

Jelisaveta Bubic

Jelisaveta Bubic

Belgrade

Serbia

2001

I am Jelisaveta Bubic [*nee Betty Lackenbacher*] and was born in Cakovec [*Croatia*] in 1913. My father Ignac was born in Cakovec in 1885, and my mother Cornelia [*nee Brau*] in 1889 in Nagykanizsa [*Hungary*].

We lived in grandfather Sigmunt's house in Cakovec. My grandfather had a café in the same house which he ran himself and a shop which my father took care of. The living space was spacious and nice. We had a housekeeper and a cleaning lady. My childhood was very happy and cheerful. In 1915 my sister Ruzica, with whom I liked to play, was born. In our house we celebrated all the holidays, we lit candles on Friday night, my mother prayed in front of them and regularly went to synagogue.

Grandfather Sigmunt, was born in 1831. He was very religious. He prayed every day with tzizit, that is phylacteries, that were wrapped around the arm and a prayer shawl. By profession he was a merchant, and he proved his ability in his successful handling of his café business.

My mother's mother, my grandmother Rozalia [*Lackenbacher*], I cannot remember her maiden name, was born in 1839. She only finished elementary school and was a housewife. Like grandfather Sigmunt, she was very religious. At home they celebrated all the holidays, the kitchen was kosher and they regularly went to synagogue. In addition to my father, Ignac, they had another four sons and a daughter. Their sons Joska and Vili lived in Nagykanizsa, Joska was a merchant and Vili was a railway worker. Their son Alexander magyarized his last name to Laszlo, at one time he lived in Hungary, and then he moved to Belgrade where he worked as the head of the Ministry for Transportation until the war broke out. Under persuasion from friends, he moved with his family to Slavonski Brod to escape calamity and spent the whole war hidden in a vineyard. Hermann lived in Bjelovar and was a carpenter by profession. Their daughter Sida Rosenfeld [*nee Lackenbacher*] married a merchant in Varazdin and had three sons. She, her husband and two of their sons were killed during the war. Only their son Stevan, who was sent from Cakovac to forced labor in Hungary at the outbreak of war, survived. After liberation Stevan finished a two-year textile college in Brno. In 1948 he went to Israel, married and had two children. He still lives in Israel. Grandmother Rozalija died in 1915 in Cakovac from a vein inflammation.

I finished a non-Jewish elementary school. In 1925 I enrolled in a one-year school in Varazdin and I lived there as a tenant in an apartment. . My mother Cornelia, a teacher by profession, was bored with village life and at the moment when I had to enroll in the gymnasium, my grandfather sold all his property and moved with us to Bjelovar in 1926. In gymnasium we learned French, and I took private German lessons. The gymnasium was not Jewish, but I had religion classes. The cantor of our synagogue taught these classes.

My parents started to do new work. They bought a three-room apartment with space for selling poultry and eggs. My father bought a big truck and wagon and rented it out to the people who supplied us with poultry and eggs from neighboring villages. Quickly he opened a slaughterhouse with a freezer and a hen-house for holding the poultry. My mother used her perfect knowledge of German and Hungarian to make contacts abroad. We started with export of slaughtered and live poultry and eggs. We worked with the British, with Germans and Italians. The capacity was not so big but the business functioned quite well. Turkeys were exported to England, geese to Germany and small poultry to Italy. My sister Ruzica and I had to spend our free time helping in my parents' business. In addition, our mother insisted that we learn to cook which we learned from our Hungarian cook.

Mother Cornelia ran all the sales and father Ignac took care of purchases, food for the poultry and work in the slaughterhouse. They had a business manager and one helper. The work advanced well, and my parents bought a big house which had two separate residential units, each measuring 60 square meters and they bought a hairdresser shop.

After finishing the gymnasium in 1929, I enrolled in a two-year college for export in Grac. A year later, my sister Ruzica also came to Grac to improve her German. Upon our return, we both joined in the family business. I corresponded with foreign buyers in German, my mother gradually brought me into the business. She transformed herself from an ordinary teacher into a real businesswoman.

Very early on, my mother was left without parents and she took responsibility for her two brothers, Bandi and Jenő Braun. As a teacher she did not work in a state school, rather she gave private lessons to a count's children. The children did not go to a regular school, instead they just passed the exams at the end of the year. While she worked her younger brothers were with their aunt Betti Krausz, their mother's mother's sister. My mother regularly sent the majority of her salary for their upkeep. Aunt Betti had six of her own children, three sons and three daughters, but regardless of the large number of children she devotedly took care of my uncles. She managed to educate all the children and to give them a secondary school education: Bandi became a merchant and at one time he lived in Nagykanizsa. When my mother married, he moved in with us and worked in our firm. My other uncle, Jenő, was the director of a winery in Nagykanizsa. Returning from the fields, he got caught in bad weather and got soaked. He had already been sickly and now he took ill with galloping consumption and died quickly.

