

LOOKING FOR AVRAM LEVI SADIĆ



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SEPTEMBER 10, 2020. / JERUSALEM / ISRAEL

This story is true. This story is personal. It is also, I believe, a story that many will recognise...

Avram Levi Sadić ought to have been forgotten. No one should have remembered him. No one even remembered what he had looked like. No one had kept his photo in their family album. It could be said that no one cared. Even the whereabouts of his grave was unknown. His name did not appear on any list of the millions of Holocaust victims, not even at **Yad Vashem**. **Avram Levi Sadić should have sunk into that dark sea of eternal oblivion**, at the bottom of which rest millions no one remembers anymore. The only thing that did remain, that was proof of his existence, was the evidence of his various properties, all of which have survived numerous dismantlings. All that vast property empire has been variously taken apart by all. Firstly, by the invading Germans. In 1941 they were seen throwing bales of socks out of the broken windows, **of Avram's** Kljuc Sock Factory. These bales were loaded onto waiting trucks. Those same socks, were transported by train to various fronts, and most probably warmed the feet of German soldiers.

Next came the Ustashas. They illegally appropriated his luxury apartment. He was then forced to live in a derelict property in Magrabija Street. From there, Avram eventually escaped to Mostar. The dismemberment continued, on behalf of the people, by Tito's communists. They nationalised everything that survived Avram. Following the Ustashas, the national hero and Communist Vasa Butozan moved into Avram's luxury apartment. Czech communists also nationalised the four luxury buildings in Karlovy Vary center. **Culminating in Avram's whole portfolio**, being confiscated and nationalised by Tito's Yugoslavia. The complete dismantling was finalised in the aftermath of the Yugoslav disintegration. It is strange but evitable that the most recent owners of **Avram's properties** have used his name to attach a byword/ label of high quality and long tradition to their newly acquired ownership of his former property.

It all began one day when I picked up the telephone; I was at home in Israel at that time. The caller **introduced himself as Amir Ibrišimović**. He stated that he was calling in connection with the property of an Avram Levi Sadić. He then informed me of his extensive database detailing the vast assets of the said Avram Levi Sadić, and that he was looking for his living heirs, given that Avram was one of the most powerful, influential, and wealthiest people in the region in the pre-World War II period. Such phone calls can ignite hope, wild imaginations of a great legacy, and

happiness just at **one's** fingertips. This call did precisely that. Amir **Ibrišimović sent extensive documentation proving that Avram** had had an impressive portfolio. He was the owner of four large classic buildings in the center of Karlovy Vary. The **Ključ** Socks Factory in Sarajevo (which employed 300 workers on the eve of World War II), and **the Šik Knitwear**, and a Haberdashery Factory in Sarajevo, which employed 120 workers (at the beginning of 1941). Also included were several residential buildings in Sarajevo. Dreams of inheriting millions seemed strangely within my reach. It was all too real as it was revealed that Amir **Ibrišimović possessed a court decision** that declared my late mother and her sister the sole legal heirs of Avram's property.

According to Amir Ibrišimović, we had the best chances to retrieve our inheritance with the properties in Karlovy Vary, now situated in the Czech Republic. Since the Czech Republic, as a 'cultural and orderly state,' **had** adopted a law on restitution. Amir doubted that Bosnia-Herzegovina, poor and war-ravaged, would ever pass a law on restitution. It lacked the finances to pay compensation to the heirs of confiscated property and probably would for a few generations to come. Concerning Sarajevo, he stated that, and I quote, "Well, everyone in Sarajevo knows that half of Sarajevo was Jewish before the Second World War."

It quickly became evident that there would be no restitution or even compensations for the four beautiful classic buildings in the center of Karlovy Vary. The deadline for lodging an application re property repossession in the Czech Republic passed in 2001. Even if we could have legally applied in time, we would still be disqualified from repossession as a key condition necessitated the applicant to be of Czech citizenship. Citizenship no one in our family held.

In about a year, all our dreams of millions had dissipated one by one. We did not have the required Czech citizenship for property inheritance in the Czech Republic. Bosnia lacked a law on restitution, which was not likely to ever be adopted. **The Ključ and Šik factories** had been privatised. To muddy the waters further, BiH media reported extensively on a major criminal trial involving very nefarious, illegal activities surrounding the **privatisation process and shares of the Ključ sock factory, involving** a certain Mr. Turkovic's and co-defendants, all being contemporary Bosnian criminal kingpins. The newspapers also noted Mr. Turkovic's connections with the drugs trade, the armed robbery at Sarajevo airport of some 2 million euros, **and the practice of 'bricking in' live people into walls during** building construction.

Day by day, it became more apparent that this bombastic story of a great, unexpected legacy would ultimately lead to merely a pile of papers

and documents, each demonstrating in its own way the story of the man Avram Levi Sadić. This was all that was left to prove the existence of a man who once lived, once meant something to someone, and who achieved much. As it is said in the will of his youngest sister Rifka Bulka **Finci (born Levi Sadić), he was brutally killed within the village of Dabar,** in the hamlet of Zapolje on 5 February 1944. Killed by the occupying enemy and their local helpers. After all, our hopes of inheriting millions were dashed, slowly while reading all these documents, a picture of **Avram Levi Sadić** slowly started to galvanise. A man, a person of flesh and blood seemed to be reaching out across the years, inspiring me to find out who he was, and what had really happened to him.

