
Klara PINTO

MOTHER'S WISTFUL LOOK

Klara Pinto was born in Sarajevo in 1936. She was the eighth surviving child. Her older siblings were Remika, Kokolo, Braco, Blanka, Zlata, Mošo, Lunčika and she was followed by Sida and Florica. Before she was born her mother delivered twins who died at birth. Another girl was born in 1935, named Klara after an aunt of that name who died before she was born. And so she is named after her late sister and aunt. She comes from a poor family. Her father was a cobbler named Abram Pinto. Her mother's name was Mazalta, née Samokovlija.

One day they threw us out of the apartment because we were unable to pay the rent. For some days all our things were out in the street. I remember that we children guarded our belongings during the day and at night my father with an uncle took over. We children slept in the houses of our relatives and mother's friends. The sight of our things there was horrible. I know that we were even in the papers. A reporter came and wrote that there was a family out in the street. I don't know how the problem of our apartment was solved, I just know that, ten days later we got an apartment in the courtyard. There were two rooms and a wooden balcony. There were a large number of tenants in the front building and in the courtyard apartments. One day I was playing on the balcony, I had a scooter and was coasting over the balustrade. My little sister came up to me and I would have fallen over the balustrade had she not held me back! She was holding me by my dress. She wasn't strong enough to pull me back, so I stayed in this unenviable position for quite

some time. The gate was open so there were a lot of people out in the street who expected me to fall. They were banging on the wooden entrance downstairs for someone to open it or to break the door down to save me. I don't know how they saved me, I suppose they broke the door downstairs. My little sister and I were probably at home alone.

We used to make our own bread and then take it to the bakery. I remember that one day I took the bread to the bakery and the basket fell on the ground. I began to cry. I was afraid of what they would say to me when I got home and that we wouldn't have anything to eat. I picked up all the dough and put it back in the little basket and, while doing this, I rolled all the little stones into the dough with my hand. When we ate that bread we all wondered why it was full of little stones and I was the only one who knew and I didn't dare tell them. From that period I remember going swimming in the Miljacka river with my mother. One day I took my little sister's comforter from her and hid under the blanket to suck it without anyone seeing me. Someone lifted the blanket and saw that I was sucking, so they laughed at me and I was ashamed. Judging by everything, it seems that I had to grow up rapidly because I had a little sister, but I still wanted to be small.

The year 1941 came, the Ustaša came, our enemies came. Then I learnt that I was a Jew, that I had to wear a yellow armband. I was very surprised at this because I didn't know what Jews were. To me it seemed that I was no different from other children and it seemed to me that other people who weren't Jews were no different from my father and mother. There was chaos in my head. I began to think a lot and to think turbulently about what was happening around me, about what the adults were talking about. I learnt that I was five years old and that my sister Renika was to be married. I heard that she had never seen the man she was going to marry. I have already written about my father's sister, whose name was Renika and who had a husband, Vinko Škaro. This Vinko had a brother, Jozo. My aunt asked Jozo to take one of her nieces as his wife, and so save at least one child. Jozo, who was a Catholic, chose our eldest sister, Renika. She immediately went to Busovača to him and I never saw her again in Sarajevo. There was a lot of talk, a lot of whispering. I didn't understand anything. I was just afraid. I didn't leave the house. I spoke to no one, I was simply disappearing. A doctor was called in, this was the first time I had heard of a doctor, and I didn't understand why this man was touching me like that. I was afraid that he was also an Ustaša and that he was angry because I wasn't wearing a large letter "J".

Then they told me that children didn't have to wear the "J". If he wasn't an Ustaša then why was he asking me what was hurting when there was nothing hurting me? The doctor left just as he had come: nothing changed, I continued to be surprised and to be afraid.

