

Nisim Navon

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Belgrade

Serbia

Interviewer: Rachel Chanin

I was born in Pristina in 1921. My sister Rukula Navon (Navonovic) was born in 1925, also in Pristina. Our parents, Gavriel and Ester (nee Baruh) Navon, were both born and raised in Pristina. They only left the town when they were forced to flee the Nazis. Our family did not change its name officially, but the "-ovic" ending was added by the school authorities when they enrolled in school. We now use both Navon and Navonovic.

Before World War Two, Pristina was a provincial village. We had a small Jewish community and everyone knew each other. I think there were about 450-500 Jews in all of Kosovo and Metohija. Most of them were concentrated in Pristina. Our family, like most families, is directly descended from Jews exiled from Spain who came to Bitola, in Macedonia. But because of the overpopulation and poverty they left Bitola to find a better life. This is how most Jewish families came to Pristina, Yugoslavia.

Later, some Jews migrated north. Pristina was a small town and life was not much better there than in Bitola, so some families moved to Kosovska Mitrovica, because the Trepca Mines are there. These Jews believed that the activity in the mines would give them a better chance to earn a living.

The Pristina community was entirely Sephardic. I never even met an Ashkenazic Jew before refugees from the north reached Pristina during the war. There was little interaction between the Jews of Pristina and more distant Jewish communities, but there were occasional meetings between the Jews of Kosovska Mitrovica and those of Pristina. All Jews in Pristina before the war were observant and there was very little intermarriage. I remember one instance when that occurred, and the drama that accompanied it. A young Jewish woman, of 16 or 17 years of age, ran away from her home and married a Serbian man. This was almost unheard-of at the time. The family was distraught over her actions and responded by ripping their clothing as a sign of mourning for their now "deceased" daughter. This young woman converted in a Serbian church and her family had no more contact with her.

We grew up in our father's father's house with our parents, plus one of our father's brothers, his wife, and their children. It was a one-story house, built of mixed materials. It had four rooms, a hall, and a courtyard. Our paternal grandparents, Jakov and Rahela (nee Asael) Navon, and their home

were the center of family life for me and my sister Rukula, as well as for our extended family. As a young child I spent more time in the company of my grandparents than my parents.

In our town, most Jewish men worked as shopkeepers or merchants and the women ran the homes. In the years leading up to the war, our family was moderately prosperous, living a modest but comfortable life. We had three houses close to each other in the center of Pristina. Before the war, there was generally no electricity nor running water and people did not have cars. I remember an army general stationed there who had a military vehicle which caused a great deal of interest among the residents of the town. We had electricity introduced in our house in 1931, when I was 10. A businessman from Leskovac built a small electrical power station and each house in Pristina got one electric bulb. It hardly changed our lives, as we didn't have any houseware that used electricity. Nevertheless, there were a lot of us in the house (my mother and father, my sister and me, my uncle with his wife and two children, another uncle with his wife and my grandparents), so I had to study at night. Until we got electricity I used the light of a petroleum lamp.

My family did not travel much, except to natural springs, banja, in the region, during the summer holidays, a few times before the war. Our childhood was mostly spent at home. The lack of running water and electricity, and the long, cold winters, meant that there were a lot of household chores to keep us busy.

Like many people in Pristina at the time, we had a Turkish-speaking maid who came to our house every day, so we also spoke Turkish as children. At home, we spoke Ladino, and in school, Serbo-Croatian.

The only synagogue was in the center of the town, and most of the Jewish community lived within walking distance. The synagogue was not large, but it could hold all the Jews. The women sat in a slightly raised section behind the men. The mehitza (barrier between women and men) was a wooden latticework trellis. Because of it, the women could see the men, but the men could not see the women. The prayer books and service were all in Hebrew, except for those prayers that were in Ladino. Everyone could follow the service and all the males knew how to participate.

