

# Sofija Zoric-Demajo

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Serbia

Interviewer: Ida Labudovic

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## Family Background

I am Sofija Simha Zoric-Demajo. I was named Simha because I was born on Simhat Torah (October 17) and, because of this, was given the nickname. My official name is Sofija.

When I was young, about five or six years old, I went with my mother to Pirot [where my grandfather lived]. My grandfather had a big white beard, big strands of amber rosaries. He sat on the second-floor porch, terrace, playing with the rosaries, and all around there were grapes and green grass. I did not know my grandmother; she must have died before I was born. My maternal uncle, who at that time was in gymnasium, studied in Zagreb and went on to become a pharmacist. My other maternal uncle, Zak, was a merchant and had two shops in Nis. I remember one [maternal] aunt named Ester but I do not remember the rest of them. They were not married. They were beautiful and my uncle was handsome. My [third] uncle was a haham in Pristina. My uncle's wife wore a velvet and silk hat, a special Jewish hat which is still considered modern today. We called her aunt Bulisa. They had three children. The boy was called Majer and lived in Skopje. He was most likely killed by the Germans or was taken to a camp in Germany, Austria, or Poland.

I remember my father's family. My father's mother died during childbirth. He was born in the seventh month of her pregnancy. After a certain period, my grandfather realized that he needed to get married immediately in order to be able to take care of my father. Only when I was older did I learn that my grandmother was not my father's birth mother. But he respected her; whenever she wanted something, he did it. After my grandfather died, she always asked the eldest son (that is, my father) for help. He took care of his brothers and sisters. If they needed anything, he helped them. My aunt, Marijeta, fled with her husband to Paris. The youngest aunt married a merchant in 1941. We did not see one another, she hid and I hid. Another aunt had a shop in Obrenovac and later in Ub, with her husband. My uncle wanted to study art in Budapest, but he was young; he



spent the money set aside for his studies without restraint and returned a photographer. He ended up in Obrenovac. There was an argument about this, but I was just a child and did not understand what had happened. I had an aunt who we called Branka - I cannot remember her Jewish name. I do not know what happened to my uncle's sister in Paris from '41 onwards as we never got any mail from her. The same thing is true about the cousin in Skoplje. My other aunt was named Rakila. My aunt Rakila and her husband died. My paternal uncle Mihajlo, the photographer, died. Only one daughter and one son are still alive. He lives in Ub and she in Belgrade.

My father and mother met in Belgrade when she came to visit and live with her brother. They met and got married. My father was a widower. He had three children. The eldest sister was Sol Suncica, then brother Samuilo Sima, and sister Sarina Jelena. My mother viewed herself as their birth mother and took care of them. Then my brother, Tuvi Dikica, was born. We did not know until we were older that we had two different mothers. I was named after their mother Sofija, and my mother handed over my upbringing to my elder sister, and she raised me [Sofija's mother was ill and knew that she would likely die].

My sisters were older than me but, after my mother left my upbringing to them, they did the job well. To this day, I remain faithful to that upbringing. I never use curse words, never raise my voice, not even to those younger than I, even though I am 89 years old. I was always mild natured, not a nervous person, and I did good deeds. Even though many people blackmailed me throughout the German occupation [those who knew that Sofija was a Jew], I forgave them after the war.

## **Growing Up**

I went to Janko Veselinovic elementary school on Dusanova Street. My teacher was Estera Ruso, she also taught the Orthodox children; Veroslava Jugovic, for one, although I cannot remember all their names, but there were Jewish and Orthodox children in the same class. Her [Estera's] husband worked for the Belgrade municipality. He always visited us and brought us chocolates and pralines. Our teacher was lovely, beautiful. Instead of handiwork we learned drawing. Our drawing teacher was a Russian refugee. We had a mixed choir, and every morning the teacher gave us an egg to drink, so that our voices would be clear. She taught us honesty, discipline, and good work habits. Our rabbi, Dr. Lang, had a daughter who also studied with us. She was my friend. I think she lived in a house on Jewish Street. Even though I lived near Tasmajdan, I went to her place and we socialized. In the II Women's Gymnasium, we had religion lessons instructed by Jewish Dr. Lang. Before the war, I socialized with Reom Aserovic, Bertica Davidovic, and Greta Levi, Dr Lang's daughter.

My mother maintained religious traditions in our home. On Friday evenings, she would lay down a special tablecloth, plates, and napkins. It was Father's ritual to place a small present under each child's plate on Friday nights. The table was set, first duck eggs were cooked in onion skin, and then Father would cut an egg into four parts and divide it among us children as an appetizer. He would have a small glass of rakija [brandy], because he did not drink a lot. In general, our Jews were not alcoholics. Rather, every day, or on holidays, they would have a small glass of rakija, wine, or spritzer. Then Mother would prepare pastel with meat. It was all covered with a special cloth and when father came home from the synagogue she would pick it up and give us an egg and, eventually, some other small thing. Naturally, the food was kosher. There is no big difference between Jewish and Serbian Orthodox food; peas, potato puree, and meat, etc. are regularly eaten.

