

Magdalena Berger

Magdalena Berger Belgrade Serbia Interviewer: Rachel Chanin

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Family background

My father, David Grossberger, was born in Bonyhad (Hungary) in 1891 to Leopold Grossberger and Roza Grossberger (nee Veseli). Leopold and Roza Grossberger moved to Subotica with their 8 children to pursue a better financial and Jewish life. At the time, Yugoslavia offered a more tolerant and receptive atmosphere for religious Jews as well as more economic opportunities. Once in Yugoslavia, Leopold worked as a peddler in local markets. While he was not as poor as many of the other people in the community, he never achieved great financial success. Leopold and Roza were both very observant and raised their family that way. In their later years they were supported by their children, and Leopold devoted himself to Torah study.



My father loved and respected his parents but he was not able to remain as steadfast in his observance and worldview as they. As a young adult he moved to the less religious city of Sombor. It is not known why he left but I believe that part of the motivation was to allow himself space for his more relaxed religious observance. In Sombor, he opened a textile factory and a wholesale textile shop. The factory was named something like Prva Jugoslovenska Fabrika za Tapaciranje, and is still located near the bus station in Sombor. The factory was functioning up to a few years ago. The shop was on the ground floor of the building where we lived.

Because he tried so hard, my father achieved a level of success his father never had. He was a successful businessman, which allowed his family to live a comfortable but by no means extravagant life. I remember that my father never gave us pocket money and he urged us to play with his workers' children. My father kept a diary on his business activities so that we, his children, would know that he was an honest businessman. Despite his success he always maintained a sense of modesty and made sure we all did as well.

Growing up

My father married my mother, Klara Guszman of Sombor, and they had two children together: my brother Andrija-Tzvi Grossberger, who was born in 1924, and me. I was born in 1926. My mother was born in 1903. She came from an entirely non-religious Jewish family from Sombor. She died when I was eight years old but I remember her as a sensitive and artistic woman. When she was

not in the sanatorium, she enjoyed playing the piano and painting, but she was sick most of the time until she died in 1934. My father, my brother and I were on our family farm on T'isha B'av of that year when my father, my brother and a cousin left the farm in the family car for the city. They were headed to town for her funeral. I only learned later about her death. I have no recollection of whether shiva was observed for her or anything about that time.

My father remarried in 1936. His sister was living in Romania. She introduced him to a woman named Joli Kohn and they married sometime thereafter. I don't remember the specifics of their courtship or where and when they married. However, I recall that it was a very natural transition when my stepmother came to live with us. Joli was religious. She did not wear a wig but I think she did go to the mikvah (ritual bath). In the few years that my stepmother lived in Sombor before the war, she did not make many friends and did not socialize much. Her mother and the rest of her family would come to visit her in Sombor but she did not travel back to Romania. My stepmother was a very strict and conventional woman and kept me under close observation even when I was in my late teens.

We had an apartment on the first floor of an apartment building on Laze Kostic and Bojevica Venac in Sombor, and also a farm outside the city. One female servant and a cook lived and worked in our house. These women were foreigners and non-Jews. The servants were a normal practice at the time and not a sign of luxury. In our family's case they were especially necessary because my mother, Klara, was often sick and my stepmother did not know how to cook.

My parents, and then my father and stepmother, socialized almost exclusively with Jews. I cannot recall them having any non-Jewish friends. But none of them socialized much. It was not the custom for Jews to go to bars. Those who did were put on an informal community blacklist. When they went out, many went to one particular pastry shop in Sombor. My parents usually celebrated the secular New Year at home with us children. Only one year, 1940-41, was I allowed to celebrate the New Year at a friend's house.

Sombor was not a large Jewish community. Most of the 1,000 Jews that lived in the town belonged to the Neolog (Conservative) community. There were some Orthodox Jews but they were a minority and were in general much poorer than the other Jews. They did not have a big synagogue, only a few shtiebls.

There was a large Neolog synagogue in the center of Sombor, close to our house, where we were members. I would go to the synagogue with my aunt and grandmother, and we sat in our permanent seats, on the left side near the ark. From there I could see my father sitting in the men's section. The service was traditional and all in Hebrew and the congregation could follow and participate. During the Torah reading the cantor would call out in German (or maybe it was Yiddish, I'm not sure): "Who has a contribution for the chevra kadishah?"

There was no hall in the synagogue so there was no socializing after the service. When my brother had his bar mitzvah, the family's guests and relatives came back to the house after the service for kiddush. In this community of modest means, it was not customary to provide lunch for the guests. I remember that my brother received some gifts, including 10 of the same pen sets.

Our family was less religious than Father's parents but we were certainly not a typical Neolog Jewish family in Sombor: we were considerably more observant than most of the other non-Orthodox Jews in Sombor at the time. We kept kosher and bought all of the meat from the kosher butcher. I believe that my father maintained these traditions more out of respect for his parents than out of ideology.

