Maks ERENRAJH

LIFE-THREATENING ROMANCE

Maksimilijan-Maks Erenrajh was born on March 15, 1921, in Travnik (Bosnia and Hercegovina), to Josif Erenrajh and Ljubica, née Ostojić. He has an elder sister, Nada, married Jovanović.

His grandmother and his father's two sisters, who lived in Vienna, perished in the Holocaust, as did his father's brother and his wife, who lived in Paris.

Maksimilijan-Maks Erenrajh (Karlo Ostojić) is a well known author and longtime journalist for DUGA *magazine and weekly* NIN. *He has published a number of literary works and articles. For his novel* KARAKTERISTIKA *he received the 1999* NIN *critics award for the best novel in the Serbian language. He lives and works in Belgrade.*

For more than forty years he was married to Ljiljana Grujić who died recently.

His great-grandfather's brother, Moses Levi Ehrenreich, was rabbi of Rome and chief rabbi of Italy. He also taught the Old Testament to the heir to the Italian throne and was a senior lecturer in this subject at the University of Rome. His grandfather, a Belgrade banker, received the highest award, the Takovo Cross, from King Milan and the highest decoration, the Golden Mecidiye from the Turkish sultan for loans and assistance in building the Niš-Istanbul railway line.

One period of my biography, that covering the time of occupation from 1941 to 1945, could not be adequately understood without explaining in detail the earlier periods, from the year of my birth up to the eruption of World War Two. This is the main reason I go back here to the first years of my life.

I was born in 1921, in Travnik, where my father was the district chief. I was christened in the Catholic Church of Christ the King and my baptism certificate reads that my father was a Catholic, born in Vienna in 1889, and that my mother, who was born in Mostar, was an Orthodox Christian. My other name, Karlo, was given after my godfather Karlo Zajdel, a lawyer from Vienna, my father's best friend from primary school. The certificate also reads that my father was an Austrian citizen, as am I. My father died in 1930, at the age of 41.

As district chief, my father worked in six different towns until 1927, mostly in Bosnia. Because he had to move around so much, he left this job and settled in Belgrade where my grandfather, the director of a branch office of the Austrian Lender Bank lived. Two years later my father passed the Bar examination and was employed in the law office of Jakov Čelebonović, my grandfather's friend. From my discussions with Čelebonović when he returned after emigrating to Switzerland, I learned that, when he arrived in Belgrade in the 1880s, he was employed in my grandfather's bank and, as a bank employee, he won a scholarship to complete his law studies abroad. Through Milan Bernard, a Jewish manager at the Franco-

Maks Ehrenrajh's mother, Ljubica Ostojić, about 1910

Serb Bank in Belgrade, I learnt that, thanks to his Vienna connections, my grandfather had arranged for Čelebonović to be legal representative of the princely Austrian family Thurn und Taxis in their law suit with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia over a huge expanse of woods in Slavonija worth 200,000 dinars in the currency of the day. Čelebonović won the case.

Čelebonović also acquainted me with certain information about my grandfather's activities: it was thanks to him that the Lender Bank gave the Weifert Brewery, through the First Serbian Credit Bank, a large loan for the modernisation of outdated plant. According to Čelebonović, my grandfather also played an important role in arranging finance for the construction of the Belgrade-Niš railway. As representative of the Lender Bank he was involved in negotiations between a consortium of major European banks and Serbia and, after the loan was approved, by agreement with both sides, he was appointed supervisor of the Serbian state monopoly's revenues in order to secure the funds for the repayment of the loan. It is of interest to note that Čelebonović never once made any reference to my grandfather's origins: for him he was simply an Austrian. Čelebonović's son Aleksa, a painter and art historian who I used to see after the second world war, was later very surprised to learn that my grandfather was of Jewish origin.

