

סאנסקי מוסט

SANSKI MOST

DERVENTA דרוונטה

TRAVNIK טראוויניק

BIJELJINA ביילינה

BRČKO זאווידוביצי' ברוציקו

DOBOJ דובוי

ZAVIDOVIC

ואגרב

TUZLA טוזלה

ZAGRE

VLASENICA ולאסניצה

ZENICA זניצה

VISOKO ויסוקו

ŽEPČE ז'פצ'ה

SARAJEVO

VIŠEGRAD

בלגראד

וישגראד

BEOGRAD

WE MOSTAR מוסטאר

SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

Lenka Lea STRAHINJIĆ

RUN, THEY ARE ROUNDING US UP!



Lenka Lea Strahinjić was born in Tuzla on 21 August 1925, of mother Rifka, née Altarac, and father Jonas Klimpl. She had an older sister Estera (born in 1924) and brother Albert (born in 1930). Grandmother Rozalija Klimpl and Lenka were the only ones who survived the Holocaust.

She attended the public school in Tuzla, but had to interrupt her education due to the arrival of Ustaša who took over the authorities in 1941. After the war she continued her education in Belgrade.

In 1952 she married a medical student Špiro Strahinjić, who later became professor at the Medical Faculty in Niš, founder of the Institute for Nephrology and Hemodialysis. They have a daughter Vesna, professor of the English language and literature, and a granddaughter.

After the war, Lenka worked as a civil servant in the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia. She is retired.

After the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austria-Hungary, many Jews from Czech and Polish regions were brought to this region as qualified experts. My father came to Sarajevo, where he opened a bookshop and a book-binding business. Once that he set up his family he moved to Tuzla, where his sister Lotika Laufer lived with her family. In Tuzla father continued with the same business – he had a bookshop and a bookbinding business.

My father was of Ashkenazi and my mother of Sephardic origin, and they had a good marriage. I had a happy childhood, during which I was very

close to my grandmother who I thought was the best person in the world. We had a great circle of friends of all origins, we observed our holidays and also went to visit others for their saint patrons' days, Bajram and other holidays celebrated by our friends from Tuzla. With my sister I used to go as guest to our friends' homes for different holidays.

My father was very much appreciated by the Serbs. It was as if they had the same kind of mentality – he had a good sense of humor, he was full of goodness and respect to others.

Grandmother, my father's mother, spoke German to all of us, as at that time German was the language used at schools and very often also in business. At home we always spoke Serbian. But, when we had Sephardic Jews, friends and relatives come over, my mother spoke Judeo-Espagnol with them.

Relations among all ethnic communities were very harmonious both at school and in our neighborhood and my father as a Czech Jew was very happy about this. Well known for his friendly and outgoing nature he was first chosen as player and later as life-long referee of the football club „Šumadija“. With this club he travelled across Serbia, organizing football matches.



RIFKA ALTARAC KLIMPL,
LENKA'S mother

No one of my family, friends or relatives could have guessed what atrocities lay ahead, or imagine what was to come for Jews in Tuzla. With the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia, the Jews of Tuzla were taken by surprise with the unheard of persecution, arrests and atrocities against Jewish citizens. People were taken away into the unknown. My parents, our whole family and relatives, from grandmother to the youngest grandchild, had to wear the yellow armbands.

The Germans stationed their command in the neighborhood called *Srpska Varoš*, specifically in the Orthodox Christian Bishops' palace, and the Bishop himself was either killed or expelled. Distinguished Serbs were disappearing overnight. Their families used to come with blankets and food to the Ustaša command HQ, although trying to talk with them was useless, and they would leave without getting any information or news regarding the whereabouts of their family members. Most of these families were never again reunited.

A commissioner was appointed for my father's shop, a Muslim, to run the shop. We lost any source of income, the house was struck by hunger.

My grandmother had another daughter, in Brčko, who was running a big manufacture business. That shop was owned by my father's step-brother, also a Czech Jew. The daughter from Brčko assisted our family as long as that was possible. However, on 10 December 1941, on a cold winter night, troops stormed the Jewish homes in Brčko and ordered Jews to come along and fill in some forms in their offices, not allowing them to get dressed, but taking them away in that cold as they were, saying that they would soon be coming back. Thus, literally out of bed, half-dressed, in unprecedented cold, they were taken to the bridge on the river Sava. The execution was designed as follows: they were all tied to each other by wires. They were all with great speed hit on their heads with hammers and finished by "kama" knives stabbed into their stomachs! After that they were kicked by foot and ended in the river Sava. This atrocious crime was performed by the infamous Francetić legion of the Ustaša order. That was how my father's sister Etelka Klimpl, Samuel Klimpl and his wife Olga, and a number of their relatives whose names I do not remember were murdered.

