
Rahela LEVI

IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR SAVA



Rahela Levi was born Rahela Ruben on February 26, 1924, in Belgrade, to father Rahamim-Raka, born in Priština in 1903, and mother Flora Ruben, née Koen, born in Sarajevo in 1904. She had a sister Buena-Bojana who was three years younger. Her mother Flora's family was not religious, her grandfather Leon Koen worked as a projectionist and her grandmother Rehela was a housewife. Her father's family was religious, her grandfa-

ther Hajim was a rabbi in Priština and her grandmother's name was Bonoza. They used to attend the Bet Izrael Synagogue in Cara Uroša Street.

She was educated in Belgrade, where she completed commercial academy. After the war she was head of accounting at the Directorate for the Construction of the Brotherhood and Unity Motorway. She worked as an accountant in various companies in Belgrade until her retirement in the early seventies.

Her father, Rahamim Raka Ruben was killed in a plane crash near Zagreb in 1950.

From her marriage to Hajim Levi, an electrical engineer from Sarajevo, she bore a son, Raka Levi, a doctor of electrical engineering sciences, and a granddaughter, Mia.

Rahela Levi died on December 14, 2004.

In April 1941 we were living at 23 Gundulićev Venac Street, in Belgrade. On the first day of the war, April 6, a bomb hit the building in which we lived in a two-room apartment. We lost everything. After the bombing my mother Flora, my sister Buena and I fled to the countryside outside Belgrade. We fled to the village of Žarkovo. We travelled there on an ox-cart with other refugees fleeing Belgrade. We spent the night in a school building where we slept on school desks. Before dawn, villagers came carrying axes. They wanted to chase us out because we would bring bad luck – the Germans would come because of us Jews and kill the entire village. We were scared and decided to return to Belgrade. When we arrived and reported to the police, on April 19, we were given yellow armbands and had to go to compulsory labour.



The Ruben family: Rahela's sister Bojana, mother Flora, Rahela and father Raka Ruben, a photographer with Politika

My father, Rahamim-Raka Ruben, who at that time worked for Politika, was mobilised on April 6 with the Drina Division and sent towards Šabac, where he was captured. At that time, immediately after the capitulation of Yugoslavia, I went to be vaccinated against typhoid. In Vuka Karadžića Street, quite by chance, I encountered a column of Serbian prisoners of war among whom was my father. I was overcome by joy. When I arrived home and was telling them I

had seen Father, he appeared at the door in a coat and clothes several sizes too small for him. He then told us how he had managed to escape from the convoy of prisoners.

The Germans, having captured them, were escorting them through Belgrade. In order to reach Pančevo they had to cross the Pančevo bridge, but their German escort didn't know the way. He led the column in circles through November 29 Street, then called Knez Pavle Street. People came out to watch this strange procession. They included a typesetter from Politika, a colleague and acquaintance of my father, whose name I don't recall. He was standing at the gate of his house. When he saw the column pass again, he shouted to Father: "Run, Raka, into my house!" Father hesitated, but the other captive soldiers urged him on; they used their bodies to screen him from the German escort and gave Father a chance to run into his colleague's yard. This man then gave him a business suit but, because my father was much bigger than him, he threw a winter coat over him to cover the fact that he couldn't button up the trousers, the shirt or the jacket.

For a while we lived crammed like sardines in an attic apartment in Molerova Street, because a bomb had demolished the buildings of a number of our family members. This is where we were living when the school year ended. I was in second year of the state commercial academy, completing specialist secondary school in economics.

My maternal grandfather, Len Juda Koen, was shot on July 27, 1941. He ran a kiosk in Belgrade. Grandfather Leon had visited all the family, telling everyone to hide and not to report to the police when ordered because the Germans were deporting and killing people. However he was among the first to be killed, after an incident of sabotage in Belgrade. He was shot, along with the first hundred hostages in Tašmajdan. Our Uncle Isak moved to Priština and we were sent to compulsory labour throughout June, July and August. Father was clearing rubble after the bombing. I was cleaning the buildings where German institutions and commands were housed. One day the men were taken to the Topovske Šupe camp.