When we arrived in Belgrade, my father enrolled me in the German primary school because, all things considered, he felt it was very important that, unlike my sister, I was brought up as a German. To this end he bought the most appropriate books in German, such as Grimm's *Fairy Tales* with miraculously beautiful colour illustrations, an abridged version of the *Nibelunglied*, also with illustrations, and poems for children my age. There were many Serbs and Jews at the school. Some of those who were at school with me were Milutin Garašanin, Gradimir Bajloni, Aleksandar Đermanović, whose father was a well-known lawyer and mother a German cellist in the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, and Ljubica Đorđević, the daughter of a prominent academician. At the time Hitler was still only fighting for power and the evil spirit of anti-Semitism had still not been felt at school. It was thanks to all this that I was very familiar with and felt very close to German culture, although not to the point where I would forget my mother's roots. Siegfried coexisted with Kraljević Marko and Brunhilde with Fairy Ravijojla. The turning point came after my father's death in 1930 when my mother took over my education. At the

age of eighteen I felt much more a Serb than a German, however, because of my documents, when I appeared before the draft board in 1940 it was as a Belgrader of German nationality.

WITH ARYAN PEERS

When my grandfather noticed that I had forgotten a great deal of my German, he decided that my sister and I should spend the summer of 1936 among our Austrian peers: me in a summer resort for Vienna secondary school students in St Wolfgang and my sister in Waldhausen. I had the impression that the great majority of my peers were pro-German, that is to say Hitler-oriented. There was no dangerous tension, nor conflicts, but lively debates could be heard. The most ardent and aggressive was the extremely blond Karl Heinz, who was rather reserved toward me from the very beginning, probably because of my surname, and a little later he asked me directly if I was a Jew. I said that I wasn't, but this did not reassure him and he continued with almost a police-style interrogation.

"Where do your parents live?" he asked me.

"In the Thirteenth District, Hitzinger Haupstrasse."

"Of course, the street of the Vienna Jews. What more is there for me to ask," he replied, walking away almost angrily. From then on, he never said another word to me and, when we passed each other, I saw contempt if not downright hatred in his eyes.

It's interesting that one of the group, a Viennese boy, liked to spend time with me. He was short and had short, black hair with tight curls. I remember his name was Moritz. Even his face indicated his Jewish origins. Whether he felt instinctively that I, too was of Jewish origin, or whether he wanted my company in order to some extent to protect himself in the shadow of my height from his Aryan peers who were ready to play practical jokes on him from time to time, remains a mystery to me.

The summer in Sankt Wolfgang was important for me because, for the first time in my life, I was suspicious about my father's German origin. Immediately after I returned to Vienna I asked my Granny Beti and my Aunt Maria Theresa over lunch: "Are we Jews?"

My grandmother pretended not to hear the question, while my grandfather said "Nonsense!" But the next day my aunt took me to the huge Gerngross department store to buy me a pair of short Tyrolean

trousers, probably to let me know that I was Austrian. However this garment did not wipe my suspicions out. I returned to Belgrade with some relief. My mother's presence, and her Hercegovina dialect, certainly held my doubts at bay, at least for some time. I admit I felt that knowing I was Jewish on my father's side would have been quite painful for me at the time. I would have had to change some of my opinions, show greater respect for my Jewish friends and, together with them, put up with a lot of unpleasantness incurred simply because someone is born a Jew rather than a German or Englishman.

Maks Erenrajh, 1944

Immediately after Austria joined Germany, my aunt Maria Theresa arrived to ask Čelebonović personally to have his lawyer take care of all the legal formalities required for my grandfather's estate. When she opened her suitcase in front of me, I was shocked to see a large Star of David on the inside of the lid! It had once been sewn onto the lining of the suitcase lid and later removed, but the mark of the star remained visible. "Weren't you afraid to have this star when you crossed the border where German customs officers and police are now stationed?" I asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders: "I didn't think about it. The suitcase is from the time I spent summer in Italy with my mother". That day I realised, more clearly than ever before, that my father was a Jew. What was still not clear to me was why his parents had decided to change their religion.

GERMAN OR JEW?

I then threw myself into a physiognomical and anthropological analysis of my father's immediate family and more distant relatives. My grandmother, Barbara-Beti, née Ehrenreich, because she and my grandfather were the children of two brothers, was a typical Ashkenazi Jew, short, her nose hooked at the end and protuberant in the upper

part, thick lips. She had blue eyes, the colour of many Jewish women. Aunt Maria Theresa took after them, so did Aunt Frederika, but a little less, it was only about Aunt Margarita, with her blond hair. that one could say she might be German. Alma von Poliakoff, my grandfather's niece, was one of those typical black-haired Jews. As for my grandfather, Edvard, just by looking at his rather parrot-like nose one could say that he was of Semitic origin. I saw Josef Reis, the son of my grandfather's sister for the first time before the war. He was a Romanian citizen who spent more time in Paris than he did in Bucharest, he was the prototype of an Ashkenazi Jew. Still, even after this analysis I was not quite certain about my father's extraction: there was still the possibility, I believed, that I was German.

