

Rahela Perisic

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Bosnia

Interviewer: Klara Azulaj

My name is Rahela Perisic (nee Albahari) and I was born in 1922 in Sanski Most. My father, David Albahari, was born in 1889 in Tesanj (Bosnia) and my mother, Luna Albahari (nee Levi), was born in 1899 in Kladanj (Bosnia).

We lived in Sanski Most in a one-story garden house. Upstairs in this house we had a three room apartment and on the ground floor my father and his brother had a dry goods store. Next door to us lived my father's brother Jakob. They also had a garden house but their garden was much nicer than ours. Jakob's wife, Rena, grew beautiful flowers and had an orchard. My sisters, brother and I liked to stay at their house and play with their children. My father and his brother Jakob, two brothers, married two sisters, my mother and her sister Rena. Thus we lived liked one family.

A great number of Jews lived in Sanski Most. They had many professions among them: merchants, craftspeople, pharmacists, lawyers, etc. All in all it was a beautiful Jewish community, one that knew how to get along and was always ready to jump in and help someone when it was needed. There was a temple. It was an old modest building where all the Jews of Sanski Most gathered and marked their holidays.

My father and uncle's business did not go well and they decided to leave Sanski Most. My family went 12 kilometers away from Sanski Most to a place called Lusci Palanka. My uncle and his family went to Sarajevo.

We were the only Jewish family in Lusci Palanka. My father, who was a very sociable man, made a lot of friends quickly. Soon after our arrival he also established the first library and reading room and a group of mandolin players. My mother was well received by the other women and she was always willing to help the other women especially when it came to advise about running a household and taking care of children.

In Lusci Palanka my sisters and I went to elementary school. Since Lusci Palanka did not have a temple we went to Sanski Most for Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot and sometimes for Pesach. While there we stayed with our relative Avram Atijas and his wife Mazalta. For us children Chanukah was the best. I loved to light the candles. I remember before Pesach my mother would take all the dishes to the garden where she cleaned each plate. She also had a special trunk with dishes only for Pesach. Regardless of the fact that there was no temple in Luka Palanka my family always washed before the Shabbat and wore nice clothes. My father wore a dress suit as if he had come back from temple. Then he would read a prayer and after dinner we would go for a walk.

We did not stay in Luka Palanka for long. My father had to move because his business was not going well. This was not an industrialized environment in fact it was exclusively an agricultural region. In 1930 we moved to Drvar. Drvar was an industrialized town rich in wood. There was a

cellulose factory and a big sawmill. The Grmec mountain was exploited by the sawmill and many people were employed in this industry. Unfortunately, we found that we were once again the only Jewish family. My father found a very good space for our future shop and very quickly the seeds of his and my mother's work began to appear. As very social people, they quickly had a steady clientele and my father was able to buy many shares and we had a solid savings.

When we finished elementary school my sisters, Flora, Judita and I continued our schooling in Banja Luka because there was no secondary school in Drvar. We lived with our aunt Rena and her husband Jakob who had relocated from Sarajevo to Banja Luka. My uncle's business did not go well and his family lived very modestly. My father helped him a lot.

My sisters and I joined the Jewish youth group in Banja Luka. There was a big temple and next to it a space for Jewish youth activities called Ken. In Ken we learned Hebrew, songs and Jewish games and we organized trips out of Banja Luka. Older girls and boys always went with we younger ones and they paid strict attention to our behavior. When we passed through the town everyone knew that we were Jews because we were dressed in clean clothes, not luxuriously, but very neat, and we were always well behaved.

My mother's brother, Haim Levi, also lived in Banja Luka. He had a big hairdresser salon. Frequently, he told me stories about his parents, Haim and Flora Levi. Since they died before I was born I listened to his stories with great interest. The story of my great-grandfather, Salomon, my grandmother Flora Levi's father, was especially moving and interesting. My great-grandfather was a banker of sorts. He had a currency exchange. He would take foreign currency and go from Banja Luka to Prijedor to change the money from Turkish currency to Austro-Hungarian. (Editor's note: we assume she is speaking of pre-1878, when Banja Luka was still in Turkish hands). He traveled a lot for this work. Once, while he was in Prijedor, someone noticed that he had a big bag from which he took out foreign money and changed it. Thieves waited for and killed my great-grandfather and took the money. His horse and dog returned home by themselves. My great-grandmother Bikina organized a search party and with help from the horse and dog she found the place where the crime occurred. The killer was quickly found and taken to prison.

