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*Sava BOGDANOV*

## HOW LEA ROZENCVAJG SAVED HERSELF IN 1941



**L**ea Rozencvajg Bogdanov was born in *Losijek* on June 9, 1916, to *Eduard* and *Olga Rozencvajg, née Braun*. She had a brother *Oto*, two years older. All members of *Lea's* immediate family perished in the course of 1941. Her brother *Oto* immediately joined the *Partisans* and was killed in the very first clashes with the *Germans*. Her father and mother, as well as her paternal grandmother, who moved to *Belgrade* in 1938, were killed in the *Sajmište* and *Topovske Šupe* camps.

*Lea* became an active member of *Hashomer Hatzair* in 1934, preparing to move to *Palestine*. Having decided to postpone her *aliyah* until after she graduated, she enrolled in the *Medical Faculty of Zagreb University* in 1935. *Lea* was caught away from her family by the second world war. She is the only surviving member of her immediate and extended family.

During the war she worked as a nurse in refugee centres for children in occupied *Serbia* under the name *Olgica Rodić*. In the refugee centre in *Arandelovac* she met *Sava Bogdanov*, whom she married in 1943. After the war *Lea* quickly finished the few exams she had left at the *Medical Faculty* and began specialising in *microbiology*. Over the years she became a recognised and respected scientist, physician and professor and received many scientific awards. She has a daughter, *Branka*, and a grandson, *Borjan*.

*Dr Lea Rozencvajg, married Bogdanov, died in 1983 in Belgrade with the rank of retired colonel in the Yugoslav People's Army and professor of microbiology at the Military Medical Academy.*

Even as a child, Lea's father Eduard Rozencvajg showed great interest in reading books. He was a bright boy who kept to himself. His parents decided to educate him. His mother, Marija (née Vajs, born 1860), took him to Budapest when he was fourteen to study to be a rabbi. He was admitted to the *heder* and so a search began for a family with whom Eduard could stay while he was at school. However for his mother no family was religious enough, kosher enough for her to leave her son with them. So, instead of studying to be a rabbi in Budapest, Eduard was sent to Osijek to study to be an assistant merchant. Sometime in 1913 he married Olga Braun. Their children were born not long after, first their son Oto, then their daughter, Lea.



*Eduard and Olga Rozencvajg (sitting) with their son Oto and daughter Lea*

Eduard Rozencvajg became a partner in Fachat & Friend, a shop selling men's accessories in Osijek, in about 1924. However, in this time of global crisis, the shop went out of business. Eduard took this very hard, withdrawing into himself and prayer. The family was now

left without income. His wife Olga proved very practical and soon took over the role of provider for the family. She began taking in laundry and ironing for other families. However she never allowed this to bother her, every afternoon she would get dressed and go to the City Cafe to meet her friends for coffee.

In 1938, Eduard found work with Vukojičić & Sons in Zemun. He moved to Belgrade with his wife and mother, who lived with the family. Their son Oto stayed in Osijek, where he had a job. Lea was studying medicine in Zagreb and supported herself by giving lessons. She visited her parents during the university vacations.

Immediately after the German occupation in 1942, when there was a census of Jews in Belgrade, Lea was not registered because she was in Zagreb as a final-year student at the medical faculty. She had planned to take her final examinations in September. However the university authorities in the Independent State of Croatia would not allow Jewish students to sit exams, even those who had completed their full courses.

Lea came to her parents, now living at 3 Karadorđeva Street in Belgrade. At home she found the atmosphere difficult. Her father Eduard had completely withdrawn into himself while her mother had devoted herself to sewing and knitting so that they could feed themselves.

Her parents insisted that Lea immediately register as a Jew, as they themselves had obediently done. Lea refused. She went from one friend to another trying to find a way to save her parents, her grandmother and herself. When she went out she wore her mother's yellow armband.

One morning the Germans came and took Lea's father, mother and *omama*, which was her name for her grandmother. Since Lea wasn't on the list and because she wasn't at home when her parents were taken they never looked for her. She discovered what had happened when she came home. Her father had been taken to Topovske Šupe and her mother and grandmother to Sajmište. She tried to bring them some clothing, shoes and food. In Topovske Šupe she saw her father from the distance, the guards took her parcel. She wasn't even able to get near Sajmište.