Suddenly some men came, banging about in their boots which were black, new and nicely polished. There was dead silence in the house. There was fear reflected in the eyes of my whole family. My brother Braco said that we should go and beg those people not to take them away. I didn't know who or what was to be taken away, but I did go with my sisters to beg them. We started begging and when that didn't work, we all started to cry and kiss their boots. It was no use. They took away Kokolo, Braco, Father and Mošo. Later I heard that they had taken them to the Jasenovac camp. This was the first time I heard the word "camp". I understood that they were taking all men who were Jews to Jasenovac. Little by little I began to understand who the Germans were, who the Ustaša were and who the Jews were. It was just that this was all a bit vague for me. With my father and brothers away, life was sad.

Mother and we six girls remained in the house. One day we packed up and put our things in a cart. The packing of the things was supervised by a man with a rifle. When the cart with our things set off and we all started to walk behind it, a neighbour ran over. I thought she had come to say goodbye to us, but she spoke to the man with the rifle saying: "That's not all of them, they have another sister who was married yesterday." The man with the rifle said "What business is it of yours?" and we set off. I realised that she meant my sister Renika and that she was evil and mean. I realised that the man with the rifle was better than her. He was our enemy but she was our friend because she had many times drunk coffee with my mother. We reached the railway station and got into wagons that were used for carrying cargo and animals. There were a lot of women and a lot of children, most of them female. I don't know how long we travelled, I just know that we set off during the day and left the train during the day. I don't know whether we spent one or more nights travelling. I know that we unpacked our mattresses and blankets and that we slept in the wagon. I also know that there wasn't enough space. Some of us slept underneath, some of us beside, some up some down. We had a bowl in which we relieved ourselves and which we emptied through a small window. They could barely fit this bowl through the little window. Mother told us that we were going to where

things would be better. She promised that we would see Father and our brothers. I was again happy and cheerful, although I never saw my father and my brothers again. I know that Mother said that I looked as if I was better. I was surprised that she talked about my illness all the time when I was healthy and there was nothing wrong with me. We left the train at the mill in Đakovo.

I remember that we lived upstairs, and would climb up there on wooden stairs. The upper floor was made of wood and there were wooden bars on the walls. The whole floor was one, big, long room with a lot of people in it. Again we slept on the floor, on our things, and we had as much room as we had had in that wagon. I can't say that life in the camp was bad for me. We children always played outdoors. Our only problem was the lavatory. Right in the middle of the yard there was a big hole with some wooden boards over it. We had to stand on those boards and relieve ourselves. I was always afraid that I would fall into the faeces. Because of this we children would go to the real lavatory which was only for the camp guards, who had rifles. Sometimes we would keep guard, watching the place where the men with rifles were, and then go one by one to the nice lavatory. This was a major event for us. There were people selling food who used to come to the camp (probably villagers). We used to buy that food, we gave away gold and nice things to survive. My mother had a gold chain and she said that it was with me. I didn't know where it was. Later I discovered that this chain was sewn into the collar of my coat. I don't know what eventually happened to this chain. One day I saw my sister Renika at an iron door. I was some distance away, but I was really happy and ran to the gate as fast as I could. As I ran I was stopped by two men with bayonets on their rifles and, with a terrifying "Halt!", they crossed their bayonets right in front of me. Although it's almost forty years since that day, that "Halt!" still echoes in my ears. I stopped short and just couldn't understand why I couldn't go over to my sister. Even though we were all locked up in that camp, I didn't feel as if I was in prison, instead I thought that we had moved in there and that all of us were there waiting for our fathers and brothers and that when they came we would return home. Mother always had us believing that Father would come for us one day.