From the numerous documents sent by Amir Ibrišimović, it was possible to find out some basics. Mostly routine information-his birth/death details, family/children details, and other possible relatives. It was like assembling a puzzle. Using common sense and an elimination system, I discovered many previously unknown facts about my family. These papers revealed the stories of many interesting people. They also showed their fascinating destinies, most of which proved tragic. **Avram Levi Sadić** had seven brothers and sisters. Little is known about the fate of these eight **children of Solomon Levi Sadić and Dona Levi Sadić (nee Pardo)**. Little is also known about the fate of their daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, grandchildren, or their great-grandchildren. Some were fated to die from fire, some from water, some from diseases, some from knives, some from bullets, even some from sorrow. All of them have left this life, one by one, each in their own way. Each one took their story with them to the grave, leaving no one who could tell their stories. Maybe something more could be gleaned from the books of the Jewish community of Sarajevo. That avenue proved to be lined, not with trees but thorns. For whatever reasons, guided by who knows what local politics and policies, those who have custodial rights of these books do not allow others the right of personal access. Even for legitimate enquiry. Even for family information. All applications for any information about a current or former member of the Sarajevo Jewish Community, including personal family ancestry, must be submitted in writing. You are then told that the requested details will follow. After a person writes numerous emails/lists naming family members/lists of the ancestral family names, they regularly receive the same stock answer; there is no information about any persons under those names in the Sarajevo Jewish community's books.

When Soviet soldiers tore down the Third Reich flag at the Berlin Reichstag, it ignited the signal for all of Europe to begin rejoicing in celebration of the end of hostilities. However, the fates of the family **Levi Sadić did not** leave much grounds for rejoicing. A once large, prosperous family, considered one of the richest and most influential in the region in

1939, had been reduced to a mere handful of frightened, sick, and depressed people. Avram's youngest sister Rifka Bulka Finci (nee Levi **Sadić**), aged 61 years, was dying at the hospital in Glina in July 1945. Before her death, she had dictated her last will to a court clerk. From this document, we learn that her brother, **Avram Levi Sadić**, was brutally murdered by the enemy and their local allies on 5 February 1944, in the village of Dabar, at the hamlet of Zapolje. Rifka also knew that her own husband and two sons, Shalom and Salomon, had been killed in Jasenovac. Therefore, her will stated that she would leave all her property to her daughter, my grandmother, Berta Beja Kamha (nee Finci). Up to her last days in Glina, Rifka did not know that her thirty-nine-year-old daughter's days were numbered.

This story is my odyssey. Was it always fated to be too little, too late? I do know that after the realisation that not a single penny of Avram's quite considerable wealthy assets would come back to his descendants, I became obsessed with a need; a need to find out just who Avram Levi Sadić was, in the hope that he could be liberated from that deep dark trap of oblivion. Apart from the documents received from Amir **Ibrišimović**, I held no other evidence of his life, nothing else that had belonged to him. Everything was permanently, thoroughly destroyed. It had been killed, burned, confiscated, nationalised, and later, privatised by other people. While other amateur family historians have drawers and closets to rummage in, older relatives to talk to, evidence to sift through, I had nothing tangible. No drawers. No closets. No older relatives, nothing. Any material that could have been was variously confiscated, removed, destroyed, or 'sold'. **Anybody who** I could have spoken to was dead, or at best, living with severe dementia. I was left with a feeling of being drawn to find out more by something which was not easy to explain. It felt as if I was groping in the dark. Catching hold of something here and there. Trying to then work out what that could mean, like a blind man through touch. And then having to attempt an interpretation by which it could be placed, sorted, stored, and related. It was all so random, too disjointed too often.

I spent long hours on the internet, googling in various languages looking for any sign of Avram's life. I reviewed all the testimonies in Yad Vashem. I made enquiries about the camp survivors at Rab and read any other written testimonies that existed. The same as those who were in hiding in Lika. I searched the archives of Sarajevo, Zagreb, Belgrade, the military institute in Belgrade, the Jewish Museum in Belgrade, Otočac, and Gospić. I even took to reading books reporting that period, hoping to see the name Avram Levi Sadić somewhere, anywhere.

One day I came across the book "Dollar a Day," written by Danko Samokovlija. In that book, Samokovlija describes the lives of Jewish refugees in Lika after they left the Italian camp, Rab, following Italy's capitulation in September 1943. He states **that they were in Petinjić Polje**, where there were rumors that there were Ustasha informers present. This being so, they continued walking through the snow until reaching the village of Dabar. It seems that one group of people stayed in Dabar, **and a larger group continued walking to Ličke Jasenice**. Among the group that remained in the village of Dabar was, and I now quote, "a well-known citizen of Sarajevo, the owner of the Kljuc socks factory, **Avram Levi Sadić**. This man had no idea that this small village would be the last place he would ever be in his life. One night he was slaughtered by Germans and Ustashas. " That exactly coincided with what Rifka Bulka **Finci's** would have said. The will of my great-grandmother **and Avram's** youngest sister clearly stated that her brother was brutally killed on 5 February 1944 in the hamlet of Zapolje near Dabar. The vivid descriptions of **Avram's road's end within this book** informed my decision to travel to Rab, then later to Lika in **the footsteps of Avram Levi Sadić**.

Dabar

I will not try to explain why it was not so simple to just go to Lika. How you cannot just appear in the middle of this village to look for a murdered man. I approached **Prof. Ivan Šporčić**, who was from that area, to help. His uncle, a Catholic priest in Dabar, connected us with Tomo Rukavina, who had written a book about the history of this area. All these people opened their doors to us, invited us in, and dedicated their time to helping us. Unfortunately, no one knew anything about Avram. Neither had anyone even heard of the Jews hiding here in World War II. At that moment, it seemed to me that my trip to Dabar was in vain. Looking for **traces of Avram Levi Sadić** in Lika was beginning to resemble looking for a needle in a haystack. As we have already reached Lika, we decided to visit the hamlet of Zapolje (near Dabar). Prof. Sporic believed that it was possible to find out something in that **village. Avram Levi Sadić was** killed in that village on 5 February 1944, and here I was, his descendant, more than 75 years later, looking for his grave.

The village looked like it came directly from some definitive part of the story. It should be seen as if time stood had stood still in 1944; but there had been a new war, a new massacre, and new blood had been shed in the 1990s. The first four houses in the village belonged to Croats and the other twenty houses to Serbs. But the sum population is less than a dozen inhabitants, both Serbs, and Croats. They are all old. Many of the houses have been demolished. Some have been restored. Some of the old wooden log cabins probably date from the time when Avram passed

through this village. The sound of barking dogs accompanies us all the time as we walked through the village. Dogs know well the smell of the village inhabitants, our scent made it clear that we were not of their village. We approached the first old woman we saw, dressed all in black, the de rigueur clothing custom in these parts. She was stacking wood in preparation for the winter. I asked her if she knew anything about Avram. She had never heard of him. She remembered that her mother-in-law had told her that she "...kept Jews in the house." An old woman added: **"I got married into this house, and I only heard it from the stories. I was not born in this village, nor did I live in Zapolje at that time."** Her son, who was visiting from Serbia, said he remembers that there were six partisan graves in the cemetery. All with the names of non-local people. I hoped that one of them was Avram`s.

