

(The first letter)

My Dearest,

Some time ago when we talked something about my family and where we were from and how I survived - understandable. It is only when I have an interest in one's roots - but then I leave something about the past with them. A whole world then disappeared which formed us, and which has, and which is. In time even some of our memories are noticing we forget and when we remember.

While Old Grandma¹ was alive and I did not expect (as I should have) remembered everything so well could

such things didn't interest her much. It was quite late: it bored her to write about it, and she never learned how to tell me some things.

Aleksandar Ajzinberg

**LETTERS TO
MATVEJ**

ALEKSANDAR AJZINBERG

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Names of all objects, vilages and towns in Serbia as well as all Serbian and Russian names and surnsmes written in this book are printed on Serbian alphabet.

The Serbian alphabet is strictly phonetic.

The pronunciation of each letter is always the same.

The letters are pronounced as follows:

Printed letter	Pronunciation
a or A	English <i>a</i> in <i>father</i>
b or B	English <i>b</i>
v or V	English <i>v</i>
g or G	English <i>g</i> in <i>go</i>
d or D	English <i>d</i>
đ or Đ	a sound like <i>j</i> in <i>Jew</i> but slightly softer
e or E	English <i>e</i> in <i>pet</i>
ž or Ž	English <i>s</i> in <i>pleasure</i>
z or Z	English <i>z</i>
i or I	English <i>i</i> in <i>mashine</i>
j or J	English <i>j</i> in <i>jet</i>
k or K	English <i>k</i>
l or L	English <i>l</i>
lj or Lj	English <i>lli</i> in <i>million</i>
m or M	English <i>m</i>
n or N	English <i>n</i>
nj or Nj	English <i>ni</i> in <i>onion</i>
o or O	English <i>o</i> in <i>hot</i> , sometimes as <i>or</i> in <i>lord</i>
p or P	English <i>p</i>
r or R	Scottish <i>r</i> in <i>merry</i>
s or S	English <i>ss</i> in <i>glass</i>
t or T	English <i>t</i>
ć or Ć	A sound between the English <i>t</i> in <i>time</i> and <i>ch</i> in <i>chalk</i>
u or U	English <i>u</i> in <i>rule</i>
f or F	English <i>f</i>
h or H	English <i>h</i> and Schottish <i>ch</i> in <i>loch</i>
c or C	English <i>ts</i> in <i>lots</i>
č or Č	English <i>ch</i> in <i>chalk</i>
dž or Dž	English <i>j</i> in <i>John</i>
š or Š	English <i>sh</i> in <i>she</i>

**THIS LETTER IS DEDICATED TO THEM WHO WERE BEFORE US
AND WAS WRITTEN TO THOSE WHO WILL COME AFTER US.**

PREFACE

In 1991, my son, Matvej, left suddenly for Israel because he didn't want to take part in the insanity of the civil war that was just breaking out in our country. He did not want to be drafted and forced to kill people simply because they lived in Croatia, Bosnia, or any other republic of what was then Yugoslavia. Soon after arriving in Israel, Matvej expressed a lot of interest in his family roots and asked me to write to him about it. Additionally, he wanted me to briefly explain how I survived the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Serbia.

At the time, I thought that I could write him just a few pages about it. I was wrong. I ended up writing thirteen rather lengthy letters to him. My wife, Gorjana, and I photocopied all of them. We sent Matvej the originals by mail, but kept the copies in case any were lost en route to Israel.

Many years later, while travelling to a conference, I shared the story of how I survived World War II with a friend. He said it would be very interesting to take everything I had just told him and write it down. A few days later, I showed up with copies of all the letters I had written to Matvej and lent them to him to read. At his suggestion, and after hesitation, I submitted those first thirteen letters to an anonymous literary competition held by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. I called the manuscript simply: Thirteen Letters. Some time later, I was extremely surprised to find out that the text had won first prize in the competition.

After a long break, on the advice of some friends who had read Thirteen Letters and driven by the need to describe for my son what had happened to me after the war had ended, I began

writing more letters. I continued writing, as before, without any literary ambitions.

During the time of the NATO bombings of Serbia in 1999, I finished the last of the letters.

Aleksandar Ajzinberg

Belgrade, Serbia

(The first letter)

Belgrade, 23.03.1992.

My Dearest,

Some time ago when we talked, you told me you would like to know something about my family and my past: who my parents were, where they were from and how I survived World War II... Your interest is quite understandable. It is only when one matures that one begins to show interest in one's roots - but then very often it is too late. Those who know something about the past leave us, not to return, taking their memories with them. A whole world then disappears, a world we sprang from, a world which formed us, and which has, at least partially, made us the way we are. In time even some of our memories pale and disappear. Almost without noticing we forget and when we realize it - it is too late.

While Old Grandma¹ was alive I was preoccupied with other things, and I did not expect (as I should have) that one day she who knew and remembered everything so well could suddenly disappear. My mother knew less and her memory was not always completely reliable. In fact, I think such things didn't interest her much. By the time I decided to enquire, it was quite late: it bored her to write, it was tiring for her to talk to me about it, and she never learned how to use a tape recorder. However, she did tell me some things and I wrote them down. I learned about my father's family mostly from aunt Asja, but (in Tbilisi in 1973) I neither asked her a lot, nor did she herself talk much about it. I don't think she knew a great deal. Moreover, as the youngest child in the family, she barely recalled her eldest brother (my father). After World War I he visited Tbilisi and, it seems, stayed only a few months - and she was quite young then. She knew about him more through the stories of her elder brothers and sisters, but they are not alive any more...

As far as my parents are concerned, I shall begin with my father. His Jewish ancestors, it seems, lived in Ukraine or in the western parts of Russia. By the end of the 18th century, Russia decided to "solve the Jewish problem" in its Orthodox territory. So, in 1827, emperor Nikolai I issued a decree by which a "certain" number of young Jews were to be permitted to do military service for a period of 25 years. By doing so, the emperor thought "...the Jews will be forced to accept Russian culture and the Russian way of life..." (Dubnov, *A Short History of the Jewish People*). When there were not enough young men, boys of 12 and even younger were taken, allocated to special battalions where they received the necessary training so that later, when they grew up, they would be ready for military service. My great grandfather, Isaac Ajzinberg completed

1 This was what you used to call my grandmother Rozalija.



Zinovij Ajzenberg

This picture has been made before 1920. I got it a few years ago.

the required service, took part in the Crimean war (1854-1856) and even distinguished himself by his bravery. (I remember my father saying that his grandfather was a "hero of the Crimean war"). He became an officer and, upon completing his military service, received land as a war veteran, somewhere on the slopes of the Caucasus, which was then considered by the Russians as the "back of beyond"². At that time people were sent there as a punishment, as a form of exile (remember Pushkin and Lermontov). When my grandfather was of school age (around seven) my great grandfather sold the land and went to Tiflis (as the Russians called Tbilisi). My grandfather's name was Zinovij Isaakovič Ajzenberg. He learned a trade and became a watchmaker and jeweller. He had a small shop in the main street of Tiflis (Rustaveli Street), and it was said that he was a very respected man in the city. After the revolution, at the time when almost everything in the Soviet Union was nationalised, even the Communists did not bother him and he remained in possession of his shop until just before he died. Unfortunately, I don't have a photograph of him. I saw in some of the photos that Asja had that he was a tall, lean and handsome man with a short beard. In 1973 I was shown the premises where Grandpa's shop used to be. It was a small flower shop then, a shop which you entered by going down a few narrow steps, as often used to be the case in Tiflis.

My grandfather Zinovij married my grandmother Sofija Matvejevna, and my father Matvej was named after her father. As it turned out, two generations later you inherited the same name. I know very little, almost nothing, about her and the little I know I will tell you when the time comes. Grandpa and Grandma had nine children: Matvej, Avram, Valja, Ester, Saša, Manja, Mosja, Ida and Asja. As a child my father was called Motja. A fact which seems unimportant, but a fact which many years later, in 1943, saved my life. My father was born in 1889. He completed his elementary and secondary school education in his native city and it seems that at that age he enthusiastically embraced progressive socialist or communist ideas, which could have been the reason why he had to leave his country so suddenly³. When, as a very little boy, I once asked him why he

2 In 1958, my mother married Otto Šillinger, an exceptionally good and kind man. They traveled to Tbilisi in the USSR in 1966, and met my father's family. Subsequently I found in Otto's travel diary some interesting entries about the trip:

03.08 ...»in the evening I talked with Avram. The Russian Jews have two synagogues. One is for the «military» Jews and the other one for the non-military ones and they are opposite each other. The «military Jews» are the Ajzenbergs, who served in the Emperor's army for 25 years and then were granted freedom of settlement and land. The children and grandchildren were not required to serve in the army until outbreak of World War I when they were called up. Such military units were formed for direct persecuted groups who thus escaped pogroms. The Cossacks who live in (illegible) practise the Jewish faith. Georgian Jews are religious – the Europeans less so»

3 Taken from Otto's diary again:

30.VI...» Lunch at 6.00 and then we talked. – Valja talks about the events of 1905. When Matvej was arrested, mother immediately went up to the attic to burn the brochures and «perepljot» (a few sheets of paper bound together by sewing) with the title «Workers of All Nations Unite». In the evening we talked about the events 1919 and Matvej's short stay in Tbilisi and even shorter stay in Baku in the uniform of a «serbian officer»... So in Otto's diary I found a solution to a mystery I had often pondered on. I remember my father telling me that he held the rank of officer in the World War I: I think he mentioned that he was a captain, and shortly after the war he renounced his rank because of a conflict he had, as a Communist, with a policeman in Zemun. Then...»he was beaten up badly (...) and stopped political activity». After World War II, I read in his military documents that



Zinovij and Sofija Ajzenberg

Judging by the hat in Zinovij's hand the picture has been made before 1922. After Georgija's "annexing" to the USSR. Soviet people didn't wear hats like this one. I got this picture a few years ago.

had left Tiflis, he answered a bit jokingly that he “had probably trodden on someone’s toes”... At that age, I didn’t understand what that meant: I thought he meant it literally. Relatively recently, among some of the documents I received from my mother, I found a diploma (I can’t imagine under what miraculous circumstances it survived) which shows that Ajzenberg Mordho Zinovijevič enrolled in the First Boys Gymnasium on 1. September 1899. and graduated in 1909. The document was also translated into German.

He talked very little about his childhood - probably, at that age, I wasn’t very interested in it myself. Once he told me about his mother who was very religious and who did all she could to take him to the synagogue on some holidays. Since he was an atheist, she tried to be cunning and told him she would take him to a wine cellar where there was good wine. She took him to the cellar through the synagogue yard and just for a moment she made him enter the synagogue believing that she would thus interest him to return there... I remember him speaking about his mother with great tenderness, but never again did he enter the synagogue. I remember a story about how some people (and it seems they belonged to the “authorities”) were blackmailing his father. Grandfather should have handed money over to them in some dark empty street. My father turned up on his own initiative, with some pistols. He shot and missed and the blackmailers ran away. It seems that Grandfather had to pay the blackmailers later, after all.

Whether because of politics, the shooting or something else, my father suddenly left the Russian Empire as I said, and went to Germany in 1909. He used to tell me that he had left without any money. I have a diploma that shows that he enrolled in the first semester of the Technical Faculty in Munich in January 1909. From a series of documents it is clear that he was a regular student until 1914, when he probably graduated and became an architect. He used to say that his student days were the best days of his life. He knew Esperanto and it seemed that it was of great use to him especially when he started out as a student. Esperantists helped him financially until Grandpa’s money began to arrive from Russia. They helped him find a room and it seems they helped him even more than that: I remember father talking about it with a mysterious smile, saying they had even found him a girlfriend... But he still had financial problems, students usually do. After all, Grandpa had eight more children in the house and probably couldn’t send much. In order to consolidate his financial situation father was a part time fortune-teller. His roommate, who knew a lot of people in the town, persuaded him to do it. They obtained a black suit at a second



Matvej Ajzinberg
about 1904

he was an ordinary soldier, a private. I was ready to doubt my recollections of his story but from Valja’s account it turned out that my father was an officer in the Serbian army – and what took place in Zemun, we may never find out... ..

hand shop, decorated the room with paper dragons and started business. In the beginning Father's partner would give him all the information about their clients in advance: the young lady's name, with whom she was in love, her financial situation, what her ailments were, etc. Father would tell the young lady all that, adding nice prospects for the future, so his reputation as a good fortune-teller was quickly established. His ancestry contributed to it, too: at that time to come from the Caucasus was rather interesting, especially for young and romantic German girls. Later on, when the business developed, his roommate couldn't supply him with information in advance so father had to cope by using general phrases: "...in your childhood you were very ill but thanks to a good doctor you survived"...or..."you had a unhappy love early in life"... (And which German girl did not) and it all had an effect.

When the Russo-German war broke out in 1914 my father wanted to return to Russia. Among the papers I have there is a certificate issued by the Russian Imperial Mission in Munich which says that Mordho Ajzenberg reported on the 20 June/2 August⁴ but could not be "... sent to Russia"...That was probably the reason he escaped to Switzerland, where he told me he was interned. According to his story, he was in a town which was on the edge of a lake. It seems as if there were no real gaols in that town, because he was put in a shack on the beach. In fact, he used to tell me about a ticket office on a beach, on the shore of a lake bordering Italy. Very soon he became bored by just sitting there "doing his nails" so he broke through the wooden wall of the shack, swam across the lake and found himself in Italy. I don't know how much time he spent there. He used to tell me about Milan, a city he liked very much. He would often mention that he studied architecture there. How, for how long - it will remain a secret. He mentioned Rome, where he visited the Vatican and had a chance to see a part normally closed to the public because it had fresco paintings which were not considered decent. He went to see the Pope and 'kissed his slipper. Maybe he did so and maybe he spoke in metaphors, which I was not able to understand then.

He took part in the fighting in World War I, as a volunteer in the Serbian army on the Thesaloniki Front. He probably went there from Italy. According to his stories, at the beginning he was a soldier at the front where he made friends with Miodrag Davidović, son of a respected Serbian politician. Their unit was decimated at the battle of Kajmakčalan in 1916, so the Supreme Command decided to move them to the rear lines and so save the ones who had survived. They were mostly young intellectuals who needed to be saved in order to be the 'brains of the future liberated Serbia. One night, Miodrag went on patrol with two other soldiers and never came back. His death was never explained and it was rumoured that he was killed on the orders of King Alexander who was then regent. (My father knew or suspected something about it, because as soon as the war was over, he visited Ljuba Davidović and told him what he knew about it.) I remember him telling us that together with his friends he would secretly run away to the front and fight until each one of them was given an order to do something else which they could not avoid. So my father, who was an architect, became the director of a military hospital, in Lerin, I think. There is a document among the ones I have which confirms

4 When this document was written, two calendars were in use in Russia: the Julian and the Gregorian. The difference between them is 13 days.

that he was a translator⁵. Maybe he was: besides Russian he spoke fluent German, good Italian, some English and he knew some Greek as well. As far as I remember, he learned Serbian so well that it was impossible to tell that it wasn't his mother tongue. It was only when he did mental arithmetic that he whispered in Russian. It seems that he met and became friends with Dr. Jevsej Kozinski there who until his death remained his "best friend" (that was a phrase he always used when he talked about Jevsej).

Among the documents which have miraculously survived, as I have already said, is an old passport which shows that he travelled to Paris in 1918 and to Russia in 1919. I remember him mentioning that trip. He came back from Tiflis quickly, probably sensing which direction events would shortly take. At that time I couldn't understand a sentence which I heard him repeat several times when talking to friends: "What is happening there is not what I fought for"...

He made many friends on the front. I remember Raša Belopavlović, a senior clerk at the National Bank, Sima Milutinović (who, before World War II, had the Lamiko pharmacy in Knez Mihajlova Street), a man who had a restaurant called Era Gurman in Terazije, and another person who had a restaurant but I forgot his name. Father used to say that these two men had been cooks in the hospital where they became and then remained good friends. There were a few Orthodox priests among his friends too. We visited them for their *slavas* and other holidays, and they sometimes visited us. As far as I remember they were large men, loud, bearded, always in good spirits, in nice mantles robes with red or purple belts over their large stomachs. I remember only one name: archpriest Marko. I think he was the priest of St. Mark's Church until the beginning of World War II. We visited him for his *slava*⁶ and I liked visiting him although I don't remember why. When I think about it today, it is very interesting: the difference in religions, even the fact that my father was an atheist, didn't bother them. One more thing about the priests: they liked good company, they were gourmets, and they liked good wine. My father liked good wine but never drank too much. I remember that we always had wine with meals and he would drink no more than three decilitres for a meal. Naturally if he was among friends he might drink more, but I don't remember him being drunk. He probably learned in Georgia what the right measure was.

When he came to Belgrade after the war, he decided to stay here. (*I often wonder why. Did something alienate him from Georgia or did something here attract him? One day maybe your descendants will wonder what made you leave Belgrade and go to Israel.*) He worked in the Feniks architecture bureau and later on he opened the first factory manufacturing moulded concrete items such as pipes, prefabricated staircases, telephone poles etc. The business did very well at the beginning but his partner tricked him, withdrew all their joint money from the bank, and left my father stranded. So he began working in a bureau again, burdened with debts.

He was very communicative and had many good friends, especially in artistic circles, who he would meet in the restaurants in Skadarlija⁷. They were people of different

5 In one it says that he was a translator in the Serbian-Russian hospital in Beria and Sorovići, and his military documents show that he was in the engineer corps from 1918 to 1919.

6 Slava is a Serbian Orthodox holiday devoted to the family's patron saint.

7 Skadarlija was a bohemian part of Belgrade

professions: painters, sculptors, actors ... I remember him often mentioning the names of the sculptors Petar Palavičini and Rista Stijović, writer Branislav Nušić and actor Dobrica Milutinović. I also remember the names of the women who were in that circle: the actress Anka Vrbanić whom we often visited, Olga Ignjatović, the first woman to work as an engineer in the municipality of Belgrade, and the painter Zora Petrović who, after World War II, talked with a lot of warmth about their friendship.

At the end of 1926 he decided to build himself a house. It was quite by chance that Miša Vojčunas found the plans, which my father had probably drawn up himself. They were certified by Jakov Kozinski. Miša found a document, which shows that the house at 53 Gundulićev venac was built in a few months and completed in February 1927. It was a single-storey structure of modest but harmonious appearance. There were two entrances, three rooms, a bathroom and WC, 96 m² in all. Father immediately added a kitchen, two pantries and a maid's room in the attic and took a housekeeper, an old Russian woman, Galina, who took motherly care of him. She cooked excellently and looked after the whole house. According to some stories my father loved beautiful women and they liked him. Galina, who was up in the attic, did not disturb him.

Finally, since he had his own house, he decided to get married. It seems that the idea was Đerasi's. Alkan Đerasi (I think he was also Father's friend from the war) advised him to get married and even found a bride for him. He organised the party in his house (a beautiful building across from the Theatre Museum, which today houses a nursery) so that my father should meet his future wife and give her a bouquet of flowers. Matvej Ajzenberg dressed formally, bought a big bouquet and went to Đerasi's house. Upon entering, he saw a beautiful girl, approached her, gave her the flowers and immediately dragged her to the first empty room where he began to tell her the story of a bird who lived alone in its cage feeling sad because it did not have a partner. It seems that this story was considered in Russia to be an introduction to a marriage proposal. My mother understood it as such and she said: *yes*. They kissed (everything was done quickly) and then something happened for which Greta (my mother) never forgave him: immediately after the first kiss Matvej exclaimed, "Oh, you stink of tobacco!" He was a confirmed non-smoker.

Later on, it turned out that another girl had been intended for my father. We can only imagine how that other girl felt when she saw her intended husband giving the bouquet to Greta Sason. Alkan Đerasi was the best man at my parents' wedding and later on he was my sandak⁸. The Germans killed him as soon as they marched into Belgrade.

Very soon after my mother moved into the house in Gundulićev venac, Galina left. She bowed deeply, according to the Russian custom and told my mother that it was not good for two women to keep house. She used to visit them occasionally and helped my mother learn how to cook.

Soon after their wedding, my parents left for the Adriatic coast. As a building contractor my father built military barracks in the vicinity of Šibenik and Knin. They lived in Benkovac where they made good friends. Last year, when the situation here became difficult, my mother told me that Father had to be careful, even at that time, as to how many of the workers were Serbs and how many Croats and he had to rotate the foreman: by turns a Serb and a Croat.

8 In Jewish tradition the person who holds the child during circumcision.

Business was doing well, Father bought a van and started taking driving lessons. When he had learned how to drive, he took my mother and the maid shopping to Šibenik. On the way back, my father was driving, and the driver was sitting next to him, Mother and the maid were sitting in the back on the foldout seats. It was a winding road, and at a bend my father lost control of the van and it overturned. All was well, my mother and the maid found themselves in a vineyard unharmed, only the maid wept because she lost a hat she had just bought. However, a few days later my mother had to go to a doctor - I would have had a brother three years older if the accident hadn't occurred.

It was a period of economic crisis in Europe. Times were difficult here, too. Whether because of that, or because of some tradition, there were two brothers – *haiduks* (highwaymen) near Benkovac. Some friends informed my father that these outlaws were planning to rob him on his return from Šibenik when he went to pick up the pay for his workers. Despite the warning, my father together with my mother went to Šibenik, withdrew the money from the bank, and along with the other shopping bought a pistol and ammunition. He took another road back to Benkovac and thus avoided the trap... Very quickly after returning home, just when they started opening the parcels of goods they had bought, the outlaws together with some local peasants burst into the house. Noticing that my father was, as if accidentally, holding a gun in his hand they became polite and pretended to have come to ask if there was any work for them on the building site... Father directed them to the foremen and they left in peace. Later on it turned out that father had managed to open the parcel with the gun but not the one with the ammunition... Luckily the outlaws didn't know that.

Maybe you will be bored by these stories or not interested in them, but they are parts of my memories, or memories of what my father told me, (or I was told about him). Our memories pale with time and we cannot save them. I am presenting all that I have left. They are all fragments but I do not possess more than that. After all, I was with my father up to my eleventh year and then they took him away. Only memories remain...

He was a good father and I know that he loved me very much. When I think about it now, I wonder if one of the reasons for his going to the camp without resistance, for not trying to escape, was his fear that any attempt at resistance would endanger me. But I will write about that later on.

Unfortunately, as I have already explained, I don't know much about my mother's family either. Ten years ago I talked with my mother about it and I am now copying what I wrote down then:

“What my mother, Greta Šilinger née Sason, said was that the first ancestors that she knew about were Great-Grandmother Fani and Great-Grandfather Filip. As often happens, she doesn't know anything about her great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother. I wrote down what she told me on 30. August 1982. and I am now copying it:

Fani Polak, née Hercl (my great-grandmother)

She was born in Zemun. She was the first to be registered in the matrimony books of the Jewish Community in Zemun in 1851. Her mother came from the Klopfer family and drowned in a flood in Segedin when Fani was quite young.

Fani Hercl's father and Theodor Hercl's father were brothers.

Fani Polak had one brother whose son Emanuel Hercl (“Maći”) lived in Zagreb and had two daughters Mirjana and Silva.

Filip Polak (my great-grandfather)

My mother is not sure whether Great-Grandfather’s family was from Slankamen or Bačka Palanka. She has a photograph of Great-Grandfather when he was a middle-aged man. She had the same portrait of him on a button (or a part of a medallion 2.5 cm in diameter) which is probably lost. She doesn’t know his name but knows that he took part in a battle against the Turks (she did not know whether on the Serbian or Croatian side); he became famous, converted to Christianity and took the surname Spasojević. There was a memorial fountain with his name “Spasojević” in one of the two mentioned places Filip’s sister married a Serb and was buried in the Orthodox cemetery in Zemun.

Filip Polak married Fani Hercl. They began their married life as poor people selling vegetables at the market in Zemun. By hard work and skilful trade, they gradually increased their assets – which was reflected in the education of their children: the eldest was almost illiterate, and the younger ones got better and better education. Fani had ten children – five lived:

Hana, married name: Deutch was born in 1875. She married Dr Josef Deutch, a dentist in Budapest. They lived at 36 Andrassy Street. They had no children. She survived World War II in Wallenberg’s “Swedish house”⁹ in Budapest and died a few years after that war.

Julius Polak (“Đula”) was born between 1876 and 1880. He went to America in 1905 where he died in 1972. He americanised his surname as Pollock. “Đula” was married to Olga who came from Budapest. They had three children. A long time ago one of their sons was tragically killed in a car accident. The other two Edgar and Roy married and had children. Edgar has a daughter Ann.

Perla, married name: Weinberger. She was born between 1876 and 1880. She married Heinrich Weinberger, a watchmaker in Budapest. The couple survived World War II by living in the ‘Swedish house’ too. She died after World War II but I don’t know exactly when. Her son Maxi was born on 24 February 1907. Very early in life he lost a leg. He died in 1975. Maxi’s son Aladar was born in 1937 or 1938 in Budapest. He changed his name. He immigrated to France in 1956. (I have found out that he has since returned to Hungary. His name is now Gabor Vertes and he lives in Budapest at 12 Vaci Str.) Gabor has a daughter born in 1960.

⁹ Wallenberg: A Swedish diplomat who was posted to Budapest during World War II and saved more than 30.000 Hungarian Jews. He bought several houses, put the Swedish flag on them and literally filled them with Jews. He also organized the mass production of Swedish passports for the local Jews. At the very end of World War II when the Soviet army entered Budapest, the Soviet police arrested him and he disappeared in some of their prisons.



This picture has been made in the yard of the house on Prilaz – Zemun on the wedding day of Perla Polak and Hajnrlih Vajhberger. Standing from left to right: Julius Polak, Aladar Polak, Mariška Polak (Magda's mother) Mariška's husband Jozef Polak and David Sason. Sitting from left to right: Hana Polak (later married Dojč) her mother Fani Polak, Perla and her husband Hajnrlih Vajhberger, Filip Polak and Rozalija Polak

Rozaliija (My grandmother and your great-grandmother). When you were little you used to call her 'Old Grandma.) She was first married to David Sason, my grandfather who was killed in 1941 by the Germans because he was a Jew. David was a Turkish citizen, a fact which could have saved him, but he didn't manage to prove his citizenship in time. He was already in the train to be deported to a camp when his friends managed to obtain the documents. Rozalija and David had two daughters: Erna and Greta.

After Rozalija and David divorced, David married Micika Nojman. On his mother's side David was from Italy (Opicina). He was manager of the power station in Belgrade (the owner was the Belgian firm *Gregoire*). During a workers' strike he was suspected of being an instigator, lost his job and moved to Zemun. Just before the war he was working in the textile shop Ben Anon, in Kralja Petra Street, Belgrade.

After divorcing David, Rozalija married Fridrich Konrad (i.e. Kohen) whose family was from Novi Sad; his father was a teacher. Fridrich was the director of *His Master's Voice* for Europe and died in 1926 in Budapest.



This picture has been made 1926 in Budapest on the occasion of Fani and Filip Polak's fiftieth wedding anniversary.

Standing from left to right: Hana Dojč, Hajrih Vajnberger and his wife Perla Vajnberger, Fridrih Konrad, his wife Rozalija and Maksi Vajnberger.

Sitting from left to right: Dr. Jozef Dojč, Fani Polak, Greta Sason, her sister Erna Sason, Filip Polak and Jozef Polak.

Aladar Polak. He was unmarried and died in 1915 in Budapest. He was born in Zemun in 1890 and studied law in Zagreb. When in 1915 Austrian-Hungary declared war on Serbia, he was called up for military service. Since he didn't want to fight and kill anybody, instead of getting on the train that should have taken him to his unit he put his leg under the wheels of the train. His leg was amputated but he died shortly after that of tuberculosis in a military hospital in Budapest. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery in Zemun. Aladar was the pride of the family. My mother presented to the Jewish Museum in Belgrade a few books of his poems and translations together with his biography which she had written herself.

Josef Polak. He was born (?) in Novi Sad. Josef married twice and had two daughters: Rozika who died of Spanish fever in 1918 and Magda who was born between 1914 and 1918. During World War II she was in a German concentration camp and now lives in Budapest. Her name now is Halbror Laslone.

In the next letter, I'll write about David's brothers and his children. You may like to know about that too. However, I will talk more about my mother's family, as far as I can remember it, when the time comes.

My mother Greta Sason was born on 8 February 1907 in Zemun. Her parents lived in a part of the town called Prilaz in a street which is called Jakova Kuburovića today. The house is still standing. When my mother was six years old in 1914 the First World War began: the Austrians shelled Belgrade from Bežanijska Kosa¹⁰ and the Serbs, too, defended themselves as far as they could with cannons. The Polak and Sason families were caught between two fires, so my grandfather decided to evacuate them to Budapest. They travelled by horse-drawn carriage to Pazova and then by train. Great-Grandfather remained in Zemun and being a good businessman he wasn't idle: many people were leaving Zemun because of the war. He seized the opportunity and bought a house at 6 Dubrovačka street from a Jew. The house still exists today – it was nationalised after World War II.

My grandma's sister Hana, who lived in Budapest and was married to the wealthy and respected dentist Dr Josef Deutch, put up my great-grandma Fani, Grandma Rozalija, Aunt Erna and my mother. (Hana was considered to be the cleverest member of the family because she had married a rich man.) They had a large flat, a maid and a cook and lived very comfortably until 1919 when Communism came to Hungary. As elsewhere, the revolution did not bring much good: instead of progress and social justice – crime, madness, and poverty. The leader of the revolution, Bela Kun, lived in the best hotel in the very centre of the city and indulged in orgies with his comrades. It is said that among the things they did was to bring actresses to the hotel, put them in bathtubs full of champagne and then, using their shoes as cups, drink the champagne and thus get drunk. They imagined that the bourgeoisie acted like that, and wanted to imitate them. Very often people got killed in that hotel... Shortages and terror began. I still have a cane set in iron. It belonged to Grandma's second husband. He had it set in iron and kept it in

¹⁰ Bežanijska Kosa: a hill north from Belgrade, in those times on the Austrian side of the border.

the hall to defend himself in case they came to kill him, take him away or just beat him up. On 1 May there was a parade: my mother told me about it. My family watched it from their window. After a few hours, at the end of the parade came the mentally ill people. They were dressed like kings and Napoleons and carried a stand on which a couple was making love. Was it an ideological message or madness? It was probably a mixture of both, a mixture often found in Communism. (When the Communists came to power in Yugoslavia, we also had hour-long parades – but luckily without the lovemaking.) There were other stupidities. They also abused the children in a way. The schools took the pupils, my mother among them, to *work actions* (I don't know if that's what they called them then). They were made to pull nettles up with their bare hands. Gloves were considered bourgeois and were not allowed. It is interesting that the same thing happened to some of my female friends who had to work in New Belgrade in 1947. or 1948. Because of all that, the family moved my mother to Vienna, where Hana had a house, and she lived there until the situation in Hungary was normalised. Later she returned to Budapest but I don't know how long she lived there.

Judging by different stories, my mother was capricious and neurotic even as a girl. She was the child of divorced parents, who grew up during the Bela Kun revolution, moving from place to place, mostly in the care of her aunts. She had to do without her parents' attention: her mother lived with her second husband in Budapest, travelled around Europe with the jet set, spent the season in Karlsbad and Marienbad and from time to time somehow managed to see her children. Her older sister was considered to be a beauty and she felt neglected. She didn't hide the fact that, as a child, she used to kick Erna's suitors. I believe that all these reasons contributed to her desire to distinguish herself, something she felt a need for even when she grew up. True, this need didn't stimulate her to study. She showed little interest in school: I think that she only finished nine or ten years of school. It was the time when Sigmund Freud was discovering the unconscious and it was interesting to visit psychiatrists. She too was psychoanalysed and was always very proud of it.

When she married my father I believe that she found herself in a situation for which she was not prepared. Instead of living in Vienna or Belgrade she found herself in faraway Benkovac and she rarely went even to Šibenik. The peasants liked her, Father's workers flattered her and all of them gave her pets, seeing that she liked them. She had puppies, rabbits and even two foxes. She played with them and behaved as if she were a child. My father probably liked that. She was beautiful, the sea was near, they went swimming and sometimes the officers would come to oversee the site... She would organise dinners and they would have fun. It seems that she had suitors– father would later reproach her for that.

When the buildings were finished my parents returned to Belgrade. I was born very soon after that,



Greta Sason (about 1927)

on 13 May 1930. Immediately after my birth they noticed that I had a birthmark on my loins at the same place as my father. My grandfather Zinovij had the same birthmark in the same place. (You are probably wondering why I am mentioning this –I am going to explain when the time comes.) My mother used to say that she brought me up according to modern doctors' advice and not in an old fashioned way. She was very proud of this but it seems to me that there was a certain note of boasting. I was a healthy child: according to some photos, even too healthy. I looked blown up. So that I didn't catch a cold after having a bath, my parents tore down the wall between the bathroom and bedroom and put up a curtain instead. Hence the temperature in both rooms was the same... My mother insisted that I have a governess because it was considered to be noble at that time. We had a maid, and my father was not very wealthy but according to my mother's wish I had to have a governess for some time, a Jewish woman who had emmigrated from Austria. Naturally I spoke German with her. On the subject of languages: language was a certain problem in my education. Moving around between Zemun, Budapest and Vienna my mother had almost forgotten Serbian. She spoke Hungarian modestly (making grammatical mistakes) and German well. In Dalmatia¹¹ she learned the language they spoke there. It was a mixture of Serbian, Italian and some archaic words they used in Dalmatia but generally all that was not understood in Belgrade. Since my father spoke Serbian very well, but as he spent most of his time at work, they agreed that he speak to me in Serbian and she speak to me in German. So it turned out that the first language I learned was German. My father spent most of the day at work and was not in a position to teach me the language that is spoken here. When I was three years old I was sent to an English kindergarten where I quickly learned English.

I learned Serbian a few years later.



Greta Ajzinberg (about 1929)

11 Dalmatia is the Croatian part of the Adriatic coast

(The second letter)

Belgrade, 25.03.1992

My dearest,

I am afraid that what I write will be longer than I first thought and you expected. So I will put in these letters that Gorjana and I are sending you as much "autobiography" as I manage to write. The story will be in instalments. In this part I will try to describe my childhood. It didn't last long.

My memories of my early childhood are, in fact, a series of pictures mostly remembered in colour. Some of these memories were, I think, conjured up by the stories my mother used to tell me while I was a child. I believe that these stories have created certain pictures in my mind, which do not represent the original memory of an individual event, but actually a reconstruction of it. I probably remember certain details more because I was told about them. Be that as it may, these are my memories. I am writing them down now because it is the right moment: who knows if I will do it in the future. With the passage of time these memories will fade too, because other more important ones will push them aside or I will simply forget...

One of the earliest memories which is really authentically mine is not a picture but a combination of an image and the sense of taste: butter spread on bread with well-salted tomatoes. I remember the taste more than I remember what it looked like. Even now, when I feel its taste I remember the place on the terrace in front of the bedroom, the place where I, for the first time, felt the pleasure of eating these beautiful red vegetables, felt the satisfaction of absorbing a part of the sunshine that had been invested in their creation. I well remember the garden in front of the house at 53 Gundulićev venac Street, a garden in which I think I spent the greater part of my childhood. There were roses there which my father tended very lovingly, boxes, a plum tree (which unfortunately never bore fruit, but which blossomed beautifully) and a cherry tree. Yes, and there was a fir tree too. A long path covered by terrazzo plates went from the house to the gate and it was the best place to play. I wasn't allowed to go out into the street.

My mother regularly took me to Kalemegdan¹². I hardly remember that. I see it with my inner eye, but these images are reproductions of the photos I later looked at and which disappeared in the war. There at Kalemegdan my mother made friends with other mothers who pushed the prams of their young ones. Time would pass quickly in company and conversation. Most of these mothers (who were Jewish) disappeared in the

¹² Kalemegdan, a fortress dating from Roman times, it is now a large and very pleasant park in Belgrade

German concentration camps. The only thing that has remained is my memory of their names, names which mean nothing to anyone here any more. The Frojdenfeld, Hirschl, Friedman and many other families have disappeared and nobody here remembers their names.

My friendship with Caca Horvat dates from that time. Our mothers were friends but they fell out because of some silly quarrel. The friendship was renewed after World War II.

At that time my father got a big commission: the building of St. Mark's church. He would sometimes take me to the building site. We used to have a few framed photographs taken at the top of one of the church's domes. I was photographed crying, frightened by the height or the armature, a sort of cage into which my father had put me. The photos disappeared during the war but I can still see them. My father got the commission on condition that he carried it out with someone whose last name ended in *-ić*, that is, with a Serb. He took as a partner Milovan Smiljanić, a construction engineer, a good, quiet man from the vicinity of Užice. They remained partners until the end, until the beginning of World War II. From the very start relations with the investor did not proceed as they should have done, because of the supervising engineer who was an influential member of the church community. He made trouble for Father, demanding that he buy bricks of bad quality from his firm. My father, who wanted to build solidly, refused to do so. The payment for the work already completed was late and sometime after on it stopped entirely. My father continued to build, investing his own money in the hope that the problems would be resolved. He sold two plots of land and fell into debt. During that time my mother and I would often visit my great-grandma in Zemun and we would eat there. That I remember quite well. The bridge over the Sava was not yet built: we went by boat and it was great fun for me. Boarding the ship, waiting for its departure, the whistle which announced the start of the journey, waving to the people on land, sailing past *Veliko ratno ostrvo (Great War Island)*, the docking manoeuvre in Zemun... I remember the flat in Zemun quite well. The front door opened directly into an old fashioned kitchen: with a big built-in cooker, a table in the middle, a cupboard and in the corner a washbasin which did not function. Water was brought from a well in the yard. The kitchen led into Great-Grandma's bedroom, which had two big double beds with lace covers on them. There was a *Nachtkasten*¹³ on each side of the bed. In front of the beds was an ottoman on which Great-Grandma usually sat. There was a passage between the ottoman and the wall, a narrow passage through which I had to pass to get to the other three rooms in their apartment. I didn't like to use it, because my great-grandma could catch me there and cuddle me or hit me,



**Fani Polak with her grandson
Aleksandar Aizenberg**
(about 1935)

13 . German: bedside table.

depending. Actually I don't remember ever being hit by her, but she did threaten to do so with her stick, and I didn't like that idea. Framed photos of Great-Grandma Fani and Great-Grandpa Filip, whom I didn't know because he had died "earlier", hung over the bed. Grandpa was so serious and had such a big head that I didn't like him too much. After all, he had died – why should I like him! That was maybe the reason I shied away from Great-Grandma: she was old, and the old are somehow near death. I was not afraid of death then but, in my mind (or, rather, subconsciously), old people were connected in a certain way with death so I avoided them. There is one photo from those times: it was taken in the yard of the house in Zemun. Great-Grandma is sitting and I am standing stiffly, trying to avoid her embrace and to be as far away from her as possible.

I spent less time in the second room. It was the drawing room, and I don't remember what it looked like. I know that the curtains were always drawn and that it was always dark. The third room was Erna's: it faced the street, as well as the drawing room, but it was more beautiful, had more light, and I remember it well. That is where I was put to bed in the hot summer afternoons. The curtains were drawn (so I could fall asleep more easily) and then the miracle would happen: a little light would come in through a hole in the curtain and the room would become a *camera obscura*. On the opposite wall I could see the figures of the passers by, not quite focused, and upside down. They were walking backwards: instead of going from the main street towards the church (as I could easily tell by the echo of their steps), their figures went towards the main street... Aladar's *Alt Deutsch*¹⁴ desk with his things was in that room. Aladar, Grandma's brother who had died young, was a mysterious character for me. His writing supplies: an ink bottle and another one with ash for dusting the manuscript, his notebooks with his manuscripts – all those were things I was not allowed to touch, but I did so secretly – it all impressed me. The fourth room, which one could enter directly from the main entrance, was not ours. Toma Sojić, Erna's ex-husband, a marine officer whom I had never seen, lived there. He was always away.

The toilet was in the yard. The Gavarić family rented the flat on the first floor. They had their own toilet in the yard, next to ours. People sat on a wooden box, which was always well scrubbed. There was a nail on the wall with paper fastened to it. I didn't like that place. I had my own chamber pot.

The house was always lively in a certain way. The maids were always busy, always doing something in a hurry. My great-grandma, Grandma, and Magda were always there. They would feed the geese by force in the afternoon (there were always a few geese in the yard: the feeding process was disgusting and I hated it). A relative would often visit. Her name was Clara. For some reason she was unhappy. When they spoke about her they would say: *Die arme Klara Tante (poor Aunt Clara)*. She would often try to commit suicide. She would try to poison herself by swallowing all sorts of things. She didn't succeed. Somebody would always somehow save her. She finally died a natural death in old age. Once Magda went into Toma's room through the window, and took out his pistol pretending she wanted to kill me. Magda had a special status in the family, something between a member of the family and a servant. She was a poor relative and it was palpable. I didn't like the fact that she wanted to kill me – although I knew it was not for real.

14 . Alt Deutch: German Renaissance revival style

I encountered death for the first time when I was four years old. It was after my sister Sonja was born. She was a very beautiful and intelligent baby. My mother engaged a governess again, who left Sonja too long in the sun while busy with a suitor during a walk in Kalemegdan. After suffering sunstroke the baby got pneumonia and died, although the best doctors in Belgrade tried to save her. She was only ten months old. I remember the corner in which Sonja, while she was healthy, played in her cot, then I remember later on the oxygen bottle, injections and the miraculous words of the doctor, words which should have saved her when the crisis started: *camphor, caffeine, adrenaline*. Then one day I was sent to the yard to play. I rode my tricycle, bored, sensing that something unusual was happening in the house. My father came out silently and picked roses. He picked a whole armful of them and upon entering the house said, as if casually: "Sonjička has died". I kept riding my tricycle and wondering: how did she die? What does it mean: died? Has she died for ever?

I knew that when one dies one closes one's eyes, but for how long?

Later on, I often had to visit Sonjička's grave with my mother. She went to the cemetery every day for a while, and I was terribly bored. One was not allowed to play there. Once I remember I found a piece of wire and stuck it deep down into the newly-dug earth. I believed I could establish a telephone connection with Sonja. It didn't work.

Sonja's grave is about ten meters to the left of the entrance of Belgrade's Ashkenazi cemetery, next to the wall facing the street. My father made the design for the gravestone with great care.

During that summer, when I was four years old, my own attitude towards death became critical. I remember that it was very hot and there were a lot of mosquitoes. I had to "go to bed" and could not fall asleep for a long time. My parents were on the terrace with their friends, just in front of my window, and I felt fear and boredom. I could see the stars from my bed. While watching the stars I realized that the world was enormous and I was small and insignificant. I started wailing and my mother came and asked me why I was crying. When she heard that I was afraid of death, she tried to calm me down by saying that a cure against death would be discovered in a short time. She pacified me only temporarily. Later on, I realized that death was only a state 'when we do not exist, a state I was already in before I was born and which was not terrible. I think that I realized this during the war, when I faced death often and in different ways.

With my mother I visited my aunt Hana and her husband Josika several times in Budapest. Josika's dentist's office was in the flat which was always crowded with respectable patients, relatives and guests and it resembled the flat in the film *Fanny and Alexander*, but it was a little bit smaller. Hana had servants (a cook and a maid), and Josika an assistant, Gizika, with whom he had, as I later learned, a special relationship. This did not shake Hana, on the contrary. In her youth, she used to be a beauty. She provided the money for Josika's studies by singing, and then went on to gain weight, and was full of big warts, but she enjoyed their wealth and had understanding for his weakness. My grandmother was also fat. Other equally fat and terrible-looking aunts would also come and sit with their *ridicules*¹⁵ in their laps. They would kiss and stroke

15 Ridikil: (French: ridicule; English: funny, ridiculous) At that time, the usual name for small woman's handbag. Their handbages were black, lackuered and seemed huge to me.

me and I tried to avoid that. I preferred to be with Gizika who was young and beautiful and who developed X-ray photos of teeth in the bathroom, where a red light shone. It was really exciting to see how an image would gradually emerge in a mysterious liquid. If I wasn't spending my time in the surgery watching Josika repairing teeth, I sought the company of the servants who were always busy with some work and had no time for me. My aunt Erna, having no children of her own, had more time for me and loved me very much. She took me for walks in the town centre and was patient while I spent time looking at the shop selling different weapons very near our flat. I could spend hours in front of that shop. She would often take me to the zoo and along the river banks where the main promenade was.

Once when I was brought to the sitting room after a bath, Hana's manicurist noticed that I had a hernia. Josika immediately found a friend, a professor who had his own clinic, and I was operated on. It was established before the operation that I had myocarditis, a heart ailment, and because of this sometime later I had to avoid all physical activity which meant not even playing with other children of my age. It was also established that I was a bit farsighted and that I would have to wear glasses until I went to school. The operation was successful and I remember my stay in the clinic very well. I remember the large room full of light, a terrace with a nice view of the park and kind assistants who took care of me. I do not remember the pain. I had paints and a lot of paper. I drew and had a nice time.

Between the years 1934 and 1937 my mother and I went to Budapest a few times for long stays of several months. Then relations between my father and mother and with her family deteriorated so much that he did not allow me to see them.

Father's financial situation gradually improved. The legal case with St. Mark's church was still going on. My father was winning in court at all levels: the priests supported him (even archpriest Marko, preaching in church, said that it was shameful that a man of a different faith is more honest than some of our respected members). But the construction had to stop and the money my father had invested with his partner was blocked. He had to wait for the verdict of the highest court. Father was gaining respect in the business community and good business partners too. At the same time the quarrels at home were becoming more passionate and more frequent. I don't know what caused the quarrels, but when I think of them today, I don't think they were very serious. I witnessed many 'scenes and guided by my child's instinct I mostly took my father's side. I would say that in most cases he was right. Besides that, he was very restrained and steady and he did not provoke quarrels - which was not the case with my mother. Maybe the reason for being on my father's side was the consequence of their behaviour towards me. Father was strict but just. He would punish me for my wrongdoing but only when he was convinced I was really guilty. The punishment was administered justly and I would take it as something I deserved. He never punished me in anger. I knew that he loved me, I loved him and, more importantly, I respected him. My mother was unpredictable: sometimes she would easily forgive my wrongdoing, but she would often punish me when I was not guilty of anything at all. Food was often the cause. She pressed me to eat when I really could not. Those were terrible situations for me, when something bottled up my throat and I couldn't swallow, and Mother shouted and threatened that she would

go out into the yard naked, catch cold and die – or when she would lie on an unmade bed explaining that she would die then and there. I was terrified, I cried and begged her not to go out and not to die – but that I honestly couldn't eat ... I have a feeling that my mother almost took some pleasure in these scenes. She rarely beat me, but often spoke about it. She loved me but in a different way from my father. She liked to demonstrate her feelings, always in a somewhat exaggerated way, and he hid his. Even when Sonja died, he hid his feelings, picked roses and grieved secretly.

We received letters from Tbilisi from time to time. My grandfather wrote to my father in Russian, but corresponded with my mother in German. He had nice old-fashioned handwriting and wrote on a piece of paper taken out of a notebook : “Thank God, we are well”... and he enquired how we were. Once he asked if Father had an old coat he could send - it was a very severe winter in their part of the country ... Father would send parcels to them to Georgia: rice, sugar and coffee – since they had none in the thirties. To send large parcels and to send them often was not allowed. We received a parcel from Grandpa a few times: in it was a sweet, pink in colour, shaped like a sausage. My father explained that it was made of stewed grape juice. There were nuts in it. I did not like sweets, but I liked this one: it was from my grandfather! Father reluctantly began to use it and saved it for a long time. He probably knew how difficult it was for Grandpa to obtain the means to buy it...Those were the thirties, at a time when millions of people were dying of hunger in Stalin's socialist state.