My grandfather Haim and his wife Flora had a small shop. They sold mostly leather goods including: saddles, horse harnesses, leather bags and other household goods. They lived modestly and observed all the holidays and customs because they were very religious. When their daughter Rena married she had to go to the ritual bath. For this ritual bath all the girls discreetly accompanied her to a place on the Vrbas River and helped her with the bath. Her hair was very long and they put some fragrant grass in her hair and on the way they sang. My mother told me about how wonderful these songs were. After the bath the bride was decorated and adorned until the morning. My grandmother Flora knew how to make the nicest tukada. A tukada is a hat which is placed on the bride and made from pearls and brocade. These were real pieces of art work. The young couple married under a traditional Jewish canopy and it was an event which all the young people of Banja Luka took part in. Six children were born from this marriage: Rena, Haim, Sarina, Luna, Leon and Matilda. Unfortunately, Matilda died very young. My mother's brother, Leon, was seriously injured during WWI. He never recovered from the injuries and died in 1923. His wife, Sida, died very quickly after him and the care of their three children: Zlata, Flora and Haim, was taken over by the remaining family members.

My paternal grandmother, Rahela Albahari (nee Atijas), was born in 1855 in Travnik.

She lived in a big family and had a lot of brothers and sisters. She was born while Bosnia and Hercegovina was under Turkish control. In Travnik there were a lot of Jewish families, more Sephards than Ashkenazis. There were rich and poor families. My great-grandfather was a small merchant and lived very modestly with his family. The male children learned a trade and female children did not go to school. My grandmother Rahela was very adroit, hardworking and curious about everything. She and her brothers learned Hebrew script and read religious books. Since the prayer books had Ladino (a medieval Spanish dialect written with Hebrew characters; Ladino, or Judeo-Espanol, was to Spanish what Yiddish was to German), she was able to use the Ladino to learn Hebrew. She spoke Ladino, Turkish, Hebrew and Serbian. She went to temple regularly, which was rare for female children at the time. She married Moshe Albahari when she was 17 years old. My grandfather Moshe's family lived in Travnik, and later moved to Tesanj, a small place in Bosnia. Moshe and Rahela lived in Tesanj and had a small shop. Rahela gave birth to 7 children: Salamon-Buhor, Jakob, Sabetaj, Leon, Gedalja, Ester and David. The children all left the house early; they learned a trade with friends or relatives in Travnik, Zenica and Sarajevo. When they finished their schooling, they got married, started their own families and lived in different places in Bosnia and Hercegovnia. Grandfather Moshe was sickly and he died of pneumonia around 1910. Since the children had moved away and she was left alone, Rahela decided to fulfill her longstanding wish to move to Israel and to die in the Holy Land. Her son Gedalja accompanied her to the ship, which sailed from Split.

When she arrived in Israel she educated Jewish children since she new Jewish history and how to read and write Hebrew quite well. She was in Israel when WWI broke out. Nostalgia and sadness overcame her. She was worried about her children. Unfortunately, she only managed to return to Bosnia in 1918. She died in Sarajevo in 1930. Before her death my father, my mother and my two sisters and I went to visit her. That is the first and last time I saw her. My father, David, was her youngest son and she was very close to him. I remember when we kissed her hand, first my father, then my mother and then the children and she kept repeating: "David, my sweet child."

