

Livia Teleki

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Belgrade

Serbia

Interviewer: Julija Caran

Mother's parents lived in Kula. Grandmother Johanna Shwartz was a housewife and she had eight children, grandfather Shalamon Shwartz was a teacher. Grandmother's maiden name was Johanna Zigel. Grandmother and grandfather moved from Kula to Belgrade when my aunt built a house. This was before I was born. It was a house on three floors. The house was confiscated during WWII. They spoke Hungarian and German in their house, not Serbian.

Grandfather was a cantor and he sang in the synagogue in the center of Belgrade where now the Gallery of frescoes is. My grandmother was a housewife, and she had a lot of children to worry about. She didn't have any help in the house. When her oldest daughter grew up, she started helping her, until she moved to Belgrade, and started working as a seamstress.

Grandfather and grandmother were religious, they celebrated all the holidays; they ate only kosher. Grandfather had a beard but a small one not a big one like father's father. They were dressed in the European style -- grandfather was very elegant, with a hat, and kepele [kipa] underneath it. Grandmother wore long skirts, blouses, and big scarves.

My mother and grandmother went to synagogue. Here in Belgrade there were two, a Spanish one and another one for Ashkenazim -- we went to the other one. My grandfather sang very nicely. I remember especially how he sang Kol Nidre. Everyone celebrated the holidays in our house as long as he was alive. We would all get together, and celebrate everything according to the rules - for Hanukkah we would light the candles, for Yom Kippur we would have a big dinner after the "Long Day" [as it is called in Hungarian]. I remember that grandmother used to make good cholent, and she always took it to the bakery. The baker wasn't Jewish, but he knew what it was. He kept it hot for us.

At that time no one paid attention to whether you were a Jew or who was who or what you were. No one ever mentioned in a negative context that they were Jews. And that is how it was with us. During the holidays they would come and wish us happy holidays. This was incredible tolerance.

Grandfather died in 1927, in Belgrade, and grandmother in Belgrade too, in the Staro Sajmiste concentration camp, in 1941.

My father's parents lived in Romania near the Hungarian border, the place is called Veliki Varadin (Nagyvarad in Hungarian, Oradea in Romanian). They were merchants and they had a grocery store. I remember that my grandfather had a big beard. They dressed neither like town people nor like villagers. Grandfather wore a hat, a kepele. Grandmother always wore a kerchief on her head. They spoke Hungarian. And they died before I was born.

My mother Kornelia Kornveis [nee Shwartz] was born in 1892 in Murska Subota, that is, in Medjumurje, in Slovenia. Grandfather was a cantor there at some point. Then they came to Belgrade. My mother came to Belgrade as a young girl, right after my aunt, who was a seamstress there. My mother's mother tongue was Hungarian as is mine. She was a seamstress at my aunt's, her eldest sister, where she also learned the trade. She was a woman of the world in every respect, and a very modest type of person.

Sometimes she would go to Paris with my aunt. They would travel to Paris to buy stylish clothes. Mother was earning money at my aunt's, but as soon as she got married, she stopped working, and became a housewife for a while. Then she began doing the same kind of work again. She was murdered in 1943 in Staro Sajmiste, like my grandmother.

Father Ignjat Kornveis was born in 1882 in Veliki Varadin, which was part of Hungary at that time. He was born in the same place that I was born. I went to visit my birthplace many years later with my husband. At that time it was already in Romania. It is a very nice and interesting small town with many monuments and parks. I do not know what kind of school he finished, I only know that he was a merchant and that he sold things and that he also worked in freight forwarding. He also traded abroad.

My parents met in 1921. My father came to Belgrade as a Hungarian soldier, and he was shot in the arm during some kind of fight. He went to hospital, and when he was released from hospital he went on a walk with a friend of his, a Hungarian, through a park near the place where my mother used to live. My mother was sitting there in the park, sewing with her friends, they were talking in Hungarian. My father came to her, introduced himself, they started talking, and soon became very good friends. My father was already married at that time, but he fell in love with my mother, he proposed her, and went back to Veliki Varadin to divorce her wife with whom he had two sons.

They got married, and my mother accepted father's two sons - Laci and Antal. They were apprentices and their mother did not get angry as her marriage with my father had been a marriage for financial reasons. She went to live in another village, and stayed in contact with her sons, and with my mother, too. The sons moved to Israel before WWII, and they have their families there now.

My mother went to live in Veliki Varadin with my father, and then we moved to Belgrade. My father began working. As far as I can remember it did not go well and then he became ill with his heart. He died shortly after that. I was young when he died in 1929.