I was not even five years old when I learned the alphabet. I learned it by reading the names of signs above the shops. Naturally I only knew capital letters. My mother decided that I should start school when I was six years old, not seven. I would study at home privately and then take the exams at school. My parents found me a teacher. A poor old man, wearing a shabby old-fashioned suit, would come and he had a hard time making me read letter by letter in an outdated way and write with chalk on a slate board... It just didn't work. Then they fired him and took another younger teacher, who quite quickly taught me all I had to learn. One day my mother dressed me up and took me to the King Alexander School. She explained to me that I would be tested there so that I could see what the real entrance exam was like and so that the authorities could see whether I knew enough for the exam. I knew all they asked me and at the end my examiner took a book from a drawer, wrote something on it and handed it over to me: it was a reward for passing the first year of elementary school with honours. I started crying then and there out of anger, because I felt cheated.

In the end my parents got divorced. I think I felt relief. The quarrels and the scenes which terrified me would stop. It was agreed that I would stay with Father, and see my mother regularly. She rented a room around the corner from our house, in Francuska Street, some five or six houses away from us. Very soon after that, while looking for premises in which to open a bureau for translation and typing, she fell into an open coal chute and seriously injured her spine. She lay in that room around the corner, in a cast without moving, for six months. She ate large quantities of fruit (somebody advised her to do so) and read romances. Six months latter to the astonishment of the doctors she started walking again.

She found a job in a shop¹⁶ on Terazije¹⁷ and rented a flat on the corner of Braće Jugovića Street and Makedonska Street.

At about that time (1937) I started the second year of elementary school. I quickly made friends with the other children and began learning how to play children's games. I stress that because up to that time due to my miocarditis I had had no chance to play with children properly. Some boys did come to our house but we mostly played those games which did not require running. It was the same as when I had gone to the English kindergarten. Until I started school, my best friend was a boy called Hari, a smart boy who was a year or two older than me. He lived close by in an attic (at that time that was a sign of poverty: attic or cellar). His father was a travelling salesman. Hari was lame but very adroit. He was mature for his age and told me things which I didn't quite understand at the time. He claimed that Hitler was a great threat to Europe and especially to us Jews. This topic seemed to have been discussed a lot in his family. They



Greta and Aleksandar (about 1937)

thought about leaving the country and going to Palestine. At that time I didn't know anything about the Zionist movement. He left with his parents for Palestine in 1938 or 1939. I've never found out what became of him.

I spent most of my free time across the street with the Dojčinović family. Rajko, who was ten years older than me, was very serious and played the violin the whole day. The younger boy, Zoran, who was five or six years older than me, accepted me as a pet and gradually introduced me to the world of his games. We spent a lot of time on the banks of the Danube, where the port is now. There we flew models of planes or balloons filled with hot air and trained bird dogs. When we weren't there, we played tennis or shot from a small calibre gun in their yard. Studying for school was not a problem for me but my marks were not 'excellent'. I was 'very good' in school and I think I relied more on common sense than on real studying. After all, I am sure studying was easier then and required less effort.

16 The owner of the shop was a man named Gesler who, as a Jew, had escaped from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia or Poland. Being very diligent and busineslike, my mother quickly won her boss's confidence and become the manager of the shop. When Mr. Gesler went on business trips (he traveled often) he left his shop and his dog, a huge mastiff, in my mother's care... It was her duty to put all the mail which came in his absence, into a larger envelope and post it to address in Roprugal – she did it very diligently. As soon as the Germans occupied our country Gesler appeared in a German army uniform. It turned out that he was not a refugee Jew but a German agent....

17 Terazije: A main square in the very centre of Belgrade.

My father became friends with Momčilo Belobrk, a young architect of modern views and a planning engineer who was in fashion. Belobrk liked to visit us often in the evening. He enjoyed being in our “peasant room”, a combination of living room and dining room that father fixed up in the attic when he got married. It was a mixture of Bavarian style and Father’s imagination, in rustic style, with lots of Hungarian and Slovak ceramics, kilims, peasant’s aprons and unusual objects collected on the Adriatic coast and the slopes of Fruška Gora¹⁸. It was like a small ethnographic museum, very comfortable and cosy for evening gatherings. Belobrk would come to enjoy father’s company but also because of the gourmet cooking and specialities my father knew how to prepare. One day Belobrk noticed some of my drawings and persuaded my father to let me attend Mladen Josić’s private art school. It was an art course held on the third floor of Kolarac University. The first day of my art studies turned out to be quite dramatic: coming back from the drawing lesson I stopped by my mother’s flat and showed her what I had done. She questioned me in detail and ran to my father: “If he draws naked women now, what will he do when he is eighteen” she asked excitedly. It wasn’t easy for father to calm her down, explaining that it was not insolence. After that she was very proud of my drawing.

I enjoyed myself at art school. I drew and made progress in drawing. I was the youngest student, the others being from eighteen to forty years old. Among them there were engineers, architects and even a few professional painters. We drew and painted portraits and nudes and when the weather was fine we went to Kalemegdan to draw and paint landscapes or to the zoo to draw animals. I remember going to Topčider a few times where we drew and afterwards visited Žanka Stokić who was a famous theatre actress. A few of my drawings were exhibited at the students’ exhibition in the hall of Kolarac University. Maybe that public exhibition influenced my later choice of profession.

While my parents lived together I used to go to the seaside with my mother – which at that time was considered to be a form of luxury. Later on, I found out that Đula, my grandmother’s brother who lived in America, financed these summer holidays. After my parents’ divorce I spent my summer holidays with our maids: the first year in Erdevik, a nice village on the slopes of Fruška Gora, and the following year in Arandelovac. My father was not able to come with us because it was the building season, but he came on Sundays. I looked forward to his visits with great joy. Sometimes he would bring his pistols and teach me how to use them. We went to the woods and did target practice: he using his ‘big’ pistol (Browning, mod. 1910 or 1922 cal. 7,65) and I with “my” smaller one (Baby Browning, mod. 1906 cal. 6,35). On the eve of World War II my father gave the smaller gun to Smiljanić when he was called up for military duty as a reserve officer. In winter I went to Vrnjačka Banja with my father. I enjoyed our stay there because one could go sleighing. The spa water was good for my father’s gallstones.

I have already mentioned the maids: after my parents’ divorce, Gizela, a woman from Srem, from Erdevik, came to our house on someone’s recommendation. I spent my summer holidays with her at Erdevik. She was an Adventist, very honest, of quite stiff behaviour and rather ugly looking. She would often read the Bible to me, which I liked listening to. She also took me to Adventists’ meetings where they prayed together

18 Fruška Gora: a low mountain range about 70 kilometers north-west of Belgrade

and read stories aloud from the Bible. They were good but old people and I was bored with them. My father fired Gizela after finding out that my mother bribed her to get information on what was going on in our house (Gizela did not deny this because as an Adventist she would never lie). At about that time a typist, a robust woman from Dalmatia whom I never liked, would come to our house. I was sent “to bed” then and she would go upstairs with my father into the “peasant room”. For some time the sound of the typewriter was heard and then there was silence... I would remain awake for a long time thinking how to do her wrong. The plan I had, to put butter on the stairs or to stretch a thin rope across the stairs, was never realized.

The second maid was called Marija Jurčić. She came from Kastav (a small place near Sušak). Her son was also called Aleksandar. We were of the same age – which was a fact that later on proved to be of vital importance for me. She was not good-looking either but was very kind, worked diligently around the house, swore in Italian and took care of me. We considered her a member of the family and she loved us. She stayed with us until the war broke out, on 6 April 1941.

(The third letter)

Belgrade, 29. 03. 1992

My Dearest,

I continue to write, afraid of the many details that have crowded into my mind since the moment I began writing. I know that with age people become too talkative and fond of writing long letters without being aware of it. It seems to be happening to me. So I am trying to be briefer but without success. I thought that the information you asked me about would fill five or six pages, seven at most, but there is so much to say. However I am carrying on writing because I think that many of the details that don't seem important are necessary for the understanding of my story.

As you can see my childhood was normal, not disturbed by rumours of the coming war and all that war brings. I have a feeling now that people didn't take all those stories seriously. Hitler occupied Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and France and we believed that it would somehow bypass us. I, like all the other children, felt carefree and light hearted and no different from them. The Christian children had religious instruction once a week, Catholics and Orthodox separately. There were two or three of us Jewish children and we were free to play in the schoolyard then. I was quite satisfied with that arrangement. I started attending religious instruction when I was in the second year of elementary school. The lessons were held in the synagogue in Kosmajaska Street. The other children who had started studying in the first year knew how to read, were familiar with the prayers and understood somewhat. I didn't understand anything. I learned the texts from the reader and prayer book by heart and pretended to read them, but not very successfully. The Hebrew letters and unusual words discouraged me. I was bored during the lessons and put no effort into studying. There were about fifteen pupils and I waited impatiently for the break. It was fun to play in the synagogue yard. A big map of Palestine hung on the wall. The word Palestine had an unusual, romantic sound to me. Probably I associated it with a film I had seen at that time. Sand, camels, Bedouins, heat, rifles, some kind of heroism, maybe a nice-looking girl. During the lessons I often gazed at the map and imagined different adventures from the film... Religious instruction was boring.

I was not particularly aware that I was Jewish. My father was an atheist; he never went to the synagogue nor did he seek the companionship of his countrymen, either the Jews or the ones from Russia. He did not specially differentiate the Jews: he neither sought them out nor avoided them. Sometimes they came to him to draw up plans or to build for them. As they used to say, he was 'one of ours'. As for the unfortunate

refugees from Russia, Father as a socialist (and communist) did not have a good opinion of them... “All of them now claim to be generals and colonels and they were nothing in Russia”, he would sometimes grumble. He considered them swindlers. As far as the Russians were concerned, he was friendly with the Kozinski family and some others, mostly from the building construction professions.

We often visited the Kozinskis. They were a very harmonious family of Russian Jews, well described in the book *The Diary of Ženja Kozinski* and in Bihalji's book *See You in October*. They had a house at Kotež Neimar and I loved going there. It was there that in 1937 I met Nadinjka, Jevsej's daughter. We lost track of each other because of the war and I didn't see her again until December 1991 in Tel Aviv when we had a long talk on the phone. I was present at Ženja's wedding and sometime later, when the family had to sell their house because of financial problems and move into a more modest flat at 58 Miloša Velikog Street, I saw them there for the last time. Their fate was tragic.

Just before the war, Father built for Pera Milovanović, a textile merchant, a very beautiful and luxurious house¹⁹. The marble was imported from Italy, from Carrara, the glass from Venice, everything was perfect. At that time, diplomatic relations were being established between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and the Russians were searching for premises for their embassy. They came upon that house which was almost finished, liked it and signed a contract with the owner to rent it for 25 years. My father had to make some minor changes to accommodate their needs. Ambassador Plotnjikov and secretary Čumak were very reserved towards Father (knowing where he came from) and did not want to talk to him. However, according to Communist custom, they checked him out (the USSR kept all the police archives from Czarist Russia) and, establishing that he was not an emigrant who ran away from the



Matvej and Aleksandar Ajzenberg

(about 1939)

revolution but that he was 'revolutionarily orientated', they became friends with us. They even visited us sometimes. My father was full of enthusiasm. When the embassy was finished they made a fabulous party which my father attended. He came back late at night saying he had drunk more than he should have. He was deeply impressed by the films which had been shown to the guests, films about the Soviet-Finnish war which illustrated the power of the USSR. What kind of "power" it was, we saw a year later.

19 When this letter was written, the Chinese embassy occupied that house.

In the first year of the gymnasium²⁰, at half-term I earned four bad marks: in mathematics, religious instructions and... I really cannot remember which other subjects. Father scolded me a lot, but did not beat me. He sat patiently with me every evening, helping me to learn and to improve my bad marks. Well, other children also had bad marks and they managed to improve them. It was true that to have four bad marks was not very usual. However, as I have already said, I didn't feel that I was any different from the other children until one day in October 1940 when my headmaster came into our classroom and ordered me, Robert Fišer and Robert Nojman, to leave the class because we were Jews. First feeling confused and then ashamed I left the classroom feeling my classmates' gaze. It was a nice day outside. Hurrah, I thought: no more bad marks! I could now play as much as much I wanted. I found father at home, he was working in the garden and was surprised to see me come home early. When he learned why, he silently changed his clothes, took his military documents and went to the office of the Association of World War I Volunteers where he angrily threw down his membership card and badge on the table and said that he did not want to be a member anymore. He said that he didn't fight on the Thessaloniki front to have his son thrown out of school! They somehow calmed him down telling him that the law did not apply to war volunteers and they promised to settle everything. And indeed, about ten days later I was allowed to continue attending school. Anyway, my regular education came to an end as the holidays started and then I got scarlet fever.

I got the rash and a high temperature. Dr Marija Vajs-Gajić, our doctor, who my parents had a high opinion of, came to see me. They didn't send me to hospital as the regulations at that time required. She put a notice on the door of our house saying that there was a patient in the house who had scarlet fever. I recuperated and read some books: *Karik and Valja*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Leather Stocking* and *Vinety*. Father really surprised me: he bought an air rifle. He put a board in the bathroom, we pulled back the curtain that separated the bedroom and bathroom and we shot at the target. We were both good shots.

It was the period when Hitler's army was conquering one European country after another. Our country was preparing for the worst, too. Many men were called up for military training, an order was issued for obligatory blackout at the windows and from time to time there were warnings of air attacks. The power station near our house would sound the alarm, we would turn off the lights and light candles, put thick blue paper on the windows and near us on the banks of the Danube batteries of cannons would fire. I was sorry that, being ill, I was not able to go out to see them. At night I remember my father and Raša Belopavlović sitting and drinking wine and talking about their war experiences. It was exciting. I think I wanted it to happen again²¹.

On 25 March 1941, the Yugoslav government signed a non-aggression treaty

20 In our country after four classes of elementary school children continued attending of gymnasium that lasted eight years.

21 In case of war my father had laid in supplies of flour, sugar, cooking oil, salt, pasta, sardines and rice. The German Volksdeutchers who moved into our house immediately when the country was occupied ate everything except for a few sardines which we took with us when we fled the bombing.

with Germany. At that time we thought this pact was a national shame. (Today I have a somewhat different opinion on this subject.) Nevertheless, maybe because my father sensed something, he arranged for one his workers, Radenko, to take me to his village, near Užice, in case something did happen. He also arranged for my mother to come with us, because he, as a volunteer, would have to go to war again. So, it was planned for my mother, me and our maid to go with Radenko. It seemed as if the whole war, if it were to break out, was imagined as a repetition of the previous war, World War I: withdrawal of the army across Albania, Corfu, the Thessaloniki front, breakthrough of the front, chasing of the enemy, and the ceremonial entrance into Belgrade, where naturally everybody would be riding a white horse... My father even bought the radio I wanted so much: Tefag, 6+4 lamps! It was able to pick up London, Moscow and the whole world. I was so happy: I was only sorry that I would be well soon and then wouldn't be able to listen to it all day. My father listened to Moscow and London: there was a lot of buzzing, but the announcers could be understood. One day we found out that the government had been overthrown. The date was 27 March 1941. The events taking place were broadcast directly on the streets the whole day... The windows of the Verkehrsbüro (a German travel agency, a big propaganda centre) were broken, everybody was on the streets shouting, "Better war than treaty" and "Better grave than slave", and while all that was taking place I had to stay in bed with scarlet fever!

...

About ten days later - it was a Sunday - I got up early. It was the day I was supposed to leave the room for the first time after my illness. I was very happy because of that and very impatient. It was a nice spring day, the cherry tree outside my window was blossoming. Father was taking a bath and I should have bathed after him, got dressed and then gone out. The sirens sounded and the shooting started, but the sound of shooting was common in those days. Nobody paid attention to it. (A few days earlier, Belgrade had been declared an "open city", so we thought that there could be no danger of enemy bombing). We heard the planes, and the shooting. All of a sudden there was a bang: something near us exploded, it was the loudest bang I'd ever heard. The windows opened, Father jumped out of the bath and shouted to me to run to the cellar. This was no drill, he concluded. We grabbed some clothing and ran downstairs. We got dressed in the cellar and tried to pull ourselves together. Hell broke loose outside. The diving planes turned on special sirens whose sound preceded the whistling of the falling bombs. Later on I heard that some kind of turbine was put on the bomb, which imitated the sound of the sirens and thus created panic. Each time we thought the bomb would fall on our heads. The explosion of the bomb meant the end of waiting and wondering: "Will it fall on us this time?" We sat in the cellar, our bodies contracted, the maid in panic was swearing in Italian, while I was enquiring if it was a real war, why we were at war, with whom, how war was declared and Father did not manage to answer all my questions. The attacks came in succession, the pauses between the attacks were shorter and we thought that the whole city must have been destroyed by now. My father claimed the cellar was safe, but the house shook a lot. I think the first attack started at 6.00 or 7.00. At about 10.00 our maid completely broke down. Crying, she explained to Father that she could

not stand it any longer, that she had a son in Kastav and that she would try to go there. Father and I were left alone. My mother (who in the meantime had moved and was living at 16 Ohridska Street with her mother, at the other end of town) didn't come and there was no sign of Radenko. Who knew what had happened to them?

According to his war duty schedule, Father was to report to his unit's meeting place that was near the Orthodox cathedral. He used the pause between two raids and left. He told me not to allow anyone I did not know into the yard because thieves and burglars might turn up in such a situation. A short time afterwards someone rang the bell and tried to come into the yard. When I showed up at the window he ran away. Waiting for Father, I noticed a man on the other side of the street who being out of his mind, was running up and down carrying a child in his arms who could have been about three years old. I looked through my binoculars and saw that the child was dead: blood was coming out of its mouth.

Father came back quickly. There was no one at the muster point, only a dead priest. Somebody had put him on a porter's cart and left him there. Father heard that many people were killed at Bajloni market. The people were machine-gunned from the planes.

Somewhere around half past two, rumours started to spread in the neighbourhood that the heaviest bombing would take place at half past three. The city would be completely destroyed. Buses for the evacuation of the inhabitants would arrive shortly. People should leave the city. And at three o'clock the buses actually arrived. They had the sign of the Red Cross on their roofs. Father and I filled our rucksacks with the minimum of things we thought we would need, and put in some tins of sardines and a little sugar. Father produced some money from somewhere, and divided it into two parts. He gave me one part and the other he put in his rucksack. There could have been about 200,000 dinars²². The day before he had taken the money out of the bank to pay his workers, but since many of them were called up for military duty and did not come to fetch their wages, Father still had the money. The women and children were the first to get on the bus followed by us. Some people didn't have seats, so they stood. The bus filled up quickly and started on its journey: it passed by the church of Alexandar Nevski and the destroyed bomb shelter, which took a direct hit, then turned left into Dušanova Street. The bus followed the same route as the number 2 tram. We passed by destroyed and burned-down houses out of whose broken windows flames were bursting, I think more houses were on fire than directly destroyed by the bombing. We drove down Alexander Street, by the Technical Faculty avoiding twisted lamp posts and the craters made by the bombs and went down to Slavija Square. It was the same everywhere: shop windows were broken, an overturned cart with a dead horse, destroyed cars, people who were out of their mind loaded with bundles, some of them were pushing prams baby carriages full of their possessions... We somehow managed to reach Autokomanda and then a new wave of German planes arrived. It was the largest escadrille of planes anyone had ever seen: 450 aircraft, mostly Stukas (Yu-87). It is said that so many planes had never been used in one attack up to then in the whole history of warfare [The driver wanted to leave us at Autokomanda but some passengers offered him money to drive on. At about

22 At that time a very good house could be bought for that sum.

the same moment, a plane left the escadrille, dived in our direction and machine-gunned our bus. Luckily it missed. I was sitting by the window and saw how a few metres away from me the ground gaped open. The place where the Red Star Stadium now is used to be wasteland and there were a lot of soldiers there. They were lying on the ground and some of them were shooting with their rifles at the planes. In vain! I well remember a soldier in a navy blue uniform... The plane flew over us twice more and missed us each time. Then something fell on the roof of the bus, panic broke out but then nothing happened. The women shouted to the driver to drive on to Ralja. Someone immediately turned this into a rhyme: "Drive on to Ralja, drive on" and thanks to the money that was given him, and not the rhyme, the driver drove us even further than Ralja - to the railway halt of Đurinci - and finally left us there. A horse and cart turned up and we immediately piled our belongings and the smallest children on it and started walking the three or four kilometres to Sopot. The cart stopped at the entrance of this small place which I didn't know, and a lot of curious people gathered around us. The women started speaking all at once, explaining what had happened in Belgrade. A policeman approached us and told us that he would arrest us if we continued to spread alarming news. He didn't believe that Belgrade was bombed. Nobody at Sopot knew what was happening.

We found a room in a small house at the very entrance of the town. The owner was a blacksmith (I think he was called Ilija) and was in the army and his wife, who had unbelievably yellow skin, rented their bedroom and offered to cook for us what we bought at the market. It was beginning to get dark by the time we settled down. The sky was red and somebody saw it as a sign that there would be war: 'When the sky gets that red at sunset it means war will soon break out'. Later we realized that the sky was not red in the west where the sun had set a long time ago, but in the direction of Belgrade. Belgrade was burning and it could be seen as far as Sopot.

During the first night in Sopot a noise woke us up. Some people were looking for a place to stay. Our landlady explained that everything was full. I recognised the voice of Zoran Dojčinović: we let them into our room and it soon became overcrowded: Zoran and Rajko, their mother Maruša, their aunt and two cousins Jelica and Branka. Somewhere they had managed to find an abandoned hack and a cart, piled on it their most precious things, two expensive violins and even their two bird dogs and thus reached Sopot. I was happy because of that meeting. The atmosphere was full of joy thanks to Branka and Jelica.

The next day my father went to the market and bought quite cheaply a chicken, a lot of potatoes and *kajmak*. Our landlady fried the potatoes and chicken. We liked eating it so we ate fried chicken, potatoes and *kajmak* for ten days. It was all very tasty.

Sopot became a very busy place at that time. The army with field trains, soldiers looking for their units, optimists, panic-stricken people, a lot of people from Belgrade who had escaped from the bombing, carts pulled by oxen, some cannon batteries. It began to rain and snow a little. The weather made us depressed. Today, whenever we have weather like that, I always think of the war and remember those days on April 1941.

We spent most of our time in the restaurants of Sopot. People met there and exchanged information. The news were very different and often contradictory: our forces beat the Bulgarians at Kačanička ravine; the Germans were just about to come;

a man had seen tanks on the main road; Belgrade was completely destroyed; a German reconnaissance plane had been shot down behind Ropočevo, (very near Sopot); and a German spy was seen (and some said caught) at the cemetery with a portable radio transmitter. Someone found out that there was an overturned bus on the road close to Sopot. My father and some others went to see and arranged for the bus to be pulled out of the ditch. They got it to Sopot and obtained petrol. The Dojčinović family decided to join in this endeavour. A driver was found and our intention was to withdraw towards Greece. The problem was that nobody could start the bus. People thought that the petrol pump was not working. Somebody put a bucket of petrol on the roof and pulled a rubber hose to the motor, but it didn't help. A solution was finally found: a few pairs of oxen were hired and hitched up and we started on the journey. The belongings and the very small children were in the bus, and we walked beside and behind it encouraging the oxen, pushing the bus from time to time and that's how we intended to reach Greece. We covered a few kilometres, reached Đurinci and there, while we were crossing the rails, the bus got stuck since the oxen could not pull the bus over them. Maybe the peasants didn't feel like going any further, although they were paid as far as Mladenovac.

There were a lot of soldiers near the railway station, they were lying down or wandering around or going to urinate. They were hurrying us up because they were expecting an army train. With their help we managed to move our bus, turn it round and start back for Sopot. Just before Sopot, on the narrow road, we blocked the passage of an army unit with cannons. As the bus was of no more use to us, we let the soldiers turn it over into a ditch. That seemed to have been its fate.

Rumours reached us in Sopot that at the railway station in Đurinci the goods vans were being opened and everything was being offered to people so long as they took things away. It was better for the people to take the goods away than leave them for the Germans.

The weather was very bad and the people went in large numbers on foot or by animal-drawn vehicles to Đurinci. Swapping the goods from the vans took a few days. All sorts of things were brought back, mostly flour, paraffin in blocks and some yellow chips which people believed to be gold. A few days later when they found out that they weren't gold they threw them away. The children gathered up the chips and played with them.

As I said, all sorts of things were brought back from the station, depending on what means of transport one had. Some carried the goods on their backs, some in wheelbarrows and the richer ones on ox-carts. The first day only a few people went and then more and more did. They would go in the morning and come back dirty and muddy, laden with things, around midday or in the afternoon.

I think this incident took place on the third day. About ten people stood under the eaves of houses at the entrance to the place. They were the poor who could not (or did not want to) go to Đurinci on foot. They would wait for those who were bringing back the flour and paraffin and try to beg something from them. In the beginning, the poor were humble, as beggars can be, and later on, as no one wanted to share the loot that they had carried back through the rain with great effort, the beggars became more aggressive. Banding together, they tried to grab the goods from those who had brought them back,

but without success. They were beaten back with poles.

The miller came along. He was a man of short stature, thickset and very strong. He was coming back from Đurinci, his two carts laden with flour. He was leading the oxen of the first cart and his assistant was leading the second cart. The beggars rushed forward trying to lift down the sacks of flour from the second cart. The miller and his assistant swung the poles. A fight broke out. Someone took out a knife and the miller raised an axe. A few women swore and screamed with piercing voices. A crowd collected – some people tried to keep them apart while others watched indifferently what was happening. Taking advantage of the situation someone cut two sacks and the flour pouring out left a white trail on the muddy road. Some women appeared who tried to gather up the flour. They collected it with their hands and threw it into their aprons, and one woman raked it up with a garbage shovel, gathering a lot of mud in the process.

Thanks to the common sense of some of the people, everything turned out well. Nobody was hurt, and the miller drove *his flour* into his yard. People started to go away saying that the rich always grab more than the poor ones.

I didn't know who was right: those who were stealing and hauling the goods or those who were demanding *their share* at the entrance to Sopot.

A few days later, a cannonade was heard. It lasted the whole day. Later on we learned that there was a battle near Velika Plana. Our army resisted the German tanks and held them up for quite a while. Not knowing exactly what was happening and what would happen, we withdrew towards Kosmaj into the big house of the mayor of the municipality (I think he was called Pera – my memory is failing – he had a butcher's shop and a restaurant in Sopot). The men, most of them veterans of World War I and the Thessaloniki front, counted the weapons: one army rifle, two or three hunting rifles and five or six guns. They had two hand grenades too. If the Germans came they would defend the house. The house was in a convenient place, I must admit, but now I think that we were lucky that the Germans didn't come... In the evening the battle calmed down and we returned to Sopot. Only random shots were heard.

It turned out that the Germans took the main road and did not turn off to Sopot at all. A few days later Yugoslavia capitulated. People started to return home and we heard (as we expected) that the situation would not be good for the Jews. It was quiet in Sopot and there were no Germans there so we decided to stay. After all, everybody believed that the occupation would not last long. The English would beat the Germans and drive them away and maybe the Russians, who were up to that point good German allies, would break their pact with them. If the Russians joined in, the war would be finished in a few days! Newspapers started arriving full of announcements of families looking for their missing or announcing the deaths of their dearest; the orders of the occupation government dealing with the curfew, the obligatory registration of the Jews with the nearest authorities and the obligatory surrender of weapons (under penalty of death).

One night our host came back from the fighting. He came secretly, immediately changed his clothes into civilian ones and started telling us unbelievable stories about treason. He was in the artillery and they had received grenades that did not match the calibre of the cannons and when the Germans started the offensive there were oranges in

the crates instead of grenades. The officers were deserting. Not having weapons to fight with, the soldiers ran away too.

Father had a pistol, 'the big one' he had brought back from World War I. He had a holster made by the local furrier. Nobody else knew about the gun. Father decided not to hand it in.

Being very communicative, my father got to know and became friends with a lot of people: beside the mayor of the municipality, the judge, the local lawyer, the head of tax administration, the teacher Jelica and Miladin who was the community or district secretary. I remembered just those two names: Miladin and Jelica—with reason.

Very soon, one afternoon while Father was sitting in front of the restaurant with the mayor and I had gone home to get a sweater, the first Germans came.

Coming out of the house I heard a noise and then I saw a motorcycle with a sidecar. The driver had a sub-machine gun at his chest and a machine gun was fixed to the sidecar. Dusty, with helmets, driver's glasses and hand grenades around their waists they really looked frightening. They stopped right in front of our house and were immediately surrounded by a crowd of curious people. I was among them. We silently stared at the occupier, the first we had seen. The driver asked if anyone spoke German and since no one answered he repeated the question, this time shouting – threatening that he would shoot if no one answered. While the German was shouting one young man with a schoolboy cap on his head nudged me saying, 'Volunteer, they won't do anything to you, you're young'... I knew that young man, my father had talked with him several times, and God knows why, he had concluded that he was a Communist. I hesitated, and when I was thrust forward, I blurted out: "Was wollen sie?" (What do you want?) The German, seeing me, was a little bit surprised and then asked me: "Wo ist der Bürgermeister?" (Where is the mayor?) I didn't understand the last word in the sentence, and supposed it was a typical German compound word. The second part of the word (Meister) made me think that he was asking for some kind of craftsman. Maybe he needed someone to repair his motorcycle, machine gun, or boots? Confused, I asked the German what that craftsman repaired. The German became angry and shouted that I should not make jokes with him but should immediately take him to the Bürgermeister. The young man standing behind me whispered that they were looking for the mayor. As soon as I realized that, I tried to explain: "Go left and at the end of the street"... I hadn't finished the sentence when the soldier sitting in the sidecar lifted me up and put me on the machine-gun. The motorcycle was going up and down and my testicles hurt. There is nothing worse than riding on a machine gun fixed to a sidecar! After a hundred meters the motorcycle went round a bend and stopped in the square in front of the restaurant. I saw my father astonished, quickly hiding behind a tree. I was afraid that he would shoot – without cause – and I yelled at him not to worry, that the Germans just wanted to talk to Pera. Luckily the Germans didn't notice what was happening. They informed Pera that the next day some officers will come and ordered him to meet the officers in the municipality building when they would choose rooms for the accommodation of their regiment. At Pera's request my father acted as interpreter.

The Germans went away immediately and we went home. There I got a proper beating. As if I had entered Sopot "at the head of the German troops" of my own free will!

Next day, at the exact time specified, a car came bringing the German officers. The rooms which they chose were to be changed into soldiers "sleeping quarters in three days" time. Hay was to be put on the floor and planks put around it. They measured the rooms with steps to determine how many soldiers could sleep in them and wrote the number on the door with chalk. They did this energetically, quickly and pedantically. Having finished the job they left. Pera persuaded my father to be the interpreter again. It seemed that no one else in Sopot knew German well so my father reluctantly agreed. As always, I went with him.

Three days later, in the evening, the German unit marched into Sopot singing. The town was all green with their uniforms, but nothing really happened. I noticed that my father gave his pistol to our host to hide. He began enquiring about renting a room somewhere in the neighbouring villages – it was better to be further away from the Germans!

It began with orders: the Jews had to wear yellow bands with the six-pointed star on and the word "JUDE" (Jew). This was to be done under penalty of death. When we met the German soldiers we had to greet them and step down from the pavement. Jews as well as dogs were banned from entering the park. Luckily there were no parks in Sopot. The pedantic Germans sent the orders together with the yellow bands to the district administration which quickly transmitted the orders and gave us the bands in a great hurry. I was a little puzzled: should I wear one or not. I asked Father what he thought about it and he laughed: it was nothing to be ashamed of. Even if he were made to wear a tuft of feathers plume, he would still remain the same person. He wore the band as something natural that he was neither ashamed nor proud of. In his own way he hated and had the worst possible opinion of these Hitler Germans.

Sometimes I wore my coat over my shoulders in such a way that the sleeve could not be seen. Naturally, I did this only when there was no danger of bumping into a German because it was said that they shot people for doing that.

The order came that all Jews had to go back to the towns they lived in. That order, as all others, was written in German and my father translated it (by some miracle this manuscript has been preserved). He translated into Serbian everything that was written in German which came to the municipality or district office and sometimes the district head and mayor's replies from Serbian into German. That is why the district head said that the order for the obligatory return to Belgrade did not apply to us: he needed an interpreter and he would protect father if it were necessary.

(The fourth letter)

Belgrade. 06. 04. 1992.

Dearest,

Today is the sixth of April 1992. Fifty years have passed since the time I am writing about. I have forgotten a great deal. Maybe that is just as well. However, as I write this for you, my memories come spilling out... I am skipping many of them, now I have a feeling that they are not so important. If I am over-descriptive, it is because, aside from the very facts that interest you, I want to make the period when all that was taking place as familiar as possible to you.

I remember one morning (it was probably at the end of April 1941), we were sitting on the porch of an old inn in Sopot that still exists. There were a few people from Sopot and a family, I think their name was Cohen. I don't remember how many of them there were: father, mother and children, maybe their grandmother was with them too. Some peasants who were their friends were also present as well as my father and me. The peasants tried to persuade the Cohens to take refuge in Nemenikuće, a village on the slopes of Kosmaj - or to go somewhere further on. One of them invited the Cohens to come to his house, to live there and wait for the war to end. I remember their answer: 'Everything we have is in Belgrade. Our possessions, carpets, silver, the piano... We cannot just leave all that. We must go back to Belgrade, put them in a safe place and then decide what to do next. Anyway they cannot kill us all'. But they did, they killed them all. I heard that the family was very rich and respected: the father was, if I remember rightly, a leather merchant. Maybe they were indecisive or valued their possessions too much. Or they were just normal and they could not imagine that such terrible, abnormal things could happen.

One more detail. We went to visit Father's friend who had a house at the end of Sopot, in the direction of Nemenikuće. It had a glassed-in balcony. We called the host's name at the gate and quite unexpectedly a German officer appeared instead of the host. We didn't know he lived there. He had riding boots and trousers on. He invited father to come in until the hosts, who would be back soon, returned. Father thanked him saying we would come back later, but the officer insisted. In order to avoid trouble (we had our yellow bands on) we obeyed and went inside. There was another officer there; he was shaving and left quickly and then the first one started to talk. He asked Father how come he spoke German so well (he had already met Father in his capacity as translator). Father explained that he had studied in Munich.

- In Munich, and what did you study there?

- Architecture.

- I am from Munich and I studied architecture, too.

The tension relaxed. The German asked Father who his teachers were, and it turned out that he knew some of them... Father recalled his student days and said how good he had felt there.

- No, Munich is not the same as it was when you were there. It has changed. The people have changed too. It is not the city you remember anymore. Unfortunately.

The conversation stopped abruptly. The German had said too much and Father had heard too much. When we were leaving, the German said that it was nice talking to him: they were colleagues in a way, but if they met on the street they would not acknowledge each other and Father would have to step off the pavement. Such were the times unfortunately.

Soon after that we found a flat in Ropočevo, a village close by Sopot. We lived with Petrija Bugarčić, a self-supporting old woman who did not ask for too much money and was very cordial to us. She cooked for herself and us. The house was opposite the cemetery, a little further away from the main road. There were two small buildings: in one was the kitchen and pantry, where Petrija lived. Next to it was another building with a small balcony and two rooms: we moved in there. Between those buildings and the road was a cornfield so they were almost invisible from the road. It was summer 1941.

At the beginning of April, a few days after they had come to Sopot the Dojčinović family had found accommodation in the house of Miloš Radojević, one of the richest peasants in Ropočevo. They went back to Belgrade to bring the most necessary things and then continued to live in Miloš's house. It was convenient for them. Their father Uroš was in a POW camp. It was difficult to get food in Belgrade and they lived in the village as if they were on holiday. I often visited them and played with Miloš's sons and Zoran. They lived at the other end of the village.

One day a big, black car stopped in front of our house. A few people got out carrying something. It turned out that father's good friend Duško, Dušan Stojadinović, had come to visit us. He had a tinsmith's shop in Dečanska Street. My father had noticed him a long time ago, while he was an apprentice tinsmith, and had asked him why he didn't have a shop of his own, as he was so industrious. Finding out that Duško didn't have enough money to pay to take the professional exam and open his own shop, my father lent him the money. Duško opened his own workshop and they became great friends. As far as I know, he did all the tinsmith work for my father. So, seeing that Father was not in Belgrade and knowing what was being done to the Jews, Duško became worried and using some of his connections in the police, he found out where we were. He asked his godfather, the chief of police in the fifth district of Belgrade, to lend him his car and instead of the then obligatory travel papers (documents without which no one could move around) he got a driver and two policemen in civilian clothes. He brought six loaves of bread and offered to drive us anywhere we wanted to go. It would be quick and safe. We thanked him and stayed in Ropočevo. However, we were happy to have such friends.

At around that time there was the terrible explosion in Smederevo. I well remember being in front of the house at that moment and I experienced it as a short

thunderclap coming from the bowels of the earth, rather than as an explosion. Some time later I felt a warm wind (Smederevo was 50 kilometres from Sopot) and I realized that somewhere in that direction something terrible had happened. Just how terrible it was we found out a few days later. There was talk of 1200 dead, but the exact number was never known. How the explosion had happened - by accident or sabotage was not established. An enormous amount of explosives and ammunition, left over by the Yugoslav Army, was stored in the Smederevo fortress.

Nowadays people say it was the work of Mustafa Golubić, the famous Comintern executor, a personal friend of both Stalin and Tito.

(The fifth letter)

Belgrade. 08. 04. 1992.

My dearest,

I think I have already said that images from the occupation period have become my obsession, since I began sending you this “story in instalments”. I keep remembering many details, which at first glance seem almost unimportant - but maybe they are not quite unimportant... It is difficult to differentiate what is important in our lives and what is not. We can judge these things only much later...

My mother turned up those days. She appeared quite suddenly, dressed in a *dirndle*²³. Being Jewish she could not get the necessary travel papers, so she put on that dress and risking much went to the railway station. She found the right train and introducing herself as a wife of a German officer, asked some German officers to help her find a place. The Germans were gallant; they offered her a place in their compartment where she was protected from the railway and police control. She brought us some of our things, clothes she managed to steal from our house into which a *Folksdeutcher* ²⁴ unit has moved in. How she managed to find out where we were is a long story of its own. I must tell it so that you will be able to get to know the other side of her character, which revealed itself in times of trouble.

It seems that she arrived at Gundulićev venac, as soon as we left the house. Not finding us there, but knowing that we were supposed to go to Užice (or somewhere near Užice) she decided to find us. She had to leave Belgrade because of the bombing anyway so she packed and with her mother and Erna set off in the direction of Rakovica. There they came upon a military patrol. A half-literate sergeant asked for their documents. Instead of having identity cards, they only had their passports that were at that time considered to be “stronger” documents. The sergeant did not know that and seeing a lot of foreign stamps in the passports, concluded they were foreign spies, so he simply ordered the soldiers to take them to the nearby quarry and execute them there. It was not worth protesting: fools can be found everywhere and in all times. Luckily, after they walked a hundred meters, some air force officers, who were passing by, recognised my mother and saved them. They called the sergeant a fool and helped them continue on their way. In overcrowded trains and peasant carts they came to Užice which was full of soldiers and refugees. There she found out that in the region there were 180 families who

23 Dirdle: Dress women wore in some parts of Germany, a kind of national costume.

24 *Folksdeutcher*: Ethnic Germans who for several generations lived in our country.

had the last name Smiljanić (the name of father's partner) and that they lived dispersed in the neighbouring villages, so it would not be easy to find them all. She only knew that we were supposed to go to a Smiljanić family. Someone advised her to appeal to priests: they always know the new people in their parish. Maybe it was her idea I do not really know. Be as it may, in a short time she got a letter, written by the Orthodox Archpriest Milan Smiljanić, in which he wrote that her *husband and son had been seen alive and in good health in Sopot on the 11th of April*. Much later, she found out that the Archpriest, after receiving her letter, read it in an inn, a place where in those days people met and exchanged news. The letter moved him so much that the people who were sitting with him asked him why he had tears in his eyes. He explained that he had just received a letter from a woman searching for her husband and son. The war had just started and such tragedies were already happening. The people asked him to read the letter to them and when he did, a refugee sitting with them said that he had seen us in an inn at Sopot.

My mother's arrival really made me happy and my parents' meeting was very cordial. It seemed as if the war made all those misunderstandings, which they used to quarrel so much over, disappear. In such a situation they probably seemed ridiculous to them. Mother remained a few days and then went back to Belgrade, carrying some provisions for her family. She promised she would come again and she did every ten to fifteen days. Always in a *dirndle* which together with her good knowledge of German and the knowledge of Vienna helped her to introduce herself as a Viennese, a wife of a German officer. She would bring us things she managed to take out of our house and would take back the food that was getting scarce in Belgrade. She was courageous, skilful and resourceful. In these days people went to jail for such endeavours, or lost their lives.

Father asked mother to go to the Soviet embassy in Belgrade, find the ambassador and explain that he wanted to go back to the Soviet Union together with us. He had wanted to do that since that reception in the embassy, and now the times were difficult for Jews in Serbia. He needed passports for the three of us.

The Russians received my mother well and promised that they would prepare our documents in a week. The following week it turned out that the documents were not ready. The Russians promised again that they would do it in a day or two. That was repeated a few times, until the 22nd of June, when war between Germany and the Soviet Union broke out. The embassy was closed and so we could not go to the Soviet Union. Many years after the war, we learned that we were lucky because all those who fled to the Soviet Union from Europe at that time - were arrested at the very border and most of them sent to Siberian labour camps where they ended their lives. All that in the fraternal Soviet Union! We could not have known that then.

Russia's entry into the war made us very happy. We were all very excited: now when the Russians entered the war the Germans would be conquered in a few weeks. Maybe the Russians would drop parachuters right here...

Shortly after that, we learned that some courageous people started going to the forest to begin with the guerrilla warfare. My father knew some of them and was friendly with them while we were in Sopot. Jelica, the teacher also went, I knew her well. It was not quite clear to me what they were doing there in the forest, but it did sound

heroic. "Forestmens"! True, some people were already in the forest. The Chetniks²⁵ were mentioned, and I think that somebody had already mentioned the name Draža²⁶. They too were forestmen but they did not attack the Germans yet. The other forestmen (or Communists, as they were called) did. They cut telephone poles, tore telephone lines, sometimes they destroyed railroad lines and killed Germans and our policemen who worked for the Germans. The situation at that time was pretty unclear. One night a man from Ropočevo was taken away by unknown people and he disappeared forever. "You just disappear during the night", the peasants would say. Who took him and why we did not know.

The Germans announced that they would shoot 100 Serbs or Jews for every German soldier who was killed. They would take hostages in advance that they would kill if anything happened. The names of the shot people were announced later on posters. My mother would tell us about the situation in Belgrade. It was becoming more and more difficult especially for the Jews and Gypsies. I learned of the tragic end of my school friend Robert Fisher. His father was among the first to be taken away as a hostage. When he was arrested, Robi ran after the truck all the way from the corner of Francuska Street and Dušanova Street where they lived, to Tašmajdan where the Jews were held in the beginning of the occupation. If he had not done that, he would not have known where his father was taken. A few days later they came again. This time, they took Robi, his mother and sister. At your suggestion I wrote about this a few years ago - it was printed in "Kadima".

I think I was still a child then. What else could I have been, I was only eleven years old and had only a few months of war experience which was not much. I missed my friends from the school and from the street. I spent my time visiting the Dojčinovići who still lived in Miloš's house or I played with Branko Peić. Branko appeared with his mother in our neighbourhood. They moved into a house next to ours and decided to live there until the end of the war. Mrs. Peić was a tall, thin lady with noble manners, a bit wrinkled, who could talk nicely - it does not matter on what subject. Nicely, but very often too lengthily and endlessly. Her husband was a high-ranking officer and, as she used to tell us, he had been killed by the Ustashe²⁷ before the war. It was much easier for

25 Members of Serbian nationalist guerrilla force that was formed when the Germans occupied our country to resist Axis invaders and their collaborators.

26 Mihailović Dragoljub, byname Draža (1893-1946) army officer, a colonel at the time of German invasion of Yugoslavia refused to acquiesce the capitulation of Yugoslav army. He organized the royalist Chetniks who operated mainly in Serbia. He was appointed general in 1941 and minister of war that same year by King Petar's Yugoslavian government in exile. Fearing of brutal reprisals against Serbians, he came to favour a restrained policy of resistance until Allies could provide more assistance; the Partisans supported a more aggressive policy against the Germans. Favouring the later policy and confronted with reports of Chetnik collaboration (particularly in Italian-held areas) directed against the Partisans the Allies switched their support from Mihailović to Tito in 1944. After the war Mihailović went into hiding. He was captured on March 13th. 1946, and charged by Yugoslav government with treason and collaboration with Germans. Although a US commission of enquiry cleared him and those under his immediate command of charge of collaboration, the issue is still disputed by some historians. Milošević was sentenced to death and was executed in Belgrade in 1946.

27 Croatian Fascist movement that nominally ruled the Independent State of Croatia

her, with the pension she had, to live in the village where everything was much cheaper. I got on well with Branko. Mrs. Peić got on my father's nerves with her babbling. By the way, it turned out that the Peić's lived in Ohridska Street just across the street from my mother's flat and that they knew each other.

One afternoon, while we were at Dojčinović's house, we heard buzzing. From the nearby hill we saw a column of trucks going from Sopot toward Kosmaj. There were also two or three small tanks. Zoran claimed that they were Czech tanks that the Yugoslav army had. Having a thin armour they could resist only rifle bullets. Those were the first tanks, I had ever seen. We supposed that all those German soldiers started out for Kosmaj because of the "forestmen" who were there. The next day we heard shooting from afar. We supposed that a battle was being fought at Kosmaj. The forestmen were, we believed, something like *komitadji* guerrillas from the previous war. They would inflict casualties on the enemy and then skilfully withdraw and disappear. We hoped these ones would do the same. In the evening a few German "Štuka" planes (Yu 87) appeared. They flew over Kosmaj, dived and threw a few bombs. The shooting stopped and the column of vehicles came back.

Dark foreboding and depression set in...

Two days later we found out that the Germans killed some forestmen at Kosmaj, brought their bodies to Sopot and exhibited them at the square. They ordered the people to go to see them and identify them. Naturally, we did not want to go there.

Generally, since we moved to Ropočevo we avoided going to Sopot. The Germans were there and it was wiser not to meet them. If something needed to be translated it would be brought to our house. My father went to Sopot only a few times to translate at the request of the district chief. Later on, these requests stopped completely. The Germans ordered the Jews to return to the places where they had lived before the war. That being the reason why we did not go to places where we could be noticed. However, we felt safe as much as it was possible to be... Father made plans for a school at Ropočevo. He worked with enthusiasm and for free. The peasants liked him very much and the ones who were in the school committee told him not to worry. They would protect him if something happened.

A few days after the bombing of Kosmaj a few peasant carts loaded with the dead appeared on the road above Petrija's house. Two or three carts pulled by oxen each carrying a few corpses. They were piled like logs, without caskets. A hand stuck out of the cart. That hand with fingers clenched into a fist, for some reason remained deeply set in my memory. They were buried somewhere near the entrance to the cemetery, across Petrija's house.

One detail from that time is maybe necessary for the understanding of my father's character - and maybe mine too. My father became friends with the Orthodox

during World War II. They also conscripted an army to join the Axis powers and to fight resistance movements that were operating in the Yugoslav lands. To make their state more purely Croatian, the Ustashe set about exterminating its Serb, Jewish and Gypsy inhabitants with a brutality that shocked even the Germans and occasionally obliged Italians to intervene. Although many Yugoslav reacted to their brutality by joining the resistance movements, the Ustasha remained in control of Croatia until May 1945, when the German army protecting them collapsed and their leader Pavelić and his supporters fled before the communist Partisans.

priest from Ropocevo and I with his son. We would often go to the church yard: my father would sit with the priest, they would drink wine, eat a little cheese and sausages and talk while I played with the boy. When it became clear that all Jews would be put into a concentration camp where maybe a worse fate awaited them, the priest proposed to convert us. He would give us the necessary documents and we would be safe. My father thanked him but he just could not... "I am not religious but now, in this situation, I can't. When this war is over, prepare a good roast and a demijohn of this wine and I will come to be converted ten times if you wish"... I think they understood each other - and although I was only eleven years old I understood father.