The very same day the German troops began arriving in Belgrade I realised, late in the afternoon, that as soon as they arrived the Germans would search the premises of the Anglo-American Club in Devojačka Street (now called Andrićev Venac) and I was a member of the club. I was horrified at the thought that, if no one had destroyed the files and the register with the names of the club members, then the Germans could easily get their hands on the members' addresses and immediately arrest them. I didn't hesitate. I rushed off from Kneza Miloša Street to Devojačka Street, where I found both the gate and the club door open. Someone had already been in the premises before me. I came to this conclusion because the little doors of the cabinet and the drawers were open. Probably thieves who had thought they could get their hands on some valuable loot. They hadn't touched the drawer with the files nor the register of club members. I wasted no time: there was a fireplace in the clubrooms. I tore up all the compromising material, threw it into the fireplace and set it alight. In no time all traces of the information were burnt to ashes. Just as I was about to leave I heard, through a broken window, a car pull up. I looked out and, to my horror, saw two German officers get out of a motor vehicle, some kind of German jeep. I had just enough time to get to the ground floor before they entered. I escaped through the open or broken door of the patisserie (Mendragić's, I think) into Kralja Milana Street, and got away before the Germans noticed that someone had beaten them to it. And so I saved myself on the very first day of the occupation and, by saving myself, I believe I saved the other club members.

Two days later two printed notices appeared on telephone poles, on the walls of houses and wooden fences. One was for Jews and the other for Germans. The first explained which people were considered to be Jews – any citizen who had three ancestors of Jewish religion out of four. Such citizens were to report at Tašmajdan. Failure to do so would attract the death penalty. In the other notice, citizens of German nationality were asked to immediately report to 25 Brankova

Maks' grandfather Edvard Ehrenreich with his grandson Heinz, the son of his daughter, Margareta Dorndorf, nee Ehrenreich. (Dorndorf is also a Jew)

Street; a German was any person who had at least one German parent. I was faced with an enormous dilemma: I had two Aryan ancestors so didn't have to report as a Jew but, because of my German father, I was required to report in Brankova Street. I hesitated for a

few days and finally plumped for the German option. When I walked out of the building in Brankova Street as a Belgrade *Volksdeutscher*, I felt like a traitor to all those generations of Jews and Serbs who had come into this world and left it faithful to their past, to their religion, to their tradition. I was returning to my mother and sister, Serbs, as a member of the German ethnic group, and the registration certificate read that I was obliged to return to Brankova Street a month later in order to get an identification document which would confirm my national affiliation. These were the most agonising days of my life. Luckily they didn't last long. Soon afterwards, the Germans sank the Hood, Britain's biggest and deadliest warship. I was deeply shaken by this event and decided not to report as a German again, despite all the potential consequences.

IN THE HEART OF THE GESTAPO

In mid-May, 1941, I found employment in the Weifert Brewery, for which my grandfather, as director of the branch office of a large Vienna bank, had secured a rather large loan for modernisation of the production facilities. Because of my knowledge of German and because I had completed secondary school, the management decided that I should be assistant head of the warehouse. This was a good position in which I would not be much exposed during the war, so no one in the brewery, not even Doctor Granberg, Weifert's nephew, knew about my father's true origin. One day, at the end of autumn 1941, Granberg invited me to a fine villa within the brewery compound for a special task. He handed me a white envelope and told me that the brewery's motor tricycle would take me to the city, to the Serbian Gestapo headquarters in the building of the pre-war Military House. "Look here," he said, "you are to hand over this letter to Meissner, the head of the Gestapo, personally. He has already given the guards orders to take you to him." It was a bolt from the blue. To find myself in the very heart of the organisation so greatly feared by both myself and the people. I could hardly say that it was inconvenient for me, as a potential Jew, to carry out this mission. As we parted, Granberg added: "Give the general my regards!"

