
Dina KATAN BEN-ZION

DARK KINGDOM OF CHILDHOOD



Dina Katan Ben-Zion was born in 1937 in Sarajevo where she lived for the first four years of her life. Her grandparents, Simon and Dona Katan had a well-known bookshop and stationers in which her mother worked. After her father finished electrical engineering studies in Prague, he joined the business, mainly in the department for radio sets.

When the war broke out her father was with a unit in southern Serbia. Because the army units broke up, he managed to reach Sarajevo, disguised as a villager. But the very next day he was ordered to report with other army officers and they were all taken into German imprisonment which lasted until the end of the war. This was a group of about five hundred officers and soldiers who were serving in the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and were, in this capacity, captured by the Germans. So despite being Jews they were, as prisoners of war, under the protection of the Geneva Convention.

Dina Katan Ben-Zion is a poet, literary researcher and literary translator, mainly of writers from the territory of the former Yugoslavia into Hebrew. She has translated the works of Ivo Andrić, Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Tišma, David Albahari, Vasko Popa and the works of many other writers including Filip David and Ivan Lalić. She has published five collections of poetry and a comprehensive study entitled "Presence and Disappearance – Jews and Judaism in

Former Yugoslavia in the Mirror of Literature". Her most recent book, "Serbian Mythology" was recently published in Israel.

Campo Bari, Italy, March 1945. I was eight years old. I was in hospital. It was really hard for me, I hated every minute of it. It had been several days since my mother had been to visit me. Then my aunt came to tell me that my mother was ill.

I had fallen ill. First I had measles and then, immediately afterwards, whooping cough. Twice in succession I was admitted to the city children's hospital in Bari. My mother, Berta Katan (née Altarac) visited me every day, travelling from the Bari camp to the hospital in any vehicle she could find until, returning in a jeep one day, she was badly wounded by a freight truck and was lying in hospital with nine ribs fractured in twelve places and a torn pleura. She had had no news from my father, who was in German captivity, for more than a year. Not knowing whether she would survive and be back on her feet, concern for me forced my mother, from her hospital bed and with the help of friends, to get in touch with Aliyat Hanoar to have me sent to Palestine. I remember them taking me to visit my mother and then asking me whether I would agree to travel to Palestine. I felt, to the depths of my being, an enormous resistance to parting from my mother but, at the same time, a strong feeling of inevitability, that the whole thing was out of my hands, that the decision had already been made, that this was how it was to be and there was no other option. So, on March 25, 1945, ten days after my eighth birthday, I arrived at the Shaar Haamakim kibbutz where my distant cousin Sarina Talmi welcomed me very warmly. Then, when it emerged that there was no room at Shaar Haamakim in my age group, I was moved, on April 22, 1945, to the Merhavia kibbutz where I was put into a group of my peers (I was the eldest among them) who were beginning primary school that year.

At the time my father, engineer Isak Katan, had been in German captivity since immediately after the fall of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in whose army he served as commander of an artillery unit. At the time my mother was injured and I was sent to Palestine, from January to April, 1945, he was among a group of prisoners being taken eight hundred kilometres on foot from Barkenbrige in Germany to Alexisdorf in Holland. One of my father's colleagues, Dr Željko Lederer, described this walk:

“...trampled heels, making the ankles twist and every step insecure, so we walked, stumbling, so that every time we slid on an unnoticed slippery stone it hurt. And then this pain would go up, from our feet to our hearts, to our shoulders and our backs, and finally the whole body was screaming from pain, the heart from the strain, the shoulders from the burden, the throat from the thirst. [...] Our thoughts are drifting. We are silent because we are walking awake but each with his own vision before his eyes: that of sitting at a table covered with a white tablecloth, white plates in front of us [...] A thousand times we dreamt these dishes: pancakes, white coffee, buttered buns ... this vision was so vivid that, staring at it, we covered the twentieth kilometre, the twenty-fifth, the thirtieth, forgetting that it was four days since we were last given three hundred grams of bread, that we had set off in the morning five minutes before they came to give out the soup [...] After twenty kilometres our consciousness becomes numb: the only thing alive is the awareness that we are slaves, that we are riveted to one another with chains and, all together, to world history. Our marching in step is the rhythm of world history: we marched through Pomerania two days ahead of the Soviet troops, ten days before the British troops through Hanover,” (December 21, 1947)