Pastel was a must on Shabbat evening, Friday night. Everything I am talking about was for Shabbat evening, this is how it was for Friday night dinners. The next day, Father went to synagogue. I remember very well that, on Yom Kippur, Mother gave us a quince with cloves punched into it. This was so that we could fast and not eat until the sun set, but I do not remember if we were allowed to drink water. Then we ate again - kosher, naturally. For Pesach, my mother had a big trunk with metal handles. In there was where she kept pots, cutlery, plates, and other dishes which were used only for holidays, when she would take out those kosher plates. For Purim, we dressed up as jesters, as men. Costume parties were organized for children and adults in the Jewish community. Later, even though I married a Serbian Orthodox man, I made pastel for my children; I made ruskitas wreaths from walnuts [cookies made by Sephardic Jews for Purim]; and, after Liberation, since my sister volunteered in the women's section, a Mrs. Danon always made ruskitas and sent me some because I was burdened with three children. My children loved those holidays. We celebrated their father's holidays as well, of course, but they also respected mine.

My [parents'] house or home was spacious and we had nice rooms, nice furniture. At the beginning, when I was born, it seems to me that we lived on Jewish Street. But we moved to 45 Kralja Aleksandra soon after, where Madera restaurant is today. This is Tasmajdan. My mother was in the Jewish goodwill society. They organized various tea parties - at a different person's house each time - and they sang, danced, and collected contributions for the poor. The Jewish poor were not noticeable, because people gave them money discretely, as with the sick and those who were soon to be married. People gave what they could and what they knew to give. Contributions were given with songs: someone sang a song and gave a contribution. Wherever they went, they brought cakes and made tea and hot chocolate. And mother always participated in these acts of goodwill. At home, we spoke [not only] Hebrew [and] Ladino [but] Serbian [as well] and we spoke it correctly. We went to school and socialized. We did not think about religion; my girlfriends were Orthodox and Catholics. My friend Marija, for instance, married a Catholic priest. We did not think about what religion we were and we helped one another in school. There was no anti-Semitism at that time. Maybe there was political anti-Semitism, but not amongst friends.

My father was a merchant and he had a shop on Kralja Aleksandra Street, on Tasmajdan, near St. Mark's Church. He sold suits and various other things. My father closed his store when he felt he could no longer compete with the younger and more promising people. He closed the store and lived on the interest, I do not know exactly how. In our family, the children never knew what the parents did or how they got by. My elder brother had a furniture store on Tasmajdan, also on Kralja Aleksandra Street, across from the law faculty. [He] had the store until the Germans came to Belgrade and confiscated people's property. He was wounded during the bombings. He was treated, but the Germans captured him and sent him to forced labor in Smederevo, Belgrade, and the surrounding ruins. After that, they locked him up in Topovska Supa [camp] at Autokomanda, and later in Sajmiste [camp in Belgrade]. I heard that, on one occasion when he bent over to pick up bread, one or two Germans beat him on the head and the rest of his body with shovels. I do not know if it is true, but I never saw him again. He was probably killed at the end of 1941. My youngest brother, who was two and a half years older than me, finished secondary technical school, but like every young Belgradian he thought he needed to learn a trade as well. Father wanted him to work in the store, but he did not want to do that. He wanted to finish learning the typesetting trade and then work as a typographer, engraver, and typesetter. He worked for a man

named Horovic, and then for [the newspapers] *Vreme*, *Politika*, and I do not know where else. When the Germans came to Belgrade, they captured him and sent him to slave labor until November, or December, when the whole group was taken to forced labor, either in Germany or Austria. Or else he was killed in Banjica or in a mobile gas chamber. We never found out. His wife and two kids had to register at Tasmajdan. It seems to me that this happened in November, when we were already deep into winter, and the kids were from two to three and a half years old. They confiscated their three-and-a-half-room apartment, and they locked them up in Sajmiste. What happened to them, only history knows. They blackmailed us to send packages, we sent them; whether they received them or not comes down to the humanity of those people who blackmailed us.

My eldest sister loved singing and studied with Ms. Vinaver, a professor at the Music Academy. She taught my sister both piano and singing. My sister completed her degree in the Faculty of Humanities. She knew many languages: French, English, German, Italian, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Esperanto. She worked as a correspondent for a Swiss-Serbian bank until she married lieutenant colonel Gradimir Spasic. He took part, as an academic, in all the wars, and received the rank of lieutenant colonel. Passing through Albania, he was wounded and spent twenty four hours in the snow. For some time before the war he was in the military hospital in a full body cast. He spent some time in all of the sanatoriums in Kraljevica and ended up in a military hospital.