My younger sisters Sida and Florica, and I got into a wagon inside the camp itself and headed for Osijek. My sisters immediately became lost among the other children while I stayed behind on the steps of the wagon and waited for Mother to come with me. Mother told me to get

inside the wagon with my sisters because I was older and should look after them. I didn't want to go. Mother played her last trump and said that I should go inside, take care of my little sisters, and that she would follow. I remember that moment as if it happened today. I remember my mother's wistful look. I think that this was the moment at which I became an adult. I realised that we had to go and that we would never see Mother again. I didn't want to tell my mother that I knew she was just saying this to keep me calm. I pretended to believe her and told her I would look after my little sisters until she came. I don't remember the journey to Osijek at all. I just remember the rooms at the Jewish Community to which we were taken so that we could be taken in by families who wanted to adopt us.

That same evening, Mr Vladimir Ebenšpanger came to adopt a male child. He used to say, later, that he came up to me, caressed my head and said: "Isn't this girl pretty." I don't remember that. He went on to pick a boy, however I kept running after him and pulling him by his trousers. He thought for a long time about what he should do, he had agreed with his wife that he would bring a boy, but I wouldn't leave his side. Finally he said: "Maybe it is my destiny to take this little girl," and decided on me. I wanted to go with him immediately, because he seemed so nice to me, but I didn't want to leave my sisters behind. I said that I was the grown-up one and that I had to look after them. They explained to me that Mother had told me that I had to look after them in the train and that, from now on, grown-up people would take care of them. Not until they promised me that we would be separated only at night and that we would see one another every day did we agree to be separated and each of us took our things from our bundle.

I remember that my foster father (Vladimir Ebenšpanger) took me to a shop across from the cathedral in which my foster mother worked selling leather goods. They put me on the counter and everyone came to look at me. I was given something really nice to eat, although I don't know what it was. I remember banging with my little legs against the counter. When my foster mother came she began to shout because he had brought such a small and skinny child, although they had agreed he would bring an older boy. My foster father looked at me and said: "Look, isn't this child a darling, and beautiful!" My female vanity must have been activated at that moment because this was something no one had ever said about me before and I fell in love with him. I know that galways held him by the hand and never left his side. That

evening I went to the apartment. This was a one-room apartment with a bathroom and running hot water. Everything looked pretty and clean to me. That evening they said that they would give me a bath but, to their great surprise, I washed myself. I remember that later they used to say that they didn't need to take care of me because I knew how to do everything on my own. They would say that I was a decent girl and well brought up. The problems continued in the morning, when we got up – I had slept between them in their double bed – and there were lice crawling from my head into the bed. My foster mother clutched her head. I was very surprised that she should make such a fuss about so many lice which, probably, I had always had and saw as normal inhabitants of my head. I never again saw the clothes I had brought with me. They immediately dressed me in some new and, for me, beautiful things and new pyjamas. I hadn't known such things existed at all, because I didn't know that people should undress before going to bed and put on something called pyjamas.



Klara (L) is embraced by her mother's sister, Fina, in the first days of her adoption

I was by then six years old. Obviously the next thing was delousing. I was very pleased with all the attention I was given. I felt like a princess. I forgot that I had Mother, Father, brothers and sisters. I had arrived in a new world which I liked a great deal. I had become rich, everything was very clean. I found everything entertaining. I admired everything and was astonished by everything. The clothes I had been given came from Vesna. My foster mother had a sister, Judita Bakajlić, who had a daughter, Vesna, and another sister, Fina, who had no children. So there were three families and only one child. This Vesna was a spoilt brat who had a very nice life. On the other hand, I was from a poor family, whose life had been very difficult. I was content to have come to a completely different environment where I was given the kind of things and toys which I could not even have dreamt existed. She, however, had been given a little cousin with whom she had to share everything, although up to that