The rabbi, Zaharija Levi, also served as the chazzan (cantor). He had such a beautiful voice. The services currently led in Belgrade by Rabbi Isak Asiel remind me very of much those I remember from my childhood. Rabbi Asiel has a similar accent and uses the same melodies that we used in Pristina back in our time. Before the war there was a daily minyan (prayer quorum) but I am not sure how many services there were a day. Our mother's father, unlike our father, went to synagogue every day. The rabbi lived in a house in the yard. There was also a building in the yard that belonged

to the community. The first floor was used as a classroom and the upper floor had a hall that was used for community celebrations and meetings. In the yard there was a section where the rabbi slaughtered poultry and behind the rabbi's house there was a place where the chevra kadisha (burial society) stored their materials. No social events were held in the synagogue.

The chevra kadisha was interesting and I sometimes got to watch, although the children were kept away. When someone died, a group of women prepared female bodies and some men cared for the male bodies. They had a long wooden board they kept near the synagogue, and they would take it to the dead person's house to use while preparing the corpse. They washed the body and dressed it and placed it in a wooden coffin. Rukula and I spoke about this but we could not agree on whether there was a bath in the synagogue where the bodies were washed, or whether they were washed in the home of the deceased using water from the family's well. The corpse was transported to the cemetery-carried on a cart, pulled by a horse-in the wooden coffin, but was removed from the coffin and placed directly in the ground without a coffin. We had two cemeteries in Pristina. Albanians destroyed one immediately after the war, when they built houses on our ancestors' bones. The other is partially destroyed, as Albanians are using it today for their funerals.

It was the practice in Pristina that women did not go to the funeral. They stayed at home during the funeral and only visited the cemetery some time after the shiva (mourning period) was over. I remember sitting shiva for our father in Pristina in 1951. All the mirrors and pictures were covered. Rabbi Josef Levi helped us rip our garments, we sat on the floor the entire seven days, and other people from the community brought us food. The male mourners did not shave for 30 or 40 days after the funeral. When they recited a pomen, muldadu, which was recited for the dead it was either done at the family's home or at the cemetery. After the service they would eat small rolls and inhaminadus, which were also eaten at the end of the shiva, insejiti in Ladino.

Rabbi Zaharija Levi was the shochet (ritual slaughterer and kosher butcher) for our community. Several times a week he would go to the town's slaughterhouse and slaughter large animals. Then he had some man take the meat to two butcher shops in Pristina, where it was kept separated from the non-kosher meat. These were not kosher butcher shops but all of the Jews knew about them and bought their meat there. When they wanted to eat poultry they bought it live in the market and brought it to the synagogue yard. Rabbi Levi would slaughter the poultry in a special section of the yard set off just for this. I myself brought poultry on several occasions to the synagogue for Rabbi Zaharija to slaughter.

There was no mohel (circumciser) in Pristina, but when there was a need, one was brought in from Sjenica in the Sandzak region of Serbia. That is how every Jewish male in Pristina was circumcised before the war. I really cannot remember, nor can my sister, if there was a mikva (ritual bath), and I do not know if the women practiced the laws of family purity on a regular basis.

Like all boys in Pristina, I had a bar mitzvah when I was 13. I prepared for this occasion by taking special classes with Rabbi Levi to learn how to put on the tefillin, and study the text that I had to recite. After the bar mitzvah in the synagogue, I gathered my Jewish male friends and we all went to the city's Turkish baths and then back to our house for a big meal. There were two Turkish baths made of stone with wells. Water was heated in kettles. We had baths weekly or once in 15 days. Women went each Friday to a bath; first I went with my mother when I was 4-5 years old, then with my father. Almost all of my friends with whom I went to a bath are dead.

All the old men in the community wore the fez, and they were always black. Both of our grandfathers, Rabbi Zaharija Levi, everybody. They would even wear them in synagogue. The younger men all wore hats or caps in the shul (synagogue) and on the streets. No one had a kipa (skullcap) like men wear today. My father wore his hat in his store, too. The women wore kerchiefs on their heads, some of which were held on by gold chains called kilindjare, which had gold coins hanging down from them.

