Zamila (Jamila, Dzamila) Kolonomos
Interviewed by Jasa Almuli
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Abstract

The interview is with Zamila Kolonomos from Bitola, Macedonia; later a part of Yugoslavia. Before World War I, Bitola had a large Jewish population; many Jews left after World War I. Zamila relates that the Jewish community was well organized and that nearly 90% of the young Jews belonged to Zionist organizations before World War II. Her family was not very religious, but they celebrated all the holidays. Her father was director of the French-Serbian bank and earned a good salary. When they learned that the Bulgarians were going to expedite the deportation of the Jews from Bitola, Zamila left her family with the intention of joining the Partisans. She and others hid in a store; from there they heard soldiers marching people to the train station. They remained hidden, waiting for the Partisan connection to come, leaving the store once when they learned of a police inspection of the store. With the help of some communists, the group joined a Partisan unit where Zamila became a journalist in charge of a Partisan bulletin. The Jews in the unit were good fighters, invalidating the reputation of Jews as bad fighters. During the war, she at one time developed hallucinations while ill, and also had gangrene from frostbite on her leg. She married the man who had saved her life five times; he was later killed in a motorcycle accident.

Zamila also relates a story of how her father, a soldier in the Bulgarian Army, was captured by the Serbian Army and sentenced to death. A Serbian guard helped him to escape to Skopje where the Jewish community hid him until the end of World War I. It was in Skopje where Zamila’s father met and married her mother.

Zamila’s mother died one month before the family was taken by the Germans. The remaining members of her family all perished in the Holocaust.

Testimony

Zamila Kolonomos (married name, Sadikario) retained the name of Kolonomos for the memory of her family. It’s an old name, recorded as early as the Byzantine era. This name means the same as Hebrew “Shem Tov,” that is, “Good Name.” The last name, Shem Tov, was translated as Karonimos; later an error in the records resulted in the name Kolonomos. Her correct name should be Voyanina (?). Her Hebrew name was derived from Avram Sadikario. Her family was from the section of Macedonia which was given to Greece. She is the only survivor of the Holocaust in her family.

Her great-grandfather came from Greek Macedonia. All subsequent generations were born in Bitola (Bitolj, Bitolja, Monastir). Many family members later emigrated to America, Israel, and
mostly to France---Paris. Many cemeteries, remains of the synagogue, and the Jewish community remains bear the name Kolonomos, the last as the donor of the structure.

(Zamila shows photographs of family, going back to grandparents and down to young generations. She also shows a photo of Solomon Kolonomos, the oldest brother of her grandfather.)

Zamila talks about Bitola, her home town. Bitola was thought of as “little Paris,” mostly because of two of its big schools. She states that it was a large commercial, cultural, and diplomatic center. Up until World War I, Bitola had a population of about 100,000 people, of which 10% were Jewish. The Jews spoke mostly Judeo-Spanish (Ladino). However, the French language was also gaining ground with the young due to the influence of the “Alliance Israelite” schools, and the young folks’ desire to be westernized. They spoke Judeo-Spanish at home and also French. Also spoken was Greek (her sisters married in Greece) and, by older generations, Turkish (the secret language between her parents). Her mother used to sing in many languages; neighbors came to listen. Her grandmother was a great teller of stories; children loved her. Many other languages and cultures coexisted. Before World War I, one could see in the marketplace people from many nationalities and religions, speaking various languages (Turkish, Macedonian, Vlach, Albanian, Greek, etc.) all interacting freely and peacefully, without any problems.

In Bitola there were two primary Jewish schools, sponsored by the Alliance. Practically all Jewish girls attended French School, run by a Catholic order of the Sisters of St. Paul. As in much of the East, there was Alliance Israelite, mostly for Jewish boys. There were also the Serbian schools, although some parents sent their children to private French schools which, after passing all the exams, were equivalent to six years of gymnasium. The French school was patterned on the Grenoble system and directly connected to it.