I was by then six years old. Obviously the next thing was delousing. I was very pleased with all the attention I was given. I felt like a princess. I forgot that I had Mother, Father, brothers and sisters. I had arrived in a new world which I liked a great deal. I had become rich, everything was very clean. I found everything entertaining. I admired everything and was astonished by everything. The clothes I had been given came from Vesna. My foster mother had a sister, Judita Bakajlić, who had a daughter, Vesna, and another sister, Fina, who had no children. So there were three families and only one child. This Vesna was a spoilt brat who had a very nice life. On the other hand, I was from a poor family, whose life had been very difficult. I was content to have come to a completely different environment where I was given the kind of things and toys which I could not even have dreamt existed. She, however, had been given a little cousin with whom she had to share everything, although up to that

point she had never shared anything and had been everyone's favourite. Now these three sisters and their three husbands also shared their love with me. It goes without saying that they always took my side because I was far more modest and I always gave in, because I had learnt to share with my brothers and sisters. I think that for Vesna, this period was like days spent in hell. If I put on a pair of slippers she wanted exactly that pair; if I took a different pair she no longer wanted the ones she had cried for but the ones I had taken. Of course when the adults saw this they shouted at her and defended me. I felt sorry for Vesna. She was a year and a half older than me. She was born in 1934. When my foster mother wanted to spank her, I put my little hand on her behind so that the blow fell on my hand.

When I had had enough of all these new and pretty things, and when I had had enough to eat, I began to feel nostalgia for my mother and my little sisters. First I remembered the things I had brought from the camp. Somehow it seemed to me that these were the most direct connection with my previous life. At first they would tell me that they had taken these things to have them washed because they were all dirty, just as I had had lice; however when enough time had passed for them to have been washed, they told me they had taken my things up to the attic and locked them in a cupboard. I had grown and could no longer fit into these things, so why should I need them now when I had other things which were nicer! When I persisted in asking for my things, at least to see them, they kept repeating that they were up in the attic. I know that after that, for many years, I would go to any possible attic to look for my things but that I didn't find them. Even now I don't know what happened to those things. They probably threw them out because they weren't worth keeping but didn't want to tell me. Later I stopped enquiring about them, they probably would have told me when I was grown up, but by then I had completely forgotten about them. I know I occasionally visited the families who had taken my little sisters in, but even that became all the more infrequent. One day I felt like eating *ašlame*. I asked them to get some for me. But my family didn't know what these were, nobody knew. I thought, at that time, that *ašlame* grew only in Sarajevo. One day my foster mother's sister Fina fell ill and went to hospital. I didn't want to let her go to the hospital. When we went to visit her I ran over to her and began crying and sobbing: "I told you not to go to the hospital." Everybody laughed, although this laughter of theirs was something I could not understand at all. When it was

time for us to go home, I couldn't be separated from her bed. They had to simply drag me away from it. As we started walking towards the door, the nurse was bringing Aunt Fina her supper and I shouted "Those are *ašlame!*" Then my foster parents saw that they were cherries. I haven't mentioned yet that the family which adopted me was Jewish. Aunt Fina had married a Catholic, Joza Đurđević, and Aunt Judita, Vesna's mother, a Serb, Jovo Bakajlić. When the time came for Jews to be taken from Osijek to camp, my foster parents paid quite a lot of money and moved to Split, which was under the Italians. They left and I stayed with Aunt Fina.

She was afraid to keep me with her in case she too would be taken away, because she was Jewish by origin. She gave me away to some people. I didn't want to stay with anyone else so I returned to my aunt. I found my way back to my aunt just as a dog finds his way back to his master. She again gave me away, to some other woman, this time a little further away, but again I returned. And so she sent me away like this four times, to various families, and she wanted me to stay somewhere but no family was good for me. I would always return home on foot, no matter how far away she took me. When my aunt had had enough of this she said: "I won't send her anywhere any more, if the child is so dependent on me then let them take me to camp along with her. So, thanks to my persistence, I achieved my goal. Not long after this, perhaps a month or so later, some Irma came, I don't remember her last name, to take me to Split. She had a passport with my photograph in it. I was to travel as her daughter. Before we set off they told me that I was to address her as mother and that I mustn't get confused. And so, at the age of six, I got my third mother. They also told me that I wasn't to speak to anyone. They told me never to leave the side of this mother of mine, not to answer any questions and that, if anyone wanted to speak to me I should just say "I want to go to my mother. Where is my mother?"

