

IT WAS ONLY A PICNIC

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Chapter 1

1939. It was the year we took the family photograph. I remember it well. It was the middle of summer. I was ten and my brother was fourteen. Neat and formally dressed, we waited for the photographer. I clearly recall the conversation I had with my father on the subject.

We had a heap of lifelike snapshots – on the riverbank, on a stroll, in the garden, in the backyard... To take those, one did not have to get ready beforehand and it was always a pleasure to look at them again. So what was the use of this new sort? What was the difference?

My brother and I keenly felt the difference. We were expected to behave, to smile just a little, to look ‘special’, as my mother said.

“Why do we need such a photograph?”

“Someday you will understand why a family portrait is something special.

This photograph will remain as a reminder of your parents – of your childhood. It will

find its place of honour, first in an album and later in your home, on the bookshelf.”

Then, if I understood correctly, this would be something for the future. This would be the photo I would look at when my parents were no longer. But what a dreadful thought. I couldn't even manage the semblance of a smile. I could not understand how they could wash us, dress us, and ask us to smile for a photo that was intended to be appreciated after their death. My heart beat very fast. I dared not ask more questions. The photo was taken. I alone kept a profoundly sad face.

We lived in Belgrade - a small house all to ourselves - five rooms, not too large, a garden with many flowers, some fruit trees, and a lawn on which we played out our childhood dreams.

Our parents worked and we lacked for nothing. I believe we were what could be called a happy family.

I realise now much better, how my parents differed from each other. My mother, sweet and understanding, would threaten us with punishments that she never carried out. When my father would raise his hand to my brother, which happened often, or more rarely to me, my mother would shut herself in her bedroom and not come out for some hours. We weren't allowed to cry when he smacked us.

"When one is given punishment that one deserves, one must bear it without complaining."

If we did cry, even so, he would listen to what we had to say to him and, if finding that our misbehaviour did not deserve physical punishment, he would pardon us but firmly tell us: "Don't you ever do that again."

Right after having punished us, he would smile. No one should hold a grudge or pull faces. He used to say that spankings came from heaven; that he hated giving them as much as we hated getting them; but to become a good person one had to suffer the treatment.

Mamma, on the other hand, was always there to understand and console and we took advantage of her weakness, knowing very well that with an: "Excuse me, Mamma," everything would be settled and in order.

"Wait until your papa gets home. I'll tell him everything," she would say.

We knew that she would not say anything at all since she suffered our punishments more than we did.

I never heard my parents discuss our upbringing, but I suppose my mother accepted the role that my father played in it even though she did not always agree with his methods.

My mother liked socialising. She had some girlfriends with whom she played cards on Sunday afternoons. My father despised cards; he thought they were a waste of time and tried to convince her to come with us for a stroll. She would refuse. He loved to walk and that was fine; she had nothing against it. We children were there for him to walk with.

He could walk with us and leave her to do what gave her pleasure. Really it only concerned Sunday afternoons. The mornings we would spend together at home.

I think I was six or seven when I first noticed this difference of inclination between my parents. At this time, papa spent his Sunday afternoons walking with Atza and me, and soon after, only with me, because my brother began to prefer the company of his friends.

I became my father's friend and I felt very proud. I don't know whether he minded my mother's absence during these strolls, but with time he must have become used to it and we were very happy together.

During the springtime, we used to go to the forests of Kochoutnaic where we walked for hours looking for violets. I was never tired. I adored my father so much that I found those hours always too short as I didn't have to share his affection with anyone else. Then he was mine alone. After our walk, we used to have afternoon tea in a cake shop where I was permitted to eat as much as I wanted.

If on Sunday he was my friend, during the week he was my father - strict, demanding, severe and inflexible in everything concerning our behaviour and education. The only presents he would give us were books. Every evening, on returning from work, he would ask how many pages we had read that day. Toys were the domain of my mother and we had many.

Seeing us at play, he would pretend to grumble, but he would let us continue.

I think was about ten when, on his return from a trip to Germany, he brought me a magnificent winter coat. All the summer I awaited the moment when I could put it on. On the first wintry day, even though it was not very cold, I arrived at school wearing my brand-new coat. I showed off: "My coat's from Germany and it was very expensive."

In my class there were some poor, little girls who would go through winter, more often than not, wearing a sweater or, at best, a coat that had kept several generations warm before them. I played the role of the 'little rich girl' surrounded by poor admirers, very well.

Suddenly, my father arrived in the schoolyard. Where did he come from? What was he looking for in this schoolyard where he had never been before? His lips were smiling but his eyes were whipping me. He came close to me, took me aside and in two sentences told me that I had to give my new coat to the girl who had none. I looked at him and said: "No, you bought it for me."

"You will give the coat to her, and we will talk about it again at home. You will give it with a smile."

One did not argue with my father. I returned to where the girls were, removed my coat, and offered it to the girl who was called Vera, saying

that it was for her. She looked at me bewildered. But my father stood there: “Relly already has one at home, and you, you take this one. It will keep you very warm.”

She did not move and neither did I. My father took it from my hands and helped her put it on. I stood there. I was cold. I felt like killing my father, and I promised to starve myself to death and make him regret what he had done to me.

My friends stared at me and I explained to them that the coat had not been bought for me, and that I was only wearing it until my father could give it to Vera. They must have believed me because it's not every day that one witnesses such a scene.

Back home I cried. My mother could not comfort me. She convinced me that my father wanted, for one reason or another, to give me something to think about. But what had I done? How could my father be so nasty? I would never forgive him. He arrived at one o'clock and we sat at the table. Neither before nor during the meal did we discuss punishments or their causes, for: “that would upset Mamma who has worked so hard to prepare the meal.” As for me, I couldn't touch my food, though my father asked me very nicely to eat. I didn't answer him.

“Well then, I see you don't want to know why I have given your beautiful coat to your friend, today.”

“Yes, I do want to know.”

“You will find out when you have finished your lunch.”

I detested him. There wasn't a father in the world as cruel as mine. The mouthfuls of food that I pushed down my throat were soaked with tears but soon my plate was empty.

“I feel sad because you forced me to give your coat to that girl,” he said.

“I forced you? I didn't want you to give it away.”

“You forced me because I was ashamed to see you strutting like a turkey in front of children who do not have any coats. You will wear the old one all winter. I know it is too short for you but this is the only way for you to remember, for the rest of your life, that it is not the cowl that makes the monk. One should never boast about things bought with money. You can only be proud of the knowledge you have in your head. What we can buy with money, we can lose. I have just proved it to you. Wipe your tears. You are ugly when you cry. Why didn't you think of how your friends felt while looking at you? For this winter we have finished talking about the matter.

My mother, who was hiding her anger with difficulty, put in: “You could have explained to her what her mistake was without taking the coat off her back, especially since the old one is too short.”

“You are right. I was probably too harsh, but I don't regret it since it is a lesson she will remember all her life. It is true it was a bit expensive, but

it was worth it. For this winter, her old coat will be warmer than a sweater.”

That was my father. He was really right. I have not forgotten the lesson. Until this day, any garment a little gaudy, a little bit out of the ordinary still embarrasses me.

I still love the things that Papa taught us to love: books, walks, music, the desire to help, being part of the world around us. He was a very good violinist and often, especially during the winter, used to play for us concert pieces and excerpts from opera. With time, we learned to appreciate those evenings.

It was after I entered primary school that I became aware that our religion was different from that of my friends.

“The murderers of Jesus!”

“Who?”

“The Jews.”

“What Jews?”

Often, my brother and I would ask questions about this subject. But then our parents would become laconic and very quickly end the conversation or change the subject.

We were not religious people, but we had Jewish names, mezuzot¹ on the doors of the house, and we celebrated the holidays during which we used to go to the synagogue.

Once a week, I attended religious classes. I learned how to read some strange, incomprehensible characters. We used to celebrate holidays that nobody knew of and that nobody spoke about. All of this seemed to me rather mysterious and enshrouded in a fog from which I wanted to step out of.

In my classroom, I was the only Jewish girl. In the beginning, my name aroused curiosity, irony and mockery. I soon learned to accept the situation, perhaps because my parents kept saying it would pass.

My girl friends would come to play at our house, but never would we play at theirs without good reason. So it was, that one day, behind my back, I heard the irritated voice of my friend's mother telling her: "How many times do I have to tell you that your father does not approve of your friendship with this Jewish girl."

"This Jewish girl."

I was 'this Jewish girl'! What did it mean? I returned home, this time determined to talk to my father, to force him to make me understand why they didn't like to be friends with a Jewish girl. Why do they often call us 'Yids'? Why do they consider us different?

¹ Small, encased prayer scrolls on the doorposts of Jewish homes.

On the following Sunday, before eating my cake, I told father what had happened during the week. He listened and said to me, with unconcern and very calmly, that surely it would not be the last time I would hear such insults. People who utter them are ignorant and stupid and do not deserve our friendship.

“But why ‘the people who killed God’?”

“Imbeciles say all sorts of things. Man cannot kill God. There are things you will have to learn. It’s enough for you today to know that you have every reason to be proud of being Jewish. You have no reason to be ashamed in front of anybody. Yugoslavia is your country; your grandfather died during the war in 1914; and even I am an officer in the reserves.

“About our religion: You should know that the Jews have given humanity the Ten Commandments, the day of rest, the notion of freedom. Nineteen centuries ago, Jewish children were learning how to read while those of other peoples were still in the trees. People always twist the truth, especially where the Jews are concerned. Those who do not want us, we must avoid, since, unfortunately, there is nothing we can do about them. You will learn that in the past the situation for the Jews was even more difficult and they learned how to live with it. Now it is our turn to do the same. You are intelligent. You must study hard to become someone who will be listened to and respected for your honesty and wisdom.

Then, for the people who love you and respect you, your religion will never be an obstacle to friendship.”

“But why all this? It would be so much easier not to be Jews, to be like everyone else.”

“It is true, but religion is not like a hat that we discard when it does not suit us any longer. You are Jewish because your mother and I are Jews and our parents and grandparents were Jews. You are your religion.”

From all the conversation, what I understood was that when others did not want me, I must turn my back and walk away. But for me, Dragisa was not stupid and I loved her very much. I wanted her friendship, and I didn’t want to turn my back on her.

Then, what was I to do? All of this seemed so complicated. I was going to have to learn to be Jewish.

CHAPTER 2

The years that preceded the war were constantly marked by lively political discussions. Hitler was taking possession of our hearths before his soldiers. The rhythm of our lives was changing. We would talk about provisions, refuges and the word "war" was heard more and more.

My father had to go to Germany to settle some business matters. He was an exporter of wool and had two partners in Germany who were brothers: Messrs Amente, German Jews who used to visit us from time to time and whom I liked very much.

While awaiting father's return, we took a holiday in the mountains. I no longer remember if it was the summer of 1939, but, in any case, it was our last vacation before the war.

Not having any friends there, my mother spent the days with us. Towards the end of the vacation and after walking many kilometres, she told us that it was really much better to take walks than to play cards and that my father and I were going to acquire a new companion on Sundays.

The holiday was about to end and we counted the days that separated us from father's return. One week after we got back home, he arrived bringing back a suitcase full of presents for everybody. I remember receiving a magnificent satchel full of little pockets and clasps and much bigger than the one I had – a real schoolbag for a high-school student. I was in heaven.

As the first hours went by, we realised that father was acting differently since his return. He was nervous and, most of all, his mind was somewhere else. He only half listened to our stories. That same evening we had to go to bed earlier than usual. Atza explained to me that father was worried because there might be a war and this could be bad for the Jews.

"Why for the Jews?"

"Because Hitler hates us."

"What have we got to do with Hitler? He is far away - he is German and we are Yugoslavs. He can't do anything against us. But then, why is

everyone talking so much about the Jews and why does father seem so worried?"

"There are things you don't understand."

How silly my brother was! He was always pretending to be a genius just to scare me, but he didn't understand anything at all. He was always bragging that he knew a lot about politics only to annoy me and to prove his superiority. I fell asleep with the sure feeling that we, the Yugoslavs, as father said, had nothing to fear from that madman whose shouting frightened me.

The days went by and my father continued to look worried. The house acquired a certain atmosphere in which nothing seemed to work any more. Often my parents would complain of the noise we were making, and when we would

unexpectedly enter the room, they would stop talking.

Their friends would come to the house in the evenings to listen to the news about

Germany. We children were not allowed in. In spite of that, we already knew that the windows of Jewish stores had been smashed and ransacked, and that the owners were the victims of restrictions and persecution. These words were new to me. They made me afraid.

"No one can stop Hitler; war is unavoidable," said my father.

Shortly thereafter, we received a letter from Joseph Amente who informed us that their factory had been confiscated, his brother deported, and that he planned on leaving Germany and coming to Yugoslavia. Since no country wanted to let him in, he asked father if it was possible to obtain a permit for him to stay in Belgrade. He described the tragedy of Jews who had been parted from their children and deported; of the old and sick who had disappeared.

My uncles and aunts came to our house to discuss the situation. I was no longer able to understand the expression on their faces. A forced smile, a quick kiss on the forehead, and they would disappear behind the closed door of the living room.

We discussed the situation with our cousin, Jacques, the oldest son of my uncle Maurice. He told us stories of the atrocities committed against the Jews. People were being chased from their homes after all their possessions were confiscated.

I began to understand that, in that distant country, the Jews were living in a hell simply because they were not Germans.

"But they certainly *are* Germans," my father answered me impatiently.

"Then why do Germans kill Germans?"

"Right now there is in that country, a political regime that is against the Jews."

"Then why don't the Jews themselves go against the regime?" Who put Mr. Amente in a concentration camp? Why did his brother have to leave Germany?"

"The German police put him in the camp and Germany does not want its Jews any more. So, Mr. Amente must leave."

"But it's his country!"

"Maybe he no longer wants this country that does not want him. It's a situation that even I have some difficulty in understanding. As far as you are concerned, the only thing you can do is to try to look after your own affairs and not complicate your life."

"I am scared."

"What are you afraid of?" We are not in Germany."

Gone was the warm calm atmosphere of the house.

Every night, at the same time, we would listen to the news from Radio London. An hour before the broadcast, my parents became unrecognisable. Touchy, they would argue whether this time they would be able to make out something of what was said, for all sorts of noises would interfere with this distant voice which was of such importance in our lives. No matter where my parents were, they would rush home well before time for fear of missing out on being able to listen in.

The months went by. The situation became more and more tense. At school, we discussed the war, gas masks – in case of chemical warfare – and bombing. The news papers were loaded with advice in case of..... Every day, Atza explained to me the things that "even a little, fathead brain like yours" ought to understand.

"We are strong, and, if necessary, we will fight to the last soldier."

"But no one has attacked us yet."

"They will; it won't be long. Even men of my age will be drafted."

I looked at him with envy and admiration.

"Our government has not yet declared its standpoint."

Some were talking about an agreement with the Germans. The Jews trembled more than the others.

"Why more?"

"Because we are Jews. Don't you understand?"

"Yes. But we are Yugoslavs."

"There you are! Again, you understand nothing!"

It was crazy how many times a day I was told that I understood nothing. In the end, I thought it must be true. But why?

"You don't have to worry about it. Yugoslavia will never join the Boches, not even if the government wants to. I haven't met anyone who wants to go along with Hitler."

Faced with these issues, it was very difficult to remain optimistic. From all this I understood that there was, on the one hand, a problem for the country and, on the other hand, another one, more frightening, only concerning the Jews.

Our Sundays were over. We would stay at home and talk politics. Martin and his wife, Lenka, who had worked in our house for ten years, and who were, one could say, part of the family, participated with great animation in the analysis of the events. The questions that I could not ask my parents, I would discuss with them in the kitchen. I liked Martin and Lenka very much. They were happy people, always willing to play with us. When I was little, Martin used to tell stories that left me agape, and when I was older, he would make me repeat my multiplication tables.

"No. There will be no war," he would tell me.

"But what about Hitler?"

"He is all bark and no bite."

"But doesn't he already bite the Jews?"

"They are German Jews. You have nothing to fear. You know people tell a lot of stories but no one can guess where the truth lies."

Hitler's speeches became more and more frequent. Martin would often discuss them with my father. As with many other Yugoslavs who came

from Banat², he spoke German very well and agreed with father that Hitler was a very dangerous madman.

For me, Hitler's voice was appalling. His screaming acclaimed and applauded by millions of Germans, in ecstasy, was taking the taste for life away from my parents. His declarations were always followed by suppositions, arguments and bad temper. As time wore on, these outbursts became for me a veritable nightmare, every night.

One day, father's uniform, brought from somewhere, made its appearance. His officer's trunk was ready in the hall. All men, as their turn came up on the roster, were being called to manoeuvres and my father awaited his turn. In the streets we noticed the coming and going of vehicles full of soldiers and weapons. Almost every day, try out alarms were sounded and people had to run for shelter from these sham bombings.

At first, in school, this amused us. However, the shelter, too small to hold all the students, was airless. These exercises became too hard to bear and our time became spent between alerts, arguments and accounting for our behaviour in the shelter. All these security measures made us feel that the danger of war was real and that it could break out at any moment.

² A district to the north of Belgrade, formerly a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its western part was given to Yugoslavia after World War 1.

People would leave the city "for some rest in the country".

These tumultuous days, quickly passed, what with the arguments and quarrels between those for and those against, between the optimists who said we were going to kick Hitler's face in and the pessimists who were sure that he would shatter ours.

At night, the city was plunged into total darkness. Officially, this was to facilitate aerial exercises, but the whisper was that it was for protection from eventual attack. Searchlights prowled the sky looking for visitors who could be hidden there. From my window, I could watch the street and see people talking, almost whispering, as if afraid to break the silence. And above all this, a sky full of stars, the sky of approaching spring, which seemed to make a mockery of our fears.

Father was called up to the army. For the first time I saw him wearing his uniform. He looked so strong, so important. I was a little scared to see him go but he would only be away for a week. At school, I bragged about my officer father.

Martin and Lenka stocked the pantry so that it looked like a veritable grocery shop.

Father came back. He returned to civilian clothing, but his military trunk and his uniform, ironed and ready, were near the door.

"Why?"

"One must be ready for anything. Above all, we must not be caught by surprise."

CHAPTER 3

On March 25th, 1941, the government signed a pact with Hitler – with Germany.

At home it was a day of gloom.

This was not possible. This was madness!

In the streets, people debated out loud; the Jews, in their homes, talked about in hushed voices. Our house was filled with friends of my parents.

"What shall we do?"

"Leave the country while it's still possible."

"Mr. Cohen, our neighbour, has already left."

My father was indignant: "Leave the country to do what? To go where? We don't know anything about the conditions of this pact. We must not do anything that we will regret."

On March 27th, two days after the signing, the citizens of Belgrade took to the streets and a human sea, an immense, spontaneous demonstration formed against the signing of the pact. The German embassy was burned. People spat on Hitler's photographs demanding war enthusiastically, certain that only we, the Yugoslavs, were capable of barring the way to this black beast who was going to hazard swallowing us and the entire world.

Forgetting about all the alerts and shelters, here was a nation, free, courageous, with no misgivings about its power, and capable of repulsing the hand of Hitler, the man who was making the world tremble only with the sound of his voice. The Yugoslav people had preserved their honour. Radio London praised little Yugoslavia and its bold people who would never be defeated. What a great day!

For the first time, after so long, my parents seemed happy and free from all their worries.

"This is our country. When one is part of such a people there is nothing to be afraid of. What is good for Yugoslavia is also good for its Jews."

Like every body else, we spent the day in the streets. What Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France were not capable of doing, we, we were going to do! We were going to show this little "moustachio" what it is to make war. He had only to dare attack us! People embraced without knowing each other. We radiated mutual admiration. We didn't need to reassure ourselves; we were indomitable, determined to teach this lout a lesson. We met friends; we all talked at the same time; we cried, happy to be alive at such a time.

It was the time when the Jews of Yugoslavia re-found their patriotism and celebrated their re-born trust in their country. They felt that they belonged – that they were Yugoslavs. They no longer had their own problems – Jewish problems. On the morrow, perhaps, they would have to fight, to die in defence of the country – their country.

On the following day, Hitler spoke, directing his words at Yugoslavia and promising a terrible retribution.

Our people, after such euphoria, started to think about what they had said the night before and realised that perhaps it wasn't very tactful.

"Maybe we were not so wise to burn the embassy! That wasn't very civilised, was it?"

"We've been stupid, haven't we?"

"Ah! You know, I'm going down to the sea. We all need a bit of a rest"

"Why in March? What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid? What an idea! Just a little change of air for Ivanka."

This need for air became so great that one could no longer find space on the trains! People would leave by car and even on foot. "We need some exercise..."

"We should evacuate the city; Hitler will take revenge on Belgrade."

"No. It has just been declared an open city. In case of war, it will not be bombed. And neither will it be defended by the army."

Father, who was as coldly dispassionate as ever, mocked those who had left town.

"See how people behave. They clamour; they yell; they make a war of words; they fight it out to the last man; they mock the French and the Maginot Line; and, the next day, they pack their bags to go for a rest at the seaside."

But not everyone left. There were even those who returned to their homes and re-opened their stores. Life almost became normal again. At home we were optimistic, as if the *possibility* of fighting the Germans would annul the need of ever having to do it. Discussion continued without end but it was less tense. Atza and I studied very hard after the back-sliding of the last month.

I recall, very well, the ten days prior to the outbreak of the war. The country became accustomed to the idea that, with the 27th of March, we had settled our problem with Hitler, and, that, at least for a certain period of time, we would have peace.

The Fuhrer was luring us into a deep sleep in order to strike at our heart.

CHAPTER 4

Sunday, April 6th. It was market day when the people who worked during the week, did their shopping. It was the day when hundreds of peasants took their vegetables and poultry to town. I loved to go to the market, to hear the dealers, the voices of the peasants boasting about their wares and bargaining with the customers who always found the prices too high. One Sunday, I wanted father to buy me a little lamb. I didn't know if he *really* intended to get me one as he complained of a bad back, a disability from which he often suffered, and to my great disappointment, delayed the purchase until the following Sunday. Father stayed in bed listening to the news and reading. Mother was going to stay in bed for the morning and we were to go to the garden with Lenka and Martin. Already, at six o'clock in the morning, I heard father searching for London on the radio, which was making, if possible, much more noise than usual. Fancy waking up at six on a Sunday morning! I knew that my mother would not let me stay in bed if she knew that I was no longer asleep. I closed my eyes and pretended that I was sound asleep.

The news from London began at seven o'clock and I wondered whether father would play with the dial for the entire hour. I don't remember if I was asleep because father had finally turned off the radio, but a frightening explosion made me jump out of bed. I ran to my parents' bedroom where father, already up, had been able to hear, before the electricity went off, that Germany had declared war on Yugoslavia. The declaration was made by dozens of planes dropping tons of bombs on Belgrade, the open city.

I clutched mother.

"We must go to the shelter."

Father, his back rather bent, slipped on his uniform in a minute, embraced us, and, almost running, got ready to leave the house.

"Wait until the attack is over. You mustn't go out into the streets now – it's too dangerous," said mother.

Father stopped and helped us down to the shelter, saying : "Every thing will be fine. Stay in the house. I'll be back as soon as possible," and disappeared.

All this took but a few minutes. Sitting in the shelter close to mother, my head on her shoulder, I tried to hide my anguish. I tried not to cry. One does not cry when one is eleven and a half. The war! Fear froze my heart. Some passers by who, by chance, found themselves in front of our house were already pressing into our shelter. The hail of bombs

made an infernal noise. A child was screaming with terror; his mother, hysterical herself, tried to calm him down. The fear of being buried alive obsessed³ us all. The pressure in the earth was shaking the earth.

Where was father? He left, ill. Why did he leave us so quickly? I saw our neighbours; they were still at home, in pyjamas. They were in no hurry to leave. What if something were to happen to father? What if the shelter were to collapse and he didn't return in time to rescue us? My mother caressed me. Martin succeeded in making us understand that the centre of town was being bombed, and since we were far enough away from it, we had nothing to worry about. I think I understood what he said; I wanted so much to believe him.

I recited the "Shema Yisrael", the only prayer that I knew for we recite it every night before we go to sleep. I promised God to be good always and to do everything I was asked to without answering back, if only He would protect my father and let us all stay alive.

An injured woman arrived at the shelter. Her arm was bleeding. She was crying and did not seem to know what was going on. After a little while she wanted to leave. She was looking for someone, but we could understand for whom. We tried to keep her but she ran off.

Martin stood at the entrance to the shelter, and allowed no one to leave. The bombing went on for what seemed to me to be an eternity. People

³ The prayer proclaiming the fundamental tenet of Judaism – the unity of God.

became silent, each with his own thoughts. One could hear the whistling of the bombs and the noise of the aircraft flying very low. We did not hear any anti-aircraft fire.

"But isn't Belgrade an open city. We are not supposed to defend it."

"Then why are they attacking it?"

"Dear God! Don't let the bombs fall on our house. And let Papa come home safely. But everybody," I said to myself, "must be saying the same prayer. Who will God hear first?"

We began to smell the smoke. It penetrated the shelter. It made our eyes and throats sting. It became a good pretext for everyone to shed tears. Perhaps our house was burning. The shelter was full of dust. There wasn't enough air. Atza wanted to go out. Martin tried to restrain him but Atza got away. Martin caught him and slapped him. My brother turned red with anger. He was going to be sixteen the following month. To be slapped in front of all these strangers! Nobody paid attention to what had happened. Happily, mother, having her eyes closed, hadn't seen what had occurred.

Martin decided to go and look for some damp towels as we had been advised to when war was only an exercise. A damp towel over the face allows one to breathe. Lenka cried that she didn't want him to leave the shelter and my mother agreed.

"I've got to do it for the children," he said.

The bombs continued to fall, it seemed to me, quite close. Martin returned, after an interminable time, carrying a pile of towels, which he handed out. This was much better, for we could hide our faces and cry as much as we wanted.

"Our street is intact but the sky is all black. The planes are coming in waves and the whole town is burning," Martin told us.

How calm Martin looked. How courageous he was. We were lucky that he and Lenka were with us. He made me sit on his knee when I gave my place to an elderly neighbour.

"Aren't you leaving, Martin? You know that under these circumstances all men must immediately join their units," said my mother.

"Oh, Madam, it's madness to run in the streets during the bombing. Your husband was wrong to leave, but I didn't dare tell him. Waiting at home for the end of the bombing will not make us lose the war."

"You are right, but my husband is like that. Where the country is concerned, nothing else matters to him," whispered my mother as if talking to herself.

"He would certainly have gone into a shelter somewhere along the way. I'm sure it is impossible to find transport. The town is collapsing."

I recall vividly that after three quarters of an hour the bombing stopped. We left the shelter and found the end of the world – the war with all its disaster, menace, misery, death and mourning. In three quarters of an

hour, our happy and carefree life had ended. Of that life only the memory remained. The present was smoke, the sky covered with flames, people barely clothed, barefoot and with haggard eyes, babbling on, without being asked, about where they came from, what they had experienced, what they had seen, what they had lost. They spoke of thousands dead and of those about to die beneath the ruins, with no chance of rescue. They were searching for their relatives. They wanted to leave town.

"Who knows what else Hitler will do to us in Belgrade?"

"People say that the bombs fell on the market, the railway station and the state hospital, leaving thousands of dead and injured."

"Who knows how many thousands? Under the rubble of the university, we heard voices crying for help."

Ambulances could not get through. People carried the injured and dead in their arms. The water mains were in ruins and water was running in the streets. Firemen did what they could, and people tried to put out the spreading fire with buckets of water.

"We must leave town! There will be more bombing and Hitler will not calm down until Belgrade is razed from the face of the earth," said a passer by.

My aunt, my mother's sister, arrived with my three cousins all in pyjamas. We hugged each other, both mothers cried and we children hid our

tears. They had been very lucky. While they were in their basement, two bombs fell on their four-storeyed building. The basement held out. They remained alive.

"One part of the building has been totally destroyed," said Aunt Mathilde. Since they lived on the first floor, they were able to take a good many of their belongings from their apartment. Her husband, Uncle Yova, had also gone to the army.

"What if he returns to the house before getting any news from you?" we asked.

"We wrote on the walls and doors – those still standing – and everywhere we could, to let him know that we are well and that he can find us at your place. But before seeing these messages he will have some terrible moments.

Mother's older sister, Aunt Rebecca, occupied three floors of the same building. On the second floor she had a large dress shop, and, I thought, was the best dressmaker in the city. With her husband and their four children, they dwelt on the upper two floors. If they hadn't left town to "rest " by the seaside, they would have been killed, for their bedrooms were totally destroyed. Seeing that the house had been hit by the first bombs, they wouldn't have had time to run to the basement.

"She offered to take us with them saying that in leaving we had nothing to lose, that we would be at the seaside near the border, and that, if

anything happened, we only had to cross the border to be in Italy," said my mother.

"When I asked her who would guarantee that we would be safer in Italy, she told me that Italians were kind and that she knew many people in Rome who could help us, if need be.

"Grab a suitcase, some money and let's leave! Who's thinking of leaving forever? We'll decide to return when we find the situation is better," my mother quoted her.

My parents had chosen not to run away like rats.

Miki, Micha and Miryana, my favourite cousins, were at our place and I was happy. Lenka who had succeeded in filling some pots with water was happy to give them a little to wash themselves.

"We must be careful. Who knows when we'll be able to get some more?"

We got dressed. Miki, who was two years younger than I, told me about what happened to him: the explosion of the bombs, the buzzing noise in his ears, the shock, the fear of not being able to get out of the basement, the screaming and crying of the twins who were not yet six years old. Miki was boasting. He had survived a terrible experience, while: "You, you were quietly sitting in your shelter."

To be honest, I envied him just a little but I was very careful not to show it.

I liked my cousins very much. For as long as I could remember, I had spent all my holidays with them. We used to go to Kalimegdan, a huge public park where we knew every corner. I loved to take care of the twins and play with Miki

"The roads leading out of town must be packed," replied my mother when Aunt Mathilde suggested that we leave.

"Where would we go with five children? Mocha⁴ has stressed over and over that no matter what happens we will not leave the house as long as it stands. From the experience of other countries, we know that the Germans will fire at civilians on the roads. Besides, we will never be able to find accommodation what with all the other people running about without knowing where they are going."

"But listen. Neither mocha nor anybody else can imagine what is happening to us. We have to get away from the city. Let's at least go to the suburbs a few Kilometres from here," insisted Aunt Mathilde.

Atza remembered having been to the house of a friend Martin, a little further away than Lipov-Lad. There, we could leave the city behind us but remain close to it. The decision was made.

Martin was still at home and would leave only after our departure. We wanted to make sure that we took all the things that we needed. No,

⁴ My father.

Lenka did not want to come with us; she wanted to stay in the house to watch over it!

"It will be much better when Mr. Mocha and Mr. Yova return."

My mother thought it best not to press Lenka and make her change her mind, for nobody really knew what was best.

The nights were still cold, so we dressed warmly. Each one of us took his personal belongings, several changes of clothes, a towel, a comb and a tooth brush. Lenka put enough food to last two or three days in a big basket, which Atza would carry. Before we left, we suddenly realised that no one had had anything to eat since the night before.

We quickly swallowed a few mouthfuls of food while Martin explained how to get to his friend, Kurt.

"He is an old friend of mine. He will certainly recognise Atza and will take good care of you.

We all felt peculiar, as if we were preparing ourselves to take part in a children's play. For a few moments, we laughed, forgetting the reality.

Meanwhile, my brother was making an odd face. Mother sensed that something was bothering him, and asked him about it.

"It's not the right time," he said. "When we get to Kurt's house, I'll talk to you."

"Tell me now."

"No, it would be useless. I'll tell you later."

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. We had to leave to be at Kurt's house before nightfall. It was then that the ominous wailing of the sirens began again. The bombs were exploding already. The street, that had been full of people, was empty in an instant. We all crowded back into the little shelter. It was suffocating. The little children started crying. The grown-ups cursed the Germans. A woman fainted. Someone wanted water but there was none left. No one had thought of bringing any.

"Quickly, some water! How can one maintain a shelter without water?"

A voice replied: "What do you expect? The Yids wouldn't give you any even if they saw you dying of thirst."

So overpowering was our fear that it that it swamped any feelings of vexation and any desire to react. The hatred falling from the sky did nothing to diminish the one in our very shelter!

The bombing continued. Silence was called for so as to be able to hear how close the bombs were falling. The request made the pandemonium even louder. Martin then raised his voice. There was immediate silence. We could hear a rain of bombs falling very close by. We stifled as the damp towels had been left on the kitchen table.

I don't recall how long this attack lasted, but when we left the shelter, we were all sick with tension and fear. The city continued to be engulfed by flames and smoke. We hurried to leave the house immediately.

"I want to enlist in the army," said Atza.

"You want what?" mother answered, stunned. This is truly not the time to behave like a fool. Please take the basket and let us leave. Your idea doesn't deserve discussing, especially at a moment like this. You only turn sixteen next month. The army doesn't need children."

"I want to go all the same!" My brother looked very determined.

"Do you really think it is fair to leave us - two women alone with four children - to go somewhere where nobody wants you and where you won't be able to help any one? Believe me, your place is here. We'll have difficulty in finding Kurt's house. We cannot carry the basket and look after the children. Today must be awful for the soldiers trying to find their units and getting organised. And you don't even know how to carry a weapon. They will never take you. They wouldn't know what to do with you."

Atza was headstrong. The look on his face did not change.

"Very well. For me you are nothing less than a deserter who deserts his family when it needs him most. Your father will be very proud on his return home when he hears that you left us to go I don't know where."

As always, father came to the rescue and resolved all the problems.

"Oh well, I'll come with you and as soon as you are safe you'll let me go."

"We shall see." Mother won the fight.

We hugged Martin and Lenka who was crying. No, she hadn't changed her mind. She would stay at the house. Mother gave in.

"We'll be back in two or three days." We all said goodbye.

"Goodbye," they replied together. "May God protect you."

Poor Lenka. She would be all alone, for Martin was getting ready to leave, too.