## IN ŠUMADIJA WITH A NEW NAME

The Aleksić-Jakovljević family lived at 1 Karadordeva Street. The Rozencvajgs had met them in 1938 and they had become friends. Because they had seen what was happening, these next-door neighbours and other acquaintances of Lea suggested she should try to save herself by adopting a new identity, a new name and then moving to some smaller place in Serbia. Lea agreed to this.

Because of the large influx of refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Slovenia, and because of the need to provide for these people, Milan Nedić's government established a Commissariat for Refugees in Belgrade. This commissariat was authorised by the Serbian Government to register refugees and issue refugee identification papers based on documents and witnesses. Mile Jakovljević obtained a hospital release form made out for Olgica Rodić, born in Drvar in 1918, treated for schizophrenia. And so, in October 1941, Lea Rozencvajg became Olgica Rodić, a nurse from Drvar.

At the beginning of November 1941, her friends suggested she should go to Arandelovac. Lea set off with the very small amount of money her friends had given her in a bus driven by a refugee from Slovenia. Mile Jakovljević asked him to take care of "Olgica" during the trip and help her find accommodation. Near the village of Banja, between Mladenovac and Arandelovac, the Chetniks stopped the bus and checked the identification papers of the passengers, some of whom were arrested by the Chetniks and had to break off their journey. When the search and the document checks began, Olgica thought the end had come. However everything went well, thanks to the explanation given by the driver for Olgica as a refugee from Bosnia.

After not leaving the house for a day or two for fear of the unfamiliar surroundings, and having realised that she was going to be left with no means of support, she began looking for a job.

First she tried to find some distant relatives who lived in Belgrade and had a holiday house in Arandelovac. She found the house locked. Later she learned that her relatives had managed to flee to Italy.

## FEAR OF SISTERS, FELLOW STUDENTS

She registered now with the refugee office which made it possible for her to get food coupons for the refugee kitchen. Lea was claiming

to be a nurse, so she looked for a job at the Serbian Health Cooperative, whose manager was Dr Srpko Vukanović. As he was short of trained support staff, Dr Vukanović offered Olgica a job, with a salary which barely covered the cost of her accommodation. Because of her grasp of medical terminology and Latin expressions, Dr Srpko Vukanović suspected that Olgica Rodić was more than just a nurse. Lea eliminated his suspicions by telling him that she had begun to study medicine but had been forced to interrupt her studies because of the war.

In late December 1941, or early January 1942, in the main street of Arandelovac, Olgica suddenly spotted two fellow students from Zagreb, Mirjana and Tijana Mikić, who were known in the faculty as having nationalist affiliations. Alarmed at the possibility of running into the Mikić sisters, who knew her as a Jew and a Leftist, she decided to leave Arandelovac immediately.

Back in Belgrade she stayed with a younger fellow student from Zagreb, Smiljka Rebić and was fully confident that she would not betray her. Smiljka lived with her parents in a small apartment. Because of the large number of refugees, at the beginning of 1942, the Commissariat for Refugees had continued setting up refugee centres in most health resorts across Serbia. There was a pressing need for professional staff and so, together with Smiljka Rebić, Olgica applied for a nursing position in a refugee home. The first position she was offered was that of a nurse in a refugee home in Arandelovac, which she could not accept, having just moved away from the town. Smiljka, and then Olgica as well, got jobs in Vrnjačka Banja, where only Smiljka Rebić and her friend Dušan Čalić, who worked in this refugee home, knew Olgica's real identity.

At the end of 1942, because of the large number of small children arriving, refugees from Bosnia both with and without parents, the Commissariat for Refugees set up a home for preschool children in a place called Letnjikovac near Šabac. Olgica was transferred to the refugee home together with the carers, Borka and Anka Gajić, refugee sisters from Bosnia. There she became friends with the sisters and with Boško Živković and really came to trust them. Olgica was confident that they would not denounce her. And she was right. The conditions in the home were really harsh. Both the children and the staff were accommodated in old, run-down barracks which were

very difficult to keep clean. There was very little food and it was difficult to obtain it. The children were undernourished and poorly fed.

