

---

*Lea LJUBIBRATIĆ*

ONLY THE NAME REMAINS



*L*ea Ljubibratić was born in Novi Sad in 1929. Her parents, Mirko and Micika Fuks, née Sivak, moved to Israel after the second world war. There Mirko was secretary of the Association of Yugoslav Jews for a number of years.

*Lea Ljubibratić worked in Novi Sad as an English language teacher. After her retirement, together with her husband Edo, she was active in the life of the Novi Sad Jewish community.*

*Her daughter Milja and son Ivo live with their families in America.*

The Fuks family of Novi Sad consisted of four very close nuclear families. There were a total of fifteen of us. Grandfather Robert died before the war and eight people were killed in the war.

By marrying, my mother opted for the Jewish community, converting to the faith of Moses before I was even born. Together with her gradual adoption of Jewish customs, she also brought into the home some traditions with which she had been brought up. And so, before I began primary school, I knew about Christmas trees and Easter eggs.

I attended the Jewish primary school which was officially a public school. Because it had a good reputation there were also non-Jewish children attending. It was only here that I learnt the traditions from my religious teacher, Boroš, and heard the biblical stories which always

brought tears to my eyes. On Saturdays we had no classes, but we went to the school which was next door to the synagogue. At that time we called the synagogue temple. On Saturdays and major festivals, our teacher Boroš would recite prayers to us which we didn't understand because they were in Hebrew. We were happy to walk around in the yard while some of the adults were in the temple.

At that time I moved from Sokol to the Maccabi sports club. I practised gymnastics. We were led by Aleksandar Gutman who did not survive the war.

In the autumn of 1940, I enrolled in the first grade of the Girls' General Program Secondary School. Up to then I had heard adult conversations about what was happening in countries where Hitler had already planted his foot but, when I began secondary school, the war had not yet begun in our country. I felt the Fascist propaganda and its repercussions on my own skin.

One day a student from a higher year invited us to sign up for the scouts. We would spend time together and go on excursions. The idea appealed to me because I was an only child and much younger than the others in the family. Immediately after school I went to sign up. When I returned home I told my father about this. Without much explanation he told me that I must withdraw immediately the next day. When I appeared the following day I was still at the door when they told me not to come any more. I didn't need to withdraw.

Not long after that, my father told me one evening that I would be asked to go to the school headmaster who would ask me to sign something and that after that I should come home. The next day we Jews were called in to see the headmaster, one by one. As each girl returned to the classroom she would take her school bag and leave without a word. The principal gave us a document to sign and said nothing except that we were to leave the school. This was the implementation of the *Numerus Clausus*. It supplied the basis for determining the percentage of Jewish children who were permitted to enrol in the first year of secondary schools and universities.

That autumn, in October, my father was called up for a military exercise as a reserve officer. He did not return from the exercise because war broke out and he was taken into captivity. However, while on the exercise he resigned his commission as reserve second lieutenant with the following explanation: "I have been, by decision of the education minister, classified as a second class, or perhaps even lower, citi-

zen, despite the fact that according to the Constitution all citizens are equal regardless of national and religious affiliation. Therefore, because of this decision I find myself unworthy of a reserve officer rank. Before submitting this petition I thought long about this act of mine. I know that if my resignation is accepted, I will have harmed myself, however I believe that I can also make a contribution to the state as a private, working on digging trenches or something similar. However, the actions of the responsible authorities in expelling my daughter from school constitute such a great insult that I believe that, by taking such an action against my family, the authorities do not see me as worthy of being a citizen of this state." I would also like to mention that, in a letter sent to me from captivity, my father advised me to learn foreign languages because, on his return, we would have to look for another country in which to live because they did not like us in this one.

It was just before the end of the school year on April 1, 1941, that a reply came, together with a recommendation to the school to enrol me again.

Novi Sad very soon fell under Hungarian occupation. Within the first few days there was a hand grenade thrown at Father's garage and the automobile spare parts store was robbed. Mother and I were left with no means of support.

