
Henrijeta KAHAN-ORSINI

NAMELESS CHILDHOOD



Henrijeta Kahan-Orsini was born in 1932, in Slavonski Brod into a rabbinical family, to father Samuilo and mother Regina, née Šmukler. She had a brother, Damir, who was born in 1934, in Lipik (Croatia), where her father was working as a doctor in a health spa. Her brother Damir, from whom she parted at the end of 1941, did not survive Auschwitz.

Following the birth of his son Damir, her father decided to move the family to Belgrade, believing it would be safer for them there. However only Henrijeta and her mother survived the war. Part of their large family who stayed behind in Croatia perished in Jasenovac and Nova Gradiška, while a smaller part of them moved to Vojvodina, mostly to Novi Sad.

Her parents were denounced and arrested while attempting to join the Partisans. Her father Samuilo was taken to Jajinci, near Belgrade, where he was shot in 1942, and her mother Regina first to the camp in Banjica, where she was tortured and then deported to Auschwitz. She survived the horrors of this camp and Mengele's in vivo experiments and returned to Belgrade with scars which she did not succeed in healing until her death in 1975.

After returning to Belgrade at the end of the war Henrijeta completed dentistry studies in the city. She then completed the requirements for a licence to practise dentistry in Switzerland, where she lived and worked for forty years.

My memories of my earliest childhood are mainly linked to life in Belgrade. My brother and I were raised there in a very Spartan manner, something that my father particularly insisted on. He always said that days would come when we would be very much in need of courage and endurance. As if he knew what awaited us. Times were very difficult in Belgrade after the outbreak of war. Everything was banned for Jews and Gypsies.

I remember those times very vividly because of the yellow armbands and occasional harsh and abusive remarks addressed to us by children and adults. However this atmosphere and those remarks were only a foretaste of what would come with the Holocaust.

At the time my father and mother were preparing to join the Partisans. They set off to Kruševac, from where they were to join Partisan units. Unfortunately they never arrived there. They were denounced by people they believed were friends. My parents were arrested. They took my father, Samuilo, to Jajinci, where he was shot in 1942, and my mother to Banjica, where she was tortured before being deported to Auschwitz. There she fell victim to Mengele's *in vivo* experiments, because of which she later developed tumours of which she eventually died.

It was terrible for my brother Damir and me to be separated from our real parents, at the end of 1941. When we parted, the family stood silent, with no tears or words. We each went our own way, knowing that we were parting forever, that we were going on a journey of no return, that each of us had only a one-way ticket. In order to at least save us children, Father paid a woman he knew a hundred thousand gold dinars to obtain false documents in the names of Olga and Damjan Kosić and to get my brother and me to Novi Sad where we were to be handed over to relatives. This woman was a Serb named Vida Petrović. Her daughter was married to the notorious criminal Bećarević, a member of the Special Police. Instead of taking us to our family, she took us, on December 31, 1941, to Petrovaradin and left us there in the cold night, two small children, to cross the frozen Danube ourselves, alone and barefoot. We never discovered why she acted this way.

Our aunt was waiting for us on the other side and she took us, frozen as we were, to her home.

We arrived in Novi Sad exactly when the Raid was happening. This horrendous operation was mounted on January 21 to 23. It was carried out by members of the regular Hungarian Army and police.

They were searching houses and ripping beds and sheets with bayonets. The two of us were hidden under one of these beds. To this day I don't know how we managed to survive.

From that day our documents were no longer any use because it was difficult for Serbs as well. We became nameless, we no longer existed.

When we had recovered somewhat from the consequences of frostbite they had to separate us, because no one could, or dared, hide two children. So our uncle took my brother in and I was taken in by a Serb-Hungarian family.

My uncle and his wife had a newborn baby, which the Hungarian police impaled like a ball on a bayonet before the very eyes of my aunt and my brother. This sight drove my aunt completely out of her mind and they then killed her. This was the atmosphere in which my brother Damir was living.

The family with whom I was accommodated ran a brothel and a restaurant in their house. During the day I was locked in the basement and at night I washed dishes in the restaurant. No one was allowed to see me. My benefactors took a great risk in keeping me there. My only food was scraps. In the basement I could mend socks, for which I would be given one Hungarian pengö, which I would give to my brother for food.



Henrijeta from her student days

I always remembered Father saying that days would come when we would be hungry, beaten and persecuted. As though he had foreseen everything. I was stronger in some way, a little older. I coped with all the problems better than my brother, so I both grew up and aged very fast. I took care of us both.