During the bombing of Sarajevo and the arrival of German troops in the city, our family – my grandmother, mother and my father’s sister with her husband and two sons – were in the basement of our house, which served as a shelter. My memory is a blur ... darkness, some crashes from outside, great fear. Our three-storey building was not hit. There was a German officer living in one of the three apartments. Thinking that he had been “invited to dinner” he came to the family Seder, not knowing that this was a Jewish Seder. When he discovered this, he didn’t leave, astounded to be confronted with “cultured Jewish vermin” who spoke excellent German and knew how to communicate with him.

A commissioner was appointed to the shop, a former customer named Grulih. This was a man who had often owed money but never been harassed because of it. Our family was forbidden to enter the shop. Grulih took over the cash register and, from that point on, never even tried to offer the family any money. He even persuaded them to hide the

stocks of food they had collected before the war in the store so that he could “safeguard” it and ensure that it didn’t fall into the hands of the Germans. However he took for himself everything they put there. My mother was called up for compulsory labour, cleaning in the German city compound.

One night at the beginning of September, 1941, they took my grandmother, Dona Katan, away. She was 59. First she was in Kruščica, then in Lobargrad. My father made a great effort to send her parcels there from captivity, but it turned out that the Ustaša took them for themselves. My grandmother eventually reached Auschwitz where she perished in the gas chamber at the beginning of 1942.

My mother fled Sarajevo with me on September 18, 1941, with the help of a Croat named Pavao Sehtel. On his own initiative he offered to take us to Mostar with the help of false documents he had obtained. As well as helping my mother and me, he also did the same for other people, including my father’s sister Tilda Pinto, her husband, Professor Salomon Pinto and their two sons. From Mostar we travelled on our own to Dubrovnik, to my mother’s sister and brother-in-law, Mirta and Leon Albahari, who lived in Dubrovnik. My aunt, Tildo Pinto, also arrived in Dubrovnik where she was reunited with her husband and sons, Bencijon and Šimon (Bato). Our two families went through most of our emigration together. When it became dangerous in Dubrovnik, we managed to cross over to Split on February 20, 1942. From Split the Italians deported us to Milna on Brač, then to Postire. This lasted from September 22, 1942, to May 25, 1943.

According to my mother’s testimony, we lived very modestly, because the Italians gave us a minimum of staple foods and we no longer had any money of our own. We were required to report and sign in at the Italian police station every day. Going out was forbidden after



*Dina Katan in the warmth
of her family*

seven in the evening. It was also forbidden to leave the island. On May 25, 1943, the Italians deported us to the island of Rab, to the camp there. On Rab I began some kind of first grade of primary school. After Italy capitulated in September 1943, my mother fled with me (together with my aunt and her family) with the help of the Partisans, to the liberated territory. After a very hard walk we reached the regions of Lika and Kordun and then, in Rujevac, we were attached as supplementary workforce to the school for the children of fallen Partisans. There my mother cooked, my aunt sewed and her husband taught. The conditions were harsh and we would flee into the woods during the sixth and seventh German offensives during which time, because of circumstances, I was separated from my mother for a couple of days. We found places to spend the night in village houses where, on one occasion, a village woman spilt hot water from a cauldron on my chest, so I became very ill, with an infection in the wound and a fever. On July 27, 1944, the British moved the whole school by cargo aircraft to Italy, where we parted company with the school and moved to the Bari camp.