Kashrut (dietary law) was strictly observed in our household. There were separate dishes for milk and meat and these two were never to be mixed. Our grandmother and our mother made their own goat cheese. Before the onset of winter, a milkman delivered a large quantity of milk, and we used it to make a barrel full of cheese which lasted the entire winter. In preparation for winter, we also made our own wine, collected winter staples such as onions and garlic, and pickled vegetables. We would buy meat in those butcher shops which sold meat that Rabbi Zaharija Levi slaughtered and koshered. There was also a closet for Passover dishes, which was only opened for the Passover holiday. There was no kosher restaurant in Pristina, so eating in the local restaurants and cafes before the war was something we simply did not do.

Shabbat was observed each week in our family. No one worked from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday and we did not use lights. However, if by some chance we needed to do one of these things, we would go out to the street and look for a non-Jew to do it for us. Friday the women would prepare food for the entire Shabbat. The meal usually included fiuzaldikas, pastel (cake), fidjoni (cooked beans) and pitijas, an airy bread that served as challa. The members of our family living together gathered each Friday evening for the Shabbat meal. Our grandmother and the other women in

the house would light candles. Usually this was a bowl of oil with a bunch of wicks, some of which were lit in memory of dead people. Our grandfather Jakov would make kiddush (the prayer over the wine). Each Shabbat morning we went to synagogue and back to the house for lunch. Our mother's father gathered the children at his house to make havdalah (prayer service marking the end of Shabbat). We called the spices barmut.

All of the holidays were observed by our family in a similar matter to Shabbat, all at home. There were few communal celebrations. For Rosh Hashanah we used to eat apples and honey. For such occasion my uncle Muson had a roasted head of lamb on the table, and I cannot remember if our grandfather also had one. The shofar (ram's horn) was blown in shul either by Rabbi Zaharija Levi or by Jehuda Judic. Before Yom Kippur we would buy a chicken and our grandfather would perform kaparot in the yard of our house and then give the chicken to Zaharija Levi who would then give it to the poor in the community. (Kaparot, literally meaning "atonements," is the act of swinging a chicken over one's head and asking that its death substitute for the death of the one making the prayer.) Our family always built a succah (harvest festival booth) in the yard.

Before Pesach the women would buy wheat and take it to a water mill where it would be ground into flour. They would gather in our grandmother's yard and would make both matzot and bojas outside in the garden where she had a bread oven. The women also ground some of the matzot to make matzo flour. The Passover Hagaddah was read by all the family members in Hebrew. We would go around the table taking turns reading. During the reading of the Hagaddah, one child would sling a satchel with the bojas over his shoulder, then all the other children would follow him around the table, recreating the exodus from Egypt.

During the week of Passover, we would eat inhaminadus, bemulos de massa, cuftes, siviukas, pitas from matzo (with spinach, meat, leeks, etc), meat patties with leeks or spinach, sweet matzo pitas, etc. I can still smell those roasted onions stuffed with ground matzo and meat and hamin, cooked wheat and meat, that we ate for Passover.

For Purim, the community would have a small masquerade party for the children in the Jewish community building. After shul on Purim day, the children would return home in their costumes and hang small white cloth bags around their necks. They would then go to visit their relatives and each one would add a few dinars to the little bag around the child's neck. At the end of the day they would count up the money to see who had collected the most. Baklava was frequently eaten on Purim, and presents were given to the poor people in the community.

There was a small metal box in the house where coins were put before the Sabbath, holidays, and other times during the year. Once a year a Jew from

outside Pristina (maybe from abroad) would come to open this charity box and take the money, which was being collected for Israel.