In October 1941 they rounded up the remaining men. Father went to the Orthopaedic Hospital, to Dr Đorđe Marinković, a close family friend, who put a plaster cast on his healthy leg and kept him in hospital for "treatment". With the help of the doctor's wife, Stanka Marinković, we then obtained false identification documents as refugees from Priština. She obtained these through a friend at the Suvi Đeram tavern

in Sarajevska Street. My father became Radovan Rosić (the same initials as Rahamim Ruben), my mother Flora became Ljubica, my sister Buena was Bojana and I – Rahel (Ela) – became Jelena (Jela) Rosić.

In November 1941 they started rounding up men from the hospitals. My father fled, together with Stanka's father, Miloš Grčić, to my Uncle Isak's shop. He hid overnight there on November 13 and, on the morning of November 14, he took a hackney to the station, still wearing the cast on his leg. Once they were on the train, Stanka removed it for him. We women had come to the station early in the morning, during the curfew, led by Stanka through a snowstorm. Because of the weather, there was only one German at the entrance to the station. We squeezed our way through the narrow gap between the post office and the station. We all got onto the train for Priština to travel to my uncle's. Inside the wagon my father lit a match and saw a crowd of familiar faces: "Look at this, this carriage is full of Jews!" he said.

The document is a multi-lingual identification form with the following fields and handwritten entries:

- Per. op. št. št. br.:** [Handwritten number]
- Ime:** *Jelena*
- Prezime:** *Rositsch*
- Ime oca:** *Radovan*
- Ime majke:** *Ljubica*
- Name des Vaters:** *Radovan*
- Ime matke:** *Ljubica*
- Prof. zanimanje:** *Košarica*
- Beruf:** *Schneiderin*
- Datum und Gebort:** *26. II. 1921. Kuršumljaca*
- Datum und Gebort:** *26. II. 1921. Priština*
- Брачно стање:** *неудана*
- Familienstand:** *ledig*
- Signature:** *Jelena Rosić*
- Official Stamp:** *Präsident der Stadt Priština, BÜRGERMEISTER*
- Postmark:** *PRIŠTINA, 14. NOV. 1941*
- Photograph:** A black and white portrait of a woman in a headscarf.
- Official Stamp:** *ОТДЕЛ ДЕСНОГ КАДРОВСТА*

Rahela Levi's false identification document in the name of Jelena Rosić

We reached Kuršumljica but could go no further because the Albanians had closed the border at Prepolac. There were quite a lot of Jews in Kuršumljica, about forty. Mika Altarac Smederevac was waiting

at the station, as he did every day. With him were his wife, daughter and sister-in-law. Dača Koen was also there with his wife Lenka, brother Simče (secretary of the Braća Baruh choir), sister Elza, aunt Rejna and her husband, the owner of a photography shop in Sarajevska Street. Mr Pesah, the owner of the Takovo Cinema was also there with his son Jaša Bejosif, someone called Pinto, the Pijade family and others. We stayed at the Evropa Hotel which was owned by a taverner, Mr Živorad Arsenijević. As well as all the Jews there were Radivoje Uvalić and V. Stojanović, who were later hidden by Raša Nikolić from Konjuva. Then we rented a room in a thatched-roof cabin at the livestock market, from where we were to move to Priština. Because the winter of 1942 was very cold, we postponed the trip. There were great battles being fought that winter between the Chetniks and the Partisans. Wherever the Partisans seized power, even if only briefly, the Germans would arrive on punitive expeditions. After each of these German punitive expeditions we moved on. Some followed the Toplice river to Merces, but we went towards Blace, and stopped in Dankovići, about four kilometres from Kuršumljija. There were about thirty of us refugees there in the house of our host, Predrag Vasić. We arrived there on February 20, 1942 and stayed a month. We spent the next six months in a place called Preskoca. Raša Nikolić worked in Belgrade in the People's Bazaar – a Jewish shop in Terazije, which was why he was helping us Jews. We rented a house at the market from Ljuba Nikolić. With a Slovenian woman, an interpreter, we fled to Grgure at night. From there, on September 10, we moved on to Kaljaja, where we lived in the home of a local resident named Živadin. We stayed there for about three months, because of Mother's sister, Olga Koen, whose married name was Bogdanović. She was later killed at the camp in Niš, at Crveni Krst. We stayed there until December 20. From Kaljaja we moved back to hide again in Preskoca where we spent almost all of 1943.

