

Hagara KAJON-DEBIJADI

LIFE HAD TO GO ON

She was born in 1922 in Sarajevo.

In the Holocaust she lost her father, mother, and brother. In partisan units she completed a medical course and worked caring for the wounded and the sick. After the war she enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade and became a doctor.

From her marriage to Dr. Rudi Debijadi, an academician, she has a daughter, Vesna.

She died in September 2005 in Belgrade.

My father finished tailoring apprenticeship and had a shop with mixed goods. He served in the Austro-Hungarian army, and after the end of the First World War he had been receiving a pension. My mother finished civic school in Višegrad. She was a housewife and occasionally helped my father in the shop.

To reach Abdićeva Street, where we lived, one went uphill from Mejtaš and the small synagogue. Along the whole slope of the street, especially on the right side, there were single-story houses where Sephardic Jewish families lived. There were very many poor people, although aid in food and money always arrived, which the Jewish community collected and distributed. From those courtyards echoed loud speech in a Spanish dialect, and also songs without which the life of the temperamental and cheerful Jews could not be imagined.

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From the entrance gate toward our house, part of the courtyard was covered. There were two rows of sheds, roofed with red tiles. In the garden, roses and irises bloomed. From the petals of red roses my mother prepared sweet preserves, with a strong fragrance and a slightly bitter taste. We also used the preserves as medicine when we had a fever.

Of the fruit, there were mostly Razdelija plums, with red-colored fruits that had so much juice that fingers became sticky. At the very end, in the right corner, there was a small “smokehouse” where goose meat was dried, from geese specially fed and “stuffed.” We received the meat from our Aunt Klara and Uncle Natan, who lived in Brčko and had a goose farm there.

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Our parents, and especially my mother, nurtured warm neighborly relations. First, people would talk until around noon, and then our mothers would pass plates over the “fence” to

one another with freshly made cakes, plum dumplings, pancakes, slices of sweet bread with chocolate and jam spread.

We children played in the gardens, hiding among the trees. In the afternoon we went out into the streets and alleys, where we played hide-and-seek and ran around. We sat on the thresholds of our house doors. Mothers and older sisters called us to come for a snack. It was wonderful to see girls and boys holding large pieces of bread spread with plum jam in their hands.

We would enter any courtyard to wash our mouths and sticky fingers, because almost every courtyard had a faucet from which a wide stream of clear water flowed.

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On winter mornings, when everything was covered with snow, almost always at the same time a "salep seller" would pass by, dressed in a fine woolen suit, wrapped in scarves of various colors. On his back he carried a small metal box containing a drink, thick, brown in color, with a pleasant smell. From afar his call could be heard: "Hot salep!" We children would jump out of bed and take the little cups already prepared. We hurried down the stairs and ran to the front door.

In those moments we always heard my mother's voice: "Put that on, you'll catch a cold." I still remember, from the nearby house, the sound of wooden clogs as someone rushed down the wooden stairs. Everything ended quickly, and we were back again in our warm white beds, slowly drinking the salep.

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My sister Sarina finished civic high school. She had a sense for enjoying beautiful things. She painted on canvas and silk, with oil paints. My father was very happy when his daughter made, for our small synagogue at Mejtaš, a table covering.

My brother Puba finished secondary commercial school.

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We moved from Abdićeva Street to Nemanjina Street. That place was somewhat farther from the center, towards the outskirts. Our life, personal and family, gained different contents. We finished four grades of elementary school. In the lower grades of high school, our nature studies teacher, Professor Gligić, spoke with us through free conversations about life and death. That was the beginning of my interest and final decision to study medicine.

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Even as children we gladly went to the premises of Hašomer Hacair. In this way we grew up with song and dance, conversations and learning. My menahelet (youth leader) was Blimka Švarc, a serious girl who read a great deal and passed her knowledge on to us. We came to love our shared walks, excursions, and in winter, skiing.

The meeting place for skiers was across from the City Hall and the public bath. We went on foot up to Trebević, and came down on skis all the way to the park.

We loved to read books. Visits to the library were regular. We went as a group to Marijin Dvor district, then turned right toward the large library.

We watched every film in which Shirley Temple acted. I remember that one of the last operettas in the Sarajevo theater was “Maria, Daughter of the Regiment.” My memories are also tied to choral singing in the “Lira” choir, with the already well-known conductor Oskar Danon. My sister Sarina was also a member of the choir.

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With the entry of the Germans and Ustaša troops into Sarajevo at the beginning of the war, raids on homes and closing of Jewish shops began. A group of young Jewish men was immediately taken away. It was said, they were told, they were being taken to a camp where they would work for some time under forced labor. These young people believed they would soon return to their homes.

Almost all of them carried instruments, most often guitars and harmonicas. Even in difficult times they could not part from instruments and song, while destruction was being prepared.

Adult men were required, every day early in the morning, to go to forced labor. My mother, with the children, endured this uncertainty with great difficulty. What was happening to our lives?