Around the start of World War I there were about 10,000 Jews living in Bitola; at the start of World War II only about 3,200-3,300 Jews remained. Afterwards, the numbers grew because Macedonian Jews in various parts of Yugoslavia came back home after the bombing of Belgrade; they thought that the Bulgarian occupation would be less onerous. World War I had catastrophic consequences, not only for the Jews of Bitola, but for the entire population of Macedonia. By the agreement of Bucharest, Macedonia was divided into three parts; Bitola ended up as a border town in Yugoslavia. Bitola was not very far from Thessaloniki (Thessalonika, Salonica, Salonika), a metropolis with a very large and influential Jewish population. As a result, Bitola lost importance, and its Jewish residents started leaving to go to work in Belgrade or Zagreb; or went to join their relatives in France, Chile, Palestine, and other areas of the world where they always formed their own communities and synagogues. Many members of her family branched out to America and Israel; many live in Lyon and Paris. Many family members are still living and remembering their ancestors.
There were six synagogues in Bitola. As was customary, the Jews of Bitola named their synagogues after its donors (sponsors), like Kal d’Aragon or Kal Portuges. Kal Portuges was bombed during the war, and the members did not have the means to restore it properly. Kal d’Aragon, on the other hand, was smaller but very elegant and ornate (Zamila shows pictures). It was later sacked by the Bulgarian army during its occupation of the city, leaving no trace of the synagogue. Before the war, the Jewish community was well organized and active. In 1930 the first Zionist organization came into being; most youth belonged to these organizations. Without exaggeration, 90% of the young of the community participated in the activities of Hashomer Hatzair, Ken (branch), Moshavot, etc. The young people joined in organized trips, lectures, performances, summer camps, trips to Lake Ohrid, etc. Some were offered to the Jewish youth of entire Yugoslavia (?)-Moshavot. There were lectures on Zionism and Socialism by the famous Leon Kamhi (?). He was interned in Bulgaria and killed in Treblinka, along with other well-known Jews.

Culturally, there was also a “Club des Intimes” (with French orientation) which had a well-stocked French language library. It held various events at least monthly. They had humanitarian programs, and also provided social services for the young, such as raising funds to assist poor brides and for other worthy causes. There was also a French-Jewish society; her father was president of that society.

When asked about her father and other members of her family, Zamila shows pictures. Her father and all members of her family died during the Holocaust; all were killed in Treblinka. Her mother died about one month before they all were taken by the Germans. Zamila indicated that she was happy that her mother escaped the tortures and misery which they all endured.

During the period between the two major wars, the Jewish community of Bitola was very well organized despite the fact that it was very poor. They regularly received help from the Jewish Federation of Yugoslavia and from abroad. They survived, even prospered, due to the generosity of Alliance and the help from former residents of Bitola now living in South America and other foreign places. Even WIZO (VIZO), the women’s organization that did humanitarian and social work, provided some assistance for various causes, such as help for families of those fighting in the Spanish Civil War (1936), dowry for brides-to-be, etc. The president of WIZO was Zulie (Julia?) Batino, the sister of the well known revolutionary fighter, Rafael Batino, who was shot to death in 1942. Batino was in jail in Sremska Mitrovica with Moshe (Mosa) Pijade (Piade) and other revolutionaries.

The lifestyle of Zamila’s family was not opulent, modest one might say. Even though Zamila’s father, as a director (president, manager?) of the French-Serbian Bank, earned a good salary, he had to support several families --- his mother, brother, sister, and the parents of Zamila’s mother. He was very honest and upright and was given a special award by the French.
Zamila tells about how, at times, Jews from one country found themselves fighting the Jews from another country. She tells a story about how her father (note: not grandfather), who was in the Bulgarian Army, was captured by the Serbian Army; he was suspected of some activity and condemned to death. While in prison one night, he was reciting his Shema (the evening prayer), and a guard approached him and asked him if he was Jewish. When he answered positively, the Serbian guard concocted a plan for the escape of the Bulgarian (Zamila’s father) and told him to run to the city of Skopje (Skoplje) where the Jewish community would help him. The plan worked and Zamila’s father (note: not grandfather) found himself in Skopje. Walking on the street in Skopje, he heard a man yelling “al tikkun,” a call to morning prayer; he followed the man to the synagogue. After the services, he approached the “hakham” (haham), the elder of the synagogue, told him he had escaped from prison, and asked for help. The “hakham” organized the plan to hide the escapee, and they hid him until the end of the war, for nearly two years. In the meantime, the escapee fell in love with the hakham’s daughter; they got married, and Zamila’s sister was born. After the war her father and mother returned to Bitola.