First we lived in a small uncomfortable apartment near the botanical garden. Later we moved to Dzordza Vasingtona Street. This house still exists today, it was a nice comfortable building. We had everything in the house -- electricity, water. We had a lot of dogs. In Dzordza Vasington Street we had a Schnauzer.

My mother had a domestic help, Katica, when she opened her workshop. She needed help because she could not manage any other way. She cleaned our clothes, and she cleaned the house, cooked and went shopping. She had her own house somewhere outside Belgrade. I remember that mother fattened geese in the basement in the way that Jewish women fattened them. Then when they were fat she gave them to Katica. She slaughtered, cleaned and smoked them.

My mother took care of me all the time. I didn't have anybody else to take care of me. I was helping my mother with her work -- when she would finish sewing something, I would take it to the customer's house. I earned some money that way. Mother's workshop was inside our apartment, in a separate room. Clients were coming one after another - with a recommendation. They were bringing their own materials, and mother was helping them with ideas. She would never make clothes for a customer if she thought that it wouldn't fit her or him.

My uncle Martin married a Spanish, or Sephardi, Jew, a really beautiful woman. My mother wouldn't let me go to the house of her parents because she thought that Spanish Jews weren't as clean as we were. So, I used to go to their house without my mother knowing about it. They had delicious food. But they were untidy but very interesting people. They had a different mentality than we, the Jews from Vojvodina. They were good people but rather primitive -- I guess that was because of the society of those days, but I didn't understand that then, because I was very small. My uncle had two children, unfortunately they all died in Staro Sajmiste in 1943.

Mother had both Serbian and Hungarian books. I got books from my grandmother. I liked to read fairy tales when I was little. I practically learned to read Hungarian on my own from books.

My mother was very angry with the Jewish Community because when my father died they did not take care of us as they should have. Others took care of us. The Orthodox Church did. I received a winter coat, shoes and the like from them and not from the Jewish community. I only know that they yelled at me when I converted to Catholicism and married a Catholic man. As if this mattered since I was still a Jew. We celebrated holidays in our home, my mother and aunt. For Yom Kippur we went to the synagogue, on the other holidays we stayed at home and had celebrations of our own. We would have dinner, lunch, grandmother cooked something. I don't think it was kosher, anyway we didn't eat kosher in our house. And we didn't keep Sabbath.

I do not remember if we had Jewish neighbors. The majority of my parent's friends were not Jews. The majority of the Jews lived in Dorcol. Most of these Jews were killed at Staro Sajmiste.

I was born on the 10th of August 1922, in Veliki Varadin. From there I remember just that I had one small friend, a so-called "holy Jew", he was my age, something like three or four. He had small payot and we used to hide behind the house where the privy was. We used to play there until his older brother came. He forbade us to play together. He said that I was a Goy [non-Jew]. Probably because I was not religious enough. For them I was an inferior Jew.

I moved with my parents to Belgrade when I was five, in 1927. There were no Jewish schools in Belgrade when I was little. I went to the German school (on Nusiceva Street. I learned to speak German there. We all went together to the religion classes there. There weren't special religion classes for Jews, so I went to Christian religion classes, where we used to sing a lot.

Then I went to a Serbian school across from the botanical gardens. There were three Jewish girls in the grade. I remember one of them was called Gizela Kunick. We had to say we were Jewish because of the religion classes. But we didn't go there. One day before the end of the school year the principal came and told the three of us to stand up: "You do not go to religion studies, there are no passing grades for you." We told him, "how can we go to religion studies where we do not understand anything?"

We had a professor who taught us Hebrew. We had to know how to read. And it was very hard for us, and not interesting at all. We wanted to hear interesting stories from our rabbi, but all he did was teach us Hebrew while the Orthodox priest told stories. What more do children need than stories? The principal called our parents, talked with them about the problem, and in the end they all agreed that we could stay in the Christian religion classes, and listen to the priest. And we got our grades from that class.

I liked geography very much. Our professor knew how to tell a story, he always had a special story. I loved stories, that is why I had a lot of books with stories and I still love them today.

I will tell you a story from when I was in school. We had a German girl in our grade. When the bad times came for the Jews during recess she said to me "Get out of here you Jewish trash" and I grabbed her and hit her. The principal immediately took control and he called my parents to the school. He told my mother "Please, do not punish the child she was entirely correct. What kind of Jewish trash she is, when she is one of our children?" He defended me. What right did that little girl have to call me that when I was not even a "great" Jew.

After elementary school I went to middle school, and then I got married when I was sixteen and I did not have time for more school. I had many friends in that school besides those three Jewish girls. Everyone had her own group, and they were mixed. We went to every slava [Serbian family's feast for its patron saint], Christmas, etc. Once, ten of us who were not Catholics were invited to Christmas, Serbs, Jews, everybody. It was very nice.