We reached the road that would take us out of the city. The entire population seemed to be there. Vehicles, overloaded with people and luggage, moved at a walking pace. Trucks full of soldiers moved, some towards the city, others leaving. We moved to the side of the road to let them pass and wished them victory and a safe return home.

We wanted to know what was happening; where were the Germans; could we stop there advance; and where was the front line?

We walked. We were part of an endless line of escaping women and children.

Somebody told of how he saw a dead soldier on the side of the road. He had been run over by a car.

In the city there are dead bodies everywhere. One can't escape them. Nobody knows where to look. The children must walk with their eyes closed to avoid seeing the horror," said a woman. "They are first taking care of the injured. For the dead there is nothing more one can do."

"How do they know he is dead?" I asked mother.

"Who?"

"The soldier that they say has been run over by a car."

"Perhaps he is not dead."

"Then why doesn't anybody help him?"

"Don't think about it. The people of the civil defence will do what's necessary."

"Nobody helps him because he is dead. And you, you look in front of you. Hold mother tightly by the hand, and, most of all, stop asking stupid questions," said my dear brother. I didn't even feel like poking my tongue out at him.

I kept thinking about the dead soldier. Maybe he was on his way to join his unit. His children would be waiting for him without ever knowing that he was lying there on the side of the road where nobody did anything for him. It could be that he was thirsty or wanted to say something.

"Mother, do you really think he isn't dead?"

"Who?"

"The soldier we were talking about just now! We could go and help him."

"Oh, God! My child, I really hope he is not dead, but we don't even know if he is alive. The people who saw him must have done everything they could to help him. It's very sad and terrible, but it's war."

"How will his family know what has happened to him?"

"He'll be carrying identification papers. That's how his family will be informed."

Poor man. I couldn't help thinking about my father, even though I didn't want to. My father was an officer, and officers don't get themselves run over on the road. They drove, for sure, in vehicles.

We moved very slowly. The roadway was crowded. We walked single file, holding hands. In spite of myself, I still kept bringing to mind the dead soldier all alone by the side of the road.

Since that day, whenever someone talks about the war, I see, in front of my eyes, the long road to Lipov-Lad on that Sunday in April, 1941 – a badly paved road on which thousands of people are walking in the same direction, carrying on their backs those who could not walk by themselves and dragging a few belongings bundled together in torn sheets – probably all the belongings that they were able to rescue from the ruins of their houses. All of those people must have been sharing the same thoughts, the same anxieties, and the same fear for the future.

Most spent the night under the stars, looking at the sky, reddened by the flames that were swallowing all that had not been destroyed by the bombs.

"Wait and see. You think you are safe in the fields! In a few hours, when those pigs are finished with city, they will start bringing death to the countryside," said an old fellow near us.

"Old fool! Go back home," someone replied. "White hair is not always a sign of wisdom!"

We had walked for more than two hours and my legs were sore. Then how must the twins have felt?

"Just a while longer and we'll be there," my brother encouraged us. He had been to Mr. Kurt's house only once. Would he remember where it was?

"They are very poor. Kurt is a carpenter and they live at the back of his workshop."

We went to the left and then to the right. Then we retraced our steps as night began to fall.

"How stupid we were to leave home!" said mother.

The houses became more and more spread out and the faces of my mother and my aunt became more and more tense. Finally, Atza stopped. "Here it is! There's the carpentry shop." He sounded relieved. He played the role of "head of the family" very well.

At the back of the workshop, stood a small house in the middle of an unpaved yard. The door to the little house was wide open. In front of the door and in the yard, there were many women and children. My mother wormed her way into the room. "Where is Mr. Kurt?"

Nobody answered. Mrs. Kurt, an older woman, tired and nervous, arrived from somewhere. Before my mother could open her mouth, she

told us: "No. I'm sorry but I don't even have a chair to offer you. If you wish to spend the night in the yard, I have nothing against it. You can see for yourself what's happening here."

"Martin sent us, Ma'am. He begs you to help us. He was so sure that you would," said mother, as if to herself.

The woman, showing signs of irritation, considered for a moment and then, in a surly manner, told us to follow her. She took us inside some sort of storage shed. The place was very small for all of us. As she gave us a lighted candle, she said to us: "Be very careful not to start a fire. The timber is very dry. I'll bring you a folding bed and two chairs. Martin is a very good friend of ours; we are doing this for him." My mother and my aunt were beside themselves and it showed in their gratitude.

"We will not light the candle. In a few minutes the children will go to sleep and we will not need the light."

Behind the house, in the fields, according to what we were told, there were some soldiers. An officer came to tell us not to light candles, since the Germans would surely come back to finish off the town. Before we had any time to ask him any questions, he disappeared into the night.

As promised, Mrs. Kurt brought the chairs and the bed, which we opened at once. We lay across the bed, close together. I lay bent in two, but, in spite of this, my legs were longer than the width of the bed, and my

mother held them on her knees. She and Aunt Mathilde were seated next to us on the chairs. Atza sat in a corner where I had made him a little space. It was reassuring to feel my mother's hands on my legs and my brother's presence next to my head. Dead tired, my cousins fell asleep right away. I listened to the night and thought of father.

What a day we had just lived through! To think that only that morning we had prepared ourselves to spend a Sunday like any other. How that all seemed so far away. Hitler had invaded our homes. Could we stop him? Why were the soldiers and the officer, whom we had just seen, here? Why weren't they at the front line?

Mother very gently put my feet on the chair.

"Where are you going?" I whispered, uneasy.

"I'm going with Aunt Mathilde to speak a moment to the soldiers, to get some news. Perhaps they know something that we don't."

I didn't want mother to go away for a minute, but I didn't dare tell her, afraid that my brother would tease me. I could hear the stirrings of the crowd that continued to walk on the road. There was silence from the side where the fields were. I knew that there were many soldiers. Didn't they talk?

Mother and Aunt Mathilde returned. In hushed voices, thinking that I was asleep, they told Atza that the soldiers knew no more than we did. Unfortunately, each unit was, for the time being, fending for itself. They

were withdrawing from the city to re-organise, and they, too, to resume their march. The officer advised them to leave town and to find accommodation with peasants.

"It is impossible. We don't have any transport. We cannot go on foot with the children.

"It's really too much of a risk to set out without knowing where we are going. We can't trust on sheer luck. All these people walking are surely planning to stop at the nearest villages where, by now, there won't be even one room to rent."

I must have fallen asleep after all, only to be awakened by the piercing sound of the air-raid sirens, a sound that is even more terrible at night. We couldn't see. We held hands, afraid of the unknown. I would have liked to have seen the calm and reassuring face of my mother and I whispered as much to her. We went out into the yard. There it was like daylight. The Germans were lighting up the city with flares. We felt naked, defenceless. We had no place to hide. The bombardment made the ground tremble, and its rumbling joined with the explosions of the bombs.

We returned to the shed. There I could cry without shame. No one could see me. My hand, which my mother took in hers on her lap, was damp. She too was crying! In spite of her hand, I felt lost. In the night everything became so detached. The bombardment filled the

atmosphere with a continuous trembling. Outside, we looked again at the city, burning like an immense torch. On the faces around me I read the spectre of war.

We spent that night amidst bombardments, false alarms and nightmarish sleep.

"Children, wake up. Quickly! Quickly!"

They were calling me but I couldn't open my eyes. Eventually, I realised that Uncle was with us. He was wearing his uniform. In a moment his children were in his arms. How I envied them!

"I'm on a mission. I'm going south and I want to take you to a village on my way where you will not be in danger."

He had passed by their destroyed apartment, and, before knowing what had happened to his family, had suffered moments of terrible fear. He went to our house and Lenka sent him to Kurt's. When he left, our house was there, well guarded by the couple.

"What! Martin didn't leave?"

"Yes, but he returned. I don't remember any more what he told me."

We were ready. Among the people sleeping everywhere, we found Mrs. Kurt and thanked her. Uncle Yova gave her some money, which she stuffed in the pocket of her jacket.

We were in my uncle's car. How many detours he must have made to arrive at Kurt's! We sat on the laps of my mother and aunt.

Uncle Yova risked much by doing what he did. Looking for us, had made him lose two hours, but he could not leave us in the city when he had the chance to drop us off on his way.

On the road there were marching soldiers, trucks, horses and people on the run. It was raining – a thin rain, a grey sky. Terrible disorder. We kept our heads down to avoid being seen from the road. The vehicle was on a military mission which had nothing to do with the family of the driver.

We passed many villages. The cattle in the fields with their herdsman, seemed to belong to another world. Here the war had not yet arrived. Perhaps it never would.

CHAPTER 5

We stopped in a village that seemed to be bigger than those we had passed. My uncle was very nervous. He couldn't stop to look for a place for us to stay, so he dropped us off at the entrance to the village, a few steps from the first houses. We embraced, wished each other farewell and he left us.

We stood there in the middle of the street. There was no sign in the village that the people knew that there was a war on. We looked for the town centre. The steeple of the church rose high before us, and quite close. We walked on. The rain had stopped. Here were open spaces, flowers, trees in bloom, spring, peace. How lucky that we came here! On the square facing the church, there was a small cafe. Around two tables, were a few chairs and, behind the counter, the owner was standing. He took no notice of us.

"Can you tell us where we can find somewhere to stay for a few days?"

my mother asked.

"I don't know. This is not a summer resort, but you can ask anyone.

Knock on some doors and you'll find a place to stay without any trouble.

Where do you come from?" he went on.

From Belgrade," we all answered together.

What precisely do you want to do here?"

It's being bombed. It is terrible and dangerous. Everybody is leaving the city."

"In heaven's name! I'm only an old peasant, perhaps not very well informed, but, if I were you, I would get as far away from here as I could!

Right at the end of the village, the army is digging in and organising to repel the German army from here. I believe that we are in the front line.

If you have already escaped from the city, you had better look for refuge somewhere else.

We were perplexed. Everything looked so calm. What was he talking about? Besides, Yova knew that we were here. He would surely come back to look for us. How could we leave and where could we go? We thanked him and left the cafe.

"Here we are! We have all become great chiefs-of-state. What does he know and how much does he understand? Right here - the front line?

The initiation point of resistance! What nonsense!"

We re-assured each other.

It was so nice there. The sun helped us feel optimistic. We were living for the moment and the moment was sunny.

We went back into the small streets. The houses were well spaced from each other and surrounded by endless fields.

"We have no rooms to put up strangers."

"No! Our place is too small."

"No! You have too many children. At our time of life, we want to have some quiet in the house."

"And what if we don't find a place?" queried Aunt Mathilde.

We decided then that we children would return to the cafe with my aunt. Atza and mother would be able to walk faster by themselves. We didn't even have time to get back to the cafe when Atza rejoined us. They had found two rooms in the house of an old peasant couple. It was a very clean house, and they liked children.

It was a big house with many flowers and greenery! At the back of the house was a yard with hens, roosters, pigeons and two big dogs. It was the dream of any child from the city.

Grandfather Ilya – that's how he liked to be called – was a short man, robust and quite heavy. His white hair didn't suit him. He looked as if he was wearing a Father Christmas mask. One rather expected him to

remove his mask and reveal a young face and dark hair. But his hair did not change. His smile was kind and his blue eyes inspired trust.

He showed us our rooms. Mother and Aunt Mathilde took the smaller one, and the five of us would sleep in the larger one. Ilya brought some mattresses. We helped him put them on the floor for the three biggest of us. The twins had a bed each. On the big windows were flowered curtains; the beds had large, white very clean sheets and thick, downy quilts. Grandfather Ilya was paid handsomely. He took advantage of the situation, but we had no choice, and he looked very kind.

His wife, Dana, a tall, thin woman, full of energy, made us behave right from the start. "Aunt" Dana was going to cook and she suffered no one in her kitchen. We paid dearly for our meals as for everything else. The meals were not always very big. "There is a war on and one must think of tomorrow."

Grandfather Ilya didn't understand why we all had to get out of Belgrade. "If they have destroyed the city, then we don't have anything left to defend. The army is going to organise here, or father away, to repel the Germans. Perhaps from now on it would be better to stay in the city."

"Who knows? No one can guess the intentions of the Germans," Aunt Mathilde replied.

After breakfast, Grandfather Ilya took us on a tour of the village in his cart. It was painted red and drawn by two handsome horses. By turns

he let us hold the reins. We were in heaven. We discovered the countryside. We wanted to gallop. Outside the village, were trucks, wagons, many horses and a veritable ants' nest of soldiers. When we got closer, the soldiers told us to go back to the village.

We children were very happy to see all this. What an army! This is how we would teach the Boche a lesson. We would make them pay mightily for the destruction of Belgrade and we would avenge all the dead! Who knows, maybe father and Uncle Yova were also there. Grandfather Ilya didn't share our joy, but we returned to the house happy and relaxed.

We spent two or three more unforgettable days there, outside all day in the sun, playing, riding horses, running with the dogs and feeding the animals. Days of holiday. Who could think of war when everything was so beautiful? In the evening, we would have our supper early to avoid lighting candles. We lived without news. Perhaps the Germans had been unable to break through the frontier. And even if they had, we must have chased them back.

At night, lying in the dark, the war re-invaded our hearts and thoughts. Where was father? Was our house still standing? What were Martin and Lenka doing? How many days would we be staying here? And if we didn't have a house any more, where would we go? What about the Germans? I thought of Hitler's voice and the bellowing of his troops. They had already invaded Czechoslovakia, Poland, France and this in

only a few days. Now, how would we fare, little Yugoslavia? No. We were perhaps a small country, but we were very strong. I saw all those soldiers at the gates of the village. Maybe they had left already. I said my "Shema Yisrael" very softly. I pronounced each word clearly and I said the prayer to the end. Since the war began, I didn't cheat any more. Each morning, I woke to the singing of birds. I wanted to stay there forever. I thought of the magnificent day awaiting us.

My brother spent all his time on the horse. He rode through the fields with Grandfather Ilya. The women busied themselves with the animals, and the peasants with the earth. We seemed not to have a care in the world.

"If this continues, there will be nothing to eat this year," repeated Ilya at each meal, as if to himself.

Aunt Dana asked about my unusual name.

"We are Jewish," mother told her.

"But the other children have Christian names."

"Precisely. They are Christians."

"I converted before my marriage," said Aunt Mathilde.

Silence.

"This is the first time I have met Jews," said Ilya. To tell the truth, I don't like them."

"Why? You just said that you don't know any."

"No... But...people say that they are very rich, very greedy, and ... different," he said hesitantly.

"There you are. Now that you have known some, you can say that they are not always rich, or greedy, or different."

"What are you talking about, you old fool? Jews, misers, the rich? Hitler says that you, that all of us, are stubborn animals, murderers and cowards. Do you believe it? They say...!" concluded Aunt Dana shrugging her shoulders.

The subject of the Jews was closed. As for me, I was sad. Was it only *my* impression that Grandfather Ilya was not the same person?

The following morning, he decided to go to the village to get some news. He could talk to the soldiers who ought to know something.

Again we passed a magnificent day. I went to bed; I thought of father; I said my prayer and fell asleep.

It was still night. I woke up. The earth was moving. Was it an earthquake?

"What's happening?" I called out.

"It's the movement of the motorised troops, armoured tanks, vehicles and trucks – surely ours," my brother answered.

"Where are they going? Are they withdrawing or are they the reinforcements?" my mother asked.

The grown-ups were already in our room. Fear gripped our throats.

"You must get dressed and go down to the cellar," said Grandfather Ilya. We did so hastily. We grabbed our clothes, helped the twins and went down to the cellar in darkness. We couldn't see anything but we could smell the smoked meat and the cheese. We sat on the floor. At daybreak, they were going to bring a few chairs. It was cold. We listened and our imaginations ran wild. At dawn the battle began. The shells fell on all sides. The two armies were shooting at each other over the village. Was it possible that this was worse than the bombardment? It was no use listening to see if the shells were falling near or far away. They fell continuously, everywhere. There was such a racket that we could not be heard even when we put our mouths close to the ears of the ones to whom we wanted to say something. We stayed where we were for six hours – the longest hours of my life. There was so much tension that we hardly spoke. Micha sat on a little barrel. Grandfather showed him that it was full of eggs and that he should move. Nobody kept an eye on him, and after some hours, he sat on the small cask again. A shell, which must have fallen very close, made us all flinch. The barrel's lid gave way under Micha's jolting and he slid inside making an omelette of a hundred eggs. We all laughed like mad – all but Grandfather Ilya. "You'll pay for those eggs and right away!"

According to the price we were paying for each egg we ate, this would be a tidy sum.

"Very well. Do you want me to go upstairs to fetch my purse?" asked aunt Mathilde.

The peasant did not answer; he looked crossly at us. Micha stood there all yellow and sticky. He needed to be washed and changed. But how? We found there in the cellar an old floor rug and we rolled him up in it. Micha was ashamed. He didn't dare protest.

The battle continued and the tension rose again. The cannon fire and machine-gunning shook the ground. What has man not invented to kill one another? Hands over our ears, mouths open, we awaited the end. The end of what? The explosions became less frequent and gave way to a deadly silence. We stayed without moving. Who lost the battle? We wondered but we knew the answer. Another half hour went by. There was a knock at the door.

"Open up, quickly! Help me!"

We all ran. A man, a soldier about my father's age, stood there.

Have you got any clothes to give me? The Germans are here! They have taken Polanka. We tried to push them back but it's over. There is no more Yugoslavia. We have been sold out!"

The old man gave him some clothes to change into. He told us that the Germans had taken many prisoners. The whole army was looking for

civilian clothes. It was vital not to be captured during the first days. The forests must have been full of soldiers.

"You must hide the uniform and the rifle."

"We will bury them," said Ilya.

"One day, I hope soon, I'll come back to get them."

He didn't look at us. It seemed as if he were talking to himself – as if he had come from another world.

"We have had many dead, and it has been for nothing. Who knows what still awaits us? In an hour or two, the Germans will arrive in the village. They have to clear the main road of our equipment."

His name was Mita. He came from Belgrade. He begged us to contact his family on our return home, and he gave us his address. Perhaps he would get there before we did.

Yes, he was very hungry. He couldn't recall the last time he had had a meal. No, he didn't want to sit down. He wanted to get to the forest as soon as possible. Here he could be discovered.

If you are alive after all this, you mustn't get killed now," said Grandfather Ilya. But to get to the forest through the fields would be dangerous. You could be seen from a long way off. Stay here. We will hide you. They're not going to search every house."

How I loved Grandfather at that moment!

"I don't know," replied Mita. "Maybe they're still fighting somewhere. If I stay the war is over for me." He hesitated. "If I stay and they find me, I'll put you in danger. Everything will be lost."

"We are going to surrender, and after that you'll be able to return to your home without fear. We'll keep you here for two days and by then everything will be clear," Ilya tried to convince him.

"All is lost. But in Belgrade I have a wife and two sons.... Otherwise I would go." He sat down. "Aren't you afraid to have me stay?"

"No. I'm already too old. I have nothing to lose any more."

As for me, I was afraid. Hiding behind drawn blinds, we looked at the fields. Dozens of horses were running there – horses of the Yugoslav army.

"We must catch before the Germans do."

"You could catch a horse and lose your head."

"I'll go out tomorrow; it's almost night, anyway."

Aunt Dana prepared some sandwiches that the grown-ups didn't even touch.

Mother and Aunt Mathilde lay down in our room. All was silent. I fell asleep, but the noise of tanks woke me. It was a muffled noise that I had already learned to recognise. This time I imagined an army advancing and crushing everything in front of it. I thought about the stories that I had heard in spite of the closed doors. Lying next to my mother, whom I

sensed was awake, I asked if those stories were true, if the Germans could really be so cruel.

"Who knows? People often exaggerate, but, for sure, some of it must be true."

"What are they going to do to us?"

"They will do nothing to children."

"And to grown-ups?"

"We shall see. After we have signed the capitulation, we'll go back to Belgrade. We'll find father again and try to be patient because life will not be easy."

Hitler living with us! Yugoslavia will be finished. I thought about father.

Looking out of the window in the morning, I found that nothing seemed to have changed. Aunt Dana didn't want to let her husband leave the house. Nevertheless, he did go and she cried in anger and fear. After a short time, he came back: "The village square is full of crates of weapons, canned food, typewriters, files, and cartridges scattered everywhere, and dozens of dead horses."

He could see the Germans moving on the main road, but they had not yet entered the village. There was no sign of our soldiers. Everything was deserted. The village was the tomb of our army.

He brought back with him two horses and a wagon covered in green canvas.

"We can't leave all this to the Boche. Right?"

"They'll be taking yours, too!" replied his wife.

The muffled sound of the transports continued. At times we heard machine-gun bursts, but very briefly.

"Whom are they firing at?"

"No one. They do it to scare people so that nobody will dare to come out and pick up what's scattered on the roads and in the fields."

How frightened I was of what awaited us. I would have liked to have gone out into the street, to find the Germans and tell them that we were Jews. If we had to start living this life we had talked about for so long, we might as well do it on the spot. I wanted to know and feel, instead of supposing.

Yet another day was spent behind the curtains. That night, I dreamed that we had chased the Germans across our borders, and in my dream, I regretted not having the chance to see a single one before they all ran away. What a deception to wake up! I left the twins alone in the room to go looking for the others in the kitchen. They were all there, sitting around the table with faces like death masks – the look of war, of defeat.

"We must go and feed the animals," I suggested to get out of the sombre room – to run away towards the sun – towards life.

"You had better eat first. Maybe tomorrow they will take us all," said Aunt Dana giving me a glass of milk and a sandwich.

I didn't want to hear such things being said any more. I just wanted to run in the fields and forget the war.

"You resemble my little daughter who died," said Mita. She was your age, but she was taller and bigger. Don't you know that you must eat well to grow? She died of meningitis. It lasted only four days. It was terrible to see her die, without being able to help her."

Nobody said anything. We looked at him, sad and ill at ease. The mouthful I tried to swallow got stuck in my throat.

"I'll come often to visit you, with your permission," and he looked at mother. "I want to watch you growing up."

"You'll always be welcome," mother told him.

Mita had a pleasant look, but I didn't like the idea of resembling a little girl who was dead. He looked at me and I felt almost ashamed to be there constantly reminding him of his little girl.

"You see, you have another friend now. You know the friends that you make during a time of war will last all your life."

He looked so sad that I wanted to hide. The conversation ended and we were again plunged into silence. It was already two days that we had been shut in. It was so beautiful outside. The Germans had not come into the village. Why couldn't we go out? Upstairs, in our room, we had been examining the situation for two days. We hid our thoughts, our fears. We put on a brave face. Finally, we started a pillow fight and our

pillows flew around the room crashing against our heads and against the walls. The battle developed silently, lest we might be discovered. We didn't laugh much. The game, which started because we needed activity, became serious. We were rebelling against those who were forcing us to remain locked in while outside the sun was shining. The combat ended when the feathers from one pillow broke free from the torn cover and scattered all over the room. I then saw my mother looking at the scene from the door. She was so surprised to see this spectacle that she just stood there flabbergasted.

"For God's sake, Relly! Don't you realise what's happening to us? I would never have thought that you could be so irresponsible," she added, as if to herself, closing the door behind her.

How I would rather have been slapped in the face! This reprimand, coming from my mother, so unlike her made me understand that what had happened was shocking and I felt ashamed of myself. The war seemed lost. Nobody knew where my father was. The Germans were so close to the village; and there I was indulging in a pillow fight like a little child! No. I didn't have the right to behave like a child any more. And to think that, a few days ago, my mother would have punished me for having a game with somebody else's pillows. Now, "You are not responsible". I had never before been asked to be responsible about anything. Matters of conscience had not had anything to do with my

world. "Go and play outside," they would say. Suddenly, I must be "inside". I couldn't go and play. I must be responsible. My right to escape this funereal atmosphere no longer existed. Now I must endure it. During war, one could not be a child.

I believe that it was on the following morning that e heard from a distance the beating of a drum. What did it mean? Grandfather Ilya explained to us that in the village they announced news and orders with a drum roll. The sound came closer. We were afraid of what we might hear. Grandfather went outside. We heard a voice, in German, announcing something. A German soldier! He held a piece of paper m from which he was reading. His voice was the voice of one giving orders. The drummer, a little good-natured man, stood next to the soldier, a very tall man. This foreign language in a little village in the heart of Serbia ordered the peasants to do what was expected of them: to obey – to carry out orders. The drummer read the translation in a monotonous voice. That was the end of it. His head held low, his shoulders drooping, he lagged behind the soldier who marched, chest thrown out, stiff, the master of the world! Grandfather Ilya returned across the yard almost running. He was very pale. Still shaking, he drank a glass of water that someone offered him, but he couldn't talk. We saw what an effort he made to hold back his tears. A Serbian peasant doesn't cry!

"They have taken Belgrade! We must surrender all the weapons we possess. We have till noon. After that, if they find a weapon in any house, The owners will be shot on the spot. All the villagers, including women and old people, must go immediately to the square to clear the main street, the surroundings and bury the dead. We have to sweep the main road, and keep order and cleanliness. That was all. No! All those who are not from the village must leave and go back to where they come from."

Silence! We were trying to grasp what we had just heard. They were telling us what we must do and whom we had the right to invite to our homes – whom we could have under our roof.

"What a pity that I did not die before having to live through all this," said Grandfather in a hushed voice. He looked so sad, and suddenly, so old.

"I would like to hide my rifle. I have no intention of making them a gift of it. Tonight I'll find a place to bury it at some distance from your house," said Mita.

"Me, too. I have my hunting rifle. We'll hide them in the same place," said Grandfather Ilya.

"But if ever they find them, you run a great risk said Mita.

"If they find them, they will shoot me. But, at my age, it's not a loss any more. At least, in this way, I'll have the feeling that I, too, have done something to thwart these accursed Germans."

In the cellar they moved the barrels of wine, dug a hole, and, wrapping the weapons up in newspaper and an old blanket, covered the lot over and put the barrels back in place.

"Now, there is nothing left but to wait for the day when we can take them out again and use them," said Mita.

They got organised to go to the village. Mother, Aunt Mathilde. And Atza would leave with Aunt Dana and Grandfather. We, the children, would stay at the house with Mita awaiting their return.

From the window, we saw the tracks, deserted a while ago, now filling up. Women, young and old people, all were heading for the village square.

We were allowed to go outside to play, but we no longer felt that we wanted to. The long wait began. The first hours passed quickly. They were already away five hours, then six. They didn't even have breakfast before leaving. By now, they must have been very hungry. What if the Germans forced them to work all night, too? What if something happened to them? Mita, who seemed to guess what I what I had been thinking, calmed me down. He was willing to bet that before night came on, they would be back.

But, I was worried. How could I hide my feelings, and my terrible headache? My cousins, who were also afraid, asked to go to bed. There we were, the four of us, stretched out on the mattress on the floor.

I tried to help my little cousins to bear up, and keep control of my feelings under Miki's worried and disdainful glare. I wanted to hide my head under the covers and cry, but instead I told them fairy tales.

It was already dark when they came back after I had given up hope of seeing them that night. We didn't pretend to be brave any more. We could no longer restrain our tears. We wept together, the four of us, sobbing loudly.

"How could you leave us and come back so late? I won't ever stay alone again. I'll go everywhere with you!"

Mother was crying, too.

"Look at you! Look at the state you're in! Very well, You'll come with us tomorrow, but, believe me, you'll regret it."

"It doesn't matter. They'll have to get used to it. That will be the sight awaiting them in Belgrade," said Grandfather.

"What about the Germans?" asked Miki.

"Well, they are soldiers and very proud of themselves – harsh and mistrustful of everything and everyone. Let's hope we don't ever have to make their close acquaintance."

My brother went to bed without opening his mouth. When I persisted, he told me that it had been a terrible day. He hadn't seen any dead. Other people had taken care of them. But all the way to the church, the street was littered with officers' trunks like father's and classified documents in

large files with the word "Secret" written on them in red letters. "We didn't have the time to burn the things so that they wouldn't fall into German hands. I can't understand how our army, that was strong, so organised before the war, could have lost the battle in this way. I can't understand where this unit was going with all the office furniture. I'm so unhappy to see this debacle on one side, and on the other, the German order and organisation. They looked as if they were on a picnic. Their trucks and motor cycles seem to have come straight from the factory. They are so confident. They march and run with an objective. They know exactly what they are doing. I wish I didn't have to go back there ever, but I must because of mother."

My imagination ran wild. I looked at my brother. He looked so different, so unhappy and sad, that I would have given anything to see him bragging and showing me how superior he was. He was asking questions that no one could answer. What he saw that day I'll never know. When, on the following morning, he advised me to stay at the house with Mita and our cousins, for once I obeyed without arguing.

The next day, we tried to find some means of transport to go back to Belgrade. The entire country had been occupied. The railroad was solely in the service of the Germans. We heard that there were people leaving on foot. There was a curfew which came into effect at six in the evening. It was forbidden to be outside after that. We needed to find

somewhere to spend the night. It appeared that some people were leaving in wagons taken from the fields where our soldiers had abandoned them.

Mr. Mita came with us, and this was very fortunate. Everything was much easier with him around. But how could we do it? There were no more horses in the fields, and we didn't know how to handle them anyway. One needed to know horses to control them! On the road, travel was very difficult. From what people said in the village, the Germans were moving in convoys and all the time people must move aside too let them pass.

The day ended without a solution. Finally, Mr. Mita asked Grandfather to take us to Belgrade with his horses and the army wagon. We would pay him very well and would always be grateful. Grandfather considered it. But Aunt Dana shouted: "No!" from her heart. "It's very dangerous. You are an old, sick man. The Germans will kill you! I don't want you to go!" She started to curse Mita and all of us. We were a bunch of "dirty Yids". It wasn't enough that they had given us shelter, we also wanted to get them killed! Grandfather looked at her apathetically, and, after a while, on seeing that nobody took her up, she held her peace.

"I'll go because I want to. We need money for what may be in store for us. That will be our main worry. But I'm doing it also for you. If I were

alone, I would choose death. I have lived long enough not to wish for life under the Occupation."

Aunt Dana left the kitchen and we all felt extremely embarrassed.

"I think we should look for someone else," said Mita. We don't want you to do this if Dana is so much against it."

"No. I will take you. She is temperamental, my old woman. I have never done anything that she wanted me to and I'm too old to start now."

Departure was set for the following morning. We got up very early. Quickly and in silence, we gathered our clothes, anxious to start the journey. The atmosphere in the house after the scene with Aunt Dana, who didn't leave her room, was very unpleasant.

We were going home to find father, Martin, Lenka, and the house. We would have to go back to school, and I wasn't looking forward to that.

Since father had left, we had spoken about him everyday and about the moment when we would see him again. Now this moment was near.

We wanted to say farewell to Aunt Dana, but the door to her room remained closed. Mother knocked on it: "We are leaving and we would like to thank you for everything."

"Go to hell! I hope you all get killed!" a voice welling over in tears replied.

It's not nice being cursed, especially during the war!

We left the village of Natalinzi where, in the space of several days, I spent the last hours of my childhood.

We regretted having to leave Aunt Dana in this way, and, at the last moment, mother suggested again that Ilya stay home, but he refused.

"I looked after you during the battle. I want to take you home. She will be all right when I get back and very happy to count the money I'll bring her."

CHAPTER 6

If reaching Natalinzi took us only a few hours, the trip back home took us nearly two days. The road was encumbered with German vehicles – endless convoys. What an army! The troops proceeded at high speeds,

continuously honking their horns, making our horses nervous, and putting in danger the people on foot, who could either let themselves be crushed or be driven off the road by the horses. We tried to take the least possible space. With my eyelids almost closed, I observed the soldiers passing by with great curiosity – Hitler's soldiers! – those who roared their applause of him and who made me so afraid just to hear them. There they were, very close to me. They didn't look terrible. They took no notice of us, as if they owned the place. They didn't ask for directions. One could think that they knew everything – were familiar with everything. We were not up to their level; their world was above our heads. At times, pulled over to the edge of the road, naked to the waist, they washed and ate amid great bursts of laughter. We felt twice beaten. Were these the soldiers that had been at war? Did the victorious army always look so polished, so orderly, so little exhausted? No! If our soldiers looked like Mita when he arrived, then these, too, should have been dirty, tired, and sad at having lost their comrades to injury and death. But not these soldiers! If they had any dead and wounded, we didn't see them, and there was only joy on their faces. I hated these Germans because they occupied our country, because we had lost the war. But deep in my heart, I feared them less. They didn't really look so cruel.

"Now that they have occupied our country, they are going to pay attention to us, to the people. Soon we'll see if they are really as civilised as they want us to believe," said Aunt Mathilde.

"Civilised! They are cowards. They bombed us before declaring war, and after Belgrade had been proclaimed an open city. We haven't started to argue about the Germans. Unfortunately, we are going to have time to know them closely. They ignore us and it would be wise for us to do the same," said Mita.

I thought of the days we spent in a Belgrade on fire, and, I stuck my tongue out at the first soldier I saw. I poked it out behind my hand, which covered my mouth! Courage was never my strong point.

The horses had been trotting all day. In the evening, before six o'clock, we stopped in front of an inn to spend the night. Curfew. At the inn, we found quite a large room full of refugees. Night fell. Sitting on the floor, one next to the other, we waited for daylight to continue our journey.

I woke up. A German soldier was there. He held a very powerful flashlight in his hand, and trained it on us. He inspected us. I thought that he was drunk. He was holding his machine gun ready to shoot. The small children, awakened by his shouts, began to cry.

"Make them stop!" he yelled. "Are there any Jews among you?"

Nobody moved. My blood froze. I felt my mother's hands on my shoulders. Her fingers hurt me. I wanted to scream!

"Nobody speaks German? You are all a lot of savages – scared rats!"

A child asked for water. His mother didn't have any; nobody had water.

The soldier became more and more excited.

"Ruhe.... Silence!"

"Wasser?" someone asked.

"Ah! Now you know German."

He left and returned a few minutes later with a flask of water.

"For the children. Not for the Jews."