Both my sister and I had Jewish and non-Jewish friends. We did not have any problem socializing with non-Jews, just as we saw from our parents. Gavriel, our father, employed a mixture of nationalities in his store. Our family still did not observe the secular New Year or the other secular holidays before the war. Among the different nationalities-Serbs, Muslims, Albanians, Jews and Gypsies-there was no nationalism. We got along well, we all respected each other, and there were no incidents. Incidents occurred only between Albanians, because they had custom of blood revenge. There were no tendencies for the Jews to be on either the side of the Serbians or the Muslims. No one humiliated the Jews; we were respected, as we lived modestly. In elementary and high school I had Serbian friends. We had good relations with both Serbian and Muslim boys. In Pristina the majority of the population was Turkish, and there were fewer Albanians, as they lived mostly in villages. During the Nazi occupation, the Turks became Albanians overnight, as Albanians were privileged, allowed to rob Jews and other nationalities.

I attended the local elementary school, which was held in a mosque a distance from our home. In the wintertime I would meet the other children in the neighborhood at the end of the road armed with books and shovels. On the way to school we would shovel away snow to clear a path in the road.

When we were young, we also had religious education. I vividly remember the classes with Rabbi Zaharija Levi, the religious leader of Pristina before the war. Zaharija Levi was a respected man, authoritative, and we called him Signor Rubi. He was 60-65 years old; he had a beard and a cap that is usually worn by rabbis. Twice a week the young boys, about 100 of us, would meet him in the classroom of the synagogue complex. The schoolroom was on the first floor of a building near the synagogue. During these classes we learned to read and write Hebrew, learned the prayers, and learned other Jewish topics. The Hebrew script we learned was a special one used by Sephardi Jews. Community documents were written in this script. Rabbi Levi was a strict teacher and did not have much patience for lazy students. Each class we were given a text that had to be learned by heart for the next class. Rabbi Levi kept a large stick in his closet in the room and when a student failed to memorize the text he would take it out and give the unprepared student five slaps, that we called falaka, on both hands. Many of the children feared Rabbi Levi and his stick more than they did their own fathers. We spoke in Spanish (i.e., Ladino) and Hebrew. I understand and know some Hebrew, thanks to Zaharija Levi. By 1938, Rabbi Zaharija Levi was too old to continue his job and he was replaced by Cadik Danon. Rukula told me that she remembers going to religious lessons with Rabbi Danon but Rabbi Danon did not remain there long; he left for Split after just a short

time in Pristina and was replaced by Rabbi Josef Levi, Rabbi Zaharija Levi's son.

For a short time I took private accordion lessons with a Serbian teacher from Pristina and played in the school orchestra. But doing things such things as private language, dance, or music lessons or belonging to clubs were not the norm. Rukula and I were members of a Zionist club but it was not part of a larger organization. We just did not have the contact. We gathered together in the synagogue building, but I must admit that I cannot remember what we did there. I think our parents wanted Jewish children to be together. In our free time we would play with other children on the streets, and in the wintertime, ice skate and sled with homemade equipment on a nearby river.

I also attended the State Commercial Academy in Skoplje for commercial trading from 1934 to 1937. There was no such school in Pristina, so my parents paid for me to enroll and board at the school in Skoplje. My father insisted that I should continue with schooling at the State Commercial Academy. As I was the oldest grandson, no one from the family wanted me to leave Pristina. Nevertheless, my father told us that one could never know what would happen in the future, and he wanted to secure me with a diploma. Among my friends were two Jews, one from Bitolj another from Nis, and Serbs and Macedonians. While living in the dormitory in Skoplje, I did not eat kosher food but I also did not eat the meat. Not because of kashrut. I simply do not particularly like meat. Occasionally, I would eat in the kosher restaurant in the Jewish mahala in Skoplje. In Skoplje I did not observe the Jewish holidays or the Shabbat. In fact, I would often travel back to Pristina on Saturdays so I could be with my family. I traveled by train. Skoplje was 100 kilometers from Pristina and it took me two hours to get to Kosovo polje, as there wasn't a station in Pristina. From Kosovo polje to Pristina I went by horse and carriage. I didn't write letters, as almost each weekend I went home and the letters would have arrived after me.

