Ljubica (Buba) MILIVOJEVIĆ-POLEKSIĆ

THE STORY OF THE WEINSTEIN FAMILY FROM SKOPJE

Tamara Vajnštajn-Poleksić

This story is written by Ljubica (Buba) Milivojević-Poleksić, daughter of the late Tamara Weinstein, married Poleksić, a milliner from Belgrade, and the late Sava Poleksić, a barber from Belgrade:

I bear the name of my Serbian grandmother Ljubica, who, risking her own life and the life of her sister, saved the young Jewish woman Tamara from certain death.

I feel like a candle burning to remind us of good and evil, of joy and sorrow, of heroism and cruelty, of humanity, of fear, of darkness, of despair, of cries and pain — and then of day and sun and peace and progress and well-being...

My whole life I have carried a great burden in my soul, and that is why I write this story — for my children and my future grandchildren, for my brothers and sisters from aunts and uncles, for their children and their grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren — so that they may know, remember, and never forget, and never allow anyone to oppress, humiliate, abuse, maim, or kill them... simply because they belong to a particular people.

Only one member of my family perished in the Holocaust — my grandfather Josif Weinstein, a blacksmith from Skopje. I say "perished" because it was never precisely established what actually happened to him. Yad Vashem records Treblinka concentration camp as his place of death, and 1943 as the year of his death.

Ten of Josif's descendants survived the war — four daughters, two sons, and four grandchildren. Today there are ninety of us — we live in five countries, on five continents. Sixty-nine live in Israel, nine in Chile, nine in the United States, two in Britain, and one in New Zealand. Sadly, none of us still lives on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

My grandfather Josif was born in Odessa (Ukraine) in 1879. During one of the pogroms, he came to Macedonia with his father and two brothers. When the young men came of age for marriage, all three married girls from Sephardic families. At that time it was not customary for Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews to intermarry. I suppose the choice fell on Sephardic girls because only Sephardim were mainly settled in Macedonia. Josif married Dona Aladjem (Alagem), whose family was originally from Bulgaria.

Dona had three more sisters: Dina, Mazal, and Regina. When Dona's mother was widowed at the beginning of the twentieth century, she emigrated with her three unmarried daughters to then-Palestine, where the greater part of their families still lives today.

Josif's younger brother David left Macedonia in 1926 with his wife and three children, first for Egypt, and then in 1948, when the State of Israel was founded, they settled in Israel, where his descendants live to this day. David lived to the age of 106.

Josif's third brother (whose name I do not know) left Macedonia for France. He had two children, but they had no descendants.

None of these relatives of mine perished in the Holocaust.

Dona and Josif were the only ones from their families who remained to live in Macedonia.

In 1907 their eldest daughter Sterina (Stela) was born in Kumanovo, and in 1911, Tamara. Their third daughter, Rašela, was born in Palestine. Their fourth child, son David, was born in 1916 in Skopje; Mois followed in 1918, and in 1920 their youngest daughter, Liza. Josif was a blacksmith and the family was not wealthy. Nevertheless, all the older children learned trades: Sterina and Rašela were seamstresses, Tamara a milliner, David completed agricultural school, and Mois became an electrician.

Dona suffered from heart disease and died before the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939 or 1940.

In the Holocaust, only my grandfather Josif disappeared. We never learned how he actually perished — whether he died a natural death, was killed somewhere on the street, or was taken with the other Macedonian Jews to the tobacco factory "Monopol" and then by cattle wagons toward Treblinka. His name was not recorded on any German or Bulgarian list, and the neighbors who might have known something about Josif did not survive the war — it is well known that approximately 7,200 Macedonian Jews perished in the Holocaust. Not one of those who were imprisoned and then taken to Treblinka ever returned home.

The other members of my family survived the Holocaust, and this is their story.

In 1941, when World War II began in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Josif Weinstein, his son Mois, daughter Sterina with her husband David Amariljo and their children Tilda and Moni, as well as daughter Rašela Weinstein with her daughters Tamara and Zlata, all lived in Skopje. Daughter Tamara lived in Belgrade, and son David and daughter Liza were already in Palestine.