Everything happened just as Granberg had told me: a sergeant wearing a skull emblem escorted me to his commander's door, opened it and said from the doorway: "Dr Granberg's courier."

I expected to find myself before a man who looked appropriately cruel for one of the heads of an organisation which was synonymous with human evil. Instead I was standing before a fine and civilised-looking man. He looked like the film actor Curt Jurgens but his appearance and bearing were rather more refined. Was it possible that someone form the Gestapo could look like this, I thought, as I tried to collect myself and explain to him the point of my visit. He saw my confusion and smiled slightly, probably used to visitors behaving this way. I handed the letter to him with my trembling hand and repeated Granberg's words. Later I learnt that a number of women from the heights of Belgrade society had been unable to resist the Gestapo general's charms. These included two sisters from a well-known family: both were his mistresses and both were shot after the liberation. After completing this task, satisfactorily it seems, I took letters to General Meissner on another two occasions, and twice also to General Turner, the Belgrade commander. I also went once to the Parliament building, but can't remember the name of the colonel to whom I gave Granberg's letter. For a long time I didn't understand the real reason I was playing the go-between for a respectable, wealthy Belgrade German and figures from the highest echelon of the occupying authorities. It was only after the war ended that I discovered that Granberg and his uncle, Weifert, were respectable members of the Masonic lodge, so the conclusion could be drawn that Masonry was perhaps represented in the highest circles of the Wehrmacht.

Granberg apologised to me after the war when I explained my father's Jewish ancestry. "You can be sure that I would not have sent you on such a mission had I known about your father's origin. I attended your grandfather's funeral and, if I'm not mistaken, it was a Catholic service. You know, with each of those letters you contributed to saving a human life."

In addition to my visits to General Meissner, I went to the Gestapo headquarters another twice: the first in order to give evidence, and the second because I had been denounced as a Jew. On both occasions I exposed myself to the danger of my Jewish origins being disclosed. But before I proceed I must address a very dramatic episode from the occupation phase of my biography.

At the beginning of 1942, I met N. at a party, a girl a little younger than I. She was particularly dark-haired and it was perhaps precisely because of this that I was attracted to her. From that day on we began seeing a lot of each other, largely at my insistence. I fell in love. She was the daughter of a respected Belgrader and lived in their family villa in Kotež Neimar. After matriculating she had opted for art – singing and theatre. Because it was a very harsh winter we often went to the cinema or to patisseries, we preferred one in the premises of what is now a bookstore in the building of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, famous for its *indijaneri* and *torte*. We usually sat at a table up in the gallery, the favourite place for couples. Sometime in the middle of March she told me to listen to Radio Belgrade at five in the afternoon because she would sing the *Habanera* on an entertainment program.

She spoke in a beautiful, deep voice. Obviously she was imitating Zara Leander, the Swedish star who was then at the height of her career. I listened to her another two or three times, growing more downcast as I realised that I was investing far deeper feelings into this relationship than she was.

One lovely March afternoon we were going for a walk when we ran into a close friend of mine from secondary school, Aleksandar Jovanović. They laughed when I introduced them and, instead of shaking hands, embraced. They had known each other as children but hadn't seen each other for a long time. "How are your mother and your brothers?" she asked.

"Branko and mother are with me and Mima is with the Partisans," he replied.

"That's what I would expect," she said. As we parted from Aleksandar, N. said "You and Maks should come to my place tomorrow. My parents will still be in the countryside." We agreed.

The following day, late in the afternoon, Aleksandar and I went to her villa. She gave the impression she was pleased we had come. As could be expected, N. and Aleksandar began reminiscing about their childhood. When they had exhausted the subject, N. said "Let's listen to some songs, and dance, if you like." The *Habanera* was among the records.

She danced, it was immediately obvious, with more enthusiasm than us. And so we spent a pleasant afternoon talking, listening to music and dancing. After this, N. cut back on our meetings. We didn't see each other again until the end of March. There were enormous, wet snowflakes falling that afternoon. Because it wasn't exactly the weather for walking, I suggested we go to the cinema or to our favourite patisserie. She refused, but suggested she take me somewhere. I agreed. She was far more nervous than usual, and visibly distracted in this nervousness of hers.