I don't remember coming ashore in Split or how I reached my home. I only remember that I was hidden behind a curtain in a house. When I saw that Vladimir Ebenšpanger had come, I cried "Father," and ran into his embrace and I was really happy to see him.

In Split we lived with the Jagodić family as tenants and we had a floor to ourselves. My foster father worked as a dentist in a dental clinic. I liked going to the clinic with him. One day we went swimming at Bačvice; I didn't like the sea and began to cry. My foster father threw me into the sea, which was over my head. I was screaming, so the

whole beach was buzzing, people asking him what he was doing and accusing him of mistreating me and torturing me. He replied to them: "Leave me alone, she is mine and I know what I'm doing." It seems that he was also persistent and didn't give up without achieving his goal. I learnt to swim that same day. The following day we went swimming again and I wouldn't get out of the water. On the third day I was jumping into the water and swimming in the deep, where the bigger children were swimming.

I began school in Split, at the private school of Mancika Levi. I attended school for about six months until Italy capitulated. When we heard about the capitulation of Italy we went to Žrnovica. There we lived in peace for a short time, before the bombing happened. Every time the bombing began we had to go to a shelter. One day I said that I would have liked to be the enemy. They asked me why and I said that in that case no one would be attacking me and dropping bombs on me. They told me that we also dropped bombs on the enemy. Once more, I didn't understand.

We didn't have peace in Žrnovica for long, we had to head for the hills. We set off on foot. Once more some men with rifles escorted us.

But these were different people, not the kind we had met up to that point. These people were nice to us, they talked to us and laughed with us. They were guarding us. We walked a long way in the hills. Sometimes there were aircraft flying over us and bombing. Then we would have to lie down and wait for the planes to leave. One day when the planes came I was lying on my stomach and didn't want to get up. They were calling me. I heard them calling me and didn't want to get up. I don't know why. Then they said that I must be dead. I think they said they should either leave me behind or bury me. Then, calmly, without saying anything, I finally stood up. They looked to see if I was



*Klara as a first grade student
in the public primary school
in Split, 1942*

wounded, they were surprised at what had happened and I was wondering about it too. Who knows why I wouldn't get up.

After fleeing for several days we arrived at some house. Now it seems to me that it was some climbers' lodge. I think that Tito rode in that day, with some woman, probably a nurse. He gave me some sweets. At the time I was far more interested in the sweets than in this man. I had the feeling that everything was being done the way he wanted it. I too was swallowing everything he said, but I actually never swallowed anything. It was some kind of sublime state, as if we had expected this man to take us to heaven. Or maybe it was that people were hanging onto his words the way a drowning man clutches at a straw. However, watching the other people, I followed their example. We were at that house for only one afternoon and then continued on. We both slept in and walked through the woods. I don't know how many of us there were, I just remember that it was a largish group of people and that it grew larger every day until, one day, we arrived at a castle on the land across from the island of Vis. The Partisans were already there and I think that a welcoming reception was organised. We were given food, but I remember they kept telling us to be careful with food, because we hadn't eaten for months. We children, there were five or six of us, were given a glass of milk each.

That evening we quietly went to the beach. It was a cold and dark night, drizzling rain. We were waiting for a boat to come and get us. There were wounded people, Partisans, with us. The wounded men were lying on stretchers. They told us to be very quiet so that the Germans wouldn't hear us. Smoking was forbidden. I remember that some people were smoking and that they were holding their cigarettes in such a way that they were hiding them with their hands. There were different warnings and bans being heard all the time. To me it seemed as if we waited forever before the boat came. In the boat we were standing and the wounded were lying on stretchers.