Sterina (Stela) Weinstein married David Amariljo (Amariglio), a fabric merchant originally from Thessaloniki, in 1924. They lived in a beautiful two-story house in Skopje, at Beneševa Street 7. In 1925 their daughter Matilda (Tilda, Matuška) was born, and in 1932 their son Solomon (Moni), who was named after his paternal grandfather.

Moni showed an early talent for music and began learning to play the accordion. His first public performance was at the age of five, at a show at the Jewish community center. When he turned seven, he received a violin as a gift and began taking lessons from a Russian refugee. At that time (1939–40) he performed with his little violin at charity events organized by the Jewish community in Skopje for the benefit of Jewish refugees from Central Europe.

In 1941 the German army occupied certain parts of Yugoslavia, and Jewish refugees from Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia began arriving in Skopje. The Amariljo family took in two families from Serbia into their spacious home — the Altarac family with two small children (the mother's name was Mimica) and the Finci family.

At that time Macedonia was occupied by the Bulgarians, who were not then inflicting great harm on the Jews. But the stories of the ever-growing number of refugees about German atrocities were terrible. Anxiety crept into the Amariljo home and Sterina and David often sat up at night wondering what they should do. Sometime toward the end of 1941, an Albanian brought them a confidential letter from Belgrade, from Sava Poleksić. Sava was a young man whom Sterina's younger sister Tamara, who lived in Belgrade, had been seeing. The letter stated that there were no more Jews in Belgrade, that they had all been taken somewhere, and that no one knew what had happened to them. It also stated that Tamara had fled illegally to Romania, to Sava's mother Ljubica, and was hiding in a village right on the border between Romania and Serbia. In the letter, Sava advised them to find shelter somewhere as well.

One day David came home in great haste and told the family that he had secured false documents for crossing into Albania, which was at that time under Italian rule. And so David became Daut, Sterina became Fatima, Tilda became Hatije, and Moni became Mohamed.

David set out with his daughter Tilda in a truck that transported bread from Skopje to a mine right on the border of Albania and Macedonia, near Tetovo. Tilda, who was then about seventeen years old, was hidden beneath sacks of bread, while David sat in the cab next to the driver. In the cab, alongside David, was another Jew from Bosnia who also had false papers, by the surname Melamed (his family also survived the Holocaust and after the war lived in Brazil). The driver was a Croat who collaborated with both the Germans and the Bulgarians and the Italians. It is unknown whether the driver knew he was transporting Jews, but he was well paid for his work. The whole operation had been organized by a group of Albanians whom David knew and who pledged their lives (gave their besa — their oath) that the whole family would cross into Albania alive and well. Naturally, without money nothing could have been arranged, but it also required great courage and skill to organize and carry out the operation successfully.

When David and Tilda arrived at the village near the mine, a contact lodged them in a small, dark room full of bedbugs, where they waited in great fear for several days for Sterina and Moni.

Mother and son traveled from Skopje to Albania over the Šar Mountains, on foot and on mules, escorted by two Albanians.

For a time the Amariljos lived in mountain villages near the border. The Albanians who lived in these villages, in very primitive conditions and great poverty, were not interested in the refugees' origins. They were happy that "Fatima" knew how to sew, so she always had work, and "Hatije" (Tilda) helped her. They communicated in Turkish, as both Albanians and people from

Macedonia spoke Turkish. Only "Mohamed" (Moni), who did not know Turkish, was told to pretend to be mute, just in case.

One day, on some ruins, Moni found a sooty accordion. He cleaned it for three days until a beautiful, white accordion gleamed before him. Without thinking, he began to play. Fortunately, no one from the surrounding houses paid attention to the mute boy playing the accordion.

Tilda and Moni, who told me this story, do not remember how they got to Tirana, but until Italy's surrender they lived in Tirana legally, still with false documents. The Italians, unlike the Germans, did not persecute Jews either in Italy or in the countries under their occupation. And the Albanians did not question refugees much, although it is now written that they generally knew these were Jews.