My sister Sarina-Bukica lived with her husband in Zenica. We could find out nothing about her, but it seems that Zenica at that time “solved” the Jewish question the fastest. We learned that children, young women, and older women were taken to the Stara Gradiška camp.

In Sarajevo, on the outskirts of the city, armed clashes began between the occupiers and those who did not accept the new situation. Mordo Papo, the son of my aunt Rena, was among the first to be killed. The oldest sister of my mother, Rena, was taken to a camp...

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Raids and violent break-ins into apartments became more and more intense. Sensing that we were next, we went to the home of the eldest daughter of aunt Rena. They welcomed us, as always, with great care. Potatoes in cream were already prepared, dairy products on the table... when loud banging was heard at the door. "It's them," we looked at each other in fear.

They gathered us up and led us toward Mejtaš district, where a large truck full of people was waiting. Where were they taking us? I looked at my mother and saw she had no scarf. I asked one of the men arresting us: "Allow me to go home and take my mother's scarf." To my surprise, they sent two men with me.

They questioned me and told me to show them where in the apartment the "gold bars" were. In confusion I answered that I had never heard of such a thing.

When we reached the apartment, the front door was sealed with red wax. Meaning: it was no longer ours, it was taken forever. They searched everything again and probably realized that I truly knew nothing to tell them. Following behind them, I saw nothing—only my glance fell on the dining-room cabinet, and on it an artistically made ping-pong set: a table with a real green net, several ping-pong balls, and two small paddles. I had received it as a gift, and I hadn't even had time to enjoy it...

I took my mother's scarf. The man sealed the apartment again. Our family home, within a few days, belonged to someone else.

The truck took us to a camp. We were assigned tasks and these were harshly controlled. The group I was in, was given a sack of potatoes and some strange devices for peeling. We tried, turning the potatoes, but with them we could not manage to do anything.

We were terrified, knowing that the guards could do whatever they wanted with us. Still, we agreed that one of us would quietly ask: "Bitte schön, gewöhnliches Messer?" We asked for ordinary knives. We had learned German in high school, so we addressed the soldier in German. He replied: "We will teach you to do everything!"

We wore yellow armbands. One day my cousin Zlatica and I ran downhill from Mejtaš toward Skerličeva Street, to our family doctor, because Zlatica's father had an attack of gallbladder pain.

In front of the gendarmerie station a man stood and pointed for us to stop. We were ordered to clean a dormitory where soldiers had previously lain. They looked at us with hatred and triumph.

We were frightened and turned to a man in work overalls: "Please have these people leave the room, and we will clean it... The two of us are Jewish, but that does not mean we have

no pride. We are students; we and our parents have done no harm to anyone.” “Leave these brooms and shovels, go home,” he answered.

The two of us were not even aware of the danger awaiting us, but Sarajevo was our native city...

We found ourselves by the Miljacka River and our gymnasium. Marked with yellow armbands, an ordinary man approached and led us toward the City Hall, into a room where many books lay on tables. The room was full of girls with yellow armbands. “Carry these books up the stairs to the upper room.” Why, why do they humiliate us?

Quietly and with dignity we formed a line of books toward the staircase, passing them hand to hand up to the upper room. We looked at one another, recognizing faces. I saw our cousin Adela Rajbah, daughter of aunt Klara, proud and upright, with the yellow band on her upper arm.

“Now you will take these books back down,” came the new order. I still remember how a strange stillness arose in the air, like a muffled groan. What is happening to us?

We returned home and through tears poured everything out of ourselves, something like pain and choking. We no longer went far from our houses. What will become of us?

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My mother said: “Run away from here! We are old, nothing will happen to us, but life lies ahead of you.”

My mother knew that I could not part from her. She made a motion as if she would kneel.

“Please, Hanika, flee from this hell!”

She tried to say something more to me, but I covered my ears with my hands so I would not hear. I left disguised, with another identity card. I felt my mother’s gaze on the back of my head and I did not turn around. I knew she was at the window, still watching me, and that she breathed easier knowing that my brother Pubo and I had gone.

Ratko Janković in 1941 saved many Jews. I was given papers with a Muslim name and surname, and clothing which at that time in Sarajevo was worn only by Muslim women. I was also given a thin veil that covered my face.

He brought me to the railway station and placed me on the train. He encouraged me calmly and with dignity. I repeated to myself my new name and surname... Comrade Ratko Janković, with a smiling face, stood on the platform as the train departed toward Mostar.

We went to Mostar, and then to Split. We believed that the young must do everything they could so that humanity would awaken and stop the great evil.

My brother Pubo was soon killed, fighting in a partisan unit. I was in a group of young people preparing to join the partisans.

Then I had the opportunity to devote myself to the wounded and the sick. I completed an advanced medical course. What rose from the hearts of all of us was a humane attitude and a great desire to help. I know my mother would have been overjoyed to see...

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The war ended. I came to Belgrade. First, I went to the Jewish community offices to look at the lists and notices. My suspicions were confirmed: I understood that I no longer had anyone from my closest family.

There was neither need nor desire to travel to Sarajevo. I stayed in Belgrade. I enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine. I formed a new family... and life inevitably had to go on.