People gave water to the children. The soldier poured water for them, one after the other. We refused. Not for the Jewish children. Why? I asked myself. I heard Hitler's voice and I remembered the stories that I had heard. I was no longer thirsty. The German stayed with us all night. He spoke of his family. He was an only child. Because of us, the Yugoslavs, a dirty, rude mob, he was made to spend the night in this stinking inn. He recited an endless monologue to the glory of Germany and Hitler. He demanded absolute silence. We felt that he was afraid. At the least noise, he jumped to his feet and aimed the machine gun at us. He spoke of the thousands of prisoners who found themselves in their hands.

"You! You have surrendered without fighting us. Rats! Rabbits!"

He laughed and we cried. We became conscious of – heard people blowing their noses and stifling their sobbing. I thought of father and

whether he was also a prisoner. If he were, I would not see him. Where did they put prisoners? Rabbits! I thought about father and in what haste he had left the house. And Mita! The way our soldiers had fought in Natalinzi. Father, like Mita, must have needed civilian clothes to replace his uniform. Did he find any? I didn't doubt it. Father always knew how to disentangle things. I fell asleep only to awake at dawn to the sound of that same soldier's voice. He hadn't stopped talking, afraid he might fall asleep.

Our first night under the Occupation. There definitely were things to be afraid of.

I think it was about noon when we arrived in Belgrade. Ruins everywhere. Grandfather Ilya tried to get as close as possible to our neighbourhood, but it was impossible. People were moving on foot, climbing with difficulty through what had been, only a few days ago, blocks of houses, stores and public gardens. Mita suggested that we continue on foot so that Ilya would not waste precious hours. Ilya didn't intend to spend the night in our home – even if "home" still existed.

We thanked him. He collected his money with satisfaction and embraced each one of us. Just before he left us, my mother asked him if, in case of need, we could take refuge in his house again. Perhaps it would become advisable for Jews to get away from the city.

"No. For the Jews it will be dangerous everywhere. I dare not. There is also Dana. She will no longer accept you in our home."

"It doesn't matter. Thank you for everything." If she was disappointed, her face did not show it. Grandfather Ilya left us there in the street and went away without looking back. Was he ashamed or was he trying to hide his feelings?

Mita left us after a little while. He would return very soon to visit us with his wife and children.

We walked rapidly. No one spoke. Our neighbourhood had hardly been touched. One more street, a little hill, we turned at the corner and the house was there. My heart beat very fast. Father must be there. I just knew. I could feel it. Judging by the tidiness of things, he must be waiting for us. I let go of my mother's hand and I started running. The door was bolted.

"Father! Father! Lenka! Martin!" we all shouted. Atza shook the door with all his strength. We were so impatient. After a few moments, Lenka appeared. We all looked at her without daring to ask any questions. She looked at us in a strange way. Father had come back three days earlier. He was looking for us and waiting. On this day, he had left to visit someone but he would be back before the curfew, which, for the Jews, started at five o'clock.

Lenka spoke while opening the door. She gave us news of, too, of Uncle Yova Who had not returned yet, but who would not be long. He was staying with his sister somewhere in the country. What joy! Father was back. Uncle Yova was alive. Lenka, Martin, and the house – everything was there. Mother embraced Lenka. Her eyes were full of tears. "How did you spend all the time? How is Martin?"

We all talked at the same time. Home at last! "And Martin, where is he? Didn't Lenka say that he was back?"

"Yes, he is here," she replied.

There, in the front doorway, stood Martin wearing a strange suit. He looked embarrassed. I ran towards him to hug him, but something made me stop a few steps from him. Something incomprehensible was happening. Martin didn't run to me. I became aware of the silence around me. I was in front of him. He kept his hands in his pockets and didn't look at me. Martin! But a strange thing! It was then that I realised that he was wearing a black uniform and on the sleeve of his jacket, was a red armband with a big swastika!

Was this a joke? Was he in disguise? But Martin did not laugh. I remained nailed to the floor. If it was a joke, it had lasted too long. He would start to laugh. But, no, he did not laugh. Still without looking at us, and with a voice that wasn't his, he announced: "This house has been requisitioned by order of Commandant, Herr von X. You have the

right to keep a room and use the kitchen whenever we are not here. When the military is in the house, you must not leave your room until they leave."

Finally, while looking right in mother's eyes: "We are German. Between ourselves we spoke our language. You didn't ever question it. Consequently, we have nothing to explain to you. Furthermore, it is precisely because of that, that we have been able to better serve our cause. Whatever happens to you is not our responsibility. Personally, we have nothing against you. But, we must obey our orders."

He turned his back on us and entered the house followed by Lenka and a deadly silence.

We remained in front of the closed door to our house. For ten years they had lived with us in our house. They were like members of our family. They shared our joys, celebrated our holidays and our birthdays. They used to listen to Radio London; they discussed Hitler and cursed him with us. And now, the black uniform, the swastika, the Volksdeutsche!⁵

"Traitors!" exclaimed my brother out loud.

"Shut up!"

What a shock! Lenka and Martin, traitors under our roof – for ten years at our own table!

⁵ Yugoslavs of German origin.

We stood there. We said that we would wait for Martin to come out and tell us it was all a prank that he had played on us. Or perhaps he would react to my brother's insult. But no, the door remained closed, and we all took the time to swallow what had just happened.

We went inside the house, which was, until a few days ago, our home but where nothing was the same.

My brother's bed and mine were in our parents' bedroom. Fortunately the room was big enough. How sad everything looked. We just stood there, stock-still, with our bundles in our hands.

"Well," said mother, "we just have to pretend that the house has been destroyed during the bombing and this is the only room left. Let's be happy that we have it. Many people have nothing left."

"Like us, for instance," said Aunt Mathilde"

We sat on the beds waiting for father. Aunt Mathilde wanted to go right away to the house of her brother-in-law, who lived in a very big apartment, if it hadn't been destroyed. She would wait there for the return of her husband. Then they would see what could be salvaged from the ruins of their apartment.

We couldn't help dwelling on what had just transpired with Martin and Lenka. Atza, in a hushed voice, said that one of these days we must kill them.

"How?" I asked.

"I don't know, but they must die."

In spite of the closed door, we didn't feel at home. The presence of "the Germans" in the house forced us to whisper, even to refrain from talking at all. In the silence, we were on edge at every noise. Finally, we recognised one, my father's footsteps. He was walking fast. The doors opened and closed behind him. What emotion! I would have liked to run to him but we had to stay in the room. We must not reveal our feelings in front of the traitors.

What a meeting! What joy, what sadness were expressed in our gestures. We caressed each other, hugged, cried and laughed without saying a word. How fast we learned to behave like refugees in the house of strangers. But in spite of all this, we were so happy to have survived, and to have been re-united.

Straight away, father told Aunt Mathilde to go at once. She should remain in contact with Jews. We children looked at each other. We should not be in contact? Weren't we brothers and sisters? Then we saw the yellow armband with the star of David and the word "Jew" printed in black letters, that father wore on the sleeve of his jacket.

"Yes. After the sixteenth of April, we've all had to wear this sign."

"I, too?"

"No. You are still too young," my father replied.

Then, we really were different. I wanted to ask thousands of questions, but my instinct already told me that I had better save them until after the war.

Aunt Mathilde and my cousins were leaving. Yes. We would see each other very soon. We should not take things too much to heart. Aunt Mathilde was unhappy to leave us. She wanted to know how father had spent these last two weeks, but she must get to Uncle Yova's brother's house before the curfew.

I was sad to see them go. We couldn't even stay in touch. How would we learn to live apart, to become indifferent? I could only have contact with Jews. But I didn't have any Jewish girlfriends. Well then! I still had my brother.

In a few sentences, we told father about the bombings, the night at Kurt's, the journey to Natalinzi, Grandfather Ilya and Aunt Dana, the lost battle, Mita, the return to Belgrade and the encounter with Martin and Lenka.

"Yes. Martin and Lenka! That was a terrible blow. I feel so guilty and stupid. It's precisely traitors like they are who have sold us out. And to think that they lived under our roof! When I saw him wearing that uniform, I had to make a superhuman effort not to strangle him. We must learn to ignore them as much as possible. I hope that all this will

end soon, but in the meantime, we must keep our spirits high and be very patient."

"But why have we lost the war so quickly? Were sixteen days sufficient to force us to sign the capitulation?" asked my brother.

Father tried to explain to us those very selfsame things that were so difficult for him to understand, and, especially to accept. What happened to this nation which was so willing to die defending its freedom? These words that were so meaningful during the war – how empty they sounded so soon after it was over.

Defeat was written all over my father's face. It seemed as if the debacle of the country was, in a way, his own personal defeat. He told us of the events that took place, almost apologising for what had happened, as if he wanted to convince himself, but without much success, that, if the Germans were in Belgrade, it wasn't really his fault. With his unit, he had to defend a certain railroad station sixty kilometres from Belgrade. Everything was going according to a very precise plan. When they arrived, they began to open the cases containing the ammunition to be distributed among the soldiers. What they found was a single layer of cartridges on top of a number of stones, neatly arranged one next to the other. It was impossible to describe the astonishment, horror and rage that they felt as they looked at those boxes. He learned afterwards that it was the same all over the country. The fifth column had sabotaged the

entire defence of the country. The best soldiers in the world cannot go to war without weapons. They blew up the tracks and the material that might be used by the enemy, and , after that, each soldier fought till his last bullet.

"We were able to inflict some losses, but we quickly had to retreat, hoping to join other units better equipped. But, unfortunately, everyone was in the same boat. An entire army was turning around in circles, impotent and incapable of doing its job. How else could I judge what had happened to the country when I find, on my return home, that Martin is a traitor? What happened to us in our house had happened to the country. The fifth column made us lose the war before it began. The country was infested with Martins, and the stones found in the cases of ammunition were the result of their work. We were blind and stupid. Seeing Martin dressed in black made me feel as if part of this defeat weighed on my shoulders.

"And, while we were withdrawing, without any tactics, without communication between the units, without weapons to stop them, the Germans were advancing in perfect order. We could only help in bringing about our own burial."

Father's unit took off to the forests, unable to help the wounded, without food, guided by only one idea: not to be captured – not to be taken prisoner. Perhaps somewhere there was a Yugoslav army, and they

would be able to reorganise. Of that hope, very quickly, nothing remained. The soldiers understood, seeing the German columns advancing on Belgrade, that everything was lost and that the only thing left for them to do was to look for civilian clothes, get rid of their uniforms, and await the signing of the capitulation.

Every man for himself. The wounded, who were unable to walk, stayed behind waiting to be helped by the peasants that father tried to find in a village. When night came, he would go there only to find closed blinds, darkness, and a deathly silence. He knocked on a number of doors but there was no sign of life. In front of one door, before knocking, he said in a hushed voice, "Open up. I'm an officer. I have some wounded men who need care."

A peasant opened the door just enough to put his head out. He was mistrustful, considered for a moment, and then decided to let him in.

"The village is empty. There are only women, children and old people," he said.

The Germans? He hadn't seen any yet. But our soldiers had come by the dozens, knocking on his door.

"This is not a shop. There's hardly a change of clothing left for myself. I cannot help you. There's nothing that we can do for the wounded right now. Tomorrow morning I'll organise something with some of the other

others. We must see, too, where the Germans are. We don't want to get killed, do we?"

Father left the village. He was still in uniform. Every now and then, he could hear gunshots and canon fire. At all costs, it was absolutely necessary to change clothes. He must reach the forest and remain hidden for a few days. He got there; he looked for the wounded but couldn't find any. Perhaps most other peasants had taken them in. He decided to walk north, distancing himself from the road as much as possible. He encountered other soldiers, other officers, all of them despondent, all hunted, like himself. They were trying to stay alive and not be captured by the Germans. He walked all day with the idea of going to the next village. At nightfall, he arrived and knocked at the first door. It was immediately opened by a woman. "Sir, the Germans have been here since yesterday."

Yes, she would like to give him some clothes but she had none left. She had given them all to the passing soldiers. Frightened, she begged him to leave. Father thanked her. He understood.

"It would be more prudent to go through the fields, behind the house."

He left and made a turn so as to get away from the village. A German patrol was waiting for him.

"Halt!" They were already shooting. Father stopped.

"Hands up!"

By the light of several flashlights, they examined his papers.

"A big fish." The Germans laughed. They were happy.

Father spent the night at the village police station with some other soldiers and officers as frustrated, despairing, and deadly tired as he.

The following morning they were pushed into a truck already full of prisoners. Father thought of the camps. He was a Jewish officer. He thought of us and suddenly decided to jump from the truck and escape.

The road bordered the forest. He would only have to run a few yards to get inside. He made his jump at the first bend in the road, when the driver slowed down to negotiate the bend. He ran. They fired. They shouted. My father was on the plump side. I tried to picture him running.

It made me laugh. Fathers don't generally jump from lorries to save themselves! The Germans were afraid of the forest, and, furthermore, to chase him, they would have had to leave the other prisoners alone, as there were only two soldiers with them. Father ran on for a while longer.

He felt himself, and could not believe that he had succeeded – that not a bullet had hit him. He was free but for how long? He felt as if he had saved his life – his and ours, too. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving us alone, without his support, knowing all that could happen to us.

He found some soldiers who shared their slice of bread with him. They all talked about the treason, the thousands of civilians dead and the

soldiers machine-gunned by German aircraft while escaping. Hatred, anguish, and fear for the future.

Most of the soldiers were wearing civilian clothes. My father was still in his uniform. He waited there two or three days not knowing where to go or what to do. Finally, a peasant turned up with some shirts and some torn pants. What luck! Father changed and was bemused to discover that only by chance he had not been killed. During the battle for the railroad station, a bullet must have grazed him on the left side at the height of his heart. On that side he kept his wallet with some coins, which must have stopped the bullet. He showed them to us – the coins, all twisted, that evidently saved his life.

While I listened to my father, I thought to myself that, after all, God, perhaps the Jewish God, protected the good people, and that maybe Grandfather Ilya was wrong when he said that in the time of war, good and bad people all faced the same fate.

The hours passed without anyone setting eyes on us. It was already dark. We were hungry and dirty. We needed to wash and to eat something.

We couldn't leave the room. We were to find out that almost every night Martin and Lenka "received" their friends. They partied and sang till very

late. During these "receptions" we were not allowed to use the kitchen – here in our own house!

I thought about Lenka; Lenka who had watched me grow up; Lenka who used to bathe me when I was little; Lenka who would tell me stories; Lenka who would bake those little cakes that I liked so much; Lenka who would help me plant flowers and water them; Lenka who was always there, always smiling. I even had little secrets with her – things I could not tell mother like reading in bed until late, which was forbidden.

And Martin! Martin who had built a magnificent swing in the garden. Thanks to that swing, my popularity at school became unquestionable. "We can't argue with Relly or there will be no swing." Martin who had made me repeat my lessons and who had corrected my multiplication tables; Martin who had erected tents in the garden where I used to organise, with Atza, summer camps with children of the neighbourhood; Martin who would tell me stories that would make me laugh until I cried; Martin who had discussed the news with father; Martin who, together with us, had cursed Hitler.

Martin and Lenka were members of our family. Martin and Lenka were traitors!

Martin was wearing the black uniform. Martin and Lenka, knowing that we were hungry and thirsty, were there behind the closed door, eating the supplies of the house,

our food, and ignoring our presence. I wanted to hate them, to wish them to die, but I could not. I listened to the noises in the house, feeling, knowing that Lenka would come; that she would bring us food; that she would tell us that everything would be all right because she and Martin were there to protect us.

Our parents spoke in whispers, sitting on their bed. We two, my brother and I, in a wordless agreement, waited for a sign of life from our friends of yesterday – today's enemies.

I tried not to hear what my parents were saying to each other. My ears were glued to the door. I was waiting, and what I was waiting for arrived. Someone knocked on the door very, very gently. My father opened it. We had no candles; we couldn't see anything. It was Lenka. She brought a big tray of sandwiches. She apologised for not being able to do it earlier. The German officer, who lived in the house, had just left. So there she was. She regretted not being able to do better. She and Martin would never take advantage of their superior situation, but we must understand that they could not do very much for us, the Jews. "You do know there are rules that everyone has to

obey?" Nobody answered her. She could not see our faces, and we could not see hers.

Often, in my mind, I saw this scene. All that she said was in whispers. Was she sad? Was she feeling superior? Was she happy in the role she was playing? Did she have tears in her eyes as I did? Didn't she want to hug us?

For ten years, they had played a comedy. They had lied, pretending to be good people. In reality, they were hypocrites and traitors!

Nobody moved to take the tray and she didn't know where to put it. We were there looking at her without seeing her. Then she put it on the floor near the door and left, closing the door behind her.

If only I could have spoken to mother and father about what had just happened. We, who could think only of eating one hour ago, could not even think of touching the stuff she had brought.

"The trollop," said my brother in a hushed voice.

My mother, shocked, found the strength to tell him that the situation didn't allow him to use such language. I didn't know the word, but I told myself that it must be very coarse if he used it to describe the new Lenka.

In the morning, as I opened my eyes, I saw my father standing near the window, looking outside. Mother and Atza were still asleep. Father didn't realise that I was looking at him. He looked so sad, so different from the father he was in happy times. I felt a new awareness that until now I had only felt for some of my friends who were poor or for the dogs that had been abandoned on the streets. I felt pity for my father! My father, who could do everything, who knew everything, who was always busy with his work or reading a book. My father was there but had an appearance that I couldn't recognise in him.

I got up and moved closer to him, to my father of the forest of Kochoutniak. He felt my presence only when I touched his hand.

"Father, I'm scared. What are the Germans going to do to us?"

"Nothing. We are Yugoslavs."

"But you told us what they did to the German Jews in Berlin."

"Yes. But those were German Jews. We are Yugoslavs. Now you must get ready to go to school," he said.

"To school? But how? I'm scared. I don't want to go!"

"There's nothing to fear. Children go to school and you will do as they do. Atza must also get ready."

In an hour we'll be able to leave the room because the German officer who now lives in the house will leave a little before eight o'clock. Unfortunately, there's little water, so we can only wash our hands and faces."

"Why isn't there enough water?"

"Because the city's entire water system was destroyed by the bombing. It will take time before we'll be able to take a bath. You must be very careful not to get dirty, because we can't do our laundry. They are distributing water to the population, a bucket per person. But, for us, the Jews, it's a bucket per family."

"For the Jews that are not Yugoslavs?"

"No. For all the Jews," replied father.

"Then we are not like everybody else!"

"No. But we will struggle to be like everybody else. You take care of your homework and you'll see that everything will be all right."

"Martin and Lenka. How is it that they are German? They speak Serbian. They were so good and, now, all of a

sudden, they are German. Are you going to tell them to leave the house?"

"Oh, no! We can't tell them anything! Those who lose the war lose the right to speak. I am sure that they will not harm us. But I warn you to stay away from them and not to speak to them unless they speak to you."

I said nothing but I was thinking. What was all this? A play? Not speak to Lenka! I had to stop asking questions because, no matter what, I would never be able to understand the answers.

CHAPTER 7

At eight o'clock in the morning, Martin knocked on the door. He entered the room, his head lowered, and told us that on the walls of the city, there were notices ordering all Jews of Belgrade, and those who called themselves Christians but were of Jewish blood, to report that same morning at nine o'clock sharp to Tache-Maydan Square. Those who did not report would be shot.

Father left the house to go to Aunt Mathilde's to advise her not to go, since she was not registered with the Jewish community of the city. The Germans were using the records on which all of the Jewish inhabitants of Belgrade were listed. No one would escape them.

Tache-Maydan Square! I knew it so well. In winter, my brother and I used to spend wonderful hours there. At least two or three afternoons a week, we would go there to skate. We enjoyed it so much. It was my favourite sport and I was good at it.

But now, Tache-Maydan, the enormous square, was surrounded with barbed wire, and guarded by German soldiers and dogs.

There were so many Jews there! They were talking to each other in whispers.

"They want to verify the community records. They will not harm us."

Reassured because we so much wanted to be reassured. We stood in line under a blazing sun. The healthy young men and boys over sixteen all received a blue card – the magic card that would safeguard their future and that of their families. They would have to work every day from seven in the morning till five in the afternoon. They had to clean the city, which was three-quarters destroyed, repaint the barracks, and pave the streets. Forced Labour!

"What does it mean, 'forced labour'?"

It must have been a good thing, since each person holding a blue card looked very satisfied.

"No. We'll be forced to work very hard. It won't be easy. But from what we know, the Germans grant freedom to those who can be useful to them. We have to hold out. The war will be over very quickly and nobody dies of work."

"But what about those who don't work?"

"We'll manage. We will help each other. The important thing is to keep our spirits high and to be hopeful. As long as we can do that, Hitler will not be able to crush us. They will try to exhaust us physically and kill our spirits. We must not allow them that pleasure. Today we will work and tomorrow the world will make them pay dearly for all the things they are doing. When the right time comes, we'll have the last word. We Jews must have confidence in the future."

The following morning at seven o'clock, in the various parts of the city, big military trucks waited for the Jews to take them to work.

Two or three sandwiches each, a bottle of water, and they were gone.

Mother could not hold back her tears. As for me, I didn't understand why she was crying, but I had already learnt that I couldn't ask questions. I would ask her when the war was over.

A few days later, we were told that we had permission to do our shopping after eleven o'clock in the morning. By then, there was nothing left to buy. The Jews, with the Star of David on their sleeves, were slaves amongst men, and slaves didn't have the right to eat.

Merchants and peasants kept the vegetables, which were only good for throwing away, to sell to the Jews at the price of gold. Those, who could afford to pay, ate – others ate less.

I went often to the market with mother, because Jewish children could not attend school any more.

The first days of forced labour went by rather quickly. Mother prepared somewhat larger meals for she said: "Father and Atza are working hard. They need good nourishment."

I remembered that one day, right at the beginning, they came home with their clothes dirty, their hands bleeding, my father's face despondent and his body bent double from

fatigue and the suffering caused by his bad back. Atza, in contrast, stood quite upright but his hands were also bleeding. He had a furious look on his face – a face that screamed: "No!" He was not willing to accept the situation. He stood stock still and declared that he would not go to work the following day. He was going to kill the Germans. He didn't want any more; he couldn't take any more...

Father said that he wasn't tired. He was suffering from his back, as often in the past, but surely the pain would soon go away. The next day, with Atza, he went back to work. They returned that evening looking much the same, but were less vocal. We talked to each other much less at home. We had much less to eat, and, later, almost nothing. The little we could get hold of, we kept for father and Atza; quite often, mother and I went hungry.

Lenka, Martin and their guests ate from our supplies – those that my parents had acquired before the war.

One day, there was nothing to be found at the market, not even enough to prepare some dinner for father and Atza. Without saying a word to mother, I went to Lenka. She worked from early morning until evening at the "Todt Organisation". I told her that we were hungry. Scarcely

had I uttered these words when she began to cry. "For as long as I am here, you will not be hungry."

From that day on, we were able to use "our own" supplies., and every evening, on her return, she would bring us vegetables and other things, that we could not find anywhere – supplies from the German army! We knew that Martin was unaware of what his wife was doing. We hid all these treasures in our room. He did not ever come in there.

We were also afraid of the officer who, for some days, had been living in the house. Every day, we waited for him to leave. His presence in the house made the air unbreathable. He knew that we could speak German, but he would not say a word to us, and we, on our part, were very careful not to meet him or look at him.

There were several Jewish families on our street. We did not socialise but we knew each other. All the men were doing forced labour, and the women would only leave the house to do errands that were difficult for the children. They were afraid to be alone in the streets, since the Germans would often stop them and make them clean their

apartments, do their laundry, or carry their cartons of groceries.

One morning, I left, with my mother, to visit Aunt Mathilde, who was now living in the three-bedroom apartment in the house of her brother-in-law. It was on the other side of town, at least an hour's walk. The tram, as well as all other means of transport, was prohibited to dogs, Jews and Gypsies.

I held mother by her arm, trying to hide her armband with the Star of David. We were walking quickly and silently, when, suddenly, a scream in German stopped us. Even before seeing the man, we understood that we were in danger, and we were frightened. We stopped and waited. The German soldier, with his finger pointing at his suitcase, told my mother to carry it,

My mother was a very slim woman, and, to me, the suitcase looked enormous. Instantly, I visualised all the horror stories i had heard. My mother would not be able to lift the suitcase and the soldier would kill her! I wanted to help her. But how? There was no place for me to grab it. We stood there for a few seconds.

Mother lifted the suitcase and told me to go home. I looked at her wondering how she would make out carrying it. She walked with difficulty, almost dragging it, while the young soldier screamed at her: "Faster! Faster! Hurry! Dirty pig! Slob! When do you think you'll get to the station!" The station. But that was so far away from where we were.

I walked behind mother, crying. I couldn't bear what I was seeing. I got close to her and put my hand next to hers to share the weight, to do something, but the piercing voice of that monster stopped me: "Go away, slut, or I'll have you sit on her back, too!"

I withdrew my hand and stopped. I let them move away a little and then followed them. I looked and saw all these good Serbian citizens who were watching the sideshow without seeing it. Were they indifferent, or, like I was, helpless? Why didn't anyone help? Why didn't the men who passed by, offer to carry the suitcase? Was there not even one man willing to do it? How can I describe the feelings that were suffocating me? "We mustn't show our feelings in public," I heard my father saying.

I gathered all my strength to keep from crying, unwilling to show my pain to these people. I felt ashamed. Why didn't I dare attack this man, slap him, spit in his face? I felt small and weak, but I knew that I was not small any more and that what was happening to mother and me had never happened to anyone else before.

My mother, who would do anything for me, was there in front of me, and I could not do anything for her. We were living in a place of witches where the good fairies would not come to save innocent people and punish the assassins.

I suddenly became aware of the value of mother's presence in my life, of my love for her. How I pitied her, and how I pitied myself! What must have been going on inside her during all this? What must she be feeling – thinking? Did she see the look on the faces of her fellow countrymen? Did she realise that there was no one willing to help her?

Still today, I think of how much these people must have feared the Germans, not daring to say, not even in Serbian, a word of abuse to this barbarian, the representative of the most civilised people in Europe! Or perhaps what was happening to us didn't affect them at all.

The trek to Golgotha ended. The station stood before us. Mother stopped and put the case down on the floor. No. She had to carry it right to the train and put it in the compartment.

The station was full of soldiers. Some laughed; others envied the good fortune of their comrade; while some others admired his intelligence and ingenuity, deciding to do the same on the next occasion. "But, we will find a younger whore!"

The return home!

"You will say nothing to your father! To no one!"

"No. I would never say anything."

I would not tell anyone of my anguish, shame and suffering. And my mother, my poor mother, would keep to herself her lack of strength, her impotence, her burden and her effort to conceal how difficult the task was. She would say nothing of her disappointment in her compatriots who looked at her, powerless, yes, but how indifferent.

For my part, I cried but no tears ran from my eyes. How I wished it had never happened. What pity I had for mother – my own mother!

We walked in silence, almost running, to get back home, to regain that comforting reassurance of familiar rooms – to be screened from the taunting looks of my friends of yesterday; to be shielded from the sadistic soldiers; sheltered from the dangers that each sortie into the streets meant for every Jewish man, woman or child – our shelter, lived in now by a German officer and a couple of traitors, a shelter nonetheless, for there, there was a door that we could close and that no one could seek to force. Four people behind that door – four people who kept their feelings of humiliation to themselves – four people apprehensive of the future.

Father returned home in the evening, exhausted, his back breaking, and in a few words told us what he had done during the day. He told us how the others, his friends, were having difficulties fulfilling their tasks according to the demands of the of the Germans. He told us how they were given only a few minutes' rest at mid-day – only a few minutes to swallow the sandwiches they had brought from home! He said that it was necessary to hold on because the war would soon end. He tried to explain to Atza that disobedience of the Germans would bring instant death

which would serve no purpose. Our duty was to survive until the day we would be able to fight them, and then, if necessary, die. Our life was horrible, but we must survive to become free again and not to die as slaves.

In letting ourselves be slaughtered like animals, we were giving them the satisfaction of killing Jews who, in their eyes, were not worth the bullet that kills them. If we must die, then we must choose the moment of death and sell our lives as costly as possible.

Did my father really believe what he said? I would never know. What was certain was that he was trying to convince Atza to save his own life, knowing what a sixteen-year-old boy might do in such a distressing situation.

Every day we heard of the blows inflicted because of a gesture or a look that displeased the Germans. The victims were always old people who could not work as quickly as they demanded, or young boys who protested or tightened their fists, and, consequently, were whipped near to death. How could my father protect his son from such a fate?

"Our powerlessness is the most terrible thing to bear. But it will not last long. Life will be as it was before. That's why we must protect it."

From time to time, we would hear of entire families who disappeared. We assumed that they had fled. People would talk about Albania, about false documents, trains that had been stopped and the Jews , who were escaping, shot on the spot.

One Sunday, my father's sister, Aunt Nety, came to us to tell us that she was getting married and to introduce us to her husband-to-be. I met Uncle Bata. He wore a light grey suit with a shirt, tie and white shoes. He was tall, blond, and, to my eyes, very handsome.

Where did he come from? A different world?

The wedding would take place on the following Sunday at the house of Uncle Bata's parents. Father's other sister, Aunt Mathi, her husband, and their son would be the only guests.

"I want to go to the wedding, too," I said.

"No. The neighbourhood might become aware of this exceptional event and it could be dangerous. Jews don't have the right to gather."

The wedding was not the only piece of news they had brought. They intended to escape and suggested that my parents should go with them and Aunt Mathi. They had found a way to obtain false identification documents certifying their Albanian nationality. They would help us to obtain them, too. We must all take the train and try to cross the Albanian border.

"We have to remove the armbands and pray to God that all will go well," said Uncle Bata.

"But how? You don't speak a word of Albanian. You are going to be shot. It's not clever what you are doing. It's frighteningly dangerous," said my mother.

"But it's more dangerous to stay here," replied Aunt Nety.

"Who knows what more the Germans have in store for us?"

Father reflected a while and then said: "I don't have the right to risk the lives of the children. There are sixty thousand Jews in Yugoslavia. What were they going to do that they hadn't already done? We will have to work until the war is over. Perhaps later there will be a resistance

and we will, one way or another, join them and fight against the Germans."

"I want to go with them," said Atza.

"No. You can't. We must all leave together or no one. If one of us is missing from work, it will be the end of the family."

"But it's better to risk being shot on a train than to be whipped to death!" replied Atza.

"We are not going to be whipped to death if we are patient and careful. If we leave with false documents, I am sure we would be risking our lives. I know it's hard. We are humiliated and unhappy, but, if we stay here, we can be sure to survive and fight them when the right time comes. If I were by myself, I would leave. I would do a number of things. But I have a family and I can't do anything that might endanger their lives."

Aunt Nety left us in tears. And we watched them leave, also in tears.

CHAPTER 8

After a time, father was transferred to work in a place close to our house. He had to put up a barbed-wire fence around what was, before the war, university premises but had now become barracks for the German

soldiers. Often I had wanted to see what forced labour was – the Germans with their whips, father and Atza working. Finally, the occasion presented itself.

One day – I don't remember what excuse I found – I went to look for the place where my father was working. I arrived around eleven o'clock. I think it was in August – a beautiful day. People in the streets were coming and going. A few yards from them, a group of Yugoslav Jews was working, detached from the surroundings as if belonging to another world.

I looked and thought that, as with Mr. Amente, who was not German any more, neither were we Yugoslavs any more. The passers by, our neighbours, our compatriots, didn't harm us, but they had no concern for us and ignored us. To see that was worse than being insulted.

The Jews, who were older than my father, carried bricks on their backs. They were doubled up under the weight and worked without raising their heads. Father was working with the barbed wire and I was happy about that for I couldn't have borne to see him sagging under the weight of bricks. His work was easier for him.

Like the others, he worked fast without raising his head. Around the workers there was a lot of noise. Those carrying the bricks were being "encouraged" by the shouting of the soldiers, who, from time to time, would crack their whips and amuse themselves, yelling: "Schnell!

Schnell!" making them run with their loads. I was hypnotised by the spectacle.

I remember thinking of the book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin". My father was a slave. The Jews were slaves but the Yugoslavs were not!

No. The Yugoslavs had lost the war. They were suffering. But they walked in the streets. They went to work. No German soldier would stop them and order them to carry his suitcase. They didn't have to carry bricks and they were not being whipped if they didn't do it quickly enough. They took the train to go wherever they wanted. They went to the market and were able to buy whatever was there, whereas the Jews bought what the others had thrown out. My friends went to school, but no longer came back to my house.....

On April 16th, 1941, after the capitulation, the Jews of Yugoslavia did not belong any more. They stopped being Yugoslavs. At that time, certainly, we were no longer Yugoslavs. Maybe we never were!

There was my father, working. He could be whipped at any moment.

When I used to cry about the life of Uncle Tom, my father would tell me that slavery had been abolished all over the world – that slave holders were barbarians. But then, father had told me that we had to learn the German language, and know their culture, because Germany was the cultural centre of Europe. If American slave owners were barbaric, how

could the Germans be called cultivated, when they were even more cruel than the Americans were? What is culture?

I looked at my father. There was nothing I could do to help him. The distress caused my throat to tighten. I was so disheartened! There were so many questions I wanted to ask him, but I knew it was useless, for he would no longer tell the truth. He would never be able to explain to me why he, yes, he of all people, had become a slave and his neighbour hadn't. He, who called himself Yugoslav, worked, bent from blows, whereas his neighbour, who also suffered and could no longer eat his fill, went to work, received his salary and obeyed a different law. Was it perhaps that our friends of yesterday ignored us because they could not help us?

I returned home feeling sad, very sad. That evening looking at father and Atza, I realised that their lives depended basically on their physical strength. When I said my evening prayer, I asked God to give them strength and keep them free from being whipped.

I never told anyone what I saw that morning. Instinctively, I knew that it would make mother and father even more unhappy.

Every morning, behind the curtains, I looked at my friends passing our house with their school bags. How I envied them! Where had the time, when I was one of them, gone? How many times did I pretend to be ill so that I could stay home? Now, I would have given anything to be with

them, sharing the anxieties of the examinations and homework. But all that was over.