Autumn was approaching. It was clear that the war, despite our hopes would not finish so quickly. According to the German newspapers (that is newspapers printed in Serbian but written in accordance with the German policy) the Russians were withdrawing. Miloš Radojević had a radio but since there was no electricity in Ropočevo, he would sometimes obtain a bulky box with batteries and then we listened to radio London. Secretly, because it was forbidden. The news was not good. Father began thinking about preparing food for the winter. We also talked about the possibility of my mother, aunt and grandmother coming to the village. Schoolbooks were provided for me, I had to study although I did not feel like doing so. My father tutored me and he found a student who began teaching me. I would take my exams when all this was finished.

One morning we got up early and went to the Sopot market. There were a lot of blackberries in large baskets. We choose the best, father negotiated the price, paid and when we were about to leave, Mrs. Peić turned up and rushed at our blackberries: "What wonderful blackberries, I will buy them". My father explained that he had just bought them, but she insisted that she needed to buy those blackberries for her child. Then father told her that he also had a child, that he already paid those blackberries and if she wanted to buy blackberries she could buy some other ones. While we were leaving carrying our heavy basket, Mrs. Peić shouted: "I'll take revenge for this, you will see"... All this was ridiculous and it was a little bit characteristic for Mrs. Peić, so we did not pay much attention her words. However, much later I often thought about what she said, analyzed it - but without results.

The Dojčinović family went back to Belgrade and we found out that Miloš was ready to rent us the two rooms in his house. That suited us because the German soldiers, looking for geese, eggs and brandy started coming to the part of Ropočevo where we lived. We really lived near Sopot and Miloš was on the other end and his house was not so exposed. We moved to his house quickly. Miloš had a wife, mother and three sons. His eldest son was a year older than I was, the middle one was a little younger and the youngest was very small. The company suited me. I looked after cattle with them, we went alone with the cart to some meadows and when nobody was looking, we drove the horses standing on the cart. We often talked how children were made... The topic was very interesting to me.

My mother would often come, almost every week. Miladin the clerk, when he would go to Belgrade on some business would visit them bringing my mother, grandmother and Erna food. This, at that moment insignificant detail turned out to be a very important one in their lives.

Maybe, we could have spent those few years of German occupation living in peace, hidden in Ropočevo. We felt relatively safe there and believed that the war could not last long anyway. Later on, I learned that it is most dangerous when one feels “safe”. Then one should be cautious and in some way be prepared for all possible unpleasant surprises...

I remember well, one morning while I was sitting and studying physics and chemistry, my father was sitting at the same table, cleaning hip rose to make jelly. Suddenly, our landlady came into the room frightened and said that soldiers surrounded the house. We looked out the window and saw that there really were policemen and Chetniks standing, close to each other, behind the fence. My father was calm and went out to see what was happening. He was arrested and immediately taken away somewhere. A few minutes later, the policemen came back and began to search our two rooms very thoroughly. That was the first time I saw how it was done. I knew that there was nothing there that was dangerous for us, but I was concerned about the money. My father hid a certain amount under the threshold and masked it well. The other part of money was hidden in the double bottom of the cardboard box of the Primus stove. He always had only small sums on him. The search I think lasted for two hours. It was fun to watch how the policemen knocked on the handle of the shaving brush, how they examined the toothpaste and looked behind the landlady's pictures on the wall. I became frightened when one of them took the Primus box. They took out the Primus, turned over the box and knocked on it. Sitting on a low stool, I died of fear when I saw, watching from underneath, how the false bottom was slowly sliding and opening... Luckily, the policeman did not notice anything suspicious; he returned the box into the normal position, so the money did not fall out.

Finishing the search, the policemen took me to Sopot, to the district building and handed me over to the Chetniks. Father was sitting on a bench in the corridor and I was not allowed to sit next to him. “Don't admit anything” he whispered to me. What he was talking about I did not exactly know, but I understood. We sat for a long time until evening fell just before the curfew. Then a Chetnik came out of the office and conveyed Vojvoda's²⁸ order that we could go home but must come back tomorrow morning as soon as the curfew is over and be in the corridor in front of his office.

While walking on a very muddy road father told me what had happened. Somebody denounced him: that he had obtained peasant clothes and held communist meetings in the nearby villages; that he had a pistol and hand grenades; that he was connected with the Partisans at Kosmaj and that my mother was the courier who connected Belgrade communists with the Partisans²⁹. Of all the charges only the one referring to the

28 Vojvoda: originally in some parts tribal chief; at the beginning of the XX century the leader of the komitadji units which fought against the Bulgarians and Turks; in the World War I, the highest rank in the Serbian army; during World War II everyone who gathers, organizes and commands a group of a hundred (sometimes even less) men in Kosta Pećanac's units.

29 Partisans: members of a guerrilla force led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia during World War II against the Axis powers, their Yugoslav collaborators, and a rival resistance force the royalist Chetniks. Under the direction of the party leader, Josip Broz Tito, Partisan detachments conducted small-scale sabotage until Sept. 1942 when they occupied the Serbian town Užice and proclaimed a liberated Užice Republic. Later on the Partisans were forced to retreat

peasant clothes (father did not deny it) and the gun were true. The furrier knew about the pistol but he like our former host, the blacksmith, would keep quiet about it. My fathers knew many people from Sopot who went to the forest but was not connected with any them except Jelica, the teacher, but even her he met rarely. She would sometimes, while she was on her secret errands, drop in on us while we were still at Petrija's. She would stay long and exchange news with father. It is most important not to admit anything my father explained and wondered who could have denounced us. He concluded that it could have been only Mrs. Peić and no one else.

The next day, we were again in the corridor, on the last floor of the municipality building that was held by Pećanac's³⁰ Chetniks. That was my second meeting with them the first one was the day before. These Chetniks appeared at the time when we stopped going to Sopot. They wandered around the corridor went into the offices and were in a hurry. They were dressed in brown peasant clothes, grey army uniforms or a mixture of both and wore "šajkača"³¹ or fur hats; they had cartridge belts on their chests, and on their waists hand grenades and cartridge belts. Some of them had bayonets and kamas³².

The vojvoda first called father and interrogated him and afterwards he called me. I went trough an office where a few Chetniks were writing and went into vojvoda's office. The room was at the corner of the building. It was simply furnished. In it there was an iron bed, a black carved desk, two or three chairs, a hanger and a big army chest. The chest was huge. A belt with cartridges, hand grenades, pistol and a kama was hanging on the wall. Two or three poles and some things that I have never seen were also hanging on the wall. Later on I learned: they were whips made of bull's tendon... Vojvoda was of moderate height, dressed in simple heavy peasant clothes, he had a beard and looked

into the mountains of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, they attracted enough recruits to designate themselves the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with elite Proleterian Brigades selected for their fighting abilities, ideological commitment and all-yugoslav character. In November 1942 Tito demonstrated the strength of his movement by conveying the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, which eventually became a provisional government.

Fearful that a powerful resistance force might encourage the Allies to invade the Balkan Peninsula, the Germans and Italians led seven major offensives against the PLA. The turning point of the war came in May 1943, when Partisans escaped encirclement in Hezegovina by forcing to exit up the Sutjeska gorge. The battle of Sutjeska was of first importance in persuading the Allies to switch their support from royalists to communists. Anglo-American and Soviet arms and equipment thenceforth were supplied in ever-increasing amounts. In October 1944 Partisans took part in the liberation of Belgrade by the Soviet Red Army; they were then able to focus their campaigns against the Chetniks and Yugoslav collaborators.

30 Kosta Milovanović – Pećanac was the Chetnik vojvoda, the first man in the history of warfare who landed on enemy terotory by plane. It took place on Sept.28th.1916. Celebrated as a hero in the World War I, in World War II very soon after the capitulation of Yugoslav he joined the Germans, organiziring throughout occupied Serbia Quisling, Chetnik units. The people did not like them. These Chetniks should not be confused with the units of Draža Mihailović. The units of Kosta Pećanac were disbanded in 1942 and Pećanac was centered to death by the verdict of Draža's court and executed soon afterwards.

31 Šajkača: a kind of cap worn by the Serbian peasants. They were part of Serbian and Yugoslav army uniform.

32 Kama is a doubl-edged knife,a kind of dagger.

terrifying. I have a feeling now that I was neither scared nor even too excited then. I had to tell him why and how we came to Sopot and why my mother kept visiting us. He asked me about the meetings and the gun and I naturally denied that.

-Your father admitted having a pistol.

I kept denying but I was shaken.

-Why do you deny when your father admitted having pistol and hand grenades?

It was quite clear to me that he was lying. I knew that father did not have any hand grenades. I kept to what I had said.

-What were your connections with Jelica? Did your father use to see her?

-Yes, we used to see her often.

Vojvoda was happy to hear this; he became less severe and asked where we usually met her. I explained that we used to visit her. Than he asked: where?

-Well, at her place in the inn.

-Which Jelica are you talking about?

-The Jelica who is the innkeeper, we sometimes used to eat at her place before the Germans came.

I felt a great pleasure for duping him. I realized that I could do it. That Jelica had a small inn in the immediate vicinity of the municipality. We knew, she used to cook for vojvoda and her husband was a Chetnick in his unit.

The interrogation lasted an hour or two and everything went, as it should have. Naturally, when I was asked about Jelica, the other one, I answered that I never heard of her.

In the evening we were allowed to go home and ordered to come back the next day and be in front of vojvoda's office early in the morning. As we were going back home I told father what happened at the interrogation. I was proud of my little victory and father praised me.

On the third day we saw my mother in the corridor. We were astonished, what was she doing there? We were not allowed to talk, she was sent to the other end of the corridor where she nervously, secretly gave signs with her hands to us: she showed number three, crossed her hands as if they were tied, and pulled her index finger as if she were shooting... She was called in for the interrogation first and then father. Somewhat worried I wandered when the cross-examination will begin, the cross-examination when they expose you and find out everything, the kind I have seen on films. We waited for a long time in the corridor, there was no cross-examination, evening fell and finally they let as all go home. We had to come again tomorrow morning... We went back, the three of us, walking on the muddy road. Mother told us how she was arrested in Belgrade, her apartment searched and was taken to a Special Police prison, but the next day, probably thanks to Mihajlo Rajković and his connections, she was transferred to another prison called "Diris-prison.³³" The blackmarketeers and the prostitutes were kept there. When the Germans or the police had fewer hostages they used to take prisoners from the

33 During the occupation the government organized the so-called Direkcija za ishranu (direction for Supplies) shortened DIRIS. At the time when food was rationalized the black market for food thrived. The prison where the offenders of this kind (not political) were held was unofficially called «Diris-prison»

Special Police prison to the camp in Banjica and sometimes they were even executed there. The “Diris” prison was safer. Prisoners were not taken from it. My mother was in the same room with the prostitutes. They had a basin with water and they would very often wash their asses and then dry them next to the stove (something like that was never shown on our films showing the war and occupation period. It would probably not look heroic...). On the third day she was taken to Mladenovac with a police escort. She stayed there during the night and then they brought her here (*A few years ago Miša found a few documents in the archives that refer to her arrest. I have the photocopies*). We spent the next days in front of Vojvoda’s office. We were not interrogated anymore, and after some time I did not have to go to the municipality building every day and shortly after neither did my father. Since my mother knew how to type using all ten fingers she had to work as a typist in vojvoda’s office. She would go every morning and come back in the afternoon. She would type minutes of the interrogations. Vojvoda was always interrogating someone. I heard that the interrogations were terrible: they used to beat people.

We found out that the District Head, the one that promised to protect us, was changed. A new one came, mother saw him and said that he was not nice. That was unpleasant news.

Shortly afterwards the police came to take us. They told us that an order had come that all Jews had to be taken to camps. We were taken to the district building, but not upstairs where the Chetniks were but to the ground floor where the Police Station was. My mother somehow managed to plead with them to let her go upstairs to inform the vojvoda. I went with her. Vojvoda told us indifferently that that was how it had to be. We had to go to the camp. He could not protect us. The interrogation against us was closed. It is true that we were not guilty of what we had been accused of, but he could not protect us. And why should he protect us?

My mother started crying and pleading: “At least save my child”. Vojvoda hesitated a while and then he showed mercy. He took up a pose and said: “All right I will save you and the child, but not your husband”. He held out his hand folded in a fist: “Kiss the hand of father Vojvoda”. He used to say that to everyone, holding out his hand. He liked doing that.

A terrible scene took place. I kept kissing his hand and pleaded that he save my father too, telling him that it was in his power to do it. Crying my mother also pleaded and vojvoda stood motionless as if he had enjoyed the scene. It lasted for a long time and I finally realized that I could not talk him into saving my father. On the wall I saw his belt with the weapons. In the holster was his pistol. It looked like father’s Browning. I knew how to use it. If only I had enough time to take it out and cock it. But what would I do if it were locked? Should I push the lock forwards or backwards? Would I have enough time? Maybe I should take the hand grenade? I would need time to unscrew it. He would be faster than I would. I wished I had been bigger and skillfull enough so I could force him to do what he was in a position to do. At that time I did not know that hostages could be taken but I wished to do something like that. Although, I was aware that if I did not succeed all of us would be killed immediately and so I gave up. I stopped crying. I think that I became another person at that moment. Even if I did not, I have not cried again in

the next fifty years and for the next five years I did not know how to laugh.

Vojvoda informed the District Head that the investigation against my mother and me was not yet closed, that we had to stay for some time more. Let him send father to the camp. We went back downstairs to father. He was satisfied that they would not take me. He asked to bring him tomorrow morning his winter coat, spiked boots and the rucksack with his underwear. We said goodbye and I still hoped that a miracle would happen. When we came home I started trembling. I think I trembled the whole night but I did not cry. We got up before sunrise and it was still dark when we came to the district building. There we waited for some time in a small hall of the side entrance to the building. Father was brought there. We gave him the things he needed and embraced. My mother asked me not to weep when I see father. I did not cry. I knew that it would not change anything and I was not able to weep anymore. Father was quickly taken away and we had to stay in the building for sometime. It was half-dark and I felt terrible. Everything else that happened to me later on in the war and afterwards I thought was simple compared to this.

We received a letter from father about ten days after he had been taken away. He somehow managed to smuggle it out from the camp to some one who posted it. It was a short letter. He was in Kragujevac and he was worried about me, he was all right, working. If we sent him peasant's clothes and five thousand dinars we would see each other soon. It was clear to us that he decided to escape. We found a refugee who worked for Miloš Radojević. We paid him well to take everything father asked for to Kragujevac. The man left but he did not come back for ten days. Two weeks past since we met him again... He began lying how he became ill in Kragujevac and how the peasant clothes and the money were stolen and that he did not find father. Quite by chance we found out that he sold the clothes and spent the money on drink in Kragujevac. In the meantime father was transferred to Belgrade. Father sent us another letter telling us when he would be transferred to the camp in Belgrade and wrote the exact time he would pass though Đurinci. For some unknown reason Miloš did not give us that letter on time but much later... A peasant in Đurinci found, near the railway lines, the last letter father wrote and gave it to us. Father wrote it, begging the person who would find it to deliver it to us and threw it out the window. Desperate that no one came to the station to meet him he begged to be informed on what was happening to us and how I was. He was worried that the same fate awaited us. He was being taken to the camp Topovske Šupe (that is near Autokomanda today) and if I too was taken to a camp I should try to find him so we could be together at least there. Sometime later a women, a wife of a priest who was Russian, went to Zemun. Passing near the Fair grounds (the old one) she saw father with some other camp inmates digging a ditch. She approached him calling him by his name. He was eating a raw potato. When he recognized her, he started telling her how he was all right and how I was in the camp with him. She, knowing that I was in Sopot with mother, began calming him down, telling him that I was not in the camp but it seemed as if he did not understand what she was saying. Maybe he wanted to tell her something by behaving in such a way and maybe she was the one who did not understand. At the end he started swearing, something he never used to do. What his state of mind was, we will never find out.

(The sixth letter)

Belgrade 15.04.1992

My dearest,

In the last letter I described the state of my father when he was last seen. I have often wondered and especially lately how come he who escaped from Switzerland by swimming across a lake; who fought as a volunteer at Kajmakčalan and who, when returned to the rear lines, fled to the front to fight again, why he did not try to escape? Was it because of the others, because of me or what? ... But it is better that I continue my story.

We spent the last days of autumn and the first days of winter coming and going between our house and the municipal building... Mother had to go and type every day and I went with her. Her position was not clear. We had to spend the days there. Actually we were in prison but they often let us go home at night. Sometimes they did not and then we had to sleep there on the floor. Sometimes, when the interrogations lasted too long and we could not go home because of the curfew, they let us go to Jelica's, escorted by her husband who was in the Chetnik unit. We slept there together, Mother and I, on a very narrow and uncomfortable bed. Jelica's house was about a hundred meters away from the municipal building on a little square which still exists in Sopot. Across from her house at the very corner there was a photo shop and a little further away a tobacco shop.

Most often for lunch we had the same food that the other prisoners ate: food from the Chetniks' kitchen. They would sometimes let us go to Jelica's inn for lunch. In the municipal building, I would wander through the corridors of the top floor where the Chetniks were. I wasn't allowed to go down the stairs. A guard was always standing there. There was a guard at the exit of the building, too. Other prisoners were also present; they sat on the benches in the corridor, waited to be interrogated, scrubbed the floors and cleaned the stoves. Some of them were locked up. Gradually I began to get to know the Chetniks. I listened to their conversations. They were very different but I think they were generally not evil people, except the vojvoda and maybe two or three others. Some of them joined that unit in the belief that they could fight against the Germans and the Communists, others because they were sure that no one would arrest them or deport them to do forced labour in Germany. Some of them came expecting an easy life, peasants' wives whose husbands were in POW camps, good food... Some of them were not clear what they were doing in that unit. It even seemed that they sympathised with the Partisans.

During the day the Chetniks would often go out into the field: on patrol or into “action”. What those “actions” were like, I wasn’t quite sure. Judging from the conversations that we heard, they would go to the neighbouring villages in a column or in a line of riflemen, ask suspicious people for their identity cards and search some houses if they had a tip-off. They would often bring back prisoners. The main interrogations were mostly done in the evening and at night. The prisoners were interrogated by the vojvoda personally, in his office. He forced the unfortunate people to admit that they were Communists and that they were connected with the Partisans. After the prisoners had denied these allegations, the vojvoda would shout loudly: “Buha” and his bodyguard Buha, who was two metres tall, would come in. Usually another man would also come in with Buha but I don’t remember his name. The vojvoda would then point to a dogwood stick or a bull’s whip, the ‘instruments’ for the interrogation. The prisoner would be folded on a chair and beaten terribly. The unfortunate man would scream, howl, lose consciousness and the vojvoda would beat the rhythm and shout to the panting soldiers: “faster, faster, faster”. He would shout from time to time at the prisoner: ‘speak up, speak up’ with a horrible voice that I can remember even now. Such interrogations – beatings actually – would last a very, very long time, hours. They usually took place in the front room and besides the Chetniks other prisoners had to be present. It was obvious that the vojvoda took pleasure in all this.



I lost consciousness when I had to watch someone being beaten for the first time. One Chetnik (it later turned out that he had children of my age) carried me to the soldiers’ dormitory and stayed with me until I pulled myself together. He brought me water and calmed me down by saying that this was the way these people should be treated, otherwise they would kill us. I don’t think he was sure of what he was saying... Some of the prisoners were “interrogated” for a few days, but care was taken that their vital organs were not damaged. The vojvoda took special care about this – as if he was afraid of losing a precious toy. In the end, many of the victims turned into trembling, senseless, broken bodies. The vojvoda would then order them to be transferred to Mladenovac. That order was actually a death sentence. The unfortunate man would be put on a peasant cart and



Pećanac’s vojvoda Milija Majstorović

(This picture was found quite occasionally. According to the date written on its backside the picture has been made only a few days before my mother and me escaped from the prison.

taken in the direction of Đurinci. Very quickly the guards would come back and report that the prisoner had tried to escape so they had had to kill him... Somebody noticed that wealthy people were often arrested, especially the ones who had young, beautiful wives. These prisoners were also beaten, but less. After a few days the vojvoda would become merciful, he would give his hand to be kissed and would start a speech which I listened to many times: "You are not a bad man, you were just led astray by evil people. I will release you, and you will become better, promise that you will become better. But you must know that while you are being foolish it is me who has to fight for you, to go out into the field, I freeze, my feet freeze. Write a short letter to your wife to prepare socks, beautiful, embroidered ones, a small pig and a little honey. I will release you; write and tell her to bring all that. Come on, kiss Father vojvoda's hand. Father vojvoda is a good man, kiss"...

The women would bring what was asked and had to stay overnight with the vojvoda. He would put the socks into the huge chest, and would send the honey he got in enormous jars to his son in Mladenovac. I saw his son only once, he was a tall, handsome young man in a Chetnik uniform but was unarmed.

Nobody knew anything about the vojvoda, who he was or where he was from. Some said that he was a teacher, and others said he was a tax collector. He had a friend in Mladenovac, a tradesman called Borota. He would often speak to him by telephone or send messages to him. He would order oranges from him. He had to have a crate or two of them. How Borota obtained them I don't know, probably through the Germans.

In the winter when the Partisans started appearing in the neighbouring villages, the vojvoda became nervous. He was obviously a coward. When he found out that the Partisans were strolling in the villages of Sibnica and Stojnik, he began gathering prisoners around him. He would sit in the middle of the room and give an orange to each prisoner: "...Kiss Father vojvoda's hand. Take the orange, take it. See how good I am to you"... We all took the oranges and kissed his hand. If shots were heard close by in the night (who knows who was shooting, probably the Partisans, simply to cause a disturbance without exposing themselves to much danger), he would gather us at night, and the next day he would go to Belgrade pretending he had some urgent business there. Because of such behaviour, he suddenly lost his reputation in the unit and the officers barely concealed their opinion of him.

The so-called "Republic of Užice" was being set up at that time. For some reason the Germans abandoned Užice and immediately after that the Partisans entered the town and established their rule. We learned about that from the newspapers. We wished to get out of prison somehow, get to liberated Užice and join the Partisans. Both options were impossible for us. The 'Republic of Užice' did not last long. At the end of November 1941, when the Germans decided to retake Užice, the Partisans had to evacuate urgently. After the war we found out that, instructed by the Partisan Supreme Headquarters (most probably on Tito's orders), a *workers' battalion* was sacrificed on that occasion. Almost all of them were killed at Kadinjača, protecting the withdrawal of the Supreme Headquarters.

A young man with a wife turned up in the unit. As far as I remember, the Chetniks found him somewhere near Sopot without documents. When they asked him

where he was going, he answered that he was going to join their unit. They were right in their suspicions that he was going to join the Partisans. For anyone who knew what Jews looked like, the features of his wife were too Semitic. Fortunately, the Chetniks were not able to recognize this. The young man got a uniform, an officer's overcoat and the rank of second lieutenant but he was not given weapons. They did not have confidence in him – maybe he still intended to go to join the Partisans.

During one of his sudden journeys to Belgrade, the vojvoda wounded himself and was put in hospital. His companion (a beautiful girl, allegedly a captured Partisan, who appeared who knows from where in the unit and was given the position of the vojvoda's nurse) came back to Sopot and told us that he had intentionally wounded himself in the leg. Everyone considered that he did this out of fear of the Partisans – he felt safer in Belgrade. Only Buha remained with him³⁴. The Chetniks became upset. Many of them demanded that the vojvoda be dismissed from his position and that his deputy, a lieutenant, be elected as the new vojvoda. He was a pleasant, mild and scrupulous man. Within a few days, different groups formed in the unit. Some of them wanted everything to remain as it was, they felt good where they were, and they didn't want to make the vojvoda angry. Others were absolutely determined to have a different vojvoda, a third group wanted to go to Bosnia: some of them wanted to actively fight the Communists there and others wished to go there in order to join the Partisans. All this was taking place at the end of February 1942. There were very few Partisans in Serbia: the 'Republic of Užice' had collapsed and the Partisans had mostly escaped to Bosnia. We heard that there were many of them there.

At that time while we were as usual sitting in the corridor (the vojvoda being absent, there were no interrogations, so there was less work for my mother) a man who was an acquaintance of my father and who worked for the municipality approached us and whispered that the District Head had decided to send



Aleksandar 1940



Aleksandar 1942

(March 1942 a few days before my flight from the prison)

34 After the war I heard that he didn't go back to his unit. After the Pećanas units were disbanded he lived in Belgrade in Ljuba Didić Street in a house with a high fence. Only his bodyguard was with him. By the end of the war the Vojvoda (Majstorović) withdrew with all those who were leaving the country. I enquired about him for a long time, wanting to find him and square some old debts. In the end I found out that he had been killed somewhere in Slovenia: maybe at Kočevski Rog or Bleiberg. Now, at my age, I think it was better that I didn't find him. It is not my business to be an executioner.

us to the concentration camp in a few days' time. We should escape, he said. My mother told him that if we were caught trying to leave, we would be killed but he explained to us that we would be killed anyway in the camp. We must try to escape, that would be our only chance of survival. Since we did not have documents, we should give him our photographs and he would make it for us.

That day, on the pretext of buying cigarettes for a Chetnik, I bought two identity card forms at the tobacconist's across the street. Forms were sold at such shops. In the evening we asked Jelica's husband, who escorted us to their house to sleep, to allow us to be photographed, saying that we wanted to send our photos to our family before we went to the camp. He agreed to do so only when Mother suggested that he, too, be photographed at our expense. It seemed that the photographer understood and the photos were ready in the morning. Our acquaintance passed us in the corridor and we managed to give him the forms and the photos. Sometime later he came back. Now we had our identity cards with photographs and the seals stamped on them in an orderly way. The round seal was stamped at the bottom of the documents. The man did it by finding a moment when the District Head, who had the seals on his desk, left the office. He risked a lot and after the war I was not able to recall or find out who the man was.

Mother and I had an agreement: she would be Marija Jurčić our former maid, and I would be her son Aleksandar. We knew their biographies, they were far away in another country now and nobody could check our documents or our stories. All we had to do was to fill in our empty identity cards with those names, dates of birth etc. – but we did not have the opportunity to do that. We did have something else, something which had proved to be very important: much earlier, during one of the interrogations when the vojvoda left the office for a moment, I took the opportunity of stealing a handful of newly-printed passes (travel papers). I don't know why I did that – at that time we did not seriously consider escaping. The passes were divided into two parts: one part was a pass for the Chetniks and the smaller one for the members of their families. All one had to do was to fill in the names, destination and reason for the journey. At the bottom was written: "All authorities are requested to allow free passage to the above named and in case of need help him. In God We Trust for King and Fatherland – Freedom or Death!" And the signature: Milija Majstorović, vojvoda. The signature as well as a big seal were printed but the papers were valid.

At that time, there was a kind of silent rebellion in the unit. The vojvoda's deputy opened vojvoda's desk. One drawer, it was said, was full of 'Spanish flies' (a kind of aphrodisiac) and the big chest was full of embroidered socks. The Chetniks finally divided into two groups: one would stay in Sopot and the other wanted to go to Belgrade to ask Nedić to appoint the vojvoda's deputy as the new vojvoda.

The following morning the whole unit stood in a line in the corridor. The ones who wished to stay in Sopot stood on one side and the ones who had decided to go to Belgrade and ask Nedić for another vojvoda, as well as those who wished to go to Bosnia, stood on the other side. Mother and I looked at each other and stood at the rear of the group going to Belgrade. In that chaos nobody asked what we were doing there. All of them probably supposed that someone else had ordered us to stand there... After that, they divided the property of the unit: blankets, ammunition chests, cooking utensils, and

then they went down to the yard, stood in a line again, made speeches and even shot in the air... It all seemed somehow festive and we were impatient to start on the journey. We noticed that the second lieutenant and his wife were also in our group.

We went to Đurinci on foot, walking somewhere at the end of the column. We were not asked anything and we didn't know how it would all end. The only thing that was important was to be as far away as possible from our District Head who wanted to send us to the concentration camp. And as far away as possible from his policemen.

In Đurinci, we waited for the train to Belgrade. It was probably late – or we arrived early. The Chetniks dispersed in small groups, and we remained alone on the platform. All of a sudden, a police patrol appeared. They were from Sopot. They already knew us, so they approached us sternly and asked us where we were going. My mother became sad: 'I don't know, we are probably being taken to the camp. We will be killed there.' Seeing her crying the policemen started to comfort her saying that nobody would kill us, that the Germans did not kill women and children. We would be kept in a camp until this war was finished... They left quickly, convinced that the Chetniks were taking us to the camp. They didn't ask for documents. A little later Popče turned up. He was a theology student. The village dandy, handsome, tall and slim, he had a Chetnik uniform (actually, it was formal peasant dress with a fur cap with a cockade on it), and a small hand grenade and a *kama* on his belt. He didn't have any other weapons. I don't think he belonged to any Chetnik unit but he wanted to show off in the village³⁵. He asked us where we were going and Mother started crying again and told him the same story. Popče became angry: "I'm not asking you where you are going in order to hear your stories. I want to help you if I can: that is why I am asking you". Then we told him that we were with these Chetniks because we were trying to escape, that we had forms which were not filled in because we didn't have pen and ink. Popče took us to a small room in a nearby inn. He asked the innkeeper to bring writing materials. The innkeeper brought what he asked for, mumbling: "Popče, don't set my house on fire", and Popče answered immediately: "If you don't shut up about this, I will personally set your house on fire".

That was the end of their conversation. Popče filled in the identity cards and the passes and I signed for the District Head, or was it the other way around, I don't remember but it is not important now. It was important that we had the IDENTITY CARDS.

Soon after that we got on the train. The unit was crammed into two cattle vans and there was straw on the floor. The wife of the second lieutenant sat next to us and whispered with my mother. They confided in each other. They agreed to meet at a certain place, at a certain time every day.

We travelled for a long time because the train kept stopping. It seemed that it had to let the German freight trains pass first. We arrived in Belgrade late in the evening. The Chetniks got off the train and formed into ranks on the platform. At that time there was a military station between the railway station and the post office. Some of the Chetniks left the formation and ran to the WC. We did the same and stayed in the WC for a long time, it seemed like forever. When we peeped out the unit wasn't there anymore. We

35 I recently found out: his name was Radojević and he belonged to Draža Mihailović's organisation. At the end of the war he emigrated and died a few years ago.

went towards the exit with the rest of the people who had arrived by some other train. It was very crowded at the exit. There were many of our agents and policemen and the German *Feldpolizei*³⁶ on the station steps. They let the passengers through, inspecting their identity cards one by one. We showed them ours; an agent looked at them and gave us the sign to pass. WE HAD MADE IT!

36 *Feldpolizei*: (German) military police.

(The seventh letter)

Belgrade, 17.04.1992

My dearest,

As you read in the last letter, there was nothing spectacular about our escape. Now, when I think of it, neither much skill nor much courage was needed. One just had to make the decision, carry it through and have some luck. However, if the decision is not made at a decisive moment, luck alone will not be enough.

As I write this I recollect that we actually didn't plan anything in advance. Our sole wish was to be out of prison, free and as far away as possible from the District Head and the vojvoda. And we made it!

At that moment we were not aware that freedom is a very relative term.

It was late; the curfew was just about to begin. Some women were standing in front of the railway station offering rooms to let. We accepted the offer of the first one. She lived near the station in Karadorđeva Street. The price was 20 dinars per person and we had that much.

I don't remember the flat we stayed in overnight. I just recall the bedroom, a classic one with a double bed, bedside tables, a photo of the married couple hanging above the bed and small carpets at either side so your feet don't step onto a cold floor. I slept on one of these carpets. There were over twenty of us in the room, on the bed and on the floor. We were lying so close to each other with our legs under the bed and heads outside on the floor in order to fit in as many of us as possible. I was so tired that I immediately fell asleep. In the middle of the night a bright light woke me up. It was a German policeman with a torch. He wanted to see our IDs. Very sleepily we started looking for them. Disturbance... I handed him mine, he looked at it and handed it back. It was all right.

I don't think that we had eaten since we started from Đurinci. Where would we have had the opportunity? Anyway we didn't even think about eating. We weren't hungry, we were cold... We were frozen from fear and cold. It was an extremely cold and damp winter in Belgrade that year.

We got up early and went directly to the hairdresser's. My mother's hair was dyed a very conspicuous blonde. She had the colour changed to an inconspicuous chestnut. She did so in case a Wanted poster ever appeared. Then she called Mihajlo from a phone box. Mihajlo Rajković, a lawyer's apprentice, was the son of a well known publisher and bookshop owner in Belgrade (Rajković & Ćuković), a *bon vivant* who had been for some years now a "friend" of my aunt Erna, which was well known in

certain Belgrade circles. As soon as he recognised my mother's voice he said he would come immediately. We would meet in a street in the vicinity of the railway station, near a pastry shop. He came quickly but did not approach us immediately. He walked by us and we followed him. It was a precaution he probably saw in a film or read about in a book. It didn't make any difference where he learned it but it was useful. By doing that you could see if someone was following you. Finally we entered an almost empty pastry shop in Gavrića Principa Street. Mihajlo ordered a "pastry" of the kind made during the war: flour, a little sugar, much more saccharin and water. We talked. He had brought us some money and a bag containing some personal things, maybe clothes, I really don't remember what. We arranged to meet again the next day at the same place. He told us we didn't have to worry about Grandmother and Erna. They were in Budapest where the Jews were safe.

In front of the railway station there was a hotel. It was a miserable building that was falling apart, called Đerdap. We took a room there. It was like a lair. In front of the station we bought a log. I remember it cost a hundred and fifty dinars. We paid as much again for an Albanian to cut it up for us on the street. The stove was small and good but we used up all the wood to make the room warm. We then got into bed fully dressed, so as to be warmer.

The next day we met Mihajlo again. He brought some clothes, money and bad news. The day we had arrived in Belgrade two well known police agents Đorđe Kosmajac and Obrad Zalad were killed. (It was 6 March 1942.) Belgrade was blocked; no one could leave and the police were combing the city looking for the assassins. We couldn't have arrived at a worse time! But maybe the blockade would be lifted in a few days...

We met the Jewish woman. She and my mother made an agreement: in case my mother was caught she would try to save me. In case something happened to my mother I should meet that woman. Then she would take care of me as far as she could. We agreed to meet again next day.

We went to Duško the tinsmith, who had a shop in Dečanska Street. He was surprised when he saw us. He immediately told us that my father had been in his shop the day before. He was now in the camp at the Fairground (*Sajmište*). Being an engineer, Father had been engaged by the Germans to build barracks for the prisoners. He had used the opportunity and said that he needed some books of tables in order to calculate the reinforced concrete. He went into the town escorted by two old German soldiers. Duško gave some money to the Germans to buy beer and they went to the restaurant across the street, so he could talk with my father alone. He suggested that Father should make an excuse to come to Belgrade again a few days later. He would free him from the escorts in the same way he had done that day and the rest was easy: Duško's godfather being the chief of police, Father would be arrested and escorted wherever he wanted to go. Duško's sister Rada lived in Homolje a mountainous region in Eastern Serbia. The policemen could escort him there and he would be safe. We could also go there as soon as the blockade was lifted. My father answered that he wouldn't escape from the camp because the Germans had announced that for each escaped prisoner seventy people would be shot. He had already applied to go to work in Poland. It was difficult in the

camp; people were starving and being killed. In Poland he would be safe until the end of the war. The Germans needed experts and he would work in a mine. We gave Duško two of our stolen travel papers in case Father showed up. If the opportunity presented itself, he could use them.

Suddenly there was hope that I would somehow meet my father again, in Homolje or as soon as the war finished. The truth was that we had no idea when the war would finish. The Germans were advancing on all fronts and no good news was to be had.

We didn't dare sit in our hotel room too long – the receptionist could become suspicious and my mother knew that porters and receptionists were always connected with the police. We went to the cinemas; to the matinees and the afternoon performances. It was dark in there and the cold was not so unbearable. We ate in a nearby restaurant. Mihajlo gave us a few coupons for bread. We could buy 150 gr. a day.

The third day of our stay in Belgrade – an unpleasant surprise: the receptionist announced that the next morning we would have to leave the hotel. An Italian unit were moving in, soldiers with feathers on their caps. It was terribly cold that afternoon, our feet froze in the cinemas and I think our bones did too. I had an idea. We bought a lot of newspapers, they were very cheap. We entered a restaurant in our hotel building. There we ate something. The music was playing loudly, and the singer was singing. I remember: *'Si Si Si, play my serenade, the serenade of my heart.* The restaurant was full of prostitutes, smugglers and Pećanac Chetniks festooned with cartridge belts. We didn't stay long; we just warmed ourselves a little and left. There, in the restaurant, we could have been recognised.

I made a mess in the room. I took out all the drawers and broke them up, everything except their fronts that I put back in place. I took out the hangers and all the shelves from the wardrobes and bedside tables. I took out the boards from one bed, leaving only three to hold the mattress in place. And I put all that into the stove and burned it. We warmed ourselves beautifully, fell asleep and the next morning left the hotel and went to the town centre. Cinemas again... We met the Jewish woman. Where could we go? She didn't know either. We phoned some of our friends. They were all scared: 'Don't come, it's dangerous. I have children. Sorry. It was March 1942. The whole town was very cold, miserable and spiritually shitty. Then in the evening the Jewish woman had an idea and took us to her friends. I remember their last name: Čuturilo. They were nice young people who lived on the first or second floor in the building next to the '1st May' pharmacy. We stayed the night there. They neither asked us who we were nor did we explain. It was better that way.

The next day the Jewish woman took us to Mrs. Bodi. I think she was a relative of hers, maybe her aunt. A wonderful elderly woman, the wife of General Bodi who, for unknown reasons, had committed suicide on the eve of the war. She took us in without hesitation, very warmly. We could stay as long as we needed to. She didn't think about the danger. She put us up in her bedroom. She would easily find a place to sleep for herself.

Around eight o'clock when, frost-bitten and exhausted, we intended to go to bed, the doorbell announced an unexpected visitor. It was the neighbour Mrs. Bodi had

told us about. He was a police officer, an unpleasant man very devoted to the Germans. He loved to play cards with Mrs. Bodi. We quickly went into the bedroom and crept under the bed. The neighbour came into the living room, obviously in a good mood. He suggested to our hostess that they play poker and she tried to avoid it by saying she had a headache. He was in a very merry mood and tried to persuade her that the game would make her headache go. "I don't have any money" was her second excuse.

– Don't worry about money, I caught a Jewish family today. Three of them. Just imagine, our people, Serbs, hid them: a husband and his wife. All in all, five people. As you know we get five thousand dinars for each Jew or someone who hides a Jew. So I have earned twenty-five thousand today. I'll give you five. If you win, you will give the amount back to me and if you lose I haven't lost anything.

Terrified, Mrs. Bodi brought out the cards. Lying under the bed we trembled. They played cards until dawn. When the policemen left, Mrs. Bodi almost had a nervous breakdown. The whole night, while she was playing cards, she kept wondering: "Maybe this man knows who I have in the next room, so he's playing games with me like a cat plays with a mouse. Maybe he'll take out his pistol before dawn and hand us all in to earn fifteen thousand more dinars." We too had this on our minds the whole night. As soon as the sun came up we crept out of Mrs. Bodi's flat³⁷. Next to the slaughterhouse we found something that was called a "hotel", Hotel Drina. It was a lair worse than the previous hotel, the one next to the railway station. The toilet: a dirty shed in the yard. It was terrible but still a hotel. We thought it was best to stay in hotels, because no one would expect people would try to hide there.

Nothing significant happened during the two or three days we spent there. We would buy some food in town and eat it in our room using newspapers for plates. We would sleep a lot: it was warmer in bed and time passed more quickly. We went to cinemas. I only remember one film: it was called *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*. It was German romance with singing, sailors, the Danube and saccharin smuggling. It was on at the Drina Cinema. When we left the cinema I noticed a school friend who had a German name and was, I think, of German descent. He followed us. He may have recognised me although I had my coat collar up and my cap pulled down over my head. We started going in the direction of the slaughterhouse, turned right and still he followed us. Maybe it was accidental, maybe not. Then I saw an appropriate house with a yard and a fence I liked. We went into the yard, approached the house, went around it, jumped over the low fence, went through the other yard and found ourselves in a neighbouring street. My

37 A few years ago, I found out how this noble woman ended her life. After us, for some time she hid a Communist in her flat. Later on, at the very end of the war, a German officer approached her. He was a decent man (there were some among them) and he explained her that he did not want to fight any more. He would like to desert but he did not know where and how to hide. He was not alone, he had another friend with him. Mr. Bodi took them in and hid them for a few months – until the Red Army and Partisans came. Then somebody denounced her to the liberators saying that somebody was probably hiding in her flat: for months she had been bringing in more food than was necessary for one person. The Germans were caught and shot immediately and she was put in prison. After some time the Communist she had hidden during the war appeared. Now he was a senior officer and he did all that was necessary for her to be released. But unfortunately it was too late. She had contracted acute tuberculosis in the prison cellars and died soon after.

school friend was nowhere to be seen.

As I have said, we stayed in the Drina Hotel three or four days. We were then again told that we had to leave— because of the Italians with their feathers. Luckily we learned that the blockade of the city had been lifted. We filled in our travel passes. We would go to Homolje, to a small place called Krepoljin. Duško told us that we could be free there, that there were no Germans in the region. His sister, Rada Šikić, was married there in a place completely unknown to me at that time. Her husband was a shopkeeper in Krepoljin. All we had to do was tell them that Duško had sent us. They already knew everything. We could stay with them until the end of the war. Our journey would take us from Belgrade to Požarevac. There we would find private accommodation at the railway station. The next day, early in the morning, we would catch the train to Petrovac. There we could spend the night in a hotel. Once there, it would be easy to find a peasant who would transport us cheaply from Petrovac to Krepoljin.

The train to Požarevac was crowded, mostly with smugglers. During the journey we sat on some of their things. Getting off the train in Požarevac, I noticed how my mother twitched and hurried on. We found a room near the station. Very soon the police came after us. They looked at our documents in detail and there was a quick interrogation. They left. My mother knew the reason for this: a Russian emigrant who was an old acquaintance and now an officer of Vlasov's army³⁸ had probably recognised her. It seemed that he had unsuccessfully wooed her before the war and had a grudge against her. It was true that my mother had changed a lot: she didn't wear make up any more, the colour of her hair and hairstyle were different and to top it all she had tied a kerchief round her head like peasant women did. Maybe he was not sure and didn't want to arrest her immediately but, just in case, he sent his people to check.

The next day, we continued our journey on the narrow-gauge railway with a train called *Ćira* to Petrovac. The weather became better, the train was not too crowded and we thought all the dangers were behind us now. We would soon be in Homolje!

In Petrovac we found a hotel, a real provincial one. In Serbia such hotels used to be named 'Grand' or 'Europe'. We rested a little and went down to have dinner. There were a lot of peasants in the restaurant so we quickly found one who was willing to take us to Krepoljin. He was going there the next day with his two horse carriage. He would take us for 250 dinars and we had to give him 50 in advance. We agreed and Mother paid him. He promised to pick us up at 7 o'clock in the morning.

As soon as he left us another one approached our table. I didn't like the look of him. He had overheard our conversation. He would drive us for 200 dinars. 'We've already given 50 dinars in advance' my mother answered, refusing his offer. He explained that his horses and carriage were better and that he would leave earlier. Anyway we had to pay 200. My mother accepted; we would go with this one who would come and pick us up sooner.

We got up early, went down and saw the one I didn't like the look of— he was waiting for us and we, driven by the desire to leave as soon as possible, started out with

38 Vlasov: a Soviet general who, being captured by the Germans, went over to them and organized army units made up of Russian emigrants and Soviet soldiers who were captured by the Germans and whose goal was to fight against Soviet rule and the Communists everywhere.

him. It was a nice day, the horses were strong, and we were almost flying... Veliko Selo, what an unusual name! I remembered Jaksic's verses:

“Od Velikog Sela, pa do samoga Ždrelo,
ko da j' vila neka, ćilima razastrela”³⁹...

I didn't usually remember verses but these just popped into my mind. The peasant said that Ždrelo was the entrance to Gornjak canyon, where Gornjak monastery was situated. I remembered another poem by Jakšić, *Night in Gornjak*. Naturally I couldn't remember all the verses, it would be too much for me. We went into the canyon, drove by the river Mlava and reached Gornjak in a poetic atmosphere. All of a sudden, Chetniks! They stopped the horses and ordered us to step down and take our things with us – the peasant could go on. He wanted to wait for us. They did not allow him to do so...

A handsome Chetnik wearing a simple peasant suit with a pistol in his belt was standing on the waste ground in front of the monastery. He had a neat reddish beard. He was brief: 'We know all about you. We know that you have false documents. Admit who you are and where you are going. It would be better for you to do so'.

Mother's legs collapsed. She sat on the waste ground and to my horror she started talking. She told them every thing. And our agreement was that she would deny everything! Anyway, it was all over. They would hand us over to the vojvoda or send us directly to the camp. If only they would not torture us before doing so. The only thing she did not say was who we were going to (she skipped that, as she told me later, in order not to bring harm to Duško the tinsmith and Rada). She did not talk long but she said everything: who we were, where we were from and from where we escaped. The Chetnik listened to her silently, took off his fur hat and, making the sign of the cross, said: "Lady, thank the Almighty for inspiring you to tell the truth – if what you say is the truth. We are the King's Army in the Fatherland and we won't hand you over, either to the Germans or to the Chetniks you have escaped from. We were informed that a Gestapo woman with a child was coming and that is why we stopped you. Look at those three men sitting there (he pointed to three soldiers who were sunbathing next to a wall), they were already chosen to "ojavaše" you. We cannot believe you simply on the basis of what you've said and we cannot check you out. You'll stay here with us for a while until our people check your story out in Belgrade." (I didn't know the verb "ojavašiti" but the movement he made with his index finger across his throat was clear enough).

They put us into a monastery cell. They didn't lock the door but a guard stood in front of the entrance to the building that looked like a shed. The room was plain: army beds, a table and two or three chairs. They regularly put wood in our tin stove. It was warm and it was pleasant to look out of the window. Outside we could see the Mlava, a part of the canyon and the falling rain. There were bars on the windows. When we wanted to go to the toilet, a guard followed us. It would not be easy to escape. They fed us well, we got soldiers' rations, it was tasty and there was enough of it. They even brought us a pile of pre-war comics. Once a Chetnik came to ask us if we needed anything. We didn't want anything except – to be released.

39 "From the Big Village to the Gorge, as if fairy spread a carpet out"

The uncertainty and waiting were not too difficult for us. It seemed as if, for some reason, these Chetniks were really different and that they would not kill us. Ten days later, the man with the reddish beard came, together with another man who was obviously higher in rank. They introduced themselves: the man with the red beard was called Jagoš (I forget his last name) and he was a captain. The other one was a major, Siniša Ocokoljić-Pazarac.⁴⁰ They told us that they had checked out my mother's story and established that she was telling the truth. In the meantime a Wanted circular had been sent out for us. Petrovac was under blockade because of that. The Ljotić units had just missed us by half an hour in Petrovac. We had been lucky. Now we were free. If we went to Krepoljin, we should contact the commander of the unit stationed there, Captain Mika Pejčić who, if I remember correctly, went by the name of "Corporal Milenko". He already knew that we were coming and we would be under his protection. Pejčić would take care of us. Nobody should know who we were. Officially my mother was Pejčić's sister-in-law, the wife of his brother who was in a POW camp.