My sister Jelena Sarina finished gymnasium, married, and became a housewife. She married Jug Nikasinovic in 1922 or 1923. He was head of the Tax Board in Smederevo and it was there that they had a son, Djordje. After his birth, they moved immediately to Belgrade, where they stayed and had a girl: Sofija, Sonja. They moved to Zemun where he was also head of the Tax Board. They hid there. The NDH [Independent State of Croatia] was in control there, so it was somewhat more secure than where we were since we were under German control.

In 1934, or at the end of 1933, my brother socialized with my future husband. That is how I met him. He fell in love with me and I liked him a little bit. We dated for a month or two and, on 1 November 1934, we married [although Sofija's husband wasn't a Jew, the family easily accepted their marriage]. He was employed as Djordje Vajfert's financial director. He had a good salary. Djordje Vajfert owned the Kostolac mine, had projects in the Borski and Trepca mines, owned breweries, etc. When Djordje Vajfert died, Dr. Granberg, his nephew, inherited everything. During the occupation, Dr. Granberg helped us. Somehow, he was able to change my name and falsify my papers. He erased the name Demajo and replaced it with Dekic, so that, to some extent, I was able to save myself.

## **The Beginning of the War**

I had my first daughter, Radmila, when we lived at 14 Francuska Street, on 10 September 1935 - my husband's birthday. I gave birth at home. In those days, you could give birth at home because the midwives and doctors who took care of me were good. My second daughter, Ruzica, was born on 24 November 1937. The same midwife and doctor helped me. I did not go to the hospital because I was delicate, but I liked that they were around me and that they made it possible for me to give birth at home. The children were born healthy, they progressed, but in 1941 the war broke out. We lived at 1 Zelena Venac, in the Serbian Doctor's Society building. When the war broke out, we moved to Zahumska Street, I think number 37. We fled as soon as Russia declared war,

because it was at this time that I began to receive messages ordering me to register at Tasmajdan, because I am a Jew by origin. If they had found me I would have been killed like the rest of them. I registered, but then I regretted this - both my husband and I did - because then I began receiving calls to report for forced labor. Luckily, my brother had done a good deed for a woman who worked for the Belgrade municipality. She was responsible for registration and either had the registration files or had access to them.

My husband and I decided to commit suicide, with the children too, so that we could all die at the same time. He acquired something, I think they were cyanide capsules. We lived in the Serbian Doctor's Society building and he kept their books for free. I suppose that one of the doctors recommended or acquired those pills, or whatever they were, for him, but I do not know how. In any case, we decided to do it. In the meantime, we were visited by my eldest brother. He came to see how we were, to see if we were going to move, to escape - to find out what we were going to do. We told him that I had received the calls. He met with that woman from the Belgrade municipality for whom he had done something good. She risked her life and ripped up my file. She could not have done that for him because that would have been too much, but, in any case, my file was ripped up and I did not get any more calls. In the meanwhile, we found a small house on the periphery and hid there.

### **In Hiding**

We fled to the periphery, the tip of Konjarnik. No one knew us there. They thought that we had fled from town to spare our two children from the bombings, the constant "Achtung!", "Achtung!". They assumed that we were rich, which meant that we then had to pay a lot of people off to get them to leave us in peace. I did not go into town, I was not permitted. My husband got all the necessary things, the neighbors and the milkman also helped us to some extent. So, we managed. We hid in a dug-out, slept a little, but, in general, managed to withdraw enough to see us to Liberation. Dr. Granberg helped us with groceries, which he provided for all the miners and staff who worked for him.

On the periphery we were to some extent secure. Some of those who knew me needed to be paid off to be quiet, so that they would not tell. My husband's colleagues and their wives all helped me survive. They visited us secretly, they sent various necessary things for me and the children. Although my husband never told me, I felt that there were some people who blackmailed us. He paid them off - how, I do not know - and somehow we got by. The Germans only knocked on our door once, that was in 1942. They were looking for a man also named Dusan, but with a different last name. Just before this visit, I had given birth to our youngest daughter, Brankica, Branislava, and I was still weak and in bed. My husband got up to open the door and I laid covered up to my head. He told them that I had just given birth and was unable to get out of bed. Seeing the chaos, they left. But we were shocked and were unable to eat for a week, nor were we able to sleep peacefully for fear that they would come back. I gave birth to Brankica with an unknown midwife, a neighbor helped me by going to get her, she knew the woman. I gave birth very quickly, without complications, as if God himself knew that he needed to help me. The child was born healthy. Before Liberation, friends found us an apartment at 72a Strahinica Bana. During the period when half of Belgrade was liberated, but the area where we lived (Konjarnik) was not, somehow we managed to cross on foot, through the gunfire, to Strahinica Bana Street. We were there until

Liberation, in October.

