

# Hana Gasic

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Bosnia

[My family background](#)

[My parents](#)

[Growing up in wartime](#)

[Post-war](#)

[Our religious life](#)

[My husband Miroslav](#)

## My family background

I am the daughter of Menahem and Flora Montiljo. I was born in Sarajevo on July 27, 1940. I have one brother, Rafael, who was born during the war on March 22, 1943.

My father's parents, Mose and Hana Montiljo Hahasid ("the pious") had 11 children. This family was known as Montiljo Hahasid to distinguish them from the many other Montiljos that lived in Sarajevo, and to recognize them as a particularly religious family. My grandfather was born in the 1870s, worked as a textile merchant in Sarajevo, and died in 1941 before the outbreak of war. His wife, my Nona (Ladino for grandmother) Hana, lived a much longer life. During the war she hid with her son, Jozef, in Sarajevo. After the war she decided to live the rest of her days in Israel. She imagined that this would not be a long time, but she managed to live another twenty-three years, until 1970, when she died at the age of 96. Having left, she never returned to Yugoslavia. She went to Israel with two of her three surviving children, her sons, Jozef and Leon, my uncles.

My father was the only one of the brothers to remain behind in Yugoslavia. He had heard stories about life in Israel and he did not believe that he would be able to make a living there. A tailor, he thought he would have to work in a textile factory and be unable to work on creating pieces from beginning to end. So he decided to remain in Sarajevo. He visited my Nona and his brothers in 1957. I do not recollect his journey, or his return, nor do I recall him questioning his decision to remain behind as a result of it. Both of his brothers struggled in Israel, and because of that, my father probably did not regret his decision.

My mother, Flora Montiljo (nee Kohen), was born in Sarajevo on December 31, 1913. Her parents were Klara and Rafael Kohen. She had four sisters and a brother. My Nona Klara died when my mother was just thirteen, and after that, my mother's brother took over as the central figure in the family. My grandfather had a butcher shop in Sarajevo, and when he died my mother's brother took it over. I am not sure if it was strictly kosher, but it is unlikely that they sold pork and other non-kosher meat. Whether the meat was slaughtered by a shochet (ritual slaughter) and kashered (made kosher) as is proscribed, I cannot say. At that time, Sarajevo was heavily influenced by its



Muslim population, and therefore it was difficult to find pork in the town.

My mother went to a school for women and learned how to embroider quite nicely. She liked doing this but her responsibilities to the family business kept her busy and she was unable to commit much time to it. Among other things, she was responsible for delivering meat. In two of the pictures in my album, my father is pictured playing Samuel the Porter, a character from a short story of the same name by Isak Samokovljia, a Jewish writer from Sarajevo. It is the story of a man who delivers fish to the Jewish families in Sarajevo. It is ironic that in some sense my mother played the same role in real life. Like to the fictional Samuel, my mother used to tell stories about the different families she delivered to. Many of their names were Jewish, but I do not know if their clientele was exclusively Jewish. She would tell me about which families tipped, which were too cheap or too poor to give a tip, which would give her cakes and sweets to take with her, and other things about the families.

When my grandfather died, my mother's brother became the head of the household. That is why my mother and her sisters were so disturbed when he was taken away at the beginning of the war, never to be heard from again. He liked to play cards with his friends and he did this frequently. One evening he had just returned home from playing cards at his friend's, when the friend whose house he had played at came to the door. He informed my uncle that he had been instructed to turn him in, but he assured my mother and her sisters that he would come back. Despite his assurances, my mother never heard from her brother again.

Before the war, her brother had married a Slovenian woman named Kristina, and had two daughters, Makica and Evica. They were all saved by Kristina's mother, a non-Jewish Slovenian woman, and lived in Sarajevo after the war.

Two of my mother's sisters were killed during the war. My mother never found a definitive record of where and when, but she was convinced that they had been killed at Djakovo or Nova Gradiska, two concentration camps (editor's note: run the Croatian Ustashe). Her other two sisters survived because they had married non-Jews before the war. Her sister Ela married a Catholic man named Zvonko Gjebic. She converted and changed her name to Jela. Despite her name change, my mother and the rest of us always called her sister Aunt Ela. They lived in Uzice, Serbia, where Zvonko worked in the Foma ammunition factory. They had two children, Anton and Zorica, who live in Kragujevac, Serbia. My mother's other sister, Rivka, married a Jew before the war, and had a daughter, Rahela. But her husband died, and she got married again before the war, this time to a Muslim man named Karahasanovic. They had two children, Zlata and Ahmed. Mr. Karahasanovic died while cleaning his rifle during the war, and Ahmed, born in 1943, never saw his father.