They gave me a *šajkača* with the Yugoslav coat of arms and told me that. I was from now on a "Yugoslav soldier"... Then they stopped the first peasant cart, put us and the few things we had on it and said goodbye cordially. Krepoljin was four kilometres from Gornjak.



Siniša Ocokoljić - Pazarac

40 Siniša Ocokoljić – Pazarac, a major in the Yugoslav Army. We often met him while we were moving around the Homolje mountains during the war. We had the impression that he was an honest man, a patriot, very religious and a good officer. The soldiers liked and respected him, the Germans and Ljotić units persistently tried to catch him. After the war I read in some newspapers that he had been the head of a Royalist intelligence network in Trieste and sending sabotage units into Yugoslavia. At 1954. communists kidnaped him and killed in one of their prisons in Belgrade.

(The eighth letter)

Belgrade, 19.04.1992.

My dearest,

After we spoke and you told me that all this was not too detailed and to keep writing, I feel easier. Nevertheless, I am pleasantly surprised to hear that you have been reading this to your friends and that they are interested in it. If it is true, I will continue writing.

It was market day in Krepoljin. We found Pejčić easily at the market square. It was easy to recognise him because he was a huge man. He kissed us and took us to Živan, the peasant shoemaker, a nice and peaceful man who lived at the other end of the village, in the direction of Žagubica. The room we rented there was very cheap. We immediately called on Dušan's sister Rada who kept a shop with her husband in the centre of Krepoljin.

After a few cloudy days, spring came. Draža's Chetniks controlled Homolje. They considered themselves to be a part of the Yugoslav Army that had not surrendered to the occupier, but for brevity's sake they called themselves Chetniks. That is what I'll also call them in my letters. They were under the command of Colonel Draža Mihailović and they controlled this region in the sense that no one could pass through the Gornjak canyon without their knowledge. Siniša Pazarac was the commander of the corps; he had authority over a wider area and was in direct contact with Ravna Gora, Draža's headquarters. At that time, wanting to avoid reprisals, they didn't attack the Germans, but when the time came they would do so.

Krepoljin was a small place: two or three shops, two or three inns, the municipal house a peasant shoemaker, a potter. A "main street" stretched along the Petrovac - Žagubica road. There were a few small streets a little further on. We spent most of our time in the shop. I helped Rada and Pera Šikić, her husband. The customers were mostly Wallachian⁴¹ women and since I didn't understand their language, I started learning it. Actually I learnt the phrases the customers usually used when they came into the shop and how I should reply. That was of great use to me later on. I sold salt, petroleum, aniline dyes, kerchiefs, thread, needles, cooking oil... Pera was mostly on the road and he would bring back the goods. In the course of time I did most of the jobs in the shop. Rada was rather lazy. My mother did the cooking. We shared the costs with Rada. Later on

⁴¹ Wallachians: an ethnic group living in the eastern part of Serbia, near the Romanian border. The language they speak resembles Romanian; most of them are shepherds; their religion is Orthodox.

there were some misunderstandings about this. Since the Chetniks had no use for giblets in their cooking they used to give them to us for nothing. The unit, about a hundred men strong, always had enough liver from the animals that were slaughtered for the army canteen. My mother would sometimes make lunch for the unit officers. Besides Mika Pejčić, Corporals Bora and Joca would also come. The wife of one of Draža's close collaborators also came. She was very pretty and elegant. This provoked my mother's vanity. She decided to dye her hair and somehow managed to obtain henna. She didn't read the instructions and prepared the dye wrongly. The result was fantastic – her hair was all the colours of the rainbow, just like a parrot. She had to choose whether to cut her hair or wear a turban. She decided on the latter and so she walked around Krepoljin wearing one. In my opinion she was too conspicuous.

We met some other officers of Draža's army who were passing through. Some were in civilian clothes, dressed elegantly⁴². As intelligence officers, they would go to Belgrade on errands. There was one Communist in Krepoljin too, Pešić, who was a teacher and had a wife (from Petrovac on the Mlava) and son. They had taken refuge there from the Germans, and Draža's people were somehow helping him. There was also a girl there: we didn't know her name, only her nickname, Rumba. She was good-looking and cheerful, of Russian descent and had spent some time in the Partisans. The Chetniks had captured her somewhere and then released her. She lived in a nearby village, Breznica. Her position was not quite clear to us.

An exceptionally beautiful woman, Kira, appeared from somewhere. She was rich and had tuberculosis. She had rented a house on the outskirts of the village in the valley of the river Mlava. The curtains of her house were always drawn and she didn't go out during the day. She would sometimes call a few people to come to dinner: some of Draža's officers, the Pešićs, Rumba, my mother and me. The only image that I can remember from those dinners seems completely unrealistic to me now: the hostess sitting almost motionless at the head of the table, well chosen food, beautiful porcelain, all that illuminated only by the light of a few candles. The guests could hardly be seen in the dim light. She didn't talk much. It was tiring for her to speak but she obviously enjoyed company. She told someone that she knew she would die soon and that was why she had withdrawn to the village. The crockery she used was different from what we used so the guests could not accidentally be infected by her illness. I don't know what happened to her later.

Summer came and we went to the Mlava to swim. It was so peaceful that it seemed as if there was no war and as if we were on holiday. I missed my father. It often seemed to me that I could hear him coming. It was his habit to cough in a low voice when coming as if he wanted to warn someone of his presence. It was something that I had first experienced in Sopot and now again.

At that time I met the gunsmith. He was a Chetnik in Mika Pejčić's unit. He was small in height, of solid build and very diligent. He was called 'the Hungarian' because of his strange accent but, being respected as a good craftsman, no one cared where he was from. I liked going to his workshop and watching him work. Our friendship was

⁴² The only one whose name I remember now is Velja Ostojić (it is not the major Ostojić who was in Draža's headquarters) This one was a major or be even a lieutenant colonel.

interrupted when he went on leave and I impatiently waited for his return.

About ten days later we found out that a spy had been caught in Gornjak. There was great excitement in Krepoljin because word reached us that our gunsmith was the spy. Our acquaintance, Draža's intelligence officer who had caught him, arrived a few days later. He told us how, on returning from a task in Belgrade, he stopped for the night at Petrovac and there, in the hotel restaurant, he mixed with a group of Ljotićs soldiers who were sitting drinking. Among them he noticed our gunsmith who was quite drunk, so he sat at his table. The gunsmith didn't recognise him and bragged about how he had just seen the Ljotić commander Marisav Petrović, and how he had arranged with him to set a trap for Siniša Pazarac.

The next morning the intelligence officer informed the Chetnik headquarters and our gunsmith was caught in Gornjak on his way back to his unit. After being slapped just a few times he admitted everything. They decided to take him to Krepoljin where he was to be put on trial by *the people's court*.

I was not quite sure what the people's court would be like but was happy and impatient to see it in session.

Naturally, all the people in Krepoljin were now sure that the gunsmith was a Hungarian. A Serb could never be a spy. He had to be Hungarian. The Hungarians had been our enemies in the last war too... Maybe he was an Ustasha. He would admit to all that.

Three days went by quickly. The gunsmith was brought to Krepoljin. He was led through the village followed by a few Chetniks and about twenty peasants. His face was so disfigured that I, standing in front of Rada's shop, could hardly recognise him. He was barefoot, his clothes torn and bloody. His hands were tied behind his back with a thick rope. He was beaten with rifle butts and poles, stones were thrown at him and he was forced to say that he was a spy and a traitor... He mumbled something through swollen lips, stumbled, fell from time to time, got up and went on with a mute look. It seemed that he was quite unaware of what was happening to him. The group followed him to the end of the village and back, constantly hitting him. It stopped in the middle of the village in front of the municipal house where he fell and lost consciousness... They took him behind the building and left him there with one guard. Some time later the village drummer went by, beating on his drum and calling the villagers to come and see the spy.

When, despite my mother's protests, I went behind the building, a lot of people were already queuing up. The gunsmith was lying on the path and the villagers were walking by, in single file, hitting him with poles, kicking, spitting on him and swearing at his Hungarian mother. He didn't mumble anymore. He was lying on his side, completely disfigured and somehow smaller – I would say more like a trembling, bloody pile than a human being.

Two very tall bony men stood beside the guards. They said that they were refugees and that they had recognised the spy while he was being taken through the village. They knew who he was immediately. He was a Hungarian, Ustasha and spy. And they said that he had killed their families. Now they were asking to sentence him personally. They got two old French rifles with six cartridges from the unit.

I heard that they put him on an oxcart the very same afternoon, took him out of the village and shot him there.

I didn't see the *people's court*. Or maybe I did...

The intelligence officer Ostojić brought information that the Germans were preparing to come to Homolje. They were intending to build a railway Bor – Crni vrh – Krepoljin – Gornjak – Petrovac so that it would be easier to transport copper from the Bor mines. The railway would be built by the German semi-military organisation TOT. Their soldiers and the Gestapo would probably come with them. Our tranquillity would then be interrupted.

The Chetniks decided to “legalise” a part of their unit, that is, to register it as a German auxiliary unit on the pretext that they wanted to protect Homolje from the Partisans (who had left there in 1941). They got English rifles (Lee Enfields) and 50 cartridges each from the Germans. From time to time, they announced that they had conflicts with the Partisans and most of the ammunition was spent, then they would receive more but not enough. In Serbia there was no ammunition for that kind of rifle. When the Germans passed through Krepoljin, most of the Chetniks would hide in a small forest behind the place, only the ‘legal’ ones remaining in the village. We too would go and hide there in any case. Thanks to the Chetnik intelligence officers we would be informed in time when the Germans would appear. In such a way Draža's units held the area under their control despite the German presence.

Since it was clear to us, after what we had undergone in Požarevac and Petrovac, that the Germans, Pećanac Chetniks and Ljotić units knew that the Jews who had escaped prison were hiding under the names of Marija and Aleksandar Jurčić, we did not dare use the documents we had had for escaping from Sopot. So Mika Pejčić arranged that we get new ones from Žagubica. The names that were used were Marija and Aleksandar Nikolić, and we were refugees from Novi Sad. I somehow managed to save my identity card, only the photo that was made in Sopot faded.

The Germans would now pass through Krepoljin more often and it could be more dangerous for us. What would happen if we weren't informed in time that they were coming? Or what if they found out about us? We should go to a village that would be out of their way, somewhere where they wouldn't come. One misfortune made us decide to leave hastily. The wife of Draža's aide had an affair with Lieutenant Bora. My mother for some reason quarrelled with her and informed Bora's commander, Pejčić, about this affair. Since the Chetniks were very strict about male-female relations, Pejčić scolded Bora, threatened him with a firing squad and transferred him to another unit out of Homolje quite a long way from Krepoljin. When he left, Bora publicly promised my mother that he would kill her. That same night and for that reason Pejčić ordered a Chetnik whom he trusted to secretly transfer us to another place.

A Chetnik unknown to us burst into our house at night and ordered us to prepare at once for the journey. Not knowing what to do, (and knowing that my mother had blabbed about something), we tried to find out on who had given the order for us to go. The Chetnik was very strict, impatient, and didn't want to tell us anything. There was nothing we could do. We packed quickly: one kerchief with some things, a small suitcase and two live chickens. An oxcart waited for us outside the village. We thought it was a

good sign: if they had prepared a cart, he wouldn't kill us. And he didn't. He took us to the nearby village Sige, left us in a nice house and ordered us to stay indoors and not to appear until Pejčić came. All he would tell us was that our lives were in danger.

Pejčić came the next day. He had sent Bora away and the immediate danger had passed but it was still better that we stayed there. Bora might secretly return to Krepoljin and carry out his threat. The Germans came more frequently and would probably leave a few soldiers in the village.

So we stayed in Sige for almost a month. It was a small village, a peaceful one, but we were in constant fear and on the lookout for Bora to turn up. We spent the days in the house, which was uninhabited. I went out only when I had to fetch water. Then I would go to the nearest well and return almost without stopping. The owner of the house brought us food: bread, vegetables and some fruit, it was all very cheap. But since we had to save money, we ate quite meagre meals.

One night the same Chetnik who had brought us there appeared again. He ordered us to prepare for a trip. We had already got to know each other. He stuttered and so he was called Muta (the Stutterer), Mileta Muta. He said that it seemed that Bora had come to Homolje and that it was dangerous for us to stay in Sige. He would take us to another village where it was safer. This time we walked. Mother carried the small suitcase, I had the kerchief and Muta those two unfortunate chickens. We walked noiselessly, carefully like hajduks⁴³. A few kilometres away from Sige, when we were near Krepoljin, we saw a light straight in front of us. We quickly went off the road and hid. Then we noticed that there were a few lights moving around as if they wanted to surround us. Muta had a rifle and a few hand-grenades. He gave me one, as was the Chetnik custom, so we would not be caught alive. We lay in a ditch for a long time and at dawn we realised that those lights were actually floating on the water. The stream formed a meander there and the peasants went fishing that night or they may have, according to an old pagan custom, been floating candles on miniature boats made of small halved gourds. We continued walking but because of this delay it was already daylight. Luckily a little later we came upon a peasant with a cart. He let us ride with him since we were going to his village Jošanica. On the way I noticed that Muta had sat on one of our two chickens and that it was dead. I kept turning her round hoping she would revive. Muta advised me to blow into its tail and ass might bring it back to life. I thought he was making fun of me, but much later on I found out that this is sometimes done. As we proceeded towards the village we threw the chicken away.

In Jošanica we settled into one room of a nice house owned by the respectable peasant Ljubivoje Nikolić. We immediately examined it and saw that it had two exits. That, we knew, was good. Muta brought Pejčić's order to the mayor that the village was obliged to give us food: twenty kilograms of flour, some beans, onions and a kilo of bacon monthly. That was very convenient for us because our money was almost all gone. Ljubivoje was very kind, he gave us fruit and in fact he fed us. He was rich, honest and a very good man. Later on, on several occasions, he turned out to be a courageous man too.

In a short time we felt at home in the village. It was peaceful, there was no danger. I was friendly with the miller's daughters; one of them had just started attending

43 Hajduk: highwayman, in the Serbian tradition an anti-Turkish highwayman.

teacher training. I went fishing with the teacher, a nice young man. We never caught anything but it was nice to wander along the stream that flowed into the Mlava a few kilometres down from the village. The days passed carelessly until diarrhoea struck. It all seemed harmless at the beginning. First somebody got it, people laughed but later on it turned into an epidemic. In the end almost the whole village was ill. Many people stumbled around utterly exhausted, some walked around in long shirts, leaving behind a stinking, bloody trail. My mother tried to treat the people with planed apples. It turned out well (babies are treated for diarrhoea like that, too), but only in the first phase of the sickness. A doctor turned up, his name was Petrović or Popović. He came by car to the village and that caused a sensation. He even had his own chauffeur. We thought that he was probably the district doctor. He went through the village, gave some injections and left quickly. Since the disease appeared in other villages too he treated the whole district. Many patients died, how many, I really don't know: it was said that some had died in Osanica and in Vukovac but the number was not known... My mother and I didn't go to see the doctor, we stayed away.

After the third or fourth visit from the doctor, while he was with a patient, his chauffeur told the peasants who were gathered around the municipality house that the doctor was a German spy... That was how he had use of the car. After each of his visits to Homolje he went to Petrovac and reported to the notorious Ljotić commander Marisav Petrović where there were Chetniks and what he had seen. There was also something suspicious in his treatment – many patients died quickly after receiving his injections. He should have been stopped from doing that.

Word got back quickly to the Chetnik headquarters and the order came back and a decision was made: next time the doctor should be met outside the village!

The doctor came again and never returned to Petrovac. I myself took part in that. At that time the whole thing seemed to be quite clear to me, but today I am really not quite sure. The car was stopped outside the village. Muta and another man from Jošanica, I think that he was called Neša, took the doctor out of the car with all his things. I was nearby. One of the men brought some of his things to me (I was the only literate person present) to look through them and read them. There was one notebook. The text in it was very unusual, even for a doctor. Something like this was written: *15. August. Jošanica. Gave Murat 2 ccm, 15%. He died the day after.* Then there was a date again and the name of the village and: *Gave Alija 3 ccm., 12%, died three hours later.* There were always some Muslim names (there were no Muslims then in Homolje) the amount, the percentage and when the patient died. The list was quite long. I read all that out loud. It seemed to be enough. Should he be escorted to the unit or should it be done immediately? I went back home. Muta and the other one back later, excitedly, and told us that when they took the doctor to the woods, after a hundred metres he steadfastly refused to go any further, saying that he knew what fate awaited him... The other one, being just behind the doctor, took out his bayonet and stabbed it under his shoulder blade. The doctor did not utter a sound. They hid his corpse in a grassy brook that flowed into the Mlava. Was he a madman, a murderer or something else? At that time we were convinced that he was a spy and a murderer and that the right thing had been done. Now, at my age, I know that nothing can definitively be known.

When the excitement had died down, we realised that someone would probably come looking for the doctor. The driver would say (as was agreed with him) that the car was stopped and the doctor taken out on the main Krepoljin – Žagubica road so that the inhabitants of Jošanica would not be blamed. But we were not sure, they might use dogs to find him – and we believed the dogs could find everything they wanted. The corpse should be hidden further away from the village as soon as possible, maybe the next night. It occurred to my mother that the ‘murderer always returns to the scene of the crime’ so if that was the logic of Ljotić’s men and if they had already found the corpse they might set an ambush at the very place where he was hidden. There was reason to be careful. Now I think that our fears were groundless but maybe not. Ljubivoje engaged another man in this business: a creature that he trusted for that job at least. He was of small build, with a limp, a knife under his belt and an axe that he did not let out of his hands. He was from Krivi Vir. Ljubivoje would say that people from Krivi Vir were dangerous. The man from Krivi Vir offered to go with Muta and help him to remove the doctor’s corpse, but Mileta considered it preferable if there were not too many of them: two would be enough – just he and his friend from the day before.

When darkness fell, they started out on their “job” which could not only be dangerous and also, because of the hot weather, very unpleasant. The man from Krivi Vir went away somewhere and the three of us, Ljubivoje, mother and I, stayed in the village. We waited for them to come back. At about the time they should have reached the place where the doctor had been left, we heard a shot. Only one shot that came from that direction. A few hours before sunrise the two of them showed up pale, slobbering and half-drunk. The man from Krivi Vir came, too. They told us that they had found the corpse in a bad state already, that in the night they had had trouble with the horse which was most unwilling to be loaded. They somehow took the doctor’s corpse into the mountains and buried it there. The man from Krivi Vir asked if anybody had seen them and if they had buried the corpse well. No, they answered nobody saw them and they buried it well. Upon hearing this, the man from Krivi Vir started laughing. He swore at them and told them they were fools and explained how he had followed them the whole way. He recounted all the details: how they loaded the corpse on the horse who was unwilling, and how they did not bury it at all, but just covered it with leaves. Since the job was not done as it should have been, he went down into the village, lured the village dogs with some meat and took them to the place. He took all the clothes off the doctor, cut him up with his axe and fed the flesh to the dogs. He guaranteed that nothing remained! He also took care of the clothes by burning them.

However, a few days later people in the village began to talk about the doctor’s disappearance and some unknown men came and made enquiries. Ljubivoje thought that it would be better for us to go to the mountains to his salaš⁴⁴, at least for some time. At about the same time a courier sent by Miha Pejčić brought a message to say we should leave the village. He told us that more and more Germans were coming to Homolje and that they would probably be coming to the villages, too. That could be dangerous for us.

One morning, when I woke up I had a high temperature. From time to time, I

44 Salaš: in Homolje, a farm in the mountains – usually with a small hut, an enclosure for sheep and, sometimes a stable for the cattle.

was even in delirium. Mother called Muta, he found an oxcart, put hay on it, put me in the cart and hid his rifle in the hay. He took a few hand grenades with him, the ones made in Kragujevac. He would take me to a doctor in Žagubica. Muta and I started off. I felt very ill at the beginning of the journey but later on I felt better. One hour later, when we were approaching Žagubica, I felt quite well. Muta gave me a hand grenade to have it in case of need... When we reached Žagubica and came to the pharmacy Joca, Mihajlo's relative, a very fearful man who ran the pharmacy, was terrified to see me enter his shop. His fear increased even more when he found out that we were armed – and the place was full of Germans! He immediately found a doctor, gave us a lot of medicine and hastened our departure. He was scared to death. I must admit I was amused by it all. Generally, I think that I started changing after I came to Homolje. It was all so sudden, I was not aware of it but now I know that I was not a child any more. However, I trusted the people in Homolje. They were different from the people in Kosmaj.

Homolje was a very undeveloped area at that time, and it had an outlaw tradition. If the authorities were pursuing someone, people there would protect him. The law does not come from God. The law takes taxes, always more than is fair; it takes boys and sends them to the army; the courts are always on the wrong side and generally one should not trust the law. People from Homolje would always readily help those who were pursued by the arm of the law.

During our sudden and for Joca very distressing visit he gave me a parcel that Mihajlo had sent us. It contained a very nice leather suitcase with a cloth cover. In it there were a few dozen pencils, about ten erasers, a few notebooks and some underwear. When we returned to Jošanica and I showed Mother what we had got, she became furious. Why would we need these things? Did he know where we were? I don't think that he was really aware of our situation. After all, neither was Joca. The parcels that Mihajlo sent us during the war, (there were three or four of them), would often stay with Joca for a long time, because we were really in deep hiding and very few people knew our whereabouts. Joca would usually give these parcels to a peasant and they would go through many hands before reaching us.

(The ninth letter)

Belgrade, 21.04.1992

My dearest,

I'm continuing with the story. As more and more Germans came to Homolje we had reasons enough not to feel safe in the village any more, especially after the episode with the doctor... Ljubivoje suggested that we go to his salaš.

A few days later we decided to go to the mountains where his salaš was, not knowing what it would be like there. It was about ten kilometres from Jošanica. It was well situated for our needs because no one could approach it without being noticed and if necessary we could easily flee from it. His grandma, a tall thin old woman who used to be a beauty, was there. She had lost one eye and an oval piece of cardboard, with the letters BA printed on it, covered the socket. It made Grandma look very educated (the cardboard came from a shoebox - BATA). Sometimes she would allow the children from the neighbouring salaš, if they obeyed her, to look into her empty eye socket. She didn't show it to me. She liked me very much and gave me pears and tobacco, beautiful golden coloured leaves of tobacco. My mother smoked it with great pleasure and the pears were mine. The old lady planted the tobacco for her own use somewhere in a secret place in the woods. She was surprised that we regularly washed ourselves whenever we had the chance. She herself had not bathed since her twelfth year when she was minding the geese and bathed with them in the spring... However, her skin was clean and fine. Probably people who live as she did have skin that scales more and thus cleanses itself without washing.

Ljubivoje told me that his grandma used to be the mistress (he did not use that word but I understood it as such) of the famous *haiduk* Babejić. Once, while Babejić was in her house, someone informed the police, and they surrounded the salaš. A battle took place. Babejić had a rapid-fire rifle (as the army rifle with five cartridges in the magazine was called) and Grandma had a percussion cap rifle. During the battle, Grandma in her zeal rammed the bullet in further than was needed. Instead of expelling the bullet, the barrel exploded and took Grandma's eye out. Babejić threw a hand grenade, scared the police, broke out of the encirclement and escaped. The police found Grandma (then a beautiful girl) in a coma, in a puddle of blood. Their sergeant, who was in love with her, realised that she was still alive and although minus one eye still *usable*. He administered first aid and took her to a doctor in Žagubica. She was nice to him and he didn't turn her

in. (After the war Ljubivoje told me a completely different story, a very romantic one⁴⁵. It is not important which of the two is true).

We felt good and safe at the salaš. The first evening two peasants came and made us feel uneasy. They were armed, and brought a lamb on a spit. Ljubivoje started a fire, we sat around it for a long time, roasted the lamb and the two of them took turns keeping watch. We were offered the best pieces of meat. They disappeared at dawn. The next day at sunset two others came. They behaved in the same way as the other two did the day before and so it went on for about ten days, maybe even longer. Ljubivoje did not know what it was about, or did not want to tell us, and we didn't ask.

At about that time, the legalized Chetniks were eliminated. The Germans saw through the Chetniks' trick and called them to Petrovac on the pretext that they would give them new and better weapons and more ammunition. Mika Pejčić, who was registered



with the Germans under a false name (Corporal Milenko or something similar), took his legalized unit to Petrovac. Afterwards, we found out what happened: in one military barracks they had given in their rifles and they should have received the new ones in the other barracks next door, but as soon as they had given up their weapons, they were arrested. After the war I heard that Mika, who had been sent to a concentration camp in Norway, had been tortured to death there.

A small incident occurred with the Germans at about that time somewhere between Jošanica and the main Žagubica – Krepoljin road. A few German soldiers went to Jošanica *to get supplies* (to grab geese and plum brandy). Mihailović's Chetniks waited for them in front of the village. The Germans took shelter behind some haystacks. Hearing the shooting, more armed peasants and Chetniks came. An ex-German soldier was with them. A few months before, he had deserted from the German army, not wanting to take part in Hitler's wars any more, and



joined Mihailović's army. He appealed to the Germans in their language to surrender, not to fight mad Hitler's war any more but it was in vain. The Germans fought back until the Chetniks set the hay on fire using incendiary ammunition. They then removed the captured German soldier's outer clothing and had them return to Žagubica in their underwear. I heard rifle fire and learnt all about it at

Ljubivoje's salaš a few days later. Many years after the war, I saw a photo of a German poster announcing that they had shot hostages because the "bandits" had killed a few of their soldiers on that occasion.

45 I heard another story when I visited Ljubioje in 1978. His grandmother was a famous beauty. All the young men wanted to dance with her in the kolo during the fair held at Trška church. The Ban (governor of the province) himself showed so much interest in her that her husband (Ljubivije's grandfather) became jealous. He took out a knife and struck her in the eye, to make her ugly so no one would look at her anymore. She would then belong only to him...

Since Ljubivoje was with us at the salaš, he started taking care of the sheep and Grandma went back to the village. We slept on the floor in the *kuća*⁴⁶, as they called the front room in which there was an open fire. One night a sound woke me up. The dog was growling strangely. I realized that Ljubivoje was awake. Some time earlier, he had taught me how to differentiate the barking of the dogs: what their barking sounds like when they scent a man, a wolf, a fox, a rabbit or a squirrel. How they bark when there are more people and how they bark when they are just bored. I couldn't differentiate the growling but Ljubivoje gave me a sign: I woke my mother up and we crawled out of the house. We crawled for about fifty metres up to a



Ljubivoje Nikolić



fence and hid in the shadow of a bush. If somebody came straight at us, Ljubivoje whispered, he would attack him with his small axe and I would help him with my knife as best I could. Ljubivoje had given the knife to me while we were down in the village. It was made from an old saw and was too flexible and thin to inflict a serious injury, but in case of danger... However, there was little possibility that someone would find us in the darkness.

After some time, we heard rustling in the cornfield. Someone was sneaking up to the salaš. Finally we saw the door of the salaš open suddenly: someone was standing at the very entrance, holding a rifle ready to fire. Before we'd left the house Ljubivoje had put some wood and branches on the half-extinguished fire; in the meantime the fire flared up and threw light on the newcomer. The dog we had taken with us lay silent. We withdrew deeper into the forest and remained there all night. The unknown people searched around a little and, seeing that we had escaped, left.

The next day we carefully examined the house and its surroundings and by the tracks in the cornfields we saw that there had been three of them. Two were wearing heavy soldiers' boots and one was wearing shoes. At that time, no one went to the mountains of Homolje in shoes. People wore either heavy soldiers' boots or *opanke*⁴⁷. Who knows who it was? We found a photo of a beautiful young woman with curly locks at the threshold. A few unconnected words and a name were written on the back of the photo. It was placed upright, leaning on the door as if somebody had left it there on purpose. Maybe somebody had dropped it accidentally. Was it a message or a coincidence? We didn't know but we connected their sudden "visit" with Bora. Maybe he was looking for us? Or was it someone who knew



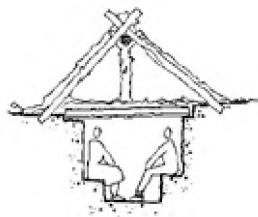
46 *Kuća*: (Serb.house) In Homolje the first room of a house. It could be entered straight from the yard.

47 *Opanci*: very simply shaped peasant footwear, crudely made of a single piece of leather.

that we were connected with the disappearance of the doctor? In any case we didn't dare stay at that salaš any more. Ljubivoje suggested that we go to his brother-in-law, whose name was Radisav Krstić and had a salaš at a place called Grabova Bara⁴⁸ which was above the neighbouring village of Vukovac. It was quite near as the crow flies, maybe we could even shout to each other, being only separated by a deep valley. But it would take us an hour to go down and another to climb up the other side. The area was covered with dense forest but we could not get lost.

We stayed only about twenty days at Ljubivoje's salaš but the time I spent there was of great use to me. As if he knew how much I would need it, Ljubivoje taught me how best to move at night, when no one could see you; to move at night and avoid the heights where you could be seen against the sky; to avoid the paths and crossroads because you could be ambushed there; ambush could also be laid near a spring; if I got lost in the forest I should howl like a wolf, as the dogs would then bark and disclose where they were: where there were dogs in the mountains, there must be a salaš with people; before I approached a salaš I should observe it for a long time – I would always have enough time – maybe there were soldiers already there; if there were soldiers there, the dogs would be disturbed and mostly tied; if the dogs were quiet it needn't mean anything, maybe the soldiers had killed them when they arrived; I should never be in a hurry but observe even in the middle of the forest; I should pay attention to the behaviour of the birds... I learnt a lot from him and I have forgotten a lot since then. It was of great use to me then, not only once but many times...

It was not a two but a three hour walk to Grabova Bara. (It is our peasant's custom always to say that less time is needed to reach a place than it really takes so as not to frighten you!) We found the salaš easily. There we found Radisav, an old, clever, experienced and distinguished-looking peasant with a large moustache. He received us cordially. Mirija, his daughter-in-law, was there with him. She was young, with a nice face and had the bust of a caryatid. His sons were very different. The older one was Mirija's husband. He liked tending the flock and was not interested in anything else. The other son, the younger one, distinguished-looking, clever and skilful, was only a few years older than me. We quickly made friends.



In order to understand and to picture the situation we were in, I must explain where we were. At that time Homolje was a sheep-breeding area. The villages were situated in the valley of the Mlava river and its tributaries. The fields were in the valley of the Mlava. The peasants grew vegetables, flax and hemp in their gardens, but only as much as they needed for their own use, and spent most of their time tending their flocks up in the mountains staying at the salaš's nearly all year around. The salaš's

48 Grabova Bara (Serb. Hornbeam swamp) A hill about ten or fifteen kilometers above the village of Vukovac.

in Homolje are farms in the mountains (contrary to the *salaš*'s in Vojvodina⁴⁹ which are quite different) with a hut or small house to live in, an enclosure for the sheep and maybe a stable for the cattle. They would rarely have more than two or three cows but they had a lot of sheep. Peasants of modest means had around 25 to 30 sheep and the rich ones up to 250. The houses they lived in were small and simple. Some of them were timber-framed constructions filled with clay and some were log cabins. Both types were divided into two parts: the first, that could be entered straight from the yard, was called the *kuća*. It had an open fireplace with a chain on which hung a copper cauldron where the food was cooked. Along the walls were benches where all the household necessities were kept: two pails for water; an earthenware pitcher; a sack of corn flour; a wooden vessel used for carrying cheese; a *crepulja*⁵⁰ and *sač*⁵¹, a few wooden and earthenware dishes for preparing and serving the food. A *sofra*⁵², a little shelf for wooden spoons and the peasant's tools, hung on the walls: a scythe, sickles, a stick used to mix polenta. People sat on low, handmade, three-legged stools. Since there were not enough stools for everybody, only the elderly and respected people sat on them. The women ate kneeling and the rest sat on the floor with their legs crossed.

The floor was of beaten earth. Hygiene was unknown. The walls in the *kuća* were shiny black from the smoke, which only partially went out of the house through a hole in the roof. The next room was rarely used. It had a small barred window and the walls were sometimes whitewashed. It contained a bed or two and a stove made from a tin barrel. Sometimes there was a table as well. The beds were simple: they had two trestles with crudely-cut planks of wood on them. Hay or corn stalks covered the wooden planks instead of a mattress and there was a small wooden fence around it to keep it from falling off the bed. A thick, handmade woollen cover lay on the bed. These beds were quite high because young lambs were kept underneath.

The small lambs are kept a few weeks in the room under the bed. As you can see on my sketch two sides of the bed are leaned on the wall. The other two sides are free. Under the bed on these free sides was improvised something like a fence so that the lambs can not get out and burn themselves on the stove while moving around. The fire in the stove was lit to keep them warm. When the lambs weren't there, all the occupants of the house went back into the *kuća* and sat around the fireplace. A little cornfield surrounded the *salaš*, which was handy for us because in case of danger we could hide in it without being seen. There was no danger of anybody surprising us by sneaking up to the house through the cornfield – the dogs always warned us in time if anybody was coming.

49 Vojvodina is a part of the country that lies to the north of Belgrade.

50 *Crepulja* is a round shaped earthenware vessel about 40 centimeters in diameter and about 10 cm. deep.

51 *Saç* is a very conveks lid of the *crepulja*, made of sheet iron. *Crepulja* and *sač* were used in Serbia in open fireplaces instead of an oven. The *crepulja* was first heated on live coals, and then the dough (or meat) was put into it. Then the *crepulja* was covered with the *sač* and all this was covered with live coal. Bread and meat baked in this way are considered to be much more tasty than if baked in an oven.

52 *Sofra* is a very low (15 to 20 cm. high) round table about 80 cm. in diameter.

In Homolje, the distance between the salašes depended on how big the farms were. Sometimes the distance was even greater because there was a “state forest”⁵³ between them. Sometimes it was a few hundred metres (which was rare) and sometimes it took an hour or two of walking to reach another salaš.

The mountain area was very large. In the meantime, we began to realise many things. Before the war, I couldn't have imagined what it meant to ‘hide in the forest’. I thought it would be like going to Topčider and squatting in a bush or going to Kosmaj into some little wood and hoping that no one would find me there. Homolje is completely different. Only when you go up to the mountains can you realise what a large area it covers, criss-crossed by deep gorges and streams, here covered by forests, there by fields for grazing, and further on there are large complexes of forests where you can easily get lost if you don't know the way. A person who knows the art of hiding could at that time remain there for years and stay alive if he were cautious enough (now with helicopters it is not so simple). *Haiduks* who hid there in the past were most often caught because of women. When visiting one, they would be caught in an ambush. Many of them had hiding places that were actually dugouts, sometimes quite large, with a well-camouflaged entrance. It was said that Babejić had some in which you could light a fire. The opening for the smoke was far away and well masked, but a large fire could not be lit because of the smoke, nor could it be lit with wet wood. There used to be a bed in them, a vessel for water, and a place for a toilet. There were spikes on the wall to hang clothes and weapons on. I had seen some of these hiding places myself and by that time they were in a poor condition. Since people knew where they were, we couldn't use them.

Soon after we came to his house, Radisav and his sons began building a hiding place for us. They made a hole on the wall near the floor opposite the door that led out of the ‘house’. The opening in it was hidden with some things and its outside end was covered with cornstalks. In case of danger one could leave the house by crawling through the opening without being noticed. Behind the hut, near the entrance, they put a few piles of cornstalks to make the imperceptible exit easier. Right next to that opening they dug a hiding place for us: a hole approximately 1,80 x 1,50 metres and about 1,80 metres deep. The lid on the hole was made of thick oak, lined with tin. All of it was covered with hay and garbage and a kennel was made above it. In case of danger we were to crawl through the opening in the wall, hide in the kennel (the dog knew us) and go into the hiding place. If the soldiers came, regardless of which army they belonged to, the dog would bark and no one would approach it and search underneath it. They could kill it, as they sometimes did, but then no one would look under a dead dog. The lid was strong enough to protect us against an obliquely-fired bullet..

My clothes were torn and in rags and my shoes were falling apart. Up to that point I wore spiked boots, which my father had bought for me on the eve of the war. They had gone through a lot and finally wore out. My mother's shoes were in an even worse condition. Radisav got untanned leather from a man from Jošanica. His son cut out two pairs of primitive *opanks* and taught me how to put them on. *Opanks*, made of untanned leather, are unusual footwear. They must be soaked in water the night before putting

53 The peasants are the owners of some parts of the forest but some larger parts were in the government's possession and are called «the government's forest» or «states forest».

them on, so the leather will soften and then you can wear them for one day. If it is warm during the day the leather begins to dry, it stiffens and begins to tighten and squeezes the feet so you have to step into something wet from time to time. We wore them only when it was very cold or we had to walk a lot. Around the house we went barefoot. Footwear was to be taken care of, and worn only when absolutely necessary.

Radisav taught me what to say in case I met someone we didn't know. I should say that I was an orphan, working for a man called Truca, in a fulling-mill⁵⁴ somewhere in Neresnica and that I was there because I had brought the cloth that my master had rolled for Radisav. He told me something about that man and his rolling mill, so I would know if I were asked.

Once very soon after we came to Radisav's house, while going to the spring after heavy rain to fetch water, I caught sight of a salamander. It was immobile, shiny black, with large, bright yellow spots. It seemed like a prehistoric monster to me – only smaller. Excited by seeing it, I ran back to fetch Mother and persuade her to come and see the animal. As soon as we had gone to the spring we heard the dogs barking: some soldiers were coming to Radisav's salaš. We concealed ourselves and waited for them to leave. They didn't stay long. When we came back to the salaš we found out that it was Lieutenant Bora, the one from Krepoljin with his unit. He was enquiring about us. Maybe the salamander saved our lives!

Radisav planned to build another hiding place for us somewhere in the forest near his house. It would be bigger and better equipped. It turned out not to be necessary because a Chetnik unit came to the neighbouring salaš which actually became the headquarters of a Chetnik brigade. They moved into the two or three empty huts situated just behind a gorge, hardly a fifteen-minute walk away from us. There were about fifty of them. The commander's surname was Đurić, a distinguished-looking and pleasant man who was a lawyer from Zemun. His deputy, the commander of the battalion, was a pre-war non-commissioned officer, a short man, petty in body and soul. He was nervous and rather unpleasant. We went to greet them and introduce ourselves. They already knew that we were somewhere in that region but did not know who we were. They did not ask. Some unwritten rules of conduct existed. We gathered from our talk with them that they thought my mother was the wife of one of their officers or the wife of someone important who had emigrated. We were invited to eat with them from their canteen. Contrary to the stories that were told after the war, they did not eat splendidly. Very often it was just cooked beans with browned flour, sometimes potatoes, rarely cabbage with polenta or a piece of corn bread. Nevertheless, for us it was abundance. We didn't get much food from the peasants who did not have much to eat themselves in that poor region. They lived on very little, and on poor food at that.

For us, it was very convenient that the unit was so near. It had its patrols and intelligence, so we were informed in advance of any danger. At that time the Germans and the Ljotić units began going up into the mountains to search the area. It was necessary for us to be informed of their movements in time and then it was easy to hide. It was easy with the Germans: they would fire their rifles before starting to climb the mountains

⁵⁴ Filling-mill is a mechanism powered by water (like a water mill) which is used to transform a woven fabric into a heavy coarse fabric.

as if to warn us of their approach. “They don’t want to be killed either”, the peasants commented. We heard that those units were transferred there after having fought on the Eastern front, where they had suffered a lot of casualties and they were sent to Homolje to recuperate. Now, being on a kind of holiday, they were obviously not willing to fight and be killed. They kept to the roads and rarely went into the forest. Nedić’s units didn’t come to the mountains. Actually they did, but only once, and they didn’t represent any danger. It was more difficult with the Ljotić units. They would start out from the village at dawn, move silently, and encircle the region in which they thought they would catch somebody. Since there were no Partisans in the area, they hunted down the Chetniks, very persistently.

Sometimes, when the Germans and the Ljotić units (or both of them together) were coming up the mountains in our direction, the Chetnik unit would prepare quickly, and send someone to inform us and we would march in a column with them, mostly to the east where there were larger forests and mountains. Then we would stay a few days with them. We had as much food as the unit and we were safe. It is true that the unit was forbidden to fight the Germans. It would always withdraw because of possible reprisals that would be taken against the people. Sometimes, they found this difficult to do but they had to obey orders. When the chases had passed (they would never last longer than five or six days and sometimes even less) we would return to Radisav’s salaš. And so, moving around with the unit, I got to know a good part of eastern Homolje. Through my friendship with the soldiers, I learned how to use weapons. They had different types of rifles, machineguns, pistols and hand grenades and it all interested me a lot.

Several times, while moving around and avoiding chases, we met a strange group of people who produced hand grenades for the Chetniks at the village Blagojev’s Kamen⁵⁵. There were three or four men, one or two women (I don’t remember exactly) and their chief, whose nickname was Duka, they called him captain Duka, a pre war aeronautical engineer. One evening while sitting around the fire one of them began humming a melody very quietly which I didn’t know. My mother, recognising the melody, began humming it too. No one added the words. Later on my mother told me that it was a Communist song which she had learned in the prison. After the war we found out that the group, officially Chetnik, produced grenades for them and secretly worked for the Partisans too. I don’t know how and where they transported those grenades when there were no Partisans in the vicinity.

Between chases our life was mostly quite peaceful. Being friends with Radisav’s younger son, I helped him with all the chores at the salaš and learned how to mind the sheep and cows, make cheese, build haystacks etc... Sometimes, when they were passing by with their unit, the Chetnik officers, Siniša Pazarac,



The Chetniks’

55 Blagoje is a Serbian name. Kamen: stone. The vilage’s name is: Blagoje’s Stone.

Velja Piletić, Puniša Vešović and the others would stop at the salaš. They were all very decent men, completely different from how the Communists described them after the war. Talking to them, my mother mentioned to Vešović that her maiden name was Sason (Sassoon) and that there were Sassoons in England. She had even heard that one of them was an aristocrat, Lord Sassoon. Vešović showed great interest in the story. Next time we met he told us that he had informed Draža Mihailović about that. They intended to transfer us somehow to England, hoping that our connection with the aristocrat could be of great help to Mihailović's movement. It was all too good to be true: later on we found out that the information was wired to London, that somebody in London called the Lord and informed him that hiding in the mountains of Serbia was a child and a woman whose maiden name was Sassoon. It seemed that he was not disturbed too much. Apparently he sent a message through his secretary that the woman should send proof that she was of the Sassoon family and in some way related to his lordship. Naturally we had no proof.

Around that time we found out that the occupying authorities had ordered all males above seven years old to come down from the mountains into the villages under penalty of death. A peasant skirt, a blouse and kerchief were found for me and I kept tripping around the hut holding a knitting basket. The kerchief kept falling off, the skirt bothered me and a week later I was happy to learn that the order had been rescinded.

A month after, while coming back from somewhere (probably from a posse) we found Mirija trimming beams with a big *adze*. It turned out that she was about to give birth. When the first contractions came, she sent the future grandfather to the attic with the *pogača*⁵⁶ and a bottle of plum brandy, as was the custom⁵⁷. He had to pretend that he didn't know what was going on. Mirija prepared dinner for us, and left the room for a moment, going into the *kuća* to get some cheese – and about two minutes later everything was finished. When we heard the baby crying and my mother went to see what was happening, Mirija had already cut the umbilical cord with her teeth. My mother brought out the child who was naked, slimy and a little bit bloody. Two cats, probably sensing the blood, went around meowing. Mother gave me the child, told me to tie the rest of the umbilical cord and then fainted. With a strong feeling of disgust I first tied the umbilical cord in a knot. Then, with a piece of string which the two women had prepared, I made one knot above the first knot and another one underneath it and, to be certain, tied a third knot over all that. Then I cut off the remaining part of the cord with the sheep-shearing scissors. These had been sterilized on the fire in the hearth. The cats swiftly grabbed the piece of umbilical cord and, fighting over it, escaped under the bed. Mirija and Mother had already prepared a copper cauldron full of hot water as if they wanted not to bath the child but to scald it. While I was bathing the child in a wooden trough, my mother recovered. Soon afterwards Mirija came, we had dinner and went to bed. While lying

⁵⁶ A *pogača* is a flat round bread baked in the *crepulja* and usually made without yeast.

⁵⁷ In those regions marriages between minors, actually children, were common. Boys between the ages of seven and thirteen were married to girls who were usually a bit older, girls who were enough strong to work and be useful in the house. The bride would get her first sexual experience not from the husband but from the father-in-law. So usually the first child was most often the grandfather's! That was the reason why according to the custom the grandfather had to pretend that he did not know that his daughter-in-law was going to give birth.

in the darkness, drawn close by the events I have described, we talked for a long time. I remember quite well one part of the conversation. Mirija asked my mother if she had seen Jews in Belgrade. “Yes, I saw them often”, my mother answered. Then Mirija asked if the Jews were really black and had horns. “No, they look exactly like my child and me” was my mother’s answer.

Next morning, a monotonous banging woke us up. Mirija was trimming those beams again... The child survived my “midwifery skills”. A few months later it was christened by the Chetnik priest Raško and named Slavijanka. The godfather was Siniša Pazarac.

The Chetnik unit sometimes moved from place to place for shorter periods of time. Then we were left to ourselves, had to be more cautious and in case of danger had to flee alone or if the danger was not too great, we found refuge in a nearby gorge. Nevertheless, when we had to flee alone it was more difficult for us because we could not count on getting our food from the Chetniks’ canteen. If it had been permitted, we would have been with the unit all the time, but it was considered to be a part of the Yugoslav Army and there was no place for women and children in it – except in case of danger.

Writing about the events, I must describe the state we were in. Soon after going up into the mountains we noticed that we had lice. They multiplied quickly and we learned to differentiate between them: the white ones, we ‘bred’ in our clothes and the black ones lived in our hair. We had them both and I would not be exaggerating if I say that there were hundreds of them. We tried to kill as many as we could but without much success. I had the feeling that everybody in the mountains had them. As we were constantly on the move, it was impossible to get rid of those terrible insects, which sucked our blood mercilessly. They caused unbearable itching, scratching, and then scabs that would always turn into festering boils which would take a long time to heal on our emaciated bodies. We had no soap. We washed when there was an opportunity and used ash instead of soap. By the time we got toothbrushes and toothpaste, it was almost the end of the war. We wore all the underwear that we had. During the winter it was difficult and risky to wash clothes. What would we do if we had to put on our wet clothes and run in case of sudden danger?

At about that time, I saw a wolf in the mountains for the first time. It was not a dramatic meeting at all. On the contrary. One very severe winter night when we were sleeping in an abandoned hut, I had to go out. Right in front of the door, in the snowstorm, I saw something moving around that looked like a dog. It seemed like an Alsatian. While I was “doing my business” behind the hut, I realised that there were no inhabited salašes in the vicinity and therefore no dogs. I recalled what Ljubivoje had taught me, went back into the hut, took from the hearth a blazing piece of wood and went out again. The wolf fled. Alsatian dogs are not kept in Homolje, dogs do not wander around in snowstorms so far from their flock and are not afraid of fire –but wolves are.