My family observed the Shabbat. Father's store was closed on Saturday and although my brother and I went to school on Saturdays, we were not allowed to write or do other things that violated the Sabbath. On Friday, Mother lit candles and we had a Shabbat dinner. Dinner usually consisted of a goose, goose liver, charvas, kiska, fried eggs and onions. For the second Shabbat meal we ate cholent and cold zucchini. The Shabbat leftovers were then eaten the rest of the week. We rarely had beef, mostly only poultry, and we made challah at home. I recall my father saying havdalah at the end of each Sabbath, using a flat, braided, brightly colored candle.

All Jewish holidays were observed in our house. Before Rosh Hashanah we would buy a chicken and perform kaporot at home and then take the dead chicken to the butcher. On Succoth my family had a small succah on our terrace. Not many other people had one but each year my father put one up and decorated it. He would cut up strips of colored paper and hang paper chains around the succah. We would eat in the succah during this week. We had the family Seder at our house, which my father led. The Haggadah was read in Hebrew and I believe that we had copies with a translation in Hungarian. As the youngest child, I was always responsible for reading the Ma Nishtana (the four questions about the meaning of Pesach). We celebrated Purim but I cannot remember where the Purim Ball was held or exactly what the service in the synagogue was like. On Hanukah we lit a menorah (candlabra) and the children played dreidel (spinning top), gambling for walnuts. I don't remember getting presents but I know that it was common for most Jewish families to light Hanukah candles.

Even though my family was more religious than the other Jews in our community, I had no problem socializing with the other children. My family's religious practices were never an issue for me as a young girl. In all other respects my childhood was similar to that experienced by the other Jewish children in Sombor at the time.

There was no Jewish school in Sombor, the closest was in Novi Sad, so I attended the local schools. There were 3 or 4 other Jewish kids in my class at school, but no Jewish teachers. The Jewish children were always among the best students. In my grade, boys and girls were in the same class. Once a week all the children in the school had religion lessons. Each minority group had a teacher sent in to teach that group. All of the Jewish kids in the school were together in one class for this lesson. We mainly studied Bible stories and Hebrew. The law allowed us Jewish children to stay at home on Jewish holidays. The Jewish children in my school went to school on Saturdays but none of the Jewish kids went to school on the holidays.

I recall that young people did not socialize or travel in those days as they do now; people spent more time closer to home. As a child I went to school and came home. During the free time I rode bicycle or played by the canal near our house. My friends did not come to our house very often and almost never slept over. Most of my friends were Jewish but I had a few non-Jewish friends. Once the war started the non-Jewish children in the school would no longer socialize with the Jewish ones. I would pass other kids from my class on the street and they would not say hello. However,

even during the war I maintained friendships with two Serbian students from school.

Like most of the teenagers in Sombor at the time, I took both dance lessons and music lessons. I took a dance course for several months and although I did not enjoy it, I finished the course. I took private piano lessons at a Jewish woman's house, but was not very good, and quit after a while. I also had private French lessons after school. All of these things were normal practices for young adults at the time.

I was a member of the local Hashomer Hazair youth group. We used to meet in the yard of the synagogue and sing songs but I cannot remember what else we did. I was not particularly Zionist but the youth group was something to do. We did not go on trips because the parents would not let youth go away overnight. Occasionally, the Hashomer Hazair youth from Subotica would come to Sombor. My brother was not in Hashomer Hazair but he was a scout for a while. My family did not travel much but Father would take us to the Croatian seaside or to Bled for summer vacations and we spent time on our family farm.

During the war

We remained in Sombor through spring 1944 when the Hungarian fascists took control of the region. When the Jews from Sombor were captured and held hostage, my father put up one million of the required two million Hungarian pengo ransom to have the Jews released. My stepmother and I were deported to Austria, where we were held in a labor camp. In 1944, while in the camp, my stepmother gave birth to a baby girl. I was given the honor of naming the baby and I called her Mira Ruth Grossberger. As an infant she was quite ill and my stepmother wanted her to have two names to protect her from death.

Post-war

We were liberated on the 8 May 1945 and immediately left Austria. We returned to Sombor, where we learned that my father had been killed in Auschwitz. I finished the last year of high school in Sombor and then moved to Belgrade. In Belgrade, I lived in the Jewish dormitory and studied at the Faculty of Technology. In the meantime, my stepmother and half-sister went to Israel. Mira still lives in Israel and my stepmother died in Israel in 1989.

I met my husband after the war, in the Jewish student dormitory in the Belgrade synagogue. He came from a rural Jewish family that was not at all religious. He had a drastically different upbringing than I did. For example, his father was inclined to drink a lot, and socialized with the local gypsies, things that my father never did. We married in Belgrade on the same day as another Jewish couple from the dormitory. The two of us, the other couple and all the witnesses lived in the Jewish dormitory, which confused the judge officiating at the weddings. We married on a Friday because on Friday afternoons the Jewish cafeteria served the best lunch, beans and apple pie, which served as our wedding feast.

Ivan and I had one son, Ivar, who was born in 1957 in Zemun. Ivan, while aware of his Jewish background, was never active in the Jewish community. We lived in Zemun and worked a lot and there was not much time left to go to the community. My son is 43 and not married and says that he is waiting to find a nice educated Ashkenazi woman to marry. Personally, I am inclined to think that this is just an excuse.