We then went to the Serbian orthodox cemetery only to discover those 'other' names were written on a memorial plaque. The villagers were trying to convince me that Avram was probably buried at this cemetery. Where else could he be buried? They shrugged. They reasoned that if he was killed in the village, he was probably buried in the cemetery. I believe that the locals were keen to promote this explanation to afford comfort, so that I would have something tangible to hold onto. There were some unmarked graves in that cemetery. I surveyed all those graves without names, some marked by crosses, some with no markings. Just looking at those graves did not give me closure. I knew, I just knew somehow, that Avram was not there.

I asked if someone could be buried outside the cemetery walls. The old woman's son answered, "No way, all around this is rock, no one can dig there." That is it then. I lit a candle in the Orthodox cemetery. Even as I lit the candle, I knew that that place had nothing to do with Avram. We went back to the car. That is, **Professor Šporčić, his uncle**, the priest from Dabar, Tomislav Rukavina, the old woman's son, my husband, Muki, and me. We said our goodbyes and thanked the old woman's son. Everyone got into the car; everyone but me.

At that moment, something pulled at me; it seemed to be telling me to go to the other end of the village. Maybe it was feminine intuition, a sixth sense. Or perhaps it was a familial shout across the generations. Call it what you like. I cannot explain this. But I knew that I should go over there, to that other part of the village. With the rest of my group already sat in the car waiting for me I walked off in the opposite direction. I understood that if I got into that car, this story would end right there. I said nothing to anyone. I just left. I quickened my pace. Moving away from the car, as if running away. I walked and walked. Alone, continually looking around. Trying to catch a sign, something, anything. I remember

thinking, "Here I am, Avram, I have come to Zapolje, and where are you? Give me a sign, now it's up to you; I've come to the wall, show me the way out." And while I was talking to Avram in my mind, I noticed my husband, Muki. He had been sent by the others to look for me. They were waiting to leave. They did not understand my sudden unexplained walkabout. I noticed an old woman trying to talk to Muki from a balcony, but his serbo-croatian is very limited, so he was having difficulty understanding her. I quickened my pace towards them. I greeted the old woman, and she asked me, "Who are you? What are you looking for?" I replied that I was looking for my Jewish relative who perished in this village. The old woman responded, "Wait, I'll come down now."

Evica Vlajisavljević is eighty-six-years old, and has lived in this village all her life. A thin, vital old woman, with a clear head and the obligatory black scarf. She informed us that five "chivuts" (Jews) had been slaughtered by Germans and Ustashas at the village outskirts. She continued, "... there was Sara, a beautiful little woman, she didn't know how to speak our language, so we children taught her." It was my Avram that she remembers well because she often saw him walking around the village. "He was a bright man, always wearing a cap, of a medium height just like him (**she pointed at Professor Šporčić**). One night the Germans and the Ustashas from Brinje came and caught them at the bottom of the village. They took them out of the village and slaughtered them. Their bodies lay in the field for a day or two, and then people from the village went there and buried them, right there at the same place where they were slaughtered. " **When she was little**, Evica and other children looked after the sheep. She remembers being told by the adults not to go to that field because the Jews were slaughtered there.

Childhood is a time of significant events. Yet the biggest of these is the world of adults seen through children's eyes. That adult world looks enormous, giant- like. Then life happens, and that big adult world somehow shrinks. Children grow up, they go their own way, and the world appears much smaller in proportion. Evica also grew up; she stopped looking after the sheep. She got married, had children, went through another war, but she never left Zapolje. Her world has not shrunk. This bright and vital old woman, dressed all in black, tried to evoke distant memories and recall something else. She added: "...whether they dug them up later or not, I don't know anymore. I don't remember that, as if I remember something, but I am not sure." This old woman looked into the distance, trying to recall the memory, but she kept repeating that she was not sure.

I begged Evica to take us to that place. She reluctantly agreed because it would not be easy to get there.

She wanted to direct us so we could go alone. "Go." - she told us - "to the last house in the village and uphill, and through the high bushes all the way up to the wall, there you will see a slope right behind that wall, that is where they were killed. In the end, Evica agreed to come with us. We drove her as far as we could. Then this wily old woman headed up the hill. Through the tall uncut grass, through the thorns and bushes. It was not easy for her to go through those bushes and thorns. And then this old woman stopped for a moment and said, "Just go to that big bush, there is a wall behind it, then a slope. Behind the wall, there is leveled ground. That is where it happened. They were killed there. "

We walked in the direction indicated by Evica. Through the bushes and the neglected lawn, where no human foot had stepped in a long time. **Professor Šporčić** stepped tentatively as he was afraid of snakes. Along the way, **Muki and Professor Šporčić** bumped into a thorn bush. Finally, we reached the sub-wall.



Berta Zekić Belson at the place of death near the sub-wall mentioned by Evica Vlajisavljević and Veljko Čturilo

There we found a rusted can on the wall, just by its appearance; one could tell it had been standing there for a long time. Initially, I thought it was a memorial candle, the kind Jews light — but who could light a memorial candle there? We took a picture of the can to enlarge the letters and read what was written on the can. Finally, we discovered that the sign on the can said fish in German. Someone had been there. He ate canned fish brought from Germany. Why? How? What was he looking for

there? We passed the wall; we came across the slope, exactly as Evica had described. Here were the slaughter grounds. I stood and looked around, almost stunned. Was it possible? It seemed that I came to Zapolje in vain just about an hour ago and that the chances of coming across the trail **of Avram Levi Sadić were zero**. Yet here I was, standing where Avram parted with his soul. I looked around in disbelief. Am I really here? Are these trees the last thing Avram's eyes saw? What was going through his head as they led them uphill? Surely, he was afraid. What is the fear of death? Did he know it was the end? Did he hope for salvation? What was he thinking as he parted from his soul? What does a slaughtered man feels?



