
Sara MANDELBAUM

IT WASN'T EASY BEING YOUNG



Sara Mandelbaum, née Finci, was born in Sarajevo on July 6, 1911, to David and Berta-Beja Finci (née Gaon). She had an elder sister, Regina, and brother, Salom. From the camp on Rab, she joined the Jewish Partisan Battalion and the Seventh Banija Division. Both she and her sister survived the Holocaust.

She has two sons, Zoran and Zigmund-Bata, and five grandchildren. Zoran, an engineer and father of four, has been chairman of the Jewish Com-

munity in Mostar. Bata is also an engineer and has one daughter.

My parents were from Travnik. I had a sister, older than me, and a younger brother. I don't know when my parents moved to Sarajevo. My grandmother and grandfather lived with us there. My father was a tinsmith, with a business near Bašćaršija. First we lived in Bijedenica, but later we bought a house in Babića Bašča. After leaving school, my sister worked in a medical institution as a clerk. Before the war she married Alfred Finci from Zovik near Sarajevo and had a son, Sabetaj.

All of my family observed Jewish customs. We were a patriarchal and devout Sephardic family and spoke Ladino at home, always staying together to observe the Sabbath. Every Purim we would wear fancy costumes. This was always an enjoyable occasion, and we children would be given money and fruit.

I remember later having a Serbian Orthodox boyfriend and my father being unhappy about this. "I want my child to be what I am now," he said. Despite this, in my heart of hearts, I was Jewish, and wouldn't have thought about changing my religion just to get married. We would go to the synagogue, where my mother, my sister and I would always wear a hat. We used to go to the big temple in Sarajevo, where my father had his own seat. When the Fascists came and destroyed the temple, that evening, my father stood in front of the portrait of his own father, saying "You are lucky not to have lived to see this."

After Hitler came to power in Germany, a large number of Jewish refugees arrived in Sarajevo. I remember once going with my sister to the theatre when some refugees from Germany were singing. They were driven from the stage when people started throwing eggs at them from the balcony, bringing the performance to an end. Politics wasn't discussed in our house, but we knew that several families with a lot of daughters were sending their children to Palestine, where they were saved. We were sorry that we were unable to go because we were not wealthy. My father had family in Belgrade, his brother Isak Finci, with his wife and three sons. They had a furniture shop and a cabinet maker's workshop in Terazije, in which the sons, Šalom, Salamon and Moric also worked. They fled with their mother to Palestine, but their father was executed in 1941.

When the Germans arrived it was terrible. For the first time my father came home early from his shop, where he still worked as a tinsmith. He told us that they had abducted fifty Jews from Sarajevo the night before. These abductions later continued on a massive scale. Jews all had to register: they would round us up at the Jewish Community and send us to forced labour. Everyone had to work for a week. A man would come and choose the people who had to go to work. I felt most sorry for my brother, who had to go to the railway station and, with the other men, carry heavy sacks. Once he hurt himself, but the Germans brought him back to work.

At that time I was 28 and not yet married. They came one evening for my brother, but he and I had already fled towards Miljacka. They struck my father on the face, demanding to know where his son was. The next day we returned. A few days later, on Sunday, my father dressed up in his best and walked out of the house. A truck came by which had been picking up Jews, so they took him away as well. My cousin, the son of my mother's brother, later told me that they had all

been taken to Jasenovac. He told me that they had forced these elderly people to dance the *kolo* and whipped and beat them into unconsciousness. My mother and I stayed away from the house that night. They had locked our house and sealed the door. We went, empty-handed, to our neighbour and from there to the house of a Jewish friend. Soon after this we paid a cousin from Konjic to send us a forged identity card for my brother and she took him to her house. He then joined the Partisans and was killed by the Chetniks at the age of 25. I never told my mother that he had died.

One day I was also locked up in the town hall. I had to give them everything, including my shoelaces and buckle. We were sent some food by a Jew whose name I never learnt. I remember there were meat balls. I wasn't there long, they let us go quite soon, but I found it very distressing.

My cousin in Konjic also sent me a forged identity card so I was able to go to her. Later we did the same for my mother, but we were cheated by the man who was supposed to bring her. Instead she stayed in Sarajevo and was later taken to the women's camp at Stara Gradiška.

Despite having the identity card, they threw me out at the Konjic station. I don't remember what name I was going under then, I was supposed to be from Goražde. My uncle was the only Jew there and was counting on the Croats to protect him. But one day the Partisans came, then the Chetniks and then the Ustashas and they took us away, back to Sarajevo. We were saved by David Hajon of Mostar. He told the Italian colonel that there was a written agreement that all the Jews in their zone were to be protected. So the Italians then paid for each of the Jews. I was even photographed for the newspaper. In this way we were lucky enough to be returned to Konjic. We had nothing to eat the whole time, but I felt no hunger. Our group consisted of my uncle, his wife, two daughters and one granddaughter, who survived and is now in Zagreb, Dr Debora.