The "somewhere" was a new, pre-war five-story building in what was then Frankopanova Street and is now called Resavska Street, second or third on the right from the corner of Kralja Milana Street. As we approached our destination I tried to take her hand, but she refused almost rudely. There was obviously something on her mind. Very soon, without talking, we arrived at our destination: across the road were the offices of the pre-war British Cultural Centre. We climbed the stairs, still in silence and stopped before a door. It was on either the first or the second floor, I no longer remember. She rang the bell vigorously and the door soon opened. A German sergeant appeared. "Hello, Willi," she said and, with no hesitation or explanation, began walking towards the room closest to us. "What are you standing there for," she said, having noticed that I was hesitating to cross the threshold. I followed her, confused, which didn't seem strange to Sergeant Willi.

It was warm in the room we entered, which was cramped rather than spacious and this added to the pleasant, intimate atmosphere. In the room there was a rather wide sofa covered with cocoa-coloured velour, two rather shell-shaped armchairs in the same colour and a small table with a Blaupunkt radio standing on it.

"Sit, what are you waiting for," she said, in a rather softer tone of voice. I sat on the sofa and she joined me. A wonderful opportunity for an outpouring of emotions, I thought, aware however that all this was incomprehensible, unexpected and so impossible. Then Willi knocked and, standing at the door, addressed N. "Brandy," she said. Turning towards me she asked "What will you have?"

"Tea," I replied, "with a little rum, if possible."

We were silent. Having seen through my plan to hold her hand in order to calm her down and let her know that my feelings for her remained unchanged despite Willi, in this warm room in which she

doesn't feel at all strange, N. quickly stood and went again to the window. It was obvious to me that she was avoiding any kind of intimate contact with me and any discussion of how and why we had found ourselves in an apartment which had clearly been requisitioned for senior German officers. At one point she moved away from the window, through which the wind could be clearly seen blowing away the large March snowflakes, and walked decisively towards the door. However she didn't open it. She stopped. It was as though she had changed her mind, had decided not to do what she had planned. Again she walked to the sofa and sat next to me, a little further away than the first time. Willi appeared soon after, deftly managing a tray with the tea and brandy. She drank nervously from the fine, conical little glass, letting me know with her silence that I should not begin a conversation. I listened to her, wanting to drink the warm, aromatic tea as soon as possible, hoping that everything would be clear as soon as we were out in the street again.

"Let's go," she said, when she saw that I had emptied my cup and that I was also anxious to leave this ambience. When we reached the street the dark had begun to fall. It was snowing a little less. She allowed me to slip my arm under hers for about a hundred metres, but only until we were across the street from the old officers' residence with its dome. "I'm going home," she said, "don't walk with me!" I was defeated by her behaviour.

"When shall we see each other?" I asked as she walked away, although I know that this was irrevocably the end and that nothing would change her decision. I watched her until her light grey coat sank into the dark, even before she reached the end of Manjež Park.

About twenty days later I heard that Aleksandar was in the Gestapo prison. No one knew why. And a few days later I, too, received a notice to appear at this notorious institution. What else could I do but respond to the summons in fear that they had perhaps discovered something about my father's origins. The investigator began with personal information. I said that my mother was Serb, my father German, avoiding describing him as Austrian. "So what is your nationality?" he asked me.

"I'm a Serb," I replied, "because my father died when I was nine and my mother raised me as a Serb." Luckily, I remember, he didn't make much of this, but asked me who my friends were. It was only then that I began to suspect that the Gestapo had called me in as a

witness in connection with Aleksandar's arrest. At first I avoided mentioning him, but when it became clear that it was he the investigator was aiming at I gave his name.

"All right," asked the investigator, "and what friends do you have in common?"

I was no longer hiding anything. "N.," I said. After that I had to tell him about Aleksandar and my meeting with N. and briefly describe that afternoon and what we did. I didn't conceal anything from him.

"Do you remember whether, in your presence, Aleksandar asked N. to get him some white oil paint so that he could write anti-German slogans?"

I was totally surprised by the question and by the discovery that N. could have accused Aleksandar of such a thing because, at the villa, N. and I had been together the whole time. I roundly rebutted N.'s claim, emphasising that Aleksandar had complained to me several times that he was having a lot of trouble because of his brother, who was a Communist.