The place where Abraham and four other Jews were slaughtered

Veljko's testimony

On that July day, we had walked through the hamlet of Zapolje talking to the older people trying to find out if there was anyone who remembered an old Jew who had hid in the village in 1944. Tomo Rukavina referred us to ninety-one-year-old **Veljko Čturilo, who** had recently returned to **Otočac from Serbia**. We found him in his new apartment in the center of **Otočac, where he** had returned from Petrovaradin with his wife, Sofia. Veljko is originally from the nearby village of Bobinje, more precisely

from the hamlet of Čturiilo, which was a neighboring village, just above Zapolje.



Berta Zekić Belson with Veljko Čturiilo and his wife Sofia, in their apartment in Otočac

This hearty and bright old man remembered Avram very well. He told us, "I remember him so well. He wore a winter coat with a fur collar and walked through the village, " Veljko had also written a book about the history of this area. However, he had not written a single word about the Jews who hid there or about the slaughter in Zapolje. I questioned him about why he had not mentioned these events, and Veljko replied that he had not wanted to get involved and that he had left the Jews to write about their own people. As for Avram, Veljko says that he often mentioned him with Marko Narandzic, who was a politician even before World War II. That local politician, Marko **Narandžić and Avram** often talked during those days when Avram was hiding in Zapolje. Seeking company in the village, Avram befriended several local pre-war politicians. Veljko was a teenager at the time. Later, when Veljko grew up **and became a politician himself, Veljko Čturiilo and Marko Narandžić** became friends. At that time, Marko often mentioned Avram and everything that he told him in their conversations. And he always said, "That's what your money stands for, my Veljko, remember Avram, left four wagons of goods, a lot of money in the current account, he also left houses, factories, apartments, great wealth, and do you remember how he ended up."

Veljko Čturiilo became a politician in the municipality of Dabar in the 1950s. In 1958 or 1959, he received a letter from the then-mayor of **Otočac, Dane Rupičić, asking Veljko to provide all necessary assistance to** a delegation of the Jewish community that was to come to Dabar to exhume the bodies of five Jews slaughtered on 5 February 1944 above

Zapolje. Veljko told us that three people came to Dabar, he believes from Sarajevo, led by a Dr. Stockhaimer. Veljko found several strong men to exhume the bodies. All five bodies with skulls intact were located. The bodies were transferred to tin crates and stored for transportation. On that day, during their lunch, Veljko told the Jewish delegation about an additional grave of a Jewish woman who had drunk poison after the Germans wounded her in both legs. Unable to escape and fearing falling into Germans or Ustashas hands, the woman had drunk poison. She was buried at the village called Mala Kapela. The Jewish delegation was surprised to hear about this additional victim. They went to Mala Kapela and exhumed her body. Then the tin boxes with the bodies of six Jews were taken by lorries **to Ličke** Jasenice. The rest of the journey was by train. Veljko did not know precisely where they took the bodies, but he believed that they were taken to Sarajevo. He was not even sure of the exact year - 1957, 1958, or 1959. He also mentioned that a few months later, he received a thank you letter from the Jewish community signed by Dr. Stockhaimer. He offered that letter to me as he did not need to keep it. Veljko explained that during the war of the 1990s, he transferred all the documents, including **a large archive from Otočac to** Petrovaradin, and it remains with his son in Petrovaradin today. I was hoping to collect that letter, **but it was never found. Instead, Veljko Čaturilo typed on a** typewriter, as it had been originally committed to history, three and the half **pages of testimony about Avram Levi Sadić and the exhumation of** those killed in Zapolje. I asked Veljko where Avram lived. He said that **Avram spent his last days in Mate Krznarić's house**. Once again, Veljko mentioned that he remembers Avram very well and that his memory of him is very much alive. Avram, it seems, was a man possessing a certain something memorable. There was something impressive about him Veljko volunteered. According to his testimony, Avram was calm, optimistic, always smiling. Talking about **Mato Krznarić, Veljko Čaturilo** says, "...that he was a good man even though he was a Croat." When the Ustashas and the Germans captured Avram, Mato begged the Ustashas to spare him. They promised him that nothing bad would happen to Avram.

From the beginning of January until 5 February 1944, twenty eith Jews hid in the villages of Dabar municipality. **Dabar and Otočac** were within the liberated partisan territory at that time, and the people of the village were given directives to accommodate Jews in their homes. After Italy's capitulation and the liberation from the Italian concentration camp, Rab, most of the healthy Jewish men, joined the partisans. A Jewish battalion was formed and quickly disbursed. The Jewish members were scattered among the non-Jewish partisan units. Elderly Jewish men, women, and children left the liberated Italian camp Rab and were transferred to Senj. When the Germans took Senj, they fled across the Velebit Mountain to **Otočac, which** was still under partisan control. The partisans billeted

these refugees among the villager's homes. Jewish refugees then lived with them, eating the same food, living the same lives as their local hosts. Those refugees with money paid for the food. Those without money worked for their village hosts or managed some other way. Later, following six German offensives, the partisans withdrew. The villages of Brinje and Letinac to Zapolje witnessed the arrival of the 392 German Legionary Division allied with the Ustasas. They came deliberately at night. They had only one order: one goal; to eliminate all the Jewish refugees. Were they tipped off? They seemed to know that Jews were hiding in these villages. This German Division, also known as the Blue Division, was manned by Croats and Bosnian Muslims then serving in the German army. Following the creation of the Independent State of Croatia, **in June 1941, Ante Pavelić offered Hitler volunteers to serve on the Eastern Front.** This offer translated into the formation of air and naval personnel units, trained, and equipped in Germany, primarily to serve on the Eastern front fighting the Red Army. On 17 August 1943, the 392nd Croatian Infantry Division was formed. It mustered and trained in Austria. It proved to be the third and last division formed for service in the Wehrmacht. It consisted of about 3,500 members from the German cadre enhanced by around 8,500 soldiers of the Croatian Home Guard (part of the regular army of the Independent State of Croatia). The division was led by the Austrian Major General Johann Mickl. The soldiers were primarily Croats and Muslims from Bosnia, while the commanding staff was German. Soldiers of this division wore Wehrmacht uniforms with the Independent State of Croatia's coat of arms on the right sleeve. Although initially intended to fight on the Eastern Front, shortly after its founding, this changed. The German High Command decided that this division would be limited to operations within the Independent State of Croatia territory. This combination of historical circumstances led to the fact that the hands that cut Avram's throats along with the four women in Zapolje wore German uniforms, although the method of slaughter was not very common amongst Wehrmacht soldiers.