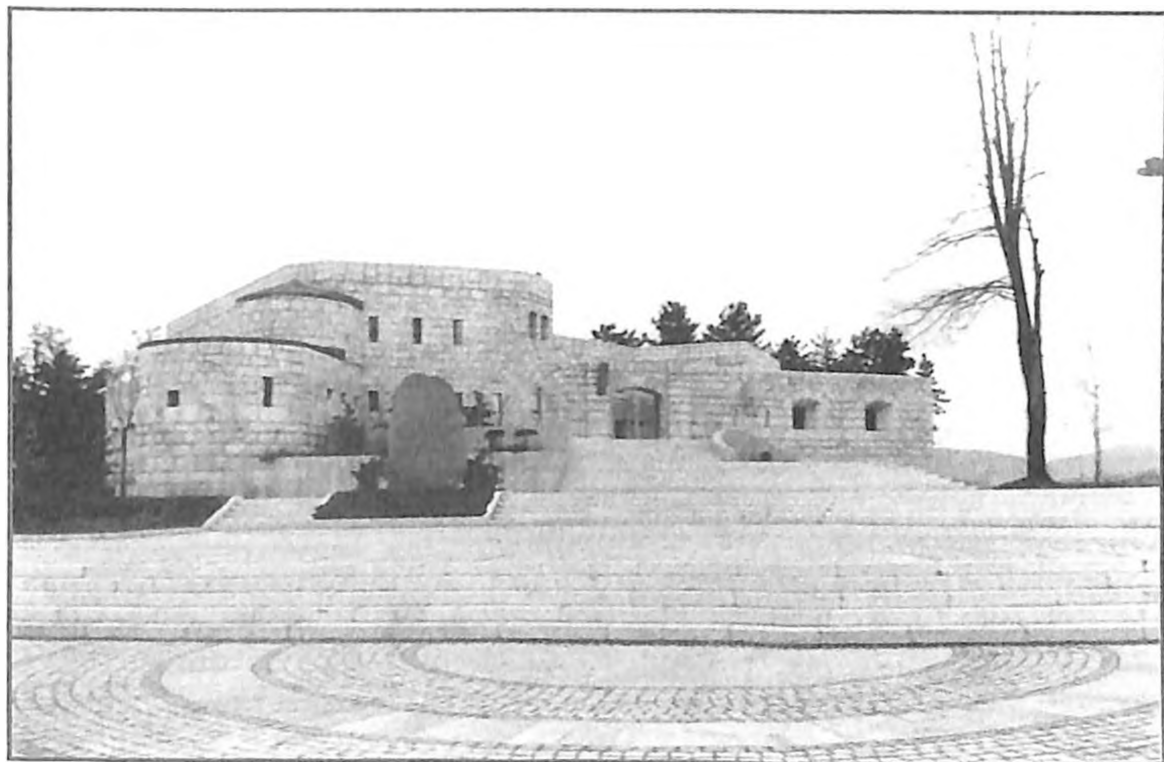
We finally set off for Vis. The rain set off with us, falling more and more heavily. Not much later, as we were sailing quietly, they opened fire on us from Vis. Everyone began shouting that the captain should turn back. The captain listened to no one, he just went forward, towards the shooting. People on the boat were shouting: "People, children, friends, don't shoot!" Nothing helped. They fired on us mercilessly from Vis. We threw ourselves down on the floor of the boat. Now the wounded men in their cots were the most exposed. The wounded, who were as

afraid as we were, simply rolled off their beds and fell on us. After sailing for an eternity, we reached Vis. Just before we reached the shore they stopped shooting at us. When we came ashore, they asked the people there on the beach if they had heard the shouting from the boat. They replied that Ustaša could shout the same way. They had opened fire on us from Vis either because the signal had changed, or our commander didn't know the signal, or he was unable to send the signal because of the rain. I don't know exactly what happened. Anyway, the people on Vis were sure that this was an enemy vessel. That night they put us up in a big room and, as much as possible, they warmed us up. I don't know how long we were on Vis. I don't know how we reached Vela Luka. I just know that one day I boarded a boat and set off for Italy with my foster parents, another group of people and two Italian soldiers.