In the summer of 1943, on July 7, the Bulgarians came to arrest us and take us to prison in Kuršumljija. They didn't find Father, so only we three women were in prison. Again Živorad and Živko Arsenijević helped us out. Živko went to see two Bulgarian officers, Divčev and Bakalov, who used to drop into his tavern every morning and begged them to release us. He told them: "We Serbs have an old saying – do good and you will have good returned, do evil and you will get evil back." The Bulgarians released us from prison seven days later. We fled Preskoca on October 14, 1943. We walked eight kilometres to a village

named Grgure, to Sava Bradić. We spent the winter in Grgure. From there, with the Germans approaching, we fled to a small village, Muđere, where we hid from March 20 to April 20, 1944. After that we returned to Sava in Grgure and stayed there until the liberation of Belgrade on October 20. We then returned via Barbatovac, where we stayed until October 31. From there, via Prijepolje and Niš, we reached liberated Belgrade on November 7, 1944.

The story of how we hid at Sava Bradić's place is as follows:



Lives saved: (L to R) Priest, farmer Sava Bradić, Raka Ruben and the village teacher

We were hiding in the village of Grgure, in the Blace municipality, with Sava Bradić. He was a carpenter and had made for Father a perfect *camera obscura*. Father would put a camera lens on this and expose the paper on the window in the sunlight. At night, while we children were sleeping, he would develop the photographs. I remember us walking a couple of kilometres to the spring to bring back water for him to wash them. He would make photographs for false and real identification documents and photographs for weddings and funerals. For all of them, he charged in wheat, one capful of wheat for one photograph.

I would not want the noble-mindedness of the Politika newspaper staff to be forgotten, especially that of Diša Stevanović, his son Miro, daughter-in-law Vida, Jurij Isakovski and others. My mother would travel to Belgrade with false documents, disguised as a village woman, and they would give her the photographic material. Father used to take

the photographs which kept us fed during the war. When Mother came to Belgrade she would stay with Stanka's mother, report regularly to the police and the police would come at night for a routine inspection of the apartment. They went through all this together and put it behind them, but all of them were in fear. It appears that Mother was once reported (we think it was a Politika driver who recognised her). There was a warrant issued for her arrest and the whole railway station was plastered with her photograph. One of Stanka's neighbours, a woman who worked at the railway station, came and told Stanka to hide Mother. Mother soon returned to the village by catching the train at the Topčider station.



*Most treasured moments: Rahela
with granddaughter Mia*

I really want to pay tribute and express my gratitude to Sava Bradić for his heroism, which most probably changed the course of events for us during the period we were fleeing and hiding. This was probably the decisive factor in our not being taken to the camps where so many members of our extended family perished.

Sometime around the beginning of 1944 when the Gestapo were coming to round up communists and Jews, my father decided that we should pack again, flee into the woods and look for a new refuge. But Sava came to him and said: "Raka, you're not going anywhere, you're safe and secure in this house! If they want to kill you they'll have to kill me and my nine children first!" When the Chetniks insisted that we were Partisan sympathisers and wanted to take us away, Sava said to them: "You can only do that over my dead body. This is the only decent family we have taken in and we have welcomed them like our nearest and dearest, and we are prepared to protect them at any cost from anyone, including you." What Sava didn't know was that Bojana and I had

made underwear from parachutes for the Partisan Drinka Pavlović from Spanac village who had been recommended to come to us. This famous Partisan woman was killed treacherously in the camp in Banjica in 1943.

Father and Mother decided that we should stay with the Bradić family until the end of the war. We lived as one family. The four of us had to share a bed at their place, but we were always all right and, which was more important, we were always safe. Sava was best man at the wedding of my sister Buena (Bojana) and my mother was matron of honour at Milan's wedding and the wedding of the younger brother, Tomislav. She gave Milan's daughter the name Olga, after her sister who was shot in the camp at Crveni Krst. Not once during the whole war did anyone from the brave and patriotic village of Grgure denounce us, although all the children knew that there was a Jewish family hiding and living among them.

For saving us, Sava and Jovana Bradić, Predrag Vasić, Đorđe and Stanka Marinković were proclaimed Righteous Among the Nations.