Zamila talks about how family togetherness was of great importance. She showed a picture of the entire extended family engaged in the construction of a vacation home. Her father and a Wallabian (?) family had planned on building a house together, but it fell through because of business developments.

Zamila talks about a book dealing with the ethnic life of the Macedonian Jews. The book was translated into four languages (Spanish, Hebrew, English, and French). She is happy that some record is maintained of this folklore, even if just in a book. Although the community was not very observant, the holidays were celebrated in a traditional way. Her family was not very religious; they observed at a basic level, but lax. All the holidays were celebrated according to tradition. Zamila describes how they observed each holiday: Sukkot (Succoth) --- build a Sukkah; Pesach---they ate matzot, not bread; Rosh Hashanah---they ate apples and honey; Purim---children received monetary gifts and baked cakes in the specific shape; etc. For Saturday they would say appropriate prayers before doing other things. In Bitola’s multi-cultural environment, they celebrated the Jewish holidays with their non-Jewish neighbors and also with Christians.

Every Jewish house had an oven; they cooked for a whole week and for Shabbat. No meals have ever tasted like the ones from those days. There was a Shabbat ritual every weekend; it was obligatory at home and in accordance with ritual.

(Zamila shows more pictures of her relatives.)

TAPE 2

During the war, the Jews were aware that Bulgarians were preparing the deportation. The deportation was initially planned for a later date, but the Bulgarians decided to expedite it because the Jews were aware that something bad was going to happen. The family prepared
food and decided not to spend the night at home. The father arranged for a friend to pick up movable property to keep until they returned. Zamila cooked beans, and said she would be back in the morning. She left without even hugging her family. Her father was sympathetic to the Partisans. He collected money for the movement and did not object to Zamila’s leaving.

Meeting that night with a young Communist, Stela (Stella) Levi, Zamila took Stela with her that night. They left, hiding in a church yard, and came to a store to meet their helper. But he left because there was something suspicious in town; the police were preparing something. They waited all night in the store. All of a sudden they heard a horse galloping; the Jewish part of town was blocked. Five to six hours later, they heard a noise approaching --- shouting, crying for help; merciless soldiers marching people on. She can’t forget those voices. She observed the column from the store. She even had the urge to leave with the people, but they were locked in.

The people marched to the train station; there was a terrible silence. In the morning, the store owner didn’t come. In the evening, he came with other hidden Jews; Roza (Rosa) Kamhi (?), Estreja Ovadija ((Estreya Oxadiya/Ovadja/Ovadya), Adela Faradji (?) and another communist; eight people in two square meters. Boro Miljoslei (Milyovski ?) came to say that all Jews were taken by trains, and their property was sealed. They stayed without water and food. The communists took the communist; only women were left locked up in the store. They stayed there for a month; they had no connection with the Partisans. They wanted to go to the Partisans, but the Partisans did not seek them. Zamila was insulted by partisan legends that Jews didn’t want to join the Partisans.

While waiting for someone from the Partisans to come pick them up, they were hiding in the store. Agents were coming every morning to buy cigarettes. There were problems during their stay in the store --- no food; illness; it was unsanitary. The Partisan connection was reported to be coming. The police became suspicious because there was a smell coming from the store. One night they transferred to the apartment of a poor local Communist; here they had their first warm meal. This was for only one night; they went back to the store after the police inspection of the store.

One night, after thanking the store owner, they went to meet the Partisans. However, they lost the connection and hid in some rubble for the night. They didn’t know where the connection was, and they could not go back to the store. They went to the home of a local communist and demanded from his sister (?) that they be put in touch with the Partisans. The communist came back, and though it was curfew, he took them through town. They even met a police patrol, but said that they didn’t have a watch and were just walking on the corro (? unreadable). They arrived at the National Bank, and a Slovenian woman (a communist) hid them for three days in a shed. They were hid from the police and the woman’s father.