Most of the time I spent time with those three Jewish girls. We were studying in the mornings in the school. After the classes, we would go home, and I would help my mother in the house, or I would go to the market. In the evenings I would meet my friends and we would go to the cinema. There was a trading center which had its own cinema. We had special places in that cinema, because the mother of one of my friends was working there. We saw films in Hungarian and German. Usually I took along my grandmother to see films with us, and that is why we didn't see films in Serbian. My friends spoke Hungarian, Serbian and German, like me. We communicated mostly in Serbian and in Hungarian, sometimes. We also went to visit one another.

When there were Jewish holidays a few Jewish friends came to my place. I also invited some Serbs and it was all very interesting to them. My mother insisted on that. I used to take my friends to the synagogue, too.

We didn't eat kosher. Saturdays my grandmother went to synagogue with my mother, I never went. Mother always said, "You want, you don't want, you do not have to." They went early in the morning, that is why she said to me "you sleep, we are going."

My grandmother and my mother used to say some sort of prayers for Shabbat, I remember that there was some sort of prayer but I forgot. And some other prayers. For Yom Kippur I used to bring some special fruit for my mother and grandmother, because they were fasting, and that fruit used to help them to go through that day more easily. I didn't fast, my mother would give me money to buy a sandwich to eat outside the house. After Yom Kippur, in the evening, we would all gather, the whole family to have dinner together. It didn't matter if somebody fasted or not, the point was to get together for Yom Kippur. I remember a prayer, a part of it "... el melech haolam, shma

Israel....” My grandmother taught me that.

My favorite holiday was Christmas because of the presents and the Christmas tree. All children love that. For Christmas, we were always invited to friends’ houses who were Christians, as they were coming to our house too when we were celebrating our holidays. We hardly ever celebrated Purim, for many reasons but mostly because there was no man in the house. I know that both the Orthodox and the Jews say that when a man dies, all of that disappears, too.

I didn’t have brothers or sister, but I had a relative that was like a brother to me, Paul Levensohn. He was my auntie Sofija’s son. He was a great guy. They observed the holidays. Everyone liked matzot very much. When I think about him, I only remember, as if through a dream, that they had something in London and that there was a Jewish fund there for all of those who fled but did not make it to Israel. I only know that it was one fund for Jews. Those that went there were taken care of, they got money for the trip and further to Israel. Paul was unable to go to Israel because of my aunt-she didn’t let him to go. Only a week after she refused to let him go to London, they were killed in Staro Sajmiste.

I had two husbands, and they were both very good men. The first one, Sandor Kapas, was a dentist. He spoke Russian, Hungarian, Serbian and English. I learnt Russian from him. He lived many years in Russia. He was a tenant in our apartment. We had a third room beside the room that my mother used as her workshop and our kitchen, which we rented out. He came to live there around 1935-36. In the mornings he was working as a dentist somewhere in the city, and in the afternoon he had his own patients in our apartment. He was really a charming person. And we started dating. In 1938 we were told that we had to leave the country, since we weren't born there. So, if I wanted to stay in Belgrade and not go back to Romania, I had to get married -- and I did. As it was all in a rush, I didn't have time for a white wedding dress.

When I married a non-Jew, my mother didn’t complain. She adored her son-in-law. She was only opposed to the fact that I married so young. I was sixteen and he was thirty. This was a big age difference. But he was very nice and handsome and a good man. Only in Belgrade there was a law that everyone had to be married in the church. That is how I became a Catholic, but after the marriage I never went to church.

We had two children, a daughter Ester who was born in 1940 in Belgrade, and a son Petar, who was born in 1944 in Budapest. [Before the war] I helped Sandor with his work. In 1940 he was drafted. When he had already been away for a year, I received a postcard from him, with his signature, from which I understood that he was alive. He was in Libek², and he stayed there for two years. In the meanwhile, I moved with Ester to Szenta, to Sandor’s parents’ house. Then, when Sandor came back, we moved to Budapest, to a small house in Buda, leaving Ester in Senta, with her grandmother and grandfather. When he came home, he brought a lot of people from Libek with him - mostly people from Vojvodina that spoke Hungarian. They were all helping him in Libek, because he was working there as a dentist. He got them all out by saying they were all Hungarians.

The house in Buda used to belong to my mother’s aunt, Aranka Klein. When we came to Budapest, my husband Sandor managed somehow to buy the house from my aunt, she was Jewish, and he wasn’t, so it was a good way to save that house in that period. During the Szalasi era³ Sandor had a cousin that was a member of the Szalasi party. Once it happened that I was almost taken to the

concentration camp, but Sandor's cousin didn't let anyone go into our house. He was a great man.