Those Jews who were situated in the houses that sat higher in the villages managed to escape. However, those in lower valley sited homes such as Zapolje and were unfortunate to be at the lower end of those settlements were caught. The house of Mato Krznarić, **where Avram** lived, was at the bottom of the village. Veljko said that after these five Jews were captured and slaughtered, the other Jews did not return to Dabar because they were afraid. Only one family returned, and they returned to the house of a Janko.

The next day we returned to Zapolje. I wanted to see Mate Krznarić's house, where Avram spent his last days. At the same time, I brought modest gifts for all the good people who had assisted us the day before.

Those who had helped enhance our slim knowledge of Avram. Firstly, we went to the house of Tomo Rukavina. Tomo generously opened his doors, sharing the best wine, the best brandy, the best prosciutto, and the very best homemade crempita. Together with his wife Vera, he now spends more and more time in his native hamlet of Lug near Dabar. They also own a house in Gorica, near Zagreb, and a house in Rovinj. Tomo says they feel the best in Lug. Tomo Rukavina is an interesting person. He was formally one of the commanders of the Tigers and spent the entire **1990's** war on the battlefield. He is proud of that part of his past. He noted that people of this area, both Serbs and Croats, lived here in harmony until the latest war. He explained that there was a local agreement between the Ustashas and the Chetniks during World War II. Ustashas would not touch Serbian villages, and the Chetniks would not touch Croatian settlements. However, on occasions, it did happen that Ustashas from other areas would come, and then the Ustashas from Dabar would warn the Serbs to take shelter until they passed. Likewise, Dabar Chetniks also protected "their Croats". Both sides stuck to that agreement until the last war **in the 1990's**, when all those time-honored woven seams tore apart.

As we had visited Tomislav and Vera for two consecutive days, they invited us into their house the next day. Their house was full of Croatian symbols, festooned with flags, war trophies, pictures of deceased parents, and various old objects and memories from an ancient, and more recent past. From all this, it was possible to see how much Tome cares about the **area's** history and his Croatian identity. He remembered **Mate Krzmarić well. He says that he was alive until the** end of the 90s and that he died at a very old age in a nursing home in Udbina in 1998/9. In describing Mate Krznaric, Tomo indicated that he was a tragic figure in his own way. He came from one of the wealthiest families in the village. His father, Micho, was very rich. The best and most fertile land belonged to his father. Old Micho built a house that was later shared by his sons Mate and Milan. **Mate Krznarić reached** an old age whilst his brother died younger in the 1950s. "And the fact that a Jew lived in his house does not surprise me at all," Tomo continues. "Mate was married to a Serbian woman, which was very unusual at the time. They had a son, Micho, named after his father. His son Micho lived in Gorica near Zagreb, and he was a policeman. All was good until he started to drink. He left his wife and daughter and set up another home with another woman. Mate was angry with his son; the wife was angry with her husband, so Mate`s granddaughter never visited the hamlet of Zapolje. She never saw her father`s **village**. There were unresolved property issues between Mate`s granddaughter and Mate's nephew, the brother of Milan's son, who still **lives in Otočac**. **Mate's house** that once sheltered Avram Levi Sedic now looks neglected. Deserted, overgrown with weeds, and surrounded by tall

unclipped hedges. Judging by its appearance, no one seems to care about that house anymore. Not enough, anyway.

It was at the entrance to the village earlier that we had met Ilija. He was leading a tied cow wearing his deep rubber boots. When asked about **Mate Krznarić's house**, he showed us a deserted old half-ruined house; made half in stone and half in dark wooden planks. He told us that "...it was a big house," especially for that time. All other houses that proceeded that time were smaller, much more modest. Mate was one of the most prominent people in the village. That plot of land on which his house was situated on the most fertile land in the village. Mate also owned a "large estate that he inherited from his parents". In this half-ruined wooden house in which Avram spent his last days, no human foot had stepped for years. Tallgrass and thorns have grown around the house, as no one had cultivated the fertile field under the house. Ilija nods and tells how Mate was a good man. I lit a candle on the collapsed wooden stairs at the entrance of the house. However, Ilija, **Prof. Šporčić**, and Tome were concerned about the fire risk, so I asked Ilija to put out that candle in the evening. I went to Mate's nearest neighbor. There seem to be a lot of long-lived people in that village. Or perhaps this older population has been swelled by many old men who returned to their homeland. I asked the neighbour if he knew Mato Krznaric. He says: "Surely I knew him; we drank coffee every day together." I pushed my point further. "So did Mate ever say that a Jew lived in his house during World War II?" The man shook his head - "He never told me anything **about it, and we drank coffee every day.**" **Prof. Šporčić adds**, "People rarely talked about such things in our area."