One evening, before going to bed, Atza wanted a glass of water, but to get it he had to go the kitchen. Mother didn't like the idea since, as usual, Lenka and Martin had their "friends" over. Sometimes they sang and drank till late in the evening, generally with German soldiers in transit. We stayed in our room until their departure. That evening, we only heard the voice of one guest and Atza didn't want to forgo his glass of water.

A few minutes after he left the room, we heard the voice of the German screaming something and Atza's voice replying in Serbian. Scared to death, we ran to the kitchen. A soldier, standing with a glass of brandy in his hand, was shouting at Atza to drink a toast to Hitler's health. My brother, on his knees, refused. Lenka begged him to do as the soldier said because he was drunk and could really do him harm. At that moment, as if understanding what was expected of him, the German took his revolver from its holster and, pointing it at my brother, shouted: "Drink and say 'Heil Hitler!' or in a moment you'll be dead, you dirty Jew!" We were all standing there, frozen with terror – incapable of reacting. We had to do something immediately! My mother begged Atza to make the toast. Father stared at the soldier. I was crying. The soldier was

waiting. How many seconds? It seemed an eternity. Atza, on his knees, terribly pale, was also waiting, but for what? Probably only father knew. Quietly, he told him: "If you live, you can have your revenge. If you die, I'll die with you, and it will be useless."

The German asked what my father had said and, before we had time to think of an answer, Martin said that father had told him to drink.

Even Martin asked the soldier to drop the affair, for Atza was just a child. He had watched him grow and even though he was a Jew, he didn't want to see him die.

Almost in a whisper, swallowing a few drops of brandy, Atza said: "Heil Hitler."

The soldier had won.

"Say it once more, and louder!" He made him repeat it five times.

I thought that my father was about to do something terrible, but mother had already grabbed his arm, and was holding it very tightly. At that precise moment, Lenka announced that dinner was ready. The soldier went away, but not before abusing Atza and giving him a kick.

All this took no longer than a few minutes, but what minutes!

Back in our room, mother and I broke into tears. Father and Atza were silent.

After a long enough silence, Atza said: "I regret having drunk a toast to Hitler. I don't want to go to work any more. Almost every day they beat me up. I want to run away."

"If it were possible to do it, we would do it, but we don't have anywhere to go. You and I cannot go away leaving your mother and Relly behind. They would shoot them. We are responsible for their lives."

Poor Atza! What could he do? Run away and leave behind his parents and his sister to pay for his flight with their lives.

"Why didn't you want to leave with Aunt Nety? By now they must be far away from this hell, and you, because you are a coward, we are still here drinking a toast to Hitler. They will kill us all. We will never have our revenge!"

How could he say such a thing? Father who was always so brave – who told us every day that courage is what keeps us alive.

It was dark in the room and I couldn't see my father's features.

"How dare you call your father a coward!" said mother.

"You are disgusting!" I told him.

Father didn't say a word.

Only after what seemed an eternity, my father began to speak: "You don't know the meaning of the word coward. A coward runs from danger. He behaves cowardly to save his life, profiting from the misfortune of others. I have never been a coward. I had to choose

between the possibility of risking your lives or of staying here and going through all this that we are going through.

"I chose to stay because I didn't think I had the right to risk your lives. I have chosen a very hard life, but nonetheless a much safer one. To drink a toast to Hitler was not cowardice. That German knew. You told him you didn't want to drink. You drank to save your life. Was it worth dying only to avoid saying: 'Heil Hitler'? He forced you to kneel and do it. Was it cowardice to obey him?"

"Yes," said Atza, "because I was scared."

"But he is the coward and what a coward! It was he who had a gun and took advantage of his position, forcing you to kneel – you, a child. And to make you choose between death and life! He didn't risk anything. We could only have died. Even if I wanted to jump on him, which I thought of doing, for a moment, he was too far from me, and he could have shot you before I had time to get my hands on him.

"Today, it's necessary to have the courage to remain alive, so as to be able to annihilate them tomorrow. I told you to drink because I want you to live. If you despise me for it, I will have to live with it. Facts count, not words. About our departure with Aunt Nety, I took all the responsibility on myself."

"I wanted to go with them and you didn't let me. I had chosen," said Atza.

"Yes. You had chosen, but in our society you are not of age. For the time being, your mother and I are responsible for you. Though, as it is basically, now, that is not true. I have told you that the four of us must stay together and do what we are doing. Besides, only a small number of Jews have left. We don't know if they are dead or alive. Out of the Jewish community in Belgrade, the great majority is here, with us. We all share the same destiny. Believe me, the war will be over soon. And then, at the first opportunity, we'll take our guns, and, together with the rest of the Yugoslavs, we'll fight these damned Germans!"

"Yes. But when?"

"Very soon. You'll see. We must have faith, stay strong and believe in the future."

"I'm sorry, father. But every day seems more difficult than the one before."

"We have to think of the future, to the life we used to have and the one we'll have again. Then we'll be able to appreciate, to see things differently, and enjoy every moment of our lives. These times will pass, like a bad dream."

That night each one of us thought of what had happened. I thought it was better to die than to obey and to say: 'Heil Hitler'. But, immediately, I saw in front of my eyes, my mother carrying the heavy suitcase of the German soldier with me walking behind her unable to help – unable to

kick that bastard! I, yes, I, had nothing to be proud of. I didn't do anything because I was afraid he might kill us. It seems that to be courageous is to want to live at all costs – to remain alive now, in order to die later, a free person. We must not die on our knees. We had to live on our knees in order to die later, standing up.

My head was going to explode. With each day, I understood less. I wanted all this to end. We only talked of death, standing or kneeling. I wanted to live, standing, all of us together, and oh, that it might be straight away as it was in my long-gone childhood.

Only four months had passed since the German invasion of Yugoslavia. How everything had changed! I wanted to wake up one morning and see that our present life was just a nightmare. But no nightmare could be as terrible as our life. One cannot dream such nightmares. The Germans were not human. They were wild beasts. What could my father do against them? And Atza? Why was he beaten up every day? What did the Germans want from us and why?

I was frightened that one day father would not be able to get up because of his back – that he would be unable to go to work. What would we do then?

Why could we no longer tell each other what was happening? I didn't tell father what happened to mother that day with the suitcase. I didn't tell mother that I had seen father working, back breaking, under the

surveillance of men with whips. Atza thought that father was a coward and wouldn't speak of his days at work. Mother cried, but what did she think?

Father was right. I should remember our previous life and imagine the one later, when we would again be standing. But how to make it happen when one hears nothing but sighing every night? Before falling asleep, I prayed to God to protect my parents and my brother. I prayed to Him to make the future come soon because I was scared of the present.

All the Jews who had a refrigerator or a radio had to take them personally to the Kommandantur⁶ on the other side of town. At the same time, they also had to make a list of the jewellery and other valuables they possessed and give them to the officer whose job it was to collect them. Those who hid anything could be shot. Any disobedience by the Jews was punishable by death. Death and the Jews had become inseparable.

How was one supposed to carry a refrigerator, even a small one, across town? Father found a board in the cellar and, with Atza's help, tried to attach four wheels that came from an old perambulator. Without being asked, Martin came to help. The three of them worked together without talking. Martin helped put the refrigerator and the radio on the plank and

⁶ Headquarters of the German Occupation Forces.

said that he regretted not being able to do more. Without thanking him, without looking at him, father and Atza went on their way.

Halfway there, the wheels came loose and the radio rolled to the ground, breaking into pieces. They picked it up. I don't remember how many hours it took them to arrive at the appointed place. But they carried the refrigerator between them, walking at a snail's pace. They were told that those who had brought broken things had to pay for them. Luckily for us, it was just the radio. There were those who had to pay for their refrigerators. Father, not having enough money on him, sent Atza home to find some more since they demanded the price of a new radio.

What a day! No more refrigerator! No more radio! But we didn't listen to it any more, anyway. To listen to Radio London meant the death penalty, and with Martin and Lenka in the house, we couldn't do it. We wouldn't miss the radio. As mother said, it didn't give us any news that we really wanted to hear. As for the refrigerator, we had not had anything to put in it for a long time. Martin and Lenka were the only ones using it. As father put it, we had nothing to cry about. It wasn't worth worrying about the things they were taking away from us. They would come when we'd be able to replace them.

Sunday, the only day of rest, was spent carrying the refrigerator and the radio. Another week of work would begin without any rest.

Father now worked in a barracks in Dedinier where he cleaned the toilets and worked in the garden. At home, he always talked about the flowers, and never about the toilets. Perhaps he got used to his work, because he never complained. He said that since the Russian participation in the war, we had only to count the days till the end of the Third Reich. He called to mind the story of Napoleon – how his unbeatable army had lost the war against the Russian winter and the great expanse of that country. "The same fate awaits the Germans. We must hold our breath and endure."

The days went by and the time came when my mother had to go out. I don't recall the reason any more.

I left the room to go into the garden to pick a lettuce to make her a salad as a surprise. I thought I was alone in the house, but passing by the bedroom where, generally, Martin and Lenka's "guests slept, I saw that the door was open and a German was still there. I hesitated a moment not knowing what to do and then decided to go into the garden all the same. Before reaching the end of the hallway, I was stopped by his voice: "Make me a cup of tea."

How scared I was. I didn't know how to make tea, but I didn't dare tell him. I did what I saw Lenka do many times. With my hands trembling, I carried the tray with the cup. Without raising my eyes, I approached the

table to put the tray down and leave. At that moment, I looked up and saw a naked man in front of me. The tray and the cup fell, landing on my feet. The pain made me cry out, even though I was aware of the danger. I ran, short of breath, out of the room and into the street, away from the house. I didn't feel the pain any more, only terror. What did this man want of me? Did I take him by surprise when he was getting dressed? Then why did he leave the door open? I realised that my foot was all red and hurting badly. What would I tell mother? What would she think, coming home and finding me gone? I knew that I must not tell my parents what had happened. It would only make them unhappy because there was nothing they could do to that man. He was naked, but he didn't harm me. They didn't need any more worries. I would say nothing, but I would not stay alone in the house ever again. Now I had *my* personal secret, too.

I remember once, when I was little, we went to the movies and a man seated next to me took my hand in his and forced me to caress his leg. When we went out, during the intermission, I told mother and she made such a scene. Father went to the police but the man had disappeared. Mother told me that I should never let a stranger touch me, ever. If they were so shocked then, what would they say now? They couldn't go to the police or say anything, because we were Jews and he was German.

After the war, when we all would tell our stories, I would have mine, also. But it should have been easier to tell mother and be consoled in her arms. If he had attacked me, what would I have done? Luckily, he could not run after me, having nothing on. But why was he stark naked?

From a distance, I kept an eye on the door, and saw the German leaving. Just seeing him gave me goose pimples. I decided to stay outside until mother came back.

"Why are you in the street? You know I don't want you to go out when I'm not home. And what happened to your foot? What have you done?"

"I spilled some hot tea on my foot."

"What did you want tea for? Are you sick? You should have waited for me. Your foot looks bad. It must be very painful."

"Yes. It hurts. The tea was for the German officer."

My mother was dumbfounded. "Tea for the German officer? But he wasn't home when I went out."

"He was there when I left the room and he asked me to make him some tea."

"Well!"

"Then, I made some, but, when I took it to him, the tray slipped from my hands, the cup broke, and the tea splashed on my foot."

My mother's eyes were piercing. "Did you make him another one?"

"No. I was in pain and I ran out."

"What did he do?"

"I don't know. I was afraid he might get angry, so I left the house."

She took me by the hand and only then did I really feel how painful it was. Mother looked despondent. The broken cup and the tray were still there, next to the door. Mother picked them up and began to take care of me. "Nothing else hurts, just your feet?"

"Yes, mother."

"You are sure you have nothing else to tell me?"

"No, mother, there 's nothing else. I was so scared that he would punish me for breaking the cup that I ran away. Do you think that he will do something when he returns home tonight?"

"No. I don't think so. But I will speak to Lenka."

"I will not stay home alone any more!"

"I didn't know that he was still there, otherwise I wouldn't have left you."

During the whole day, mother kept her eyes on me and I felt ashamed at having hidden part of the truth from her.

"It's better not to say anything to father," I said to her.

"Why? We have nothing to hide from him. You were scared at breaking the cup and ran away. He will understand that."

When father got home, mother told him. He had a sad restless look in his eyes. "Look at me, right in the eyes. Are you hiding anything from us?"

I looked into my father's eyes and told him that I wasn't hiding anything. I was sure that, after the war, when he learned the truth, he would forgive me.

Two weeks later, the German left the house for the Russian front. I didn't see him after the day that I saw him naked.

We celebrated his departure. I began to feel freer and less worried.

A short time later, Lenka told us that they also were leaving. They were going to Germany to work in a factory in Berlin.

She cried because she had to leave us, saying that she would never forget us. Martin left without showing his face. Traitors! Liars! Our enemies! I tried to erase their faces from the memories of my childhood, but it was very difficult. After all, for the last months, we were eating the bread and vegetables that Lenka brought us. And they did, in the end, even let us use the provisions of the house from time to time. Somewhere in my heart, I knew that if it had been up to them, our life would not have been so difficult. They did not denounce us for damning Hitler and the Germans. Martin had saved father and Atza during the episode in the kitchen. I could not hate them, but I kept my feelings to myself.

Father, mother and Atza thought otherwise.

"They lived in this country and they sold it out. They deserve to die. If they were in any way humane, they would not have brought all these

Germans to the house to sing and eat our provisions, when they knew how we were living and that we didn't have enough to eat. Having all those Germans in the house has kept us in constant danger. It could have cost us our lives. I hope they pay for all the bad things they have done!"

There we were, finally alone in our house and so happy to be "free" – not afraid to leave our room.

The four of us tried to behave as before the war, but nothing worked any more. Bread and vegetables were impossible to find. Aunt Mathilde occasionally brought some provisions. The daily worry was to provide father and Atza with sufficient food. Mother and I could make do with very little. For the first time, I began to understand the meaning of the word "hunger". I wasn't really hungry, but I longed for things like the salami that was stored in the cupboard in the kitchen, but could not be touched. I helped mother make the sandwiches with my mouth watering; but if she would tell me to have a piece, I would reply, indifferently, that I didn't like salami any more. It was my little war with myself, and I thought that my sacrifice well deserved a medal. I would content myself with some bread and a half-rotten tomato, understanding that the salami and all the rest helped father and Atza keep their strength to be able to work. Obviously, they were not aware of what mother and I had to eat during the day.

Yom Kippur⁷. They left for work as usual but on empty stomachs. At home, it was like a funeral. I didn't know why. On that Yom Kippur, we prayed more than ever. We had very good reasons! That evening when father and Atza returned home, father wanted to say at least some of the required prayers before sitting down to eat. They told us that during the day the Germans were even more cruel and the work harder. The aged Jews and the women who were at home were forbidden to keep the holiday or to pray. The Germans circulated among the Jewish neighbourhoods and entered the houses to verify that their orders were being obeyed. So while my parents and my brother prayed, I stood next to the front door watching the coming and going of the Germans, ready to alert the family in case of danger. That day, unlike most days, I spent several hours in the streets of our neighbourhood. The Germans were in the habit of asking for directions, and with great pleasure I sent them the opposite way! That was my mitzva⁸ for Yom Kippur. I was scared of what I was doing, but I considered that one can learn to be courageous even if one is as scared as a rabbit. On that Yom Kippur of 1941, I sent many German soldiers far away from their destinations. I was able to overcome my fear, even if it were only for a few hours.

⁷ The Day of Atonement – the holiest day in the Jewish calendar – a total fast.

⁸ Good deed – a religious precept.

Mother had three brothers and three sisters. Aunt Rebecca had left Belgrade before the war and the other two sisters were married to Christians. Two of her brothers were in Belgrade. One of them, Uncle Joseph, had three sons. The other, Uncle Haim, had a daughter younger than I was. Uncle Mika, her third brother, was young and had not yet married. We rarely saw him before the war, but when he came, he was always happy, talkative, and each time he would drive a more beautiful car. All my uncles and cousins were doing forced labour, like everybody else. Sometimes, on Sunday, they would visit us and then each would tell of his own experiences. The young were especially proud of their courage. I hadn't the right to participate in the conversations, because I was a "little girl" who didn't know anything about their difficult lives. That made me feel very grown up, because I also had my experiences of war about which they would hear some day. The Yugoslav people are a courageous people. For five hundred years of their history, they fought against the Turkish invaders without ever giving up hope of chasing them from their land. The Germans must have realised that their stay in Yugoslavia wouldn't be without dangers. Almost every day there were attacks on their soldiers, and their vehicles were burned. Rapidly, a system of retaliation was initiated under the Jews were the first victims. They took Jews as hostages and shot them for each "act of violence" committed against them.

In this way, one hundred and twenty-two Jews were executed because a truck was burned by a young compatriot.

One day, I can't remember what month it was, they announced that the following morning, all men over sixteen had to report at eight o'clock to Tache-Maydan Square.

What was going to happen? We felt anguish, frustration, and, most of all, a terrible powerlessness. That night, we didn't go to bed. We needed to be together. Father encouraged us: "They are sadists. They try to torment us, but they need us. Up to this moment, they have only killed old and ill people – those who are of no use to them. Not even beasts like they are would dare to gather thousands of people and kill them in the middle of the day.

As usual, he calmed us down. What he said made sense to us. The following morning, I left the house with father and Atza. Since I didn't wear an arm-band, I could follow them, watch what happened, and let mother know.

This time, the square was even more guarded. Soldiers, with dogs on leashes, were walking back and forth looking, if possible, even more aggressive than usual. How strong they were and how powerless we felt! There were more of us, but they had machine guns, ferocious dogs, barbed wire and the Reich behind them.

How many thousands of men were there? Standing, one very close to the other, in countless rows, the Jews waited and the hours went by. The sun blazed mercilessly. Despite the fact that there were so many people, only German voices could be heard. The Jews had nothing to say. As for me, I listened, my heart beating with panic, and the hours went by. It was already afternoon. The men awaited their fate. From time, one of them would fall, fainting. His friends would take him away from the lines. Around four o'clock, a German voice announced that every eighth man would be taken hostage and shot, because twenty-one German soldiers had been killed. I was too far away to understand what had been said.

The lines of men began to move. I heard screams, cries. I saw people changing places. Later, I was told that the grandfather would try to take his son's or his grandson's place. The Jews counted, made mistakes, fainted. Only the German hand did not tremble at sending men to their deaths. The number of those set aside increased and the despair of those who awaited their fate was indescribable.

From where I was, I understood that something terrible was happening. I did not know where or why they were taking away this group of men, but I was sure that my father and brother were not among them. I was sure because God would not allow anything to happen to them. I had no doubts. I couldn't ask why He let the others be taken. During all those

hours, I continually recited the "Shema Yisrael", saying to myself that at least one of these prayers would reach Him.

The swarming crowd began to disperse. People had to return home before the curfew.

I mingled with the crowd, looking for my father and brother. I asked but nobody had seen them. Nobody knew them. People were walking, their heads bent, crying. I realised that I was crying, too. I had to run home to tell mother, but what? I would tell her that they would be there in a few minutes. But that was really what I was so earnestly praying would happen. Breathless, I arrived on our street, and, from afar, I saw my mother, all alone, in front of our door. Then I pulled up, stupefied. They were not yet there! And I? I hadn't even tried to look for them among those taken away. Sobbing, I tried to escape. Mother spoke to me. She shook me. She laughed and cried: "They are on their way. They will be here any moment, now. Do you understand?"

I understood very well. I was ashamed of my tears, but why did they run in spite of myself?

"Mr. Mandile just passed by. He told me that father and Atza were not taken away."

"I know."

"How?"

"I don't know."

We waited in the house and when they came in, we embraced as if we were leaving on a voyage. No, more than that."

How tired, sad and happy we were, without expressing it? We thought about what we had just witnessed and survived. We spoke of those who were, perhaps, already dead.

"It's terrible to kill people for something they haven't done," said mother.

"They are diabolical savages. They are not fighting a war, but massacring innocent people."

"Let's hope it's the last time they take hostages," said mother.

Why? Could this happen again? How was it possible? Wasn't the war supposed to end in two or three months at the most? I kept my thoughts to myself. What good was it to torment my parents, who, since the war began, no longer knew how to answer questions? Autumn was at it's height and we could already feel the approach of winter. It was an exceptionally cold autumn. Yellow leaves covered the pavement. Rain and wind added to the difficulties of life. All was grey and sad.

Father and Atza returned home in the evenings frozen, wet through, and sometimes even feverish. Sick or not, every morning they had to go to work.

In spring, this nightmare would be well behind us.

CHAPTER 9

October. It rained and it even snowed. But the snow melted right away leaving mud everywhere. In the evenings, at home, we heated only the kitchen for a few hours. We had to save the wood and coal for later when it would be colder. We had little to eat but it was enough.

October 18th. A day like any other. We waited, as usual, for the return of father and

Atza. The clock already showed six o'clock and they were not back yet. My heart started racing.

"Do you think the clock is fast?"

"Yes."

"But yesterday it was working all right."

We checked all the clocks in the house, but, unfortunately, all of them showed the same time. The expression on my mother's face told me nothing. My stomach ached, but I was sure that in a few minutes they would open the door.

A terrible silence. It was already seven o'clock. Tears were running down mother's cheeks and I was crying aloud.

"We mustn't cry, dear."

She was right. It would prevent us hearing the noises from the street, or recognising their quick footsteps on the pavement.

Mother held me very tightly. I could feel her heart beating as fast as mine. We waited. But we knew that there was no more hope. At this time of night, no Jew could be on the streets.

"We must find out what has happened," said mother.

"Yes, but how?"

Several Jewish families lived on our street. Mr. and Mrs. Mandile lived just a few steps from us. However, we couldn't go into the street. Mother decided to call Mrs. Ivanovic, our neighbour, with whom we had had no relationship since the war began. We went into the garden and mother called her. Yes, she would go right away and call on Mrs. Mandile. Ten minutes passed in falling rain. We waited knowing that Mrs. Mandile would know no more than we did.

"Mr. Mandile hasn't returned either. I would really like to help you. What can I do? What a disgrace – these damned Germans!" said Mrs. Ivanovic, her eyes full of tears.

"Thank you very much. I don't think anyone can do anything more for us."

We returned to the house where the table set for four awaited us. We were only two. We wept. Perhaps, I hadn't prayed with sufficient fervour. But didn't father say that nothing could happen to honest people who have done nothing to harm anyone? It was true before the war, but the Germans had forgotten it or never knew it.

"Maybe the truck left them far away from the house and they are hiding in some courtyard until six o'clock in the morning. That's what must have happened. Don't you think, mother?"

Maybe, you're right. We must believe that something like that has happened. Come, eat something and we'll go to bed."

We went to bed without eating. The house seemed, dark and cold and so sad. In the bedroom my father's bed was empty. Mother and I lay on her bed, still crying.

What were they doing in this cold without food? We had to have confidence and believe that the war would soon be over – that everything would be as it was. But whom could we trust? God? I was afraid of God.

I fell asleep only to wake up on a damp pillow and in an empty bed. Perhaps they were back! I ran to the kitchen. Mother was there, all alone. In front of her was a large basket and in it all that was left of our provisions. Next to the basket was a pile of winter clothes – sweaters, shirts, two blankets and a big pillow.

"The Germans have transferred all the men to the Topovske-Choupe camp. We have to bring them warm clothes and something to eat," said mother without looking at me.

"In a camp? But, why? Where is Topovske-Choupe? How do you know?"

"There were some signs glued to the walls. Mr. Raditch has just told me. He heard from a friend, who has a Jewish neighbour, that yesterday evening, the Germans arrived at Kalimegdan where this man worked in a shelter. Within a few minutes, the Germans had them all in trucks and told them that, from that moment on, they would all be living at the camp. The man stayed at the bottom of the shelter, and, after the curfew, removed his armband and went back home. Then, not knowing what to do or where to go, he thought that he would go to the camp and tell the Germans that since he was working at the bottom of the shelter, he didn't hear their orders to stop working and get on the trucks. Poor man. He thought he could save himself but very soon realised that the Germans would come to look for him at his home. Having nowhere to hide with his family, he decided to go to the camp. Unfortunately, no one can escape them."

"Is the camp far away?"

"Far? Yes. But we must take all this to them."

I started crying.

"We mustn't cry. We must be very brave. Just a little time in Russia...."

"But the Germans are advancing on Russia. They are going to win the war."

"You mustn't ever think that they will win the war. Promise me! They are going to lose and we will make them pay for all the terrible things that

they are doing to us. The Russians are letting them advance. That's their tactic. Winter is coming and the Germans will not be able to get fresh supplies in. They will run out of ammunition and they'll die of hunger and cold. We must be stoic and we mustn't show father and Atza a sad face. We must hold tight as we have learned to do already."

In my books, stoicism was a great thing for soldiers, but that was another pre-war truth!

I knew mother was right. I felt ashamed of myself, but how could I show a happy face when I had never been so sad?

We left the house before dawn. It was raining and we were loaded down. Very quickly, I realised that I would never be able to reach the camp with all that I was carrying. I felt that any minute all of these precious things for father and Atza would fall from my hands and roll into the mud. Finally, I told mother. She, feeling wretched, stopped. What were we to do?

"Dear, we must get it all to them. I can't help you very much. Think about other things. Think that...."

Again, I was ashamed of myself. I was so cold. I had to get all these things to father and Atza. Why was I behaving like a spoiled child? This was war. I must be strong. I mustn't show mother that I was lacking.

But she knew very well how I felt. She, too, was dragging herself along with difficulty. But she encouraged me at every step.

From time to time some wagons passed by. Mother stopped one. The driver looked down at us from his seat. Mother explained our situation to him and begged him to take us. She would pay him whatever he asked. "No. We are forbidden to take Jews. Besides, if it's too heavy, why did you bring so much?"

The driver spoke loudly, almost shouting. Another wagon stopped and the driver got down to take care of his horses. He overheard the conversation.

"What!" said the second driver. "Aren't you ashamed? A poor woman and a little girl. You're a great bastard!"

"Well, take them yourself," the other replied.

"That's precisely what I'm going to do. Come, lady." And he helped us load all we were carrying and ourselves into the wagon.

There was a canvas sheet which was probably used to cover the merchandise. He wrapped us in it in order to hide the yellow star that my mother wore on her coat. This sheet was dirty and stank of horses, but I felt so happy that I had held my own. I had helped mother, and now I was getting warm.

"Well, we'll get there sooner and be able to take everything. Perhaps, after all, God is going to start helping us."

"What a disgrace to do this to people. The Germans showed us during the 1914 war that they are a detestable people. Be brave, Ma'am. They

will soon leave their carcasses in Russia, for certain. Sweat it out! You can't give up now," said the driver.

He had to go in another direction, but he took us very close to the camp. When mother offered to pay him, he refused.

"We are human aren't we? I don't take advantage of the misfortune of others."

That man would never know that, on that day, he restored confidence in people to a little girl who had lost it. Without his help, we would have been forced to leave behind some of the things I was carrying. And as a consequence, I would have felt so unhappy to be weak and little when it was expected of me to be big and strong. This Belgrade wagon driver taught me what greatness of spirit, courage, and brotherliness were.

We walked faster after the rest. The closer we got, the greater became the number of Jewish women and children, carrying baskets and bundles.

War. The misery of the Jewish people. So many tears. There, near the camp, we were all in the same boat, sharing the same fate, without the need to hide our feelings. The street reverberated with the crying of women and children whose world had crumbled.

I remember that poor neighbourhood outside the city, its deserted streets and its houses with closed shutters. Nobody knew which way to go, and

there was no one to ask to find out. We all walked in the same direction. It proved to be the right one.

Topovske-Choupe. The old stables of the king – a place surrounded by tall, grey walls dilapidated by time. Behind these walls were the husbands, fathers, brothers and sons of thousands of women and children. To arrive at the entrance, it was necessary to go down, or rather, slide down a rather long hill. We became part of an enormous crowd, which began to form a queue. We waited a long time in rain and snow. The Germans forbade us to speak. We could only hear the crying of children and the whispering voices of their mothers who tried in vain to calm them down. What cold! What distress!

There, far in front of us, was a very long table behind which were a dozen German soldiers. Behind them was a big, wooden, double door. Behind this door were father and Atza. The hours went by. We heard voices calling the men's names after the women waiting outside had their names taken down.

They let a hundred people at a time. We had ten minutes to find the fathers, husbands and sons. Ten minutes to find them among a hundred others, give them their belongings, embrace them, encourage them, and be encouraged in return. Many left without seeing their loved ones.

Mother and I were panic stricken. What if we could not find them? They would be cold and hungry. No. We had to believe that we would find

them. I thought that if I could say a hundred times that we would find them, then, surely, we would happen on them as soon as the door was opened.

In the meantime, the deluded and despairing women were leaving the camp, their hands full. In tears, they begged other women that they knew to give the packages to their husbands so that they in turn could pass them on to those unfortunates who didn't have the luck to see their wives and children.

It was already noon. We were freezing. Freezing tears ran down our faces, hurting us.

From what we could see in front of us, we would have to wait about two more hours.

Suddenly, two young German soldiers appeared out of nowhere, running and holding in one hand a bun and, in the other, a bayonet. They were laughing and shouting: "We need Jewish blood to dip our buns in."

Panic. We had nowhere to run. Women and children, unable to do anything else, fell back, cramming into each other. It was the only thing they could do. The soldiers passed back and forth, happy in what they had succeeded in provoking. This game lasted about ten minutes. They left without harming anyone, but we got up covered in mud, wet and feeling, if possible, even more miserable. Many baskets were

overturned. Bottles were broken and so precious food lost. Women gave some of their provisions to those who had none left.

The hours were passing. Would we be able to get in before four o'clock?

We had still to walk back home before curfew.

We had had nothing to eat or drink. Several times, mother suggested that I take something from what we had in the basket, but I refused.

We got very close to the table. The Germans emptied the baskets, turned the tins of biscuits upside down to "verify" their contents. With what care all these things had been put together! How many women and children would go without food for days? How precious each crumb was! Before tearful faces, the Germans babbled on, confiscating, throwing away, or simply dropping things, thoughtlessly. We could not react. If a woman said anything, they would take all her things and send her away without letting her enter the camp.

There we were in front of the table. The Germans talked amongst themselves. Behind the wall we clearly heard the call. Father and Atza ought to have been already waiting for us. The soldier, who searched our basket, opened the bottle of milk, spilling more than half of it just to make sure that it did not contain wine, and confiscated the canisters of pickle.

Before letting us in, they grouped us in front of the huge door until it finally opened. The precious ten minutes started to tick away. Would we

have time to ask them questions and answer theirs; to reassure them that we didn't cry – that we were full of courage? With our hands full, and hence incapable of holding on to each other, in order not to lose each other, we ran hysterically. One could only hear the cries of children, now having to look for their mothers as well, and the voices of men and women calling for their loved ones, and all aware of the passing minutes. We must not show a sad face. I clenched my teeth to breaking point, and this time my tears obeyed me.

There they were in front of us! They, too, were desperately looking for us. I embraced my father very, very tightly. I looked at him. He was not the same man. His hair, brown, only yesterday, had become totally white. He spoke rapidly, telling us not to give up hope because if we did, the Germans would win. While he talked, he pushed away the basket that we were trying to give him. "You will be without food," he said.

"Mathilde brought us enough food to last us a month," lied my mother.

Atza's eyes were all red. We held hands, and he whispered that, at night, the Germans whipped those who snore. Father hadn't slept all night, afraid that Atza might snore, as often happened at home. Nor had Atza slept, worried that father would fall asleep. In this way, both had had a sleepless night.

The visit was over.

The Germans shouted: "Schnell! Raus!" and pushed us, mercilessly, toward the already open door. We hugged. We cried. I promised not to cry, to be brave, to force mother to eat, to help her. We tore ourselves away from caressing hands, to be pushed by those monsters out of the camp.

It was over.

We had waited for more than eight hours for these few, so sad minutes! I tried to figure out what I had just seen and heard. I wanted to cry so badly, but I had promised father. I looked at mother. She was also holding back her tears. Then, hand in hand, we started our return.

People in the neighbourhood looked at us with pity. Perhaps they would let us warm ourselves inside their houses or offer to let us sit for a few minutes. But they didn't even think of it. Or were they afraid? We heard nothing from anyone.

In spite of the fatigue, the way back seemed much shorter. The Kocharka wind blew pitilessly. Our bodies and hearts were frozen. We walked without talking to each other. I thought about father's white hair, and the things that Atza told me of their first night at the camp. I thought that we could never be as unhappy as we were right then. Nothing worse could possibly happen to us.

We arrived home, but it didn't feel like home any more. Without father and Atza, it became only a place where we hid our pain from the eyes of

others. It would always remain cold and sad in my heart. I thought of death, but quickly, quickly, pushed this thought away. I must be courageous and have faith, but I didn't know how. I was so scared!

Mother gave me a slice of bread but she didn't eat.

"For me, today is like Yom Kippur. I want you to remember this day all your life. Don't you ever forget it! "

"I will never forget it. But, why?"

"I can't explain. But when we will all be together again, we will be much happier if we remember this day."

"But this has nothing to do with eating."

"Yes. Yom Kippur is a sad day and for us there will never be another as sad as today."

"If you don't eat, I will not either."

I was ashamed for being so hungry. Then, to encourage me, my poor mother chewed mouthfuls but was unable to swallow them.

We went to bed right away, lying close to each other to get warm. My mother's tears bathed my face and merged with mine. In the darkness promises don't hold together. I considered father and Atza had said. How unhappy father must have been for his hair to turn all white. Why did he ask mother to excuse him for the decision he took to remain in Belgrade instead of leaving with Aunt Nety and Uncle Bata? And Atza.

He looked so little, my big brother. Fortunately, the two of them were together. They could take care of each other during the night.

I saw the Germans who had the knives, in front of the camp, spilling the milk, and turning everything into crumbs. Why were they so cruel? Why did they hate us so much? We hadn't done anything to them.

"Go to sleep. Soon everything will be all right. You'll see."

"Are you sure, mother?"

"Yes I'm certain."