In the autumn of 1943 the Commissariat for Refugees passed a decision to move the preschool children to the Serbian Maternal Home in the village of Bukovik, near the Arandelovac spa, where living conditions were more suitable for the young people.



*Lea at the beginning of 1944*

The move was set for September, 1943. Olgica was offered a transfer to Arandelovac but refused, fearing that she could again come across the Mikić sisters.

At that time I was accountant and treasurer of the Serbian Refugee Homes in Arandelovac. The staff in the homes were refugees from Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia, with the exception of a few locals. The manager of the homes was Dr Sima Grozdanić, a refugee from Sremski Karlovci. Later he was arrested and Jovo Čubrilo, a refugee from Croatia, was appointed to the job. The atmosphere in the Homes' Administration and rela-

tions with the professional staff were good, people worked hard and were dedicated to their work. Everyone was expecting the war to end. We lived as a family, driven by our desire for the country to be liberated. Every month, sometimes more frequently, I travelled to Belgrade to submit the monthly cost accounting for the homes and the refugee kitchen.

Once the carers, Borka and Anka Gajić, complained to me, saying they needed a nurse to take care of the children's health. They asked me to help and proposed that I submit a request through the personnel department of the Commissariat for Refugees, for Olgica to accept this transfer. At the same time they told Olgica that there was a good atmosphere in the refugee homes, that the Serbian Maternal Home was not in Arandelovac itself, but near it in the village of Bukovik, and that they believed she had no reason to be concerned for her personal safety.

In September 1943, in Belgrade, I visited the head of the personnel department, Dr Novković, who informed me that Olgica Rodić had refused to go to Arandelovac. "If she won't accept the transfer, dismiss her," I replied. Dr Novković asked Olgica to come to Belgrade, informed her of the decision and advised her to accept the transfer after all. Not knowing where to seek refuge, and encouraged by the Gajić sisters and the preschool children whom she had come to love while looking after them in Letnjikovac, Olgica accepted the transfer to Arandelovac, though reluctantly and with trepidation.

### MEETING LEA AND MARRIAGE "ON ONE CONDITION"

It was a beautiful and extremely warm September day in 1943 when, on a voluntary basis, we organised the making of sugarless plum jam to have better winter nourishment for more than five hundred children. All the volunteers were dirty and sweaty because the jam was cooked in huge vats and then poured into prepared boxes for cooling and easy storage. Olgica Rodić walked in and asked the group of volunteers who Sava Bogdanov was, because she was reporting for her new post as nurse. They pointed at me. I had plum jam smeared all over me. Olgica gave me her travel warrant and her transfer document. I looked at her and said, harshly "So you're the one who doesn't want to come to her children."

Olgica Rodić was given accommodation in a room shared with carer Dobrila Gutalj. I soon learned that both the children and the other carers were overjoyed that Olgica had arrived because she had charmed everyone with her diligent and gentle manner.

Because of my hostile approach at our first meeting, Olgica asked the Gajić sisters what kind of man I was. She was told that I was short-tempered but good and fair. They also told her that I didn't know her real identity.

At about that time a refugee from Banja Luka called Tomić who worked in the warehouse was celebrating his saint's day. A number of the staff from the homes, carers, refugees from Bosnia and others, attended the party. I joined them later in the afternoon. That's when I first really had a good look at Olgica. At one point, looking at her over a glass of wine, I asked her "Do I know you from somewhere?" Olgica was visibly disturbed by the question. The party continued and

I continued to court her. I was soon head over heels in love. We were together whenever possible. I remember well that whenever I was travelling to Belgrade, or returning, I counted the sounds of the wheels hitting the rails, thinking I was a little closer to Olgica with each click. During one of our conversations she suddenly interrupted me and asked me if I was aware she was a Jew. She added then that she would understand if I put an end to our friendship.