### **After the War**

After Liberation, there were a lot of Germans on the roofs. They were shooting, so the children and I did not go out. Only my husband did, because he had to go to the office. My sister, who was made a widow before Liberation, moved to an apartment at 2 Ohridska Street, near the military hospital. She immediately started working in the Jewish community. I think that Alkalaj was the president. My sister volunteered in the women's section and did social work. She collected food. Jews who were held captive in the Borska mines were emerging, along with a few Belgradians, some foreigners, Hungarians, and inhabitants of various parts of Vojvodina. Mr. Vegner and she were the main provisioners. In a courtyard, maybe on Cara Urosa Street, they had a large kettle. My sister collected sugar, beans, potatoes, onions, etc., while other people gathered other things. Together, they cooked the provisions in this kettle for the newcomers. All together, there were maybe a thousand Jews from different areas: Zrenjanin, Novi Sad, Sombor, Subotica, etc. But many of them were at the kitchen because they did not have anywhere to sleep, no money, no clothing. From all sides, we - as much as possible - collected contributions of clothing, groceries, etc. until the community was formed, the JOINT was established, and others sent help. They helped a lot Belgrade half-Jews, Orthodox, and Catholics. Everyone helped as much as they could and knew how. Later, when things were a little more stable, performances for the Jewish holidays were organized. My children participated in recitations, ballet, etc.

After Liberation in 1945 I was reunited with my male friends and some girlfriends. One of my friends, Amodaj, was the technical director of *Filmske Novosti*, and another, Isak Amar, was the director of the Terazije Theatre. They told me about their lives. From 1941 onwards, they had been imprisoned. I do not know exactly if they were in Dachau, Treblinka, or Mauthausen - but they were with my best man Colonel Jovan Teodorovic. They had a hard life in captivity, but they survived. They returned looking like skeletons. One of my relatives, Isak Aserovic, came back from captivity and came to visit me when he learned that I lived at 72a Strahinica Bana. Later, in 1950, when he went to Israel, he wrote to me for some time. But then all trace of him was lost.

When the Mining Ministry of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was set up, my husband was the head of its financial section. Until the Ministry was abolished, he visited mines, controlled the finances, and then moved to the Faculty of Economics at the commercial college, where he taught bookkeeping. Later, he taught at the college part-time and for a period was the financial director of [the enterprise] *Balkan* and for radio and television stations in Belgrade, until he had a heart attack during a meeting.

My eldest daughter finished secondary school and enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities where she studied English, world literature and Serbo-Croatian grammar. She graduated and got a job with the *Tanjug* news agency as a translator, editor, and journalist. She worked at *Tanjug* for 31 years before retiring. She was married to Vidojko Velickovic. They have two children: Ana, who was born in 1959, and Dusan, who was born in 1965. Ana finished her degree in social work, got a master's degree, and is currently the assistant director of the Social Work Institute in Hartford, U.S.A. Dusan holds degrees from the the Electro-Technical Faculty and a mathematics college in Hartford. He also has a job. My middle daughter finished the gymnasium, became a secretary in an agricultural bank, and then worked for eight years as a stewardess for JAT. She married Stevan Labudovic and

became a housewife. She has two children: Ida and Milutin. Ida finished a degree in anthropology, and Milutin is a photoreporter. He lives with his wife in Jerusalem. Branislava, my youngest daughter, finished secondary school, then got a degree from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Film and Television, and was a leading actress at the National Theatre. She worked for 32 years until she retired. She married Velibor Vasovic, a lawyer and famous football player, who was the captain of AIAX in Holland. My granddaughter, Ana Velickovic-Wittig, who also lives in Hartford, has two children. My great-grandson, Robert-Bobi, is almost twenty years old. My granddaughter, Aleksandra, is about fifteen years old. My youngest grandson, Milutin - who lives in Israel with his wife, Masa - is expecting a son in January. Therefore, soon, I will have three great-grandchildren.

I can tell you that, in general, not as a child, nor as a young girl, nor as a married woman, did I experience in Belgrade - nor while travelling to the seaside, around Serbia, Vojvodina, Slovenia, Croatia - any anti-Semitism. I had friends in Zagreb and in Slovenia, but the majority of them were in Belgrade. We reunited with each other, those who survived the bombings; we met up with each other until I got old. Now I have to have my grandchildren drive me to see my Orthodox and Catholic friends. In general, neither my father, my mother, nor my sisters felt that someone pointed the finger, singled us out as Jews, told us we were an inferior race, or said anything insulting. We all considered ourselves Yugoslavs.