I wanted so much to believe her, but father also had been certain, and now he was in the camp. We couldn't be sure of anything, but I decided to say nothing to mother.

The days went by and became colder and colder. We had no news from father and Atza, but the thought that they had some warm clothes and food was comforting.

Towards the end of October or the beginning of November, the Germans announced on the wall of the city that that the Jews in the Topovske-Choupe camp would be deported the following morning. Women were to bring warm clothes and food to last for three days to the camp. They were permitted to leave their houses before six in the morning.

This time mother could no longer hold back. She sobbed, and I with her, over father, over Atza, and, who knows, perhaps even over me. Again, we prepared the basket, putting in it everything that we had saved for

them in case we were allowed to visit them. We wanted to put the whole house in the basket - all of the warmth and everything that we had in our hearts.

I finally fell asleep in the chair. When I woke, up a few hours later, I found mother with her face flooded with tears. I felt guilty for leaving her alone.

"You haven't slept. Let's go to bed," I told her.

"No. It's already time to go. You must wash and change."

The torturing trek began again. It was still dark and very cold. I carried the suitcase for Atza and mother the one for father and the basket of food.

The suitcase was quite heavy but this time I was too distressed to notice. They would be deported! What did that mean? Mr. Amente had been deported but I didn't ask what it meant. I knew. I felt that it was a word that made my parents afraid. And now my father and Atza were going to be deported. They would be sent far away from us. I would no longer be able to see them. For how long? I didn't ask any questions. I didn't want to force mother to talk to me. She wouldn't know how to answer.

Afraid of being late, and of not seeing them, we almost ran. The closer we approached the camp, the more distracted we became. An enormous mass of Jewish women and children were hurrying towards the grey walls that enclosed all that was most dear to them. We could

only hear crying. Some were crying out loud, others silently. No one stopped to wipe their tears. A sea of yellow stars bent and crushed against the grey walls, waited, fearful, and tried to distinguish the names that were being called behind the wall. We waited for some hours. The prayers of Yom Kippur and my prayers every night had not helped. Why? They were all going to be deported: my father, my brother, my uncles, my cousins, friends and relatives. They would be deported to another camp, perhaps quite near. But why was everybody crying? They no longer believed, all these women and mothers.

"We must hold tight a little longer and be strong," I told mother.

"Yes. You are right."

She stopped crying and so did I. The Germans were playing some martial music to cover the sound of crying or maybe to lessen the importance of the moment. They read the names of sixteen young boys who would not be deported. Atza was one of them. We began to cry again in joy for Atza, in pain for father. He would leave alone. They would not be able to watch over other at night. If father snored, he would be whipped. I was terrified and said so to mother.

"No. You don't have to worry. Father will not be alone. There are more than three thousand Jews and they will look after each other."

It was already noon when we finally approached the table. It was our turn. Our suitcases and the basket were on the table. An officer came

from the camp and announced that no one else would be allowed inside. We had to give the soldiers all the things that we brought, mark the name of the prisoner on the suitcases and baskets and leave the place. There was a moment of silence, a time to take in the news; and then came the begging, the fainting, the protests. We were no longer afraid of anything. For those ten minutes with our loved ones, we were prepared to face anything. A unit of soldiers came from the camp to enforce order. "Silence!" they shouted. They took the suitcases, indifferent to what went on. We had to obey and leave. "Schnell! Schnell!" What could we do faced with the machine guns ready to shoot?

We were in front of the table, our hearts pounding. The German who was already checking our things, looked very young. The women who had passed the rummaging, just before us, were at the point of entering the camp, when our soldier finished his work and asked for father's name. We understood then that he would not let us go inside. Mother started to beg him, but he ignored her. She fell on her knees in front of this monster. He raised his arm to hit her. I grabbed his hand before it struck my mother and bit it with all my might. The German, shocked, put his hand in his pocket. Right at that moment, the camp door opened and an officer let us in with the others unaware of what had just happened. The soldier did nothing to stop us. We were already inside the camp, without having had time to realise what had happened to us! This time

we only had five minutes, but we were only a dozen women and children, and father was already there in front of us. He hugged us and promised to send news in any way possible. They would probably be taken to work in another city or even in another country. He made us promise never to give up faith and courage. The whistles blew. The doors opened. The three of us were crying. I put my arms around his neck. I didn't want him to let me go. I didn't want them to take him from me.

"Take care of your mother," father called out.

We were already outside, and we ran to avoid being seen by the soldier that I had bitten.

We had seen him! We cried, but we were luckier than many of the other women.

Where did all these tears come from? Our eyes had become wells.

We had succeeded. Father would have some food. We had embraced him. We had told him that we would wait for him and that we would be brave.

Only then had I time to think about what had occurred earlier.

"Mother, why did you kneel before that damned German? He would have hit you if I hadn't bitten him. I couldn't let that happen."

I know that it was difficult for you, but for me it was also terrible. I had to see your father and make sure that he received the basket and the

suitcase. So, in haste, I thought that maybe, out of pity, the soldier would let us in since we already were in front of the door. Now, thanks to God, we have seen him, hugged him and said goodbye. Waiting for his return will be easier because of that. But, you, you have avenged me," said mother, smiling.

"Me, too,. I acted without thinking. I had no time to be afraid. Pity he had gloves on."

"I don't think that he had time to react either, because we were shoved through the open doors."

The Germans chased us from the street. We left the camp our heads bent. The women, one behind another, held their children by the hand, walking in tears, as in a funeral.

After ten minutes, mother told me that we were going to return to the camp to see father leave.

"But the Germans will chase us away!"

"We will hide in the house opposite. The apartments have their shutters closed and people say that they are not occupied.

Mother knocked on the first door. After a short while, the door opened.

No. She could not let us in. The Germans forbade them, and had ordered them to close the shutters and not to go outside.

A long hallway led from the main entrance of the building to the stairs. We stayed in the hallway with the door part open. Outside, it was very

cold and it was snowing. We knew that father would be in the first convoy since his name began with the letter "A".

About four o'clock, eight big military trucks covered with green canvas entered the camp. We could hear the roll being called. We waited. Outside, the Germans were no longer chasing the women away, but we remained in the hallway, in case they changed their minds. Half an hour later, one after the other, the trucks left. We went outside. With the other women and children in the street, we ran after them, calling their names, desperately wanting them to hear us, to know that we were there, that we hadn't left them alone, until the last moment. Through the four openings in the canvas, on both sides of the trucks, we saw hands, only hands, agitatedly waving goodbye.

The trucks accelerated and disappeared. It was over.

We were in the street, so alone, in spite of all those other women who shared the same fate with us. All alone on this street, opposite the houses with the closed shutters, in front of the camp where German voices continued their calling of the rolls.

Since that day, I have maintained a loathing, without compromise, for all that is German, including their language, which I will never speak.

We had to get home. We held hands and walked in silence. I needed to take care of my mother. I couldn't let her cry any more.

"The war will soon be over and father will come back. He will write to us. We must have faith to make it happen."

"You are right, dear."

I was so sad and so frightened. The Germans kill their hostages, but father was not a hostage. He was deported to another camp. He was going to work. He was strong. And the Germans needed slaves. Didn't he tell us? We must believe and count the days. I thought of father with all my might, and I knew he felt it. I recalled that once, during one of our strolls, he told me that if we wished for something with all our might, we would finish getting it. Then, I wished that he would come back. I wished for it with all my might, and I was certain that the war would soon end, and he would return.

We arrived home, our toes swollen and blue, our faces covered in bleeding cracks, and our hands blue, with fingers that we could not bend. Another Yom Kippur had just passed; we had to remember it.

Lying in my mother's bed, next to father's, which seemed even emptier now, I said my prayer. I realised that every day this prayer became longer. If all the Jews said a prayer as long as mine, how could God hear us?

We knew that three thousand five hundred men were deported, and that at the camp, there were only sixteen boys left, and among them, Atza.

For about two weeks we had no news of him. Just as mother was becoming unable to hide her disquiet any longer, we received permission to see him at the camp.

With our basket full of provisions, mainly brought by Aunt Mathilde, we were once again standing before the table at the camp, which seemed deathly silent.

This time we had no problems. They let us in right away. Atza was there. He smiled. He was so happy to see us. And, we, to see him. He took us to "his stable". It was suffocating and dark. A little skylight, the only opening that could let in some air and light, was shut with a plank.

"I closed it to keep the place warmer," said Atza proudly.

I guessed that all sixteen boys slept in this place. On the floor was strewn filthy straw. And, in one corner, over the straw, the blankets we brought from home made a bed for my brother. The walls were damp, and had never been painted. A filthiness, terrible and black.

"It's all right here, mother, don't you think?" asked Atza.

"Yes," said mother.

"It smells awful," I said.

"I'm already used to it. It's not a holiday camp, you know," replied my brother.

I was ashamed. I felt like vomiting.

Mother suggested that we go outside.

Atza told us that a few days prior to father's deportation, three men had tried to escape while working in the city – father, son, and uncle. They were recaptured and brought back to the camp to be hanged. The Germans had all the prisoners brought out into the courtyard and the commandant of the camp warned that the same fate would befall all those who tried to escape. They all had to witness the hanging. The three unfortunate men were placed on a sort of a decking so as to be seen by everybody. A rope was put around their necks. The two men, father and uncle, prayed. The boy was silent. At the moment when they put him on a chair with the rope around his neck, he kicked the commandant, who was very close to him, in the face, causing him to fall backwards from the decking. The soldiers opened fire, killing the three of them on the spot.

"It was a faster death and less painful," said Atza. "After that the Germans turned on us and beat us. It was terrible. We didn't have a place to hide. But we were so happy with what the boy had done. It was fearful to see the people with ropes around their necks minutes before they were to die. How brave the boy was!

"The commandant did not return to the camp for a whole week."

We wanted to know how father had taken it – what they had said about it.

During the first days, father was very depressed and tired. He was so worried that Atza might snore, that he spent the nights watching over him. Atza managed to get father to sleep a few hours each night while he watched over him. Father talked about Aunt Nety's and Uncle Bata's escape. He said that he probably had been wrong in deciding in Belgrade. After the execution of the three men who had tried to escape, he said that perhaps they would have a better chance of survival in the camp since the Germans needed them to do their work. He was always worried about mother and me. He begged Atza to be prudent, not to do stupid things – to protect his life. He also said, before the deportation, that if something were to happen to him, Atza had to take care of mother and me; and that the two of us, Atza and I, should never forget the values with which we grew up.

"Why did he speak as if something might happen to him?" I asked, my heart pounding. "Wasn't he sure of coming back?"

"Yes. He was sure," mother said. "But you know, when people go away for a long time, they always give that kind of advice."

"But why for a long time? The war is not going to last for more than three months," said Atza.

"Yes. But father has never left us before for three months," said mother.

"During the last week, he hardly ate anything. All the provisions that you brought us before the deportation, he left for me. He didn't want to take anything with him."

"But why? He wouldn't have anything to eat for the first three days," said mother in a hushed tone.

"Don't worry, mother," said Atza. "Without telling him, I put many things in his suitcase. He will not be hungry. Mr. Mandile saw me doing it and approved. He was going to tell father after the departure."

"You can be sure that father would have found his courage and faith again even before the truck turned the corner," said mother. "We must also be optimistic and have faith. By spring all this will be over and all four of us will be together again at home."

"It's a long time till spring," said Atza, discouraged.

"But the days go fast."

"For me they don't. Work is hard and the Germans beat us up for nothing."

"You are young and strong. A little longer and it will be our turn to beat them."

"I hate them!"

"We all hate them. They will end up drowning in this hatred. The whole world hates them."

We were so discouraged. Perhaps father's pessimism before the deportation was to be expected; but since he was so optimistic, we knew that it would be short lived.

We had to leave the camp. Atza tried to smile. But when he embraced mother, he told her: "I would give ten years of my life to be able to leave with you."

In the street, mother and I cried. Atza remained there with his fifteen friends. Each one smiled at his mother. They did not want to look like babies in front of their friends. They returned to their stinking stable to share their good things, to laugh, and then later in the night, to become children of sixteen once more.

The cold began to be felt more and more. We were terribly lonely at home. A friend of my parents, who lived around the corner, asked mother if she could come and live with us with her two children. We would have more wood to heat us; we would be able to share expenses; and altogether make things a little easier. Mother accepted and we became five people around the table.

We scarcely spoke of the present – always of the future. Afterwards we will go away together; afterwards we will have breakfast together; afterwards we would have chips, steaks and nice cakes for lunch; and we would never say no to sandwiches. We would go to school to catch up with subjects that we hadn't studied – and we would be happy to go!

It was November. Everyday we waited for the news father promised us, but there was not a word and no news of any Jew deported from Belgrade.

"But father promised he would find a way to write even a sentence on a cigarette packet that someone might pick up and bring us. Have people heard of similar cases?"

"They must have taken them far away, and we must be patient. Father will keep his promise."

By the end of November, mother started me that she wanted to take some of the things from the house to Aunt Mathilde's, and give some other things to the neighbours to look after for her.

"But why? Don't we look after them well enough, ourselves?"

"Yes. But very possibly, one of these days, the Germans will want us to leave the house. We need to make sure that we'll have something left after the war."

"But if we leave the house, where will we go?"

"No need to be afraid. I think they'll leave us alone but, even so, it will be better this way."

I became scared. I spoke to my friend, Bianca, who lived with us. She told me, secretly, that in two days, they would be leaving. They planned on leaving Belgrade and hiding in a village with some friends of her parents.

That evening I told mother about Bianca's secret.

"They can leave, but we can't. We have Atza in the camp. We can't leave him all alone. Perhaps, from time to time, the Germans will let us see him and bring him some food.

"It's true. We can't leave him."

Our friends left and again we were alone. Our cupboards became emptier. Every day we took something to Aunt Mathilde's house. At night, in the darkness, our neighbours came to take rugs, curtains and chinaware. They would faithfully keep everything safe. After the war, we would be sure to find it all.

The house was bare. It was not my home any more. It was a place where we spent our time – where we counted the days and the hours – a place we didn't love any more.

The beginning of December. Winter was very harsh. No news of Atza. No news of father. We were very cold. Mother ate only when I threatened not to eat any more, myself.

"I want you to go and spend a few days with Aunt Mathilde."

"No. I don't want to go. I want to stay here with you."

"You are a big girl. You must understand. It's very cold. You could get sick, and your arm is already sore. We must do everything we can to stay well."

"What about you? You could get sick, too. And besides, you eat nothing if I'm not with you, I will not leave. Father told me to take care of you." I was already crying.

"If you want to help me you must go. I will feel better knowing that you are there in a warm place."

"No! No! I don't want to go."

Ten times a day she would tell me the same thing.

"I will come to see you every day, and you can always come back."

"No. I'm staying here with you."

Mother became angry.

"I'm not asking you if you want to or not. In the spring, as soon as it will not be so cold, you'll come back here."

"When spring comes? But you just told me that it would only be for a few days that you want me to go. I promise I'll do anything you want, but let me stay with you."

I cried, but mother, without looking at me, packed my suitcase. She put in all my winter and summer clothes, my underwear and all my shoes.

"If I'm leaving for only a few days, why are you packing my summer dresses as well?" I began to panic.

"I also took mine to your aunt's. You saw that, didn't you? Then, we are taking yours, too, and you will put them next to mine," mother smiled.

"At your aunt's place, you will behave like the big girl that you are. You have to help her, because, with the four of you, her hands will be rather full. You don't have to be sad. Remember to keep your faith in the future. You must be brave and optimistic like your father."

"What about? Aren't you brave and optimistic?"

"Yes. I am."

"But you cry often – every day."

"Well, that's why I want you to be brave. Like your father."

I didn't reply. I didn't want to be brave. I wanted to cry aloud. I didn't want to leave her alone. I told her so.

"If you love me, you will go."

"If you loved me, you would not let me go! Do I upset you?"

Now mother was also crying.

"You talk a lot of nonsense. You know I want you to go for your own good. I'll come to see you every day and with you I will eat all the good things they eat there."

Then perhaps it would be better that I go. Mother would eat better, and she would come every day to see me.

"You should think yourself lucky you are to go to your aunt's house. Many Jewish children would want to go in your place."

I didn't understand why, but I didn't say a word. The door of what used to be my house closed behind me and I cried.

"I want to come back in three days."

"Dry your tears. One day, very soon, we will all be together again, at home. Then you will stay there always."

"But, you alone, you will stay all the time in the house waiting for all of us."

"Yes. I alone."

"Promise me that as soon as the weather improves, I'll be able to come back and we will wait together."

"Yes. I promise you."

Mother took me to my aunt's house, and after a little while, she left us promising to be back the following day. Before closing the door, she whispered something to my aunt. I could hear a word because my cousins, happy to see me, were making a lot of noise. I was a little ashamed by my situation, but I didn't show how I was embarrassed and disheartened. In three days, I promised myself, I would be back in my own house.

On the following morning, my uncle and aunt were talking about deportation.

"Whose deportation?" I asked.

"You know. Tomorrow, the Germans are putting all the Jewish women and children in the camp."

"Then I must return home. I want to go with my mother."

"No. You will stay here with us. Life in the camp will be easier for your mother without you. She will have only herself and Atza to think about. You could become sick there, and that would be terrible for your mother."

"But I don't want to stay without my mother. She promised me." My tears were flowing without my knowing.

My cousins, and my aunt and uncle were looking at me.

"Why don't you want to stay with us? We'll all sleep in the same room," said Miki.

How could I explain what I felt – what I thought? They would never understand.

They looked so calm, my uncle and aunt.

"What a fuss you are making for two or three months. There's no need to get upset. Time will pass very quickly with your cousins."

"But they can kill my mother once they see I'm not with her."

"No. She will tell them that you died two months ago."

Now I understood the suitcase – the summer dresses. I wanted to run home. I wanted to go with my mother – to take care of her – to help her. The five of them were watching me. They looked so unconcerned. They had no idea what a concentration was.

I didn't cry any more. I was a big girl. Besides, my cousins would laugh at me. Mother wanted it to be this way and I must obey her.

"Will mother come here today?" I asked.

"Yes. She will come, and to encourage her, you will show a smiling face," said my aunt.

A smiling face!

Around noon, my mother arrived. I wanted so much to be alone with her – to ask her why she lied to me – why she didn't want me to go with her – to beg her to take me. But in front of the others, I kept quiet.

"Tomorrow, I will go to the camp. I will be with Atza."

"To Topovske-Choupe?"

"No. To Saimichte."

"I want to come with you."

"But why?" asked my aunt. "Aren't we nice to you?"

"Yes. You are. But I want to go with mother."

Mother looked into my eyes and said, "In two months, we'll all be back home. It will be very cold at the camp. Be happy to be here."

"But it will be cold, also, for you and Atza."

"We are stronger than you are." She smiled.

I could feel all their eyes on me. I would have liked to have shouted at them to leave us alone. I wanted to beg mother not to leave me, but I clenched my teeth and said nothing.

Mother hugged me, and I cried in spite of all my efforts. With my kisses, I told her all the things that she didn't want to hear.

"I've been waiting for the day when they show you the door. Tomorrow is the big day. I'll bring you flowers," said my uncle jokingly.

"Keep them for the day of our return," mother said smiling. She turned to me once more and whispered in my ear, "Two more months. I promise. You know how much I love you and how much you will miss me."

Then, out loud, "Be a sensible, big girl. Smile. No one likes to be surrounded by faces like at a funeral. So, give me a big smile and look after it for ever."

We both smiled our eyes full of tears.

"Goodbye, mother."

One more kiss. Mother let go of my hand and the door closed behind her. I

knew that in the whole world there wasn't a girl more unhappy than I was.

CHAPTER 10

"Come and play," said Miki.

"A big girl does not cry because her mother leaves her for two months," said Aunt Mathilde.

What I began to understand was that I was the biggest girl in the world. Then, why did I feel so small? I also learned that one ought not to show one's feelings to people who aren't Jewish. And this applied to my aunt's family. Because of this, I waited for night to be alone with myself in my bed. The day seemed so long. I played with my cousins; I helped my aunt; I ate; but I thought of mother all the time. What was she doing all alone at home? How would she carry her suitcase? Would she be able to take blankets? They would be so necessary in this cold.

Finally, I lay in bed in the room I shared with my cousins. I waited until they fell asleep, and only then, under the blanket, I cried. I didn't take care of my dear, dear mother as my father enjoined me. I let her go, all alone.

The following day, the second day of my exile, it snowed and was bitterly cold.

"Until your mother returns, that is until the war is over, you cannot leave the apartment because the neighbours must not see you. I'm sure it will only be for two months, but you must be patient," said my aunt.

At one o'clock my uncle came home. In a very detached manner, he told us about the departure of the Jewish women and children. The women had to go on foot with their children and baggage to a designated place to give the Germans the keys to their houses and apartments. The keys had to have attached on a tag, the precise address of the property and the name of the owner.

Women and children, carrying heavy loads, walked in the snow, in an endless line, surrounded by soldiers. After they had gone, suitcases and other possessions lay scattered on the roadway, abandoned through lack of strength. People greedily picked up these things.

"I would never have believed that there were so many Jews in Belgrade. They are saying that today five thousand women and children have been deported.

I looked at him. I drank in every word that came out of his mouth between the bites of food that he chewed slowly. He seemed to be talking about something that amused him, but didn't interest him over much.

In front of my eyes, I saw the familiar scene: women and children walking in tears, and among them, my poor mother, all alone.

I couldn't touch my food. My throat felt tight. It was the most sinister Yom Kippur, and I, I was sitting in front of a full plate. I watched my aunt's face. She didn't cry. Was it possible that all this was not as terrible as I saw it? No. I knew that it was. I had walked with women in the snow, but, then, I had returned home with my mother. Now there would be no return for two months, if they were not lying to me. I felt a stranger at this table and terribly alone. Why did this family seem so indifferent? Why didn't my aunt cry? Why didn't she even look at me? Was she pretending? How unaffected life seemed in this room.

"Only two months." I heard mother's voice. I began to count the days.

The house was well warmed. The pantry was well stocked. My cousins went to school, did their homework and received their marks. The radio played German marches, and, several times a day, the famous Lili Marlene was sung by sultry voices.

St Nicholas Day was approaching. My aunt sewed some new outfits for my cousins. There was no material left for me. In the kitchen, I helped her prepare an enormous quantity of cakes. I thought of my family. In this house they didn't know what war was. My uncle bought everything on the black market. It was forbidden and dangerous, but he was resourceful.

It was more than a week, and we had no news from the camp. Nobody seemed to notice. I didn't dare ask questions.

Just one day before the holiday, Atza knocked on the door. He had only a few minutes. The sixteen boys who were not deported were working at emptying the houses and apartments of Jewish people. Often, the soldiers who guarded them left them alone and went to warm up and drink a glass at the nearest bistro.

On that particular day, they were emptying an apartment nearby, and Atza took advantage of the occasion to come and eat something and give us some news of mother. He was terribly dirty and hungry. He spoke while he was stuffing himself with everything he was given.

Saimichte, located on the river-bank, was used for international expositions before the war. The pavilions were all very large, and some, damaged by the bombings, were transformed into communal rooms. In pavilion number three, five thousand Jewish women and children lived all together. All of them slept on planks erected at different levels, one underneath the other and covered with straw. The children cried day and night from cold and hunger. They urinated on the straw and even though the walls and the roof let the wind and snow in, the air inside was suffocating. The pavilion was covered with ice, and the temperature was twenty degrees below zero. There was no water – all the pipes were frozen. Children and old people died from typhus without anyone being

able to help them. They got very little to eat – three potatoes a day per person. Mother was well. She was very brave.

"Until now, we've had the food mother brought from home."

"I'll give you a lot of things," said my aunt.

"Sometimes they search us when we return to the camp to make sure that we haven't 'stolen' anything from the houses that we have emptied."

He hesitated a moment; but temptation and hunger were too strong, and he finished by filling his pockets with as much as he could, hoping that on this occasion the Germans would not search them.

"We are happy when the guards leave us alone. We take advantage of our freedom and break everything that is breakable. Three days ago we emptied our house. The soldiers were there, but even so I dropped a pile of plates from the dinner set. They kicked me but I was very happy. At least they will not eat from our dishes!"

Yes. He would give many kisses to mother. Yes. He would take care of his health and mother's.

"Encourage mother and be brave," said Aunt Mathilde.

I hugged him and told him that I would like to be there with him and mother.

My brother looked at me: "Be happy to be here. It's very cold at the camp. Very soon we'll be back."

He seemed to be much more unhappy than I was. I hugged him one more time, for mother.

He left the warm apartment, which was all ready for the coming holiday, the tables covered with white table cloths waiting for the guests. I followed him in my thoughts. I saw him arriving at the camp to find mother waiting for him, lying on the stinking straw, among people who were dying from the twenty-below-zero cold.

Each of them ate three potatoes per day while I ate cakes. Mother was cold and I was warm. Mother could wash her face only with melted snow and I

My face didn't show anything, but I had a lump in my throat that impeded my breathing.

No. I was not hungry. I pushed my plate aside.

"Didn't you hear what your mother and brother eat? Be happy to have a full stomach and don't behave like a spoilt child," said my aunt.

I could not tell them that for me it was a day of Yom Kippur. They wouldn't understand anything. They were not Jewish.

After Atza left, I was not the same. Previously, if I tried to imagine my mother's life being more or less bearable, now I knew the truth.

I looked at the grey sky and the snow falling incessantly and I cursed them.

That night in my icy bedroom, I stayed in my pyjamas, shivering, as long as I could stand it, in order to feel much closer to my mother. Finally, numbed with cold, I covered myself, ashamed of not being able to continue till the morning.

If I prayed to God with faith before, that night I pronounced the familiar words with dread and doubt. God scared me! It was an unknown feeling for me, and with all my strength, I tried to chase it out of my thoughts. "We must believe that everything will be alright. Doubt can bring misfortune." Then, I believe I felt sure that in two months, God would declare war on the Germans and allow us to return home.

The next day, all dressed for the party, we waited for the guests. I didn't need to hide. The people who were coming were friends of my parents. We didn't have to worry.

They drank to the coming defeat of the Germans. They ate, laughed and talked in hushed tones of Atza's visit and about Saimichte.

"Luckily for us, she doesn't understand the situation," whispered my aunt.

"Poor child."

I realised that they looked at me with pity. I hated it.

I promised myself that I would never show my feelings to anyone so as not to arouse concern. To be sad and unhappy, yes, but inside – in my

heart only. I must behave like a big girl who makes herself useful and is not a burden to anyone.

To think that only a few months ago I had my parents, my brother, and a very "important" place in my family. I was a spoiled child who had the right to cry, to argue and question. I asked to be bought things and pouted if I didn't get them. I went to school. I had friends. I tried to read books that father said were not suitable for my age.

"You will read them when you are older," said mother.

"When will I be big?" I asked impatiently.

Now I was big, but how much I wanted to be little again. I would be when spring came, and that was certain.

I peeled twelve potatoes for the six of us. I counted them. We had them fried for lunch, accompanied by meat after soup and before dessert. Less than two months to go. They would make it. I knew it. But it is so little – three potatoes a day!

Christmas! The Christmas tree, in one corner of the room, was lit by little candles of all colours. Holiday warmth inside. Outside, as in my heart, it was thirty below zero. The Danube and the Sava were covered with ice. How were they surviving at Saimichte?

No news. Atza hadn't returned. We heard that the Germans found out what the boys did during their absence. Before returning to the camp,

they made them empty their pockets. If they found any food, which the neighbours almost always brought to them, they whipped them. I wanted to believe that on that day Atza got back to the camp with all that he carried in his pockets.

"The Germans make raids at night. They look for the Jews who are hiding."

"You cannot sleep here any more. It's becoming very dangerous for all of us," said my uncle.

Every evening at nightfall, I would go to spend the night with Mr. and Mrs. Djoukitch. He, a well-known painter, lived with his wife, in the street where my uncle had his store where he sold spare parts for cars.

For a certain sum of money and some firewood, that I would bring every night, they had agreed to keep me during the nights.

Every night before curfew, when it was already dark, I would leave the house with a small sledge and a basket full of wood. The streets were dark. Nobody was to see me entering or leaving the house. It was very difficult to breathe as the air froze in my nostrils, and my coat didn't protect me from the wind and the snow. Thirty below zero. Nobody remembered such a winter. Was God also against us?

While I walked, I thought of mother and Atza putting up with this same cold – chilled by this same frost. Sometimes I would walk slower to suffer more.

"Cover your face well with your scarf. Leave only your eyes uncovered. Walk fast. Don't speak to anyone. If they discover you, they will kill us all," said my aunt.

At night we didn't risk anything. The streets were deserted, except for a few passers by in a hurry to get home. Then, with my head uncovered and my hair covered with snow – if it were snowing – I would arrive at the Djoukitch's house almost paralysed with cold.

"Why didn't you wear your scarf and hood? You'll become ill," said Dana, the painter's wife.

Could I answer her that I had a rendezvous with my parents, and that where they were, people always outside, that they were always cold and hungry, and that they could not light a fire, ever?

In the morning, at six o'clock, my face hidden under the scarf, pulling the sledge and with my eyes nailed to the ground, I would return home. The few people, always in a hurry, would pass by and sometimes I would sense that they were looking at me. Probably they were wondering what a little girl was doing in the street so early in the morning.

I never left at the same time, afraid that I might encounter the same people and arouse suspicions. I began to fear people.

"If they recognise you, they will kill us all," my aunt would remind me every day.

Mr. and Mrs. Djoukitch were very kind. I was like Father Christmas who brought them wood to keep them warm. That was what they called me – Father Christmas. They spent the day in bed waiting for my arrival. It was in the evening, after lighting the fire in the kitchen and warming his hands, that the painter began work. Often they invited their neighbour on the same landing to come in and enjoy the warmth.

"She's an old lady," said Dana.

The lady arrived, and I recognised the principal of my school. I was afraid, but it was too late to warn them. She didn't recognise me. Or was she pretending? Many times during the Occupation, father went to see her. He asked her to let me attend school. Her answer was that she dared not disobey German orders. Someone might denounce her and she would lose her position. I remembered father's reply; "Principals and teachers should not obey such orders." It was the time when my father still believed that he was a Yugoslav. Very soon we understood that everybody obeyed German orders.

They introduced me to the principal. "Rada is a relative of ours. Her parents work at night. We don't want her to be alone in the house so she sleeps here.

I was Rada. To become Rely once again, I must wait for spring.

The first evening the principal asked some questions, but very soon she lost interest in me.

She told stories about the school. I listened eagerly. Each of her words brought me news of that wonderful world to which I didn't belong any more and into which I could not re-enter. In two months, when she saw me at school again, we would laugh together.

It must have been two weeks later, at the beginning of February, that my aunt announced that I could not stay in Belgrade any longer. The neighbours knew me. They might run into me. My presence in their house had become too dangerous. It was a question of life and death.

"Rada, you will leave for Arandelovac⁹. It's a village famous for its mineral water. In peacetime, people spend their vacations there. You do understand, don't you?"

She, also, called me Rada! There was that lump in my throat, but I understood.

"You'll be fine there. You'll stay with Dana's sister. She is a young woman of twenty-five. We will pay her well to keep you, but she must not know that you are Jewish. Don't ever tell her. Ever! You'll be free to go out whenever you want like everyone else since nobody knows you. I will write to you often and time will pass quickly.

⁹ A village about fifty kilometres south of Belgrade.

"Oh! One more thing that you must never forget. It's possible that, somewhere, by chance, you might run into your father. We don't know where he is. He could be working in a factory or in a military camp. Be very careful! If you see him, pass him by. Ignore him. Run away. If the Germans discover you, we will all die. Don't you ever forget it! We have kept you, because we thought that the war would not last more than two months. Now we realise that it will last much longer than that. So, you see, our situation has become very dangerous. You understand, don't you?"

My aunt was a very uncommunicative and nervous woman. She was not used to showing affection, not even towards her own children. But while telling me, she had tears in her eyes. I knew how much I complicated their lives. Did they perhaps regret not letting me go with my mother?

I had nothing to say – no questions to ask. There was the suitcase. My aunt arranged in it my winter and summer clothes. I followed her movements and thought of all the cases we had packed of late. Why did you leave me, mother? Now I have to leave all alone and be responsible for the lives of the entire family.

"Couldn't I go back to mother?" I asked out loud. Immediately, I realised the foolishness of what I had said. Aunt Mathilde looked at me. She didn't reply.

The following morning, Dana came to get me. I hugged my cousins. They looked sad. And my aunt and uncle embraced me. "Don't forget that our lives depend on you," said my uncle, before locking the door behind me.

CHAPTER 11

We walked in silence. Where was I going? Where would I live? There was no more Relly. I was Rada. The war wasn't going to end in the spring. Where were my parents and Atza? If I saw father, I must ignore him. But I wanted to see him so much.

"You'll find my sister is very kind. She suffers from tuberculosis. You'll be able to help her. Her name is Ivana. Tell her that your mother is ill and that there's no one to take care of you. Don't ever talk about the Jews."

We took the train, which was half empty. We moved slowly, and, after a short time, we stopped. We could hear people arguing and I began to be afraid. I didn't have any identity papers. Soon we discovered the reason for the stoppage. The tracks were covered with snow, and it was very difficult for the locomotive to proceed. It was terribly cold. The train started to move again. After an hour, we stopped at a village station. We could go no farther. We had to get off. The railroad was covered with snow. We would have to continue by sledge. But there was no sledge anywhere. There were only about a dozen passengers who wanted to continue to Arandelovac. Time passed and we were frozen. After an hour's debate, a lorry driver agreed to take us. But as he had

only a wagon, we were forced to go very slowly. There was no choice. We sat very close together, trying to keep warm. The driver held the horses by the reins and walked by their sides for a few kilometres. It was already dark. How long was it since we left Belgrade? Nobody spoke. Finally we arrived. I made out a long street, badly lit. Houses, shops, a few people. The driver stopped the wagon. We paid him.

"We are very close to the house," said Dana.

The snow was very deep. I was benumbed from the cold, and could only walk with difficulty.