The Amariljos lived in Tirana in a small apartment they had rented from the Kalakule family. The Kalakule family was highly respected because the father of the family, who was no longer alive at that time, had been a former mayor of Tirana. Many Jewish refugees passed through their home, and the eldest daughter, Nezi, even married a Mr. Menaše, a Jew from Zagreb who had come there as a widower with his small daughter Tamara. They later lived in Argentina.

The Amariljos lived in Tirana from the money they had brought with them and from what mother Stela earned sewing in people's homes here as well. Moni attended an Albanian school and Tilda studied at home and helped her mother. Although life in Tirana was very modest, although they were more often hungry than full, they lived relatively freely until Italy's surrender in the autumn of 1943.

When the Germans entered Tirana, the Amariljo family could no longer stay in the rented apartment. While sewing for various families, Sterina had also sewn for the family of the young Turkish ambassador in Tirana. This is how she came to know the Turkish consul, who lived alone in a large house with his driver and cook, both of whom were from Belorussia. Sterina explained her situation to the consul, and he offered to move the family into his private residence. The problem was solved, but the Amariljos' life was not easy at all. Across from the consul's house stood the command post of an SS division. Tilda is certain that the Germans knew a Jewish family was living in the consul's house but dared not take any action because of Turkey's neutral position in the Second World War. Naturally, leaving the house was completely impossible. Nevertheless, Sterina sometimes had to go to the Turkish ambassador's house, because his wife had given birth and things needed to be sewn for the newborn and the mother. She went hidden in a car. For a time, Tilda also lived at the ambassador's house to help the young mother with the baby. It was a time of great fear for all members of the family.

They survived nonetheless, and after the liberation of Albania and Macedonia they returned to Skopje.

The Altarac and Finci families, who had remained in the Amariljos' house in Skopje, later also fled to Albania and were thus saved. After the war they emigrated to Israel.

When the Amariljos returned to Skopje, they found partisans in their house. The family moved in with Serbian neighbors, and when the partisans left, they returned to their home. There were no more Jewish neighbors. The house of Sterina's father Josif was empty and no one knew anything about him. Sterina's brother Mois was also not there, but they heard he was a prisoner of war somewhere in Germany.

David Amariljo's sister Sterina, married to Mois Noah, and their two children, Mika and Rahela, were saved thanks to Spanish citizenship (Rahela Noah Konfino's story was published in the book We Survived, volume 2). Members of the David Amariljo family who perished included: sisters Bela and Berta with their husbands and children (Belgrade), brother Leon with his wife and children (Belgrade), brother Saul (Skopje), and many family members from Greece.

Despite the great tragedy that befell them, the life of the Jewish families continued. Tilda started secondary school and passed her matriculation exams. In the autumn of 1945 she moved to Belgrade, to her aunt Tamara, to begin her studies. Moni went to school, never separating music from learning.

But the anxiety that had entered father David in 1941 did not leave him — he could not and would not find his way in postwar communist Yugoslavia. So, at the end of 1945, the Amariljos secretly left Skopje and, through UNRRA and Jewish organizations, went to Italy, from where they were supposed to leave illegally for Palestine (Aliyah Bet). But David no longer wished to go anywhere illegally, and so the family remained in Italy where for a time they lived and worked in a Jewish camp (hachshara) in Milan, where Jewish youth was preparing to go to Palestine. From Milan they moved to Fano, a small seaside town in central Italy. On the train between Milan and Fano, Tilda met her future husband, Manek Rechter, whom she married on 19. May 1946. Manek was a Polish Jew who survived by joining the Russian army. In the Holocaust he lost the two people dearest to him — his mother and his sister. His sister had jumped from the train taking them to a concentration camp, and his mother died two days after her daughter's death, from grief.