The news that Francetić legion was coming to Tuzla spread very quickly around Tuzla. The chief mufti, the judge – as the most distinguished Croat in town – and a reputable Serbian citizen agreed to go together to the German command and present to the chief commander that the town is in panic and that the citizens have heard about the atrocities in Brčko. The commander ordered that posters should be printed right away with condolences to Serbs, and instructions for the citizens to stay calm, to freely move around, and that nothing was going to happen to anyone. So, that was what happened that evening. The next day, a woman who used to sell fish and dairy products at the green market in Tuzla and who knew the Klimpl family, came and told my father that everyone from his sister's home was slain and thrown into the river Sava. We were dumbfounded and silent with fear. However, father did not decide that we should leave. The family was big, we had no money, all that we had was being spent on food.



The only survivors of the KLIMPL family: LENKA with grandmother ROZALIJA in Tuzla, May 1946

Soon, arrests of Jews and Serbs began. Deportation transports started for Jasenovac, Stara Gradiška, and Auschwitz. We all ran away, except for my father; he stayed at home thinking that fleeing was useless. We were hiding in Tuzla and its surroundings and intermittently came home. They arranged for me to be hid in Muslim families and in a Catholic family in the neighborhood Kreka, whose children were my school mates in the same school. That was the family of Štefica Ledić. However, all of this proved useless: the year 1942 had arrived.

On Serbian Orthodox holiday, *Đurđevdan*, grandmother and I went to visit our friends, family of Lazar Kaljalović, to congratulate them. Around 9 PM we were returning home. My younger brother Albert was standing at the window and he told us:

„Run, they are rounding us up!“

And he left the window hastily.

At the same moment, our first neighbor came out and stood in front of grandmother and me and told us the same. We went back to the house where we went for the *Đurđevdan* saint patron's day, and spent the night there. Early in the morning, our neighbor arrived and told us that the whole family was taken away: my father, mother, sister and brother. Grandmother and I were lost. A rural family which used to supply milk and cheese for us, advised us to hide in their village, saying that someone will come at night and take us there. That is how it was. We fled, not knowing what was happening to our family.

My father, mother, sister and brother were later released and were under supervision. Finally, the Germans and the Ustaša had a plan: the first part of the family (father, brother, and sister) was to be deported to a concentration camp right away, while mother, grandmother and I were left for another transport. Mother and I used the protection of Serbian villagers and Serbs from Tuzla and left the town. Grandmother Rozalija was living in hiding with Serb families in Tuzla during the occupation.

Our neighbors were, obviously, linked with some Partisan relatives, so some people from the Anti-Fascist Youth of Tuzla took me to the Majevisa mountain. Thus, the following morning I was already with a third family, while grandmother was put up in another safe home. I think that at the time grandmother was over eighty.

In 1943 we had news from Estera from Oberlager Noebern, Poland. Mother Rifka was transferred to the liberated territory in Majevisa. At the end of the year she was wounded and she froze in the snow in Šekovići, near Vlasenica, and died.

When I came with the partisans to liberated Tuzla in 1944, I was with the others in the Bishop's home, and everyone fell asleep on the straw. I just

sat there, staring. There was no sadness, no strong heartbeat, no desire to see the house in which the six of us used to live happily. My heart and my soul as well as my thoughts were dead.

The following morning I was told to go out to the yard of the Bishop's home, as there was a woman looking for me. I went out and saw Partisans standing in a circle and nothing else. I approached the circle. They made room for me. In the centre of the circle there was an old woman dressed in black. She said nothing, she was only trembling and crying. Along with her the circle of Partisans was crying. I came close to her and hugged her, not crying, and she said:

„Does it mean, my child, that you no longer have anyone?“

I said:

„Don't say so, grandmother. Didn't you have news that I was killed, yet here I am, alive? Mother and father have surely gone to America, to join your brother“.

She kept silent. Her chin was trembling. The Partisans, fearing that she or I could fall down, were holding grandmother and me, bringing us inside and washing our faces with cold water. Grandmother went home escorted by Partisans, and I collapsed on the floor. The Commander said:

„Black Hair, don't cry, we will leave you here with grandmother and we are going to the border in Slovenia to chase the Germans and Ustaša away“.



*LENKA with granddaughter TIJANA, daughter VESNA,
and husband ŠPIRO STRAHINJIĆ, 2000*

I stayed and was engaged in the work of the Culture Team for eastern Bosnia. My grandmother had not seen any bread for days. We were eating some very coarse corn-bread, which later gave me stomach ache.

It was already October 1944. I decided to complain to the Mayor of Tuzla. I went to see him, not bitter but rather poisoned with anger that grandmother had to starve, that there was no one to give her some vegetables or bread. Although he used to know my family, the Mayor said plainly and coldly:

„There is not enough for us either, comrade, and therefore we cannot give to you“.

I repeated that they did not have to give for me, but that they must give some food to grandmother who had lost everything and had suffered fear, hunger and loneliness. It hurts me even today. I think it was in 1946 when grandmother was transferred to Zagreb, to the Jewish Old People's Home in Palmotićeve Street 16. I visited her several times, until I had my child in 1954. That year grandmother died of natural death.

After the liberation in 1945 I found out that my father Jonas, brother Albert, and sister Estera were executed in Auschwitz.