We stopped in front of a house and went round to the backyard. There we found ourselves in front of a row of doors separated by two or three windows. A door opened before we had time to knock. Dana embraced her sister and introduced me to her: Rada Yovanovitch.

Ivana gave me a hug and I liked her right away. I would be sleeping with her in her bedroom. She showed it to me. It was tiny – two beds, a wardrobe and a dressing table, all lit by candles. It looked very poor, but very clean. The apartment seemed to be as cold inside as outside. Ivana lit a fire in the kitchen, and, sitting around the stove, we slowly returned to life.

Shortly afterwards, a woman came in. Ivana had let the second room in her apartment to her. She was a French teacher at the local high school.

After the Occupation, she had been transferred from Belgrade to Arandelovac. She was old and sullen. Ivana introduced us.

"What's new in Belgrade?" she asked without curiosity.

Dana told her.

"We just have to wait until the war is over," she said, locking herself in her room.

"A strange woman. She leaves the house only to go to work. She doesn't speak much. Sometimes she doesn't speak to me for days on end," said Ivana, ruefully.

I was very tired but much less distressed. Ivana was young and seemed really happy with my arrival. She was the only person I had seen in a long time who was delighted by my presence.

The two sisters exchanged news. I fell asleep in the chair. They woke me up. We had to eat. We ate some of the things that my aunt had given me. I noticed that Ivana did not eat – she gulped things down!

"We won't die of hunger, but there isn't much to eat."

The next morning Dana left us. I no longer had any ties with my life in Belgrade.

"How is your mother?" asked Ivana.

"Not well," I answered.

She understood that the subject was too sensitive to be broached.

"Don't worry. When spring comes she will feel much better." She looked at me with compassion, and I thought of my parents and my brother.

"Yes, when spring comes," I answered. I believed it.

"Winters are very severe here at Arandelovac, but spring and summer are wonderful. There are many summer visitors who come here to spend their vacation. Perhaps your mother would be able to come, too. It would be very good for her."

I smiled, but I was afraid of summer and the holiday-makers who could come from Belgrade. I cheered up, thinking that, by then, I would be home with my parents, and Ivana would be able to come and spend her holidays with us.

For the first time in my life, I was faced with poverty, hunger and misery. Ivana was a dressmaker, but she had no work. She was very ill and was coughing up blood.

She had another sister, Nathalia, living opposite us. She was a widow and the mother of five children. Of the two bedrooms in her apartment, she had let one to a potter who had a small shop in the house. He made pieces of pottery, jugs of different sizes, vases, coffee mugs and amusing little statuettes. He was a peasant who came from the inland area. His wife and children loomed up from time to time, spent two or three days with him, and then left again.

Nathalia's children were older than I was and kept their distance. I wore fine clothes "from the city". I was rich. They pitied me because my mother was ill, but they didn't want me as their friend.

Ivana was very agreeable but could not do much in the house. Quite often she was feverish. We had no running water. There was a well in the yard. We let the bucket fall to the bottom of the well, and when it was full of water, we lifted it, helped by a wheel. It was heavy. Ivana didn't have the strength to do it any more. I took over the task. I lifted the bucket half empty, and, in spite of the difficulty, this job amused me. It was something that I had never seen done.

At the beginning of my stay with Ivana, we ate potatoes and drank warm water with sugar. I suffered, mainly because I could not eat the bread which was made entirely with corn flour. It was absolutely inedible when cold. It tasted like soap. I couldn't swallow it, even when I was very hungry.

Little by little, our supply of potatoes came to an end. We began to eat onions and corn bread. No more choices. I learned to swallow it. Ivana only talked about the high prices of food.

It was very cold, and Ivana spent her days in bed. We had nothing to keep us warm. At lunch time, Nathalia brought us two plates of beans which were so peppery that they burnt my tongue and throat – but they made a hot meal. They were a present from the potter, who boiled them

in a huge pot once or twice a week and gave some to Nathalia and us. If I remember well, it was the only hot food that we had during the long winter weeks.

The Germans had seized all the food that they could find from the peasants. To replace it became, for poor people, an impossibility.

"When spring comes, we will be able to buy vegetables from the peasants," Ivana apologised.

I was hungry but I was not afraid. I went out every day to look for medicine for Ivana. Above all, I used to spend some hours with the potter. I helped prepare the clay that he used to make the pots. I arranged the merchandise that came from the kiln, and, in the spring, I watched the display in front of the shop to prevent any pilfering by those passing by. Often I sold the pots which made me very proud.

"You are earning your plate of beans," Milan said to me, one day.

I am earning my plate of beans! I wasn't receiving alms. I began to enjoy my independence.

Inside the shop, it was hot in spite of the earth and water that we used to do our work. I spent Sundays in bed because the cold was unbearable.

I had received not one letter from Belgrade, and I felt hurt. Every day after the mailman came, Ivana, who awaited a letter as much as I did, began asking me questions. "Why doesn't your mother write to you? I

know she is ill, but even so it doesn't take much to write a few words just to let you know how she is doing and to ask about you."

"She is very ill."

"And your father? What's wrong with those people?"

"I don't know. He is very busy. Perhaps letters get lost on the way."

"I can't understand them," she said. "The letters arrive. Don't I receive those from Dana?"

She began to doubt my story, so I knew that it was time to tell her the "truth". "My mother is locked up in an asylum for the mentally ill. She went mad a few months ago. My father is an alcoholic; he is always drunk. That's why they don't write to me. I beg you to keep the secret. Please don't tell anyone."

"Of course. To no one. I promise."

The following day, I felt the furtive stares of the teacher, Nathalia, her children and the potter. Those glances told me that in spite of having rich parents, warm and beautiful clothes, I was no happier than they were because I had an insane mother and a drunkard father. They were poor, very poor, but they were neither crazy nor alcoholic.

After learning "my secret", Ivana made no more excuses for our lack of food... The French teacher kept well hidden in her room some rice, oil, and smoked meat. She bought them on the black market to send them

to her sick niece in Belgrade... "We don't have any money. Your father pays me very little."

I felt very embarrassed. I didn't know how to reply.

How long the days of winter seemed while we awaited the spring! I thought of my family. How had they coped with the cold and hunger? I felt closer to them because I didn't live any longer in the over-heated house, eating food from the black market.

Nathalia found work as a kitchen maid at the house of the German commandant for the region. "The commandant has thirteen-year-old twin boys and a very nice wife – a real lady! What parties they give! The generals of the region come for lunch at "our place" almost every day."

"They are Germans. They eat what they have stolen from us," said the potter. "Have you forgotten?"

She had indeed forgotten. Every day, home from work, she would describe the banquets and the special dishes that they served, making our mouths water. "We could all live from the things that they throw away," she said. That, to her, was the most painful part of all as she could not take anything for her children.

One day, by chance, she told us that in the barracks not far from the villa there were some men dressed in civilian clothes. They were working under the surveillance of German soldiers. No one went near them and she had never seen them talk amongst themselves.

I felt I was blushing, and I thought that they would all be able to hear my heart beating. Could it be possible that my father was working there? I might be able to see him, if only from afar! But my name was Rada. I was a Christian. My mother was crazy. My father was an alcoholic. I was responsible for the lives of all the people around me to whom I owed my "freedom". I could not go near the German barracks. I was denied seeing my father!

For several nights I dreamt of our meeting and escape to the woods of Boukoulja, which rose above Arandelovac.

This news gave me renewed courage. Even if father was not among these prisoners, he must have been working in another barracks or factory. I also understood then why he was unable to keep his promise to send us word. If the Germans prohibited the prisoners from communicating with each other, how could he send us any news?

I put up with my situation, I longed for my family. I thought about the pampered and spoilt girl that I was, and remembered well being told: "You can consider yourself very fortunate." What right had I to complain? Being cold and hungry, and having to lie to protect the lives of others and myself made me unhappy but gave my existence something in common with that of my family. Of the child that I was, and of my previous life, I had only the clothes that protected me from the cold. I was a little ashamed of them because they made me different

from the children in the neighbourhood. I was Rada masking Rely but the mask did not fit me any longer.

One day that colder than usual, we stayed in our beds, and Ivana, who was running a temperature, told me in a playful voice, "I have a great idea. You'll go and steal some coal from the Arandelovac station!"

"But how? The station is guarded by Germans!"

"So what? You are so small that even if they catch you, they will not harm you, and we could have some warmth."

I was struck dumb with fear. I didn't reply.

The fence of our house was at the bottom of a piece of rising ground and the local station was just over the other side. It was usually deserted, for only two or three trains stopped there each day. The coal depot was part of the building which was watched day and night by guards.

"I'm dying with cold. You really don't have to be afraid. You can go at nightfall and nobody will see you."

"I can't. I'm too scared. They could beat me up – kill me!"

"No. They are not animals. They won't do anything to a little girl. You don't look older than ten."

"I'm scared!"

"You are scared! I thought you were my friend. You risk nothing and I risk dying. The cold is unbearable."

"I love you very much, but I don't know how to do it, and I'm so scared."

"I'll give you a bag, and you'll fill it up."

"But it will be too heavy. I won't be able to lift it."

"You'll leave it half empty. You see. I have thought of everything. On your way back, you'll have to wait until the guards' backs are toward you. Watch them while crossing the tracks and hide behind the foot of the hill where they can no longer see you. Because it will be already night, you can then climb the hill and I'll wait for you on this side."

"But if they see me they will shoot," I begged her."

"It will be dark, I'm telling you! They won't be able to see you. You are too small."

"But if it's dark they can't see if I'm small or big."

Ivana got angry. I was terrified. Should I have told her that I was Jewish; that I must stay as far away from the Germans as possible; that if they caught me, my aunt, uncle, cousins, her sister, her brother-in-law, and even she would die for having hidden me? But I couldn't explain this to her. I knew that after all, if they caught me, it rested with me never to tell the truth and then no one would die. I didn't know how to tell her that I would rather die of cold than *steal*.

All that day, Ivana wouldn't say a word to me. I dreaded that she would send me back to Belgrade and that she would die because the room was so cold. But the idea of stealing, stealing coal from the Germans was so terrifying.

That night, Ivana cried in her bed and I in mine. I felt terribly alone and my prayer became longer. But what was I asking God? To help me – to protect me – so that I could steal? I dreamed that I was being chased – being fired at. When I opened my eyes, I found the reality no less nightmarish. I was bathed in perspiration. If only I could be lucky enough to get a fever – to fall ill until springtime...

Day came. Ivana was coughing. She didn't look at me and I knew that she was cross. We stayed and ate corn bread and onions. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, Ivana, without looking at me, asked, "Are you going, then?"

"Yes. I'll go."

A little later, she handed me a sack made of rough material that she must have prepared in advance. It looked huge to me.

"Don't fill it up too full and don't lift it. Just drag it on the snow."

"The Germans will be able to see the tracks in the snow," I tried once more.

"No. It's snowing all the time. After fifteen minutes there won't be any trace left."

When I left the house, it was still daylight. I didn't feel the cold. I was shaking with fear. I found courage in thinking that, in the spring, I would be home with my parents. What I was doing was part of the war. It was Rada who was doing it, not Relly.

I climbed over the fence, which was not very high, and, sliding down the other side, I found that I was at the bottom of the hill. It was then time to start climbing. The snow was very deep, making it very difficult for me to carry on.

Once on top of the hill, lying on my stomach, I tried to make out what was happening on the other side. On my left was the station. Two soldiers were patrolling the platform all the way to the end where the coal was stored. Everything was exactly as Ivana had told me. I stayed there for a while observing them and waiting until it would be totally dark. I wanted to see if they would go right up to the last coal shed. Then, retracing my steps, I walked along the hill to my right towards the end of the platform and the last sheds. I felt a little less afraid because the hill hid me from the eyes of the Germans. It was already dark. I climbed to the hilltop, rolled down the other side and fell into the ditch between the railway and the hill. Bent over, I quickly moved towards the last shed and stopped right in front of the door. I heard the Germans talking. They turned and walked back towards the station. Quickly, I got up, crossed the two tracks, the platform, and entered the shed. I was crying and my teeth were chattering.

I filled up the bag without making a sound. The light from the lamppost near the entrance helped me a little. I heard the soldiers coming back, and feared that they might hear my teeth chattering. They were gone

again. It was time to get going. The bag was too heavy. It would be impossible to carry it and climb the hill. I took out several pieces. It was still too heavy, but I had to carry it. The bag on my back, I ran across the tracks and fell into the ditch. They could not see me anymore, but the light from the platform allowed me to see them. By then I was a little less afraid of them, but I was still very fearful of the darkness of the night. How was I to get over the hill with the bag? I had to, and very quickly. It seemed to me that the bag was heavier than I, and the snow was very deep. I wasn't cold; I was very hot! I thought about how happy Ivana would be. I dragged the bag up to a point where I thought I would be facing our fence, and began to climb. The bag pulled me back! It was a fight and I, I had to be stronger. I had just outwitted the German soldiers. I was really brave! It would be some story to tell at home. No. Only to Atza, for father and mother would be far too devastated even to hear an account of my exploit.

Ivana was not waiting for me near the fence. She had let me down. Was she, perhaps, too cold? I began to throw the coal, piece by piece, over the fence, into the yard. Then, I jumped over and filled up the bag again. Very pleased with myself, I opened the door of the apartment. Ivana and the French teacher stood there looking at me. I was wet to the bone and, suddenly, ashamed. Ivana took the bag. She lifted it with difficulty, but did not look at me. The French teacher looked angry.

"How could you dare to steal coal from the Germans? You know that, if they had seen you, they would have shot you. Have you risked your life for a bag of coal? I didn't think you were stupid, but now I see that I was wrong. Don't do it again! Today you steal from the Germans; tomorrow you will steal from the shops."

I wanted to explain to her that I only did it for Ivana; that I didn't want to do it; that I was more scared of the Germans than she could ever imagine... But I knew what Ivana expected of me and I kept quiet.

From that day on, Madame Olga, the teacher, began to "take care" of me. What kind of parents did I have to send me away from home without even registering me at the school! "You will study instead of spending your days with the potter or stealing coal!"

I didn't trust her because, above all, she was a teacher. She didn't speak to me. She lectured. And she was cold. She paid her rent, but never uttered a kind word about anyone.

We were happy with our stolen coal. We lit a fire in the stove for a few hours, especially at night. We were warm; we drank hot water with sugar, and fried some onions – a real feast! Unfortunately, it only lasted three days. Again we were cold, even under the blankets. Without being asked, I took the bag. Again I was scared, but I know that my fear was overcome by bravery and self-composure. If they caught me, I would say nothing. These thoughts gave me courage till the moment

came to cross the lines. I was risking the lives of eight people, and my own. But there was nothing else that I could do. I was not a thief. Would my parents understand that I could not do otherwise? What had Madame Olga said? "What counts is that you, you steal; It doesn't matter from whom you steal!" She was right. Nine people might pay with their lives for a sack of coal. I was sure that my parents would be very angry. But they certainly knew what it was like to have to do things that one didn't want to. Father had told me that I had to be a good, honest, and brave girl. I was good and brave, but I was doing was not honest.

I stayed a good while in the ditch, waiting.

After the deed, I returned to the house with my bag. The kitchen was warm once again. Madame Olga came in again. She understood why the kitchen was warm. Calmly she told me that if I did it again, she would tell the police.

"Both of you will be even colder. You, Ivana, are responsible for this child. Her parents are paying you to take care of her, not to send her about stealing coal from under the noses of the Germans. If something were to happen to her, you would never be able to justify what you have made her do."

For once I loved Madame Olga. I was happy to hear her say what I could not. I knew that I would not have to go for coal anymore.

Every night, for several weeks after my two adventures, I had nightmares. I climbed the hill with the bag full of coal; the Germans shot at me; my mother called me a thief. To the nightmares were added my fear of God for committing a sin that deserved to be punished. Who did I not fear?

We counted the days and finally spring arrived. Springtime in the countryside! I spent a few hours every day in the public gardens. It was the first time that I really experienced spring! The trees began to be covered in leaves; everything turned green. Above all, the weather was fine. Nobody spoke about the end of the war. Nobody in our circle talked about politics. Having to live with poverty, people's main concern was work and the difficulty of finding it. They cursed the Germans because of the scarcity of food, but I did not get the impression that they lived in fear. They waited for the summer and the holiday makers who would change their economic circumstances.

I walked in the streets and looked for my father. I knew that mother and Atza were in Saimichte, but father could, perhaps, be somewhere nearby. I often saw the Germans marching up and down the middle of the roadway, commanding groups of men dressed in torn clothes and worn out shoes. These men walked with their heads sunk into their shoulders – sad and indifferent to what happened around them. Nobody

knew where they came from or who they were. No one tried to approach them. It wasn't possible.

I followed them, looking at their faces, and each time I thought that I recognised my father.

In bed at night, I thought about my family. I was hungry, and I was suffering from the cold of that winter. Mother had left me with my aunt, thinking to spare me all the things that I had lived through during that winter and what I was still going through. "Three potatoes a day." If I had been with mother, together we would have had six. I cried for her and for me. She was with Atza. I was alone. "You must have faith and be brave." During the day it was easier, for one was not alone and I had the role of Rada to play. But, at night, I only had God with me. I didn't dare ask Him questions, fearing He might punish me; but I begged Him... I mouthed Hebrew words that I did not understand and then continued in Serbian. God must be a polyglot.

It would soon be one year that we had lived with the occupation. One year! Nobody spoke about the end of the war. People spoke about the Chetniks and the partisans¹⁰ who were attacking the Germans, and of

¹⁰ The partisans and the Chetniks were both Yugoslav resistance movements, the former organised and led by Tito, a Croatian communist, and the latter by a Serb, General Mihajlovic, a royalist recognised as the national resistance commander by the Yugoslav government in exile in 1941.

The Chetniks not only waged guerrilla warfare against the Axis but also against the Axis-influenced Croatian puppet state. The nationalist Croatians retaliated, vowing extermination of the Serbs.

The partisans fought against the Axis invaders and the puppet state.

the Germans who, in turn, executed dozens of hostages for each dead German soldier.

I didn't need to steal coal any more, but: "Come. We'll go to the fields and 'pick' some fresh vegetables," said Ivana.

"No. I don't feel like having fresh vegetables. For me, onions and the beans from the potter are enough."

There were supplies of food items. Each person had a ration book that allowed him to receive a miserable ration of rice, sugar, flour and oil. I didn't have one.

"I wonder why your father has not given you yours. You can see for yourself that with the money he is paying me, we can't buy anything on the black market. Isn't he ashamed? What I receive from him is not enough for one person. I want you to stay here because I really like you, but your father has no heart. You must write to him and ask him to send you your ration book."

"I can't write to him. He is a drunkard. He's always drunk. He doesn't understand anything at all."

From that moment, it was difficult for me to swallow the little she gave me. I felt as if she were feeding me out of pity and I hated the feeling.

In 1942, Tito and his partisans were able to set up a provisional government, which accused the Chetniks of Axis collaboration causing clashes between the two resistance movements. Eventually, Tito built up a huge army (with which the Allies were able to combine in 1943) and also set up a national parliament, which did not recognise the government in exile. Tito was able to have himself replace Mihajlovic as official leader of the army and, in October 1944, the German army of occupation was defeated.

One day, Ivana told me that on the following day, we were to go to the burial of one of her relatives, a sixty-year-old peasant who had just passed away. She accompanied this piece of news with a rapturous smile that embarrassed me.

"I don't want to go. I didn't know this man."

"You are crazy. With the peasants, a burial is like a wedding. We are going to eat like we haven't done since the war began."

"But I have never been to a funeral."

"That's very good. It's an opportunity for you to see how we bury people in the country. We are going to have fun. You'll see."

With that, I understood even less.

We dressed as if for a party. We walked several kilometres through the fields. The weather was beautiful. We met many people, peasants dressed in their Sunday best, all walking in the same direction. What a crowd in front of the deceased's house! We heard the women lamenting. The coffin, covered with flowers, was carried by six men with serious, but not sad, faces. A priest and four choirboys, carrying big candles, walked with slow steps at the head of the procession, followed by the family and all the villagers. The church bells tolled.

People next to me were talking about their problems: how good the harvest would be; the Germans who would come and confiscate it all; and what they could do to hide at least some of it to feed their families. I

listened, looked and forgot that I was walking behind the coffin of a man. I was far from the family who cried for their loved one. The others were walking because it was the custom of the country.

For me, a burial was an event about which one spoke in hushed voices, away from the ears of children. Instead, these people spoke about death as one would talk about the harvest, giving the burial the air of a wedding.

When we reached the cemetery, it was already noon. The grave had already been dug. The priest began the funeral service; the hired mourners did their job; their sad and melodious voices drowned out the voice of the priest. The coffin was lowered into the grave and several men covered it in a few minutes and placed a big cross over it.

During these minutes, everybody gathered together and the party began. Very quickly, people brought a dozen sheets – from where I didn't know – and they covered both sides of the path for the length of twenty graves, including the one at which we had just gathered. In the twinkling of an eye, the place was covered with plates of rice, meat, hard-boiled eggs, sausages, bacon, pork roast, fruit, cakes, and plenty of wine and brandy. I thought about the man who was just buried. It seemed that he too was participating in the feast. Perhaps, in the eyes of these peasants, this meal symbolised the wedding of the deceased with death.

It was several months since I had last seen such an abundance of wonderful things to eat. People threw themselves into it without trying to disguise their greed. Bottles of wine were passed around. They made a toast to him – that the earth would not weigh heavily on him – and spoke directly to him. I sensed that the dead man played a very active role in the celebration in his honour.

People sat on the graves, eating and drinking, and telling stories about Nicholas. They told about how they valued his friendship, his courage, his love for the land and his work. They spoke of the life, which he loved so much, and of his beautiful voice. They began to sing his favourite songs. The widow and the children of the deceased sat very close to his grave; they smiled with their lips but had tears in their eyes. The black colour of the clothes seemed to clash with the atmosphere. I couldn't link death, the cemetery, the sadness, to all that my eyes were witnessing.

Nobody paid attention to me, and, slowly, my empty stomach forced me to overcome my disgust and embarrassment. I averted my eyes from the gravestones, stooped like all the others, or rather swallowed, all I could. What a wonderful sensation it was to have a full stomach and to have been able to stuff myself again, if I felt like it.

Then, sitting far from his grave, I thought of the poor man to whom I owed this feeling of contentment. It pained me to think that for him

everything was over. I would have liked to believe that he had just been born, and that this celebration had been his baptism. Yet, it was not so sad to die and be buried in this way. Death no longer seemed so final. These people talked about their relative and friend, and drank to his arrival in paradise as if he were leaving on a trip, to be gone only for a short while. The cemetery, in this far-away village, seemed to me like the setting-out station, not the final stop.

June came. It was neither hot nor cold and, as usual, I went to the park with Ivana. All the young people gathered there to flirt, gossip, and drink mineral water. I didn't ever participate in their conversations. I was a stranger in their eyes, and I truly felt it.

Life in the village had completely changed. People cleaned the streets, repainted the small bistros, and took special care of the park. They watered the flowers which were starting to blossom, placed chairs around and repaired the benches. In the mornings, mothers with babies and children filled the paths and shaded corners. The shrieking, the flying balls, which made strolling grown-ups duck, the peasants in their Sunday best... all heralded the holiday season and the expectation of holiday-makers from Belgrade. I began to feel afraid. I felt free, but I would have rather stayed in the house. Each day, according to what I

was told, many people would arrive from Belgrade, and I wondered if ever...

I usually spent the mornings at the potter's. I displayed flasks, which sold very well. Children wanted to have one as a souvenir of their holidays. In that way, I was responsible for some of the business, but I never forgot the danger. I watched as they approached the display, my heart beating fast, ready to run away if I recognised a face. In spite of this, very often I felt that I belonged to this little shop where my great friend, so poor, shared his plate of beans with me.

I had been in Arandelovac for six months. How many times during the course of those months did I "see" my father in the distance? I realised in the depressing moments that followed, that it was not he. I thought of my mother and Atza there at Saimichte. Now they would no longer be cold, but the war was not over. People around me talked about the partisans, of Germans who were killed, of sabotage and terrible repression. But no one foresaw the German defeat or the end of the war. I looked at the Boukoulja mountain and the forest that people said was full of partisans. How I wished that I could help them, be with them.

"Here's a letter for you," said Ivana.

It was a letter from my aunt! A lump came in my throat. So they had not forgotten me! I opened it, but there were only a few lines telling me of

her arrival with my cousins. I was mad with delight. I would surely have news of my parents and my brother. Besides, if my aunt was coming to see me, it was because she was less afraid of the Germans – the end of the war was drawing near. Those in the city knew, for they listened to radio London.

I waited for them at the station with Ivana. They got off the train, with many holiday-makers. They looked so neat, so well cared for. They came from Belgrade. They were different from me.

Back in our house, as usual, there was nothing to eat. In a few hours, there was everything: meat, chicken, eggs, cheese, butter, flour, sugar... A real "burial" like the one I happily still remembered. We kneaded dough, and the yeasty aroma made my mouth water. We ate three meals a day and enjoyed afternoon tea at five.

"You see," said Ivana, "how with money, one does not feel the war; and your aunt has money, indeed, a lot of money."

I told my aunt about our hunger and cold. I told her of the potter and the plate of beans that I earned. I told her that I would like to return to Belgrade.

"You don't know what you are asking. Here you are free. You have where to rest your head and our risk is small. Back in Belgrade, you could never leave the house and you would put us all in danger. Besides, you don't have a place to live. We can't take you back and

nobody else will agree to take care of you. You are still a spoiled child. We risked our lives to save yours and you talk about cold and hunger. You should be ashamed of yourself."

And I was ashamed.

"I don't understand why Rada doesn't have enough to eat."

"With what I am paid, Madame, I can barely buy a bottle of oil and one kilo of sugar on the black market. I keep your niece because I love her and I feel sorry for her."

My aunt was furious. To pay more! What her sister paid was already too much. But *she* would make an effort for Rada, seeing that the child liked her. "I will talk to my brother-in-law. He will give a little more, but certainly not what you are asking."

The conversation made me feel bad. I wanted to run away to the forests of Boukoulja, far, far away from them all. I wished that my aunt and my cousins would go. I was ashamed of the things she bought. I was ashamed of the way she spoke to Ivana. Before she went, she demanded that I be fed well and promised to send my ration card!

The kitchen was again empty; they left nothing behind. Ivana was no longer the same. "I didn't imagine that you came from such a rich family."

"My parents are not rich."

"Judging from your clothes, one would say they are. But even if they are not, your aunt is a cruel woman. She lets you die of hunger, while she has all that money."

I tried to defend my aunt – to defend her for me – for my security – for my need to know that I was liked by her. I wasn't able to understand why she refused to speak to me about mother and Atza. If not, then the end of the war could not yet be close.

"It's dangerous to talk about the Jews. You must wait and consider yourself lucky. You are living in a paradise. Don't you understand yet? Get it into your head that your return to Belgrade is out of the question."

No. I didn't grasp it. If this was paradise, then what was it where she lived? What I understood was that she could not understand me, and that I must never ever talk about my parents or my life to anyone.

She left me with the feeling of being a burden, of not being wanted. She felt duty bound to support me, but because of me they were in danger. They were paying a lot of money to Ivana with such difficulty under the present situation.

Ivana saw it from her side: "I don't see why I have to keep you for nothing when you have relatives who are so rich."

I began to live in fear. If Ivana sent me back, I would have nowhere to go. I tried to eat even less, and did everything to be useful. I only felt comfortable when I was with the potter. I thought about the winter, about

the cold and about the coal. Perhaps the war would end before winter returned. "You must be brave." I must consider myself lucky not to have had to go to the camp with my mother. But I was unhappy for not going with her. Here also I was cold; I was hungry; I was scared and I was alone. At the camp, I would have been colder, hungrier and more scared, but I would have had my mother with me. It was over. I could no longer change anything. I must accept the situation – be "wise". This I had promised my parents, and I would keep my promise.

The village was full of people on vacation. Again, I walked with my eyes nailed to the ground. But, one day, near the station, it happened.

I was with Ivana. She liked to go to the station when the train was due to see who came; to appraise the beauty of the women and their dresses; and to keep abreast of the fashions from Belgrade. Obviously, I did not like to go with her, but I had no choice. We were there, the two of us, among a few other curious onlookers, looking at a dozen women and children who left the train. I turned my head to look somewhere else and, suddenly, I found myself facing my old high-school teacher. I stood transfixed for some seconds before I started to run toward the house. Ivana called out after me. She arrived, breathless, behind me, "What's the matter with you? What's wrong? One would think you'd seen the devil!"

"I don't feel well. I'm sick and I want to vomit."

"Are you ill?"

"No. But the sun is bad for me. When I was in Belgrade I had to be very careful."

"You never told me before."

"I thought I had got over it."

She looked at me. Did she believe me?

Did my teacher recognise me? If she did, perhaps she would give me away! I remembered her anti-Semitic feelings towards me. Then, I was trapped. We would all be killed. I didn't know what to do. I went to bed. I had a headache. Ivana stayed near me. The next day, I refused to go to the park with her.

"Come with me. Outside you'll feel better. Come on. We will go a little later. It won't be hot. You might meet an old school friend among the holiday-makers. I'm sure that would give you pleasure and give you something else to think about."

No. I don't feel well. I'm ill."

For the next few days, I refused to leave the house.

Ivana still insisted and I felt that she understood that I had a good reason for not wanting to leave the house.

A few days later, she told me to write to my father to ask him to increase considerably the amount of money he sent for me. "If they can't pay more, they will have to take you back."

I wrote. The letter was sent with the small van that made the daily trip between Belgrade and Arendelovac. I awaited the reply and it arrived. I had to leave Ivana and the village on the first of August and go to Belgrade to the address given in the letter. I saw that it was the same building where my uncle had his shop on Detchanska Street, in the centre of the city. I was to knock at the door of a Mr. and Mrs. Babovitch. I had never known any people with that name.

I was restless, but happy. I wouldn't be able to leave the apartment, but I would see my uncle every day and, very often, my aunt and cousins. Most of all, I would never have to steal again.

Ivana looked sad and disappointed. She had been certain that she would get the money that she had asked for. Did she regret having asked? Had she understood that my situation was not "normal" and tried to take advantage of it?

I packed my suitcase. I said goodbye to the potter, my only true friend, who, without asking questions, had always shared his plate of beans, even when times for him were equally difficult. He was one of those people, who, after having known them, one remembers forever. He was ignorant and illiterate, but he had qualities that I learned to appreciate and, as far as possible, imitate, all my life.

"You will be better at home near your mother, even if she is ill."

He hugged me and he had tears in his eyes.

"You are a very brave and sensible little girl."

He had no idea of how courage was failing me at that moment!

I looked at Ivana, with whom I had lived for six long months.

I liked her very much, but I resented her for having asked for more money. If she had loved me, she would not have done it. I was sad to leave her and, suddenly, so scared of the future.

With my ticket in the pocket of my dress, and the suitcase in my hand, I arrived at the station where a small bus for eight was waiting. I said goodbye to Ivana. I cried and so did she. "I'm sorry I asked for more money. I didn't imagine that they would refuse to pay. I will be very lonely without you."

She was right. I would also be much lonelier without her.

CHAPTER 12

I was the first to take a seat, and I sat right behind the driver. The other passengers arrived and among them there was a classmate with her mother. Distraught, I wanted to get out. Ivana was still there waiting for the departure. I couldn't out, but I couldn't stay either. This would be the end! Everybody would die because of me. I was paralysed with fear. My head was spinning and I felt nauseous.

Time to go. Militza sat behind me. She hadn't seen me yet. She and her mother were settling themselves into their seats and chattering. I looked straight ahead. She had not noticed me. An old gentleman took the seat next to me.

After a while the gentleman asked me: "You are not feeling well, my child, are you? Does travelling make you ill?"

"No. I feel fine," I muttered, afraid that Militza would recognise my voice.

"Why are you afraid? We will look after you. Does anyone here have a lemon?" he asked.

I felt the looks of all the passengers riveted on me. Militza's mother had a lemon. I started to vomit. The driver stopped the bus and asked me to go out and get some fresh air.

"No. No. I feel better already. I will not vomit again."

Militza saw me! "Relly! Is it you? Look, mother, it's Relly!"

"My name is Rada."

Perplexed, she hesitated a moment, but then said, "Nonsense! It's you, Relly."

Her mother told her to be quiet.

"But I know. She hasn't been to school for a year, now, because she is Jewish."

"I don't know you. My name is Rada."

"But you are Relly. Look! I can see your bad arm."

Unfortunately, the short sleeves of my dress showed my right arm, undoubted witness to my identity. Silence. I didn't know what to do with my arm. The old gentleman turned round to Militza's mother: "Can't you keep your daughter quiet? She is upsetting everybody."

Upon seeing that her mother did not re-act, he said, "Mind your own business and leave this little girl alone!"

Militza did not reply. I thought that now there were seven people who knew that I was Jewish.

In Belgrade, I would be arrested. I couldn't let that happen. I tried to think, but my thoughts left me. I had to find a solution. I couldn't let them take me. "All our lives depend on you." I was so scared but I had to have courage. As soon as the bus stopped, I would jump out and run. What about my suitcase? I was going to have to leave it. Yes, I must. But what would I do without it? What would I tell my aunt? I would be without clothes. I knew that I couldn't tell the truth; they would become so afraid, and, perhaps, the Babitches would not want to look after me. I would tell them that I left the suitcase because I thought I had seen a friend of my parents at the station. But what if they stop me from getting off? The closer we approached the city, the more frightened I became. I was terrified. All my relatives would die because of me. But it was not my fault. I didn't ask to Belgrade. They did not want to pay what Ivana asked. I hoped that I would not cry. I mustn't cry. I clenched my teeth.

The old gentleman offered me a sweet. I refused, shaking my head. He knew who I was. I was such an idiot! I should have left the bus the moment I saw Militza. I could have told the truth to Ivana. It would have been much less dangerous. She would never have betrayed me. I had been stupid and my stupidity would cost the lives of all those who wanted to save mine.