Trouble followed. Already, in 1941, all who had not lived in Novi Sad before 1918 were required to leave the city. And so two of our families set off for the Independent State of Croatia and two stayed behind. This first decision of my mother not to obey the order saved me from the camp in Croatia in which my grandmother Sofija and my uncle's wife Vali perished. My grandmother was unable to walk and, when my father, who was in captivity, asked the camp commandant why he was no longer getting any letters from his mother, he replied that she had been finished off with a rifle butt. My uncle, Nikola-Niki fled to Italy and thus saved his life. Father's two nieces, Mira (born 1920) and Ljerka (born 1923), returned illegally. After Ljerka was harassed in the Novi Sad prison known as the Army building in January 1924, they were both thrown under the ice of the Danube in a massacre called the Raid. Their parents, Feliks and Ana, crossed over to Budapest illegally. It wasn't easy to live under Hungarian occupation. My Aunt Jelka's son Đorđe Barta (born 1921), was taken to a labour battalion. He never returned. Allegedly he was killed. (There were *appell* – roll-calls every

now and then and if something wasn't to the liking of the Fascists they would shoot every tenth person in the line).

I continued my education. At first I socialised with the girls from my class. More and more I was compelled to socialise only with young Jewish women and men. We managed to read many books, those that were considered progressive. In the summer a "No entry for dogs and Jews" sign appeared at the entrance to the Strand beach. We young people who by some miracle had escaped the Raid went to Ribarsko Island.



*Lea, before her expulsion from secondary school, 1940, and her father Mirko Fuks, December 1948, before emigration to Israel*

And so came 1944. In March, the German occupation, in October the Nyilas. This was when the first sweep of the Fascist dragon's tail started. They began deporting Jews. Mother saved me a third time (the second time had been during the Raid when she showed the gendarmes who burst into our house some old birth certificate of hers) by hiding me under the staircase of a building in a neighbouring street. As soon as they stopped rounding up Jews to take them to concentration camps, she took me to Pecs, to a distant cousin of hers whom she hadn't seen or heard from for some time. I stayed there for a month. Most of the time I pretended to sleep on the sofa in the kitchen so that I wouldn't have to talk to her or her husband, a railway worker. After a month, my mother came to get me and took me to Budapest. We changed apart-

ments every month and most often lived in the outskirts of the city, in Sashalom, Mátyásföld or Rakosfalva.

By this time I was no longer a little girl whom a mother could easily keep at home. I couldn't just hide passively. I would take the little Hév train and go to Budapest. At first I would get cigarettes for Uncle Feliks and then I would go to their *Csillagos ház* (house with a yellow star) and visit him and Aunt Ana. I would talk for a while. One day he told me that he would give me pocket money while my father was in captivity. This was touching, because he no longer had his two daughters to give it to. So I was able to buy a ticket for the train every day, while in the trams I would get in at the back door and push my way through to the front door so I could get off without being caught without a ticket by the inspector. Then I would wait for the next tram and do the same thing, all the way to Teréz Körút, where I would go to another house with a star, to my school friend Vera Pik. Often, on my way there, I would have to go into basements with people I didn't know because of air raid alerts, until I finally reached Vera's place. We both daydreamed about a future life, especially because she read literature which fired her imagination.

One day, outside Vera's building, an old lady wearing the star stopped me and asked me if there was a bench nearby where she could sit and rest. I took her by the arm and began leading her towards a bench when some woman with an umbrella attacked me. She began waving the umbrella in the air and saying "How can you help a Jew?" The old woman told me to run away, so I pointed her towards the place where the bench was. A number of people had gathered around the woman who was shouting. I ran, zig-zagging from one side street to another until I was tired and dared to turn around to see my pursuers. There was no one there.

