
Sida LEVI

PROBLEMS AND A LITTLE GOOD LUCK



Sida Levi was born in Sarajevo in 1925, to Laura and Albert Danon. She had a brother, Isa, fourteen years older, and a sister, Sara, who was four years older. The sisters were born after their father returned from spending six years in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp in Vladivostok in Eastern Russia during the first world war.

Sida graduated from medical school in Sarajevo before specialising in microbiology in Belgrade. She worked at the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade until her retirement in 1952. She was married to engineer Benjamin Levi with whom she had a daughter, Sanja, also a microbiologist, and a son, Teo, an economist. She has a grandchild from each of her children's marriages.

Sida Danon brought this testimony personally to the editorial office in Belgrade a few days before her unexpected death in March, 2002.

My father was loved and respected by everyone around him. Thanks to his friendship with the Muslims, he was able to send me and my sister to Mostar in August 1941 to stay with relatives there. Disguised as the sisters of two Muslims, we travelled from Sarajevo to Mostar which was occupied by the Italians who, at that time, were tolerant of Jews. Later my entire family moved to Mostar.

My sister and I made contact with the progressive young people of Mostar and were given various jobs. Wearing a *feredza*, the Muslim cloak and veil, I carried weapons to the Partisans. After a month I was admitted to SKOJ, the Communist Youth organisation. The Mostar Muslims with whom we were spending time gave us a lot of help, bringing us flour, sugar and other essentials. They were really kind people, progressive thinkers, and most of them had joined the Partisans. Our quiet life in Mostar lasted for about a year, until October 1942, when the Italians interned all the Mostar Jews. We were first sent to the island of Lopud, where we were accommodated in a hotel, but fenced off with barbed wire. Life was very well organised. We were given food supplies by the Italians and our women prepared meals which were wholesome and lavish under those circumstances.

Together with a handful of teachers, my sister and I helped with the school children. We also joined a choir in which I often sang solo. There were performances every Saturday evening.

From Lopud we were sent by boat to Rab, where the Jews from Dalmatia were interned. My first encounter with the Italian Fascists on the boat was enough to know that we were on our way to a concentration camp. There was also another camp, for Slovenians, on the island of Rab.

There we were put into barracks. The food was very poor: each day we were given beans with noodles, with no seasoning, and a piece of bread. On top of everything there was a terrible shortage of water. My sister and I immediately got involved with the Communist Youth organisation. We took a course in first aid because there were preparations under way for us eventually joining the Partisans. On September 7, 1943, we learnt that Italy had capitulated. We were told to get as many of the girls as possible together and go to the barbed wire and tell the Italian



Sida in Zagreb, 1945

guards that the war was finished. We asked them to release us. They did let us out and then we danced the *kolo*, the traditional Serbian circle dance, with the soldiers and together celebrated our freedom. While we were doing this our leaders in the camp, together with the inmates of the Slovenian camp, organised a raid on the camp armoury. Now all the weapons in the camp were in our hands. The camp commandant was arrested and soon afterwards committed suicide. Inside the newly-liberated, camp preparations were being made for our departure to the Partisans. A battalion was formed from the Slovenians and our inmates and was given the job of liberating the islands of Cres and Lošinj. My sister and I were attached to the battalion as nurses. Cres and Lošinj were liberated and we returned to Rab.

Then a Rab Jewish Brigade was formed. It was to be attached to the Seventh Banija Division. The trip there was long, with the danger of being attacked by the Germans and the Ustasas. After a long and arduous march we arrived in Banija to find the Seventh Banija Division already engaged in the Fifth Offensive. The women remained in Banija.

My sister and I were assigned to the propaganda division. This was later disbanded and a large group of girls was sent to the Banija District Committee to be sent to Lika as nurses in the newly formed tank battalion. However this was at the beginning of the Sixth Offensive and all links with Lika were cut, so we were kept behind in Banija and sent to work as teachers in the villages. I was assigned to the village of Bruban. This was an inaccessible place with scattered houses. The school was still being built with the donation of a local who had



Sida with her friends Biserka and Helena in Sarajevo, 1941

emigrated to the United States. It had a roof, but no windows or doors. Night after night we could hear the wolves howling. It's easy to imagine how I felt there, at the age of sixteen and all alone. I had never been separated from my parents before. There were only a handful of children at the school, five or six, and in winter they had to walk for miles in deep snow.

My friends were at that time forming a theatrical group for the district committee in Banija. Because I had sung at Lopud almost every Saturday they asked me to join. This was a godsend for me. I immediately joined the group which acted, prepared theatrical pieces, sang in the choir and danced the Partisan *kolo*. We visited various places, including the front lines, wherever the army units were and gave performances, which really raised the morale of the soldiers.



Sida Danon with her classmates and form teacher in the fourth grade of secondary school in Sarajevo

I stayed with the theatre group until the end of the war. The conductor of our choir insisted that I should be sent to Zagreb for voice training because he believed I had a voice which should be developed. Because I hadn't graduated from secondary school I could not be admitted to the conservatoire, so I enrolled in the Partisan intermediate school where I finished seventh grade and then enrolled in the spe-

cial musical secondary school. In Zagreb I stayed at the Partisan Home in Gornji Grad. My parents had been in Banija, where my father helped in the municipal office, and after the war they returned to Sarajevo.

I visited them during one school vacation and decided to return to Sarajevo, because the Partisans had also opened a secondary school there. After finishing high school I enrolled to study medicine, because that was what my parents wanted. There was no way they could reconcile themselves to my desire to become what they called a songstress. I finished medicine in 1953 and, in the same year, married and moved to Split, where my husband, Benjamin Levi, was building the Jugovinil factory. My children, Sanja and Teo, were born in Split and, in 1958, we moved to Belgrade, where I specialised in microbiology and worked in the Military Medical Academy until my retirement in 1982. Although I never fulfilled my dream of becoming an opera singer, I was happy to sing in the Baruh Brothers choir.

My husband died in 1974 and I found myself, at the age of 47, a widow with a daughter in her first year of medicine and a son in the seventh grade of school. My mother lived with me, which made my difficult life as a widow easier. My daughter graduated from medical school, specialised in microbiology and was employed at the Torlak Institute, where she works to this day. My son graduated from the Belgrade University Economics Faculty and married. This marriage produced my granddaughter Laura. Sanja presented me with my grandson, Igor, who brings joy to my life. Although I am now ill and often bedridden for months on end, each day when I open my eyes I again find solace and a reason for living in watching my grandchildren grow up. They are not yet thirteen years old.