The old gentleman talked to Militza and her mother. They had spent two weeks at Arandelovac. It had been wonderful and much less expensive than in Belgrade. They stayed in the country, at the house of some peasants and had plenty to eat.

From the window, I saw that we had arrived at the city's outskirts. The streets were full of German soldiers. It would have been enough to have called one of them, and everything would be over. I wouldn't say a word, not even if they tortured me.

In a few minutes we would arrive. I heard a disturbance behind me. I didn't move. With my eyes half closed, I looked at the door to see if there was anything to hinder my reaching it as fast as I could. I would jump from the bus even before it stopped. The old gentleman must have understood my intentions. He folded his legs to facilitate my movements. The bus slowed down. The passengers were stirring in their seats.

The gentleman stood up. I thought that he wanted to bar the way to the other passengers. The bus stopped. I opened the door and jumped.

I ran headlong with all my strength. After a good while, breathless, I looked back. Was I being followed? There was nobody.

Soon I reached Detchanska Street. I was breathing evenly. The smell of vomit from my dress enveloped me. I didn't want to reach the Babovitches ever. I wanted just to keep walking till the war was over.

But there I was. I entered the courtyard of a big building. A few steps. A glass door with the names: "Dragoslav Babovitch". I knocked and soon made out the silhouette of a woman coming down a few steps leading to the door, which she opened. A blonde woman, somewhat on the heavy side, with small and expressionless eyes, but whose lips were smiling, let me in. She had about her a hard look. "Come in! Where is your suitcase? Haven't you brought anything with you?" she asked.

I told her my "truth".

"We'll have to go and look for your case."

"I don't think so. We can't explain why I ran away."

She shrugged her shoulders without saying anything to me, but, judging from the look on her face, I could see that she thought I was an idiot.

She walked in front of me taking me to the kitchen, and, from there, through a very narrow door on the right, to the pantry. When she opened the door, it hit a mattress which had been placed on the floor,

and barely opened enough for me to get through. To the right of the door, there was a small shelf with a few jars of jam. A long, narrow window let some light into the room. On the wall behind the door, there were several nails. "For your clothes."

With the door closed, I had forty centimetres to stand up in. As a matter of fact, the room was just a few centimetres longer than the mattress upon which I would be sleeping.

After a while, Mr. Babovitch arrived. A big smile lit his face. He was a tall, dark man with black eyes, which shone with kindness. "It will not be too nice for you in this hole. But it's the war. When it's over, you'll go back home."

"She has left her suitcase in the bus," said Boutza.

I repeated my story.

"I understand. Perhaps you did the right thing. I will speak to Yova and we will decide what to do."

He would speak with my uncle! Why hadn't my uncle come to see me? His shop was only a few metres from the entry door of the building. I was disappointed, and began also to realise that I had no clothes left, and that of all the things I had, nothing could be replaced – my dresses, pullovers, shoes and all the rest – the clothes that my mother had bought for me. Above all, it was this that made me ill. The only things that I had left from my previous life were lost.

Mr. Babovitch returned. My uncle and aunt were appalled. How could I have been so stupid as to have left my suitcase? I should have waited for this friend of my parents to leave and then picked it up. Now it was too late, and since my behaviour had not been normal, it would be dangerous for my uncle to go and ask the driver for it.

I wanted so much to cry – to tell the truth – but I knew it would only make things worse.

My uncle came the next day. "How could you have been so stupid as to leave all your clothes? What were you thinking? Where am I going to find clothes for you to wear? You thought that you had recognised a friend, but you are not even sure of it! Besides, what was this man doing in front of the station? Probably he was just passing by. You only had to wait a while. Running away, as you did, only raises suspicion. You will end up killing us all with your stupidity. It's high time that you grew up. You are a real catastrophe!"

I looked straight into his eyes. His face was red. He was very angry. But if he knew the real truth, I would be less stupid and he would be dying of fear! Uncle Yova left without welcoming me.

A few days later, he brought two old dresses, both much too large for me. "You'll manage with these for the summer. For later, we shall see," he said.

I thanked him. He didn't mention the family and I didn't dare ask him. Besides, he spoke to me without looking at me, and my heart was cold.

"You understand that your going out is over. Now you have to stay in your room. Two rooms of this apartment are rented to a lawyer. He is here from eight in the morning till four in the afternoon except on Sundays. He must not know of your presence here. You can't even use the toilet. Do you understand? At the moment he is away on holidays, but he will be back in a week."

"Yes. I understand."

"Your name is Rada Yovanovitch. You are my illegitimate daughter, conceived in my relationship with my children's nanny. You have just arrived from Bougovitsa, where you were rescued. Together with other Serbian children, you were transferred to a camp in Belgrade, where I came looking for you. You live with Mr. and Mrs. Babovitch because my wife doesn't know of your existence, and I can't take you home with me. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I do."

This story rang true for, at that time, the Croatian government encouraged the massacre of the Serbian minority. Hundreds of orphans were being transferred to Belgrade, where, either their relatives, or simply good people would adopt them or look after them until after the

war. Naturally, these children spoke Croatian, which represented a very real problem for me.

With my uncle and Mr. Babovitch as witnesses, I would have to go to the police with two photographs in order to obtain an identity card. But how? I spoke Serbian with a Belgrade accent, which had nothing in common with the Croatian language. People recognised Croatians as soon as they opened their mouths.

"You will have to practise Croatian. You must behave calmly and not show that you are afraid. You know that everything depends on you. If they discover that you are lying, it will be the end for you and for all of us. Memorise all the details. You must know them by heart and be able to repeat them if they wake you up in the middle of the night," my uncle said.

The three of them were terrified. I looked at them and my legs quivered. Quickly, I learned that "my mother" stayed in Croatia – adults were not allowed to leave. She had entrusted me to the Serbians in charge of the transportation of children. That was how I had arrived in Belgrade. "My father", who knew the date of my arrival, came to pick me up at the camp where I had spent a few hours.

Babovitch and my uncle talked at the same time. Boutza looked discontented. Much advice rained down and the tension increased.

I knew what they wanted from me and I showed a calm and attentive face. "No. I will not be afraid. I will do exactly what you tell me. My voice will not quiver. No. I will not forget anything. Yes. I will behave naturally. I will not arouse the slightest suspicion."

"There will be German agents there. You will not behave like an imbecile! Don't stare at the floor! Don't look in their eyes! Be shy as a little peasant would be but don't be too shy!"

"Yes. I will behave like a peasant. No. I will not be too shy. Yes. I will look at them without staring at them. No. I will not keep my eyes fixed on the floor."

To gain some courage, the two men drank a draught of brandy. I was cold in spite of the warm air. I knew that if I told them how scared I really was – that I didn't want to go – that I didn't want to go to the police, they would be even more fearful, and, in the end, I would have to go all the same.

Several times, they made me repeat "the story of my Croatian life". They corrected me. They unnerved me and I felt sick. Again, my uncle told me how my existence had become a burden for them, and I could feel how they wished I were at the camp with all the others. How I wished to be there, too, with mother, Atza, and all my cousins. But it was too late and the lives of seven people depended on me.

When I had learnt "my life" by heart, my uncle handed me two photos of me that had been taken at the start of the German occupation for some documents that they had required. I remembered the day the four of us went to have the photographs taken. It seemed such a long time ago – more than a year already – and the war was not yet over. The Relly in the picture had no longer anything in common with Rada, Yova's daughter, who was going to the police to obtain a card with her new identity. In spite of knowing "Rada's life" inside out, Relly's life lived inside of me day and night. That life I didn't need to learn by heart.

Before leaving the apartment, Boutza made a terrible scene with her husband. "What need did we have for all this? It's better to be hungry than to be afraid day and night. You are going to sign papers as a witness to her identity as Yova's daughter. If one day they discover the truth, we won't be able to say that we didn't know who she was."

"No. I will only witness that I knew he had a child out of marriage. It's useless to shout and get upset. We can't change our mind now. The war will soon be over. Rada's situation will be less dangerous once she obtains her identity card."

We left her crying.

I didn't like Boutza, but this was not the time to be thinking about her, but about what was awaiting me.

We walked through the crowded streets of Belgrade. The noise of the vehicles and trams, the sound of children running to and from their parents, a few phrases of conversations, sometimes in German... the life that was passing on all sides of me, I heard, and felt without seeing, since I had to walk with my head lowered.

I was sad. I was fearful. I felt as if they were taking me to the slaughterhouse. But once there, if I didn't play my role well, I would not be the only one to die. They would all die because they wanted to spare me from the camp.

We arrived at the police station. We had to stand in line with many other children who looked scared and who didn't hide their fear. A few cried and I wondered why. What were they afraid of? I looked at them. I studied their behaviour and I saw that the adults replied for them, even for those who looked much older than I.

The real danger was that the police might recognise my accent. I went over the details of my identity.

Finally, we stood in front of the police clerk. He hardly lifted his head. "Name and given name?" he asked in a monotonous voice.

"Rada Yovanovitch."

"Are you ill? Speak out loud. I can't hear you."

I raised my voice, my heart thumping, but I answered his questions. He wrote. "Your photographs."

I gave them to him. My "father" and Mr. Babovitch signed several forms. The clerk picked them up and put a blue identity card with my photograph on the table. Everything was done. We were already outside.

I wanted to cry, to shout. I wanted to go to the toilet. It was difficult for me to realise that it was all behind me, that I had overcome my fear, and that, in my pocket, I carried an identity card.

"You have done very well," said my uncle. "Now we feel safer. If the police ever come to the house, you can show them that your papers are in order. Nevertheless, you know that everything will always depend on your behaviour. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

How I wished that I didn't have to hear those words any more. How I wished that I would have to be responsible no longer for their lives. What would I do if the war never ended or if the Germans won?

No! That would be tantamount to blasphemy! One must never have any doubts. Doubts would help them carry off the victory.

This was how I began my new life in Belgrade. It didn't take me long to realise that, Arandelovac, I lived among friends, not only with whom I would have shared my last piece of bread and suffered the cold, but also with whom I shared many moments of joy. For them, I was a twelve-year-old girl whose parents didn't love her enough to take care of her.

They pitied me and loved me, perhaps because their lives did not depend on my behaviour.

Now I knew that my aunt and uncle must have bitterly regretted not having let me go with my mother. The war did not end as they foresaw, and they were at a loss to know what to do with me.

Mr. Babovitch worked for my uncle and, for fear of losing his job, accepted to hide me, against his will. They were all scared because of me. I felt, deep down, that I didn't have the right to live – that my life was a punishment for everybody. I was someone that they couldn't make disappear, and with whom mere contact would lead to death.

I didn't know under what conditions the Babovitches were hiding me but I knew that the bread that Boutza baked once a week was made with flour that my uncle bought on the black market.

According to them, my uncle was not short of means and, at his place, they ate well. At our place, we ate but only just. I had one piece of bread with each meal and lots of onions, but several times a week I also had potatoes and tomatoes that Boutza herself grew somewhere at the home of friends who had a little garden.

I was confined to my small "cell". I began to understand the difficulties of the situation that I was in.

Originally, Boutza came from Banat, from the same region as Martin and Lenka. There were days when she was kind, and others, when she

ignored me. Very often, she spoke to me of my uncle's selfishness, of the miserly salary he paid her husband and of the ridiculous amount he gave them to keep me. To be of help to them, to make myself more "profitable", I ate little and at least once a week, I skipped breakfast pretending to have an upset stomach. Boutza was visibly happy about my ills and never tried to take care of me, or find out what was wrong with me. To go without food did not upset me after the empty stomachs at Arandelovac. Besides, as always, with an empty stomach, I was part of my family, whom nobody thought about and about whom I had the right only to think and never to speak.

Boutza loved playing cards. With Dragi, once or twice a week, she would go to play cards with two of Dragi's uncles, two very old men who were single and lived alone. On other days the two of us would play rummy. She taught me how to play this game, which I hated, but had to play with her for hours. As soon as the lawyer left his office, I would leave my "bedroom" and sit opposite her. The worst part of all was that she was a bad loser. To keep her good humoured and nice to me, I had to let her win. Time wouldn't pass. Once in a while, I let myself win a game to conceal what I was doing. Those afternoons became a real ordeal for me, but I could not refuse to play.

Boutza was a very withdrawn woman, cold, terribly selfish, pessimistic, and constantly in a bad mood. The only being she loved was her husband. They were a strange couple.

Dragi was an optimistic and kind man. He loved life and people. Always in a good mood, he tried to make his wife's life less miserable. He was the only understanding person around me. He tried to encourage me and make my life as easy she could. It was his idea to register me at a nearby library (in his wife's name). He was allowed to take two books at a time. He undertook to go and fetch them and he did it with pleasure. The librarian knew that the subscriber was a thirteen-year-old girl who was ill and who spent her days reading. At the beginning, she sent me books that were appropriate for my age, but soon she sent me all the good books that she had, for every two days I needed two books. Books became my only company and my only friends.

By eight in the morning, I was already dressed, had had my breakfast and was back on my bed, where I had to stay till four in the afternoon, when the lawyer left his office. I forgot the war, the Germans and my fears, and lived the thousand lives of the heroes in my books.

With sadness, I discovered the Jews, almost always dishonest, negative and cruel characters, people who worshipped money, and who were insignificant and cunning. In addition to this, there was the German propaganda. For them, the Jews were rats, the bringers of evil, the

lepers of humanity. I was nonplussed. I saw my parents, my grandmother, my uncles and aunts, and my cousins. I saw my parents' friends. I remembered their friendly faces full of kindness. I thought of my father for whom books were the centre of his life. I remembered our conversations – his efforts to make fine human beings of us. Whatever the Germans said were lies. But what about the books? The only explanation for me was that the characters in the books had been created by writers. What did these writers know about Jews? We Yugoslavian Jews were just like the Christian Yugoslavs. We had different names and celebrated different holidays, but that was the only difference. I thought of Mr. Amente who had always been for us a German and who had become a Jew without nationality. He and his brother were very kind and honest. Why the French, the English, and the Germans good or bad, stupid or intelligent, thieving or honest, but the Jews were always the same Jews and always bad. Finally, to the Germans, they were beasts, destined to be slaves to serve them, the superior race, and forced to work under the whip, to bend their backs, to live in the camps, to eat three potatoes a day, and all this because they were Jews! What good was it to be a Jew? If they were Christians, they would be together at home. But I remembered my father's words and I felt ashamed of myself. I knew he would not like my thinking. But then, I also knew that, in the past, he wasn't always right. Would he, perhaps,

have chosen to become a Christian, now? I felt that he would not have, but I could not understand why. Why choose to be cursed, persecuted and ill-treated? Was it only for the pleasure of saying that we were Jews? Father told us that we were Yugoslavs – that Yugoslavia was our fatherland and that our destiny was the destiny of Yugoslavia. But he was mistaken! He was deported, mother and Atza were in a concentration camp, and I, I was hiding under a false identity. It all happened because we were not Yugoslavs but Jews. Even my uncle who was hiding me did not like us in spite of the fact that he had married one. But why? Because we killed Jesus, the son of God? But how could we kill the son of God? Father told me that Jesus was a Jew, and died as a Jew. Then what? Why did my parents, I and all the others, have to suffer for something that happened about one thousand nine hundred and twelve years ago? I understood that people hated and despised my people, either because they envied us for our money or because we had killed Jesus. To the non-religious, we were despicable; to the religious, we were the assassins of God; and to the Germans we were rats!

My family, friends and acquaintances were not rich people. They had never harmed anyone and had had nothing to do with Jesus.

People said that there was only one God. Who, then, was this God? When I reached God, I didn't dare analyse things any more. I was

scared. I needed God so much. I recited my "Shema Yisrael" with fervour and fear. I could not doubt God's logic and justice. Only God protected my family and me. He was the only one who would re-unite us and make the Germans lose the war. In fact, He alone was the one to whom I could speak and of whom I could ask something. He was the only one who listened to me.

When I was not reading, especially during the winter when I could not turn on the light until the lawyer had left the apartment, I thought of my parents and my brother. I cried for all that they had suffered and for what they would have to suffer during winter. I remembered all our conversations and all the events that had taken place since the war began. I imagined our very next meeting and our life afterwards.

The fact that I was not able to study made me unhappy. I felt stupid and ignorant compared to my schoolmates. At times, when I was alone in the house, I telephoned Voika, my best friend, just to hear her voice. She would repeat "Hello" several times, but, when I didn't answer, I would hear her say, "Nobody is answering."

I was that "nobody".

How I envied her! She was at home with her parents. She was going to school. She was studying. She had friends and talked on the telephone. I was "nobody". How I wanted to see her!

Every day, I became more conscious of the passing of time and of my ignorance. I could hear my parents' voices telling us over and over that education was the most important thing in life, because the knowledge that one possessed was the only thing one could not lose. It could not be stolen while one's head remained on one's shoulders. Upon one's profession, the future and a comfortable and satisfactory life depended. Those who did not study could only face a future of poverty and ignorance. They said that, for the Jews, study was even more important than for other people. I wondered why they thought like that, if we were "like the others". Now I understood that they knew, even before the war, that we were not "like the others".

And now, we, the Jews, didn't go to school; we grew up; we would not have a career; and thus we would be unhappy in the future, too. What could I do? Read! Didn't father say that reading gave us knowledge and wisdom? I comforted myself in thinking that, if I read night and day, I would come to learn, perhaps, not those things that were taught at school, but, nonetheless, it would help me not to be completely ignorant.

Every day, we listened to the news on Radio London. It was the voice of freedom, of hope, the voice that was our source of courage. We also listened to the broadcasts on Radio Belgrade, which praised the German victories on all fronts. These were the masters of the seas, who, each day, sent the Allies' ships to the bottom. I imagined thousands of

soldiers, on board these ships in flames, and my heart tensed with fear
for them.

CHAPTER 13

The days went by and my fear of being discovered persisted. Babovitch would tell me that, from time to time, Germans and the local police raided the houses looking for partisans and communists. He didn't conceal his fear, but I concealed my panic from him.

Each night in my bed, I thought of what I would do if they came, and my stomach-aches became even stronger.

Often, my uncle came to the house to weigh the meat that he bought on the black market. Heaps of meat in Boutza's kitchen! But it never entered his mind to give us a little so that I might be able, after so long, to eat a bit. He would tell Boutza how dangerous and dear it was to get. "What can I do? My children are at the peak of their growth and they must have nourishment. Isn't that true?"

"Yes. Very true."

He never asked if I needed anything. My aunt and cousins never came to see me.

I used to say to myself that I really didn't need anything, and, if they did not visit me, it was because they were afraid, and I understood them. What was more difficult for me to grasp was the fact that my uncle never

thought to give me the slightest bit of any of the things that he bought and of which I had, for a long time, forgotten the taste.

I needed to believe, or to feel, that my family loved me. I tried to justify my uncle's selfishness and excuse him. My cousins were younger than I. They needed to eat better than I did. I was already a big girl. I could do without it and eat the same as an adult.

One evening, two big bags of flour were brought, one after the other. Half of one was for us, and the rest was to be kept in the house. My uncle would take it home little by little. Babovitch got ready to pay the man who had brought them, and I saw him take from his pocket one of my mother's earrings – the sparkling earrings that my mother always wore. I looked at him, transfixed. I wanted to take it, hold it in my hand, at least for a few minutes, but I couldn't say anything.

The man examined the stone, and, finding it to his liking, smugly thrust it in his pocket with an air of satisfaction. It had disappeared for ever! I wanted to cry so badly. I would have given anything to take it from him. It was as if for a few minutes I had found my mother again and immediately lost her without having had time to touch her. My mother's earring in exchange for half a bag of flour for me! That night, before falling asleep on my pillow, which was a little wetter than usual, I found comfort in the thought that there was still one left and mother would understand that we had no choice.

My uncle's visits always caused fights between Boutza and Dragi.

"You are too good. You let him take advantage of you. You risk our lives for a few kilos of flour. He knows what we eat and he has the audacity to come here to weigh his meat and all the rest without leaving something, even for Rada. If I had known that this was going to happen, I would never have agreed to look after her. For the little we get, we didn't need this headache. At least we could live quietly, without fear every time the doorbell rings."

Sitting on my bed, I prayed to God to free me from all these people who only put up with me because they could not do otherwise.

Winter came. Boutza and Dragi went out more often to play cards with friends. I stayed home alone, sitting in their bedroom, which served as our living room. By the light of a bedside lamp, I read and listened to the silence. I felt that each step that came near was that of a soldier coming to look for me. To gain courage, I recited my only prayer, and it helped me to feel less lonely. I never thought of thieves; it never scared me that they might come to the apartment; I was sure that they would not harm me. They were not German.

The Babovitch apartment was located at the back of a big building and hence had its entrance in the courtyard. Other than their guests, no one else had a reason to be on that side of the house.

Day and night, no matter what I was doing, a part of me was always on the alert. With each noise, or what seemed to me to be one, my heart began to beat quickly. And if...? I would quickly identify myself. I imagined thousands of situations, each worse than the other, in which I didn't know how to answer the questions, and caused "the death of all".

I learned to live and accept that, other than Dragi, no one liked me; that I was a burden to them; that I complicated their lives; and, that without me, their lives would be much easier. I tried to be as unnoticed as I could. I stayed in my pantry where I hadn't space to stand up, and did not leave it until they called me. I did not enter their room unless they invited me.

It was about that time that I began to write poems and, one day, I read a few to Boutza. She listened with an astonished look, and then, almost shouting, told me, "Get rid of them and right away! Are you crazy? They could search the house, find your notebook and discover who you are."

"But how? I only speak of things in general. I write about hate and freedom. There is nothing Jewish in them."

"You are even more stupid than you look! One of these days we will pay for your foolishness. What must we do to teach you how to behave? Perhaps you think you are on a holiday?"

Thus ended my poetic period... It was impossible for me to escape reality, even for a few minutes. I didn't have the right to do so, even

faced with a blank sheet of paper. I found comfort in books, my only friends.

Months passed. The Jewish question was on my mind more and more. I spent hours trying to remember the words of "Hatikva"¹¹. I had learned it in the dark ages, three years ago. I didn't understand the meaning of the words, but I knew that it referred to the hope that Jews had of returning to their homeland. Their homeland? My homeland was Yugoslavia. "Hatikva" must be the hymn of the wandering Jews. But my family and I were not wanderers. Why then were we Yugoslavs taught the Jewish hymn?

Sometimes, not often, when talking with Boutza and Dragi, the subject of the Jews would come up. I could feel their indifference, their unconcern, as if what was happening to the Jews was unpleasant but to be expected.

We talked a lot about the Chetniks, the partisans, the communists, the hostages, the prisons, but almost never about the Jews. From Kalimegdan Park, a fifteen-minute walk, one could see, on the other side of the river, Saimichte, the camp where my mother and Atza were. They were so close and yet so far!

¹¹ "The Hope", the Zionist anthem, which is now the Israeli national anthem.

Once only, I overcame my fear, and asked my uncle, "Can you see what is going on at the camp?"

"What they do is none of your business! Nobody can get near enough to the place to see what is going on there. Nobody knows anything. And you, it would be better for you to think about your new identity, about the girl you are today, Rada Yovanovitch."

I didn't like this Rada who always had to say, "Yes, thank you. No, I'm not hungry. Yes, I love playing cards. No, it doesn't bother me to stay in bed eight hours every day in a room the size of a mattress."

I was experiencing pain in my arm, especially during the winter months when it became unbearable. I knew that nobody could help me, since all the orthopaedic doctors in the city knew my case and could identify me. I watched my hand becoming deformed, making me very unhappy, but I didn't complain. I knew it would have been useless.

When I came back from Arandelovac, my head was full of lice. During the entire war I did nothing about it but scratch! There was only kerosene to fight these terrible pests, and it was a waste of time. My hair, long and very thick, was a paradise for them. Boutza insisted on cutting it, but for once I objected. My hair was the only thing that I had left from the time before the war. It was the same hair that my mother combed every day, and my father on Sundays. To cut it, for me, was like

having nothing left of my personality 'from before' and I didn't want that to happen.

A few months after my arrival at their house, the relationship between Boutza and Dragi changed. Even from my room, I could hear them arguing. I didn't have any idea what it was about, but realised that it was very serious, seeing that Boutza cried every evening from seven onwards, whenever he did not arrive home on time. Occasionally, he called to say that he could not be home before curfew since he was far from the house.

Boutza cried and I comforted her. I thought that she was afraid of what he was doing, for I imagined that he was working for the resistance. One day, when Boutza was not at home, I said to him, "Boutza is crying a lot, and every night after seven, she looks at the clock every minute. I don't know what to do to comfort her."

"I know this must be very difficult for her and for you also. I'm in love with another woman. Boutza suspects it even though I told her that she is wrong. You would be helping me by persuading her that I work for the resistance."

I looked at him open mouthed. "Another woman? Why?"

"Her name is Tina," he continued, without looking at me. "She lives alone in a big villa in Dediner. She has helped many Jews and I have told her that I am hiding you."

"How could you tell her about such a dangerous secret?' My head was spinning and my heart was in my mouth.

"Don't be afraid. She is a patriot. She helps the Chetniks. She would only help us – never harm us."

I regretted knowing the truth. I felt bad for Boutza, and despised my role as a hypocrite and a liar. One evening, seeing her in tears, I told her that probably Dragi was working for the resistance.

"The resistance?" she retorted. "Is it for the resistance that he shines his shoes twice a day? He changes his shirts as if I had a soap store in the house. He must have a mistress!"

"No. He loves you very much. He is very kind to you. He'll be back in a few minutes. You'll see."

But the minutes went by and he didn't come. The telephone rang. He was far from the house and could be back before curfew.

Boutza, her passion unleashed, turned her anger on me. "You little bitch! You invent stories to protect him. I will report you to the Gestapo! You will all die! You are a dirty Jew! The Germans are right in doing what they are doing."

I cried. I didn't know how to answer her and she chased me out of the room.

In my bed, I shook with terror. I felt at fault. What she said was true... I knew the truth and I lied to her. But what could I do? I feared Dragi and that strange woman who knew my identity. I feared Boutza's terrible vengeance. I felt that I had fallen into a trap from which no one could rescue me. I thought of my mother, who had left me for my own good. I thought of my cousins, who were going to die. How my uncle and aunt would hate me! But what could I do to prevent this catastrophe? How did Boutza know that I knew the truth? I didn't even want to know. I didn't understand in the least why Dragi was doing what he was doing and why he had told me. The problems that Boutza and Dragi had were nothing to do with the war. They lived in a world that I didn't want to know about. To punish her husband, she was ready to have us all killed. A new feeling of terror invaded my being.

I waited for the morning to see what Dragi would tell his wife. In books that I had read, I had come across the situation – a man finding himself between two women, to whom he was tied for different reasons. I also knew that these sorts of stories could have a bad ending, but never as bad as the one I was going through. I fell asleep only to go through another nightmare – a new one this time. I saw us all with our backs to a wall, before soldiers who were getting ready to shoot us, and my aunt

was cursing me for what I had done. I woke up feeling that this nightmare would soon become a reality with Dragi's return home.

I thought about God. I couldn't understand why He let all this happen to me. I knew that He was very busy and I felt that He had no time left for me. But I needed him so much. I could not make it without Him. I murmured my prayer but I was afraid that He did not hear me any more. There was no more justice. The Germans, so cruel, who had captured us; who had put all the Jewish people into camps; who had killed hostages; burned villages; battered the innocent; did not seem to fear the punishment of God – of my God. I was convinced that the Jewish god was not the German god.

My father must have understood this truth. The Germans killed their god and ours could not do anything against them. Only men, our allies, who were stronger than the Germans, would make justice prevail. But they could only do it with God's help. I was losing my faith, and re-finding it from fear of being punished. But punished for what?

Since the war, I had heard people say of us, many times, "They really deserved it!" Deserved it? Why? My father's words always came to my mind, "If you deny your religion, you deny your past – your origin. You stop being yourself."

But at that time, I was no longer myself. My parents and my brother were themselves. They were Jewish and were paying dearly for it, while

I was Rada. I declared it and I repeated it day and night. But I didn't have a choice. If I refused to take her identity, I would bring death to all those who were protecting me. What importance was there in what I had to say out loud? What was important was what I had in my heart, and there, I was Relly.

Father and mother would come back, and we would talk about all these problems. Perhaps I might even try to convince them that it would be better to become Christians, in order to live in safety, never again to be separated or forced to hide. It seemed so logical to me.

"A man who denies his origins..."

But my origins were my mother and father. If we all became Christians, we wouldn't have to deny anyone. But mother and father would say that, by becoming Christians, they would deny their parents.

"We cannot change our origins like we change our shirts." I could hear my father's voice.

I stopped thinking of these things. Perhaps, after the war, together, we would be able to resolve them. Deep in my heart, however, I knew that we would never discuss these matters – that 'the shirt' would never be changed.

After the war! Would I live to the end of it? Would Boutza really do as she said?

When Dragi came home the next morning, he explained for the tenth time, that he had come back in the morning because of work.

"What work?" she shouted.

"I will tell you about it when the war is over."

"Liar! I will go to the Gestapo! That's where you belong! You can tell them what you are doing!"

"We will tell them that *you* knew from the beginning and you will die with us. Be smart. I am your husband and I love you. There isn't any other woman in my life."

The atmosphere in the house became unbearable. Boutza locked herself in her bedroom. Dragi tried to keep me calm. "Don't be afraid. She will never say anything to anyone. She is threatening us only to scare me."

"She hates me because she thinks I know the truth. She says that I'm protecting you. I don't know what to do."

"It isn't your problem. Be kind and patient and everything will settle down."

I tried to be of help in the house, when I could leave my room. Boutza calmed down. But if she cried less, she still kept her funereal face. She even refused to play cards! We spent hours sitting, facing each other, doing nothing. Out of politeness, I didn't read. It was then that I thought about life on the outside! I imagined the days of a normal life. I could

myself waking up, getting washed, having breakfast with my family, leaving the house with my schoolbag, meeting my friends, and studying to pass my examinations. Every day I lived a different adventure. Sitting there, I could enjoy a life of freedom, trying out thousands of feelings that otherwise were forbidden to me.

Those afternoons of re-creation helped me put up with my lot. But, on my return to reality, I knew very well that in this existence I could try out but few feelings: anguish during the day, nightmares at the night and a terrible longing for my parents and my brother. In between these feelings, there was the hope that, in spite of everything, in the end, all would be well.

CHAPTER 14

In February 1943, Radio London, the voice from heaven, announced the Russian victory at Stalingrad. Three hundred and fifty thousand Germans annihilated! The incredible had happened!

After six months of despair, the Russians had succeeded in repelling the all-powerful, invincible German army. For the first time, after many long months, Boutza and Dragi hugged each other. We celebrated the event – the beginning of the end of almighty Germany!

We had to hold on a little longer before we could all begin to live a different life – life with the family, school, strolls in Kochoutnac, visits to the seaside... I would be able to fall asleep without being afraid of my dreams; to wake up without fear of the voices; to live without being afraid of footsteps approaching the door. I could see us together at home.

How many days would we need to tell what we had endured? Had father, perhaps, already joined mother and Atza at Saimichte? Mother would regret having left me with my aunt. I cried a lot. How many hours could we cry and still have tears?

Dragi told us that the Germans were arresting and shooting many people under the pretext that they were communists. They came in the night during the curfew, when people were at home. They were doing this much more often than in the past.

"Could they come here?" I asked.

"Yes. They choose streets at random. They could come here. They are looking for people who have false documents, and they know how to recognise them."

I kept an impassive face, but my throat was tight and my stomach became upset.

"Try not to be foolish now, so near the end. Your identity card is in order, but you must remain calm, and, if questioned, reply in Croatian."

I repeated my "origins" several times. Since my arrival back in Belgrade, I had done it regularly. Dragi and Boutza said that I sounded convincing. Summer arrived. We were eating vegetables every day, and lots of polenta, which I didn't like, but which I swallowed even so.

My life was never monotonous. The daytime fear was different from that of the night. During the day, I stayed on my guard. I listened. I waited, ready to defend myself – to defend all of us. At night, I was always afraid of the same nightmare: the Germans would question me; I could not answer them; I had forgotten my "identity". I would wake up in bathed in sweat, and, very often, would really not be able to recite what I had to, "even if you are awakened in the middle of the night".

Sometimes at night, the resounding noise of sirens would break the silence. We heard explosions. People said that the Americans were mining the Danube and the Sava. The Germans were trying to prevent them and the anti-aircraft artillery sounded like thunder. For me, those nights were nights of bliss. I felt that I was hearing the footsteps of liberation, and I saw myself in my parents' arms. Sometimes I lived

these moments with such an intensity, that the sound of my own joyful laughter brought me back to my sad reality.

I started to look at myself in the mirror, and I saw that I had changed. I had very long tresses, and I looked rather pretty. I thought about all that I would have to do, and study to catch up the lost years.

But first, after the liberation, I would walk for an entire week, day and night, without stopping, to recover the time I had to spend in bed or sitting down. After that, I would meet with my old friends. How would they greet me? Would they be as happy as I would be to see them again? At the time, I was almost certain that I would survive. At night, I listened with my whole body to the noise of German motor cycles and trucks, and I begged God that I would never see the face of anyone who was hunting for me.

Winter 1943 – the end of the year. People said that this would be the last winter under the occupation. The Germans were retreating. They were losing the war.

One day, when it was very cold, Boutza and I were sitting in the kitchen, near the fire, playing cards. It was already six in the evening and, in an hour, Dragi would be home. Boutza had already won several games and I was about to make her lose one, when someone knocked on the door. I picked up the cards and she made a signal for me to go back to my

room. I had just enough time to glance at the glass door, and saw, by the kitchen light, the silhouette of a man who seemed to me to be in uniform.