But the day came when we had to part and each go our own way. They did not dare keep me in the family any longer out of fear that someone would see me. They decided that I should go. This was the time in which Germany occupied Hungary. The last transport for deportation to Auschwitz was assembled in the Novi Sad churchyard, which was where my brother and my family had been taken. They got me to

some Hungarians who had a farm near Buda. I worked in a barn. It was a difficult situation in which everyone's life was in danger. The family who took me in were good people and took pity on me. However eventually they could no longer risk their lives so, after a few months, I was turned over to a home for children without parents, nameless orphans. There were about four hundred children of various nationalities accommodated there. This was some kind of ghetto, as far as I remember now.

I know how long I spent there: the end of the war was approaching. The Fascists were withdrawing. The orphanage was near a barracks which had been mined so we were forced to make a dramatic flight through an underground sewer. There were children of various ages there and very few survived. I was one of them.

The Russians had already entered Pest. I was saved by a Russian officer who took me with him. He was stationed in Novi Sad. He lived in a requisitioned apartment in which a *Volksdeutsche* family of four lived. They had a girl who worked for them. She was a Serb named Marica. These were people who did not dirty their hands with any compromising acts during the war. They had two children the same age as me and they accepted me gladly. I learnt later that the Russian officer who brought me to this *Volksdeutsche* family was a Jewish engineer. His whole family had perished during the siege of Leningrad. He always used to say that I reminded him of his little girl. At this time I was allowed for the first time to acknowledge that I was Jewish. I felt like a normal human being, thinking that I had finally found a home somewhere. I loved my new family and gave them all the love a child can give.

But one day my dream of a home and a family turned into a nightmare. My "Russian father" came home one evening completely drunk. In that state he lined the entire *Volksdeutsche* family up against the wall and shot them all in the eyes. He killed all four, ruthlessly. He then hugged me and Marica and begged us to forgive him, saying that he could not get over the loss of his family. Then he killed himself, shooting himself in the mouth.

Marica and I were paralysed. When we came to ourselves we were surrounded by death and blood! All the corpses in the world were floating through my mind; I have looked death in the face many times, but this was a horror which cast a pall over the whole of my later life. After this experience I could not sleep for years. I have seen many deaths, and they were part of everyday life, but I have never been able to forget this. I could not even take any joy in liberation when it finally came. I was indifferent to anything happening around me.

Again fate determined my path. Marica took care of me for a while, but unfortunately not for long, because she herself was very poor. Because she was unable to look after me, she registered me with the Red Cross as a war orphan, hoping that survivors from my family would be found. She planned to put me into the orphanage if no one contacted the Red Cross. At the time my health was very poor. The two of us were given a room in which we lived and in which Marica took care of me.

After some time, two cousins of mine returned to Novi Sad and took me in. I was with them until my mother returned from Auschwitz and found me. She returned alone because my brother Damir had perished in the camp. I didn't recognise my mother and so my cousins, who were rather older than me, had a lot of trouble trying to persuade me that she really was my mother.



*Henrijeta with mother Regina and stepfather Dragutin Zloković,
Switzerland, 1965 or 1966.*

I don't remember the period just after the end of the war very well. I know that Mother and I stayed for some time with our cousins. After that we were given a room in our former house in Belgrade. We had lived in that house before the war as the Kahan family. Now my mother and I lived in one tiny room until 1947, usually hungry. Mother found a position as a worker in a state stamp shop. Every day she was given a portion of lentils which we shared when she came home from work in the evening.

I had to work in order to survive. I took in laundry, sometimes for only a slice of bread and lard. This was a difficult life, and Mother's health was deteriorating.

At around this time a pre-war friend of my parents, Dragutin Zloković, returned from captivity, also in a very poor state. After some time he married my mother, mostly wanting to help me, to adopt me and raise me. However he was unable to adopt me, but he stayed with us until the end. He was a Serb and a great friend of Jews, and he loved me as though I were his own child.

I was thirteen when the war ended. My stepfather taught me that "my brother is my brother whatever his religion", that a person should not be judged by who or what he is but by the kind of person he is, that there is no shame in being poor and that honesty is the greatest virtue.

After I completed my education, my stepfather suggested to me that I move to Switzerland so that, as he put it, I would never again experience anything like the war. He advised me not to declare myself as a Jew anywhere. He was also afraid of the Cold War. I always followed his advice, although there was no need for that in Switzerland.

After my mother's death, my stepfather lived in Belgrade. When he fell ill I brought him to Switzerland to live with me. I cared for him until the end of his life, looking after him as a devoted, grateful daughter.

A few members of my extended family emigrated to Israel, which is where they still live.

I have strong emotional ties to Belgrade. Basically I have never left it. I am bound to this little remaining part of my country, to the graves I can still call "mine".

Some survived, some did not. One must forgive, but one must not forget.