In 1937, I enrolled in the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University, but my studies came to an abrupt end with the passing of the Numerus Clausus laws restricting the number of Jews allowed to enter certain professions. I was in Belgrade once or twice before that, when I escorted my father to Vienna where he had a throat operation. I enrolled in the Faculty in 1937 and stayed until 1940. I lived with my cousin in a part of the city called Zvezdara. Students whose fathers had been in World War One could remain at the university. I was among those students, as my father had fought against the Bulgarians in World War One. Nevertheless, I wanted to show solidarity with all of my Jewish friends; I even left my documents at the university. I found them and used them after the war, as the building wasn't destroyed. My oldest friend from the Faculty was Marci Levi.

At that time there was anti-Semitism "thanks" to Dimitrije Ljotic, who published a magazine called Zbor, with anti-Semitic articles only. Cicvaric was the editor of the magazine Balkan, also with anti-Semitic articles. The magazines had their readership, and that was the beginning of hatred towards Jews, who were described as murderers and usurpers. But nothing happened to me as I had a lot of Serbian friends.

Before the war I wasn't involved in political life. Jews had their own cultural organization that belonged to the synagogue. I was a member of it. I was a Zionist. Each house in Pristina had a blue cash-box in which we put money each Friday. A delegation of three people from Belgrade or another European center came once a year to collect the money, which was used for buying land, kept by Arabs, in Palestine.

Our father was a very honest and well-liked man, highly respected even amongst the general population in Pristina before and after the war. He served three four-year terms as president of the Jewish community of Pristina. His last term ended in 1951, the year of his death. I succeeded my father as president and served three terms, ending in 1963.

In his capacity as president, our father was able to save some Jewish refugees from Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, who were captured in Pristina in 1940. He went around the Jews of the community to collect the required 1,000 golden coins to ransom some of the captured Jews that were being held by an Albanian named Kemal Beg. Those that were not released were taken away in caravans by the Germans.

I met my first Ashkenazi Jews in Pristina right before the war. They were running to the south, as they wanted to settle in Israel. The government put them in Jewish homes, where we shared good and bad, as fear and the same destiny unite people. We hosted a family from Poland. Together with Rabbi Josif Levi, we supplied these Jews with food and medicine. There were no differences in manners or outlook between them and us. The Germans came in 1941 and put them in prison, from where they were transported by trucks to Belgrade, where most of them were shot. Some of them escaped to Prisen.

The first Germans arrived in April 1941. The Albanians liked the Germans. They came down from villages to welcome them and kiss their boots. Right after the Germans came, the Jews were ordered to wear a yellow band with the word Jude, and form a brigade of 200 adults from Kosovo to work at the stone pit. When the Nazis first rounded up the Jews in Pristina, they came with a truck to our house and took away everything from us, 10 kilos of gold, family jewelry which we had had for four generations. Five bags were all that were left, one each for my father, mother, sister, grandfather and me. They made our father carry all of the family's belongings out of the house onto trucks, the whole time beating him on the spine. His back never recovered from these beatings and he never regained his strength. Rukula

and our mother were both operated on in 1946 for respiratory problems that developed during the war.

We thought that the Germans wouldn't take my grandfather as he was old, so we gave him everything we had. But my grandfather was taken to prison immediately and killed. Soon after grandfather was murdered, my grandmother died of sorrow and lack of medicine. My two uncles and I were put in labor camp where we worked at the stone-pit 12 hours a day. My sister, together with another 40 Jewish women, had to clean streets and public buildings that belonged to German organizations in the city. They worked 12 hours as well.

Six months later, two policemen, one Italian and the other Albanian, took me to be shot in the village of Milesevo, 6 km away from Pristina. A Gestapo chief asked me if I was a communist. I answered that my family was capitalist. He thought for some time and released me. When I came back, the Italian police put me and my cousin in prison in Pristina. I was in prison from October to December. I was in the room with 40 prisoners, mostly Serbs expelled from villages by the Albanians. We had to work and we were beaten. I still have a scar on my arm. In December the Germans transferred me into a prison in Tirana, where the living conditions were better. I stayed there till January. In the meantime I didn't have any information about my family. While I was in Pristina they were moved to Elbasan, Albania. In February I was removed to Elbasan, but still didn't know that my family was there, as I was in another part of the prison together with thieves and criminals. My family was with six other Jewish families. Later I found out that we were in the same prison. We were there until the end of August 1943.