I wasn't surprised, because I had had my suspicions about her real identity. Red hair and freckles, an accent which wasn't exactly Bosnian, too well educated for a nurse. And my suspicions had been confirmed by a refugee from Osijek, Pero the barber, who knew Lea's brother Oto. Once when he was cutting my hair Pero asked me whether I knew that the girl he had seen me with the previous day was a Jew. When I told him I knew, he said he had been friends with Oto, that Olgica's real name was Lea, but that he couldn't remember the surname. Pero kept his promise not to expose Lea.



*Lea and Sava, 1944, in Arandelovac, where they married*

I told Lea all this and she became very upset. I tried to calm her and then added "Marry me; you'll be safer that way." We talked for a long time. Eventually Lea agreed to marry me, but on one condition. When the war ended, if her boyfriend from Zagreb, the engineer



Mirko Fridman (alias Mirko Mirković) were to return from captivity sick or badly wounded, she would feel obliged to take care of him and we would have to end our marriage. I agreed.

I prepared all the documents necessary for me and Olgica Rodić, scheduled the wedding in the Orthodox Church in Bukovik for February 11, 1944, and taught Olgica the Orthodox wedding ritual.

On the day of the wedding, Arandelovac was covered in deep snow and the only way to get to and from the church was by taking the well-trodden paths through the snow. I took Olgica, on my skis part of the way, to the church. The wedding ceremony was conducted by a refugee priest, Dimitrije Glumbić, who didn't know about the bride's real identity. Along with the marriage certificate, we also took out a new refugee identification document in the name of Olgica Bogdanov, born in Drvar. This made Lea feel much more secure, although a number of people in Arandelovac knew she was a Jew: Anka and Borka Gajić, Dobrila Gutalj, Mirjana, Tijana and Braco Mikić and Pero the barber. After the war, when word got around Arandelovac that Olgica Rodić was a Jew, we learnt from an acquaintance that Glumbić, the priest, was unhappy about this and felt that he had been tricked into marrying a baptised man to a woman who was not baptised.

Attending the wedding were my sister Milena, brother Borivoj and brother-in-law Časlav Gaković (they had come from Belgrade), and his brother Tihomir with his wife Olga, from Arandelovac. There was a luncheon in the hall of the Serbian Maternal Home for about fifty friends and acquaintances.

It was already clear to everyone that Germany would lose the war, so this lunch party was held in an atmosphere of anticipation, as we looked forward to a rapid end to the war.

## FROM PLACE TO PLACE AND INTO BATTLE

During her time in Arandelovac, Lea was in touch with the staff of the Wehrmacht hospital stationed in Bukovička Banja. A resident of the Refugee Home, a boy of secondary school age, had fallen ill. The Home physician, Dr Rumenić and Lea diagnosed acute appendicitis. They also found that the patient's condition was such that he wouldn't be able to make the trip to Kragujevac, where the nearest hospital was, for surgery. Because she spoke no German, Dr Rumenić

refused to try and negotiate an urgent operation in the German hospital. Lea took the initiative and organised his transfer to the Wehrmacht hospital, begging and demanding that the patient be operated on immediately. The officer refused any possibility of him being admitted. However, thanks to her persistence, and her excellent command of German, Lea managed to talk him into letting her speak to the doctor on duty, a surgeon, to whom she explained professionally the condition of the patient. He was examined and underwent surgery immediately. The surgeon asked Lea how she came to speak such good German. She replied that she had learnt the language in a place she had lived and then when she was studying before her study was interrupted by the war.



*Lea and Sava Bogdanov with their daughter Branka*

In April and May 1944, the Chetniks put greater pressure on me, asking me to get them blankets and food. I couldn't meet these requests. We spent the 1944 Easter holiday in Belgrade, where we were bombed by the Allied forces.

My family suggested that I take my mother and my sister Mirjana to Arandelovac to give them shelter and this I did soon afterwards, renting an apartment in the same building in which Olgica and I lived.

As the summer approached, the pressure from the Chetniks was increasing and Olgica and I decided that it would be best to move

somewhere else. The situation was such that, to put it bluntly, I was forced to flee Arandelovac and go to Belgrade. I asked my friends at the Commissariat for Refugees to arrange a transfer.