Father David was again dissatisfied and insisted on returning to Milan, to the UNRRA refugee camp. Living conditions were very difficult and the family did not know what to do or where to go. And yet, good things happened too. There Tilda, in July 1947, gave birth to her only daughter Sabina. There they met Sterina's younger sister Rašela, who with her two daughters, the twins Tamara and Zlata, had also been saved via Albania and was waiting in Milan to leave for Palestine. And finally, something happened that would decide the Amariljo family's onward path.

At the very beginning of the war, David had lent a certain sum of money to his business associate from Zagreb, a Mr. Holcner. With that money, Holcner had fled Zagreb for England and thus saved himself. When he learned that David was in Milan, he returned the borrowed money. With that money, David Amariljo bought two sewing machines as proof that they would have a means of supporting themselves — and thus they obtained immigration visas and were able to legally emigrate to Chile.

David Amariljo never recovered from the traumas suffered during and after the war. He died in 1960 in Santiago.

Moni Amariljo was very active in Zionist youth organizations in Santiago, and when he turned 18, he emigrated to Israel. He lived and worked for a time at Kibbutz Dvir (Negev) and Kibbutz Merhavia, where he also married.

He later moved to Tel Aviv to study music, but his devotion and love for kibbutz life never left him — until his retirement, he taught music at Kibbutz Ein Karmel and Kibbutz Glil Yam.

Sterina Amariljo, after the death of her husband David, moved to Israel to be closer to her son and his family. There she married Žak Benvenisti, originally from Belgrade, with whom she lived until her death. She died at the age of 85, on the first day of the Gulf War, when Israel was exposed to a serious threat of chemical and biological bombardment. The courageous heart that had endured all the horrors of the Second World War, many Israeli wars with neighboring Arab countries, could sadly bear no more — it could not withstand this war either.

Daughter Tilda Kneler is 83 years old and lives happily in Santiago near her daughter, three grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Moni Amariljo is seventy-five years old and lives in Givatayim. He is still actively engaged in composing, his best-known works are popular music and songs for children. He has received many recognitions and awards, the most significant being the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Israeli Composers Association (Moni's story was published in the book In the Beloved Land, published in Israel by immigrants from the former Yugoslavia). The book in fact took its title from one of Moni's compositions.

Moni has four children and six grandchildren. The eldest son lives with his family in the United States; the others are in Israel.

My mother Tamara was born in Kumanovo, in the region then called Vardar Serbia.

Having completed her trade in Skopje and gained experience, Tamara moved to Belgrade in the early 1930s, where she later had her own ladies' hat salon ("Primavera", later renamed "Tamara") on what is now Nikola Pašić Square.

Photo

Tamara and Sava – "Love and humanity as the greatest stake for saving a life."

In the late 1930s, at one of the Jewish youth clubs, she met and fell in love with a handsome, eloquent, and witty young man named Sava Poleksić. Sava was a barber employed at a barbershop on Prizrenska Street, across from the Hotel Moskva. Tamara, who had been raised in a Jewish and Zionist spirit, often wondered whether a Jewish girl should be going out with a Serbian young man.

My father Sava Poleksić was born in 1910 in the village of Keča, in Banat, which at that time belonged to the powerful Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The majority of the village population consisted of Romanians, but Serbs also lived there (they had their own school and church in the village), Swabians (which at that time was not a pejorative term for the local Germans), and a small number of Hungarians. Thus Sava, playing with children, learned all those languages; naturally Serbian, as his mother tongue and the language in which he was schooled, he knew best. When he turned fourteen, he went to Timișoara, the nearest larger city, to learn a trade — barbering. Most of his friends stayed in the village and became sharecroppers (farmhands on someone else's estate) or worked their own estates, and one (Velja Micin) became the village butcher. In 1926 Sava moved to Belgrade to continue learning and perfecting the barbering trade and to work at his uncle's salon "Grujić," located at the beginning of Prizrenska Street, across from the Hotel Moskva.