Just a few days later I went in through the wide open gate of the building. I saw all the members of the household, including Vera, standing lined up, with bundles, and next to them gendarmes with bayonets out. They wouldn't let me near them. Vera shouted to me to go to the Swiss Embassy in Vadász Street and ask for written confirmation that she was under their protection. I began running at once. When I reached Vadász Street it was packed with people who had come for the same reason. I could do nothing but push my way through that crowd like an awl and shout that I had to get in because she was already lined up to be taken away. When I rushed into the Embassy, a young man was coming

down the stairs. I told him what I needed. He immediately went back to the first floor and appeared with the document I had asked for.

Still running, I returned to Vera's gate. They were still there. I folded the document and rushed into the wide hall, as the bayonets turned towards me, but I pushed the paper into Vera's hand. Again I rushed out and, running, went to the corner and then across to the other side of the street. I hid behind a news stand and watched to see whether there would be any commotion after I had fled. They didn't chase me, probably because they saw that I was a little girl.

Vera and other children who had the document were taken to a building which was under protection. I visited her there. She told me that it was rumoured that they would not be able to keep them there much longer. I gave her my new address. Less than two days later, Vera appeared with Helena, a girl from the same building. I was to hide them. The man who had given me accommodation was very angry because he had only agreed to shelter me, but he allowed them to stay the night. All three of us lay in a narrow bed. For myself, I know that I didn't get a wink of sleep, thinking about what I could do with the two of them, while they had completely placed themselves in my care and may even have fallen asleep. Early in the morning I began preparing them to go out into the street. I had come up with the idea of dressing them as village girls and setting off by train with them to Sashalom. I knew a German woman and her daughter there. Her husband was Jewish and they belonged to some sect. I could speak freely to her and she took both girls in. They both survived the war. Vera emigrated to Israel and was always sorry that I didn't go there as well. I don't know what happened to Helena. All my life, in my thoughts, I continued to thank the woman from Sashalom for her kindness but, after the war, I could not find the strength to visit her.

I often visited my Aunt Jelka, who had come to Pest with her husband Joži and her daughter Vera. They also lived in a building with a star and this always meant that there were too many people crammed into all the apartments. It was never possible to keep the apartment tidy, so in their room there were a lot of saucepans on the floor to catch the water dripping through the ceiling in the autumn rain. In Feliks and Ana's place the walls were full of insects which fell on people at night. My dear Aunt Jelka, my father's sister, was very concerned about me travelling freely around Pest without a star. She was also worried because I had no clothes and shoes for rainy and wintery days.

Tragedy struck them too. They were visiting the parents of Vera's husband, Andrija Mikeš. While they were there the Nyilas came into the apartment, tied them up in pairs and took them to the bank of the Danube. They were turned facing the river. They fired bursts of shots at their feet, making them fall into the river and they began to drown. On the way there, while they were being taken to the Danube, Vera told the young man she was tied to that he should try to loosen the ties. They managed to do that and so, when she fell into the river, Vera was able to swim to the river bank once the Nyilas left. Among the drowning people she found her mother, who still showed some signs of life. She bit through the ropes with which her mother was tied and dragged her ashore. Then, crawling because her injuries left her unable to move any other way, she went from one house to another asking for assistance. But no one was willing to help her. With the last of her strength she managed to crawl to the Yugoslav Embassy. There they were both given first aid and then put in two different hospitals. However Aunt Jelka had no strength left to fight for recovery and that was how we lost her.

In February, 2001, exactly 56 years later, I was with my husband in the garden of the big synagogue in Budapest to honour the souls of the Jews who had perished, among them my dear Aunt Jelka. On that occasion I wrote: "The garden is shady and, at this time of the year, damp and cold. The footpaths are strewn with gravel, there are no grave mounds, only flatly harrowed soil, framed with bricks into large rectangles and on them plaques, simple, grey, squares of granite, filled with names, dates of birth and death. For some there is not even a plaque because they had no family to do that, or because some of those still alive felt there was not point in it, because there is no small number of those whose remains lie in some unknown place. But perhaps this is wrong because a name, even if only written on a stone, is the only sign that a person once lived."

Every year, remembering the days of the Raid on the Danube bank, I would say to myself and to my family just how different and more meaningful my life could have been had my closest family members and my school friends survived the war.