The winter of 1942/43 was a very difficult one. I cannot remember how many times we had to leave Radisav and flee from place to place, alone or with the army. The snows were deep; food and clothing were scarce. The *opanks* we had on our feet fell apart. We cut up our nice suitcase and made new ones. They fell apart very quickly. It turned out that fine leather was completely useless for footwear. Then we wrapped our

legs in the cloth which protected the suitcase. During the march, the cloth turned into rags which unwrapped or tore and our feet froze. My mother didn't have a winter coat, only a lady's suit, which used to be elegant and was now also falling apart. The sleeves were dangling in strips, so during one march she tore off those rags and continued on, her arms naked up to the elbows. Ice formed on her arms. I think the temperature was at least minus 15°C. I don't know how she stood it. The night we marched to Čoka Fantina was something that I don't think I shall ever forget. Exhausted and frozen, walking in the column, I stumbled and fell a few times into a short sleep. I dreamed of going to a salaš, hearing dogs bark, entering the 'house', approaching the fire.... and at that point I would wake up. Maybe it all lasted a second or maybe longer, I don't know. I was carrying a peasant bag with all our important possessions in it, which were in fact only some terrible rags. Mother had a smaller bag. In order to protect her hands, she carried a kilim⁵⁸ which Mihajlo had once sent us and which we used to cover ourselves with as we slept. She was as exhausted as I was. Her spirits were lower than mine. That night she began wondering whether it was all worth it. She was afraid we would be caught anyway – sooner or later. She couldn't go on any more... I comforted her and tried to persuade her to carry on. I had the feeling I would not succeed. That night, at one moment she decided to sit down in the middle of the mountain and stay where she was in the snow. I begged her to go on. Brigade Commander Lieutenant Djurić also encouraged her, but none of us had much strength that night.

There was ice on one slope which was covered with a beech forest. Walking was difficult and at one moment my mother tripped and began slipping down the slope. She stopped ten meters further down by catching hold of something. There was no moonlight, so we didn't see her. She was just moaning quietly. We couldn't see how deep the gorge beneath her was. The column stopped. The soldiers, who were also exhausted and frozen, made steps in the ice with their rifle butts and reached her after some time. Then a line was made and she was pulled up slowly, passed from hand to hand. Somehow they pulled her out. I was also in the line, somewhere at the end. The kilim, that got stuck somewhere, was also pulled out. My mother had neither the strength nor the will to carry it any longer, and she wanted to throw it away. I took it. It helped us a lot later on. Someone wrapped a blanket around her during the night.

At that time, my mother often thought to suicide. She was afraid that we would be caught after all this and be tortured for a long time before being shot. She was not afraid of death. She used to say: "death doesn't cause any pain". Fortunately, I managed to encourage her and take her mind off the idea.

Sometimes the peasants would give us some of their clothes: a sweater that someone had worn or a little wool that my mother would use to knit something for us. In order to somehow pay them back for their kindness, she also knitted for them. She knew how to knit well and quickly. Hunger was becoming more difficult to bear. The peasants didn't have much to eat themselves. We always had a small piece of cornbread or polenta in our bag that we saved in case our hunger became overwhelming. Not to eat one day was not difficult or terrible for us. The reserves were kept for even worse occasions. A

58 Kilim is a weft-faced plain weave in which the design is rendered by means of coloured areas of discontinuous ground wefts. I still have it!

dog would almost always follow us and we would share our food with him. When the snow was deep it was easier because the soldiers, even the worst ones, (Ljotić's units) did not organise posses. We would then return to Radisav's salaš.

And yet, on one occasion it turned out that it was not absolutely safe even when the snowfall was heavy. One evening while we were sitting at Radisav's, three men suddenly came to the salaš. We realised from the way they talked, the clothes they wore and the white fur hats they had on that they were Chetniks belonging to Voja Tribrodanin's group. He used run an inn in Kučevo. Formally they belonged to Mihailović's formations but not in practice and were, as we had already heard, primitive, half-wild, undisciplined and I can say now that they were bandits. Already drunk when they dashed in, they asked to eat and to drink plum brandy. They looked at us suspiciously. Our clothes were not quite of the kind the peasants wore. The gypsies wore such rags, although the peasants themselves did not wear fine clothes. They asked who we were. We started telling our story, as we had agreed to do, but one of them interrupted us. They knew we were not from those parts. He said that he had noticed while they were approaching the house that someone behind the house had been wiping his ass with paper... Peasants didn't do that. That was true since there was no WC there. Not even a C without the W. When the weather was nice we went to the woods and when it was snowing we all just did it behind the house. The dogs ate everything they found behind the house and asses got no special treatment. If there were leaves around they were used, if not, then the peasants didn't use anything. However, we saved every piece of paper and used it with great care, not thinking that it might give us away.

Since we didn't tell them anything, these Chetniks decided to kill us by cutting our throats. In their drunken state, that seemed to be the best solution to them. They were sure we were spies. They would first have dinner and then finish us off. I had to take a risk. I told them rudely that it was none of their business what we were doing there and who we were. Their vojvoda, Voja, knew that we were there and if anything happened to us they would be as good as dead, they could count on that. It worked. They were not sure what to do and didn't want to show it. They started talking in the Wallachian language and came to an agreement. We understood some of it. They decided to take us to their vojvoda. I continued to bluff: I told them we were there on orders from the highest level (that sounded good) and that we would not leave the place. If they didn't believe us, they should go and check for themselves with their vojvoda. My plan was, if they went we would disappear from the salaš. Let them find us later on if they could! They didn't want to do that. They were drunk, but not that stupid. I suggested that one of them go to check with their vojvoda (I reckoned that if only one or two of them stayed, Radisav, his sons and I could easily put things in order – kill them as soon as they dozed off. With the three of them, suspicious old wolves as they were, it would be difficult. They didn't agree to that either. In the end they made up their minds what to do. After dinner, they ordered Radisav to sit on the threshold with an axe and left. They said that if they didn't find us there when they came back, he would pay with his life. "We will burn your house down, and take your cattle" added one maliciously.

The snow was really very deep. Not even the people who lived in the mountains went anywhere in such weather, especially at night. The wolves were near, hungry and

howling. In fine weather it usually took five or six hours of walking to reach Voja's unit. We secretly hoped that drunken people in such deep snow would never reach his headquarters. They could have turned back immediately in such awful weather. That would have been very bad for us. So, as soon as they left, Radisav told his younger son to bring their rifle. It was skilfully hidden in the stump used for chopping wood in front of the house. It was a French carbine (Lebel) from World War I, well wrapped in an oily sheep's skin and he had enough ammunition. We chose the best cartridges and took turns standing guard in front of the house. If they came back, they would have to approach our house that was on top of a hill. We had good cover and they would be like moving targets. Radisav, his younger son and I were on guard – we stood for about ten minutes because it was very cold. In the end it was clear that they would not return. Not even a sober person would be able to do so in such snow. Nevertheless, we stayed on guard until early morning and then together with the sheep and cows left for a neighbouring salaš and stayed there for a day. Just to be sure, Mother and I didn't return to Radisav's salaš. We went to Čoka Fantina, to an empty salaš, and stayed there for ten days. We didn't have enough food there and hunger drove us away. We had a feeling it would be safe there. The soldiers who went searching didn't go there. The salaš was very well positioned and it had been uninhabited for a long time. Later on we found out that it had belonged to Babejić the legendary *haiduk* of Homolje.

Returning to our old place above Vukovac, we came upon 'our' unit and joined it. Avoiding German and Ljotić's posses, we wandered around the mountain with the unit, mainly above Vukovac, Milatovac and Selište, came near Laznica or when the danger was greater we withdrew again towards Čoka Fantina and went further toward Neresinca or Majdanpek. Brigade Commander Lieutenant Djurić and his subordinate, the battalion commander, were often at odds. Conflict broke out when the interrogations began. It was known that in some parts of Homolje the Germans and Ljotić's men had information on the whereabouts of the Chetniks and that they directed their posses in that direction. Suspicion fell on an elderly woman and her neighbour who was also her lover. How and why I do not know. They were brought into the unit. I expected an interrogation of the kind I had seen in films, where the suspects were cross-examined: but things were settled in the same way as in Sopot – with a pole. They were beaten in turns, she first and then he. She wailed but not too much, and he begged: "My nice, sweet gentlemen, I am not guilty, I have never even stepped on an ant. My nice, sweet" ... Just that. My mother, Djurić, Raško the priest and I were in the *room*, and the pair was beaten in the *kuća*. The interrogation was conducted (alone or with someone else's help, I do not remember) by the commander of the battalion, and Djurić would from time to time put his fingers in his ears so as not to hear. He was a lawyer and could not accept such methods. But the security of the unit was jeopardised and he could not stop such a procedure, although he was higher in rank. Finally the battalion commander ordered the woman's legs to be tied (her hands were already tied) and put into the fire. The screaming and stench were terrible. Sitting in the room, we were going mad. They would open the door from time to time and I saw everything... Naturally she lost consciousness. Then the battalion commander had a new idea: he beat her until she screamed and her lover was put in another room (ours) to listen. The peasant could not stand listening to her being tortured

and immediately admitted everything. He confessed that she wrote the reports, which he took to a place near Žagubica. There he left them in a hollow tree trunk where money was left for them. A patrol went there and money was actually found. The two were taken that night to a gully, which was between the Chetnik headquarters and Radisav's salaš, and they were slaughtered using the *kama* that belonged to Raško the priest. It was the only *kama* in that unit... "The execution had to be done without much noise, the position of the unit had not to be given away by the sound of gunfire"...

Now, when I think about it I am not sure that people should have been slaughtered just in order to preserve the security of the unit.

Very soon after that, four unfortunate men wandering around stumbled upon the unit. They tried to explain that they had escaped from the German labour camp in Bor (the Bor mines) where they were interned and that they had got lost in the mountains. They were scared and their story was not convincing enough. The interrogation lasted one whole day; they were beaten, but without success. They didn't admit anything. However, the battalion commander insisted that they had to be executed. "If they are spies, they will inform the Germans of our position and the safety of the unit will be jeopardised". Djurić wondered: "What if they aren't spies?" He was against liquidation. Raško the priest didn't want to take the risk. That night they were killed in the same gully and in the same way as the couple a few days before. Soon after that Djurić sent a message to Mihailović asking for permission to go to Vojvodina to work on the organisation of the Chetnik movement there. In great secrecy he admitted to the two of us that as a lawyer he could not endure all that was happening in the unit. The letter to Mihailović and the answer took a long time in coming. I think it was almost spring when Mihailović's permission came. Djurić even got an escort; it was Mile Muta whom we knew well. He was to have escorted Djurić up to the Sava river. It was a long journey but Muta came back after one or two days obviously hiding something. Once when he was drunk he blabbed out that he had killed Djurić while he was drinking water from a stream. He had smashed his head with a rifle butt. He said that he did it on the battalion commander's order. And I think it was probably true.

After the departure of Djurić we were told that we could not remain with the unit any more because they were: "An army and not the Partisans". We wandered around in need of food and clothing. After the scenes we had witnessed we did not feel comfortable in that unit. But still we kept sight of it: in case they went somewhere, we could move in time too.

Following a rule I had learned from Ljubivoje, we never spent more than five or six days at one place, so that in case somebody noticed us he would not have enough time to inform on us. It is true that there was no treachery in Homolje. It was an area of *haiduk* tradition, but the case of the couple that had been killed made us realize that there were exceptions. When we came to an uninhibited salaš we tried to remain unnoticed. It was not always easy. That is why we spent most of the day in the hut lying close to one another cramped up in a sort of half sleep; it was less cold and we expended less energy. We talked about the time before the war. Sometimes we sang quietly. My mother didn't have a good ear for music but it was not important. We waited for spring. When spring came there would be dock leaves and nettles to eat. We didn't always get the food the

Chetnikshad ordered the peasants to give us. The peasants would give it to us only from time to time but they themselves had less and less. It was difficult to bring any food out of the village.

Once after Christmas, completely exhausted by hunger and cold (I don't think we had had any food for two or three days), we came to a salaš which was behind Čoka Fantina and belonged to a wealthy peasant. He was a Wallachian. We came in and sat beside the hearth. It was lunchtime. The host's wife was laying the *sofra*. She put a salad made of onions and vinegar on it, made polenta, brought cheese and some meat leftovers in a white enamelled bowl. According to the custom we waited to be offered twice. When invited for the third time, we sat at the *sofra* and ate. Cooked food! While our strength was slowly coming back I told the host that the white enamelled vessel in which he kept the meat was very nice. Its form and blue edge reminded me of something I had seen before. The host told me that when Yugoslavia was falling apart he heard that the peasants were going down to Kučevo and taking all sorts of things from the military barracks and the hospital. He came down too late when everything had already been taken except these vessels which were on the floor in the corner. He said that they had a lid with a hole in the middle so they were useless.

Then I realized what it was – a spittoon.

...

We greeted the first nice days of 1943 with joy. It was less cold. Being hungry, we expected the nettles to appear soon. The sun shone from time to time and warmed us. We were in an uninhabited, half-ruined hut somewhere between Vukovac and Laznica. We slept in a corner where the roof didn't leak and it was less windy. We stuffed the cracks between the logs with moss and lay the whole day hiding from unwanted eyes. It was a good place. A peasant whom we already knew was passing by and we went out of our pigsty and met him. He told us that a Ljotić officer had come to stay in his friend's house in Žagubica. He was a very decent man, kind to his host and the children. One day he came looking very sad so the host asked him what had happened. The officer, after a lot of hesitation, said that he had managed to save a Jew from the camp. The poor man who had lost his will to live was so weak and ill that he couldn't eat any more. His wife and child were hiding somewhere in the mountains. If he could see them, maybe his will to live would return and he might be well again. If only his wife and son could be found.

As you know, I was very devoted to my father. In those circumstances particularly I missed him a lot. I was ready to rush down to Žagubica immediately. But instinct and what I had learned in the meantime made me think and be cautious. My mother, exhausted by what we had gone through, had been ready to commit suicide or to surrender a few times: only fear of torture stopped her. Out of spite, and probably out of some life instinct, I did not want to surrender. So, we asked the peasant to convey back to Žagubica that the son of that Jew could be found but he had to know what nickname his father had had when he was young and if his son had a certain mark which was the same as his father's.

At that time, we also found out that Marisav Petrović, a Ljotić commander, spoke at a meeting in Žagubica. In his speech he said, among other things, that a woman

posing as Queen Marija with her son prince Tomislav (or Andrea, I do not remember which) was hiding in the mountains. That woman was not the Queen, she was an adventuress. The Queen had left us by shamefully fleeing the country and they would catch the adventuress and find out who she was.

That officer, once he had established the conditions for my appearance in Žagubica, was not sad any more. I heard that soon afterwards he moved from his host. We had escaped the trap and found out that the peasants who had come to Ljubivoje's salaš with their lambs and kept guard believed for some time the story of Queen Marija. Mirija also told us that the night after she gave birth she knew that my mother was the Queen. It was not easy to convince her to give up her belief. How the story started, we will probably never find out. I think it did us more harm than good: because of it the Ljotić units groups had tried to find and catch us several times.

There were some signs that a great cleansing of the area where we were was being prepared. It looked as if the largest posse so far would be coming. The soldiers came with trucks to the nearby villages and prepared to go up into the mountains. We heard we could not go back west, because the road was under German control. It seemed that our only chance was to go east towards Romania. There were large forests there, uninhabited areas and little-known caves. We needed food for at least a few days. We spent one night under a strange kind of shelter that we stumbled upon accidentally, while hiding in the forest. It was 2 x 2 metres wide, one metre high, half-rotten, almost hidden in the bushes. Since it was covered by fallen leaves, it was naturally well camouflaged and it sheltered us from the rain. We already knew about this place. It was a hundred metres away from a nice spring. The next morning we came upon a peasant who was the Chetnik commander of Vukovac. We used to meet him before. He was a clever, nice and decisive man. He told us that he was going to his salaš to find his brother and get weapons. He intended to go in the direction of Romania and suggested we go together. Promising to bring weapons and food for us too, he said it would be easier to break out of the encirclement together. If necessary we would fight. We decided we would spend the night in our shelter and agreed to come and meet him at his salaš at dawn. We thought it would be safer if we did so. His salaš was near, we knew: the third mountain range to the left.

That night we heard shots near us. We didn't know who was firing. It was probably somebody who was connected with the occupying forces. Before dawn we hurried to get to the agreed place. It was foggy; we rushed downhill, missing the place where we had to turn. All of a sudden the fog lifted in front of the stream at the very bottom of the gorge. In front of us and very near we saw a column of Ljotić's soldiers. In a trice we turned round and started running uphill. They began shooting at us. We heard shots behind us but luckily they didn't hit us. I think they had a lot of explosive ammunition (called dumdums) and that saved us. There were a lot of bushes behind us, which the bullets hit and exploded. We ran as fast as we could. The Ljotić people moved very carefully and were slower. It seems that they were sure we couldn't escape them. We weren't sure we would be successful. When we couldn't run anymore, we started looking for a hiding place. Where to go? We came upon a deep gorge. Its bottom was filled with dry leaves and a little bit above it there was an enormous tree that had fallen there, God

knows when. Next to it there was a pile of dry leaves. We dug a hole in them with our hands, crawled inside and piled as many leaves as we could to cover ourselves. Before that, we had found a branch with dry leaves and covered ourselves with it. Our dog Gara was a problem. I've mentioned



him before a few times. He was the first dog that followed us when we came to the mountains. He was an ordinary mongrel, very nice and extremely intelligent. He was black with a white bib. Although he liked to cuddle, he didn't want to join us at that moment because he sensed our fear. I thought I could pull him into our hideout and hold his snout so he couldn't bark and give us away. If they noticed him in the middle of the forest, they would know there were people in the vicinity and they would search more carefully. I went out of the hideout and started running after him through the forest. Gara would always be at least ten metres away from me. It lasted for some time. Then I lost patience and tried to make him go away by throwing stones. I threw everything that I could get my hands on at him. He would move away wagging his tail and then he would come back. Finally, when I sensed that the soldiers were quite near, I hid in my hole, masked by the branch and waited to see what would happen. My mother was trembling and I peeped through the leaves watching how Gara would act. He wandered around a little and then quite unexpectedly crawled into a hollow tree stump near us. It was black inside, probably half-burned by some lightning or a shepherd's fire. Gara could not be seen there. I looked at him. For a moment he looked at me and then in the direction in which he heard the soldiers footsteps. When the soldiers came close, Gara burrowed down. A soldier passed fifteen metres away from us and luckily did not notice either Gara or us. Another one was even closer, judging by the tracks (which we saw later on when they had left) he was about five metres away from us, but he could not have seen us from the other side of our block.

When they had passed Gara looked after them jokingly. One ear was raised, the other lowered. A little later he left his hideout, came to us and started cuddling. He was not afraid of us anymore. Then I trembled violently for a long time. Half an hour later, when we were sure that no straggling soldier would find us, we left the hideout and gave Gara the last piece of polenta that we had. We had been saving it for days in case we got extremely hungry.



(The tenth letter)

Belgrade, 25.04.1992

My dearest,

Since I sent you an extensive letter yesterday, I'm now sending you a shorter one. I think that, physically, the period I was describing in my last letter was for my mother and me extremely difficult, maybe the most difficult of all. Now, when I think about it, I feel that we suffered less then than in some other periods during the war. We were too occupied with our struggle for survival to have time pay attention to ourselves and think about our difficult fate. We were happy when we managed to escape whoever was pursuing us, happy if we had food, happy if the weather changed so that it was less cold... Immediately after the war my mother attempted to write something about the meaning of happiness. Her story is lost and, as far as I remember, she had a good idea but she never had any talent for writing and her Serbian was quite poor. I am not a writer myself and I, too, lack talent for writing but maybe one day I'll try to reconstruct her idea and tell her story again. But to continue with my story.

After the chases had stopped, we decided to go a little further in the direction of Čoka Fantina. Before starting out, God knows why, we passed by the fallen tree next to which we had hidden during the posse. It was covered with edible mushrooms. (As I am writing this I feel that something isn't right – I clearly remember that it was spring but I read in books that those mushrooms grow in the autumn. The posses took place throughout the year and maybe in my memory the order of things got mixed up, although I doubt it. Maybe those mushrooms grew in spring too.) It was precious food and we picked a bagful. We ate them raw, and when we went a little further away and came to the area where we could light a fire, we grilled them without worrying that we would be discovered because of the smoke. A few days later when our bag was empty, we returned and picked some more. I think that we ate them for ten days and then they stopped growing.

Going in the direction of Čoka Fantina and coming back for the mushrooms we met a Chetnik unit in the forest. We knew them so we followed them for a day and got food from their field kitchen. At one resting-place the soldiers played with Gara. After some time the soldiers' game became cruel and Gara ran away into the forest. We couldn't help him and thought that he would find us (as he often did) by our tracks. We never saw him again, and we regretted this for a very long time.

We would often find abandoned huts at Čoka Fantina and spend a few days in them. Those were very hard times for us. The cold returned and we had no food. One day we noticed that a column of soldiers was approaching from the direction of the neighbouring hill. We fled, as we always did, because we might be caught if we waited to find out whether they were enemy soldiers or ours. We crept out of the hut but couldn't reach the forest. Between the forest and us there was open ground and they would see us. We ran down to the nearest stream and lay in it, next to the bank. The stream was shallow (the water was only about ten centimetres deep) but it was icy cold. Lying next to the bank I watched the water's surface begin to wrinkle, then freeze. The column of soldiers passed by slowly, taking ages, or so it seemed to me. When they'd gone we tried to warm ourselves by running but as our clothes were wet we failed—both in running and in warming up. It was even difficult for us to light a fire, our hands were trembling so much.

Even when the nettles began to appear (only boiled, without anything else, they weren't very tasty, despite the fact that we were famished,) hunger was still present. We couldn't rely on the unit anymore. It would disappear somewhere and then come back and they no longer let us know us about upcoming dangers. There, on the eastern side of Homolje, life became too difficult for us. Without a firm connection with the unit, without food and better clothes, exhausted and quite depressed by the constant chases, we wondered how to get to the other (western) side where we thought it would be less dangerous. We knew that somewhere out there was the unit of Siniša Pazarac, the corps commander, who was actually the commander of Homolje. We met him a few times; he was always kind and full of understanding. Beljanica, is a high mountain and the chases were rarer there. We seized the opportunity when we ran into a courier (whom we knew) to send a letter, actually a note, to Siniša. We asked him to permit us—and help us—to go to the region where his headquarters were. We received his reply shortly after. He said that we could come and would be escorted by a young Chetnik whose name I have forgotten. He was an orphan, only sixteen or seventeen years old, from Žagubica. He would come for us and we should be ready. He knew the area and would take us to the western side regardless of possible ambushes by the Germans and Ljotić. The greatest danger for us was the river Mlava, which could only be crossed via a few small bridges—where guards and ambushes could be placed. It was also said that the Krepoljin – Žagubica road was under constant surveillance. Being used to freedom of movement in the mountains, we were afraid of the roads. What would happen if we came upon a patrol and they began shooting?

Crossing to the western side of Homolje turned out to be really easy. The young man who guided us knew the area very well. We didn't cross the river, we just went around it going over Crni Vrh which was to the south of the Mlava spring. The forest was covered with leaves and Homolje, which was always beautiful, became even more beautiful and safer for us now than it had been in the winter.

We crossed the road with unbelievable ease. We stopped in front of it, listened, took a look and ran. The road was no longer something to be feared. Then we passed near the German barracks situated on the slopes of Crni Vrh. The Germans didn't notice us. We were even amused as we lay for some time in a safe place in the forest, watching the Germans washing themselves and moving around. The young man gave me his rifle

so I could observe them through the sights. I imagined shooting and killing them one by one, in revenge for all that they'd done to us and to others... I hoped the day would come when we would be able to do that. Now we did not dare. *"For each German killed, a hundred Serbs and Jews will be executed."*

Crossing to the other side, we walked in a semicircle and in the evening came to the place where Siniša had ordered us to stay. It was also a salaš but covered with tiles and a little bit bigger than the other salašes in that area. The owner, who had worked for some years as a miner in Bogovina, considered himself a "man of the world". He had two daughters of marriageable age who, after they had spent some time in that faraway mining town, regarded themselves as ladies. It was here that, after a long time, we took a bath in a wooden trough, got rid of the lice (we had hundreds of them), slept in a bed, rested from the chases and ate normally.

We received food from the Chetniks. They promised they would give us twenty kilograms of corn flour, half a kilo of bacon and two kilograms of beans regularly each month. From our host we sometimes got some eggs, onions and a little cheese. Actually we would give him what we got from the unit and we ate together with his family. We soon recuperated. Mother and I did everything the peasant needed: we took care of the cows and pigs, cleaned the barn, worked in the garden and worked the land. Mother knitted for the peasant women kerchiefs, stockings, gloves and sweaters as well. The salaš was, as far as I remember, about three hours walk far from Žagubica and a little less from Crni Vrh. After some time we moved to a neighbouring salaš that was no more than a fifteen minute walk from the miner's. It was a little bit hidden in the forest and less noticeable. We did that because we found out that the Germans were beginning to come up the mountains in small groups – looking for plum brandy, chicken and geese. I felt much better at this salaš because the owner's son was my age. Later the chases also started in that region, so we had to move right under the peak of Lisac (one of the summits of Beljanica) and we stayed at the salaš of old Radovan Lilić, then one of the richest peasants in Žagubica. His son was in a POW camp in Germany and he was alone there with his daughter-in-law. The headquarters of Siniša Pazarac was very near, no more than a fifteen-minute walk through the forest, and we received food from them, but very soon felt hunger again. This time it was a very unusual kind of hunger. The shepherds were in the mountains with their sheep. Their wives brought food and clean clothes to them from the village, usually once every ten days. They used that opportunity to bring food to the Chetniks as well. The Germans and Ljotić's units, knowing what was going on, banned the taking of food to the mountains and prevented this by means of blockades. For some time we ate the reserves we had and, when they were exhausted, the Chetniks began to buy up lambs and roast them. For a few days it was wonderful, but then it turned out that it was difficult to satisfy one's hunger by just eating meat. We were ready to exchange all the meat for a single piece of polenta.

Very soon the Chetniks went off somewhere and we stayed with old Radovan. He was a wonderful old man, and I liked to talk to him in the evenings sitting around the hearth. Having always lived in the mountains, he didn't believe my stories: that town houses had taps out of which came water, that there were carts that moved by themselves and weren't pulled by horses or oxen... And when I tried to describe the hot water tap

he got fed up. He told me clearly that I spoke well and lied nicely but that I shouldn't overdo it...

Later on, I don't know why, we spent a few days near the miner at an abandoned salaš. It was nice, almost idyllic, but the food reserves which we had in our bags began to run out. We tried to save as much food as we could (the flour and the beans) but we used it up.

I don't want to bore you by describing our moves from place to place. We changed places for different reasons, sometimes because of the chases, or because of hunger and often out of caution. The summer of 1943 we mostly spent in the area of Žagubica at different peasants' huts. We got food quite irregularly from some of the units and more often from the peasants. There were rich peasants who were misers so it sometimes happened that we had to steal potatoes from their fields in order to have something to eat. This was the exception, however. We would usually stay at a peasant's house a few days and did everything that was needed: took care of the cattle, worked in the water mill (I learnt how to do that), did the haymaking and I reaped corn and picked all kinds of fruit... Mother knitted a lot. We often slept in the forest to be on the safe side. Once, when we were sleeping there, a wolf visited us. The rustling of the dry leaves woke us up. The poor animal sensed a piece of corn bread in my bag and tried to get at it. I drove him away with the pitchfork, which I had because I was haymaking. Actually, I thought that he was a dog. Immediately afterwards I realized that it was a wolf by the barking of the dogs that he bumped into while running away from us. In the summer the wolves are not dangerous. They are afraid of people and they do not attack.

Sometimes it happened that the peasants invited us to *pomanas*. Those feasts were remnants of pagan beliefs intended for the souls of the dead. People in Homolje believed that everything that was put on the table and given to someone would immediately reach the dead up in the other world. That is why they put socks, towels, shirts, flutes and other things on the table besides the rich food and drink ... The guests were obliged to eat, drink and take home everything that was in front of them. Naturally, after the rich food and drink, the peasants started singing and when they got drunk it happened that some couples would disappear behind the house or the haystack... They did so because the dead should not be deprived of anything, not even of that...

Two or three of these *pomanas* that we attended were an opportunity for us to eat well (and not only for us, but for the peasants too—at that time they had very poor food) and also to take away some supplies which would last us two or three days.

Fire used to be a great problem for us, as well. Matches were very rare and, being exposed to the rain, we couldn't keep them dry for long. When we had any matches I treated them as something very precious. If it rained, I kept them under my armpit. I learned how to light a fire with only one match, without paper, and in all weathers. In the evening, before we went to sleep the fire would be banked – covered with ashes. So with a little live coal the fire could be kept going for a long time (the cavemen knew that) but it wasn't possible during the posses as the smoke might give us away. When old Radovan gave me a flint, tinder and steel, which we had long wished for to create sparks, we felt truly rich. With them we could light a fire whenever it was

safe. I quickly learned to ignite a fire with only three strokes. I have tried recently and cannot do it anymore but I still keep them as a treasured memento.

Moving around the mountains, hiding from the chases, running away when necessary, even when we only *thought* we should do so, we spent a second winter in the mountains. We had already acquired all the experience we needed for survival in those conditions. We got to know Homolje and we moved around easily: we knew all the paths and shortcuts, streams, abandoned salašes, huts and hiding places and we got used to the hunger, lice, rain and cold. We learned enough of the Wallachian language to be able to communicate. Many of the villages in Homolje were mixed (Wallachian and Serb) and some were only Wallachian. They spoke Serbian reluctantly, especially the women who in fact very often didn't know it at all.

Undernourished as I was, in late autumn 1943 I became ill and felt very weak. I was lying in one salaš when a small group of Chetniks arrived. Luckily, among them was a doctor, a man from Belgrade, Dr Pešić, a specialist for skin and venereal diseases. He examined me and diagnosed pneumonia, gave me some medicine from his bag, and told me that I needed rest and nourishing food. He suggested that we come closer to the unit again. We would get food from the unit's field kitchen and there would probably be some medicine for me. When he left he took a letter from us in which we asked Siniša Pazarac for permission to go back to old Radovan Lilić, that is, very close to where his unit was. A few days later we got Siniša's agreement and moved back to the familiar spot.

I remember the period we spent under Lisac peak as being peaceful. I think that it was about that time we found out that Radisav Krstić had been caught by Ljotić units and taken away in one of their posses. He never returned to his family. Very soon heavy snow fell – so there was little danger that the Germans (or anyone else) would make chases. We received food from Siniša's unit: lunch and dinner, most often both of them at the same time. Beans, potatoes and even cabbage sometimes. It was all very tasty, browned and sometimes included meat. Instead of bread we ate polenta or corn bread. I recovered very quickly.

A British non-commissioned officer visited us very frequently. He didn't have anyone to speak English to and he could talk with us. As a member of the British military mission he had jumped out of a plane one night with his captain, but the parachutes had got caught in the branches of the tall beech trees. It was moonlight and hanging up high they miscalculated the distance to the ground. When they untied themselves and jumped the sergeant broke his leg and the captain badly hurt his spine. The former limped and the latter was paralysed. Later on they were moved to Senjski Rudnik on the other side of Beljanica. It seemed safer there. But the Germans burst in unexpectedly, caught them and shot them at once, although they were in English Army uniforms.

(The eleventh letter)

Belgrade, 27 April 1992

My Dearest,

My last letter was a little shorter than the previous ones. I hope you got it in the meantime. If any of the letters don't reach you, do let me know (that is why I numbered them): Gorjana has photocopied them all before sending them...

One day while I was sick, Jana Todorović from Žagubica, came to the salaš. She was 29 years old and very beautiful. She was on her way to visit her blood brother⁵⁹ Rade Bondžulović, a Chetnik officer⁶⁰. It was late and Jana had to spend the night at our salaš. It was not safe to walk in the mountains at night in winter, especially if there were wolves in the vicinity. Seeing that I was ill she sat on my bed, stroked my head for a long time and talked to me. I remember she asked me if I liked reading. She left in the morning. Ten days later a peasant brought a parcel: a jar of honey, socks and a book: Turgenjev's *Hunter's notes*. Those things so carefully chosen meant a lot to us. Later on Jana set aside for us as much as she could (she had three children, and her husband was in a POW camp somewhere in Germany) and sent it to us whenever she was able. Some small things and greetings. If people were caught doing that, they would be killed.

When I'd recovered, we returned, on Siniša's orders, to the area where we had been before I got sick. There were serious reasons for that. The Germans started going to the mountains even when there was snow. Their skiing units turned up out of nowhere, wearing white capes. I didn't see them personally but we heard stories of how they moved silently, like ghosts, and appeared in places where you least expected them... Maybe they had come from the eastern front. Being in the immediate vicinity of the unit had some advantages, but because there was a possibility that the Germans could organise a search for the unit, it was better to be further away now and maybe even more so because of their motto: "We are an army, not the Partisans⁶¹".

59 Blood brother (Serb. Pobratim) To be a bloodbrother or bloodsister (Serb. Posestrima) is a custom to which two person unrelated by blood established a relationship that had the same status as blood kinship. Sworn brothers (or sisters) were obliged to help each other in need or danger.

60 Lieutenant Rade Bondžulović was born in Žagubica and graduated from the Military Academy right at the outbreak of World War II. He was nice, brave and unrestrained; he liked to drink a little more. He hated the Germans and had trouble because of that: his fondness for provoking Germans, his fate and Draža's orders. He was inclined to shoot at the Germans despite Draža's orders not to. He was killed by Partisans at the very end of the war.

61 Women didn't serve neither in the prewar Yugoslav army nor in Draža's units. Maybe that is forbidden because of the "possible relations that could appear between men and women". In the Partizan's units women were equal with men and fought together with them. I think that something like that was the reason why my mother (and me with her) wasn't welcome to be in

I remember that one day Rade Bondžulović unexpectedly came to the salaš where the host's son was my age. Some time before, we heard he had left Draža's units due to a misunderstanding with the HQ and his need to shoot at the Germans. Some people even said that he went over to the Partisans. It turned out that there were some misunderstandings but he didn't go over to the Partisans. "Not yet" he would tell us significantly. He left his rifle at our salaš, took only his pistol and a few hand grenades and went down to Žagubica to visit his mother. There was a real snowstorm, the snow was waist-high and in some places even higher, and it still continued to snow heavily. I went out with the host's son to feed the sheep... We could see no more than a metre or two in front of us. When we reached the haystack, I could hardly see because of the snowstorm but I realized that something was happening: the wolves were attacking the flock. I turned round and saw one was dragging away a sheep he had just killed. The deep snow meant it wasn't easy for him. A little afraid, I swung the long wooden pitchfork: what would happen if the wolf was faster and attacked me beneath the pitchfork? He kept on dragging the sheep, moving away from the pitchfork. From time to time, he would leave the sheep and attack me with a growl – I had the feeling that he wanted to frighten me or to just keep me at a distance. It all lasted for some time. Behind me my host's son had the same problem. The dogs (two of them) were fighting on the other side of the haystack. Remembering that there was a rifle in the house, I ran to get it and returned, loading it with frozen fingers. As soon as I appeared with the rifle the wolves fled. I didn't get a chance to fire. Later on, when we collected our thoughts, we realized that those two wolves had only wanted to attract our attention. At the same time, on the other side there were more of them who killed and took away a few sheep. They had no time to take all of them away.

Where we wandered in our flights from the chases I really don't know. I remember all the places and events well, but not their exact chronology, but now that's not important. When the posses started in this area, we moved further on towards Suvi Do, a village downstream from Žagubica. When I speak about villages, I am really referring to the terrain up in the mountains above the villages, the land which is a part of a village's district. We didn't go down to the villages after Jošanica, since the end of 1942⁶², except once and then we went because Mother was ill. It was to do with some women's problems caused by bleeding. At about that time the Germans, Ljotić's units and soldiers from the Bulgarian army had encircled the part of the mountain where we were. They would go up the mountain from all directions and there was little hope that we could break out of the encirclement. We lost contact with Siniša's unit. It had gone away a day or two earlier. As we were already quite experienced, we concluded that it wasn't worth fleeing as we had done up to now. Surrounded, we had no chance of escaping. We did the opposite of what was usually done in such situations: dressed in our rags, we took some sacks and started going to Žagubica, thus going straight towards the soldiers who were coming up the mountain. We looked like gypsies. We knew that most of the gypsies, as well as the Jews, were already in camps and that those that were not were being pursued – but we supposed

Draža's units or very close to them, except in moments of great danger.

62 Jošanica has been the last willage in which we were and from which in Autumn 1942. we went to the mountains. After that we spent more than 2 years not being down in villages.

that at that moment the soldiers who had started out to catch the Chetniks would not be interested in gypsies. Hurrying downhill wanting to reach the village before dark (not to attract attention by moving at night), we ran out of the forest onto a plain and straight into a skirmishing line. Judging by their clothes they were Bulgarians. They walked at a distance of 100 – 150 metres apart. The first soldier we noticed was right in front of us, about 80 metres away. As soon as he saw us, he stopped and turned his back to us. He stood like that until we had passed by. The others were further away. When I think of it now, I am not sure whether he was a good man or just a Bulgarian. Bulgarians were the worst occupiers, even worse than Ljotić's men. When the Germans were advancing in Russia, the Bulgarian soldiers used to be very cruel and did terrible things but when the Germans were withdrawing they become nice and kind and spoke about our brotherhood.

We reached Žagubica and found Jana's home right away, thanks to her description. It was at the very entrance to the village. Jana was wonderful! First she fed us and then found a doctor who would keep quiet. She managed everything. She got the medicine from the pharmacist Joca and brought it home. We spent the night at her home and, the next day when the soldiers came back from their mission we returned to the mountain. Mother recuperated and we thus managed to get out of the encirclement.

We kept on moving, now mostly above the villages of Suvi Do and Izvarica, where there was a Chetnik unit under the command of Lieutenant Blaža Radovanović. He was a brigade commander and Djorđević was the battalion commander. Djordjević was a non-commissioned officer. He was a joyous man; he dressed neatly and played the guitar well. It seemed that he was close to his host's wife. She was good looking and a real Wallachian woman; having a sexually indifferent husband, she was fond of cheating him whenever she could.

At the end of winter, I had to go with her to her water mill, about a two-hour walk from our salaš. We took two horses loaded with sacks of corn. We ground the corn, but it took longer than we thought and it was getting quite late. I thought we would sleep in the mill and I hoped that she would, on that occasion, teach me some things... To my disappointment, she thought that we could reach home before dark. We loaded the sacks full of cornmeal and started to hurry. We knew the way but we had heard that there were hungry wolves in the vicinity. They had killed a lot of sheep in two flocks. That should have reassured us –the wolves were full so would not be aggressive for some time. We had covered two thirds of the road when on one steep slope the horses stopped and wouldn't go on. They were very aggravated. The woman knew what it meant and told me that "He" was near. (The name of a wolf or a snake is never mentioned in those parts. A wolf is a "He", and a snake is a "She".) Sparse hazel bushes dotted the slope. Having small axes with us, without which people did not go to the mountains, we quickly cut a few long, strong poles and sharpened them like spears. Then we set the horses in such a position that they were next to each other standing head to tail. We stood, each on one side, ready to protect the horse's flanks and ourselves if the pack of wolves appeared. After some time, one wolf did show up. He was no more than 80 metres away from us. He went along the path very cautiously like a real scout. The whole pack followed him, one after the other. I knew that the wind was blowing from their side to ours. I think there were thirteen of them. The next to the last was lame. A very large one guarded the rear. They passed by, not noticing us.

They were probably not hungry. The horses decided to start only about ten minutes later and we reached the salaš by dark.

By the middle of March 1944 we were at an abandoned salaš on the slopes of Beljanica, near Lisac. Some peasants turned upon in the afternoon going to Siniša's headquarters. Sun bathing in front of the house (the weather was exceptionally nice that day) I noticed some unusual black clouds coming from the east. Very soon after, large snowflakes began to fall. The peasants, being experienced, decided to spend the night at our salaš. In the morning it was covered with snow. It snowed for several days without stopping. I think the snow was more than two metres high. We kept shovelling the path leading to the place where we went to relieve ourselves – a sort of ten-metre-long tunnel. At the end of the path there were stakes which were perfect for making a fire. We melted snow for water. We quickly ran out of food, but found corncobs in the attic which we husked and cooked. A few days later we found under a pile of corn a wooden bucket of very salty cheese made from sheep's milk. It was delicious! We were snowed in for about ten days and then it suddenly became warmer. The mountain roared with the sound of snow melting into streams that flowed down to the Mlava valley...

And so it went on: chases, hiding, fleeing, hunger, lice, all mixed up in my now rather weakened memory. I remember a rainy and cold early spring day in 1944. We were near Lisac, again without food. We had spent the night at a salaš and a group of peasants came by. Among them was an accordionist from Žagubica. He was not a Chetnik but he hung round them. I knew him from some time earlier: instead of guns he carried his accordion and was a good singer. He was on his way down to Žagubica to see his family. The peasants sat around the fire for a long time and he sang: "*Ja se opraštam Cigani sa vama*"... ("I say goodbye to you Gypsies") and the other one: "*Doviđenja, druže, doviđenja*"... ("Goodbye my friend, goodbye") The accordionist promised that he would bring me a kilo of honey. Down in Žagubica he had beehives. Around midnight he stopped singing and went off so that he could get into Žagubica before dawn. In the morning we were informed that large groups of soldiers (Germans, Bulgarians or Ljotić's units, it was all the same to us), had started coming up from the villages in our direction. It was raining. We hid in a thicket, crawling into a thick bush, completely wet, and trembling with cold and hunger. Some peasants passed close by without noticing us at all. We gathered from their talk that they were going to Siniša's headquarters nearby. We quickly joined them and very soon found ourselves in a big hollow which was overgrown with a dense beech forest. The Chetniks had made their camp there. They had built small huts and there were some tents. The fires were lit and food was being prepared. The British military mission was there: Major Greenwood and the sergeant and radio operator called Andy (I think his name was Anderson). We saw many familiar faces. The beans that were cooked in the field kitchen were almost ready when a patrol came with the report that the Germans and Ljotić's units had turned west – that meant they were not coming in our direction. We relaxed, but ten minutes later the shooting started all around us. We were surrounded. The Chetniks were running in all directions, the horses reared up and I noticed to my horror that the cooks spilled the half-cooked beans and quickly put the empty cauldrons on their horses. Only Andy, with a pipe in his mouth, observed the whole situation as if he were at the horse races.

We noticed that there was one side from which no shots were coming. One of their units was probably late and the circle was not complete. Maybe the unit had got lost in the fog that was really thick in some parts of the forest... Or maybe it was a trap. Not thinking too much, we ran in that direction, ran and ran and soon left the shooting behind us. We had got out! It seemed as if the whole Chetnik unit managed to get out in that way. Sometime later, running through the forest, we noticed Germans. It was probably the unit that was late or had got lost in the fog. They were running as if they wanted to block our way but they did not shoot at us. In front of them ran the German Alsatian dogs: they were approaching us quickly. We were afraid of them. We had heard that some of these dogs were trained to catch fugitives, jump at their throats and tear them open while others were trained to bite the tendon just above the heel. I didn't have any guns with me (I never did, although I could get them easily; the people in Homolje always had lots of weapons but it seemed safer not to carry any: in case we were caught we could more easily pass ourselves off as peasants). I only had the old knife I'd got from Ljubovoje. I thought maybe I could kill one dog – if that – but there were several. Marko was with us, he was our new dog whom we had found half dead with hunger shortly after Gara's disappearance. We fed him a bit and adopted him. (His previous owner was an old man from Vukovac, a rich peasant who was known as a miser. The peasants in that area fed the dogs only as much as was necessary for them to survive, no more. That old man, probably mad from old age and stinginess, didn't give his dog even that little. Marko was a huge shepherd dog that looked like a special breed from the Šara Mountain; he was good at fighting wolves. Running, I shouted at him the way shepherds do when they want to set a dog on wolves: "Marko, tuta, tuta" and he ran at the German dogs. I didn't have time to look what was happening. It would only delay me. We ran for a long time, crossed a stream and ran much longer than was necessary. We stumbled on some people who were also fleeing: a few women and peasants who we had noticed in the unit. They only had one old fashioned rifle (French, Lebel, 1886) but no ammunition. For sometime we went along together and then parted. They wanted to turn left and I wanted to turn right. I saw some tracks and was convinced that they were made by English boots (that is, by the members of the British mission I had seen in the Chetnik's camp) so I wanted to follow them. The others were afraid of going in that direction. Mother and I turned right and followed the tracks...

The weather improved and after the fear and all the running we started to feel hungry. In one clearing we saw an unbelievable sight: a goat with a huge swollen udder. We caught the animal easily. We didn't have a bucket to milk her, we had nothing. So I took off my *šajkaca* which was quite dirty, milked the goat into it and we took turns drinking. After this both the goat and we felt much better. If only we'd had a flask or a mess kit so that we could take some of the milk with us! Shortly afterwards, following the tracks, we met Siniša's unit and the English mission whose boot prints we had followed.

A few days later we went back to the Chetnik's camp. Near it, while looking for our dog Marko, we found his remains. The forest animals had eaten most of him. We found out that some people had been killed too. One elderly Chetnik had stayed behind the patrol, probably sensing that the Germans would turn round and start going towards the unit. He tried to hold them back and to warn his unit by firing shots. He fought for

some time until he was wounded. We found him behind a beech tree. He was drilled with bullets and his throat was slit. There were many cartridge cases around him. The tree was also drilled with bullets. Later on we found out that the accordion player had brought the Germans and Ljotić's soldiers to the Chetnik headquarters. He was the traitor! A few months later we heard that somebody had killed him in Žagubica, others said that he'd fled Homolje...

Soon after that, Siniša's unit moved to another place and we kept on wandering in that area for some time. One day, fleeing from a posse, we stumbled on an abandoned camp in the middle of a forest, to the south of Beljanica. There were about twenty small eaves covered by ferns. In that area they called it *prislon*⁶³. Nothing was left; the hearths were still warm as if somebody had just fled. We stayed in the camp for some time

but had a feeling that somebody was watching us from the forest. It was the gypsies: they approached us in small groups and gathered around us. They were woodcutters who had escaped from their villages and lived there in the forest making wooden troughs, spindles, distaffs, etc. which they sold secretly in the villages, thus managing to survive. One old gypsy woman took some flour from a small bag and kneaded the dough for two loaves of



very small flat bread and lit a fire. She gave my mother and me an apple each. "Eat, but slowly, so you don't get sick". She knew that we hadn't eaten for two days. Soon the bread was ready. The loaves were as small as the palm of a hand, but given from the heart. Our stomachs full, we fell asleep very soon, and after we had regained our strength we went on. We got two more apples and two small breads for the journey. That food lasted for two days.

When the situation calmed down a little bit, we went back to the salaš where I had fought with the wolf. A few days later some Chetniks we hadn't seen before came to the salaš unexpectedly. It was the headquarters of colonel Pavlović the commander of Eastern Serbia. Colonel Pavlović who was an elderly, refined, active officer had gathered in his headquarters a group of younger people with whom my mother and I quickly made friends. One of them told us that he knew us. He was the son of my father's good friend Katerinić. The unit was about fifty men strong and as soon as they came they began preparing everything that was necessary for the acceptance of a "transport". I was very excited because it meant that on one of the following nights Allied planes would drop weapons and equipment for the unit. This had happened before but never in our vicinity. Sometimes at night we used to hear the characteristic sound of the English plane Liberator and then we would find out that the Chetniks had received supplies. Weapons, clothes, blankets, medicine and even gold (the English pound made of gold). For us all these things were less important than the fact that they represented a kind of a connection with the faraway, free world and that freedom was approaching. We knew that, as a rule,

63 The word *Prislon* is made of the word *prisloniti* (to lean) How *prislons* were looking like you can see on my sketch on this side.

the day after the delivery of the supplies the Germans and Bulgarians would quickly come up the mountain and surround the area hoping to catch the Chetniks and get the precious booty. (I remembered the story that the Bulgarians had already come up that winter but the Chetniks had set them an ambush in which several Bulgarians were killed and the others fled. Their commander was killed and, as his leg was caught in the stirrup, his horse dragged him all the way down to Žagubica. Whether it was a true story or just a legend I don't know.)