## **My parents**

Both of my parents came from traditional Sarajevo families, and like many of those families they were from modest financial backgrounds. When my mother's siblings married non-Jews, it was not as devastating as it might have been had they had more money. When you are poor, you take what you can get, and many non-Jews did not look for dowries.

My parents met in the Jewish community, either in La Benevolencija or Matatija, two social clubs. They socialized and courted for five or six years before they married. When they did marry, in

1939, they had both civil and Jewish ceremonies. My father worked as a tailor in a private clothing shop owned by Gavro Perkusic. After their marriage they bought a small home on Gornja Mandjija Street on the periphery of the city in an entirely Muslim neighborhood. It was a two-story house. Our family lived upstairs in an apartment with an entranceway, a kitchen, and one room where we all slept. My mother's sister, Rivka, lived downstairs with her children. After her husband died she had difficulty supporting herself, and my parents let her live in our house and never asked her to pay rent.

### **Growing up in wartime**

During the war, my father's boss, Gavro Perkusic, protected both my father and us. When he heard that a raid was planned—usually to gather up Jews and Serbs—he would hide my father in his tailor shop until it passed. Several times my mother and my brother and I were rounded up and taken to detention centers and he was able to get us released. Except for those occasions, my mother, brother and I spent the war at home. Throughout the war my mother kept a rucksack packed with all of our important belongings and necessary things. Whenever we were rounded up, this was the one thing we took with us. During the war my mother was forced to sell her wedding gown for four kilos of flour and a chunk of soap.

The location of our street and the fact that it was primarily a poor Muslim neighborhood also protected us. We lived on a steep narrow street, which must have looked daunting to the policemen that were sent to round up the Jews in the area. Many times they would holler up the block asking if there were any Jews there, and the neighbors would reply that they had all been taken away. I am sure my mother's personality and role in the community also played a role in protecting us. My mother was one of the few literate women in the neighborhood. Like most Jewish women at the time in Sarajevo, my mother had a basic education and therefore could read and write. Most of the Muslim women in the area had not had an education and could not read and write. When these women needed such skills, they always came to my mother for help. Generally, she got along well with all of our neighbors and they with her. This is another factor that kept us from being captured during the war.

### **Post-war**

When I was about 12 years old my parents renovated our apartment and made a small room for Rafo and me. Despite the fact that we were relatively poor, my parents' apartment had an English water closet with indoor plumbing downstairs, and a laundry room, another room with running water, things that most of our neighbors did not have. Later, shortly before I married, my parents added a bathroom to our apartment upstairs. From the laundry room one could reach the small garden in the back where my father liked to spend his free time.

In addition to Serbo-Croatian, my parents both spoke Ladino, as did my brother and I. As the years went on, the amount of Ladino lessened, but it was still prevalent in our conversations. My mother was always combining Serbo-Croatian words with Ladino. For instance, she used to say *noc de Purim*—*noc* being "evening" in Serbo-Croatian, *de* being "of" in Ladino, and Purim, of course, being the Jewish holiday.

We were the only Jewish family on our street. In school there were usually only one or two Jews in each grade. Buka Kamhi, another Jewish girl, was in my class throughout secondary school and we became best friends and remain best friends today even though she lives in England. Her father, Haim Kamhi, was a very educated and intelligent man, a Jew par excellence. He was one of the few people I knew after the war who maintained full commitment to Judaism, sincerely observing all the holidays and Shabbat. There were many who hid that they were observing Jewish traditions, and many who observed nothing, but Mr. Kamhi practiced openly and wholeheartedly. He was also the president of the Sarajevo Jewish community for many years.

After the war, in 1949, my father began work as a tailor in the National Theater, and worked there continuously until his retirement. In addition to this full-time job, he also had private clients and made all of our clothing. My father worked hard and always put money away for our summer holidays. Most of the people in our neighborhood did not go away, but every summer my father made sure that the four of us went to the seaside. There he taught my brother and me how to swim while my mother observed from the beach-she was not a swimmer.