My father told me that he had rented his first room in Skadarlija by chance, not knowing that people caroused there every night and that the taverns never closed. He quickly adapted to the Skadarlija way of life, which obviously suited him, and from a modest village lad became a "bon vivant and reveler." During the day he continued to work diligently and learn the trade from his uncle, while at night he caroused with well-known footballers (football was his passion; he later became a fervent Red Star supporter), writers, poets, and painters... Naturally there were also actors and actresses, beautiful women. I do not know whether it was there that he met a beautiful Jewish woman, or at work (Sava's uncle was a ladies' hairdresser), or somewhere else, but he began to frequent some Jewish youth clubs in Dorćol. At a friend's place in Romania I saw a photograph of one of his girlfriends, whom he had been seeing before my mother Tamara — she had a distinctly Jewish appearance.

My mother told me that she met my father at a Jewish club and that for a long time she thought he was also Jewish. Sava was a very handsome, eloquent, witty, charming, and educated young man. He could tell wonderful stories with which I grew up and which he knew how to use to entertain larger groups of people. I believe my Tamara fell in love with him at first sight. When she found out he was not Jewish, she wondered whether a Jewish girl should continue going out with a Serbian young man. Tamara and her family were not religious, but they maintained Jewish tradition and were strongly Zionist in orientation. Yet I believe that love and attraction were stronger, and that they were both very happy together — which, incidentally, can be seen in the photographs.

And who knows how that romance, despite the great love, would ultimately have ended, had the Second World War not begun and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia not been occupied by the Germans. One of Hitler's goals was the complete extermination of the Jewish people.

In photographs from that time, my mother is not wearing a yellow armband — whether the photographs were taken before the start of the war, or whether Tamara never placed this shameful mark on her arm, I was unable to find out.

It is well known that in Belgrade and Serbia as a whole, the Germans, as early as spring 1941, based on lists they possessed, first summoned all Jewish men to forced labor, and then in autumn, women and children as well, threatening death to those who did not respond to the summons and calling on those who were not on the lists to report themselves.

Photo

"Tamara strolling along Belgrade's streets and in front of her salon on Nikola Pašić Square."

Working in a busy location in the city center, where German soldiers also came for haircuts, Sava — who spoke some German — understood from conversations with customers that Jews who had responded to the German summons were gradually disappearing without a trace.

It happened that Tamara was not on the lists the Germans possessed, so the two of them decided to transfer Tamara illegally to Romania, to Sava's mother Ljubica. Ljubica Poleksić ("Mother Ljubica," as she was called in the village) lived in the village of Keča, which after the First World War had come under Romania and is now right on the border of Romania and Serbia (near Kikinda and Zombolj). She shared the same courtyard as her sister Angelina Grujić and was by that time already a widow.

A few more relatives from her own and her husband's families lived in the village, but no one — except Angelina, at least officially — knew that Ljubica was hiding a young Jewish woman throughout the war.

Photo

"The local priest, Ljubica's sister Angelina, and Ljubica, mother of Sava Poleksić, who hid and sheltered the young Jewish woman Tamara."

The details of how my mother crossed the border, how she knew which house to go to, whether Sava took her there, whether they even asked Mother Ljubica if she was prepared to hide a Jewish woman, knowing she would be killed if discovered, how she was informed of the girl's arrival: I DO NOT KNOW. I keep asking myself WHY I KNOW SO LITTLE ABOUT ALL OF THIS. Today I think that when I was a child and when I was young, my mother did not like to talk much about the days of the war, and that is why I did not ask many questions. But at the same time I am aware that even today, at 58, I am afraid to ask questions about it, even to listen to it, as if it were Pandora's box that must not be opened. Although there are still living witnesses who probably know more about those days than I do, although I would love to find out every detail, I am afraid to investigate further.

I assume my mother Tamara went to Romania in the autumn of 1941. Although Romania fought on the German side in the Second World War, many of its Jews perished. My mother once told me that in the neighboring village a Jewish family was killed, betrayed to the Germans by their servant girl. On another occasion she told me that she bribed soldiers with gold jewelry at the border — both when she crossed into Romania and when she returned to Serbia in early November 1944, after the liberation of Belgrade. I know that during those three or four years she was hidden by day in some kind of pit or dugout in my grandmother's garden. When night fell and it was unlikely that anyone would come to Mother Ljubica's, Tamara would come into the house to sleep there.