On a nearby hill, about a hundred metres away from our salaš, the Chetniks made ten large piles of branches arranged in the form of a cross. At night, when the plane appeared, they lit the piles but a little too late. The plane circled a few times over the area, but the fires were not yet burning brightly and there were clouds. The crew didn't see us and the plane flew away.

The next night there was more hay in the piles, which therefore ignited immediately. It was an impressive scene. The whole area was lit up. The plane saw us and fired a rocket as a sign of identification. The Chetniks responded by firing a rocket of the agreed colour. In the next approach, (the plane flew unbelievably low for a night flight and I had the feeling that the treetops were bending when it was flying over us), it dropped the first lot of containers. There were many and they fell so quickly that the air flew noisily through the openings of the parachutes and warned us of the approaching danger. Those people who had already been present at the arrival of a cargo, shouted to us to move away because a container could kill a person if it fell on them. The plane flew over us a few more times, dropping more containers which we quickly piled up. After that, the plane started dropping large sacks full of clothes – without parachutes. The sacks were falling around us and we ran to the left and right of the direction in which the plane was flying. We found the containers quickly but it was more difficult to find the sacks. In the meantime the fires had gone out and it was dark again. The plane flew off and we started gathering up the sacks. The Chetniks were putting everything on small horses and preparing to take it all away somewhere.

Still excited by what I had seen and by everything that was happening, I took a shortcut crossing a gully back to our salaš. In the forest I stumbled on a sack. I tried to pull it to the hill but couldn't as it was too heavy for me. I informed Pavlović about it: he was pleased and told me there was a rule that whoever found something from the transport and reported it could claim a reward and that I would get one. He also told us that we could expect chases the next day and that it would be better to come along with them tonight: it would be a very exhausting journey, about 80 kilometres of marching, but we would get to a safer place. Half an hour later we started out towards the east.

The journey was really exhausting. We went as quickly as people and heavily-laden horses could go. We hurried particularly the first three hours until we had crossed the road and got to the other side. One Chetnik had his own horse that was a rather wild stallion; he allowed me to ride it for some time. I wasn't afraid of the horse, and we quickly became friends. By the end of the journey we were all worn out. I had previously learned to walk using only my legs. It is difficult to explain how it is done and I am not sure whether it is a technique or autosuggestion. During long marches I tended to use only my legs for walking: thighs, knees and calves, and I used my feet less. In such a

way the body doesn't tire and so I could walk for a very long time. I repeat, maybe it is autosuggestion but it helps.

I don't remember how much time it took us to cover that distance. We walked and rested periodically. After some time we became numb and it seemed as if it was easier to walk. Only our legs functioned, our conscience was elsewhere. When we reached our destination (I say "destination" because I don't know the exact name of the place, it was somewhere above Kučevo) we moved away from the unit and settled in an empty hut. We were told not to leave it until we got other orders. The unit was allocated a few neighbouring salašes.

Very soon after we had rested, a soldier came and brought us something to eat. The next day an officer visited us. He was tall and thin and of stiff bearing. He was a member of the signal corps and if I am not mistaken he had a high-ranking position. I think that he had spent some time at Draža's headquarters. He had graduated from the Military Academy just before the war. My mother thought that he was "not a pleasant type". Much later I remembered her opinion of him⁶⁴. Anyway, he was very kind and talkative. As a reward for the sack I had found, he brought me a pair of boots, which were new, made in England. And two toothbrushes and some toothpaste...

⁶⁴ Nikola Milošević. It was only a few years later that I found out his name. He was a member of the Communist Party infiltrated into Draža Mihailović's movement. After the war he was a major in the secret police (OZNA).

(The twelfth letter)

Belgrade, 02.05.1992

My dearest,

*By the time spring came in 1944 we were much better dressed. Mihajlo Rajković sent us, through Joca the pharmacist, some parcels that contained more useful things than the first ones had. I got a pair of excellent strong boots but they were unfortunately too narrow for me and too large for my mother. We preferred to walk in woollen socks which had rags and leather sewn onto their soles. We had better luck with clothes. Someone gave mother a woollen peasant skirt. Mihajlo sent me a long, heavy winter overcoat, which couldn't be worn in the situation we were in. A peasant who was also a tailor remade it for us: he made trousers for me and a vest for my mother. Since she knitted for the peasants, my mother got some wool so she could knit sweaters for us and we had two pairs of warm woollen socks each. Joca the pharmacist sent us some potassium permanganate and bandages. After using the bandages, we washed and boiled them, and saved them to be used again. I got a blue rubberized pelerine from Mihajlo. It protected us from the rain (we put it over our heads) and we spread it on the ground when we slept outdoors. I got the book **Crime and Punishment** by Dostojevsky. I read it a few times, but living in those circumstances I didn't get much out of it. We left the Hunter's Notes at a salaš during a posse and when we returned the book had disappeared. I suspected the old man living at the salaš: he needed paper for rolling cigarettes... We also had the kilim. All in all, about two rucksacks of property. I would carry the larger and my mother the smaller one.*

However, I should continue where I stopped in the last letter:

Sometime later, the signal-corps officer appeared again. He brought us a tent square and an English military blanket that was wonderfully soft and big. It was precious to us! Now we had something to spread underneath us and cover ourselves with. Pavlović asked us to come to headquarters in half an hour.

When we got there, they explained that we were now on territory controlled by Voja Tribrodanin who would be host at the celebration of the feast of Đurdevdan (6 May 1944) and we were invited to lunch and the celebration. It all looked like a village fair: tables and benches made of roughly cut boards and brass music playing. There was roast lamb, bread and a glass of wine for everyone. I think that at the end we got a piece of *gibanica* (a kind of cheese pie). We kept a low profile. As soon as we'd eaten what we'd been given, we returned to our salaš. We didn't meet the three men from Radisav' salaš. We weren't afraid of meeting them now, but all that celebrating was too noisy for us – we

weren't used to it. We wanted to take another look at the wonderful things we'd received. Before we left I met Voja's daughter: she was my age or maybe a little older and very nice, or so it seemed to me then. I heard many years after the war that she'd married a senior officer of UDBA⁶⁵. If she hadn't done so, I wonder if she would have survived, being the daughter of a Chetnik vojvoda.

I don't know why, but my memories of those few days we spent above Kučevo are connected with Allied aircraft. I think they began flying over our country at about that time. They were squadrons of a few hundred planes 'flying fortresses' (as the huge B-29 bombers were called then), which were said to be flying towards Budapest, Belgrade and the oil fields of Romania... We were happy to see those planes because we had been told that freedom would come soon after the Allied planes started flying over our territory in daylight. We counted those planes like children and envied the pilots: they could bomb the Germans, they could avenge for everything and when they had completed their task, they could return to their bases.

We didn't stay long above Kučevo. Pavlović's unit had to go on, towards Krajina, and we returned with a smaller group to the slopes of Beljanica. This time we were above Izvarica and settled at a convenient empty salaš. It was actually a small hut, with no outbuildings and the usual fence for the cattle, but it was obviously not quite abandoned. Judging by the things that are usually found in such huts (dishes, pottery etc.) we knew that it had an owner and that he was accustomed to come from time to time. There was a smaller Chetnik unit in the vicinity and we regularly received food from their field kitchen: lunch and dinner. I became friendly with the soldiers and spent the greater part of the day with them. Mother knitted for the peasants in the vicinity. They paid us in milk and cheese.

This Chetnik unit was unusual because it included many soldiers from the different countries occupied by the Germans. As far as I remember there were four Poles, three Italians, one Greek, one Frenchman and one Dutchman. The Italians came from the Italian army, which had been allied with the Germans for a long time and had surrendered before at the end of the war. The Germans disarmed them and put them into POW camps. One such camp was at Crni Vrh near the German barracks that we had once passed while crossing the road. The Italians in these camps were hungry and they sometimes managed to escape like these three who were with the Chetniks. The others were also former POWs. They had worked in the Bor mine and escaped from it. My best friends, the Italians Mario, Antonio, and Giuseppe, were different in looks, origin and education but they were inseparable friends. Mario who was a truck driver was handsome and charming. I think he was from Milan. Giuseppe, a short, broad and silent man, was a peasant from the south of Italy. Antonio, a student in the Technical Faculty, with an aristocratic look and behaviour to match, was from Ancona. They liked my company: we wandered in the vicinity, caught frogs and crows which they ate with pleasure, and talked about women – which interested me at that time. They explained to me how people do "fike-fake". They lusted after Milunika, a young, nice-looking divorced peasant woman

65 UDBA: State Security Department. It was organized during World War II in the Partisan units (1944) and was called OZNA. Later on (1946) it changed its name to UDBA (now DB).

from the neighbouring salaš. They even made up a song: “*Milunika, Milunika, Milunika treba fika*” (Milunika, Milunika, Milunika needs to be fucked) to a melody of a then popular song ‘Rosamunda’. They were joyful and ready for all kinds of mischief – just like children.

The Poles were younger but more serious. They had participated in some actions of illegal groups in Warsaw, they talked about the uprising, about Warsaw, Poland, swore terribly and argued passionately. One of them, Hanjek, had been interned in 1941. I remember him telling us that he took part, as a prisoner, in the exhumation of the victims in the Katyn forest. It seemed as if he was sixty years old but turned out to be only a few years older than me. He couldn’t live without plum brandy. He started drinking when the Germans gave them alcohol to drink while they handled the corpses during the exhumation. He claimed bitterly that the Russians had murdered the Polish officers by shooting them in the back of the head. They killed more than 10,000 like that.

Sometime later a group of Russians who had escaped from a nearby POW camp appeared in our vicinity. The Chetniks didn’t immediately accept them into their unit but provided them with food and gave them a few old French rifles. I met these Russians a few times. Very thin, in rags, suspicious and very confused, they wore footwear that they had made themselves from the bark of trees. They didn’t look as we had imagined Red Army soldiers would look. Of course we couldn’t imagine all they had gone through – both before they were taken prisoner, and later on...

By the end of spring 1944 circumstances in Homolje had changed. We felt that the end of the war was approaching. We knew that the Allies had landed in southern Italy and that they were advancing. The Russians were also advancing and the Germans were withdrawing on all fronts. We weren’t afraid of them any more and their collaborators gave up pursuing us. The chases stopped. The Allied (American) squadrons flew above us almost every day, sometimes in formations of more than a thousand planes. Our lives, I could say, were normalized. In the meantime had I got hold of a soldier’s flask. Now we had everything that we needed. We couldn’t carry more than we had. Actually, it would have been nice if we had also had an unbreakable aluminium mess kit. We prepared our meals or took our food from the soldiers’ kitchen in our “*grne*”, an earthenware pot, and we had to be very careful not to break it. Somewhere I found a piece of copper wire. After a few days of grinding with a stone and drilling with a knife I made a good strong needle for repairing footwear. Maybe it would be useful. At that time we could wash ourselves more often and steam our clothes. I think that somehow we also managed to get rid of the lice.



It sometimes happened that the German anti-aircraft artillery managed to shoot down an American plane. The peasants would try and locate the crew after they had parachuted down, before the Germans got to them. As a rule, the peasants were faster. They would first give safe shelter to the crew who would then be organized into small groups and the Chetniks, whenever possible, would transfer them to the west where there were improvised airfields in the Morava valley from which they were sent back to their

base in Italy (Bari). I was called to translate several times because no one in the vicinity spoke English. The pilots were near the headquarters of Blaža Radovanović, an hour's walk from our place. They were nice young men, slightly nervous because they weren't flying. One of them showed us movie tickets: he was supposed to go to the cinema with his girlfriend upon returning from the mission. To the cinema! We had completely forgotten what that was. Their biggest problem was how to relieve themselves in a squatting position. They suffered so much because of that.

When the owner of the hut we lived in showed up, we decided to move to another place, because this one was too small for three people. We moved to a nearby salaš whose owner was a peasant from Izvarica. I don't remember his name any more. He had a son Ilija and his daughter was Milunika, the one the Italians dreamed about. We helped them with all the chores, taking care of the cattle, and working on their land. Since there wasn't much work, I could spend quite a bit of time with my Italian friends. Nearby, in a 'vrtača' (a funnel-shaped depression), there was a small, deep lake in which the peasant women soaked flax and hemp. My mother taught me how to swim there. We considered that to be an important and necessary skill for someone who was constantly hiding and fleeing. Once I almost drowned whilst learning to swim.

We continued to get our food from the peasants or from the unit. The end of the war was approaching. We were expecting the Allied landing and thought it would most probably take place on the Adriatic coast. The Chetniks were preparing a general uprising and an attack on the Germans from the rear. Those already in the unit (the 'old Chetniks') were to become the officers of the future army preparing the uprising that was to be made up of conscripted peasants. The units called up the peasants for training and often moved from place to place although the posses had stopped. Because of the frequent movements of the Chetniks, we couldn't get our food regularly from the unit's kitchen, so we got it from the municipality of Izvarica. We would get some flour, beans, some onions and sometimes a piece of bacon.

...

I think it was by the end of the summer that the so-called 'Sokobanjski front' (the front near Sokobanja) was created. The Partisans were advancing from the west, from Bosnia into Homolje where they had not been present since the end of 1941. The Chetniks organized a barrier, a front that should have prevented the Partisan breakthrough. They conscripted a lot of peasants who were not very keen on fighting. The Partisans spread the word that they would immediately let anyone go home who voluntarily surrendered with his weapons. The peasants surrendered en masse, returned home, then they were conscripted again and returned to the front. It did not bode well. The Chetniks themselves lost their self-confidence. They were afraid not of the Partisan men but of the Partisan women. There were rumours that the women Partisans were especially brutal towards the dead and prisoners of war if they had beards (beards were worn by Chetniks who went to the woods in 1941 or 1942). There was much talk of cutting off sexual organs, of carving the five-pointed red star on the forehead or chest, of the slogans which they shouted hysterically during the fighting... We weren't afraid of the Partisans and weren't inclined to believe these stories. On the contrary we saw the

Partisans as fighters, active fighters against the Germans and all others who collaborated with them. If they came, maybe freedom would be closer. Maybe I would join them.

Since we weren't sure how soon liberation would come, we started thinking about how to get closer to the liberators – but we didn't know which direction to go in. The English and the Americans were in Italy. According to a tiny map I found somewhere, the Allies were more than 1000 kilometres away. Considering the danger, the unknown territory and everything else, we would need to walk a month or two, at great risk, through Croatia, where the Ustashes were, and northern Italy, where the Germans were. The Russians were much closer (we didn't know exactly where) but the Danube separated us. We decided to stay put. We didn't manage to get the opportunity of being transferred to Italy together with the pilots. At the beginning of autumn, we began to think how to prepare for one more winter in the mountains. Now there was less danger, the chases had stopped and we got food more regularly. We decided to collect hazelnuts, which were abundant that year, as soon as they became ripe.

The Sokobanja front existed for some time. We heard that Draža's and Ljotić's units, enemies until now, had joined forces. It was said that they were jointly fighting the Partisans and as soon as the Partisans withdrew, they would fight each other. The so-called White Guard – Russians who'd joined the German troops and wore German uniforms – appeared in some villages near Homolje. They would change their uniforms, taking off the German badges and putting on the five-pointed red star, and present themselves as Soviet soldiers – the liberators. They would shoot the people who greeted them enthusiastically, shouting: “You want Russians, you want the Communists, fuck your mother!” I never found out if those stories were true.

The Germans were withdrawing from the south, in long columns on the main road which went through Homolje. We went up a hill to watch them go. When it was clear that they would not exact reprisals because they were in a hurry, the Chetniks decided to attack them. I found out about it too late. I quickly went down with Ilija but the shooting had already started. A few trees were cut down and put across the road as a barrier. A few wires were torn from the nearby telephone poles and added to the barrier, quite naively. The German scouts appeared in three small tanks. The first one stopped, probably observing something, its caterpillar tread was hit and it started spinning round. The other two tanks withdrew shooting wildly to the left and right at the willow trees – where the Chetniks, armed only with rifles and machineguns, sheltered themselves. Nobody was hit and the Chetniks, realizing that they were armed only with rifles, and weren't making any impact, ran away. The shooting was soon over. The German column passed, leaving its damaged tank. All in all, it was a badly organized and clumsily carried out action.

(The thirteenth letter)

Belgrade, 06.05.1992.

My dearest,

As it can be seen from the last letter, the war was approaching its end.

A few days latter, the road was deserted. It seemed as if all the Germans had withdrawn from our country. Their collaborators also seemed to have disappeared. The peasants told us that we were free to go down to the village. It did not seem so safe to us but we were tempted: maybe we could just run down for a moment and see what it looked like. Ilija told me that down in Izvarica, in the inn, one could get Turkish delight! What a wonder, Turkish delight! I did not believe him but he swore that it could be got and that it was very cheap. We had some money and we agreed that I should go down alone. In case of danger it would be easier for me to run away. The village was a two-hour walk, which meant that it would take four hours to get there, buy two or three cubes of Turkish delight and come back! Somebody explained to me how to get to the inn. The village had only one alley, I could not loose my way.

I got to the village easily. Walking down the alley, I neither felt comfortable nor did the empty street bode any good. True, it was early afternoon and the time of the year when the peasants were busy with the cattle or up in the mountains and not wandering in the alley. However, as soon as I saw the inn, I hurried to go in and get off the street where someone could see me. Opposite the entrance there was a table at which German soldiers were sitting and I ran straight into them. I think they belonged to the organization TOT⁶⁶. They had no riffles, only guns and I had only my small knife was not a serious weapon. I was wearing a pelerine, and honestly speaking, I looked very extravagant: English soldier's boots, blue trousers of peasant cut, a blue worn out pelerine made of rubberized linen and a šajkaca. I put my hand on the knife intending to defend myself until the chance came to run away - at the same time hoping that the Germans would think that under the pelerine I had a gun or a hand grenade and that they would leave me alone... The inn was empty. There was no one at the bar - only them and me. The Germans looked at me and I had a feeling that they were talking about me. I think they were annoyed but I did not know why. Did they intend to catch me or were they frightened of something? I approached the bar, saw the door that led to the yard behind it, went out slowly, passed by the surprised innkeeper, jumped over the fence and quickly went back to the mountains. Without the Turkish delight.

66 Organization TOT: a german military engineering organisation in World War II.

I met the innkeeper about ten days later and he told me that the Germans left the village hastily, as soon as I had gone out of the inn. However, this meeting convinced us that the mountains were much safer for us.

There was talk that the Russians would come in a day or two. That “day or two” lasted for a long time, so long that we doubted if they would ever come. We did not know exactly where the Americans and Russians were.

One night colonel Pavlović and his headquarters came to our salaš. They did not stay long, they rested a little and said that they were going on to the west. They were going to meet the Allies; the Americans that had already conquered Italy. We immediately decided to join them. They were not enthusiastic about our idea. Katerinić told us that it would be... “*a very long, exhausting and maybe bloody journey*”... Those were his exact words. As if he had foreseen the future, all that had happened on that journey, at Bleiberg and Kočevski rog⁶⁷. He told us that it would be better for us to stay where we were. The Partisans would come, they would not do us any harm, the Russians would probably come too, everything would last two or three months and then the Chetniks would come back. If we remained in Homolje we would be freed sooner than if we wandered with them through Bosnia or Croatia... They left before sunrise. I do not know anything about the fate of the unit. I only heard that Pavlović survived and lived in France and I know that Katerinić lived in Australia where he died. We remained in the mountains above Izvarica.

Ten days later, the first Partisans came. A group of about ten young people. There were three women among them. Five or six Partisans were armed and the rest were without weapons, since they had just joined the unit. Someone informed them that we were at that salaš and they came to arrest us... We approached them with joy and they took us captive! They searched us and took almost all of our things away. Firstly, one of them took of my šajkača and put it on his head. Then they took the blanket, our tent square, the little medicine and bandages we had, one bag my mother made from rags and a sack of hazelnuts. It all happened so quickly. We were robbed of everything and than they ordered us to follow them... We had no possibility to talk to them. They had orders to escort us to their headquarters.

The journey with them was disgusting. The Partisans were joyful, artificially joyful somehow. They sang Partisan songs that referred to the Chetniks and at the same time they looked at us as if we were candidates for the shooting squad. The meeting with the Partisans did not turn out to be as we had imagined it would be and it was not pleasant at all. They led us above Ribare, then to the left all the way to Magodica where we went down to the village.

The village was full of soldiers. That unit was obviously a larger one. There

67 Towards the end of the war different military formations (Chetniks, Ljotić's units, Vlahov's Russians and Ustashes...) often with their families, began withdrawing towards the western borders of Yugoslavia fleeing from the advancing Partisan units hoping to get to the Allies. A few thousand of them were surrounded by the Partisans somewhere in Croatia and during the negotiations suddenly attacked and killed. Later on, the ones that got to Italy were put into closed fourgons by the British forces and near the Austrian city Bleiburg delivered to the Partisans. Nobody knows exactly how many people were killed and thrown into the pits of Kočevski Rog (Slovenia) and other places but numbers are estimated at about 30.000.

were many horses, supply units, and couriers who were hurrying somewhere. They took us to the headquarters and almost immediately started interrogating us. He interrogated first my mother and then me. Who we were, what we were doing in Homolje, why we were not with the Partisans, what connections we had with the Chetniks. Finally, they interrogated us together. The interrogator was a youngish man rather unpleasant. He repeated some of our words or sentences ironically, and reproached us for not having joined the Partisans and for not fighting against Germans. He did not believe that we did not really have the opportunity to do so, because we did not meet the Partisans throughout the whole war. In the evening, he went out somewhere and when he came back he told us that we could go anywhere we wanted. We were free. True, he suggested we stay in his unit. I could be a courier or a bombardier. If I proved to be good enough, he added... All that, I do not know why, did not appeal to me. Somehow they were unpleasant, hard, suspicious - as if they did their best to be so, at least that is how they behaved toward us. We made our decision not to stay with them and we set forth to our salaš at night. We walked for a long time and then spent the night in a completely abandoned hut. It was very cold. The next morning we kept walking until we reached our salaš. There we gathered the few things that were left (the kilim and some other little things they had not been taken) and we went down to the village. When they let us go, they ordered us to go down to the village immediately and report to the National Liberation Committee that would, if we were not guilty of anything, take care of us.

Coming to the village, we looked for the National Liberation Committee. It still had not been formed. Actually, in the middle of the village, we found a large group of peasants who, standing in the presence of a Partisan, were just discussing who would be a member of that Committee. We were told they could not feed us anymore and that we alone should take care of ourselves. Luckily, our former host had more understanding for us. He took us to his home. We stayed there, I think for about fifteen days. I remember that there were unbelievable numbers of bedbugs that crawled all over us and bit us terribly, so we slept outside under a mulberry tree. The weather became warmer. We heard that the Russians were at Kladovo and needed only to cross the Danube and then could reach us in only one day. We kept hearing this story for about two weeks. Some were saying that the Russians crossed the Danube and coming closer but we did not believe that any more. Those who were seen were maybe the White Russians we have heard about. We need to be careful!

One night while sleeping under the mulberry tree, we heard the thud of horses' hooves. We immediately jumped over the fence and fled into the field, out of the village. My mother and I were always ready to flee. We always had an agreed meeting place where, if something separated us, we would meet in two days' time. If there were no chances to do that, then we would meet at the same place in five or ten days. We also had an agreed upon kind of whistling by which we could, recognize and find each other at a great distance. The meeting place now was the salaš we had come from. We decided to stay that night in the field. In fact, my mother would stay in the field and I would slowly creep up to the village. There were some soldiers in the middle of the village who were explaining in Russian that they were our liberators. "Krasnaja Armija" said one of them to the few people who had the courage to walk out from their houses. In the meantime, I

noticed that the peasants were secretly leaving the village and going up to the mountains. Later on, I found out that they were hiding the women and the goats up there. Just in case, because there were rumours that, in earlier wars it did not make any difference for the Russian soldiers...

Half an hour later, a new group of soldiers came and lit a fire in the middle of the village. They did not look like the liberators we had imagined. They were short, dirty and wore jackets stuffed with cotton that was sticking out of the torn places. Somebody gave me a few matches and I approached a soldier who had just rolled tobacco in a piece of newspapers making an enormous cigarette. I lit his cigarette in a servile way and by the light of the burning match I saw the five-pointed red star on his cap. To be sure I asked him to give me a piece of his newspaper to make cigarettes. He tore a large piece, gave it to me generously and I ran behind the nearby house, lit the second match and looking at the paper saw that it was "Pravda" from Moscow! That meant he was a real Soviet Russian! We were finally LIBERATED!

.....

A few days later, we moved to Žagubica, to Jana's house. She accepted us as if we were her closest relatives. She put us into her double bed and she moved to the next room with her children. That double bed gave me a lot of trouble. Being very tired I lay down and felt as if I were sinking somewhere. The mattress was too soft for me. I was used to sleeping on hard surfaces. I noticed back in 1942, that I got blisters all over my body when I slept on hay. Then I did not know that it was a kind of allergy. However, I avoided sleeping on hay. Whenever it was possible I lay on straw or corncribs and if I could not find them, I would sleep on a board or on the earthen floor. That first night at Jana's house I felt as if I were sinking, I suffered and suffered until I finally solved the problem: in the morning they found me beside the bed sweetly sleeping on the floor. It took me a few days to get used to sleeping in a real bed.

Jana's house was, I think I've already told you, at the very end of Žagubica. Jeeps, trucks and tanks, kept passing through it. Of course, they were all Russian. Some tanks, which were damaged, would return to be repaired. More seriously damaged tanks were repaired in Rumania and the less seriously ones were repaired on the waste land across from our house. I quickly made friends with the Russian soldiers. Many of them slept in the neighbouring house and some of them in Jana's kitchen. As soon as it was possible, we wrote to grandfather Zinovij in Tbilisi. We wrote him that we were alive and asked if he had any news from father. We hoped that my father had been in a camp (probably in Poland) and that the Russian troops had already freed him, so he was able to contact grandpa. We informed him that we would return to Belgrade, as soon as it was liberated and that we would certainly be in our house number 53, Gundelićev Venac.

Many things happened during our stay in Žagubica but it would take up too much space to describe all of them in my letters. If I were writing a novel or my memoirs, maybe it would be interesting to someone. We met a lot of unfortunate people who had just been freed from the camp in Bor. There were many Hungarian Jews who were too weak to make up their mind to embark on the long journey home. After all, Hungary was still occupied by the Germans. Later on, these poor Hungarian Jews started their journey home mostly

on foot and most of them were killed or died on the way. Little is known about that. There were unusual encounters with the Russians. They were really convinced that life in no country was as good as in the Soviet Union. Some of the Russians who when advancing saw the villages near Belgrade and passed through rich region of Stig, saw how the peasants in Serbia lived and when they went back did not even attempt to hide their amazement at all they had seen. They did not even suspect that there were such rich places and that people could live so well.... One officer of higher rank whispered to us that he “also was a Jew”, begging us not to tell anyone. We did not know then why he was hiding his origins. I sent a letter to my grandpa under unusual circumstances. I made friends with a Russian soldier, and asked him to do me a favour and send a letter by military mail to my grandpa who lived in the Soviet Union. He agreed to do so and was surprised when he heard I wanted to send it to Tbilisi. He was also from there. When he found out to whom I was sending the letter to, he was even more amazed: a month before he had been home on leave; he knew my grandfather and had seen him sitting in front of his house, sunbathing. Of course he sent the letter immediately.

I do not really remember how long we stayed at Jana's. I think it was two or three weeks. As soon as we found out that the road to Belgrade was safe we started: HOME! I hoped father was already there. It seemed that the war was over for us.

The journey back to Belgrade was also unusual. We asked some Russian drivers to give us a lift. They agreed and at dawn we got into the truck. One truck was pulling another vehicle, which did not have front wheels. The second truck was pulled on the loading platform of the first one and thus being hauled in that way. They seemed like two giant bugs that were copulating. We were put into the rear cabin while the drivers were in the front one. They drove very slowly. Just before we started another passenger showed up, a woman from Belgrade who it turned out lived near Gundulićev Venac street. She was a very decent lady but who my mother could not stand from the beginning, God knows why. We travelled the whole day. In the afternoon we passed by Avala mountain. Near Beli Potok there were a lot of damaged and abandoned German vehicles, helmets and equipment. Obviously a large battle had been fought there. At dusk, we entered Belgrade and came to the unfinished buildings of the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences. At that spot someone began shooting at us. The Russians swiftly jumped out of the truck and with Nagant⁶⁸ revolvers in hand, took up positions. We also jumped out though somewhat more slowly. We lay for sometime and then, when nothing happened, we proceeded. From time to time, in some parts of the city, we could still hear shooting. We did not know whether people were firing in the air expressing their joy because of the liberation or whether battles were still being fought in some parts of the city. Having that in mind, we went to the flat of the lady who travelled with us and stayed the night at her place. Early next morning, we hurried out to go to our home. As soon as we got out into the street, the shooting started again: a German plane probably held up somewhere was now trying to fly over Belgrade. It flew very low. It was shot at by cannons, machineguns, and even rifles. It flew away.

We ran to Gundulićev venac. Maybe father was already there. He might have

68 Revolver Nagant Model 1895, cal.7,62. A very popular and reliable weapon first produced by the Belgian firm Leon Nagant, Liege. Later on produced and used in the czarist Russian army and police until 1917 and finally in the USSR army and police until replaced with pistols.

come before us... We knew that some German soldiers were in our house that it had been plundered - but maybe something was still there. Anyway things were not important. We would manage without them.

The house was at the same place but something was not right. The big cherry tree was not there. The cherry tree in blossom was the last thing that I remember when we were leaving the house on the 6th of April 1941. The lilac was not there either, nor was the plum tree that blossomed beautifully but did not bear plums. The roses were gone too... The yard was neglected. Some strange people were in the house. They asked us who we were looking for. They were very surprised when we said that it was our house and that we had now come back to it. They were suspicious. "What do you mean by *coming home* when we live here? We are not alone, there are four families here."

We needed sometime to grasp the situation: the parents of our former grocer were in our bedroom and in the bathroom. A worker with five children and, of course, his wife who bore all those children, occupied father's room and mine. A woman with two daughters was in the kitchen, pantry and the maid's room. An old woman was dying in our "peasant" room.

The worker greeted us with unconcealed hate. He said that he was a worker who had five children, that the workers were in power now and that our ownership of the house was something that belonged to the past. He would not leave the house. He had a document issued by some committee (that quickly!?) which gave him the right to be in that house and he did not have much patience with us. He showed us an axe, threatening us. The old man and woman were deaf, so it was difficult to talk with them. The authorities gave them permission to be there and if the authorities ordered them to move out, they would do it. Otherwise, they would not. Their son would not accept them in his flat and they were ill. In any case, they had nowhere to go. The woman in the kitchen was a real beauty. She told us openly that she had a legal right to that part of the house. By the way, her husband was a chief of OZNA and she did not intend to discuss it with us. Having realized by her accent that she was German, I asked her how did she manage to marry a chief of OZNA so quickly... She answered that "...in the new society illegitimate, common-law marriages are now equal to the former legitimate marriage, so her marriage was legal"... *(A few years later, I found out that her first husband, a folksdeutscher had been the German commissar of the Belgrade power station during the occupation. The Russians, as soon as they came into Belgrade, at someone's denunciation, caught him and shot him right there in front of our house. They did it because of his cruel behaviour towards some of the prisoners who worked in the power station).*

The old lady was really dying. The once nice "peasant room" was full of home bugs. It stank of excrement and urine. This house was not ours anymore. We learned that my father had not appeared yet.

We crossed the street and went to the Dojčinović family hoping that they had some information about my father. We expected a warm greeting, maybe even an embrace. They were very cold, unpleasantly cold. They did not know anything about Mr. Ajzenberg. It was a pity that he had had to go to the camp. It was nice that we remained alive. We had a feeling that they wanted to get rid of us⁶⁹.

69 When I think about them now, I understand: in those days everyone had his own

Mihajlo Rajković! Maybe he knew something. We hurried to Kosmajaska Street where he had his bookshop. He was there, he looked the same as ever. He greeted us warmly without overdoing it, but if he had done it at that moment it would not have been unpleasant. The only thing that was important was that we were alive! He locked up his shop and said that we would go to mother and Mirjana for a lunch. My mother wanted to avoid that visit. Mihajlo's mother did not like my aunt Erna, she was against her son's marriage to a divorced woman who was older than he was and - what is more - a Jewess. We did not even know who that Mirjana was.

We went to Pašino brdo⁷⁰ on foot. There was still no traffic in the city. We walked for about an hour talking with Mihajlo telling him where we had been and we asked for... No, he had not heard anything about my father. We should not lose hope. Many people were already coming back. We asked him if he had any news about Erna and my grandmother from Budapest. He said that he still had no news from Budapest, let us have lunch first and then we would talk about everything. He asked how we had lived in Homolje, when and how we arrived and why we had not come to him first.

The house number 13, Varvarinska Street at Pašino brdo was a nice one and surrounded by greenery. My mother whispered to me that we should not stay a long time there. We still had to look for a place to spend the night. We went into the yard, into the hall and then into the kitchen. My grandmother was sitting there on the sofa and my aunt Erna stood there by the stove cooking... During all the war years, they had been there, in that house, hidden under a false name. When we met Mihajlo in Belgrade in 1942 he did not tell us about it, being afraid that, in case we were caught and tortured, might start talking and thus endanger the two of them - and him too. Erna had documents in the name of Mirjana Rajković. Mirjana kept that name until her death. My grandmother went under the name of Radojka Popović.

...

We inquired about my father for months. For months, it seemed to me that I could hear his characteristic quiet cough as if he wanted to announce his presence... Many people did come back from the camps. However, we found out for many others that they would never come back. We did not lose hope for about a year and a half after the end of the war - until we met a woman who had also been in the camp Sajmište. She knew my father and had seen him there. He was alive almost up to the very end of the camp's existence. She saw him when he was put into the gas truck. He was among the last group of men to be killed. Only the women remained for a while.

I wonder, if he really believed that he was going to work in Poland? I used to wish he did. Today, I think that he could have and must have known that the Germans were killing the Jews that he must have known what was happening. I wish he went knowing where he was going, that they did not succeed in deceiving him then.

The woman told me that it took place in the second half of March in 1942, at the time when we were hiding in Belgrade or when we were in Gornjak. She claimed

troubles. Who knows how many problems and difficulties they have had during the occupation and also in the days when we met again. Maybe they did not feel like talking.

70 A part of Belgrade about six kilometers from the very centre of the town.

that it happened on the 16th 1942... I wonder if she had any notion of the dates in the hell that she was then in. If she had, how did she manage to remember that date? However, the exact date is not important. I do believe that it could have really taken place in the middle of March.

Two or three years ago, I found out that the Jews were driven from the Sajmište camp in special gas trucks and the corpses were unloaded in Jajinci. After the war, the authorities hid that fact wanting to present the mass graves in Jajinci as the place where “the fascists killed the patriots”.

I thought that what you had asked me to write would be much shorter, maybe eight to ten pages. I have not been able to make it shorter. I have tried to do my best. Maybe it could have been shorter, maybe it could have been written better and maybe it should have been longer. I have tried to tell you what I know of my ancestors and how my mother and I survived the war, what that war had done to my family and me.

What THIS war has done, you yourself know.

I should have also told you how my grandmother (“old granny” as you used to call her) and Mirjana survived the occupation. That story is much shorter and I owe it to you.

And to add: then, when we came back to Belgrade, we thought that the war was finished. That all our (and not only our) suffering stopped and that better days would come. Very soon upon our return, on the 30th of April 1945, we were arrested. The investigator interrogated us for a long time wanting to find out how we had managed to stay alive. As if we were guilty - for being alive. We were freed and later arrested again. We were in communism. One part of that story you got to know during your last days here.



Part of East Serbia where we hid ourselves

(The fourteenth letter)

Belgrade, 08.10.1997.

My dearest,

I thought that I would not write my “autobiographical” letters any more. I have never had such ambitions and I considered that by writing at your request those thirteen letters, I have done everything what I was able to do. I wrote everything that my mother and I knew about our roots and I told you how my mother and I survived World War II. After what I had written was appreciated not only by you but by others too, I asked myself why I had stopped the story when we returned to Belgrade in October 1944. Thinking about that, I concluded that all that I had gone through in my youth and wrote about, did not stop that October 1944, that my life and my destiny had continued to be influenced by that unfortunate now already eclipsed World War II and all that war brought. I concluded that it might be of interest to your generation what it was like. Nevertheless, more than half a century had gone by. Everything that was said about that time, written or presented in our films was not completely authentic. Therefore:

Finding my grandmother and my aunt at Pašino Brdo and realizing that it would not be so simple to return to our house at Gundulićev Venac street, we accepted what seemed normal to them: to stay with them. I do not know what my mother thought about that, we never talked about it. But all that I had to accept was very strange to me. I had to get used to the city, to sleeping in bed, to the different noises of the city, I had to change my habits, the ones I acquired during the war and which were so useful to me in the forest. It was not easy for me. For some time I used to put my clothes, shoes and the bag, the one I had in Homolje, next to my bed at night - so I could have them at hand quickly in case of danger. I easily woke up and was ready to react (by fleeing, naturally) whenever I heard the slightest suspicious sound. That caution was not completely irrational because although Belgrade was liberated the Germans were not far away. The “Sremski front”⁷¹ was opened and the fighting lasted for a few more months.

Belgrade was liberated, but it was not as I had imagined it would be. First of all, we did not return home to Gundulićev venac. We lived at Pašino Brdo a part of the city of whose existence I had not even been aware. I did not feel “at home” there. The city itself looked somehow different: there was a lot of debris, bomb craters, German bunkers half destroyed or whole which stood out at many crossroads: a damaged Russian tank stood near the crossroads of Nemanjina street and Knez Miloša Streets and another one could be seen at Slavija square at the place where it meets with Beogradska Street:

71 A battlefield in Srem (a plain in the northern part of Yugoslavia)

the streets were full of discarded German helmets, gas mask boxes and newly dug graves of Red Army soldiers and the Partisans. There were lots of soldiers on the streets: Red Army men, Partisans and Bulgarians (the same Bulgarians which, only a few days ago, were our occupiers; they just unbelievably quickly changed the badges on their soldier's caps - now they had a five pointed red star). There were also Italians - some of them had just come out of the POW camps where the Germans had put them after the surrender of Italy and the others were the ones who had managed to escape from the camps and who joined the Partisans and who were now, for some reason, disarmed roaming the streets of Belgrade. And, of course, Germans who now were prisoners of war. They were dressed in rags, often barefooted or with feet wrapped in rags. They were clearing up the debris.

Very soon after the liberation the square in front of the National Theatre was equipped by loudspeakers and news were broadcast from time to time. The Germans were withdrawing on all fronts and the Red Army was liberating city by city advancing towards Berlin. Our units were also advancing. The advancement of the Allies was not announced as often. After the news that a city was liberated thunder was heard: canon salvo from Kalemegdan was fired and the Partisan joyfully fired their rifles and machineguns on the streets of Belgrade. There was more than enough ammunition. Every evening, the kolo⁷² was danced on the square in front of the National Theatre. Naturally, it was the *Kozaračko kolo*⁷³. Both men and women Partisans danced the kolo, which was unfamiliar to us; they danced for hours; the Montenegrin *Oro* was also danced; some civilians would join in with them and the astonished citizens of Belgrade just stood there and watched ... And then a Partisan would get an "attack": he would invert his eyes, fall to the ground and start shouting at the top of his voice: "Hurrah comrades, assault, machine gunners start shooting, shoot at them with short bursts, assault, hurrah, hurrah comrades"... Those unfortunate people would shout and thus live through some of the battles they had gone through now laying on their backs on the pavement, some of them would try to fire their machine guns, then one of their fellow soldiers nearest to them would jump on them, they would scramble, a few people were needed to hold them down, a cold knife was put on their forehead (it was believed to help); they were held thus for about ten minutes, until they calmed down. Often, when one person would get an attack a few more would react, so beside the *Kozaračko kolo* the blare of those who got the attack resounded on the square. The women Partisans were especially loud. It seemed that they most often got the attacks and it was terrible to listen to them.

In a very short time, the citizens of Belgrade got used to the *Kozaračko kolo*, the women Partisans who got attacks, to some new words and abbreviation which were confusing: AFZ, USAOJ, USAOS, NOV, POV, CK, ASNOS, SKOJ, OZNA and to a lot of other things... Each street now had a *street secretary*, a person who was usually, until then, a completely minor creature and now close to OZNA⁷⁴ a person who, being part of the new government, had special authority. He could order people to attend conferences and work actions, could burst into people's flats and establish the existence of a surplus of rooms in it, and then report to the authorities which would order some unknown

72 Serbian folk dance.

73 A Bosnian folk dance very popular by the Partizans.

74 OZNA: State Security Department (later UDBA; now DBZ).

people to be moved into the flat. As a result the institution of a *joint apartment* (an apartment shared by few families) originated in Belgrade; it was an institution typical of countries under communism, since people sharing a flat people would necessarily come into conflict and would start to denounce each other *where it was necessary*.

It took a few days for the citizens of Belgrade to realize that they should not call each other by the titles of Mr., Mrs. and Miss. Everyone should be called “comrade”. It was undesirable to wear hats, especially women’s hats. The fashion in the city changed and people began to wear kerchiefs, caps and berets and it was learned that the ones wearing long leather coats were dangerous: they belonged to the secret police, OZNA. They would arrest people who would often disappear forever.

All that did not resemble the freedom I had expected and the city I wanted to return to.

And there was something else: while we were in the mountains we needed so little, a little food and very few things. Many things were too heavy to carry. We believed that when freedom came we would find some of our possessions (property) in Belgrade. A few days after our return we again went to Gundulićev Venac street and started inquiring. It turned out that our things, furniture, bed linen, and clothes did not exist anymore. As soon as the Germans occupied our country, a small Volksdeutscher unit from the village Jabuka in the vicinity of Pančevo, moved into our house in Gundulićev Venac. They carried off all that they found in our house to their village. After them new inhabitants moved into the empty house.

We went to Ohridska Street to the apartment my mother used to live in before the war. Naturally another family was already living there and there was no trace of mother’s possessions. We found out that the flat was sealed as soon as grandma and aunt Erna had left it and that the Germans gave their supporters or sold for a bargain all things that were in it. The janitor of the building had the key to the rear entrance of the flat (which was not sealed), he would enter it and take out all that he could. We went to see him. He was a short man who looked like a rat and was extremely kind towards us. He was markedly polite, even suspiciously polite. He told us that the Germans had given out all the things from the flat to their men and that he knew some of the people who took the things. He would give us their addresses and would immediately take us to some of them. He confused us by asking us what we would now do for a living. Since we came to Belgrade we did not think about that. We thought that the important thing was that we were liberated. He took out 5000 dinars and gave them to us explaining that he would teach us how to trade. (That was enough starting capital for business - but I am going to write about that money and business latter). Then he opened a cupboard, took out a pistol and put it into his pocket. He explained he was taking it just in case. The cupboard was, I noticed full of typewriters and calculating machines, thermos flasks, porcelain, silver and other obviously, from somewhere, plundered things.

He took us to a shack in Čubura⁷⁵. There we found a man, his wife and their children looking miserably and frightened by his behaviour. Yes, they confessed they got a stove, this one, and off course they would give it right back, the important thing was that we came back alive. They would even lend us a cart made out of an old baby

75 A part of Belgrade.

carriage. I still remember pulling that damn iron monster from my mother's maid's room and thought: those people were very poor, they were left without the only stove they had - should we have taken it when we actually did not need it. I appeased myself with the conclusion: the stove was ours, who knows how they obtained it.

The next day we called upon a driver in Sarajevska Street. The janitor gave us his address. His wife let us in and offered us to sit down, and some time later the driver came. He asked us politely why we had come. My mother answered that we came to take back the sofa we were sitting on and the Persian rug, which was in front of us on the floor. Those were her possession, he got them from the Germans and he probably had other things which belonged to us. That character changed his behaviour immediately. He explained in a raised voice that he had no intention of returning those things to us. He contributed enough for the cause. Two of his sons were Partisans, one of them worked for OZNA. He himself was working as a driver for the Americans, it was better for us to leave immediately and forget why we came...

I do not remember why, but we concluded that it was really in our interest to forget about those things. We probably got some information about him or his son.

Off course, some of our possessions that my mother and aunt had given for safe keeping to friends were yet to be reclaimed. We went to the Jovanović family which lived in Dorćol. My mother had left a big trunk full of underwear and bed linen. During the street fighting shrapnel flew in through the window, punctured the trunk and tore most of the many times folded underwear and linen in it. Some of those things were missing. Jovanovic admitted that he had sold them. An ugly scene took place. Returning from the forest we were not able to understand his problems. Many years later, I realized that he had a wife and three children; that those were the difficult times of the occupation and that he was unemployed. He had to feed his family somehow...

At Pašino Brdo, a grenade flew into the room of the Midić's house. It broke a few valuable porcelain services and shrapnel punctured a trunk with clothes and bed linen. The Midićs kept to the last pieces the torn clothes and broken porcelain and showed it to us... They kept apologizing for the state the things, that had been given to them for safekeeping, were now in. Their daughter, who was a beauty and a member of SKOJ before the war, was also active during the war. She took part during the occupation in some illegal actions but was too modest to talk about it.

Finally, my mother found a chance (since transport was not yet established) and went to Ropočevo. We left some of our things there that could now be of great use to us. She was arrested there because Miloš Radojević, in whose house we lived until we were arrested in 1941, hurried to the People's Committee (or what ever the name of it was) and denounced that she was a collaborator of Pećanac's Chetniks and the personal typist of vojvoda Majstorović. Luckily, there were many people in Sopot who knew that was not true and she was released the same day. She managed to get from Miloš some of father's documents and one of his suits which was altered and I wore for a long time afterwards

Maybe what I am writing about is not so important but I think that it is necessary for you to know. Much later I learned that each of those cases was in its way a small lesson in human nature. And unfortunately only many years later did I make some conclusions from these examples.

The janitor gave us the money and taught us: for 500 dinars we could buy a liter of plum brandy from the peasants at Kalenić market. One liter of brandy could be exchanged for 25 liters of petroleum. The exchange was made with the Russian soldiers, stationed at the garage at Južni Bulevar, near Auto Komanda. Then we could sell the petroleum for 500 dinars a liter at the same Kalenić market. With a part of the money earned in such a way we could try to buy cigarette from the Bulgarians (they were stationed at the place where the main bus stop is now) and earn a good profit from selling them. Off course, we had to be careful. By the way, his, well his lady friend lived near the Russian garage at Južni Bulevar... If things got complicated I could hide at her place, because the Russians would give me the petroleum secretly so their officers did not know, probably only when it was dark, immediately before the police curfew. It was dangerous to be found on the street at that time. They would sometimes shoot without warning. He took me to her house; she had a daughter somewhat older than I was, a bit older and beautiful. It seemed to me that it would be quite convenient if a dangerous situation would appear - to hide there.

And so I started to trade. I did it quite successfully.

Some other things were also taking place at the same time. My mother began thinking that I should start studying. I had already lost three years of schooling and I had to work hard to catch up with my friends. Honestly speaking, I did not like the idea. After all I have gone through, it seemed ridiculous to me to return back to school and study singing and religious instruction for example. I postponed the idea quite skilfully. We were without money and I went on trading.

My mother was also trading, but with other merchandise. She would take from her friends, from richer ladies, dresses, underwear and bed linen, take it to Kalenić market and sell it to the peasants. She would get a commision of 10%. Kalenić's market was in those days a kind of large flea market which had, apart from the place where the market now is, two other parts: one went down Njegoševa Street up till Beogradska Street and further on up to the inn "Polet" and the other went down Krunska Street (now Proleterskih Brigada street) almost up to Beogradska street. Textile that the citizens of this city took out of their homes was mostly sold in those streets. They would sell it to the peasants or just exchanged it for food, in both cases in order to obtain something to eat. Since that was the only way to survive in the city those days. Some spread out their goods on the newspaper on the pavement and most of them would walk around carrying in their hands the tablecloths, shirts, nightdresses, evening dresses and other "rags". It seemed better to do so.