"Do you really believe that I, a staunch anti-Communist, could be friends with a fanatical Communist?" I was resorting to lies to convince him, but it seemed that these words had worked. The investigator dropped the questioning but asked me, at the end, to confirm in the record my statement that I felt Serb, despite my father having been German. I walked out of the Gestapo, happy to be free again but uneasy because of the statement I had signed.

Not three days had passed when Aleksandar's brother, Brana, came to my home. "They let Aca out," he said while still at the door. "He's sick. He wants to tell you something very important."

We set off together to Karađorđeva Street where they lived. Aleksandar was in bed when I got there, his face haggard and pale. Obviously his time in the prison had worsened the damage to his lungs from the tuberculosis he had caught six months earlier. We had not even shaken hands when he said, his voice trembling. "N. denounced me. Can you imagine? They brought us face to face at the Gestapo! She was pretending that they had arrested her too. And you know why they arrested me? They claim that, when we were at N.'s place, I demanded that she get me some white oil paint so that I could write anti-German slogans. What a complete frame-up!" He told me

this in front of his brother and mother. Aleksandar died on the eve of the liberation.

I didn't see N. again for the rest of the war. In the meantime I tried to find out what had happened to her, but no one could tell me anything for certain. One person said that during the war she had been the mistress of the head of part of Radio Belgrade which was under army control and which became popular at precisely that time because it played the German song *Lili Marleen*. Someone else said that her lover had forced her to collaborate with the Gestapo and that this was the only way she could get a visa for Germany where she wanted to study. At that time the Allied bombers had not begun destroying German cities and factories.

And so it was only on the basis of this information that I could, to some extent, understand her behaviour. Everything indicated that she had only begun going out with me so that, as an Anglophile, I could be her victim when the time came. But in the encounter with Aleksandar, the brother of a well-known Belgrade Communist, she decided to pick her childhood friend as the victim instead of me. For some time she had to hesitate, to think about whether she should choose me or Aleksandar, and it was not until the afternoon in her lover's apartment that she decided who the victim should be. Had I been N.'s choice, this story of an unusual wartime romance would probably never have been told.

UNSOLVED MYSTERY

Not long after the war I was summoned by the War Crimes Commission. The Commission chairman asked me to testify against N., who had been arrested and charged with responsibility for the death of Aleksandar Jovanović. I tried to avoid doing this, but my efforts were in vain. The chairman cornered me: "I'm not asking you to explain what happened in 1942. I'm just asking you to repeat the words the deceased said to you in the presence of his brother and mother." There was no way out of this, although I didn't want to harm N. I gave evidence out of respect for Aleksandar's mother and brother. N. was convicted and sentenced, I think, to six years in prison, but released soon after because she was pregnant. I was unable to establish whether she spent time in Germany during the war, as people said. She was married soon after the liberation. When she was released

from prison, she graduated from the Philosophy Faculty at Belgrade University, divorced, went to Italy and married a famous Roman painter. She died of cancer in the sixties.

Many things are unclear about her relationship with me and Aleksandar. Why didn't she denounce me? I once confessed to her that I had destroyed the files of the Anglo-American Club and that I believed my father was of Jewish origin. Perhaps at the time she didn't understand how significant all this was. Why did she betray Aleksandar, her very close childhood friend? I never tried to obtain the indictment against her, but when my close friend was looking for documents about the trial of his father, a pre-war colonel from Army Intelligence who was sentenced to death, he discovered a record noting that I was the leading witness in the trial of Neuhausen, the general representative for the Serbian economy. During my relationship with N. I had said on one occasion that I occasionally visited Neuhausen because he was the person in charge of procuring material needed for the brewery. Nothing more than that. The mystery remains unsolved to this day.

A few months after the hearing of the "Aleksandar and N. case", I found myself once more in Gestapo headquarters, again as a witness, but this time as a witness to the truth about myself. As soon as I appeared before the investigator he asked me "Are you a German or a Jew?"

"You see, my father was a German, born in Vienna, and my mother is a Serb from Mostar. However, as I was only nine when my father died, over time I became a Serb." It seems to me that the investigator was somewhat confused by my reply.

"Do you have documents which show your father's religion and his origin, and that of his parents?" When I said I did he nodded and said "Then bring them here tomorrow."