I gave birth during a bombing raid. Everywhere there were booms, bangs, he screamed... and I was happy. Just before I was about to give birth to my son, Sandor heard that Jewish women who were married to non-Jews would also be taken to concentration camps. That is why he placed me immediately in the basement of a hospital in Budapest, where I spent two long weeks. After those two weeks we moved to the basement of our house, where we stayed until the Soviet troops entered Budapest in winter 1945. We had food, because Sandor had thought of everything in time. Just from time to time he would go out covered with a white sheet to take some snow from outside, so that we would have water. That is how I survived the war, in hiding, in the basement of that house. And just before the end of our staying in Budapest, we managed to bring Ester to us.

Across the street there was a place where the Russians⁴ were getting together. We got along well with them, we even translated what they said to Hungarians. My husband was working as a dentist at that time. Once he helped an important Russian soldier with his tooth. Because he was grateful to Sandor, our family got a lot of food from the Russians. When that man was leaving Budapest, he asked Sandor if he had any wish before he left. Sandor said that his only wish was to go back to Szentá, where he was born. So he gave us two Russian soldiers as an escort to Szentá, and that is how we left Budapest in 1945.

We gave back the house to my aunt, to live there, but it was still on my husband's name. One day few years later a strange letter came to us which said that my husband, a Catholic, had taken by force the house in Budapest from my aunt, and that it would be returned to her. I just didn't want to fight with anybody about it, so the house went into the possession of my cousin.

After leaving Budapest I went to Belgrade to find my family, however I did not find anyone and I learned that they had all been killed at Sajmiste. The Germans sold our house in Džordža Vasiingtona Street but I found a lawyer and the house was returned to us. My late husband and I paid a lot of money for the transfer.

[After the war], we first lived in Senta, then in Kanjiza⁵. When we fixed things up over there in Kanjiza they knew that I was a Jew and that my husband was not but I never experienced anything. To be honest, I did not socialize all that much with anyone. I socialized with my gypsy neighbor, I liked her a lot; she had eight children. They came to our place and they played with my children. I liked them very much. Lord, they sure did cry when we left. I am a great Jew but I am a great Serb as well. In the neighborhood there were many nations and religions, and my children played with all of them. I took them to synagogue from time to time, but we celebrated Christmas too, because of my husband. We made lunches for the Jewish holidays. My granddaughter was in Israel. She almost stayed and now she is sad that she did not.

[From Kanjiza] Sandor moved to Belgrade in 1948 to work there. It was very hard to live in Belgrade after the war. He lived in a rented apartment, and after two years I joined him and we had an apartment of our own. My son started going to school and then to the university. My daughter learned to sew. Sandor worked in a school for the dentists, and I was working in the house. Sandor died in 1953.

I met my second husband Djordje Teleki in Belgrade, in Sandor's working place. He came as a patient to Sandor. We became friends. And later we got married, in 1956. He was an astronomer, he lived near the observatory. I used to help him in his observatory - he would watch the stars, and I would dictate some numbers from the lists.

Djordje loudly and clearly declared himself an atheist but he respected every religion. He went to church, synagogue, and mosque. I traveled with him a lot. He went to church every Sunday with his mother who was a Catholic. He was baptized when he was young. It was all the same to him whether I was a Jew or not, he was unbelievable.

I followed politics only through my husband - I wasn't really very interested in politics, but my husband simply always wanted to know everything, always wanted to be well informed. I did not have a lot of time or strength to read. We had religious books thanks to my husband who was an atheist and everything interested him. There were many different books, we even had some books about Buddhism.

We went to India, Japan, and we traveled across Europe. We had traveled really a lot until my mother-in-law got ill. Then we stayed in Belgrade because of her.

When I found out about the creation of Israel, I was overjoyed. My late husband Sandor, a Catholic and a Hungarian, wanted to go to Israel because his sister married a Jew and went with him to Israel. There they had a child. We did not go because the president of the Jewish community in Kanjiza told my husband that he could not go because he was not a Jew. So, we did not go. I regret this, I wanted very much to go, very much. And my husband acted as though he was born Jewish.

I have never thought about it if it would be nicer to live in Israel. I just wanted to go there, something simply pulled me to go there. I heard a lot about it. I followed everything that was happening there, Yom Kippur War, for example.

I have contacts with the Jewish Community in Belgrade now. I was in the community for the first time with my daughter for a concert. My daughter goes more frequently than I do. Three times I received assistance from the Community or from the Swiss fund, usually for each holiday.