even today, when I smell fire, I remember the Belgrade of that time.

My father's office in Cara Uroša street was destroyed and burnt down completely. Some employees survived and some were killed.

On an April day, during the initial cleaning up of the city, my father came – during the bombing of Belgrade he was doing his military service somewhere in Serbia. He came back pale, very thin, with deep set in black bags under his eyes, dressed in villagers' clothes which he managed to get in some village to change his clothes, namely – he took off his uniform in order

not to be taken as prisoner of war. Thus, he returned to the occupied Belgrade, to his family, but in fact he returned to real danger... Since the office had burnt down father did not work for a while, but I as a child was happy about this as I hoped that finally father would have more time to be with us, with me and my mother.



*Four sons of ALOJZ RAJNER, of whom LADISLAV (sitting) was the eldest, in Slavonski Brod, around 1928*

That childish joy was short-lived. Very soon I was surrounded only by very concerned and serious faces of everyone around me. Unusual behavior, talking in soft voices, absence of smiles and joy, no laughter at all in my vicinity – all of this turned me from a much cherished and even spoiled child into a very serious one. I did not dare ask any questions. I could hardly understand all the public announcements that kept coming up every day, the reporting, registrations, the yellow armbands and the Magen Davis signs on suits of all my family, but the overwhelming serious conduct of all my family and the fear in my mother's eyes stopped me from asking for any explanation. I did understand that something abominable was happening. I was no longer

the centre of attention of everyone in the house and around me, they spoke among themselves quietly and of things completely incomprehensible to me. Then, during the summer of 1941, there was news about the huge explosion of arms and ammunition that happened in Smederevo. Along with many other Jews, father was summoned and taken right away to go and clear up the debris in Smederevo. I cannot accurately remember how long it lasted. Many years on, when I went for the first time to Smederevo, I recognized the areas where my mother and I used to go to visit father. My memory went back to that summer and the year that I shall remember as long as I live. At that time we did, now and then, get letters from Smederevo, or notes from father. What were the channels through which he sent them I do not know,

but some of them still exist today and I donated some copies to the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade.

I do not remember accurately when father returned to Belgrade. The atmosphere in my surroundings was becoming increasingly tense. My grandfather and a close relative, Željko Kac, were taken with the first groups of „hostages“ (the word I heard then for the first time, without comprehending it fully). From the initial prison, they were soon taken away somewhere ... Nobody gave any explanation to a child who, by this time, was seven years old. Everything around me had become changed and frightening. Again, I did not ask questions, which under normal living conditions I certainly would have done relentlessly until I was given full explanation. But now, I did nothing of the kind, although I did understand that grandfather was no longer with us. I heard the words *Sajmište*, but I knew from the past that that was the venue of air-shows that I heard about from my grandmother's brother, mechanical engineer Karlo Jelinek. Yet, now the word carried with it a different feel. The next thing mentioned was *Banjica*, and it was becoming increasingly clear that these were the names of some camps, or prisons. In October 1941 all I heard was: ...„they were taken away in open trucks...“ The word *Jajinci* was mentioned. I had no idea where that was, but I soon understood that they were taken away on a journey of no return.

Briefly afterwards it was my father and the youngest uncle Ivan who were taken away and detained. They were taken to the camp „*Topovske šupe*“. Awareness set in that everywhere around me something awful was going on. Mother would not let me even a step away from her. I often went along with my mother, her clenching my wrist tightly, in the direction of *Autokomanda*, which I got to know quite well. The corner surrounded by barbed wire behind which one could see the shadows of inmates passing – that is an image I remember well. Presently, that area looks quite different. Back then, the two of us would often stand across that corner, waiting to see the well known faces. The street was not as wide as it is at present. On occasions, I would see the faces of my father or uncle Ivan. Sometimes mother would hurriedly take me to the other side of the street, closer to the wire, and someone would manage to get to us some notes intended for us and others on this side of the fence. Many times I saw the German soldiers exposing the inmates to rough treatment, as they like birds of prey came down on inmates who were trying to get closer to the wire. „*Los, los!*“, shouted the German soldiers pushing away by blows the inmates further from the barbed-wire fence. The whole street was resounding with those words and the sound stayed with me much longer. Sometimes we would get the letters or notes written by inmates at the gate to the camp, although I do not know what kind of camp rules of regimes



caused the change. Some of these I still have today, and I gave copies to the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade.