Mihajlo would go to his shop every morning and come back in the evening bringing news of the Allies advancement and stories how *these Reds* were arresting honest people, how they intended to nationalize and take over all the private shops and that all this would not last long. He heard from a well-informed man that in two weeks time we would have some *significant events*.

The renewed publishing of Politika a newspaper that was not printed during the war, was for all of us a great event. It is true that in the first issue (or in one of the first issues) the information that 140 people were shot as collaborators with the Germans was published. Among them were a lot of actors, translators, and doctors whom Mihajlo

knew well. He claimed that all of them were honest men and completely innocent of the charge.

There were many Russian soldiers on the streets. They were joyful and nice but sometimes dangerous: they took watches off people's hands and they liked to rape, so women were afraid to go out alone at night.

An order was issued and put up that all men born in 1925 were to report to the military authorities. They were conscripted and quickly sent to the front in Srem without any military training. Soon after that the ones born in 1926 and 1927 were also sent to the front. A steady column of peasant carts with empty coffins slowly crossed the Sava bridge: news came out that a big battle had been fought at the front in Srem and that many soldiers were killed so the parents went to search for their dead children. We heard that the young soldiers with no military training were made to assault on the well-entrenched Germans. My mother while filling the form for flat registration wrote that I was born in 1931⁷⁶. Thinking that she made a mistake I tried to correct her, but she explained that she did so because she did not want me to be sent to the front after all that I had gone through. I wanted to go, to take part in the war, to take revenge, but at the same time I felt that something was wrong with that war on the Sremski front. I was quite confused.

Mihajlo gave me some of his shirts and ties. He also taught me how to tie neckties. The shirts were a little too wide but it did not bother me. He also gave me a suit and the neighbourhood tailor altered it as much as it was possible. Mother went to the Jewish Community and brought back a whole pile of clothes for us. I did not want to go there - why I myself did not know. I think it was because I was ashamed of belonging to a people who went to the camps and allowed to be killed without any resistance. At that time, we were not even approximately aware of how many Jews were killed. We believed that many were in the camps that were not yet liberated, that they were at forced labour camps somewhere in Poland or Germany and that they would soon come back. We expected them. I still believed that my father would come back from somewhere.

A few days after our return, my grandmother declared that I ate "Wie ein Tier" (in German: *like an animal*) and she decided to teach me how to use cutlery. That was something I did not need to know in Homolje, and to be quite honest it was still unclear to me why she now insisted on it. However, she still went under the name of Radojka Popović, under a false name as did my aunt Erna who became Mirijana. In the next letter I will tell you the story of how they survived the occupation and got their new names.

This letter will probably seem confused to you, but I can not do better because those times were confusing too, at least to me. I will try to do better in the next letters. I will describe events and not the atmosphere... As much as I am able to. Since I think that the events and the atmosphere of those times were connected.

76 I am born in 1930.

(The fifteenth letter)

Belgrade, 12.10.1997.

My dearest,

Four years ago, in the last of my thirteen letters, I promised that I would tell you the story how my grandmother Rosalia and aunt Erna survived World War II hiding in occupied Belgrade. I also promised to do that in my last letter. I think that the time has now come for me to fulfil this promise - although I am a bit afraid of that. I am afraid because all that could be said about that is only the result of my memories of what the two of them had told me on different occasions. They are not with us anymore, nor are the two men who saved them: Mihajlo Rajković and Miladin the man whose last name I unfortunately don't even know now.

*The story about them, at first, does not seem so exciting.
But it only seems so.*

My mother, as I had already told you in the letters, after divorcing my father lived immediately before the war in No. 16 Ohridska Street, near Slavija. At that time that was considered to be almost on the other end of the town. My grandmother Rosaliya (your great grandma) whom you used to call "old grandma" lived with her.

I stayed with my father at No. 53. Gundulićev venac.

My aunt Erna lived near us in an elegant one-room apartment in Dositejeva Street. In one of those letters I told you that since before the war Erna had a romantic relationship with Mihajlo Rajković, a young lawyer. He also lived in Dositejeva Street just a few houses away from Erna.

Since my father had to report to a gathering place which was in his war schedule, in case war broke out, he made an agreement with one of his workers, Radenko, to take me to his



Greta Mihajlo and Erna
(about 1939)

village near Užice. It was planned that my mother and our maid Marija Jurčić would also go with me to Radenko's home.

I described how the war broke out on April 6th, 1941 and what the bombing of Belgrade looked like. Neither Radenko nor my mother appeared that morning... My father used a short pause between two air raids and ran to his gathering place (near the Orthodox cathedral) but as he found nobody there he returned home. In the afternoon, a rumour started in the neighbourhood that the most massive bombing would take place at half past three and that the city would be bombed to the ground. A little later buses for the evacuation for the citizens arrived. They were marked by the Red Cross. We got on them and left the city not knowing where we were going.

It seemed that my mother arrived as soon as we had left the house at Gundulićev venac. She did not find us there, but knowing that we were supposed to go to Užice (or somewhere near that place) she decided to find me there. Running from shelter to shelter she ran to Erna's place and the two of them, again running in the pauses between two bombings, reached Ohridska Street where grandma was anxiously waiting for them. They packed quickly only the most necessary things and with suitcases in hands started for Užice...

Since the Belgrade railway station was already damaged, they somehow reached Rakovica where they should have taken the train that went south. They came across a military patrol there. The head of the patrol, a half-literate sergeant asked for their identity papers. They did not have them. Before World War II the only people that had them were civil servants: railwaymen, postmen... The three of them had passports which at that time were considered to be "stronger" documents. The sergeant naturally did not know that, and seeing foreign seals in their passports concluded in his very patriotic way that they were foreign spies, decided to shoot them without any formalities. Not paying attention to their pleas and explanations he started to take them to the nearest quarry...

Luckily, a car with a few airforce officers who knew my mother came along. Seeing her and realizing that the soldiers were taking her somewhere. They stopped the car to see what was happening. The sergeant proudly reported that he caught three foreign spies and that he was taking them to be shoot. The officers called him a fool, ordered him to immediately free the women and they helped them to get on an overcrowded train.

Fools can be found everywhere and they are especially active in troubled times. Who knows how many innocent people lost their lives due to exaggerated patriotism of stupid people?

Changing trains a few times they reached Užice which was full of soldiers and refugees from bombed Belgrade. Coming there they realized that they would not find me easily. My mother only knew that we would go to the house of one of father's workers who was from Užice or from a neighbouring village and she knew that father's partner Smiljanić was from same place - so she believed that she would find out where I was through Smiljanić. Upon coming to Užice she found out that there were a 180 families with the surname Smiljanić in that area. It was not easy to go to all the neighbouring villages in the rain and snow which was falling at that time. Someone advised her to ask the priests: they always knew when a newcomer appeared in their parish. She wrote a few letters and sent them to the priests by the people who came from the nearby villages.

Very soon she got a reply from archpriest Milan Smiljanić with the information that her husband and son were seen in Sopot on April the 11th...

A few years later she found out that the archpriest received the letter and read it in an inn, a place where people met and news were exchanged. The letter moved him and the gathered people asked him why he had tears in his eyes. He explained that he had just received a moving letter from a mother looking for her husband and child. The war had just began and such tragedies were already taking place! The people wanted him to read the letter aloud and when he did so, one of them a refugee who was sitting with them said that he had seen us sitting in an inn in Sopot, on the 11th of April...

After mother found out that we were in Sopot, she did not have any reason to stay at Užice so the three of them returned back to occupied Belgrade again travelling in overcrowded trains and changing them a few times. It turned out that a German officer had already moved into Erna's flat and a small *folksdeutscher* unit from Jabuka, moved into our house at Gundulićev Venac. Erna moved to my mother's and grandmother's flat in Ohridska Street. Taught to obey the orders of the authorities, they immediately reported themselves to the German command and started wearing the yellow band...

I do not remember how my mother found out that we were in Ropočevo. I just remember that one day, quite suddenly, she appeared. At that time we already had accommodations at Petrija's house. Being a Jewess she could not get travel papers. She put on her *dirndl* dress and naturally not wearing the yellow band, went to the railway station. She found a train going in our direction and chose a compartment where there were German officers. In chosen German she asked them to help her find a place introducing herself as the wife of their *Kriegskamerad*. The Germans were polite and gallant, they helped her taking in the luggage - and in their compartment she was protected from the railway and police control. She brought us our things (mostly clothes) that she managed to steal from our house at Gundulićev venac. Later on she told us that she went to the house with Jolanda, her good friend. While Jolanda was distracting the Germans my mother would go through the wardrobes and take out what she thought we would need in Sopot.

From my earlier letters you learned that the meeting of my divorced parent was cordial. It seemed that the war had erased all their previous misunderstandings. Mother would come every ten days bringing the things from our flat. Going back to Belgrade she would take back the food, which in Belgrade was becoming scarcer as each day went by. Life in Belgrade was becoming more difficult especially for the Jews. They were arrested and kept as hostages at Tašmajdan. The Jews had to collect large amounts of money for the ransom, but later on it had no effect: the Partisans began with their diversions, and the Germans started shooting: a hundred Jews for each killed German soldier. My parent's best man Alkan Đerasi⁷⁷ was shot among the first ones. The father of my school friend

77 I found out a terrible detail about his death. The first hostages were taken to the execution site by buses, which belonged to the pre-war public transport of Belgrade. The driver, who knew Alkan, told the stora to Luci Petrović. Having driven the unfortunate people to Jajinci, in spite of the German order to return immediately to Belgrade, he drove his bus a little further on and returned on foot. He climbed on a tree near the execution site, and saw how the Germans shot the hostages; he saw how Alkan fell down and, a moment later, jumped and started running away, and saw how he finally fell down by a machinegun burst.

Robert Fisher was also taken away and soon after Robert, his mother and sister were also arrested, put in the concentration camp and killed there.

When it became clear what the fate of Jews in Belgrade would be, the three of them began considering to come to Ropočevo. It could be done in the same way as my mother had travelled since all three spoke German fluently but it would be very risky. There was the theoretical possibility of going to Budapest to aunt Hanna. At that time the Jews were safe there. The possibility was only a theoretical one since Jews could not get travel documents and it was not possible to travel without them... However, they started to give their friends the more valuable things for safekeeping. One part of linen was given to the Jovanović family in Cara Uroša Street, the porcelain (they had some very valuable sets) and the other part of the linen was given to the Midić family which lived at Pašino Brdo and most of the jewellery was given to Živojin Pop-Cenić, a younger man from a respectable Belgrade family. The carpets were given to Medika Obradović and Jolanda...

At about that time Jolanda found out that the German officer who lived in Erna's flat would move out and that another German would move in the next day. They used the opportunity, found a coachman and quickly moved out all furniture and more valuable things. Where they had left that I do not know.

Now, when I think about it I do not now how the three of them lived during those first months of the occupation. They probably sold their jewellery or some other things from the house. As I learned later the usual barter between the peasants from the vicinity of Belgrade and citizens was then already established. A porcelain set for a few kilos of cheese or curtains for a piece of bacon...

My grandmother has never worked. Emma had a fashion shop "Anre" at Terazije up to the outbreak of war. Naturally when the country was occupied she could no longer be the owner of the shop. My mother could not go on working too. (When the Germans came her boss, the owner of the shop "Ukus" which was at Terazije, appeared in a German army officer's uniform. It turned out that he was not a refugee from Czechoslovakia or Poland but a German agent. He no longer needed the shop that was only a cover for his spy work.)

As I said, they began thinking how to hide, to go to Ropočevo or Budapest. Many Jews, I think were pondering how to save themselves, but being brought up in the spirit of civil obedience, they could not perceive how to do it. They all seemed to place their hope in something: "Well, they cannot shoot us all" they still believed. I think that was what they taught in 16 Ohridska Street too.

Miša our relative, quiet accidentally found in the archives of the city of Belgrade some interesting documents. I have the photocopies. I will copy them here in the chronological order they originated.

The first document is a photocopy of a telegram. It is on a standard form, filled in by hand. It was sent from Sopot at 12.30 on the 29.10.1941. The telegram has the seal of the main telegram office in Belgrade as well as the seal were Gepruft is written⁷⁸...

Please immediately escort to the Chetnik unit in Sopot Ajzinberg Greta, wife of Matvej, ohridska street No.16 because of a very important inquiry stop and search the apartment of the above mentioned in order to find communist material.

78 All grammar and orthographic mistakes are given in the original.

*Police station Sopot.
Confid.No. offic.*

Sergeant Orlić

The second document was typed:

Subject: Ajzinberg greta housewife
The report about the bringing in the same person
TO THE SPECIAL POLICE DEPARTMENT
Belgrade City Administration

I am honoured to bring to the title Ajzinberg Greta housewife who lives in No.16 Ohridska Street, otherwise wife of engineer Matve whom is brought in to the title in the connection with the telegram that came to this Administration on 29th. of this month so that she has to be brought to this title and escorted to Sopot to the Chetnik unit which is located there and that to the same person has to be done a very detailed search in order to find communist material that during the arresting has been done but nothing of the discrediting material has been found.

I am honoured to submit the above given report to the title with the request for the competence.

Supplement telegram
Belgrade
October 30th. 941

Damjanović (name is illegible)
Police agent III class

The next document, also typed, has been written a bit more literate:

Belgrade City Administration
Special Police Department
Confid. II No. 402
November 2nd. 1941.
Belgrade
SUBJECT: Ajzenberg Greta, escorting
TO THE POLICE STATION
Sopot

In regards to the telegram request confid. No. offic. on October 29th. of this year Ajzinberg Greta housewife from Belgrade Nr. 16. Ohridska Street is escorted. During the search of the apartment of the named person nothing suspicious was found.

After the finished investigation bring the named person here together with the detailed report with the result of the investigation.

By the order
of the Special Police Department Chief
Chief of the IV Department
(Signature illegible)

The next document, typed on the same machine signed the same chief of the IV Department:

Belgrade City Administration
Special Police Department
II No. Confidential 402
November 2nd, 1941
Belgrade

TO THE CRIMINAL POLICE DEPARTMENT
Of The Belgrade City Administration

BELGRADE

Please escort Greta Ajzinberg, by profession housewife, born in Belgrade, together with the closed letter from this department to the Police Station in Sopot.

By the order
of the Special Police Department Chief
Chief of the IV department

(Signature ineligible)

And added by hand:

The person
together with the closed letter
is received. 3.XI.941

Apart from this he found a piece of paper, actually a form of the Special Police department of the Belgrade City Administration where were the personal data was written:

Surname and name: Ajziberg Greta

Nickname: none

Illegal name:

Profession: housewife

Date of birth: 10.II.1907

Place of birth: Zemun

district: (for foreigners country) Zemun

Citizenship: ex.Yugoslavia	Nationality: Jewish
Confession: Jewish	residential municipality: Belgrade
Father's name: David	mother's name: Rosalia, born: Polak
Marriage state: married	
Name and husband's surname:	Matvej Ajzinberg contractor
Number of children: one	Their names: Aleksandar
Schooling: VI grades of high school	
Speaks languages: Serbian, German, Hungarian and French	

Did he and where completed military duty (rank)

A prominent address, street and number: Ohridska No.16
Data: escorted to the Police Station Sopot (because of inquiry)
Persons connected with:
Subject: confid. II No.402/41
IV file No.170/5

There is an another paper where it is written:

Personal description: height medium	hair: fair eyes brown
Mouth: regular teeth: healthy	nose: regular
Moustaches: Beard:	Personal features: none

Handwriting: (hand-written *Gr Grete Aisinberg Ohridska 16 I G*)

And under that are her fingerprints...

Thanks to these papers I found out the exact date when my mother was arrested and the approximate date when we were arrested in Sopot. The arrest and the search were done according to a police custom most often at night.

The next day, when he found out what had happened Mihajlo Rajković started running around looking for connections which could help my mother get out of the Special Police prison and be transferred to another place - since they would sometimes, when they needed, not having enough hostages, take the people from the special Police and shoot them. "*For each killed German - a hundred Jews or Serbs*". Mihajlo succeeded and Greta was transferred to "Diris" - prison. Grandma and Erna stayed at home. They were scared and in expectation: what will happen to Greta and what will happen to them...

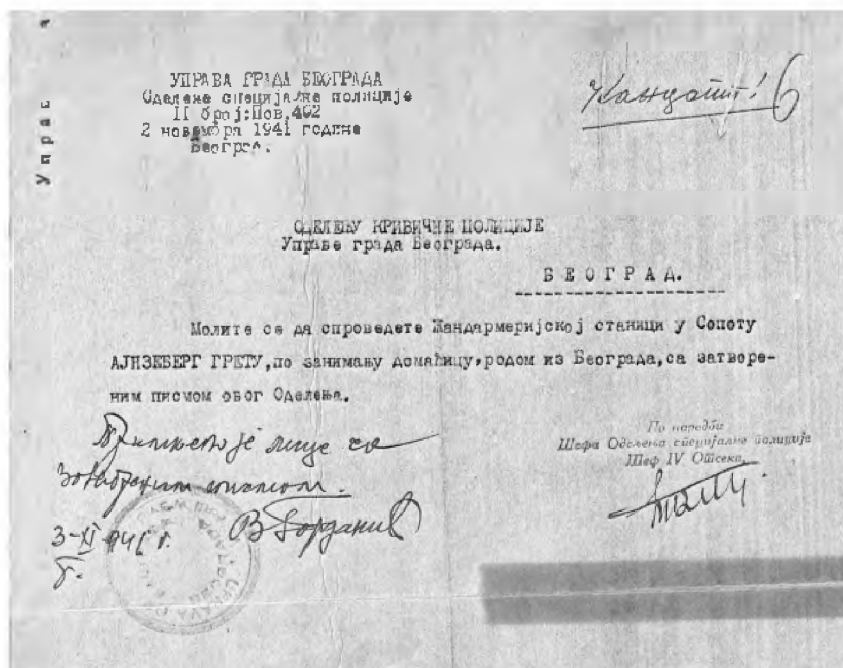
Miladin would continue to call on them in Ohridska Street whenever he would come to Belgrade from Sopot. It seemed that he came more often. And he brought food. They found out from him that Greta was in Sopot and that she, my father and I were alive and in good health but in Pećanac's Chetnik prison.

The times became very hard for the Jews. After *Tašmajdan*⁷⁹, the Germans

⁷⁹ Tašmajdan: in the XIX century a stone quarry near Belgrade, later on a favourite tennis court and skating rink where in the beginnings of the occupation the Germans organized the first «gathering centre» for the Jews.

organized a gathering camp at *Topovske šupe*⁸⁰ a previous military complex near Autokomanda and soon after a concentration camp at *Sajmište*⁸¹. In the beginning, they would first order to report or catch in the raids only men and later women. Most Jews would obey their orders obediently. They would only take the most necessary things with them and turn in the keys of their flats at the gathering place before being put in a camp.

Posters with the names of the executed Jews were put up on the streets every day. The names of many familiar friends and relatives were among them. Afterwards the names were not given any more, only the number of the people who were shot. Most of them were killed and it was not announced. Word got around that they were taken from Sajmište to Jajinci and shot there. It seemed that there was no hope for the Jews any more.



The telegram sent to the Criminal Police Department

80 Topovske šupe: (Serb.Cannon sheds) A part of Belgrade where artillery units were placed before the World War II, and where in the very beginning of the occupation, the Germans organized a kind of concentration camp for Jews there.

81 Sajmište (Serb.fairground). Before World War II the fairground with exhibition halls. During the occupation Germans converted it into a concentration camp.

(The sixteenth letter)

Belgrade, 18.010.1997.

My Dearest,

How events developed I heard from grandma and Erna, immediately after the war. Mihajlo also told me about it and so did Miladin on one occasion. Their stories mostly coincide. The story is the following:

One day grandma and Erna received a summon to register with the authorities the following day, they could only take with them the most necessary things (only what could fit into one suitcase) and they were obliged to take with them all their valuable things and the keys of the flat.

I was not able to reconstruct when this exactly took place. I suppose it was during the last days of 1941 or the first days of 1942.

The next day, upon coming to Ohridska Street, Mihajlo found grandma and Erna in the hall. Each one was sitting on her suitcase waiting for the coach because they could not carry their suitcases alone to the designated place. Not knowing what to do, he also sat intending to see them off to the place designated in the summon when the coach arrived. Quite by accident, Miladin came shortly after Mihajlo. He came from Sopot bringing some supplies. He was shocked to hear that the two of them were going to the camp and that Mihajlo was not doing anything about it. He who was a municipal or district clerk and a peasant from Kosmaj knew that the laws, regulations and orders of the authorities could and sometime should be disobeyed. His first reaction was a reaction of a peasant from Kosmaj. He shouted at Mihajlo:

- You intend to take them to the Germans to be put into a camp.

And naturally he swore badly at him.

Mihajlo helplessly shrugged and asked Miladin what else he could do.

- Hide them somewhere.

- Where could I hide them?

Luckily the carriage came. Miladin put them all into the carriage and told the coachman to drive on. Where? Anywhere. Time was needed to come up with something...

Finally since Mihajlo could not think of anything Miladin decided. He gave the coachman an address. It was somewhere near Crveni Krst⁸². A women doctor lived there who was his mistress. That's what he said: mistress.

82 (Serb. Red Cross)A part of Belgrade.

It turned out that that woman was a very decent and civilized person. When Miladin brought them there she did not ask them anything - she probably understood or supposed. She was very nice and did everything she could to make the few days they stayed in her house pleasant for them. During that time Mihajlo and Miladin were searching for a convenient flat on the outskirts of the town.

There were enough flats at that time. The shortage of flats began after the liberation (the war) in 1944. They were looking for a flat in a detached house, which they could immediately move in and which would not be in a part of town where grandma and Erna lived before the war or had friends. And they found such a place at Pašino Brdo in Varvarinska Street No.13. It was a nice ground floor house that had a hall, three rooms, bathroom, kitchen and pantry. There was a yard behind the house and a nice garden. There was a smaller building in the yard: a summer kitchen and a washing room. The rent was quite reasonable.



Rozalija before the WWII and during the war

Mihajlo rented the flat in his name... In the meantime the documents were obtained. According to their story, it seemed that it was not such a great problem to obtain the documents. Miladin, as the district (or municipal) clerk in Sopot, seemed to have relatively easily obtained or made identity cards for grandma and Erna, he made them out to false names. Erna became Mirjana and grandma became Mirijana's aunt, Radojka Popović, from the village Stojnik in the foothill of Kosmaj. A friend of Mihajlo's who was a priest and whose good intentions to help people in need was stronger than fear from eventual consequences wrote a marriage certificate and predated it so it seemed that Mihajlo and Mirijana (and from now on I will call her by that name) married a few years before the war. It was not difficult, on the basis of those documents, to obtain regular new identity cards, registration of residence and ration cards. The two of them and Mihajlo immediately moved into the flat in number 13 Varvarinska Street.

It was much more difficult to get accustomed to the new roles, the roles that their new identities required. My grandma born in Zemun, spoke Serbian, and German and latter on she learned French. Then she got married and spent the greater part of her life between Budapest, Vienna, Carlsbad and Marienbad and she would rarely come to Zemun. She mostly used German and had forgotten Serbian a little. Speaking Serbian

she would often help herself out by using some German and sometimes French words. Nevertheless, Mirijana who spoke Serbian well did not have the accent of a peasant woman from Kosmaj.

Both of them started wearing kerchiefs. Partially to create the impression that they were from the country and even more so hide their faces as much as was possible. So, they would not be recognized in the street.

They managed to move Erna's furniture to Varvarinska Street. Mihajlo who had managed to hide some other things with his friends earlier, managed under different excuses to take them and bring them... As far as the flat in Ohridska Street was concerned, it was sealed immediately after their departure, on the initiative of the janitor.

Mihajlo found out that only the main entrance to the flat was sealed - and that the rear one, for the servants, was not. The janitor used that one to take out, during the night, all the things he could and being connected with the authorities sell them for his own profit. Naturally, Mihajlo could not confide in such a man. It would have been too dangerous.

Apart from Mihajlo and Miladin, only a few persons knew that they were in hiding (and where they were). One of them was Borko Obradović. He was a Bosnian, of German descent on his mother's side, an airforce non-commissioned officer who for reasons off gallant nature left the army before the war and worked as a manager in the department store "Mitić". He was married to Ljuba Vajhberger, our distant relation⁸³ from Pančevo. As soon as the Germans occupied the country he became a partner with his brother Vlajko. They got a nice shop from the Germans at Terazije and began trading. He traded in all sorts of things. He was charming and communicative not very scrupulous (or it seemed so then), Borko invited the Germans to his house, was their host and traded with them on a large scale. The Germans had no idea that his wife was a pure blooded Jew. She was relatively safe in the house at Gvozdićeva Street where the Germans came every day. Borko met Mirjana somewhere in the street and recognized her and that worried Mihajlo a lot. Later on, it turned out that he was more than correct towards my family: he often visited them in Varvarinska Street and brought supplies.

Immediately after the occupation, Borko's sister got a job as a secretary to Neuhausen one of the highest-ranking German officials. She also knew (probably found out from her brother) but she did not turn them in, but the people who lived in Varvarinska 13 were afraid of her. When on one occasion Mihajlo visited her and asked for those carpets (probably to sell them) she answered in a disdain tone: *Tepiche! Das komt nicht in frage*⁸⁴. It was not possible to continue the talk with her any more.

The Tomović family also knew about mine. I would think they found out from Borko. Vera Adam (Polak on her mother's side), who was also from Pančevo, was a close relative of Ljuba Vajhberger. She went to a secondary technical school and was going out with her school friend Vidoje Tomović. At the very begin of the German's occupation Vera's parents were taken away and killed; Vidoje took Vera by the hand and brought her to his home. His parents were not too happy about it but they accepted her as a member of the family. I do not know how her documents were obtained. Some time later an interesting thing happened (when Vera and Vidoje were staying in a village for

83 In fact, I don't know in what kind of family relations we are.

84 On German: Carpets, it's out of the question!

a few days, in the vicinity of Belgrade, taking refuge from the allied bombings in 1943) a photographer noticed Vera. He found a national costume and persuaded her to allow to be photographed for a magazine that was published during the occupation. Under the photo was written: *A beautiful Serbian peasant woman.*



Vera Tomović as a beautiful Serbian peasant woman.

Naturally, the usual good neighbourly relations could not have been avoided at Pašino Brdo, a part of Belgrade that was then considered to be at very outskirts of the city. It could provoke suspicion. Grandma and Mirijana got to know the neighbours very quickly. The neighbours began coming to their house for coffee made from baked barley, came to chat, brought pastry made according to the recipes which were written during the occupation and they exchanged news. There were problems with grandma. She was, as you remember, a little deaf and that alienated her a little from reality. Her accent when talking Serbian did not at all sound like the one the peasants used at Kosmaj - since she mixed many German and French words (she just did not know how to speak differently), so Mirijana had to proclaim her a little ... eccentric. She would tell everyone that her aunt was a good woman but that she imagined all sort of things. At one time she imagined that she was a noble lady even that she was a queen... It was a good idea and the neighbours were not surprised when Radojka Popović, with a kerchief on her head, would sometimes mention how *her cook* used to make a certain meal differently or when she would start talking about a hat she bought in Budapest. On such occasion Mirijana was in panic and would give desperate signals with her eyes- signals which Radojka did not notice and luckily nor did the present neighbours. After all, the visitors in number 13 Varvarinska Street were occupied thinking where and how to get fuel and food or how to get hold of some textile.

As I have already told you in the previous letters, Mihajlo was a lawyer's apprentice. During the occupation he demonstratively did not want to work in his

profession. He inherited a shop in Kosmajaska Street from his father - it was a bookshop and stationary shop and he spent most of the war days there with his brother Rajko. They survived somehow, by selling books, notebooks, pencils and erasers and it was interesting and pleasant there. Respectable people: philosophers, writers, priests and actors would come and keep them company. From time to time Mihajlo would visit the people where the more valuable things were left and he would take some of them under the excuse that he would send them to Budapest. Then he would sell them and Mirjana and Radojka lived on the money obtained by the sale.

Mihajlo's mother knew of number 13 Varvarinska Street but did not want to have anything to do with it. She was against his relationship with Mirjana, a divorced woman, who was older than Mihajlo and on top of that a Jewish woman. Mihajlo's brother who was a bachelor did not approve of the relationship either. Until the bombing started.

Our Allies bombed Belgrade on Easter 1944⁸⁵. The bombing lasted for days and was, as the previous German one, directed towards the residential areas. In reality the American bombing was much heavier than the first one, the German. The destruction was greater than in April 1941, people tried to escape to the suburbs and very soon number 13 Varvarinska Street was full of refugees. The numerous Tomović family arrived: old Vaso Tomović, his wife Vasa, daughter Milena and sons Vasilije and Vidoje. (The third son, Vlasto was in the Partisans, but nobody spoke about it). Vidoje brought Vera who already had papers to the name Tomović. Mihajlo's mother and brother also came. At that moment the fact that she lived in the house of a divorced woman and a Jew who was older than her son, did not bother Mihajlo's mother. The house became a kind of poorhouse.

It turned out that the house had the most solidly built cellar in that street. Word got around quickly. So the entire neighbourhood took cover there. The cellar was then crowded but beside the fear they all felt, a certain good mood prevailed. During one of the raids when a large bomb fell nearby and the wall that separated their yard from the neighbouring, fell due to air compression. The Gypsies lived there. How those unfortunate people managed to save themselves from a German camp I cannot say. They probably somehow survived the time when they were caught and killed and later on the pursuit of them probably stopped.

Of course, when the bombing stopped all the guests went back to their homes. The Tomović family would often come and visit grandma and Mirjana and Mihajlo's mother and Rajko again ignored the existence of number 13 Varvarinska Street. Once while Mirjana was standing in a queue waiting for supplies (during the war one almost always had to queue for supplies - unless they were obtained on the black market, she noticed a beautiful Gypsy girl, who before the war used to come to my mother's and grandma's house in Ohridska street. She used to wash clothes⁸⁶ and helped when there was "big

85 The bombing is now imputed to Churchill and it is possible that he had taken part in the decision making but there is much evidence that it has been done on the request of another person who, in those days was very unsatisfied by the fact that the Partisans had to flee to Bosnia at the beginning of 1942 because insufficient support in Serbia. Tito's name is for the time being mentioned. Maybe he wasn't involved in the decision making, but maybe he was. However, maybe the book «The Last Bel» by Vane Ivanović should be read for more information.

86 The linen was washed in a trough, by hands with a lot of rubbing and using washing

cleaning” to be done. Being afraid that she would recognize her, Mirijana kept turning her head aside. Mirijana did not think that the young girl would inform the authorities, but was afraid that she would, (upon recognizing her), blurt out if she recognized her. Luckily the girl did not notice her then nor later during the occupation when they met several times⁸⁷. However the fear remained, the fear that she would once meet someone who would recognize her, and blurt out or report her...

Of course, there were fears. Fear at night when the sound of a car engine was heard⁸⁸. And fear when someone at the gate rang the bell - did they come to take them? And the constant fear that someone would recognise and report Mirijana who had to leave the house in order to buy supplies. Naturally, there was the fear of bombing. And the constant fear, fear that something unpredictable would happen, the fear that only those whose life is endangered and have to hide can understand... And then the fear at the end of the occupation when street fighting started. There was a lot of shooting. The two of them sat in the cellar again expecting what would happen. Will any soldiers barge into the cellar and kill them? *Because soldiers in war kill sometimes even irrationally*. Even then when they found out that Belgrade will be liberated, fear that the front will be moved again, that the Germans would come back to the city and start killing, this time in revenge, kill everybody...

Then we came, came back from Homolje. My mother and I came and that was a sign for them that the war was over - at least for us in Belgrade.

However, I noticed that a long, long, time was needed for their fear to completely disappear.

Now that I have put the parts of their stories together, I conclude that it was incomparably easier for my mother and me in the mountains of Homolje than it was for the two of them in Belgrade. Yes, the country was occupied, they chased us, we ran, we were hungry, frost bitten, we had lice? were in a bad condition but we were free, and as possible as it was, we alone decided on our destiny. Or at least that was the feeling we had. We were like some sort of game that was hunted - but before it was caught it was free. I realized there existed different levels of freedom and that they were very different. The two of them were in 13 Varvarinska Street and they could not go anywhere. They had to sit in that apartment or in the cellar, live in fear, live in a constant fear which cannot be described and wait, wait, wait for something to happen.

That waiting (or expectation) lasted for three years. They did not tell me much about it and what it was like we cannot even imagine today.

soap that had much caustic soda in it which bit the hands. The poorest women did that very hard job for the Belgrade families.

87 After the liberation of Belgrade Mirijana met her a few times. Only when the war was definitively finished the girl approached her and said hello... Mirijana was surprised:

-You recognized me?

-Yes ma'am I recognized you then but I pretended that I didn't, so you would not be afraid that I would betray you,,

88 There were only a few thousand cars in Belgrade then. The owners were the occupiers or the people who were in some way connected with them. They rarely went by Varvarinska Street so their noise provoked fear: will they stop in front of our house or not!

(Seventeenth letter)

Belgrade, 22.10.1997

My Dearest,

I described in my last and exceptionally long letter how Grandma and Mirjana survived World War II. I will continue now where I left off, and try to describe my life and the atmosphere in the first days after the liberation of Belgrade and our return from Homolje.

I think I have written that Grandma tried to teach me table manners. Probably wishing to educate me, Mihajlo started bringing me books from his bookshop. It was very interesting after dinner when Mihajlo would tell us the news from the city. He told us that ruffians had started arresting and even killing completely innocent people; that among the liberators were some who had been Ustashe during the war and had killed Serbs; that nobody knew who Tito was and that he was probably a Russian; that the ruffians who were actually their communist officials threw the owners out of their villas in Dedinje and then immediately moved into them. Mihajlo knew many of these new officials quite well: before the war they had gone to school together or lived in the same neighbourhood. He knew Koča Popović, Vlada Dedijer, Milovan Đilas, the Ribar family and a few more of them and he didn't rate them very highly. Quite the contrary. Many of these new officials were completely unknown and what we heard about them sounded almost unbelievable: one of them was a former tailor who used to make peasant's clothes (Ranković), another a semi-educated teacher, and as for Hebrang, Mihajlo heard that he had been an Ustasha. He also heard that their general, Sulajman Filipović, had previously slaughtered Serbs in Bosnia – and the others were no better. Not one of them had had a serious profession or business before the war. A well informed person told him that they wouldn't stay in power for long. In a few weeks they would be chased away. The King would come back and the situation would be normalised.

It was not quite clear to me why he hadn't much time for them. After all, those people had fought against the occupiers and, together with the Russians, they had driven away the Germans. It was true that they spoke too much about Draža Mihailović's treason and how his troops had collaborated with the Germans. I was with Draža's people all the time and there couldn't have been any treason there – if there had been, the Germans, Ljotić's men and the Bulgarians would not have pursued us so much.

The trade my mother and I dealt in brought us enough money to live a

modest life. My mother's "base" was a commission store opposite the palace. I also went there and gradually began trading in textiles, cameras and foreign currency. The fabrics would come from Trieste. The cameras were bought by American officers who asked for Leicas, Contaxes, or Retinas. I would find such cameras mostly at Kalenić market where previously wealthy Belgrade people were selling everything that could be sold or exchanged for food. I would buy them or even more often take them *on commission*. If I sold them I would get my commission. Dealing in foreign currency was the most lucrative, because in those days there were many different kinds of money in circulation. One could pay with "Nedić dinars" (the money that was printed in Serbia during the occupation) but that money had very little value. One could also pay with German Reichsmarks which were twenty times more valuable than dinars, but also in dollars whose value was incomparably high. There were also badly printed "occupation German marks" which almost no one wanted to accept. That was actually the money the Germans had printed in enormous quantities and in which they had paid their soldiers in the occupied countries. Very few people wanted to accept the Bulgarian lev, but the pre-war silver fifty-dinar coin had a certain value to some people. It was said that when "ours came back" it would be of value...

Of course, I continued to trade in brandy and petroleum. Generally, my daily schedule was as follows: in the morning I went to the market and sold petroleum. After that I bought brandy and then sold cigarettes. I kept the goods at the house of Tomović who lived nearby. I would finish all that by midday, and then go to Njegoševa Street and sell second-hand clothes, a job I did not enjoy doing. In the afternoon I relaxed or went to the commission shop. There I would get instructions to whom to deliver the fabrics and how much the customer had to pay for them. I usually wrapped the fabric around my body because the new authorities had already started to catch and punish "black-marketers". If I had to deliver a very long piece of fabric, I would become "chubby" but I was saved by the fact that coming from the forest I weighed less than fifty kilos and I wore Mihajlo's coat which was too big for me. In the evening, I took a bottle of brandy to the Russians and came back home with a twenty-five litre can of petroleum. There was some risk involved because the Russians brought the petroleum out of their base secretly or they would just throw the can over the fence – which could be done only in the evening just before curfew. Once while I was carrying the heavy can along Južni Bulevar, I noticed a Russian military patrol, and realised they'd seen me and had started to follow me. I speeded up, went into a yard, jumped over a fence and found myself in the next yard where the mistress of the "rat" janitor lived. I knocked at the door and in a few words explained what was going on. The daughter, a beauty, took me to a shed. Behind the pile of firewood there was enough space for my can, her and me. It became exciting... I heard the Russians who, after searching the neighbouring yard came into ours, and I felt that the young lady was nestling up to me. We were both excited: I suppose she was excited because of the Russians and I became excited because of her. The Russians were quite near, she was even closer and somehow her mouth was the closest. OK, we kissed but I could not understand why on that occasion I felt her tongue... I didn't know that it was done like that; I must even confess that it was a very pleasant feeling, but I was confused. Unfortunately, immediately after the first kiss we heard the gate: the Russians

were leaving and we came out of our hiding place. The beauty did not feel like kissing any more. I left the can with my petroleum in the hiding place and, running from gate to gate, reached home.

Of course, at home I did not mention the Russians or the tongue. My family would have been worried.

Afterwards whether I had a reason or not, I passed by the house on Južni Bulevar a few times. I saw the beauty there only once. She was somehow distant, almost hostile. That's the way women are, I concluded.

The Germans were withdrawing on all fronts and I was having my first experience with women.

The Bugarinović family lived in the house next to ours. They were a married couple with two children. Mita, his wife Dara, their son Mikica and daughter Cica. Mita would spend the whole day in his workshop and Mikica was in the army. Dara, who was an excellent housewife, made very good cakes which her daughter Cica would often bring to us. My family would send them cakes we had made, as was proper. I would be the one to take them. It wasn't a difficult job. I did it because of Cica. She was four years older than me; she had her hair done, plucked her eyebrows and sometimes used make-up. She was learning how to play the accordion and to my horror she practised a lot, always making mistakes in the same place. She was also very active in the Youth Centre. In each part of our city there was a very nice house, usually multi story building whose owners had been ejected immediately after the liberation. Its furniture was commandeered and the youth organisation moved in. The young activists of that neighbourhood met there, held their meetings, sang patriotic battle songs to the tune of Soviet songs and organised work actions. Cica told me it would be good if I joined them. There were nice-looking girls there and some of them were already enquiring about me. In the afternoon and evening there were dances. I didn't feel like going there. The four years I'd spent in the forest had left their mark on me: I avoided my mates, even my former school friends. I just didn't know how to behave. When I went about my black-market business, I would meet them and pretend I didn't see or recognise them. I did this especially when I saw the girls from my elementary school. They were well dressed with nice combed hair, had grown into fine girls and were observing me with interest, as I discovered afterwards. Many years later it transpired that they'd thought I was stuck up. But actually I was confused and frightened. I didn't know what I would talk about to fine, well-educated and well-behaved girls.

The work actions began immediately after the liberation. They were voluntary, of course. First of all the debris had to be cleared and the damaged roads, railways and factories repaired. The fields that had lain fallow during the war had to be cultivated again. Everyone took part in the reconstruction of the country with great enthusiasm. The competitions started about who could work the longest and who would accomplish more in their jobs or in the voluntary work actions. A new word was coined: *outstanding worker*... Those who managed to achieve more than the others in their physical work, thanks to their strength, skill, persistence or endurance could get the title of "outstanding worker", a special badge, a mention in the newspapers, special coupons for goods – which meant more milk, bread, meat, textiles... There were also competitions for the

outstanding workers to see who would extract the most coal during his shift; who could stay longer in the mine; who on the construction site would lay the most bricks in one shift, and even the railway workers competed to determine who could pull the most carriages with one locomotive...

In the *fraternal Soviet Union* the *outstanding workers* had been doing this for a long time.

After some time, I realised that not everyone went voluntarily to the work actions. People were organised into work brigades in several ways: in the schools, where they worked and in the neighbourhoods where they lived. It was called “voluntary work”, but actually it was obligatory. Not to go was simply not done... Most of the people were in fact convinced that it was something really useful and needed to be done, but there were some (especially among the elderly) who, having previous experience, considered that such work (which forced people to do more than their physical capacity allowed) wasn't good: that the human organism had some limits that should not be exceeded; and that overloaded locomotives would quickly break down and the damage would exceed the benefits. Naturally, they couldn't voice their opinions publicly because the least that could happen to them was to be sent to prison. In those times one could be accused and sentenced to death for saying something like that.

However, the people went to the work actions singing.

At the start of winter it turned out that there wasn't enough fuel to heat Belgrade. Special work brigades were formed which were sent to Crni vrh (somewhere between Zagubica and Bor) to cut wood.

As far as I remember, it was mostly young activists who joined these brigades. They worked under very difficult conditions: the temperature was exceptionally low, tools and clothes were very poor, there were even bands of outlaws in that region and the youngsters had to defend themselves. At least that was what the newspapers said. The word “band” referred to the remaining parts of (Dražić's) Chetnik formations which hadn't withdrawn from the country. Knowing the Chetniks, I couldn't understand why they attacked the young people who worked as lumberjacks in order to provide our city with fuel. Mihajlo claimed that the newspapers were not being truthful. A few years later, when I read the book *Kako se kalio Celik (How the Steel was Tempered)* written by Nikolaj Ostrovski⁸⁹, it seemed to me that there was a great similarity between some parts of the book and the actions undertaken at Crni vrh. Today, I think that it was no coincidence, and I'm not sure that Belgrade got much firewood thanks to what was done at Crni vrh, but I know that those who were there as members of the youth elite qualified to become members of SKOJ [Young Communist League of Yugoslavia] and the Party, and later on were promoted to all the leading official positions in the political and economic structures of our country.

In the spring of 1945 I fell ill. I had grown very tall in the forest and was still very thin. I weighed less than 50 kilos and my family did their best to feed me well. Every meal contained lard and very soon I got jaundice as I wasn't used to such food. I was given injections, ate disgusting food and was so weak that I barely managed to move around the house. I spent my days sitting by the window reading. The street activists

89 Russian (Communist) writer.

were running up and down the street calling people to conferences and work actions. One of the girls who was “interested in me” called me:

- Comrade, come to the work action this evening. There will be a dance afterwards.

- I can't, I answered.

- All right, all right, we know you're a 'reactionary. We'll settle our score with people like you.

I didn't even have time to explain why I couldn't. She screamed, I closed the window and a few days later found out from Cica that my case had been discussed at the meeting in the youth centre and they had concluded that I was a “dangerous reactionary”. I was fifteen years old.

Recovering from my illness, I decided to continue my studies as a “war handicapped pupil” Those who, because of the war, had not been able to attend school regularly, had the right, as students handicapped by war, to take exams in two grades a year. I obtained the books, the teaching plans (or programmes, I don't remember what it was called) and started studying. I should have taken exams for the second grade of the gymnasium. When the war began I was in the first class of the high school. In those days after the four classes of the elementary school children went to the high school (we called it gymnasium) that had eight classes. But it was difficult for me. I wasn't used to studying and it didn't interest me much. I'd rather have learnt something from Cica – and I thought that she had pedagogical tendencies, at least towards me. However, I attended a mathematics course run by a respectable professor. It was in an apartment next to the cafe *Ruski car*⁹⁰. He would tell us about the formulas and write them on the board so quickly that I didn't understand anything. I lost hope of ever learning algebra.

I attended English language classes held by Miss Todorović, an elderly lady who in her youth had studied in England. The Eckersley textbook that we used was not very amusing.

On the evening of 1 May after my maths lesson, I decided to go to Miss Todorović's house and cancel the lesson we'd arranged for the next day. We'd found out that the usual parade would last about six hours (maybe even longer) so I wouldn't be able to reach her house from Pašino Brdo because the streets would be blocked. The lady lived on the first floor of a building at 16 Francuska Street. I walked into the house and saw a soldier with a sub-machine gun. He asked me where I was going.

- What do you care?, I answered.

- I am asking you politely where you are going and it would be better for you to turn back”, he told me in a very peaceful tone, but I'd already walked past him.

At the bottom of the staircase, I noticed someone else with a sub-machine gun, and when I went up the stairs, a third soldier was standing in front of Miss Todorović's door. He asked me for my ID card but I didn't have one. I think that in those days only people of sixteen years of age needed to have them. At the top of the stairs that led to the attic I noticed another man with automatic rifle.

I rang the bell and Miss Todorović opened the door, clasping her head: “Oh, you've come as well!” The man in front of the door ordered me to enter. A few people

90 Restaurant in the very centre of Belgrade.

I didn't know were sitting in the anteroom. The house was a kind of ambush: anyone could enter but no one could leave⁹¹. Among a few friends there were: a postman, the clerk who inspected the electricity meter, the milkman, and a poor man whose shoe laces had broken and who'd gone into the house in order to tie them so as not to take off his shoe in the street.

Miss Todorović prepared dinner for us with what she had in the house: polenta with milk. Everybody got a little. That night I slept on the floor of her living room. Since there were a lot of us, some slept in the anteroom. There was no food for breakfast. One partisan brought some bread from somewhere which we shared out. No one knew why we were being held there. The Partisans weren't very talkative. The next day went by quickly and in the evening, just before curfew, my mother appeared. She'd found out where I was from a boy who attended the same maths class as me. She was very worried. I wasn't. The war was finished and now we were free. They would let us go.

Of course they didn't let Mother go back home. However, that night was different. Some officers turned up around midnight. One of them, obviously the highest in rank, interrogated each one of us. He looked at the documents and started asking: "Why are you in this house?" He let most of the detainees go.

I recognised him: he was the Chetnik officer from the headquarters of Colonel Pavlović, the same one who had brought us the toothpaste, blanket and tent square. He was the one my mother had said was unpleasant. Naturally I pretended not to recognise him. Maybe he was there on a secret mission. It seemed that he recognised us, but didn't show it. He only said: "Take these two away. Let's see who they are". Then I remembered that he, like most of Draža's officers, didn't know who we were, as it was not the custom to ask such things in the forest. They put us into a car and took us to the building that was at Obilićev Venac street. I knew that one of the OZNA prisons was there.

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They took away my shoelaces, belt and tie. They searched me and took away everything I had in my pockets. A boy of my age has his pockets full of all sorts of stuff. The devil got into me and I decided to trick them. I kept my pocket knife in my clenched fist and they didn't notice it. How could they since they ordered me to keep my arms spread out while they were searching me. After the search the pocket knife found its way back into my right pocket. I also had two pencils. I managed to break their tips and hide them in time. Maybe I would need them. I had to tell them my last name, date of birth and address. They wrote it all down.

My mother had already been searched before that and taken away somewhere. One of them, with a sub-machine gun on his shoulder, took me away too. We went down the hall to room 82.

91 I learned many years later: in the second half of the apartment lived Mrs. Mihajlović, who was the mother of Saša Mihajlović Draža's komandos (or ranger's) komander. OZNA had the information that he is in Belgrade and supposing that he'll come to visit his mother, made the ambush in the house. I flew in but Saša has been carefull. He spent the night near the apartment but didn't visit his mother. A few days later he went to the Zemun airport where he should go abroad in an American military airplane. OZNA found about that and made an ambush. After some shooting Saša was killed.