Sometime around 1934, one could feel that bad times were coming. Fascism could already be felt in the air. After the unification of the Third Reich in 1938 (editor's note: this is how the respondent refers to the German takeover of Austria), many Jews arrived in Banja Luka from Austria. My uncle Salomon Levi took in one of these families. They left all of their property behind in Vienna. I was still too young to fully understand their situation. But, unfortunately, the hard times soon befell me too. For the 1940-41 school year I was enrolled in Prijedor. During this school year I started to have problems because my history professor was a fascist sympathizer and he always humiliated and insulted me in front of the whole grade. I cried after almost every class with him. My three school friends: Sveta Popovic, Joca Stefanovic and Milan Markovic were a great consolation to me. They would tell me: "Don't give in to him, hold your head up high, proudly, high, you are not going to let one fascist make you suffer." I listened to them. Numerus Klausus, a law which restricted the number of Jewish children who were able to go to school, had already been enacted. They carried this out especially rigorously with those boys and girls who were supposed to enroll in the higher grades of the gymnasium. At the teacher's meeting the director of my school insisted that I be thrown out, but I was lucky and my physics, geography and literature professors lobbied for me to stay. Their argument was that it would be better to dismiss a younger student who had time to

transfer to some trade school rather than me. In the end they did not throw me out. I learned about this incident during the war when I met one my professors.

War broke out in 1941 and a German unit entered Drvar. Not much time passed before my father, mother and younger sister Judita, and my younger brother Moric, who was eleven, were taken to what was called a reception camp in Bosanski Petrovac by the Ustashe [Before and during WWII Ustashe were an extreme right wing political and military organization of Croatian nationalists on the German's side. They ruled Croatia from 1941-1945]. When this happened I was at my aunt's house. The Ustashe told her that she must send me to the camp but I did not go and I ran away instead. I hid in surrounding villages, however in the end I fell into the hands of the Ustashe and I suffered terribly when they took me to prison. But something happened to save me. Serbs, who were also mistreated by the Ustashe, attacked Drvar. I was liberated at that time. I immediately registered to help at the Drvar hospital. Salomon Levi, who I knew from before, worked there as a doctor. I contacted him and told him that I wanted to help in the hospital since before the war I had learned first aid in school. From that day I became a fighter against fascism. From then until 1945 I held a variety of different responsibilities and positions. Once the enemy attacked liberated territory and the people began to flee. Many mothers fled with weak children. Many children ran around like mad, fell in flames and disappeared. At the time I was in the 10th Krajski brigade. I gathered these children, saved them from a sure death and took them back to a safe place. They were put up in a children's dormitory in Lika, which was established during the war. In honor of my effort to save as many children as possible, I was decorated with a medal of courage.

In the meantime, my parents along with Judita and Moric were supposed to be transferred from the reception camp to Jasenovac. However, my father was clever and while they were in the cattle cars waiting for the train tracks at the Prijedor station to be fixed he told my brother and sister to ask to the officers if they could use the toilet. Since there was not a normal toilet, they went a little behind the wagon and they managed to cross over the narrow-gauge railroad tracks. Shortly afterwards my parents managed to escape unnoticed and caught up with them. All four of them got on a train for Sanski Most. In Sanski Most they hid for some time; they wanted to reach Drvar because the Italians were there and they did not practice the same abuse the Germans did. With a lot of hardship they finally reached Drvar. I was ordered to stay in Drvar from the time the Italians took over to do illegal work. My father and mother spent the entire war running from place to place as liberated territories changed. My sister and brother were in the partisans.

In 1944 I caught pneumonia. The war efforts, hunger, walking, exhausted me terribly. My unit decided to transfer me to liberated territory from the medical facility. As soon as I got a little better I began to work in the youth organization in the liberated territory. This was in Bosanski Petrovac in Grahovo, in Jajce and in Travnik. At that time I was selected to be part of the top leadership for Bosnia and Hercegovina in the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Youth. My work was a great help to our army. I organized youth to help carry the wounded, to plow, dig, sow since all the food was sent to the front lines. We started a literacy course, we taught the youth many useful things and skills. For this work I was also awarded. I received a lot of recognition. I received awards for serving Bosnia and Hercegovina, for contributing to the fight, and after the war for my work with children. I was in Bugojno until 1945 when I heard that Belgrade was liberated. Naturally we were overjoyed, however all of Yugoslavia was still not liberated. Fortunately that too happened.