My father was an outgoing man. He loved to sing, especially Ladino songs, and drink and eat with his friends. My mother was more reserved, a bit less social, and cautioned my father about his excesses. She rarely talked about her experiences during the war. All of my knowledge about it was extracted from her slowly over the years and from other relatives and friends. After the war my mother avoided wearing clothing with the color yellow. And for most of my life, I also did not wear it, even though it would truly suit a person of my complexion, with very light skin and dark hair. At one point I gradually added yellow to my wardrobe, but my mother never felt comfortable seeing me in it.

After the war both of my parents were very much involved in our local community and Jewish community life. My father even received several accommodations and awards for his efforts. His involvement was on the level of social action and community building; he did not venture into politics. During the war he and his boss both worked for the opposition movement, and had contact with an illegal print shop that was located on our street. After the war he lobbied for that house to be deemed a monument. The plaque that was eventually erected included a light bulb. My father was its self-appointed caretaker: whenever the light bulb burned out, he would see to it that the city replaced it.

In the Jewish community my father was on the religious committee and one of the few people who were regularly involved in religious events after the war. He attended the weekly Friday night service, whenever the weather permitted. Since we lived on a steep small street on the outskirts of town, if the weather was bad it was impossible for him to make it to the synagogue. My father was one of the 20 or so men who attended the Pesach seder every year. Although he was always present, he never led these services or religious events.

My mother was also an active member of both the Jewish community and our local community. After the war she did neighborhood improvement work, and continued helping those women who could not read or write and encouraging them to learn. In the Jewish community she would help prepare the food for the Seder and other community events, especially the lokumikus (light cookies made from eggs and flour) and enhaminados (extensively cooked hard boiled eggs).

## Our religious life

After the war my family maintained some of its religious practices, perhaps more than the average Jew in Sarajevo at the time. My parents had a mezzuzah on the entrance to our apartment but inside there were no decorative Jewish ornaments. My brother was born during the war, and immediately afterwards, my father arranged with Rabbi Menahem Romano, the last rabbi in Sarajevo, for him to have a brit milah. My brother experienced complications from this brit milah, among them a stutter from the stress. The stutter was quite severe during puberty, but with therapy and time it subsided a bit. I only remember Rabbi Menahem Romano as an elderly man whom we children respected; I have no vivid memories of him.

My mother observed the Shabbat in those things that she did not do. Saturday was a normal work day in most ways, but my mother made sure not to travel, nor to undertake any unnecessary work in the house such as laundry, cleaning, and so on. My parents liked to go on walks on Saturdays, and even for coffee at the Hotel Europa in the center of Sarajevo. And when we had new clothing, we always had to save it to wear for the first time on a Saturday.

We all went to El Kal-the word we used for synagogue-on the High Holidays and on Pesach. As a child I remember not wanting to miss the shofar (ram's horn) blowing. These services always seemed to interest me, probably because they were a novelty that occurred only a few times a year. When we went, we children sat upstairs in the balcony with the women. Before Yom Kippur, my mother would take me with her to the old Jewish cemetery with buckets and rags to clean off my grandparents' graves. My mother also made sure to settle her disputes before Yom Kippur. Relatives and friends who my mother had argued with during the year were once again welcome in our home and in our conversations. During these holidays, we would usually eat lamb with chestnuts, depending on the chestnuts' availability and when they fell. My mother and father always fasted on Yom Kippur, but they never made my brother and me fast. When my father would come home from El Kal after Yom Kippur, the first thing we would eat were lokumikus and white coffee, a coffee consisting of more milk than coffee.

In general, the holidays always meant a better quality food and a special atmosphere. On Pesach my father would attend the Seder in the community. Twenty or so men who were involved in religious life participated, but few others would attend. We children and other spectators did not participate in this activity.

The Jewish community in Sarajevo erected a big succah every year. It was built in a nook in the community that appeared as though it had been specially designed for this purpose. The community always made sure that it was decorated with fruit and that it was covered with branches according to the tradition. I do not remember that anybody had one at home.