They arrived at a park to meet the Partisan connection. The Bulgarian patrol did not notice them; they were in the bushes. Paole (?), a connection, came and took them to the café. He left, but
was soon arrested as the police broke their operation. However, they managed to slip in to Greece with a Partisan patrol.

They had a good reception in a Partisan unit. There were Jews there inquiring about the fate of the Jews. They answered that the Jews were taken to Monopol, but what happened later, they did not know. There were also inquiries about why there were no more Jews coming to the Partisans. Zamila said that there were small groups in Greece and Albania who might join later.

It was a new life in the Partisans for urban kids; they got Partisan names --- not Jewish names. The Partisans knew them by Partisan names; most people did not know they were Jewish. They learned to use weapons, tactics, strategy. Zamila became a journalist in charge of a Partisan bulletin. There were Solomon (Salomon) Sadikario’s articles about Jews, the Liberation movement, and how to celebrate May 1.

There were thirty people in the unit; ten Jews. Gradually more people joined. In 1943 the first Macedonian battalion was formed; it had three companies. The Jews were good fighters and good organizers. The Jews in the unit had a secret meeting when Zamila joined. They promised and vowed that they would not be cowards, as the stereotype was that they were bad fighters. The vow was that they themselves would kill a Jewish coward. In the three companies of the Macedonian battalion, three Jews were commissars (i.e. one in every unit).

Aron Bahar, “Milan,” a unit commander, was brave and excellent. Whenever he captured or killed a German, he would say, “Today I avenged my mother, sister, etc.” There were many difficult battles, mostly with Albanian Fascists and Bulgarian, but also with Germans and Italians. The “Bogomilski (?) Pohod” (i.e. campaign), in February 1944 was a series of difficult battles (also the “Februarski Pohod”) with 30,000 Bulgarians. (Note: the two pohods may be different names for the same thing.)

There were English officers as liaisons in the unit. One who was falling behind was shot by the Bulgarians. Also, a group of girls, who could not follow the unit’s pace, was captured by the Bulgarians and raped and killed. There were hardships during the march --- hunger, frostbite, hallucinations. They crossed the Black River (“Cherna Reka”) on February 12; Cede (Chede) Filipovski carried her across the river. They arrived at Berovo (Bahovo, Balrovo) with heavy losses; Zamila had hallucinations. There was an excellent reception by the villagers here.

They moved to Fustani (?), a village of Greeks expelled from Turkey, where they had a great reception. The First Congress of Youth was held in Fustani. The Jewish delegates, Zamila Kolonomos and Solomon Sadikario spoke about Jewish participation in the liberation movement. Zamila later became a Communist functionary in Tetovo. She married Cede Filipovski who went to the Military Academy in Belgrade. He was later killed in a motorcycle crash.

Zamila show photographs.
Zamila talked about problems she had with gangrene from frostbite. She used some mixture of oil and wax and sun exposure and cured her leg. There were no doctors, no surgeons; during the war; even medicines were in English.

Zamila married the man who had saved her life five times, Cede Filipovski. They were married by a priest after the liberation of Gostivar (?)

They went to see Bitola, which had already been liberated. They went to the cemetery which was destroyed; they did not find her mother’s grave. The cemetery is still destroyed today. They went to the Jewish quarter where they found no familiar people; they were all people who had moved from the villages. The synagogue was desecrated and turned into a meat processing plant. There was someone living in her house.

After Zamila’s husband was killed in a motorcycle accident, she gave birth to Cedomirka (?), who was named after her dead husband. The Isah (?) family lived in their house; the man committed suicide. People started returning from the camps; many lived in Zamila’s house. Zamila sold her dead mother’s old clothes for bread and food. There were around ten people in the house. Josef (Zosef) Kamhi became president of the renewed Jewish Community.

It was only long after the liberation that they learned what happened to the Jews in Treblinka. That night when the Jews were being deported, they did not see anything. They just heard a terrible noise that is still there with her today. There was no time or connections for the Jews to flee to Albania and Greece. The Jews did not have connections with the countryside.