The members of my family and I were reunited in Sarajevo in 1945. We all came to the family house. My father was very happy that all of his children had survived and said: "Children, do not worry as long as your head is on your shoulders, we will start over and there will be everything."

After the war we children continued our schooling, we went to so-called courses for one year and finished two grades. We all finished gymnasium. School was hard, there was no paper to be used and we were all greatly impoverished, but we were all ecstatic to be liberated. The Jewish community in Sarajevo received aid from different organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, so that we Jews had clothing and we received eggs, powdered milk, rice, etc. My father was very active in the Jewish community. Later he got work as the head of a shop and while at this job he found himself. He worked with such enthusiasm in this store. Frequently he told me how he wanted to teach young people that commerce could be an honest trade. Not to steal and lie. My mother Luna devoted herself to the house. She met each of us and picked each of us up. In this time of poverty and lack of food she managed to make all sort of things out of nothing. Everyone loved her. In our family house in Sarajevo she waited for each of our surviving relatives. They slept on the floors until they found something. She had to clean, do laundry and cook and she never complained, she was so happy to have her children around her.

My parents were proud of each of their children because they all finished some form of higher education. My sister Judita finished agronomy and lived in Sarajevo. She married and had a daughter Tanja. My brother Moric finished forestry faculty and at the same time went to pilot school. He married a Jewish woman named Rahela Maestro. My father was very happy that there would be at least one heir. Rahela and Moric had a son who they named after our father. My sister Flora finished a commercial academy.

In 1946, I participated in the building of the Brcko-Banovici railroad line. After finishing the work I met a wonderful young man, my current husband, Ilija Perisic. He was active in aviation. Very soon after we met we married, in 1950. My two sisters and myself all married Serbs. My father wanted Jewish son-in-laws, but nonetheless he respected our choices. My father died in 1973.

My husband went to an advanced military school and finished a degree in political science. He is very responsible; he worked hard in the air force war division. He retired as a general lieutenant colonel.

My mother was in Sarajevo during the summers because we, her children, came there on our holidays. Those were wonderful days when the family gathered together. During the winters my mother would visit the three of us in Belgrade. She died in 1993.

My husband was a pilot, an officer in the Yugoslav national army and was transferred from Sarajevo to Belgrade. In the meantime, I managed to enroll in a two year teachers' college and right when I graduated my husband was transferred to Nis. My first teaching position was in Nis. We lived in Nis seven years and at one time I worked in the Museum of National Liberation Battles.

In the meantime we had three children. While the children were small they went to stay with my parents in Sarajevo for the school holidays. My parents celebrated all the Jewish holidays, so that from a young age my children knew everything about the holidays. Since Jewish holidays in essence mark historical events of the Jewish nation, their grandfather and grandmother explained

to them the importance of all the holidays. My husband and I are atheists and in our house we celebrated neither Jewish nor Serbian holidays. My children are from a mixed marriage and feel like both Jews and Serbs. My eldest son Simo, finished the construction faculty and currently works for Energoprojekt as a deputy director. He is married and his wife works as an editor at the daily newspaper Politika. They have three children: Ana, a university student studying political science, Maya a fourth grader in middle school and Djordje a high school student in the II grade. My middle son, Predrag, finished the technological faculty and has a master's degree. He is married and has two sons Nenad and Mladen both of whom are students. My youngest son, Miljenko, finished the construction faculty and works. He has a daughter, Darja, who is in the V grade of elementary school. All of my sons and their families are members of the Jewish community. Sometimes my grandchildren go with the rest of the Jewish children to the (Joint Distribution Committee/Lauder Foundation) summer camp in Hungary.

We were once again transferred to Belgrade in 1959. I became employed at the Institute for History of the Workers' Movement. I worked there processing documents from the National liberation battles until my retirement in 1969.

I get much satisfaction and joy from grandchildren. They are my greatest treasure.