After that, we went to thank Evica Vlaisavljević, who was the first to tell us about the five slaughtered Jews. She received us warmly into her house. She lives in a small old, dark, and dilapidated house in which no one has opened the windows for a long time. The smell of old age permeates the interior. In that house, time has stood still. The orange plywood kitchen was popular in the '70s and bought by all peoples and nationalities throughout Yugoslavia on credit. Tin boxes for coffee, sugar, and tea adorn the shelves, as did all those types of **kitchens in the '70s**. The knitted flasks, embroidered tablecloths, crocheted pods, all screamed **1970's Yugoslavia**. Along with other numerous details, it reminded me of a time when I once lived in this country. It was a place that I did not think existed anymore. The old bright green telephone placed on the bed played a prominent role in that dark and unventilated room; its ring would bring news of life happening somewhere else. Evica seemed to exist for these phone calls. A sizeable two-story house had been constructed in the backyard of her house. I assume this was intended for her son, who probably lives in Serbia. Evica went back to the same story

she had told us the day before - but at the heart of that story was her memory that as children, while watching over the lambs in those meadows, they were afraid to go where the slaughtered Chifuts were. I asked Evica if she remembered Avram Levi Sadic. She says she remembers him. He was of medium height, bright, and wearing a cap. He was always walking around the village. We kids sometimes played with "chifut" kids; they had toys. We had never seen toys before." We said goodbye to Evica. I again wanted to go to the place where Abraham was killed. None of my party had the same inclination. They could not face wading through branches and bushes again. They mentioned snakes, our inadequate shoes and clothing, and the aches still felt by Muki and **Professor Šporčić from the previous days' encounters with the thorns**. So we did not go.

Before we left Dabar, I asked to visit the Catholic cemetery, more specifically **the grave of Mate Krznarić**. The cemetery is in one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. A Catholic church built on top of the hill, now without an active congregation. **Reverend Šporčić** only occasionally comes to open the church. The cemetery is next to the church building on that hill. You can see the most pastoral, rural, greenest, and most beautiful landscape that can ever be seen from the hill. The village of Dabar, once abandoned, tormented, ruined, dismantled, and bloodied, looks magical. There is no grave of **Mate Krznarić in the Catholic cemetery** at Dabar. We inspected all the graves. It was not there. Tome Rukavina believes that Mate was buried in his **brother's grave** along with his daughter-in-law, who died long before him. Someone before us had visited that grave. The evidence was still lying in situ, probably exactly where they had left them, plastic roses. Already aged, grey, faded, and withered.

We said goodbye to Dabr and Dabrans and headed through the beautiful **forest towards Ličke Jesenice**. The part we drove through is called Kapelsko Gorje. On that same route, my seven-year-old mother, Esther, her three-year-old sister Bulka, their mother Berta Finci, and their grandmother Rifka Bulka Finci, had escaped, saving their lives. The book, ***Dollar per Day***, states that those who were afraid to stay in Dabar fearing Ustashes **informants continued through Saborsko towards Ličke Jesenice**. There they settled in a primary school only to be bombed by Nazi planes that same day. Everyone rightly realised that the Ustasha intelligence service had reported the refugee's location, forcing onward travel, again.

The survivors return to Sarajevo

My family was liberated while in Glina. In the hospital in Glina, my great-grandmother and Avram's youngest sister Bulka Rifka Finci died of cancer in July 1945. Leaving this world, she had no idea that **her daughter's** days on this planet were also numbered. My grandmother Berta Finci Kamhi returned to Sarajevo healthy and happy to have survived the war. She died on 19 September 1945, after surgery. Doctors misdiagnosed an apparent cancer. She was told she needed urgent surgery. The operation went ahead. Only afterward was she told the good news that she had been misdiagnosed; there was no cancer. A benign cyst had been successfully removed. That period immediately after the war was not the best of days for hospital conditions. By later standards, the prevailing hygiene levels in hospitals were poor. My grandmother, after whom I am named, Berta Finci Kamhi, died a few days after that surgery from sepsis. That apparently successful procedure directly resulted in her death. Going into that operation, that poor woman sensed her death. She begged her childless sester-in-law, **Rifka Ećimović**, to take her daughters and raise them as her own. Rifka refused. **She was engulfed in her own family's** tragic drama. She was visiting her husband, Branko Ecimovic in prison every day, as he awaited trial.

Branko stood accused of collaboration with the Nazis. The charge was one of high treason. His trial was held in Sarajevo. Prior to World War II, he was indeed the owner of the Avia factory, which did produce spare parts for aircraft. The German occupation of Sarajevo saw the nationalisation of that factory. As Branko was a qualified senior engineer, he was forced by the Germans and their local allies, the Ustashas, to continue working at the factory in the role of chief engineer. Branko's personal life complicates this simplistic view of treason. His wife was Jewish. She was hiding in the basement of their family house, Askikovac 2, during the four years of occupation. Neither the Germans nor their allies, the Ustasha, ever came to arrest or even search for her. It is believed that some form of unspoken, unwritten agreement must have been understood. Branko worked in the factory as the chief engineer, and they never asked about his wife.

These were difficult days for the Kamhi family. While everyone's attention was on this momentous capital trial, few noted that Berta Kamhi, one of few surviving members of the once large Finci/**Levi Sadić family**, was being operated on in a most unhygienic hospital, destined never to return home. My mother, the now nine-year-old Esther, and her five-year-old sister, Bulka, were now alone. They had been deposited at the local orphanage. Berta, their mother, had had no choice. She had no family left to care for her daughters whilst in hospital. Her sudden, unexpected

death within days of sepsis changed the whole situation. **Branko's wife**, Rifka, assumed guardianship of Esther and Bulka and raised them in her own home as her family. Her husband was later found guilty of high treason. Initially, he was sentenced to death by hanging. Following much outcry and interventions, the sentence was changed to execution by the more, apparently, honorable firing squad. Further outcry resulted in the sentence being commuted to life in prison. In the event following many more **complaints and interventions, Branko Ećimović served** many years in prison. A few years before his death, he was released. After release, this indignant, grumpy, and roguish old man did not miss any opportunity to rage against Tito and the party.