I was transferred to a job in the Commissariat's accounts department in Zabela, near Požarevac, and Olgica began work as a nurse at the refugee home in Požarevac. Until we got the transfer we stayed in Belgrade, hiding from the bombing, mostly with Stana Ratković, the wife of my eldest brother Nemanja, on the Avala road. During our time in Belgrade we paid a visit to Vera Tomanić, a Jew from Osijek, the wife of engineer Milorad Tomanić who was in captivity. This was when Lea received a message from a friend in Palestine which came to Belgrade via Turkey, because people in some kibbutz had discovered that Lea was hiding somewhere in Serbia with a false identity. One day while we were in Belgrade, before we moved to Požarevac, we were walking down Kolarčeva Street and Lea was recognised by a fellow student from Zagreb, Bogdanka Galogaža, with her husband Milan Kovačević. I immediately crossed to the other side of the street.

When Lea signalled to me that there was no danger, I walked over to them. Milan and Bogdanka knew very well that Lea Rozencvajg was a Leftist because they too had been Leftists as students in Zagreb. Lea told them that her name was now Olgica Bogdanov and that I was her husband. Not for a moment was she concerned that they could betray her.

When we arrived in Zabela, all the employees of the Commissariat for Refugees accounts department and their families were accommodated in a large, shared hall, where people slept on the floor, which was covered with straw mattresses. We left Zabela as soon as Belgrade was liberated. Ahead of us lay uncertainty, and a parting, because we had decided to join the army for the liberation of the remaining part of Yugoslavia. After a few days in Belgrade, on October 28, 1944, Lea signed up with NOVJ, the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia. She was assigned to the medical corps of the First Proletarian Division and sent to the Srem front. She was extremely satisfied and happy that she no longer had to hide her identity and her nationality. She had many acquaintances from her student days among the senior officers in the ten military medical corps (Voja Đukanović, Đani Popović and others). As I was a reserve pilot, I was sent to the Aviation Centre in Pančevo to

undergo additional training for ground attack aircraft pilots. When I completed the course I was assigned to the NOVJ Air Force 421 air assault regiment.

### JOY IN NIŠ: BIRTH OF OUR DAUGHTER

When we parted we agreed to keep in touch through my family, who lived in Francuska Street in Belgrade.

I managed to use my leave to visit Lea twice before the end of the war. Her hospital was stationed in Ruma. These were difficult journeys because traffic had not yet been re-established.

I took advantage of the army vehicles which went in that direction and walked a large part of the way.

Immediately after the country was liberated, Lea was sent to the new Army Student Residence in Zagreb to finish her studies. She graduated in February, 1946, with the highest honours, while I was transferred with my regiment from Sombor, to Skopje and then to Niš.

When Lea graduated I was in military service in Niš. In June, 1946, she was assigned, with the rank of a Yugoslav People's Army lieutenant, to the Military Hospital in Niš. We began our life together again in a tiny, rented bed-sitting room. I wasn't interested in joining the army so, at my request, I was demobilised in August 1946 and went to Belgrade to find a job. And that was the end of our brief military life together. I immediately found a job in Belgrade. I returned to Niš to get Lea and arranged transport to Belgrade. Just before our departure she went into labour prematurely so I had to immediately have her admitted to the maternity ward of the Niš hospital, where conditions were really poor. It was in these conditions that our daughter was born in September 1946. We named her Branka. Soon after this Lea was transferred to the Military Hospital in Belgrade. We arrived in Belgrade and moved in with my family in Francuska Street, although the place was packed because of the housing crisis at the time. Still, with a lot of effort, I managed to arrange a tiny flat for us at 2 Kosančićev Venac.

And so our life in Belgrade began.

In January 1947, Lea fell ill with typhoid. The illness and her recovery took about eight months.