Shavuot was the holiday that we celebrated the least. My parents celebrated those holidays that were most closely tied to children, and maybe because of that we did not celebrate it. Or maybe because it is in May, at the end of the holiday season. Hanukah, Purim, and Tu B'shvat, or, as we called it, Hamishoshi (in Ladino it was also called Frutas), all met this child- oriented criterion and were joyously celebrated in our home. On Hanukah my mother would set up the hanukiah with oil and wicks. We children would light the candles and we would be given the honors based on whether we had been good students and children. My father would sing afterwards, but I do not

know exactly what he sang. Each year we would get a new spinning top, both from the community and from my parents.

Hanukah gained popularity as a holiday, both in the Jewish community and in the wider Sarajevo community, in 1958 after the Sarajevo Theatre performed a production of "The Diary of Anne Frank." I believe that there was a scene concerning Hanukah in that production which sparked interest.

Purim was also eagerly celebrated in our family. For this holiday we would have a big family meal with extended family members, though after my uncles left for Israel the family was considerably smaller. My mother would prepare special pastelikus (little meat pies) which, unlike normal pasteles (meat pies), were prepared in small individual portions, as well as borekitus (pie made from filo dough with various fillings) and roskitus (cake with walnuts). Each year my father would make special little cloth bags for my brother and me, which we would wear around our necks and the adults would fill with money. Sometimes, we would even be able to collect money from relatives a few days after Purim.

Hamishosi was a holiday through which one could see my parents' exuberance for the Jewish festivities. Despite our rather modest financial situation, my parents always made sure to buy all the different kinds of fruits available in Sarajevo, no matter how exotic or expensive. The cornucopia included the normal apples and pears, grapes, but also oranges, which were quite rare at the time, dried carob, and fistikas, peanuts in shells, which my mother roasted at home.

After the war, children of my generation did not have bar or bat mitzvahs. The youth groups organized some sort of activities or presentations for Yom Haatzmaut (Israeli Independence Day), but I cannot recall the exact nature of those celebrations. Without fail, every year my parents attended the memorial services in Djakovo and Nova Gradiska. Although Jews came from all over the former Yugoslavia, the Sarajevo Jewish community was the true organizer of these memorial services. The women in the Sarajevo community prepared hundreds of lokumikus and enhaminados and brought slivovica (plum brandy) for everyone afterwards.

### **My husband Miroslav**

My parents took us to the seaside each year and they sent us to the Jewish summer camps as well. When we were older they sent us on excursions. It was on one such excursion that I met my future husband, Miroslav Gasic. The excursion, run by the Ferijalni Savez travel organization, was to a youth campground near Dubrovnik. The next year Miroslav and I met again at a campground near Makarska. After that we lost touch until my brother started university in Belgrade. Since he and Miroslav both studied at the same faculty, I put them in touch and instructed my brother to do what he could to help push things along in our relationship. Rafo proved a good intermediary, and we were married in Sarajevo and honeymooned in Dubrovnik, this time in a hotel, not a campground.

My mother never got over my moving to Belgrade. After time she learned not to show her displeasure as much, but she never accepted the idea. Our neighbors in Sarajevo used to say that she would cry for long periods after my visits.

Miroslav graduated from the university and worked until his retirement at the Vinca Nuclear Institute near Belgrade. I worked as a secretary in the Federation of Jewish Communities of



Yugoslavia in Belgrade for some time and then took a position as a lawyer at the Ministry of Education, where I still work. We have a son, Dejan, born on January 1, 1973, and a daughter, Tamara, born on September 23, 1974.

My father Menahem (Miki) Montiljo "Hasid" died on April 25, 1981 in the hospital in Sarajevo. His funeral was conducted by Rabbi Cadik Danon, who came from Belgrade to perform it. After the funeral my mother had us buy a grave next to my father's, as she knew that she would not be able to live long without her beloved Miki. My mother covered the mirrors in our apartment after my father's death and a month afterwards, she arranged a limud (learning session) for my father in the Jewish community. My mother, Flora Montiljo, died in October, 1981, and was buried next to my father.

Some things have a way of coming full circle. My father's family, the Montiljos, were known as Montiljo Hahasid, a term of respect bestowed on those Sephardic families who were especially religious. My parents clung to remnants of this during their lives, and now my children have rekindled this tradition. My daughter, Tamara, has chosen to live in Israel, and my son, Dejan, is an observant Jew living in Belgrade. Today, Dejan bears his grandfather's name, Menahem, and continues in the tradition of the Montiljo "Hasids."