In Albania I had a friend, Seap Topuli. He told us that Italy would surrender. This happened on September 9. In the Tajti Mountains, in the village of St. George, he found Albanian houses to which these seven families, including mine, could escape, because the Germans were already starting to take prisons and public institutions. We were settled under the roof of a stable, where we slept on animal skins. Through the roof the snow was falling down on us. We used melted snow as water. We hid there without any contact to the outside world. A teacher from the village, Elmas Nema, gathered some food for us, corn and a few beans. We went to get it at night. Our host gave us whey and some food as well. We stayed there until April 1945, when we came back to Pristina.

Our family returned to Pristina after the war and found that our house had been looted and occupied by a Serbian family. Eventually, we moved back into one of our former properties, but we have never managed to rebuild what we had. This time around, instead of having milk delivered, we were forced to buy a small goat and depend on the little bit of milk she could

produce.

I continued my studies in the fall of 1945, but this time under very different circumstances. Before the war, my family was in a position to finance my studies and my living in Belgrade. Later the situation turned around as they became dependent on me for their income. My parents were sad about it, especially my father.

Around 50 Jews came back. The community looked so sad. In the street where I lived there had been 10 Jewish families, of which only one survived. Nine families were killed at Bergen-Belsen. I gave an interview in our Bulletin, with the title "Those Who Are No Longer," about the atmosphere after the war. As we lost almost everything, we expected help from the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia and from JOINT. And we got help in the form of clothes in Belgrade and in Pristina as well. I went to the Federation almost every day. According to the new town development plans, the synagogue would have had to be demolished, as it was made of faulty materials. The municipality called me as a member of the community board and asked me what should be done. I thought that we should renovate the synagogue, and we did it together with the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia and its representative, who was a lawyer.

After the war I married my wife Ljubica, a school teacher, whom I met during the studies at the university. Ljubica is Serbian. Her family was from Nis but moved to Pristina after the war to work on the development of the town. We used to meet while visiting our families. We had a child, Gavriel N. Navon, who died in 1954 and is buried in the cemetery in Pristina. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery, together with my father and grandfather. The cemetery still exists, but Albanians are using it now.

My sister studied in the local gymnasium in Pristina before the war. Her studies were interrupted when the Numerus Clausus laws were passed. After the war she took a couple of training courses but she never finished her secondary education. She moved to Belgrade in 1948 where she worked as an office clerk. She married Jakov Ben Cion, a Sephardic Jew from Belgrade. They were married in 1948 in the Belgrade Synagogue by Rabbi Cadik Danon. Their marriage ended in divorce twenty-some years later. My sister and I currently live in Belgrade and see each other often. I still speak to my sister in Ladino but she prefers Serbian.

Most of our extended family moved to Israel after the war, but my sister and our parents and I remained in Yugoslavia. Mainly because of their poor health, our parents were not in a condition to start a new life. Our father died in Pristina in 1951. After his death, my mother and I moved to Belgrade, where she died in 1984.

After my retirement and illness, I lost interest in politics. The situation is much worse now than it was during World War Two. It is a tragic situation for the Serbs; there are 300,000 refugees from Kosovo. Today Pristina has 500,000 residents, including thieves, homeless persons and the mafia from Albania who robbed and occupied Serbian homes. Kosovo is now an Albanian state; KFOR has to protect the Serbs when they go out to buy bread.

I can't tell what will happen in the future, but I think that anti-Semitism will increase. I'm the oldest member of the synagogue and devoted to the community. I promised my mother when she was dying that I would go to the synagogue each Friday. And I'm keeping that promise.