My father was a merchant by profession, he finished Commercial Academy, and excellently managed the new family business. He was very hardworking and industrious. His workdays began at four in the morning. His father Sigmund died in 1930 at the age of 99. Since our company was advancing my father, together with his brother Alexander Laszlo, bought a house in Belgrade in 1939. Life in Bjelovar was very busy, we had very little free time and the only time for rest was on Saturdays. We all went to synagogue and my sister Ruzica and I sang in the synagogue choir [*it was a Neolog synagogue*].

Among the Jewish families in Bjelovar there was never competition, in fact everyone tried to help one another. The wealthy families and the Jewish community helped those that were less well off materially. They took special care of the Jewish children that came to Bjelovar for schooling from the surrounding villages. Every family that was able, took it upon itself to feed at least one child. I remember that one boy came to our house every day for lunch and we helped him pay his rent.

I had a lot of friends among the Jewish youth. We went for walks and we got along well. By chance, I met Milivoj Bubic, a law student and we fell in love. My parents did not approve of our relationship because he was not a Jew, something which they paid a lot of attention to at the time. However, our love was deep and we dated for five years. We married in 1938 and I changed my name from Betty Lackenbacher to Jelisaveta Bubic. My husband did not finish his studies, instead he began to work in my father's firm as a clerk. We rented an apartment in a beautiful villa in Bjelovar. In 1939 we had a daughter Tatjana.

We had a peaceful and secure life until 1941 when the war started. In one of the rooms in our apartment the owners put up a German officer. In the meantime, I became pregnant for the second time and when the time came for me to give birth my husband and I worried that there would be complications like after the first birth. The German who slept in the room right next to ours, heard commotion and he knocked on the door. He asked if there was something he could do to help and my husband explained that we needed to go to the hospital and that it was forbidden for Jews and Serbs to go out after 8PM. He said that he would accompany us. So, I was taken to the hospital by a fully armed German officer. We had a son Stevan in 1941. Eight days later I left the hospital, and my husband, who as a Serb had to wear a red armband, waited for me. We needed to immediately get a similar armband for the child's carriage.

In Bjelovar, in 1941 a collection center was erected for Serbs from Bjelovar and the surrounding areas. A month and a half after leaving the hospital, two armed soldiers came for us. They said that we could bring two suitcases. We already had the suitcases ready, because we knew that people were being taken to camps. They had already taken my mother-in-law to the collection center in Bjelovar, my father-in-law was not taken only because he was sick and in the hospital in Zagreb at the time. After being released from the hospital he moved in with us because his house had been confiscated, and his wife taken to the collection center in Bjelovar. That night when they came for my husband, children and I they also took my father-in-law. He was reunited with his wife in the camp. When we arrived in the collection center in Bjelovar they searched us to the bone. They even stripped my baby. They expected to find gold. Luckily the 10 gold coins that I received as a wedding present, I covered with fabric and sewed onto a dress as buttons. They did not find them.

The camp was three-stories high. We slept on boards with straw. The food was very poor in the camp. My mother Cornelia managed from time to time to secretly pass us some food by bribing the guards. We were in the camp five months when my mother finally managed to get in to see me so we could talk. To get permission for this 10 minute conversation she had to give a large amount of slaughtered poultry. During her visit she told me that she and my father had obtained visas for Switzerland, but that they would not go because they did not know what would happen to me and my children, and they did not have any news about my sister Ruzica. I begged her to go home immediately, collect the necessary things and go with my father to Switzerland while it was still possible, because they were certainly preparing even worse things for the Jews than for the Serbs. My mother did not listen to me and after just two days they took her and my father away. My father was killed in the Jasenovac death camp in 1942 and my mother was taken to the women's camp in Lobar Grad near Krapina, where she contracted typhus fever and died in 1942.

My sister Ruzica, who was a year and a half younger than me, married Vladimir Kohn in 1936 in Podravska Slatina. Vladimir had a construction material shop. They quickly had a daughter Mirjam.