Nothing remains in my memory from that period which would be worth writing in this testimony, all the more so because, as soon as I arrived in the kibbutz among a group of children who had had normal childhoods, I was urged to “forget” as soon as possible that I had ever been anywhere else, so I began to hate the Serbo-Croatian language and my own name – Dona – and made an effort to distance myself from all of it. It’s clear to me today that I had been deeply affected by the feeling of flight, of insecurity, of being under threat, of being in fear, of being hungry, the horror of lice, because of which they had twice completely shaved my head, of the feeling that I was always in someone’s way in this world and that I was being pursued from one place to another, that what was most important was always most in danger: home, a sense of belonging, a normal life. It seems as though the state of feeling threatened, and the flights, the suffering and the fear, in some way grew out of proportion to become dominant as the integral material of my own perception of my childhood, despite that fact that I had been by my mother’s side up to the age of eight and in more or less immeasurably better conditions than those experienced by those children who ended up in German camps or lost their parents. It appears that I have never completely lost this original feeling, that I am some kind of “moveable” matter, a wandering quality, independent of my wish or will, which is incapable of resisting important events which have had fateful conse-

quences in my life, that my wishes or my will mean very little, that the “force of circumstance” prevails, and all of this had some kind of destructive effect on a series of my decisions as an adult. All this, of course, is the contemplation of an adult. I feel that my childhood, as a treasury of riches for life, is pretty meagre. The memories I have of the “little” things, the blessings that make up the world of childhood, like the first discoveries of the basic ideas of life, or the small joys of day-to-day life are, in my case, very few in number, deafened and muted, accompanied by fears, limitations and proscriptions. I have often wondered whether the cause of this is my nature, my personal disposition not to remember cheerful occurrences or, indeed, whether all that surrounded me was really unpleasant and largely cheerless. Still I remember, during our emigration, my mother firmly, feverishly and unwaveringly holding to her belief that my father would return and that everything she told me and the way she responded to my questions reflected her efforts to preserve him as a “living presence”. Several examples of such moments are still vividly present in my memory.

After the end of the war my parents were reunited in Sarajevo. However, as it was difficult for them to live in a place in which everything reminded them of their lost home and family, my father sought a job in Mostar, where he was employed in the electric power plant. Later my parents returned to Sarajevo, where he was employed in Bosnia Film.

Of his immediate family, my father lost his mother and first cousins, and my mother lost her father, her grandmother, her brother and sister and more than forty members of her extended family.

I was returned to my parents from Palestine in March, 1947 (by



Tombstone of Dina Katan's grandfather and grandmother which reads that her grandmother Dona perished in a Nazi camp and that her grave is unknown

that time I had already completely forgotten Serbo-Croatian) and then, as soon as Aliyah was made possible, I returned to Israel with my parents in June 1949. Until my parents settled in I was again in the same kibbutz for another two years. I then joined my parents in Jerusalem, where I finished secondary school.

I was with my parents from the age of four to eight, and then from ten to twelve and finally from the age of fourteen on. They survived and cared for me in every way possible and I was provided with a warm home in which there was love, joy and happiness. Despite this my personal view of the world has been in some distinctive way burdened by an inexplicable gloom, difficulties, unexpressed pain, an inclination towards the sad and painful as the dominant theme of life and as the "real truth". My parents did not hide what had been irretrievably lost for them, but they did not dwell on it. They tried to live each and every individual moment in the best and nicest way possible under the conditions in which they found themselves, and knew not to poison life by clinging to the memory of injustice, loss, suffering and horror. It seems that I, in some way, carried inside myself a deeply concealed sense of tremendous suffering from the past, to a degree which is disproportionate to my personal experience. To some extent I could grasp this in my encounters with books by Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Tišma, Filip David, David Albahari and other writing important to me. Through reading and translation, these have enabled me to transfer into my language a part of the intimate feeling of a severed trunk which I have unconsciously carried deep inside me for years.