I then decided that I should leave Konjic. Some of my relatives said that they had been abducted by the Ustashas because of me. My uncle took me to Mostar one day and, before saying goodbye, asked me if I needed anything, because there was no one there to help me. I asked him to give me a towel and a photograph of my father. Then a man happened to come along who offered to take me. I couldn't stay with him, so the next morning I went to David Hajon, who said that I should find a room and the Jewish Community would pay for it. While

I was looking for a room, I came across my friend Desa, Miloš Babić's wife. They had a tailoring business in Musala. Desa asked me to go with them to help her husband in the shop because I could sew. I gladly accepted. Desa was about my age, but her husband was a lot older. She introduced me to him by my real name and told him that I was her friend, to which he replied that this meant I was sure to be good and honest. There I sewed and ironed Italian blouses. I remember that Desa's husband gave me a bread roll when I arrived, which at the time meant a lot to me.

At the beginning of November, 1942, David Hajon summoned all the Jews to the synagogue. There they held a service and told us that everyone would have to leave Mostar for Dubrovnik, where they would be placed in an Italian camp, because Mostar had become an unsafe area. There were occasional visits from Francetić's Black Legions and the Italian Army was unable to provide security. The legions were picking up Jewish refugees, especially those who did not have permanent residence in Mostar. On November 17, all the Jews were taken to Dubrovnik, carrying just their personal effects and wearing yellow armbands with the Star of David.

In Dubrovnik we were met by the Italian *Carabinieri*, who said that we should gather into family groups. They then transported us by ship to Kupari, then to Hvar, Lopud and Vela Luka. I was alone, so I was sent with the Mostar Jews to the island of Lopud, where they put me into room 27 in the Grand Hotel. This is where I met my future husband, Mojši Mandelbaum. I married him on Lopud on February 14, 1943. We were married by a real rabbi and the wedding followed all the Jewish customs. We were all very happy. Mojši was even permitted to go to Dubrovnik, escorted by an Italian soldier, to buy wine and other things we needed for the wedding. I earned extra bread by sewing uniforms for the Italian soldiers.

In May 1943, all the Jews were sent to the concentration camp on Rab, where the conditions were much harsher. There were already a lot of Slovene prisoners there.

My husband and the other Jews organised party cells. They listened secretly to the radio and prepared an uprising in the camp. They were able to work together with the Slovenes because they were separated only by barbed wire. When they heard that Italy had capitulated, they rebelled, took up arms and met the Partisans who had come to liberate us. The elderly remained on Rab, some of the wealthier ones went to Italy, and a large number of young people joined the Partisans.

They asked us who wanted to join the Partisans. They were already well organised. My husband and I decided to go and were wished farewell by those who stayed. I felt it didn't matter if I were killed. We said goodbye to my mother-in-law and sister-in-law who had both decided to stay in the Rab camp, and left by boat.

We were organised into the Rab Partisan Battalion which was part of the Seventh Banija Assault Brigade. Our commissar was Muhamed Kalauzović, who married my friend Lenka Levi from Mostar. The two of us were together in the camp on Rab.

I remember we were always on the move. No sooner would we stop to take a rest than someone would shout "On your feet!" There were about 250 of us in the Jewish Partisan Battalion. Some of those with whom we had left the camp were no longer there: they had gone to Topusko or into refuge. I was given bandages and medical supplies. However, when we reached Karlovac, the detachment was disbanded. I remember someone making a speech, saying that, after being in the camps we were angry and ready to fight, but they separated us, they separated husbands from their wives. I wept, and so did my husband; I gave him everything except my own clothes. They told me that I wouldn't be able to carry everything once the offensive began, so I gave all the things I had to my women friends.

Food was a real problem. Sometimes in the villages there would be something to eat, but not always. I would arrive in a village and ask some woman "Comrade, do you have something to eat?" And she might give me something.

I remember us singing:

*Let's join the Partisans,
Let's go to our country,
For the people, for freedom.*

When I remembered how crowded we had been in the camp, this feeling of freedom meant a lot to me.

I was with the Partisans when the liberation came. I saw my husband only a few times. My first son was born in 1945, after I arrived back in Mostar. Unfortunately he fell sick with erysipelas and died. The following year I gave birth to Zoran. My other son, Zigmund-Bata is named after my husband's father. I now have five grandchildren. Two of my granddaughters and one grandson are in Israel, the other grandson is in Italy, as is Bata's daughter, and she is now married there.