At that time there was no electricity in the village and water came from household wells. Grandmother's house was the first in the village; anyone coming to the village or leaving it by train had to pass by that house and the garden where my mother was hiding. Was the garden fenced with wooden planks at that time, as it is today, or with wire? How high was the fence? How can a person sit in a pit all day, in silence, listening to the sounds above — the barking of dogs, the clucking of chickens — how does one go to the toilet, how does one endure when it is very cold, or very hot, and not just for a day or two, but day after day, week after week, month after month...

A few years ago I heard from an acquaintance that her father-in-law, Velja Micin — who was the village butcher and my father Sava's best friend — once saw Tamara in the garden when she was trying to go into the house. She stopped, froze in place, and opened her big, dark, beautiful but fear-paralyzed eyes; she looked at him and said nothing. Velja gently said to her: "You don't need to be afraid of me; I won't tell anyone." Whether Velja knew she was Sava's girlfriend, whether he knew she was Jewish, whether other people in the village had also seen her, whether they all kept the secret — I do not know. I did not dare ask the acquaintance, who is now nearly 80 years old, and who may not be alive the next time, if I have the courage to go to her and ask, to tell me something more.

Photo

"The house in which Tamara hid during the occupation and the war."

Shortly after her return to Belgrade, at the end of November 1944, Tamara converted her religion and name and became a Christian, a Serbian woman named Mara. She told me she did this because at that time there were no civil marriages, only church ones, and she and Sava wanted to get married as soon as possible — it no longer mattered whether he was Jewish or Serbian, what she was, what her family would say — she was alive and Sava was her savior. She owed her life to him, to Mother Ljubica, and to Aunt Angelina.

But was that really the only reason — did she perhaps thereby also want to protect herself from some new Hitler, some new Yasser, Saddam, some new misfortune, from antisemitism... I do not know. I am quite certain that fear of what happened during that war stayed in my mother until the end of her life. But at the same time I know for certain that many of Tamara's fears transferred to me as well, perhaps even to my children. In any case, they changed my life so profoundly that in 1995 I found myself on the other side of the world, in New Zealand, fleeing from civil war and everything that the previous war had actually brought with it, and that the last war in Yugoslavia could have brought.

I think I had not yet started school when my mother once told me that I should know I was Jewish, but that I should not go around telling everyone. And I did not tell, I hid behind a plain Serbian name and surname, Ljubica Poleksić, the same as my Serbian grandmother's name. It took me a long time to free myself from this and to teach myself to be proud of my origins, not to hide them from anyone, to teach my children that they are privileged because they belong to the Jewish people, but also to teach them not to judge people by race, religion, or skin color, but by what they are and by what they are worth as human beings.

But regardless of the formal change of religion, my mother always and forever remained only what she was by her origins, upbringing, and genes, her faith could not be changed by a piece of paper; she remained a Jew with a big heart and a broad soul, a Zionist, the best mother to me, and to everyone else the well-known Aunt Tamara, always ready to help, to listen, to carry, to bring, to feed, to sew, to share... She worked tirelessly in the Jewish community: at children's summer camps from Split to Zaton, the women's section, children's and youth clubs, social commissions; she visited and cared for the elderly and the sick, prepared costumes and props for shows at the Jewish community center in Belgrade. One of her puppets, made for a puppet theater, even reached Boston, where it is kept by Mrs. Evelyn Benson. For her many years of work she received from the Jewish community a “Megila” Scroll of Gratitude, of which she was very proud and which I now keep. When she died in 1982, a number of trees were planted in one of the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemeth) forests in Israel in her name.

My father Sava died in April 1990 and is buried at the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade, beside his Tamara.

I have two children: a son, Ivan, born in 1978, who is a mechanical engineer and currently lives in England, and a daughter, Branka, born in 1980, who has just defended her doctoral dissertation in the field of neuropsychology, and who also recently moved to Britain.

Photo

Ljubica Poleksić, author of the account about mother Tamara and the Weinstein family