In Bari we had to report at some counter. Those who were reporting stood in line. The family in front of us said that they were Croats. The man at the counter didn't want to register them. He said: "We're not taking you in, we have no room for you. Why did you flee? The Germans weren't bothering you, you weren't being chased by the Germans and you didn't need to flee!" He simply wouldn't register these people. After this registration we travelled to the Carbonari camp. This was a reception camp.

The camp was fenced off with wire. We lived in barracks. There were a lot of beds in each barracks. Each family had bunk beds. These bunks were actually a family apartment. We lived and ate on these beds. We were given food from a cauldron. Next to our bed was the bed of Dragec Ebenšpanger, my foster father's cousin. How they ended up there with us I don't know. Dragec had a wife Terka and a daughter Ljerka who was my age. There were Jews from everywhere in this camp, under the protection of the British. Life in the camp was quite peaceful. We all actually lived like one big family. We shared one bathroom with many showers and there were wooden boards on the floor. One day I found an earring on the bathroom floor. I played with it for quite a while. Then I wanted to change it for something else. It was only then that the grown-ups saw the earring in my hand and asked me where I had got it. I said that I had found it in the bathroom. Everyone in the camp except me had heard that an earring had been lost. Unfortunately, the woman who had lost the earring had left on a transport to Israel. They sent the earring on another transport to Israel. However we later learnt that neither the first nor the second transport had ever reached Israel, they had both been sunk.

There was a social life organised for us in the camp. There were also religious services. We children also gave performances, they taught us recitations. At Purim they would give us gifts. We were also bombed while in the camp. The night was like day because of the bombing. The British watched all this calmly and smoked. I found out that evening that the British are very cold. After about six months in the camp, a British woman commander came asking for seven Jewish families who would go to Selva di Fazano to be janitors in villas in which British convalescents were to be accommodated. Seven families signed up: Vladimir Ebenšpanger with his wife and daughter, Dragec Ebenšpanger with his wife and daughter, Kon with his wife, Kabiljo with his wife and daughter. I don't know who the others were. And so we set off to Selva di Fazano.



Entrance to the Vraca Monument in Sarajevo where the names of those who perished in the winds of war and the Holocaust are recorded for all time

There the British had confiscated the villas of wealthy Italians who lived in Fazano and had these villas as their summer houses. Each house had several rooms in which British soldiers and officers were staying, mostly officers who had been released from hospital as conva-

lescents. Each family was assigned to a villa in which there were about fourteen officers. The janitors' duty was to make tea in the morning, clean shoes and sweep the apartment. The bed linen was washed in communal laundries and lunch and dinner were served in communal restaurants. There I enrolled in the second grade of Italian primary school. My mother tongue was Spanish (Ladino). I had been adopted by people whose mother tongue was German (they were Ashkenazi). I went to the Italian school and lived with the British. I was able to communicate in these languages and I also spoke Croatian. In fact I didn't know any language really well. I failed the second grade of primary school at eight years of age. I repeated the second grade. I got a ten in mathematics and a six or seven in the other subjects, so I passed.

We no longer felt that it was war. I would often go swimming with the officers and travelled with the British to Bari, where I went to the theatre for the first time, to Taranto and Brindisi. We lived well and we were carefree.

We set off for Yugoslavia on the first transport after the liberation. The journey to Yugoslavia was very tiring. On board the ship, one man after another had epilepsy, they would throw themselves around on the deck. Each man had to be held by four people so as not to hurt himself. As we approached the shore of Yugoslavia, a minesweeper sailed ahead of us. We were moving very slowly and expecting the whole time to hit a mine. We were lucky and reached the shore. We got to Osijek via Zagreb. There I finished the third and fourth grades in six months. I lived happily with the Ebenšpanger family until I married.