For the first time in my life I opened my father's baptism certificate. TAUFSCHEIN (baptism certificate) was stamped on the front in large Gothic letters. Parents, Roman Catholic, godfather Teodor Riter fon Stefanović Vilovski of Vojvodina and of Serbian origin, who had made a thorough study of the hydrological situation in the zone of the Danube basin and is also known as a writer. I didn't see anything suspicious so the next day, almost calmly, I returned to the Gestapo. I handed the baptism certificate to the investigator. I could tell from the way he sat over it that he was examining it thoroughly and studying it.

Twice he seemed about to fold it and twice he hesitated to look at some item which he must have found suspicious or not clear enough. Then, with the certificate in his hand, he went to the adjacent office and, a few minutes later, returned with a serious-looking elderly man with very dark eyes. When he walked in he remained standing and immediately told me to stand up. I obeyed: first he observed my stature and height, then he came closer to look at my face. He was succinct. "The stature is Nordic, eyes grey-blue, hair light brown, but the forehead and the lips could be Semitic," he adjudged, and immediately walked out. The investigator began examining the certificate again, then folded it and returned it to me without a word. It was the end of August, perhaps the hottest day that summer, far too unpleasant for anyone to waste his energy solving a dilemma on which depended not the fate of the Third Reich, but the fate of a young man who had forgotten that he was German. Wiping the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, the investigator finally said "You may go."

As I made my way down the Gestapo stairs I wondered what it was that he was unsure about. According to my reading of it, my father's baptism certificate had nothing to accuse me, to expose me. I solved the mystery as soon as I left the building and opened the certificate: this time I immediately noticed what could have been a fatal oversight – my father had been born in 1889 but not baptised until 1894, five years later! This piece of information could have meant that my father had come into this world as a descendant of Moses. As I returned home I wondered what the investigator's attitude would have been had he known that my height and stature were determined by Hercegovinan genes rather than Jewish ones.

JEW UNDERLINED

I also dealt with the German military police just before the end of the occupation. I had stayed at a friend's place later than the curfew allowed and was unable to spend the night with my host so, despite the fact that it was later than the limit, I decided to try to somehow reach my street and my house. My awareness that the occupation was drawing to an end was responsible for my diminished caution and my excessive optimism that the night time adventure would end well. Right in front of the Voznesenska Church in Kneza Miloša

Street, in the half-darkness of the poorly lit street, I saw a very familiar silhouette: a pair of *Feldgendarmie*, the German military police.

"*Halt!*" one of them shouted. I obeyed, waiting for them to approach me.

"*Nachtausweis!*" the bigger one demanded. I didn't have a night pass, I only had the document which certified that I was employed in the brewery which supplied the *Wehrmacht*.

"This is not a *Nachtausweis*. If you don't have one, then we're taking you to the police." There was nothing I could do but resort to lies, playing on the sensitivity of the two Germans.

"I'm guilty," I said and began justifying myself. "I'm returning from my girlfriend's. You know my father is a German I'm not in the *Wehrmacht* ranks because I have tuberculosis and I live in this street." At 193 centimetres tall and weighing only 59 kilograms, I could easily give the impression of being very sick.

"Should we let him go?" the older and bigger of the two asked the other. He just nodded. No doubt their consciences were affected by the war psychology as well. Two months later, Belgrade was no longer an occupied city.

My origins could no longer drive me to death. It was not until the beginning of 1945 that I learnt, from Radio London and *Politika* that almost all the Jews in occupied Europe had died in concentration camps, most of them in Auschwitz. Among them were all my aunts and my uncle. My grandmother had died a natural death in Vienna before they began taking the Viennese Jews to Minsk, where they killed them in primitive gas chambers.

In 1986, after a persistent search, I finally discovered where and when the members of the Erenrajh family had perished. The international service for the identification of victims of the Holocaust in the German city of Arolsen informed me that all my relatives had been killed because they were Jews. The word "Jew" was underlined as though to eliminate any remaining doubt about my father's origins. What irony! While those nearest and dearest to me were still alive, their roots, their ethnic and religious affiliation were kept secret from me. Now they had disappeared in the fire and smoke of the Holocaust. And only now were all those things revealed to me: things like history and fate which determined the lives of the people among whose tragic members were so many generations of my father's ancestors.