My grandfather Dr. Hajim Kamhi was at one time the president of the Sarajevo Jewish community. In his time, he kept a perfect bookkeeping account of his life. He would scribe in thick notebooks daily everything he purchased, how much money was spent, and for what purpose. Hajim kept a kind of diary in this way. If these thick notebooks had been preserved by any chance, we could have had much more information about Avram. Unfortunately, these testaments were never found. Hajim Kamhi, for all his meticulous accounting detailing, left no trace of his or **Avram's lives**. Towards the end of his life, with his mind existing in a blurred sort of consciousness, with the last twitch of his mind, Hajim told us that he had stored all the documentation on the confiscated properties in the safe. I believe there were many other artifacts and documents locked in that huge brown box. That box was transferred to my **grandfather's apartment from the Ključ sock factory**. That documentation, along with the cash register and all the artifacts that belonged to the life of Hajim Kamhi, **is lost. My Grandfather's meticulous** notes recording his world disappeared when his apartment in Marijindvor, Sarajevo, was settled by refugees from Vogošća in 1992.

On leaving, they left nothing. Not in the attic. Not in the basement. All the paintings and mementos. All the sculptures of Haim's second wife, Berta Baruch. All Haim's prayer books, talit`s, mezuzahs, menorahs (who needed them **in Vogošća?**), all the furniture, bedding, quilts, and pillows. Even all the carpets. Everything that Hijim and his wife had cared about. All their memories were lost. All that was left from their life was gone. **When the refugees from Vogošća moved out of** Grandpa's apartment, only the bare walls remained. Everything was removed. Destroyed. Probably burned trying to heat the apartment during those **cold 1990's** winters in Sarajevo. The last traces of Avram, which my grandfather Hajim may have still kept, was probably lost forever.

I carefully examined every old family picture hoping to come across Avram`s photo. And I still do not know what Avram looked like. However, while searching online, I did find some photos from the founding

conference of LaBenevalence. In addition, some more photographs from **its' tenth anniversary celebrations. One of those members is certainly Avram.** By cross-checking a photograph taken at the Bosnian Chamber of Commerce's founding conference, I note that the same dignified gentleman sits in the center of the group in all these pictures. Is that him? I really want it to be him. I am not sure.

He had only one son Solomon, named after his father. I recall a long-buried memory of my childhood. I remember being a child playing under a table. The adults talk above me, about a child who was not healthy. This child lived in a rehabilitation center for the mentally ill in Graz. Something bad had happened to him, but I do not now recall what. I also remember hearing about his mother. She was said to have died of grief. **Among the documents sent by Amir Ibrišimović, I came across a donation contract.** Avram Levi Sadić was donating the whole building to the **Sarajevo's women humanitarian society LaHumanidad.** That building was situated at the very heart of Sarajevo in Fehadija Street. Avram had **donated an entire building with this contract, both its' shops and offices** on the ground floor, and the upper floor apartments to rent out. Interestingly, one of the contract clauses, stated an unusual condition. Part of the monies received from these rentals was to be used to pay his **son's bills, that is, Salomon Levi Sadić's expenses, or was to be paid to** his guardian in Graz. The remaining income was to be used to support the poor widows, widowers, and children. The contract was dated 1935. This proves that Avram's son Solomon was alive in 1935, and this leads me to **believe that Avram was concerned about his son's future. I do not** know what fate met his son. I doubt that the mentally ill Solomon Levi **Sadić, who lived in Graz, Austria, survived into the early part of World War II.** Another of the documents sent by Amir Ibrišimović was the **death certificate of a Simha Levi Sadić. She was Avram's wife and Solomon's** mother. She died young in 1915. Again, I can recall another memory of adults talking about a Simha who died young. They said that she had died of grief. My younger self could not comprehend just how someone could die from grief. Avram never married again and had no other children.

In search for the grave

Despite the setbacks, the composition of the great and richly detailed mosaic of Avram's life began to emerge.

Next, I needed to find his grave. I was somehow convinced that finding the location of his grave would be the easiest of all. With all that we then knew; that an exhumation had taken place, that representatives of the Jewish community led by a Dr. Stockheimer had stayed in Dabar, and that tin boxes with the bodies of six victims had been taken by train from

Licke Jasenice, I expected finding the exact location of the grave was just be a matter of formality. I presumed a formal request sent via email to the Jewish Community of Sarajevo would suffice. I expected the Sarajevo Jewish Community to reply fairly promptly and that they would inform me of the exact location **of Avram's grave**. That is what I expected. Exhumation is a serious matter anywhere. Or so I thought. Protocols must govern the preparations. Permits must be obtained. I was convinced that some documentation related to this exhumation must exist. I felt that I was within touching distance of the final parts of the story. I thought I would know the location of the grave within a few days. How mistaken I was. It was here that my odyssey truly began.

Firstly, I contacted Mr. Boris Kozemjakin, the president of the Jewish community in Sarajevo. Upon hearing my whole story to date, Mr. Kozemjakin declared that he could not understand my motives. He was unable to assist as he was caring full time for his wife, who had **Alzheimer's**. He referred me onto Danilo Nikolic. Mr. Nikolic did respond. He told me that after reviewing all the documentation, he had not found anything, unfortunately. So, I next turned to my good friend Aaron Albahari from the Association of Jewish Communities in Belgrade. He approached all his connections in the Jewish Museum and the Jewish Archives. After searching the Jewish archives, he also found nothing of use. I was then advised to contact the Jewish community of Zagreb. They, in turn, found no records. Their secretary, Dean Fridrich, explained that they only owned material relating to Zagreb's Jewish community and that he suspected that nothing could be found there. He further advised that if I wanted to look further, that would probably involve some expenses. On a recommendation from Aaron Albahari, I travelled to Belgrade. There I met Mrs. Branka from the Jewish Museum. She showed me hundreds of cardboard boxes filled with documents. She searched these boxes and found nothing. At the Jewish Museum, I met the **historian Dragan Krsmanović**. On my behalf, he had searched the archives of the Military Institute in Belgrade in connection with the attack on Dabar on 5 February 1944. Not one single written word was found concerning the incident. **With the help of Professor Ivan Šporčić, we tried to trace the exhumation in the archives of the Otočac Municipality**. It seems that most of that archive was destroyed or disappeared in the war of the '90s. The only existing archives (mostly the ones related to **building permits**) were transferred to **Gospić**. In the archives of Yad Vashem, I found many historical artifacts, documents, and numerous video testimonies of those who had survived the exile in Lika, Banija, and Kordun. Interestingly no one mentioned anything about the attack on Dabar on 5 February 1944.