They had a very nice apartment, and a maid, and were well-off. But when the war broke out they had to flee. With the Jews from the surrounding area, they made their way to Crkvenica, which was under Italian control. They did not stay there long because the Italians warned them that the Germans were coming and that it was better for them to go to the island Rab [Croatia]. They did this. Not long after, they had to move to the island Pag. Then they heard that the liberation forces were arriving on the island Vis and that it was safest to move there. From there, my sister Ruzica, her husband and daughter, managed to reach Bari.

The night when they transported the Jews from Bjelovar to the camps, they transported us to Serbia. The first station was Zemun and then we continued to Velika Plana. They took us off and wanted us to divide up among different village houses. My husband asked them to let us continue on to Belgrade, because his father had bought a house there before the war. His two sisters lived in the house. We continued on to Belgrade, where my husband's sisters, Nada and Mira, took us in. We moved into a small room with Mira, and my husband's parents in an apartment with their other daughter. My husband was unable to find work, and I, as a Jew, was not permitted to go out a lot, so we had a very difficult life.

A great misfortune befell me in 1943 when my husband was captured by the Germans in the middle of the street. They took him to forced labor in the Kalemegdan Fortress in Belgrade, where there was a German munitions warehouse. My husband worked in the munitions warehouse with another five young people. In July 1943, one of the people that worked with my husband came to tell me that there had been an explosion in the warehouse, that my husband was badly wounded and had been taken to the hospital and that I should go and visit him. I found him all burned and red. He opened his eyes and told me: „Damned Germans, damned fascists. You go home and take care of the children.” He closed his eyes and breathed his last breath. I barely made it home. It was very difficult for me to inform his mother, who lost her husband to gangrene the same winter we arrived in Belgrade. I loved my husband's parents very much, because they were always very good to me and they loved me, something I, unfortunately, cannot say about his sisters. They were very selfish and rude to me. When I was alone, with two small children, without anywhere to go, without anyone to turn to, in the middle of the craziness of war, they did not even ask me how I was going to manage alone.

At one time I supported myself by selling the coins which I had managed to hide on the dress. Across the street from our house lived the three Tasic brothers who sold mixed goods. Some things they sold legally and others on the black market. Once one of the brothers asked me if I would sell some things for them. We all benefited from this relationship. I accepted it because I did not have any other source of income. I remembered that at the market near our house there were women who came to sell cheese, eggs, bacon and I tried to trade with them. I knew that in the villages where they came from there was no fabric, no socks, no kerchiefs, and that these items would certainly be of interest to them. I wrote a lot of small notes with my address and handed them out. This is how I began selling to them. In this manner, I got by and survived the war with my two small children.

Liberation came. Soon after I received news from my sister. Her family had expanded by one, i.e. she had a son, Boris, in Bari. After two months my sister, Ruzica, and her family arrived in Belgrade. We lived together. Soon after my brother-in-law found work and was transferred to Novi

Sad. In the meantime, I became employed first in the Diplomatic warehouse and then in a meat processing plant called „10th of October” from Velika Plana, i.e. in their Belgrade branch office. In 1948, my brother-in-law Vladimir and my sister Ruzica decided to go to Israel with their two children. They went to Naharia. After their departure, I no longer had any connection to Belgrade and then my mother-in-law died so that I no longer had anyone in Belgrade, and I also decided to go to Israel. The president of the Jewish community, Bencion Levi, told me that he did not believe that the Interior Ministry would allow me to go because I had been married to a Serb and I had two children with him. Unfortunately he was right. The Ministry told me that according to Yugoslav law my children are Serbs and I do not have the right to take them to Israel. That meant that I could go but my children could not. I had to stay in Belgrade. In 1957, I was invited by Mr. Zarko Zanger, a business partner of the firm where I was employed, to work in his firm, the „Yugoslav Agricultural Products”, in Hanover for a year (with my firm’s agreement). Zanger invited me to take care of goings, comings and payment of goods for a year. He had followed my work in Belgrade and had full trust in me. He was a Jew, originally from Novi Sad, who before the war had an open company in Vienna, but he managed to move to Hanover illegally and there he succeeded to continue his business. I brought my children with me. My daughter enrolled in the first grade of the Academy of Music in Hanover and my son went to gymnasium. At the end of the year I returned to Belgrade with the children. Even though I was a single mother I succeeded in educating my children. My daughter graduated from the Faculty of Philology and my son from a two-year college for foreign trade. Until I retired in 1968, I worked in „10th of October”, where I was especially valued as a good worker.

Earlier, I used to go to the women’s section meetings at the Belgrade Jewish community. Now I am old, 88, I survived three heart attacks and am no longer able to actively participate in the life of our community, which makes me very sad, but that is life, life must go on, regardless of all the burdens and difficulties which follow us.