Sometimes I managed to see father through those wires. He was greatly changed, thin, pale, very serious and never looking straight at us. Not a trace of a smile on his face. In the past, though, we used to laugh so much together. I followed my mother quietly, speechless, as a fearful little bird trying to keep up with her long steps. And thus the days went by. My mother's health was deteriorating on daily basis. She coughed badly and had a fever. On that November day, fatal for us, mother could not go for her daily walk to the camp, due to her very high temperature. The following day, 15 November, she did go, this time alone. She returned very soon, in tears, very pale, speechless, and the moment she entered our home where I was waiting with a neighbor of ours, she fainted. That image I still remember to this day, along with the horror that came over me. „They took them away yesterday...“; was all that she told us after she regained conscience. She was not talking much the following days. She was more in a state of great confusion due to the shock and the illness and the very high temperature. She had a severe case of pleura inflammation with water accumulation, which at that time took long treatment and was not easily treated. I later understood that from other women experiencing the same suffering as her she had heard that on that day, 14 November, the transport consisted of the younger and healthier men. My father was 31 at the time and the uncle only 26. That knowledge made my mother hopeful that they were taken away somewhere ... possibly to do the most demanding labor ... Such information and thinking gave her and me some thin hope that they may survive and some day return. That irrational thin hope did not leave my mother till the end of the war, even longer.

That year, 1941, in the little apartment in Jovanova street, my grandmother was also with us, as I mentioned earlier. She had to leave her flat in Zadarska street, but for a while she could stay with us. Sick and with difficulties in moving due to her badly healed broken hip bone, she was bed ridden most of the time, although she was only 55. She could stay with us until early 1942, when she was forced to be admitted to the Jewish hospital situated in the building of the present day Faculty of Defectology, at the corner of Visokog Stevana and Tadeuša Košćuška streets. We were allowed to visit her. One day in February I saw a truck fitted tightly into the hospital entry door. My mother pulled at my hand, without a word she took me to the other side of the street, and we went home together in tears. I never saw my *omama* again. Whether at that time I understood all that was happening – I am not certain – but I later came to understand that the truck was in fact – a gas chamber. Even now I do not like going to that city district, passing by that building, or along the beautiful Zadaraska street in the Varoš kapija district.

It brings back memories which are too painful. Yet, when I do sometimes go by that building in Visokog Stevana street, I am terribly bothered by the fact that there is not a single word written there testifying that that was the location of the Jewish hospital, one of the last places of refuge for the numerous Jews of Belgrade.



*LUCIJA with parents, mother ANTONIJA and father LADISLAV, 1940*

mother's brief absences. I was not living like other children, with some age appropriate freedom. However, I interpreted this „lack of freedom“ as a sign of my mother's strictness, which I sometimes even took against her. I attended school when classes were resumed in the occupied city, but I never went unattended. Never alone. Well, I was a young child and it was wartime. Still, I could notice that some children did move around with more freedom, they did play after school, which I was never allowed. Later I understood that it was not due to my mother's strictness, rather it was due to the immense fear of the woman who had been left alone with a small child in the atmosphere of daily uncertainty about what the day may bring.

Children from mixed marriages whose mothers were not Jewish, were spared under the German rules, but the Germans, the occupiers, were never to be trusted. Only after the war I learned that with the consent of my

Since that February 1942 it was only my mother and I. Completely alone, without anyone our own. Frequent searches of our apartment, at day or night, going through our belongings in our home, had become an integral part of my daily reality. Different uniforms of the Gestapo or other German troops would be replaced by members of the Ljotic's guard or other forces subordinated to the occupiers. Always looking for someone or something. What??? Who, when there was nobody left anymore???

My movement at the time was very limited. Mother would not let me go anywhere alone and without her. I was never to open the door to anyone if I were left home alone during my

teacher and the then school principal of the elementary school „Kralj Petar I“ which I attended, next to my name in the class register there was no entry made regarding my father's name, nationality, or religion. Not a single information was written which could have indicated my Jewish origins. That was how I attended school in semi-contained conditions of the occupied Belgrade. Without actual childhood, preoccupied by sadness and worries not appropriate to my age. The severe reoccurrences of my mother's illness, along with everything else, contributed to me becoming serious and responsible at a very early age. It was only after the war, in talking with my class teacher from fourth grade of elementary school that I fully grasped the conditions of my education during the occupation. I have always felt the traces of such a childhood; I still deeply feel them today. When I speak of my life I always divide it into the pre-war, war, and post-war years. The truly beautiful memories are linked to the shortest of these three periods – the years before the war. By far the longest period of my life was the post-war years of my growing up in deprivation as many others, maturing, studying, later doing the work which I love, bringing up my only daughter and focusing on her, and later, thanks to destiny, enjoying my granddaughter which I still enjoy today. Yet, I have always lived until the present day with the indelible scars in my heart and the understanding of life which was imposed on me by the hardships of the war and its consequences on my family. I grew up with a caring mother, but without many others whom I loved endlessly and whose love as a small girl I briefly enjoyed. Most importantly, I grew up without my wonderful father. They perished under the force imposed by others without even a grave left behind them.

When I first visited Munich, as a doctor, I left without telling anyone to Dachau. I went there in desperation. I had an irrational feeling that I was going to visit the graves of the people I loved most.