

Interview with: Alegra Koen (Simcha)

Interviewer: Ilana Solowiejczyk

Interviewed on: 9/20/11

(Translator's note: the interviewee was rambling. Only at the end of the interview I was able to put everything sort of "in order". She did not listen/hear when the interviewer interrupted for clarifications. This is the best I could do.)

Alegra Koen was born in Bitola, Yugoslavia, on September 17, 1922.

There was anti-Semitism before the war. They were all fearful. Most of the neighbors were Christian. Father worked in money exchange. There were five children. She was the only girl. Alegra went as far as 4 years in the gymnasium, not the eight required to enter a university. In the school they had one hour a week of Jewish religion instruction.

One night the chief of police, a friend of her older brother, came to their house at 9 p.m. and told them to leave before 6 a.m. because they were going to be taken, the city was going to be encircled, and they would not be able to leave. The 5 siblings left but the elderly parents stayed behind. A truck belonging to some smugglers came to take them away to Tirana, in Albania, occupied by the Italians. They needed to go by boat. Alegra did not have any false documents, like many other refugees there. The older, married brother (who had documents for himself, his wife and son) fabricated a story for her; the other brothers were taken immediately to prison. Some Albanese helped them. When they found out they were Jews, they were surprised they did not have a tail! She stayed with a family that had 2 girls of Alegra's age. Later on, she stayed with her cousin and aunt, and they rented a house together. They stayed there for a year. After the brothers were freed from prison they were sent to a small town, Kabalia (?) where they were interned. Alegra joined them to take care of them. The Joint supported them (?) They were hungry. Since pork was raised nearby, Alegra partook of their food. The local war between Germans and Italians. They wanted to hang or shoot them. She used her youth and beauty to persuade them not to kill her brothers. After liberation she went back to Yugoslavia, to Zagreb. She did not find her home or her parents. There were food kitchens for those returning, and they slept in a school building. An old friend of her brother's found her there, while she was waiting in the food in line. He had gotten his own house back. He and his parents had hid in the mountain. He was a partisan. He married her later. He invited her to move in with them, and she did. They were married in 1947.

The ghetto in Monastir. After the war the older brother supported them all, working in textiles. Family lived in Zagreb. Because of the anti-Semitic atmosphere there, they said they were Bulgarians. Pavelik was worse than Hitler, Alegra said. The Bulgarian embassy gave them papers as Bulgarians (not too clear.) Chaim had an Albanese passport. (Not clear which brother that was.) They went to Italy, and lived in Bari. He never went back to Yugoslavia. Alegra says that even if she was not in a concentration camp, life was hard during the war. In order to escape Tito and Communism, the other brothers escaped to

Chile. When husband died she joined them with her son, but she did not like the country. She returned to her home but after a brief sojourn there she was convinced to return to Chile She went back to Yugoslavia once, with her son Dario, to visit her in-laws.

Her final message: "Do not forget what happened"