It was a small room full of people. As soon as the door closed behind me, they started asking me questions. Some one swore: “Fuck their mother, they even arrest children” I was insulted. I didn’t consider myself a child anymore. One of them whom they told me was the room head (I think he was called Žika) showed me where to sleep. He explained it was a good place, far away from the door and from the *kibla*. He showed me the *kibla*. I didn’t know what the word meant. This one was actually the lower glass part of a chandelier, almost full to the rim with some nasty smelling liquid and cigarette butts. The opening was tied with a wire so the thing could be carried like some kind of bucket.

“If you feel like urinating, use the *kibla* – because we can go to the toilet only twice a day. Just take care not to overturn it and not to wet anybody. Parcels are brought on Saturdays. You’ll probably get all you need then. Your people will find out where you are, don’t worry. You’ll need a blanket, a mess kit, a spoon, towel, soap, clean underwear and some food. The food is very bad here, they keep giving us cooked polished barley. Lying down during the day is forbidden. Your things must be tightly rolled and put next to the wall. You can sit on them next to the wall.”

I don’t remember how many days went by until the first Saturday, but I don’t think it was very long. First I handed in the soiled underwear that the family would take. The guards checked it carefully and then we packed it in front of them. Around noon they gave out the parcels. Someone had already opened them, but very often they checked them again in front of us. They took away letters, matches, lighters, all kinds of blades, string... In my parcel there was everything I needed in prison: a blanket, a spoon, a pan, clean underwear, soap, a little sugar, a few boiled eggs and a piece of bacon. Now I didn’t have to wait for someone to eat his meal so that I could borrow his mess kit and spoon. And I could wash myself better as well.

I must admit that the time I spent in prison was very interesting for me. They lined us up every morning. The ones who’d already been interrogated stood on one side, and the others who hadn’t stood on the other. The head of the prison would come, they took down our names and tried to see if anyone’s face was familiar to them. Very often one of the top officials would come along too. I found out that his last name was Penezić. After them, a partisan nurse would come round and ask if anyone was ill. If anyone complained, she gave him some pills. The same to everyone. Probably they were aspirins or something similar: they didn’t help if someone had diarrhoea. We waited for one of us to be called out for interrogation. We knew if they called us during the day, it was all right. Those were the easier cases and there was no beating in daytime. During the night the interrogations lasted longer and then they beat people. The window of our room looked out into some kind of inner courtyard. We could see other prisoners whose windows were on the other side of the courtyard. And we could talk with them by using hand signs, the ordinary alphabet that we’d learned in elementary school. Of course, we had to be careful not to be seen by the guard from the upper floor. Up there were also the cells for solitary confinement (there are painters’ studios there now). In one of those was Johnny Račić, a handsome, strong, young man who was a close relative of Nikola Pašić and stood to inherit a lot of ships, I was told. At the second window we saw a bearded man. It turned out that it was Nikola Kalabić Draža’s high officer. He was beaten on the

soles of his feet. Once he managed to raise his leg to the height of the window: what we saw was something black, huge and swollen. From another window two boys would look out. It turned out that they were somewhat younger than me. They didn't stay there long.

Around noon a crowd would form in the corridor. The guards brought lunch: a piece of bread and a portion of unpolished barley. To me, used to the poor war food in Homolje, that barley wasn't so bad. After lunch we washed our mess kits in the toilet. Each room was only allotted ten minutes for that and we also had to use the time to urinate quickly. You can only imagine what that washing and urinating was like since there were only two toilets and one sink. There were fourteen to eighteen people in the room, sometimes even more. For a few days, there were even twenty-four of us and it was really too stuffy and cramped. Then we took turns relaxing; half of us lay down while the other half stood close together in a corner of the room. The afternoons would pass by in conversation which I always found very interesting. In the evening the interrogations would start, and a little later supper was given out (it was the same as lunch) and then the guard would turn off the lights and we could lie down. We lay on the floor, everyone wrapped up in his blanket. We put a rolled towel or coat under our heads and lay talking softly, sometimes for a long time. And we listened to try and catch anything we could from the interrogator's room. Two of the interrogators' rooms had windows across to ours, but the interrogators would usually close them while they were "working" However, sounds could be heard and when they were beating people, it was quite audible.

The experienced prisoners told me that our prison (I think it was called OZNA for Belgrade) was one of the better ones. Better than Glavnjača⁹². The prison in Đušina Street was even worse: there were a lot of beatings there and very often people were taken away to be shot. And the one on the corner of Braće Jugovića street and Knjeginje Ljubice street was also very bad. The bigwigs were taken there, beatings were common and people did not leave it alive.

Our room was almost always completely full. New arrivals would always sit by the door claiming they'd been arrested by mistake, the matter would be cleared up very soon and they'd be freed 'probably even today. After a few hours, the head of the room would tell them where they could lie down and what each new prisoner had to know. I don't remember all the people I was there with, but I do recall one of them very well; their cases (or rather their fate), were not uninteresting and in some ways they were characteristic of that time. I hope it won't bore you if I tell you their stories.

One of the very interesting people I met in room 82 was Mr. Veljković. They brought him in one day just before lunch. He was tall, bald, with a thin moustache turned down in a Mongolian way and with a very pleasant smile full of understanding. He quickly became the central personality of our room. He was very rich; he had studied at Oxford or Cambridge before the war and there he became interested in the Middle and Far East, in Buddhism and the occult sciences. He lived near Slavija Square. Coming back by tram from the faculty library one day he was looking through a notebook handwritten in Sanskrit. At the second tram stop a character tapped him on the shoulder and in a soft voice ordered him to get off at the next stop. He brought him to Obilićev Venac prison

92 Another prison in Belgrade.

and Veljković was interrogated immediately. They suspected that there was some kind of coded message in the notebook and demanded that he read it. His explanation that it was written in Sanskrit was met with a sneer: "...What do you say, it is a language spoken in India. We, for example, know that people in India speak the Indian language, so don't lie but confess everything"... When he referred to his professor he was told that that professor had already confessed everything and that it would be better for him to confess, too. They didn't beat him (his interrogator was luckily not of the kind who liked to do that), but he was interrogated more often. Since his family didn't know where he was, he didn't receive parcels for a long time.

Veljković talked about the occult sciences. Actually they were wonderful lectures and sometime later on, when Moravec joined our room, he started teaching us English which he knew extremely well.

Moravec was a short man, very communicative and lively, a man who looked you straight in the eye, and was always ready to think and act. Before World War II he was the owner of a rubber products factory (now the firm Rekord) and a shop called Paraguma, which sold rubber products, where I'd bought rubber cords for my sling. He was of Czech origin, had a wife, two sons and a beautiful villa at Senjak. When the Germans bombed Belgrade and occupied the country, he'd had the idea of further excavating some of the underground passages (in which vine has been kept) which already existed in Sanja Živanović street and making a big shelter open to all the people in the neighbourhood. Due to his energy and persistence he carried out his plan and when the American bombings started, everyone took shelter there. Even the Germans who were nearby went there. Then when the liberators came, someone denounced him saying that he had an excellent radio, maybe the best in the city, so it was immediately confiscated. Finding out that his radio was at Tito's residence, he went there and asked the guard on duty to give it back or at least to give him a receipt for it and...

Of course, one hour later he was in our company, accused of having been a war profiteer because he'd had a factory, and a collaborator of the occupying forces because he'd allegedly made a bomb shelter for the Germans. Taught by Veljković, he studied English diligently. He learned up to a hundred words each day.

Completely different from Moravec was a very shy older man in poor health whom we nicknamed Avnoj. His real name was actually Avdej (I don't remember his surname). Žika, our room head, owner of the *Mornar* (Sailor) inn, received enormous parcels and made fun of the small parcels Avnoj would get. Although he was a lawyer, Avnoj was poor and his wife obviously barely managed to obtain and pack one boiled egg, a few cubes of sugar and a tiny piece of bacon weekly. The old man sliced the bacon with my pocket knife into tiny pieces and ate them secretly at night. I knew that he spent in prison a few months and that he was not interrogated at all. He was probably there because he was a Russian emigrant.

One day a strange man appeared in our room: as soon as he came in, he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and announced that he'd be fucked, that they would certainly kill him since he'd worked in the police before the war. He was strong, tall and was called Jovčić or Jovičić. One lame interrogator recognised him the next morning and asked Penezić:

- Comrade Commander, give me this one. I will judge him. I know him: he used to be a police interrogator before the war. He interrogated me.

Before Penezić managed to answer, Jovicic said:

- You can kill me, but let it be known that I didn't arrest you because you were a Communist but because you stole at village fairs. I used to work in the criminal police, not in the Special Police branch which dealt with the Communists. One day when things are put in order here, you'll need experts for that job – if you've not killed me by then.

Of course, the lame fellow interrupted him, shouting at the top of his voice but while I was in prison, Jovičić was not interrogated.

For a short time, a young man was with us who announced as soon as he came into the room that he was a law student and an Intelligence Service agent. Everyone quite rightly avoided him. Unlike the others, I did not, although I didn't believe anything he said. He was soon freed and later on I found out that our suspicions were correct: he was a petty thief and a provocateur⁹³ – and a silly and clumsy one at that.

One day they took us into the corridor and ordered us to strip. They put our clothes in a pile and lined us up against the wall. A Partisan nurse came with a huge pump and squirted white powder over us. It was DDT, which we knew nothing about then.

As we were being covered in powder, an old man with an enormous beard was led into the corridor. When he saw us he fell on his knees and began to wail: "For Heavens sake, not without the trial and sentence"...?? He calmed down the next day and later on told us he used to live in a home for the aged in Smederevo. When the town was liberated, there was no food for the old people so they were told the home was being disbanded. The old man started out on foot for Belgrade where he had some distant relatives with whom he had not been in contact for twenty years. As he was old and not used to walking, he didn't get very far. As soon as he left the city, he sat on a milestone to rest and fell asleep in the spring sun. Some young boys, Partisan couriers with short Italian rifles, woke him up shouting: 'Hands up, surrender. Convinced that they had captured a Chetnik because of the old man's beard, they proudly took him back to Smederevo and then to Belgrade. Seeing a lot of naked men and a Partisan woman with something in her hands in the dim corridor, he thought that he had been brought there to be shot. Of course, he was frightened to death that he would be shot without trial. We laughed at that event but the old man didn't feel like laughing. However, during the few days that he spent with us, he didn't have a bad time: he didn't go hungry and he had a roof over his head. What happened to him later, I don't know.

The guards were very different. Some of them were completely uninterested in our troubles: you could shout and bang as much as you liked, someone could be ill, you could even shit in the room, they let us go to the toilet only twice a day and no emergency state or shit was tolerated. Others would threaten us with a beating even when we knocked very softly (which was our sign to be allowed to go to the WC). Some of them would hit out with the butt of their rifles, but there were others who regarded us with more understanding, let us go to the toilet when we needed to, gave smokers a light, got old newspapers so we could wipe ourselves and sometimes even new ones for us to read.

93 He visited me a few months later and stole a cheap camera from me.

Thanks to these newspapers and the information we got from the newly arrived prisoners, we knew what was happening in the world and knew that the war was coming to an end. Almost every night we listened to artillery salvos and the small patch of the sky visible from our room was lit up by the parabolas of the tracer bullets from the machine guns and Partisans' submachine guns. Then we knew that one more city had been liberated...

I found out from prisoners who had longer experience in gaol that the King's regent, Dr. Stanković, was in the room next to ours. He had his own room, bed, table, chair, a pencil and lots of paper. Food was sent in to him from home. They didn't interrogate him but they took him for talks. He had to write down everything that he had done or was privy to as the King's regent.

On the other side in the room next to ours lay a woman. I say 'lay because she had been beaten so badly before I came that she couldn't move. Someone told me that she'd been a teacher. She was held in the dark, her window boarded up. I don't remember how and what she ate nor how she managed to get to the toilet. From time to time we could hear her moaning.

I eagerly volunteered to scrub the floors in the corridors. Someone in our room murmured "*bootlicker*" but Veljković and Moravec immediately understood my intention: by scrubbing the floor I could exploit the carelessness of the guards on duty and have the opportunity of whispering through the keyholes with prisoners in other rooms. The guards were not too conscientious. They were barely literate – they had trouble reading their newspaper – and in a short time I found out that my mother was in the attic, i.e. one floor above us. Thanks to my diligent floor-scrubbing, I was able to carry messages and some cigarettes from room to room. I was very proud of that. I prepared a message for my mother, threw it into a room and they, using the "elevator"⁹⁴ sent it to the floor above and managed to smuggle it into Mother's cell. On the margin of a newspaper, using the tip of the pencil I'd managed to hide when I'd been arrested, I wrote in tiny letters that I was well, had not yet been interrogated and that she needn't worry about me.

I also wrote a message for my family in Varvarinska Street. While the guards were examining my soiled underclothes as they were being packed, I held it folded, hidden between my index and middle fingers, and found an opportunity to drop it in and pack it all up. It was the same message as the one I wrote to my mother with the addition that they could put the "letter" for me into the shirt collar or, if they sent me spring onions, in between their 'leaves'.

Actually, I now know that there was no real necessity to write to my family in Varvarinska Street. I probably did so because of the excess energy I had and the strong need to dupe the people who were holding me in prison.

I was in gaol on 5 May. That day there was a lot of shooting in the streets, and we found out that Germany had finally surrendered. We even got the newspapers from the guard. The war was over, at least for some people. For us who were in prison, it was

94 The «elevator» in our prison was a thread lowered from the upper floor. Thanks to that invention, messages written on small pieces of paper could be tied to the tread and pulled up or lowered.

not. However, we were happy ...

Of course, my stay at Obilićev Venac was not always interesting. The atmosphere in the prison was such that we didn't know why we were accused, how we would be punished and if we would ever get out alive. The guards threatened to kill us all; the officers who inspected us every morning also threatened us, and we were present at some scenes which showed that these were no mere empty words.

One evening we noticed that something was happening in the big room opposite ours. First they led out all the prisoners, took them somewhere and then took into the room a clothes hanger, a table and some chairs. Then a few officers went in, sat down at the table and spent a long time discussing something. At some point in the night prisoners in groups of five or six were brought to them. They were lined up, asked to give their first name, surname and, I think, date of birth, and then officers would officially announce: "Sentenced to death by shooting". The groups were taken in one by one, put on 'trial', and then led out. From time to time we heard the sound of trucks taking the unfortunate men off. The trucks would return in about twenty minutes. We believed that they were shot at Kalemegdan – but the time necessary for the truck to go and come back was too long⁹⁵.

That night they "sentenced" at least fifty people. We heard the prisoners yelling, words that could only be shouted in such a situation. They were courageous but neither then nor later did I find out who they were. We thought that our turn would also come; we supposed that something had happened in the city, so they'd decided to shoot most of the prisoners. We had a few spoons whose handles were sharpened by constant rubbing on the sides of the radiators and that we used instead of knives. We also had a brick which had somehow been left in our room. We agreed that if they came to take us out, a few of the strongest among us, aided by the spoons and the brick, would attack the guards and snatch their sub-machine gun. We knew that our chances were slim but we didn't want to be taken out without a fight. A few optimists (and me among them) believed that we could maybe escape from prison like that. Now I think that we couldn't possibly have managed it.

After about fifty days in gaol, I was moved with a small group of prisoners into the big room where the "trials" were held at night. I think it was room 87. Very soon after that they brought in an unusual group of people. They were former camp inmates from Mauthausen in Austria. When they returned to Yugoslavia they were "sorted" and separated at the railway station: some of them (the Communists probably) were allowed to go home and the others who belonged to the other side were put in gaol. Five of them who were put in our room were not all on friendly terms. It was obvious that they avoided the youngest one among them. Since I was friendly with him, I was advised to avoid him and when I asked why, they told me that he was not a person I should be friendly with. We talked during the time we had to go to the toilet, always very quickly, so that the others wouldn't hear what we were saying. At my insistence I was finally told, indirectly, that he'd eaten people in the camp. The story was so unbelievable that I couldn't credit it. I used to meet that man later, after I'd left the prison, and he told me what had happened in the camp. The whole thing seemed incredible. Now, after so much

95 Now we know they were murdered in other places, not Kalemegdan

time, when I have to write to you about it, it still seems incredible to me but it appears to have really happened.

I also met an interesting Russian refugee in that room. He could have been around forty years, he was educated but avoided showing it. It seemed he'd spent his life as a circus artist and we were all impressed by his skill at telling each of us without hesitation, according to the shape of our hands, the state of our skin and eyes and other signs, what our professions and ailments were. He told me that I would be an artist or architect, that I would certainly have a profession where drawing was included. I noticed that every morning he stood among those who'd already been interrogated (although he had not). He explained that he wanted to stay as long as he could in prison but not to be interrogated. ... "I've survived the Russian Revolution and I know that the easiest way to lose one's head is in the first days of a new regime. They don't have any administration or lists of who's already been interrogated and who hasn't. For the moment, I feel safest here in prison... They have just lost me... I'll wait for the situation to normalise and then I'll report to them. As the situation now stands, a Communist could easily kill me simply because I'm a Russian refugee. Or, even worse, they could hand me over to the Russians to do the job".

I think he was clever.

On the sixty-fourth day I was finally called to be interrogated. I was questioned by Vidak personally. (I think his last name was Popović). I say "personally" since I'd heard that he interrogated only serious cases and that it was not his custom to beat people, but that he was dangerous. At that time he was the only educated interrogator in our prison – he was a lawyer.

I was not a serious case.

He interrogated me, in detail, about everything that had happened from the outbreak of war until our return to Belgrade. Judging by his questions, I suspected that my mother had already been interrogated. He was thorough and very polite. The next morning, very early, I was again taken to Vidak. He asked me a few more questions, gave me the protocol to sign and called the guard on duty who returned me to my room. Half an hour later, the guard came again.

- Take your things, he told me.

My roommates congratulated me. I would probably go home. I shook hands with all of them.

The guard led me to the commander's office and there I got my belt, tie, shoelaces and the miscellaneous items from my pockets and then they told me I was free.

While I was going down the stairs I ran into Penezić. He was a thin, unpleasant looking man and we were running downstairs together. I had the feeling that our meeting wasn't accidental.

- Well, now you know I was right. We checked everything and now you're going home.

- That's right, but I was in prison for more than two months. If you'd allowed me to get my text books, I could have prepared the exams and finished my school year.

- You're young, it's not such a big deal for you. You must understand what has happened. Our revolution is still in progress. We must check on people.

- Revolution OK, but why put me in gaol? If you were in gaol more than two months, you wouldn't be saying that.

My mother was standing near the exit. She started crying when she saw me, and I felt embarrassed. Why did she weep in front of Penezić?

Carrying our pots, toothbrushes, towels and other things wrapped up in blankets, my mother and I walked to Pašino Brdo. There was still no public transport. The blankets kept unwrapping, our things kept falling out, and we kept picking them up. We walked on and talked.

Who Slobodan Penezić-Krcun was, I found out sometime later from the newspapers.

After all, it was not important to me then. It seemed to me that I was finally free.



Greta and Aleksandar (1945)

(The eighteenth letter)

Belgrade, 28.10.1997.

My Dearest,

Everything I am writing to you now, took place more than fifty years ago and so please do not hold it against me for forgetting the exact order of things I mixed some things up. I think that the exact order of events is not important for my story since I am not a historian. I just want to tell how I experienced and perceived that time, being sure that there are other perceptions as well.

Our neighbours at Pašino Brdo had somehow already found out that we were in prison. Some of them greeted us with a marked kindness and some others were colder to us than before. Jekićka, the secretary of our street, pretended not to notice our absence, and Cica greeted me with more enthusiasm than ever before.

Mihajlo would come home every night and tell about the mass trials of people accused for collaborating with the occupier or for being war profiteers. So many people were arrested on those charges that that it seemed that people massively served the occupiers and profited from it – but it was obvious that the intentions of the new regime was to take away the possessions of the rich people. That is exactly what took place: almost all the sentences at that time were formulated: ...”loss of citizen’s rights and confiscation of all possessions”. We found out that due to some verses written during the war the well known poet and bohemian Tin Ujević was arrested. When the sentence of a few years of jail and the loss of his citizen’s rights was read out to him, Tin raised his finger in a dramatic way and added: ...”and the confiscation of all his possessions”. Of course, everybody laughed because it was well known that aside from the clothes on him he did not have anything, much less something that could be confiscated. However, I think that Tin was amnestied shortly afterwards.

The Jewish Community, the institution I missed writing about, in the previous letters had a very important role in our lives. I remember that as soon as we came to Belgrade we went to the street then named King Peter’s Street, which was later renamed Seventh July Street in order to be recently named again King Peter’s. The Jews who survived met there – first the ones who managed to stay alive in different ways in Serbia or in Belgrade and then the ones who survived the concentration camps or POW camps. It was a place where people met and families were reunited. There was a huge pile of clothes in one big room and in another not smaller pile of shoes. Some of it was second

hand some was new and all of it came from America and was for us, who in those first days were still dressed in what we had in the forest or in the camp, very precious. We dug through the piles, tried on and chose, everyone according to his taste or which was more often depending on luck, what suited him the most. There were many problems with shoes, in the pile of few thousand shoes it was more difficult to put together a pair, since they were not tied together. The parcels with food and medicine also began to arrive and those who did not have anywhere to go could find temporarily shelter in the Eškenazi synagogue which was during the occupation used as a bordello for German officers. The Sephardic synagogue which was badly damaged – burnt during the German bombing on the 6th. of April 1941. Later the new regime “overtook” this building (which could have been renewed) and turned it into the Fresco gallery.

Groups of camp inmates, who by some miracle survived the war, began to arrive from Auschwitz, Mathausen, Bergen-Belsen, Dahau, and some other camps of unusual names. The women, former inmates, looked unusual: their hair, that was completely shaven in the camp, had just begun to grow again. With such short, curly hair they looked somehow boyish. I was with my mother when we met a young woman with two young children, who had obviously just arrived from some camp. She was tall and conspicuously beautiful. My mother and she embraced and started weeping. When my mother asked where her third child was she began laughing. She laughed loudly for a very long time and finally said in a somehow horrible way: “They took him to the crematorium.”

When we took leave of each other I found out from my mother that she was our relative from Osijek. She was very rich, educated and married before the war and had three children. My mother did not dare ask for her husband who was probably also taken to a camp. Obsessed with the need to go as far away as possible from Europe, camps and terrible memories, our relative decided to leave our country and immigrate to Australia. We used to see her a few months, she visited us a few times but on contrary to the other camp returnees, she never spoke about the camp. Finally, thanks to good connections and money she had in world banks, she left our country with her children. She never contacted anyone from Australia. I don't remember her name.

For a long time, we hoped that my father was alive and that he would return home from somewhere. My grandfather Zinovij had such hopes too. We corresponded with him and he sent us from Tbilisi a newspaper clipping: at war criminals tribunal in Nuremberg a man who survived mass executions and although seriously injured managed to run away appeared as one of the witnesses. Being shot in the head he did not know anything about his past, he did not remember what had happened before the shooting, and he only remembered his last name: Ajzenberg. Grandfather asked us to find out more about that case, hoping the man was his son. We knew that Čumak, the former secretary of the Soviet Embassy, the one who was friendly with my father, is now a high official of the UNRRA organization in Belgrade. We visited him in his office and asked him to check this information. He was very unpleasant and did not even want to talk to us. Much later I found out that the Soviet personnel who used to be here before the war and the other ones who came after the war had some other duties in our country. Albi Weis was a member of the Yugoslav delegation for the Investigation of War Crimes. We gave him father's picture and some data that could be used for identification. He

was travelling to Nurnberg in a few days time. Very soon we got the information: the man the article was written about was twenty-five years old, and he in no way fitted the description of my father and he only spoke Polish.

We continued to hope. Mother as well as many other women at that time, used to visit fortune tellers and clairvoyants. Immediately after the war there were many of them and their halls were full of women who, not having any other way, believed that they could find out where the ones who did not come back were. The fortune tellers and clairvoyants most often promised that he, who has disappeared, will appear very soon...

For a long time I condemned those who "enriched" using the misfortune and credulity of people. A long time had to pass until I realized that, in the days immediately after the end of the war, people were not strong enough to accept the fact that their dear ones were no longer alive. The fortunetellers and clairvoyants were useful and necessary: they maintained people's hope until they became strong enough to face the horrible truth themselves.

One day our relative Ljuba Vajhberger with her two children came to our house. At the very end of the war, her husband Borko took a large sum of money and went to Ravna Gora where the headquarters of Draža Mihailović was. Shortly Ljuba with the children decided to follow him. Draža and Borko were not at the Ravna Gora by the time she came there, they were already withdrawing towards the west. Ljuba wandered around the mountains for some time looking for them and finally came back to Belgrade. By that time some other people had already moved into her house. As I have already written, because Borko traded with the Germans, he had really collaborated with them but, but by doing so, he saved Ljuba the fate of her parents who were killed as Jews. Not having anywhere to go, she moved in with us. There wasn't much space in our apartment so we slept two in one bed: Ljuba slept with my mother, her ten year old daughter Milka with me and Lea who was not a year old slept with my grandmother. Ljuba was often called for interrogation to Ozna, sometimes she was kept in prison for a day or two and then freed. As if she was guilty that her husband had left her and went to the Chetniks... Of course, in her absence, we were the once who took care of her children. When she met Hajra Kapetanović, a high Party official whom she had known from before the war, the arrests stopped, but not the occasional interrogations.

Ljuba stayed with us for about a year and a half. Then she moved into an apartment in the next street and found a job. We continued to take care of her children during the day for a few more years.

I resolutely decided to make up for the lost time. I continued to trade but I started studying. Mihajlo brought me the textbooks from his bookshop. It turned out that they had been printed before the war and were thus quite useless. I had to study from the new ones, which were translated from Russian. Their content was a little unusual - it turned out that almost all the discoveries in physics, chemistry and biology were made by Russian scientists and that all the historical events were the result of the great movements of the subjugated masses. The whole history somehow boiled down to the great masses of people on one side and the slave owners (later the feudal lords, then the bourgeoisie and capitalists) on the other side. Although these explanations were simple, they did not satisfy me completely. How can the war that I have just experienced be

explained? Hitler, Italy and Japan with their peoples, bourgeoisie and capitalists on one side, and again the whole world with its peoples, bourgeoisie and capitalists (except the USSR where there really were no bourgeoisie and capitalists) on the other side. Which side are the capitalists and the masses on now, how can this fit into this simple theory?

Mihajlo's father was the co-owner of the well-known publishing and book selling firm Rajković and Čuković. Mihajlo and his brother Rajko inherited the bookshop and stationary store in Kosmajaska Street somewhere on the banks of the Danube they had a warehouse full of books. One day a few Ozna agents appeared with a warrant to examine the contents of the warehouse and to take away what they considered necessary. It took them a few days to pick out all the books in philosophy, political economy and history and to take them in trucks to the waste dump. The books were destroyed there.

The newspapers announced that a large amount of flour arrived from the fraternal Soviet Union as aid for our people. That flour was allocated to the citizens. There was a long queue in front of Cane's bakery that was in the street of the throne heir Petar (now Maksim Gorki Street). The workers climbed on top of the sacks, took them down, opened them and weighed out two kilograms to each person. One worker spread an empty sack and showing it to the people shouted: "This is the aid from the Soviet Union"! A Nazi eagle with the swastika and something written in the gothic letters was printed on the sack.

I found out in the queue that the flour was brought from a former German military warehouse that was near the bakery.

One day, near the theatre, I met Mario who was one of the three Italians I was friendly with for some time in Homolje. He told me that he withdrew with the Chetnicks towards Italy and that he was captured by the Partisans on the way. Since they had captured a few Italian tanks somewhere in Hercegovina and did not know how to drive them they needed him. He became a Partisan tanker and took part in many battles. They had discharged him from the Army recently. The Italian soldiers were not looked upon well although many of them fought together with the Partisans. Many of them had already been taken to the Soviet Union as prisoners of war and he heard that some of them were killed. He managed to get in touch with the Americans, their planes were landing at Zemun's airport and he would be smuggled to Italy. He would try on Wednesday if he doesn't succeed we would meet the next day near the theater toilet. The unfortunate man tried a few times and he did not turn up in two or three week's time. I wish I knew if he had succeeded or he had been caught at the airport.

Many young people were at that time leaving for Slovenia and then tried to escape to Italy or Austria across the border. Many of them were killed in the attempt. Our border guards shot without warning.

Already being marked as a reactionary, now coming back from the prison, I had definitively become the black sheep of the street. My pride would not allow me to go to the Youth Center and to justify myself to the street activists. However, those "activists" all of the ones that I have met in my neighbourhood belonged to the category of the primitive demimonde. Everything that was happening around me, contributed to my mixed feelings towards the new regime: my father was a communist, the Soviet Army and Partisans (both of them led by the Communist Party) liberated us and led

us into a new, better and more beautiful life as it was in the fraternal Soviet Union – but... The arrests and executions of so many innocent people, throwing out of apartments and the robberies, the behaviour of street secretaries and activists as well as my recent prison experience, all that could not give me much confidence in the new regime. On the contrary, I began to doubt.

Mihajlo kept claiming that he found out from confident sources that we would ... *“have in two weeks the most very significant events”*... And he claimed that there was no sense in taking some exams now “while the thugs were here, because when they leave and the situation is normalized the exams taken now would not be acknowledged”.

Too much time has passed since these significant changes were promised and I had almost completely stopped believing. Actually, I wondered whom to trust.

Eager for knowledge I visited Cica more often. We talked about everything and about male and female relations. She was four years older than me, had a boyfriend but she liked talking with me about these things. She explained to me that honest girls did not allow their boyfriends to cross a certain border – that can only be done when they got married. Among other things I was especially interested in that border and did not hide the fact from her. One day she told me that she was in the Youth Center and that she had something important to tell me. I should visit her tomorrow exactly at nine o'clock in the morning, I should be very punctual and come on time. I came on time, knocked at the door, heard her invitation to come in and I went in. In the kitchen, in a large washbowl, stood my neighbour. Two large pots were near her: one with warm and the other with cold water. She was just taking a bath and was, of course completely naked.

We did not trespass the border but that day was very interesting to me. I had a feeling that it was interesting to her too because after that she invited me almost every day at the time when her family was not at home but she did not meet me bathing in the washbowl again.

Besides Cica I became very diligent in real studying: I began to prepare the exams for the second grade of the gymnasium. When I went to the gymnasium where I had begun the first grade before the war started I got a certificate as if I had completed it (that gap can probably still be seen in my education) and I got a booklet: the yearbook of the First Boy's and Fourth Girl's gymnasium. In it, among other things, was a rather long list of Jewish pupils... *“beastly killed by the fascist occupier”*... My name was on the list. Unfortunately, the others from the list were really killed.

It seems as if after the prison, studying was no longer a problem. I studied quickly and easily. Actually, at the first exam I realized some things: most of the “war hindered” whom I met at the first exam were Partisan non-commissioned officers (that meant a little older than I was) who were sent to the officer's schools and had to have at least four years of gymnasium. They did not know much but not much was asked from them. Together with them I got by relatively easily.

I stopped going to my English lessons with my teacher, Miss Todorovic. I obtained Vidaković's textbook “Do you speak English” and without much effort managed to cover one and sometimes two lessons, everyday. The problem was that I managed to learn almost everything from the book except the right pronunciation. I have never managed to make up for that. At that time, only Soviet films were on at the cinema,

we did not possess a radio and television did not even exist in our country.

I even had time to do some trade. Instead of trading in plum brandy, petroleum and "rags" I started trading with foreign currency and cameras. I managed to sell a Leica camera to an American Major. I used to see him from time to time while he was in Belgrade. Once while we were talking I asked him what he thought: will the Communists stay in power here? He answered was diplomatic (and maybe in a prophetic), he said that they would stay as long as it was needed for most Yugoslavs to realize what Communism was.

It seems as if most of the people have not yet realized what it is.

It was through that American that I met Aleksandar (Aca) Radojčić, a boy of my age. Aca introduced me to his friends, we walked along the corso (from Kalemegdan to Terazije), we went to the cinema, looked at girls and made acquaintances with them. Aca often laughed so contagiously that I finally, after a few months of friendship with him started to learn how to laugh again. Since the autumn of 1941, that was something that I neither could nor was not able to do. So, thanks to Aca I gradually began to meet people of my age. They were mostly children, born in Belgrade, who were attending the gymnasium. Most of them belonged to the middle class and were not the ones who went to the Youth Centers. On the contrary, they avoided them. However if someone unknown to them turned up in our company they would draw my attention to be careful what I said in front of him by saying the word acid. Lacmuss paper reacted to acids by turning red. They were not active in politics but they were convinced that Communism was an evil which could not last long in our country. And they already knew that one has to be careful what he said in front of the "reds". Fortunately, there were really very few "reds" around. Or that was what we thought living in a relatively small circle of children from Belgrade.

At that time I began my friendship with Caca Horvatović. Our mothers met somewhere and renewed the friendship that had been broken off before the war. It was through their agreement (what plans they had for us or if they had them was not known to me) we went together to the theatre and concerts. She was well dressed, her hair was combed nicely and she was discretely perfumed. And me dressed up in a new suit... In the morning Cica (without the washbowl), in the afternoon trade on the black market and in the evening concert with Caca. Just like in cheap films!

Speaking about the new suit I can not help telling this story: I arrived in Belgrade in a remade German uniform probably obtained in Zagubica and I also had those trousers made out of an old overcoat. After that, I wore father's remade suit and some clothes that my mother got from the Jewish Community. It was finally decided in the family that I should get a new suit "sewn to measure". Mother managed to get a very nice material, my aunt took me to a good tailor Mr. Kos, who lived nearby. When the suit was finished, I had a feeling that something pinched me between my legs. The tailor skilfully took "that something" and transferred it to the other side saying: *Sir, that is worn on the left side.*

And so I learned and forever remembered that which I did not need to know in Homolje: that *it* must be worn on the left side. So it seemed that there were many things that I had to learn.

Soon after I think letters and parcels began to arrive. My grandmother's brother

Đula sent them to us from America. Thanks to his help we in 13 Varvarinska Street were decently dressed, there was enough food in the house and some things were left over and we could sell them. I say: there was enough food because at that time there was a shortage of food for common citizens. One had to wait for hours in long queues for everything, and the most important groceries (bread, sugar, salt cooking oil, fat, meat, soap, clothes textile and wood for heating) were rationed and could be got only on coupons, but not all citizens equally: “outstanding workers” got the most, then came the miners, workers, children and at last the common citizens. The unemployed did not have the right to coupons and the officials were supplied from special shops, the so called “diplomatic” in which there were everything...

That now almost forgotten 1946 was a very difficult year. It was difficult for those who lived in the cities and incomparably difficult for the peasants, especially in Serbia and Vojvodina. An unprecedented terror was started in the villages. There was not enough food, the peasants had to hand over everything they produced: wheat pigs, fat... Special teams of activists searched their houses, dug their yards and stables and broke up their hay stacks looking for food. They beat respected people, grabbed even that which the peasants left for planting. Remaining without food the peasants went hungry. Many people were then killed but it was forbidden to talk about.

Out of some ideological reasons the orthodox priests were maltreated – the activists tore out their beards and rode them piggy back stile. They did so especially in Serbia and Vojvodina.

Thanks to the American parcels mother and I were not forced any more to “trade” regularly. True, because of them, my mother was called a few times to the district Ozna “for talks”. They were very interested: who was the man who wrote to us and sent us parcels, in what relations were we with him and why and when he left the country. And, naturally, the questions to which my mother and I had already given extensive answers to Vidak when we were in prison were. The interrogations sometimes lasted a few hours. The letters (which we got from grandma’s brother Đula) from America were regularly opened and censored. There was a seal on them: “censored”. The letters that my grandma wrote to Đula were also censored. I wonder how they read them when they were written (especially grandma’s in a pointed gothic handwriting and were a mixture of German and Yiddish. Đula proposed several times that we all went to Los Angeles and live with him. My mother and aunt would surely be able to find some job and he would pay for my education.

Freed from my obligations to trade, I had enough time to study and for more intensive friendships with young people of my age, mostly Aca’s friends. True, I still avoided the company of my former (pre-war) schoolmates. Maybe it was because they had advanced so much ahead of me as far as studying was concerned, or maybe it was because I still did not think that I could fit into their company or maybe out of some reasons which are not quite clear to me now.

In our neighbourhood, immediately around the corner, lived Vladislava. She was quite ugly but always in a good mood and smiling so her face wasn’t unpleasant. Before the war, she told us, she used to work as a cook in an inn at the harbour and she would make allusions that she used to deal in a very old profession. She knew how to sew

very well. She lived of the money she earned by sewing, bought books, supported her sister Anka and (which was the most important for her) fed well her two cats. Actually she sewed in order to buy books and what would be leftover went for the cat food and only then for her sister and for herself. She did not have any children. Her library was enormous, and I had the rare privilege: she lent me books. I liked visiting her looking through her bookshelves and sitting in her yard in a Thonet rocking chair and reading. That's how I came upon Jack London's book *Martin Eden*. I think that it was in that book that I read how the main character decided to educate himself by systematic reading. I liked that idea and tried to do something the same or, at least similar. Naturally, Vladislava did not have in her library the Greek and Roman classics, had never heard of medieval literature and those were the books that I could not get at the city library, so I had to skip something in my education. However, thanks to Vladislava (she has long passed away) at that time I read much more than most of the boys in my age.

By the way, Vladislava respected books knew by heart and every detail of the context of everything she had in her library but she was still completely uneducated.

Realizing this I concluded that education does not depend on good memory more the number of books read but on some kind of organ for digestion of what was the essence of the books.

By going to Vladislava I had the opportunity to listen to the trials of Draža Mihailović which was broadcast on the radio. It was trial which lasted for several days where the arrogant prosecutor in a partisan uniform (Miloš Minić) was proving that Draža was a war criminal and traitor. It was quite clear to me that much of the "evidence" was probably constructed. The story of the cooperation of Draža's units with the Germans I could not accept because I had the personal experience of fleeing from the Germans together with the Chetnicks in Homolje. I knew that it was not true that Draža's men killed allied airmen - because I had the opportunity to meet those men in Homolje. However, many did believe or wanted to believe or pretended to believe that it was true.

I asked myself: what's the use of all that?

It was quite clear to me that the whole trial was rigged with the aim of showing the events as it suited the Communists, but Draža's detached behaviour was not clear to me. There was talk in the town that Milan Nedić did not commit suicide (driven to do so by a guilty conscience as was the official statement) but that he was thrown out the window because the investigators did not succeed in making him say what they needed to hear. We also heard that experts from Moscow came and did a lobotomy on Draža after which he did not care what was happening around him... According to another possibility which was published many decades later, I read that Draža was given more and more alcohol to drink in jail and that his personality, under the influence of alcohol, was completely changed. It was also said that he was terribly tortured, it was even said that Penezić personally with his comrades interrogated him – but which of these versions was true we will probably never find out.

Again, I am afraid that this series of unconnected details would not interest you much. However, I write this believing that it is necessary in order to understand how we lived then and our thoughts were confused and how we gradually became what we are now. Or speaking for myself: how I lived then and how my thoughts were confused and

how I gradually became what I am now.

One day, Cica told me that she found out in the youth center that the street activists were planning to ambush me in the evening when I would be coming back to Strumička Street and beat me up because I was a reactionary. It was not convenient for them to attack me during the day when I went to town because many people could witness it. I made note of the information and decided to surprise them. I found a knife which was actually a letter opener, wrapped it up in newspaper and carried it in my inside pocket. The knife was made out of brass but I could not take a better one out of the house without my family noticing it. I did not want them to worry.

A few days later, they were waiting for me. There were four of them, I knew them by sight and they blocked my way. I stopped, took out the knife, held it in my right hand so the top of the knife was on the pointing finger of my left hand. It seemed as if I was checking out to see if I could stab someone with it. The boys were surprised by that so they, as I had expected them to do, moved apart.

The next day Cica told me that they decided to ambush me with poles. In that case the knife would not be of any use to me. The next days, while coming home, I avoided Strumička Street and took Tetovska street which was parallel to my Varvarinska Street. I went into a yard (I knew the owner well) jumped over a fence and was at home. The activists changed the place of the ambush (and even tried to “meet” me in front of my home) but it did not occur to them how I had come home. Twenty days later, I found out that they gave up – maybe they had new orders to beat somebody else up.

True, not all activists were like them. Steva the baker, for instance. He lived in our immediate neighbourhood. He was short, thin and wrinkled man because of the heavy labour he did in the bakery. Every afternoon he run down the street, went to some conferences, called people to meetings and work actions but I heard that he himself worked very hard at these actions. Afterwards he left the bakery profession and became what was then I think called a *political activist* – I think he even became a member of the Party City Committee. However, contrary to the other activists in the neighbourhood he did not change, he did not put on airs, and stayed in his small flat in which he lived since he was a bakery apprentice.

Ten years later, at the time and in a system which prevailed as a party functionary he could get a high position in a very good firm, a good income and a big flat but he went back to the same bakery he used to work before. He explained to me that he was a worker, that he was an activist, that he believed that at one time it was necessary for him to do so but that now he thought that should be done by people with more education. His duty was to work what he liked to do and knew how to do – to be a baker.

It was very good meeting him and talking with him. It was a pity there were so few of people like him.

My mother and Ljuba decided to have a nice time and to go out to a night-club. They decided I would be their chaperon which would mean that I would accompany them in their going out. Of course, my mother prepared me for this duty. She taught me how to dance.

Tango is danced when the man puts his right hand around the women's waist and holds her hand with his left hand. Then a step is made with the left foot and the right

one is moved next to the left, and again a step with the left foot and the right one comes near it – then a step with the right foot and the left one is drawn near... The dancing steps must be coordinated with the tact of the music. So it is: left right, left right, and then right left. Twice with the left and once with the right! You should take care not to step on the women's foot. And not to bump with the other dancers!

My mother danced well – I did not. We did not have any music so we both hummed some known melodies. I had troubles counting, taking care not to step on the lady's foot and I was not able to pay attention to the steps, the tact of the music, the chairs put around to play the other dancers and to make conversation... She showed me how the waltz is danced, it seemed simpler but only if I swing the lady to the left side. I could not manage to change the course while dancing. The English waltz seems very simply when my mother demonstrated it dancing alone but with me it turned out disastrous. The tango, the waltz and the English waltz. Those three dances were allowed, and naturally, the *kozaračko kolo* as well as the Montenegrin one. Of the foreign ones: all kind of Russian dances - they were even desirable, *kazačok* for example. Everything else was considered indecent, harmful and ideologically foreign and was forbidden at public places especially a dance called *troking*, which the young who were not "red" liked to dance. Those young people liked jazz but I didn't know anything about. Jazz and troking as something that came from the imperialistic America was not for public places.

So one night the three of us all dressed up, went to town. At that time in Belgrade existed only two night-clubs: "Kleopatra" and "Lotos" We went to Kleopatra. Half dark hall was almost completely empty with stale air, cold and damp. The half dark hall was almost completely empty and cold. Its air was stale and damp. I was not impressed, neither with music.

The waiter said that they had plum brandy, *eier cognac* and vine. My ladies ordered three cognacs. Ljuba showed us a man with long hair. It was Žarko, Tito's son. He did not have one hand, she explained. The waiters stood around him and the only one 'nightclub lady', who judging by her age was evidently from pre-war times. She was tall, with big bosoms and dressed in an evening gown made of dark red velvet. Ljuba heard that Žarko used to come every night, drank a lot and spent much money there.

After some time, began the program: the artistic dance. A middle aged pair in worn costumes danced Argentinean tango with all these strange figures but without any passion. It was even boring after some time. Bora, "the honest thief", appeared later on. He would take of the guest's watches and wallets and to our great amusement he even took off their suspenders. The music started playing again. I had to dance with my mother and Ljuba, I counted the steps, took care not to step on their feet and not to bump into others...

Somehow after midnight the waiters announced that the closing time will be soon and I hardly waited to leave. It was really a boring evening for me.

After a few weeks ladies took me out again, we went to another bar. There were some more guests but everything else was the same.

These two "going outs" were my first and last to the bars. I had never again felt the need for such entertainment – although I later on realized that those two were the after-war bars of socialist types.

The new government organized elections. I think it was at the end of 1946. Those were the first post-war elections. It was clear to everybody who could win at them because the ones who thought differently were already arrested under different excuses. They were arrested as war profiteers or collaborators of the occupier and in easier situations pronounced to be a non people element or a reactionary person. There was a very characteristic song sang that time which I think went like this: ..."Who speaks differently, he slanders and lies and he will feel our fist"... Before the very elections for days the meetings were held where we were under the watchful eyes of street activists obliged to come. There were banners on the streets with appropriate slogans and on the big houses in the city were put up giant pictures mostly of Stalin and Tito. The biggest one was put up on the tallest building in the city (Albania building) and was four floors high. The elections seemed as if you could choose: to vote for the National front or to put your bullet in an another box called the "blind box" – which meant that you were not in favour of the National front. The very voting was announced as the duty of each citizen – not as ones right. That meant that not voting at the election means not fulfilling your citizen's obligations and that could result with a loss of the right to food coupons, a loss of work, flat or freedom. The voting box had the bottom of tiny plywood so it could be heard when someone throws the ball made of heavy rubber into it. Naturally, there was launched the story that hidden near the boxes, there was a man who listened to the noise made by the ball and that those who did not vote for the National front would be arrested. If someone had listened or nor not, I really don't know, but very few dared not to vote as the government wanted. I was not yet eighteen so I did not have the right to vote. My mother and aunt naturally went and voted not wanting to risk being exposed to unpleasantness. My grandma was ill: the street activists came with stretchers and carried her, in a festive mood to the nearest inn where the voting took place. Mihailo did not want to vote. The activists came a few times that day reminding him and inviting him. At the end Jekička came in person but he remained persistent.

The percentage of those who voted was fantastic, for example 99.6 %. It was found out that in the evening before the votes were counted, the small number of bullets which had been thrown into the "blind box" were simply poured into the box of the National front. The elections were finished, naturally with the big victory of the National front.

I think that the elections represented the corner stone for all the elections which, in the next fifty years, our ruling government organized.

Remark

The book Letters to Matvej published by the Belgrade publishing house Prosveta in 2006 comprises 24 letters of my own. The first eighteen letters have been translated into English. The remaining six letters are related to my post-war life, primarily the period when I entered the University, dated girls, went mountaineering, etc., which I find of no interest to a reader living in the foreign country.

Unfortunately the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and the eighteenth letter are not edited. I do apologize and yet hope it will not influence your reading.

A. Ajzinberg



Aleksandar Ajzinberg

Belgrade architect and University professor Mr Aleksandar Ajzinberg was eleven years old when Yugoslavia was invaded and occupied by Germans in April 1941. A few months later Kosta Pecanac's Chetniks, who were devoted to the Nazis, arrested him and his parents. They obediently handed his father to the Germans and he was killed in the Zemun concentration camp. Aleksandar and his mother Greta escaped from the prison and survived the rest of the war in Homolje (a part of eastern Serbia) mountains and forests under the protection of the Draza Mihailovic's Chetniks. Being often hungry and in great danger they spent there nearly three hard years having lots of adventures during their escapes from German chases.

When the war was finished and he returned to Belgrade, the Communists arrested him and interrogated. How could he as a Jew survive the war? Wasn't he maybe German's collaborator?

Since many years later his son Matvoj (who lives in Israel) asked him to describe how he survived the II WW Mr. Ajzinberg wrote him 24 letters describing all that. These letters were later published in the book *Pisma Matvoju (Letters to Matvoj)*, Prosveta 2006, Belgrade.

His writings won the annual prize of Federation of Jewish communities in Serbia.