Life wasn't easy in the first post-war years. On top of all that, I was left unexpectedly to take care of a three-month-old baby. I cared

for our little daughter as best I could. Before going to work I would take Branka to my sister's place or, more often, to Bogdanka Kovačević's mother. When I returned from work I would again take over looking after Branka. After some time I found a girl who I trained to take care of the child. I taught her as much as I knew myself. This girl looked after Branka while I was at work. Lea's illness was very hard. In order to cheer her up I would sometimes, even in very bad weather and a few times even in heavy snow and wind, take Branka to the hospital. They would bring Lea to the window and she could look out and see her daughter, even though it was from a distance.

When Lea finally returned home she was shocked to see what Branka looked like. Despite all the care and attention, the chubby baby she had left behind when she went into hospital was now a skinny, undernourished baby. We realised that this was because the girl who had looked after her used to throw some of the milk away so I wouldn't be angry because Branka hadn't drunk it. Lea took matters into her own hands and Branka was very soon thriving again.

## MARRIAGE WITHOUT CONDITIONS

I should mention the outcome of the agreement we made in Arandelovac when we married.

Mirko Fridman, otherwise known as Mirko Mirković, returned to Zagreb from captivity in Germany. Lea told me about this some time in November, 1945. Because I was very impatient to learn whether Lea would stay with me or end our marriage, I took leave and went to Zagreb so we could talk openly about it.

When we saw each other at the Army Student Residence in Zagreb, Lea told me that she had spoken to Mirko and had decided to continue her life with me. I must admit that I hadn't expected this outcome. I was very proud that Lea had made this decision and returned to Niš, to my unit. My feeling was that Lea had no longer been obliged at all to make this decision. The marriage we had entered into in Arandelovac was no longer valid. Later, sometime in 1953, we were officially entered in the register of marriages in Arandelovac with Lea's real personal information.

There is another interesting event from our life together which is worth mentioning. In the population census of March 31, 1953, people were given the option of stating their ethnic affiliation.

When filling in the census forms, Jews in the Military Hospital were faced with a dilemma in completing this column. One day around that time, Lea came home not knowing what to do. She said that some of her colleagues had declared themselves as Serbs, Croats, Bosnians or whatever, depending on their place of birth or their feeling of belonging. This was the option backed by the political line at the Military Hospital. Lea said to me "I was born in Osijek, but I'm not a Croat. I married you, but I'm not a Serb."

"Well then, what are you?" I asked her.

"My mother and father were Jews and I can only be a Jew," came the reply.

I said to her that this was the only right thing to do and that she should describe herself as a Jew by nationality in the census questionnaire, regardless of the political recommendations.

Before, and especially after, the Israeli-Egyptian war in 1967, anti-Semitism was on the rise in Yugoslavia. Anti-Semitism was becoming obvious in everyday life, but was also present, in a veiled form, in the ranks of the Yugoslav National Army. In early 1969 Lea told me about some anti-Semitic excesses she had seen at work. For example, all Military Medical Academy employees were asked to donate blood for the Arabs. Lea did not agree to this and said openly that, given her national affiliation, she believed she was unable to do so.

During one conversation she asked if I could get a posting in one of the Yugoslav Chamber of Commerce offices abroad. She felt that this would perhaps be a way for her to get away from the Military Medical Academy for a while.

And so, in the second half of 1969, I was appointed head of the Yugoslav Chamber of Commerce office in India, based in Calcutta. I took up this new post in October 1969, and Lea joined me at the beginning of 1970, after taking retirement and transferring to the reserve units of the Yugoslav National Army.

Soon after her arrival, Lea made contact with medical and humanitarian circles in Calcutta. Within a short period of time she became one of the most prominent and respected members of Calcutta society. In her free time she studied Indian philosophy and history. Her activities in Calcutta society also reflected very positively on my reputation in India's commercial life. Very often the reputation she had won opened doors for me in those areas of the

economy which had shown some reserve towards Eastern European countries.

After I retired we first visited Israel, where Lea had many close friends in the Shar Haamakim and Gat kibbutzes. She was most warmly received by friends she had known in the *hasharah* she had attended in 1935.

After her death, Branka and I had ten trees planted in the Memorial Forest in Jerusalem in memory of our Lea.