I traveled to Sarajevo and visited the archives of the city of Sarajevo. There I found six or seven clerks gathered around the stove, making a coffee and smoking. They informed me that, "...it can't be done that way, ma'am, you need to send us an official request ... **you know there was a war... I don't know if there's** anything left." So I sent them an official written request. I am still awaiting their response.

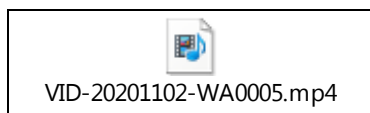
This odyssey, all this searching for Avram Levi Sedić's last resting place, had taken well over a year so far. It did not feel unlike driving a car at full throttle but going nowhere fast. For my final attempt to get somewhere with this, I resolved to make an emotional request, something to tug at the heartstrings. I needed to find someone who would have a personal reason to care **about Avram Levi Sadić**. With that, I addressed my next communication to Jakov Finci. The presiding President of LaBenevalncia, the Jewish welfare charity. I stressed that **Avram Levi Sadić was one of the founders and first vice president of** this organisation. **Indeed, during Avram's** influential tenure, this charitable body proved instrumental during the flourishing period of the Jews of BiH in the pre-World War II period. Jakica Finci replied that he had read my comprehensive email with great interest. He had been touched by the story and had spoken with **Danilo Nikolić himself**. However, in his opinion, he felt that I should stop searching. I should accept the fact that the **grave of Avram Levi Sadić was** most probably permanently lost. Moreover, he did not think that more information could be found. I had learned all that there was to know. He felt that there was no more that could be done. For my part, I felt there must be more to discover.

I was so determined to find the grave that I contacted anyone, everyone. I waited on responses, if they came at all. The replies basically passed the buck. "**Please accept my apologies...try someone else.... I've passed** on your enquiry." I knew the grave had to exist somewhere. Those exhumed bodies were transferred somewhere. I knew that the whole process had to be registered. It had to have been recorded somewhere. It seemed that I now faced the age-old bureaucratic wall. No one was interested enough to dig through books, to turn over long-dead bones; this was becoming all too evident. Common sense rationalised that the victims' **bodies** from Dabar were probably transferred to the old Jewish **cemetery in Kovačići**. The Jewish cemetery of Kovacici **was still 'active'** until 1966.

I slowly realised that the usual research points of contact could not be counted on. All the archives, Communities, organisations, museums had resulted in little being discovered. My last, best, and only real chance to find a grave was to go to a cemetery. Hopefully, the right cemetery, and walk among the graves themselves, checking each tombstone, with a

date in 1957, '58, or'59. When I came to this conclusion, Covid 19 was raging, and it was impossible to leave Israel. Or to enter BiH. I begged my friends in Sarajevo to go to that cemetery and look for Avram's grave. Dragan Stanimirovic, an Al Jazeera journalist, said he would.

He visited the old Jewish cemetery in Kovačići several times. He walked among the graves. He spoke with the Cemetery Guard. Initially, his attempts proved fruitless. He had followed the wrong clues. He followed his journalistic instincts, retraced his steps, starting again from the beginning.



(ABOVE) PICTURES AND VIDEO FROM ONE OF THESE "UNSUCCESSFUL" TOURS AND SEARCHES

In Bosnia, as it happens, everything that can be arranged is arranged simply by asking someone. Some Dragan, some Zijad, some aunt Mina, or some Sabina, "to do it for you", to help you. And usually, these 'someones' really do help, without ulterior motives or malignant intentions. They do help you, just like that. This is how it goes in Bosnia. This is how it went with me. Dragan went to the old Jewish cemetery several times. He walked among the graves. On one occasion, he missed his footing and fell sideways, and found himself in front of a grave with the name of **Avram Levi Sadić** engraved upon it, in marble.



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VID-20201102-WA0006.mp4

(ABOVE) PICTURE AND TWO VIDEOS OF THE MONUMENT OF AVRAM LEVI SADIĆ AT THE JEWISH CEMETERY KOVAČIĆI IN SARAJEVO

The grave had been damaged in **the 1990's war**. Hard battles had been fought in and around this cemetery. Most of the graves were left damaged. Graves had been blown apart with their tombstones scattered. As a result, it was no longer possible to locate where many tombs originally lay, nor what was written on them. How fortunate then that the grave bearing **the name Avram Levi Sadić**, although damaged, was still in relatively good condition and in its original place. Nearby an engraved plaque read "Victims of fascist terror, transferred from Kordun and Banija. Cabrieli Rifka (Bulka), Ernestina Jakov, Sarina Nada, Avram Levi **Sadić, J. Finci**". The space following this name had been destroyed, probably by a grenade. Lastly, the name "**Musafia Esperansa Israel**." Five women and Avram, **exactly as Veljko Čuturilo said. The grave was found on 21 August 2020.**

So I had arrived. The one specific grave that I had searched for had, against all the odds, been found. So why, after all that effort, did I find myself without closure? I was left wondering what really stood behind my obsession **with Avram Levi Sadić**? What did I want from him? What, if anything, did he want of me? Not to be forgotten, perhaps. Not to sink into that eternal darkness, not for history to erase every trace of his

existence. I am aware that I am the last one who can tell this story. If I do not tell his story, Avram Levi Sedic will sink into eternal darkness.

Many people, like Avram, sink into the dark sea of eternal oblivion. At the bottom of which rest all those whom no one remembers anymore. They sink into the sea of eternal darkness, each of them carrying their own story. They also carry all the other stories which they remember of other people. These are the forgotten stories of the forgotten. Nothing will ever be known about almost all of them ever again. **This Avram Levi Sadić**, one of my family, has been saved from this oblivion. By a most improbable set of circumstances. A strange coincidence, some providence of fate, who knows. Neither the less, he is saved. If a single person remembers **Aram Levi Sadić** **he will not sink into that** sea of eternal oblivion. Maybe, that is why I have stuck with this endeavour. Somehow, I hope that by writing his story, I will somehow save him.