Behind the closed door, on my mattress, paralysed with fear, I heard the sound of boots approaching the kitchen. Death had arrived! I was sweating. I felt faint. I wanted to repeat what I had repeated for three years, but I could remember nothing. My nightmare had become reality. My teeth were chattering. I tried to concentrate. I must not cry. All of us would die. I became aware that my door was closed, but I could hear them speaking German in the kitchen. I heard Boutza talking nervously, but it seemed to be a conversation between two people who knew each other. Had Boutza denounced us? The German spoke fast, but several times, I heard the word "Mutti". He had brought a letter for Boutza from his grandmother, and had come to say goodbye before leaving for the Russian front. I couldn't make out what followed on from this. I only knew that a German soldier was there, two metres from me, and that Boutza could easily fulfil her threats. She offered him some tea and soon after begged him to leave because her husband would return at any minute. I heard her say, "Take care of yourself and write often to your grandmother so that I can have news of you." Yes. He would write. Yes. He would take care of himself. He thanked her for something that she gave him. I heard the sound of boots, moving away. I stayed there,

stupefied, wondering what this was all about. I did not know how to react. But, before I had time to recover, the door opened. "You can come out, now. He is gone," she said calmly. "You must have been frightened. Me, too. I was in panic before I opened the door and discovered it was Willi."

She looked straight into my eyes.

"You heard everything, didn't you?"

"Not everything. You were talking in hushed voices, and I was scared."

"It was my son. Nobody knows about him."

She measured every word. "He is nineteen. My brother brought him up. After he was born, I left the village and came to Belgrade. His father left me before he was born. I was young and stupid. My son grew up thinking that I was his aunt. Right before the war, I told him the truth. I don't know how he came to wear a German uniform. Dragi doesn't know of his existence, and you will never tell him of this visit."

I nodded my head in agreement. I was so shocked that I couldn't find my voice. She had abandoned her son! Why? Dragi didn't know that his wife had a son – a German soldier son! I had to keep her secret, and what a secret! But if this secret was so important to her, it meant that she had never, but never, intended to denounce us to the Gestapo. I felt reassured, at least in that respect. How many confidences did I have to keep? I thought of Boutza's nature, her personality, and she frightened

me even more. Her son, whom she had not seen for over three years, came to tell her that he was leaving for the front, and she continued to play cards with unconcern. Could it be that German mothers didn't cry when their sons went to war? But Boutza was not German. She was Serbian and her son was in Hitler's army. She awaited the end of the war, wishing for the defeat of the Boche, which could bring about the death of her son. I remembered Martin and Lenka, and no longer understood anything. I decided, then and there, to win six games of rummy, one after the other. The following days, I continued to prove to her that she didn't know how to play, and, one week later, she told me that she had had enough of cards. I felt that I had made one small step toward freedom.

Secret for secret, I began to feel less afraid of Boutza.

Her behaviour toward her husband and me had changed. Where I was concerned, she was obviously less sure of herself, and spoke to me with more kindness. Toward Dragi, she was less aggressive and declarations of love replaced threats to the Gestapo. He, in turn, swore his fidelity and affection, while continuing to come home late. Boutza cried less. I wondered why people married if it meant living with lies, more often hating than loving each other; keeping secrets of their past; deceiving each other; and being so lonely while living together. Where was love in all this? To believe that this word truly has a different import,

I thought of my parents and our life at home, and of the love stories that I was reading, and I told myself that, like everything else, love also loses its meaning and value when people live in fear. While some fought and died for freedom, others lived like animals while waiting for it.

The chance discovery of Boutza's son left me very restless. The realisation that fear had made me forget everything that our lives were about horrified me. What did I have to do to learn how to keep my composure? Could one overcome fear when faced with death? Now, not only my nights, but also my days became a nightmare. I saw that being awake did not help me. My constant rehearsal of Rada's role would not help me when the time came. I hadn't learnt to be brave, and they surely would all die because of me. I felt lonelier than ever. As I always did in moments like this, I called to mind the stories that my mother told me when I was little. I must have been three or four years old and I was afraid of the dark.

"You know that when we are alone in our bedroom, we are not really alone."

"How is that?"

"Each one of us has a star in the sky and this star is always with us. We have only to raise our eyes to the sky to find her."

"During the day there no stars."

"Then I am with you."

"But when it rains and there are no stars?"

"They are always there, behind the clouds."

Here I was, a big girl of fourteen and a half, and through the small window of my "prison", I was looking for reassurance in my star.

From time to time, Dragi brought me news of my aunt. Uncle Yova continued to come and weigh his foodstuff, leaving behind the good smell of fresh meat. He never spoke to me about the family. Did he imagine that the silence between us would erase my existence, which hung over them like the sword of Damocles?

I had grown a lot. The few dresses I had were too small for me. Boutza, in a moment of benevolence, made me a gift of her old dressing gown. I shortened it, and I felt like a princess. My aunt sent me a pair of rope-soled, canvas shoes, that she had made herself, to replace my shoes, which, for a long time, had been too small.

When Boutza and Dragi were not at home, I used the big mirror inside the door of Boutza's wardrobe to get to know myself, from head to toe. I thought that perhaps I could be attractive, but to whom? What could anyone find to talk about, with such an ignorant girl? How could I become like everybody else? I thought, for the thousandth time, of my best friend, Voika, and wondered when we would meet. Often, in spite of the good news from the front, I feared that the war might continue for

years. If so, what would become of the Jews? My parents and Atza would stay at the camp and Rada would replace Rely forever. At such moments, which came seldom, a cold and merciless despair froze my heart.

The news on Radio London, as usual, came to the rescue: German cities were being bombed. I imagined the destruction, the fire, the lines of Germans on the roads, their children in their arms, and an overwhelming happiness invaded my heart.

"We will not leave a stone standing in Germany!" said the encouraging voice of the announcer.

Justice was not dead! The Germans had begun to pay for the evil things that they had done. If only I, too, could do something. People spoke about the partisans and the Chetniks, and in my imagination, I spent hours among them in charge of the most dangerous missions. I remembered my father's saying that we had to stay alive to be able to fight later. The time had come, but there was nothing that I could do because many lives depended on mine. There were no forests for me.

My arm was getting worse, and I suffered terribly. It was absolutely necessary to be well. I couldn't get ill or die. What would they do if I died? They could bury me in the cellar. Would that have made them happy? And also my aunt? No. I knew that they loved me, and that they ignored me because they couldn't do otherwise.

I thought of the future and of the problems of the Jews, as always. After so much suffering, of what good was it to become a Christian? So as to avoid going through the same experience again?

The partisans were attacking the trains transporting soldiers and munitions. The Germans were burning villages and killing hostages. We knew that they were withdrawing from Russia, leaving behind them thousands of soldiers, dead and as prisoners. Their propaganda against the Russians and the communists became ferocious.

I felt that I was coming out of the tunnel. I could already taste my parents' kisses on my face. I was confused. I would have no stories to tell them. What could I complain about? I had not lived on three potatoes a day; I was never beaten; and I wasn't made to do forced labour. I had only been scared, and this I would never admit, because Atza would laugh at me. I remembered his face when I saw him at the camp, and his hunger, when he came to my aunt's house. *My war was only a picnic compared to theirs.* I was the privileged member of the family – the one taken care of and nourished. I would have to keep quiet and listen. I could never explain to them that it was difficult, tormenting and dangerous to be Rada – to be someone else.

The spring of 1944 was approaching. Each night the American planes flew over the city. Sirens, explosions – the noises that would bring us freedom. People spoke about the Russians because they would be the

ones who would liberate us. They also realised how little they knew of Russian history. I had read the works of many Russian writers. I knew something of their history before the October revolution. According to the Germans, they were wild beasts who raped, stole and killed. People awaited the Russians with joy, but also with much apprehension. They chose to see with a blind eye the German propaganda which spoke of the ferocity of another people! This made me laugh. But, nevertheless, the people would have preferred to be liberated by the British, the French or the Americans.

What difference did it make who would chase the Germans away? The Russians were my friends because they were the enemy of the Germans. I couldn't stand to hear people speak against them or to fear them. Fear prevented people from being able to give a free rein to their joy at being still alive, from being able to take revenge and from looking at the future without apprehension.

I felt the approaching birth of the future. We still heard Hitler's voice, but not as often as in the past. He shouted his hatred for all that was not German. In spite of changes in our situation, this voice continued to terrorise me. It was still the voice of fear worse than death. The time was passed when I believed that no one could do anything against this force, this organised mob, who spread the poison which came from the mouth of this monster with whom they identified and whom they obeyed

blindly. I knew that their end was near and that soon they were going to learn to shut up and lower their heads.

I think it was toward the end of March that the bombing of Belgrade began.

A few planes arrived, dropped their bombs at random, and then rapidly disappeared, during all of which time the anti-aircraft artillery tried in vain to shoot them down. The warning sirens, which signalled the threat of a bombardment, were, for me, a sign of friendship – of personal encouragement.

"Hold on tight for a little longer. We are getting closer. Our bombs will not harm you."

I was happy. No, I was drunk with bliss. At the time, my only concern was for the pilots' lives. While they were flying over the city, and the Germans were shooting at them, I prayed to God not to let the shells come near them.

One day, Boutza told me that she had heard that, the previous night, the Germans had made raids in our neighbourhood. This was the end! I went to bed that night and had my usual nightmare in which someone kept calling me but I could not answer. I was not awake but I could see Dragi bending over me. He shook me. He looked different. He seemed terrified. "Come! They are here!" he shouted.

I closed my eyes again, and realised that I was not dreaming any more.

They are here!!

His hand on my shoulder hurt me. I got up. I followed him. I felt faint. My feet got tangled in my aunt's nightgown, which was too long for me. I was afraid that they might see my breasts, and I clutched the collar to me.

The door of the bedroom... In front of my eyes I saw us all dead. This time it was going to happen. It was happening. Then I was in the bedroom. In a corner, Boutza, in her night gown, was facing three Germans in uniform and three Yugoslavs in civilian clothes. They all looked at me. I looked at them. I was not afraid, but why were my legs shaking?

One of the officials held in his hand my identity card and was looking at the photo. "Your name?"

"Rada Yovanovich."

"Father's and mother's names?"

"Yova and Fani."

"Where did you come from?"

"Bougovitza."

I heard myself talking. My voice was calm. My accent was great, but I needed to vomit there on the spot. But, no! They would all die. I must not. Far away, I heard the interrogator's voice: "What beautiful hair you

have. It's so long. It hasn't been cut. Why? I know all children have their hair shaved on the day of their arrival at the camp. Why were you an exception?" He touched my head.

I heard my voice answering him: "My father was waiting for me at the camp when I arrived. They didn't have time to shave my hair."

He stared at me, and I returned his stare without lowering my eyes. For a moment, I thought that he didn't believe me, but he gave me my card and turned his back on me.

The group looked around the apartment. We heard the voices of the soldiers who surrounded the building. I stood as if nailed to the floor. The soldiers' footsteps resounded on the flagstones of the passageway of the apartment. The entrance door closed behind them, and there, in the middle of Boutza's bedroom, on her carpet, in front of them, I wet myself. Urine slowly ran down my legs and I vomited. They didn't seem to notice. Boutza hugged me! It was the first time. She cried. Dragi caressed my cheek. "You are a great girl! You have saved all our lives!" I heard them talk. I was filthy. I was ashamed of the weakness that totally overcame me. It was over. They would never come back again. I had passed the examination of my life. I made it. Now they had nothing to blame me for.

"You must clean the carpet and wash yourself," I heard Boutza's voice which brought me back to reality.

They were both sitting on their beds. I noticed the pallor of their faces. So they were still scared. She continued: "I thought the end had come when the official asked you why your hair had not been cut. How did you answer so well and so quickly? I still can't believe what has just happened. You are truly someone! I knew that we could trust you."

What a pity that during all those years, I didn't know that I could trust myself!

"From now on, we can sleep more tranquilly. I don't think that they will come back again. They won't have the time. You can be pleased and proud of yourself."

"Yes, I am pleased. Yes, I had presence of mind. Yes, I'm happy. No, I'm not shaking. I'm only very cold."

I felt unable to budge. But I had to walk. I had to clean the carpet, wash , and, above all, I had to leave that room and be alone with myself.

It was four in the morning. Their room was clean, and I, after washing myself, was again, finally, in my bed. I thought I had a fever. I was sweating and shaking. But, most of all, I cried – sobbed – under my covers. I couldn't feel anything, neither happiness nor relief. Slowly, I relived what had happened, and only then, at that time, was I scared. It was fear for something that belonged to the past. We had escaped death because I was brave. I knew that I wasn't brave really, but I didn't want anyone to die because of me. It was my sense of responsibility

toward them that made me answer. Now, I, too, would have something to tell Atza when he bragged about his adventures.

Finally, I regained my composure, and, for the first time since the war began, I was at peace with myself. I had paid my debt. They were all afraid of me, but I did not betray them. I was free to think of the end of the war. I didn't have to hear them say any more: "Your aunt, your uncle, Miki, Micha, Miryana, Boutza, Dragi, and, perhaps even Djouka, Dana and Ivana will be shot. Ten people may suffer if you don't convince the Germans that you are who you are really not."

I fell asleep and I dreamt. Always the same dream, but this time I answered that my name was Relly. I woke up to find the reality and my tiny room was comforting. For the first time, after so long, I had pronounced my name. I refused to be Rada.

I felt that I was too small for my age. I wanted to grow up, and quickly. I wanted to be pretty. But I knew that a pretty but empty head had no value. And my head was very empty. I would study hard, day and night. Yes, but my friends had been studying for three years while I did nothing. I had read a lot more than they had, it was true, but it was not the same thing.

The Allied bombing became more and more frequent. People criticised them. "They fly too high."

"They drop bombs on the city without aiming at military targets."

"The poor people! After all this suffering, to die under American bombs!"

"This is not Germany! We are their allies. They are forgetting it and causing death without mercy."

Dragi brought us comments from the street, but we didn't discuss the subject at home.

After the night visit of the Germans, my uncle was totally changed. He came to visit me at least once a week, looking me in the eyes and giving me news of my aunt and the children. He spoke to me about the end of the war, but never mentioned my parents.

Now, as soon as the alert sounded, Boutza and Dragi went down to the cellar, which served as a shelter. They couldn't take me with them because of the neighbours. Besides the bombing raids took place mainly during the day time. And, when the lawyer was there, I was not to leave my room, no matter what.

Sometimes, at night, the noise of the sirens melded with that of the bombs, the planes having succeeded in reaching the city without being detected while flying over the borders. Then Boutza and dragi ran down to the shelter in their pyjamas. I got under the kitchen table to seek protection from the glass from windows, which might be shattered by the bombing. I was not scared. I sat there and laughed. Now, everybody was frightened but I was not! My life was no longer monotonous. Every

day, I waited for them – my friends in the sky. I was sure and certain that nothing could happen to me. I thought about the holidays that we would take and the happiness that awaited us. Boutza and Dragi returned from the cellar, looking pale and tired from what they had just experienced, to find me calm and smiling. "Aren't you afraid?" Boutza asked me.

"No, not at all. I'm not scared any more."

"I can't understand that," she replied.

I couldn't explain to her that we had an agreement, my friends and I. Their bombs would not fall on my head.

I read as much as I did before, but now, I daydreamed while I read. I thought of the love that awaited me: a young man, tall, handsome and intelligent, who was now hiding somewhere. But how could he fall in love with a girl of fifteen, who had the mind of a twelve-year-old? In the end, I always found consolation in the thought that all Jewish children were in the same boat. In the camps, there must have been teachers, but there would surely have been no time to study.

I didn't know how to dance. How did one learn to dance? After the liberation, I would need clothes. I couldn't go out with what I was wearing at that time. My aunt would surely find something to dress me in until I would be able to return to normal life.

CHAPTER 15

Easter was approaching with the spring. The weather was already fine. We cleaned the house. We were getting ready for the holiday and our liberation. The last holiday under the Occupation!

I didn't know the dates of our holidays and nobody spoke to me about them. I remembered our Passover table covered with the most beautiful tablecloth, the silver candlesticks, the matzot¹², the afikoman¹³. I remembered the walk to the synagogue on Yom Kippur¹⁴ and Chanukah¹⁵. What joy! Very soon everything would be as it was in the past. I had only to be patient for a little longer. This time we could say with certainty that, in two months, there would be no more Germans in Yugoslavia.

Dragi and Boutza had been invited to breakfast by some friends. Boutza prepared some dishes to take with them, but even a holiday lunch was a meagre one. I would be alone all day.

"You're not sad to be alone during the holiday?" Dragi asked.

"It's not my holiday," I told him.

"I think it will soon be yours, too."

"I'm sure it will not. Why will it?"

¹² Matzot: The unleavened bread eaten during the festival of Passover.

¹³ Afikoman: An old custom in which a piece of hidden unleavened bread is searched for by the children after the festive Passover meal.

¹⁴ Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement – a day of fasting – the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

¹⁵ Chanukah: The festival which commemorates the defeat of the Greco/Syrians by the Jewish people led by the Maccabees in 167 B.C.

"When the war is over you'll become a Christian, and you'll marry a nice young man. You won't even have to change your name. Why do you need to remain Jewish?"

"People don't change religions as they change shirts." I blushed in exasperation. How dare they speak to me of my religion! Rada was not my given name. I didn't get used to it. My parents didn't even know it. Dragi, who had always been kind to me, didn't understand my aggressive reaction – the way I replied to him.

"Why do you get so angry? I'm only thinking of your well-being. Haven't you suffered enough all these years? What's the use of sticking to a religion that has always been the cause of your unhappiness?"

I saw in his eyes a coldness, something locked in, like repressed anger. He must have wondered how I, who accepted everything without complaint, dared, suddenly, to oppose his extraordinary idea.

For my part, I didn't understand him. How could he touch a subject so personal – a subject that only concerned my parents and me – a subject that affected only us and about which any decision could cause outsiders neither good nor ill?

Easter Sunday. It seemed that we got up later than usual. If I remember well, it must have been ten in the morning when it all began.

Today, I can still hear the unexpected sound of sirens piercing the air, destroying the feeling of celebration. Quickly, we dressed.

"Perhaps it's a false alarm," said Boutza. They wouldn't start bombing on Easter Sunday, would they?"

"Why not? The Germans are probably assuming the same, believing that they can take advantage of the holiday to transport their ammunition and troops in peace."

"Let's wait and see. In a few minutes, we will see if the planes that just passed the border are flying toward Hungary," Dragi replied.

We heard them already. They were very numerous, Boutza and Dragi were already out the door and I was under the table. This time the bombing was very serious. The building shook. The window glass shattered and fell on the table and everywhere else. The air was full of dust and it smelled of smoke and fire. I coughed, my hands covering my face. I chased away my fear and doubt. I saw in my mind's eye, the city during the German bombing. I knew that people were dying – the same people, who were preparing to celebrate the last Easter under the Occupation. They would never see the day of liberation. This time I didn't sing. I wished that these bombs would fall only on the Germans, to make them pay for all the evil things that they had done. But I knew that they would not be the only ones to die. It was not fair to survive all the difficulties, the massacres, hunger, and the bombings, only to die two months from liberation! How many soldiers and pilots were giving their lives for our freedom?

These appalling noises were the footsteps of approaching freedom.

There, under the kitchen table, covered with broken glass, breathing with difficulty, I knew that I had survived the war. I would be Relly again. For my family, and for me, there was no more danger, because we could not die under allied bombs. I felt free. After this attack, the Germans would not have time to search houses for their enemies. They would have to save their own skins.

Silence. After this earthquake, the silence was heavy, thick. I waited. I listened. But nothing moved. It seemed that people were afraid to leave their shelters so as not to see what remained of their city. I was afraid for my aunt and her family. I was less afraid for my family; they were protected as I was. I had a premonition, and was convinced that, from then on, everything would go well for us.

I left my "shelter". The only noise that I heard was the crunching sound made by my shoes on the broken glass. I looked at the sky, so blue a while before, but now a sky of war. For me, it was the sky before liberation. The siren finally announced the all clear. Boutza and Dragi came in through the big open door. They must have forgotten to lock it and the air pressure opened it. We looked at each other. They looked ill.

"How are you? What a terror," said Dragi.

He didn't wait for my reply.

"The neighbours. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"The whole street has been destroyed. There's fire everywhere. There must be thousands of victims. The Americans overdo it; they are killing the population! They don't give a damn about us. The Germans have their shelters solidly built; they are safe. If the Americans keep bombing us in this way, when the Russians arrive, there will be more dead than during the whole war."

"But how could they liberate us otherwise? If they fly low, the Germans will bring them down. They wouldn't have enough planes and pilots flying low to liberate Europe," I said in a hushed voice.

"You are right. But I can see that we will pay dearly for our freedom."

I thought about how we had already paid for the loss of our freedom, but I didn't say anything.

We sat, the three of us, in their bedroom.

"We must leave the house and get out of town," said Dragi.

"To the factory?" Boutza asked.

"Yes," replied Dragi. "Obviously, we will take you with us," and he looked at me.

"What factory?" I asked, astonished.

"Don't you know that Yova has a small factory for spare parts on the other side of Lipov Lad? We agreed, that in case of heavy bombing, we

would take you with us and stay there together. Come on! Quickly!" and he got up.

Boutza didn't move. "How can we leave the house with all the windows broken?"

"I will close them off with the boards that we prepared for a situation like this. While I do it, you pack a few belongings and blankets."

"How can we take Rada with us? "People could recognise her," said Boutza.

"She can walk behind us , by herself. Who is going to take any notice of her?"

I was blushing. I was going out! I was going to walk in the street!! How I loved those pilots, my friends.

Boutza got up. She looked at me, and seemed hesitant. "I hope you know what you are doing. My legs won't hold me up; I don't know where to start."

"I know," I told her, jumping up from my chair. "I'll do it all. You can stay where you are."

They looked at me in disbelief. How could they understand? They hadn't been prisoners between four walls for eternity. What did they know of what it was like to be unable to go outside; not to feel the cold wind that takes the breath away; not to walk in the snow, with your hands

in your pockets; not to feel the warmth of the sun on your hair, wet from the rain that has just stopped.

How dreadful life could be! All of a sudden, I became conscious that we were breathing the dust which was everywhere; that the room was a mess; that we would have to clean the apartment before we left, including the lawyer's office. I had the strength of a giant. I had wings. Before Boutza got dressed, I had already finished most of the work. She packed the suitcases. I packed mine – a very light one!

"What an Easter!" I heard Boutza's voice and I murmured to myself: "WHAT AN EASTER!"

Suddenly we heard the bells tolling.

"Instead of calling people to mass, the bells toll to announce the next funeral services and the agony of the dying," said Boutza sombrely.

I realised how tragic the situation was, and, not without feeling some shame, I knew that, undeniably for me, these bells were ringing for hope, predicting the arrival of freedom and giving a good omen for my first going out after almost two years.

We went out! We were in the street. The house opposite was cut in two. On the second floor, we could see the table set for the Easter celebrations, with, still on a strangely white tablecloth, a vase full of flowers and a cake. Half of the house was there. At its feet was heaped a mountain of tumbled walls, iron, broken furniture, stairs, stones and

silence. It was my first sign of freedom. In what was a street only a few hours ago, it seemed to me that only one building was left untouched.

As we walked, we had to be careful where we put our feet. Amongst the mounds of debris, we saw a bomb that had not exploded. We wanted to make a detour, but we had no way of getting through. The bomb was there, black, bulging, long and terribly menacing. We advanced at a snail's pace. We had to get out of the street. Perhaps further down, the situation might not be as bad. We clambered along, our eyes fixed on the ground. I was not afraid of being recognised. Nobody could lift his eyes from the ground, not even for an instant. People walked with terrified, crying children in their arms, some carrying bundles over their shoulders, and others with nothing.

We passed near a building in flames and calculated how much time we needed to get by before a part of the wall would collapse on us. How many dead were there, in the ruins? Wounded people, distraught, tried to find their way, not knowing where they were going. Others begged for help. Their parents, sisters or brothers, were in the cellar of a collapsed building. They were moving the rubble, needing to clear the ruins of five floors. Rescue teams were arriving from somewhere. For the moment, there was nothing that they could do. It would take time. Meanwhile people would die. "We are sorry. We must take care of the wounded

who are still alive before we start looking for those who are probably dead."

Those whose loved ones lay under the stones continued alone to do a Sisyphean task. What had been their hearth only a few hours ago, had turned into a grave, burying all those whom they loved and all that they had. They cursed the Americans.

I remembered the flight that I experienced with my mother, Atza, and my aunt's family. For me, the present flight was different. Then, we were fleeing the Germans. To our fears was added a feeling of despair. Now, we knew that this was the beginning of the end. What was happening now was as terrible and the consequences were as tragic, but, we, who had survived, knew that this would be the end of Germany, and, that what was yet to come, would be wonderful. That was why the death of all these people stung so fiercely. They were also hoping and praying, struggling, suffering and counting the days, and now, they were dead at the hands of their liberators... The bombs, which were meant to kill the Germans; to confuse them; to stop them from moving their troops, ammunition and supplies to the eastern front, were killing friends, the most faithful friends of the pilots.

In spite of all that I saw, I was astonished to realise that this touched me only to a certain degree. Now I was walking, like everyone else. I shared the same fate as all those around me. They lived in the present,

were afraid of the future, of air raids that could follow, of the Russians, who might behave as friends or as enemies. But, I was different again. I was not afraid of the present, and, I awaited the future with joy. I feared nothing. I knew that nothing bad could ever happen to me. The war was behind me. The worst was over. We had survived, and, in a few months, after the war, I would celebrate my fifteenth birthday with my parents.

I shared the moments of sadness with my compatriots, but only momentarily. As soon as we had left the centre of the city, and the damage looked less serious, my thoughts surged toward the future – toward *la vie en rose*.

We followed the avalanche of people that moved in the same direction. Boutza and Dragi walked in front of me. From time to time, one of them turned to see if I was following. At times, I was worried that I might lose sight of them. Dragi guided us. As much as possible, he tried to avoid neighbourhoods in ruins and streets in flames.

I no longer remember how long it took us to reach the hill behind Lipov Lad where my uncle's factory was located. It was more like a big workshop, containing a big room with a few metal-working machines and three more rooms used as offices.

When we arrived, my uncle's sister, Aunt Mitza, was already there with her husband, her two sons and her daughter. They saw us coming.

Aunt Mitza looked at me: "How you have grown! What a pretty girl you've become!"

I was blushing. Her sons, Alex and Andrea, were looking at me. They were handsome boys of nineteen and twenty. They eyed me from top to toe. They shook my hand. "Good morning, Relly." It had been three years since I had heard that name. I had a lump in my throat and didn't know where to look. I was aware that the dress that I was wearing was ugly and too small for me. I felt shabby and stupid. Boutza's voice saved me: "Don't call her Relly. Her name is Rada. The Germans are still here. This is not the time to be careless."

She turned to her husband to tell him how unwise it was to let me out of the house; that the war might last several more months; and that people like to talk, especially if they had a chance to make it sound "interesting". Dragi, to my surprise, told her that they were no longer responsible for me, from the moment we left the house. "Her aunt asked us to bring her here. Whenever we decide to return home, Rada will stay with her relatives even if they ask us to take her again."

I looked at him shocked. He noticed. "You don't have to be afraid. Your uncle's family all know that you have been hidden somewhere. Therefore we have nothing to fear."

He didn't understand the reason for my surprise. What hurt me were his words. I had spent two and a half years with them and lived with them

during difficult and so dangerous times. Then, in five minutes, he could jump at the first opportunity to get rid of me. Why did I always think that people were attached to me; that their feelings towards me would be the same as mine for them? People spoke about me as if I were a parcel, which they could take or leave. During these years, they talked right in front of me, about me as "she". Then why, all of a sudden, should I feel so insulted? I realised that what we can put up with when we are by ourselves, becomes too difficult to take when we are among strangers. I was sure that Aunt Mitza and her sons felt sorry for me, and just the thought itself made me even unhappier.

I was standing in front of them. Aunt Mitza stared at me. "You must have gone through terrible times."

I didn't reply. I didn't know what to say.

"I loved your mother very much," she continued looking embarrassed.

Why was she using the past tense? Didn't she love her any more?

"Mother loves you, too."

"Matilde will be here soon. They are fine. Their neighbourhood has hardly been touched.

She gave me a sandwich, and I thanked her. I felt terribly sad. My meeting with "the others" had not been very successful. I was shy, and that was something I didn't know until then. Andrea told me that he knew that I was hiding. He wanted to talk with me, but I pretended to follow

the conversation of the others, who were talking of the events of the day. Suddenly, I became aware that I had forgotten about the Germans, who were still very close, outside on the road, and that, really, I shouldn't have been among all of these people.

Bogea, Mitza's husband, discussed strategy with his sons, and concluded that the war would last for three more months. Three months! How many things could happen to me during that time? The sandwich in my hand suddenly tasted like sand; I couldn't swallow any more. I thought of my small room, and, as incomprehensible as it might seem, I wanted to go back to it. I didn't belong to anyone there. If I disappeared, they wouldn't even notice. But the small room was not mine anymore. Even if the war did not end, I couldn't return there. How I had dreamed of this first day of freedom! How happy I was this morning before I left what had been my house for the last three years. Why did I want to go back so soon?

It was difficult to bear their glances, which were cast at me, on the sly. I sensed with what difficulty they looked at me. I felt like a stranger. I wished that I could run away from the noise that they made – go back to my little corner and my books till the end of the war, and the return of my parents.

Boutza and Dragi started to settle themselves in a corner of the workshop while the others emptied the office of its work table and the

filing cabinet. I offered my help to Boutza but she refused. "Keep your strength to help your aunt when she arrives. Now you belong to them."

To whom did I belong until now, I wondered, but I kept it to myself.

"You must be happy. Very soon you'll hug your cousins. We have completed our job, and I am happy for us and for you."

"They are saying that the war will go on for three more months."

"Yes, probably," said Dragi, "but the Germans, in the chaos that they find themselves, have other things to do than to look for little Jewish girls. Nobody would denounce you now. The collaborators must be trembling with fear thinking of what awaits them. In my opinion, you have nothing to worry about, and nor do we.

Why was my heart so heavy then?

My relatives arrived. How they had grown! Micha and Miryana threw themselves into my arms. They were really happy to see me, and I felt that I was hugging my little brothers and sister. My aunt clasped me tightly. She had tears in her eyes, and so did I. Miki, my "brother", and friend, was there. Three years had passed since I had last seen them. They told me in detail all that they saw and experienced since the morning. I was not used to such a throng. My head was spinning. They described the fear, the difficult times. I listened to them, but I realised that I did not experience the same feelings. If I was not afraid when the bombs rained down, or when the explosions gave me vertigo and a

ringing in my ears, I was afraid now. I was undergoing a sort of disorientation. I felt that they were all staring at me, with astonishment and curiosity.

"Well, there you are! I have often wondered what had become of you," said Ilya, Uncle Yova's brother.

I remembered having met him in the street at the beginning of my stay at my aunt's house. When he met me at her house, he would speak to me, but, outside the house, he would turn his head and pretend not to have seen me. I recalled that this gave me pain. This man who had known me since my birth, was afraid of greeting me because there were some Germans among the passers-by.

"If you wanted to know what had happened to her, you had only to ask me. I would have given you the particulars," said my aunt.

"I don't like to get involved in things that don't concern me," he retorted, leaving the room.

I felt as though I was on the other side of the fence. Them and me. I didn't accept their pity. Under their scrutiny I felt smaller, clumsy, and, most of all, terribly alone – much more alone than when I was locked in my little room.

It was time to eat. The table that the workers used was now covered with an oilcloth. The cloth, the plates, everything that we needed was there. I supposed that my aunt must have more or less organised "the kitchen"

a month ago, thinking that the bombings might force them to leave the house.

We were quite a crowd around the table. We were having a celebration lunch: chickens, a huge veal roast, bread, and as many vegetables as we wanted. Nobody seemed to be surprised by what we had on our plates. The Babovitchs were not invited to join us, and I felt ashamed. I knew what they were eating, and I would have preferred to have shared their meal. I didn't understand why, but I felt much closer to them than to my relatives. I was sorry that they didn't want me anymore.

Everybody spoke about the future. They flaunted their opinions, organised the front, the German retreat, and the invasion of the Allies. They were all such exceptional strategists. They came back to the morning's bombing. Many neighbourhoods had been destroyed. They wondered how many victims there could have been. They hoped that the Germans also had had great losses. "That would justify our sacrifice... Freedom has its price."

Right up to nightfall, our lives there were regulated. It seemed that they must have anticipated and prepared well ahead for our stay.

In the big office, now turned into a dormitory, my aunt, cousins, Aunt Mitza's daughter, and I slept on a "bed" made of boards placed on bricks and covered with mattresses. We lay there like sardines, one next to the other, though not too tightly. We were privileged. My aunt's two sisters-

in-law, their husbands, sons, and Uncle Yova shared the other offices, and slept on mattresses on the floor.

I helped in any way needed. I lifted; I brought; I washed; I put things back in place; and I listened to the conversations. I thought of my parents and my brother. Perhaps they would be forced to provide relief work in the city. What a terrible task awaited them. And mother? What was she doing? No one spoke about them. They found their absence a matter of course. My place was not here either. I would have liked to have been alone with my aunt – to ask her questions; to talk about my family. But for the time being that was not what she wanted. She was too busy to wonder what I might have been thinking or feeling.

From the hill where we were situated, we could see the road where crowds continued to move, dragging along on foot. Toward the city, the sky was red and hardly visible through the thick smoke, which prevented us from seeing anything, but which explained everything. We heard the horns of the German vehicles. They, too, were leaving the city. Where were they going? Very near the factory, was a big barracks. What if the Americans made it a target?

"That barracks is not such an important target to justify those gentlemen descending from the sky and risking their lives," said Boutza.

"If they had to aim at all the military targets, in all the cities that they bomb, there wouldn't be a plane or a pilot left to fight the big battle," replied Uncle Yova.

Basically, they were all saying the same things over and over. They all understood that what was happening could not be done differently, but they didn't want to die, or see others die. So, if at one moment they criticised the Americans, they justified their actions straight afterwards. During the course of the day, they loved and accused them; they praised and condemned them.

"They know that the population is going to leave the city, and, actually, those who are smart enough are already on the road," said my aunt.

"That's what you think! In the fields, without water? It's easy for you to talk, when you are here, under a roof."

"We have waited three years for liberation. What do you expect? Now it's the real war. This is the time to be ready to die. Now, at least, we know why," said Andrea.

Everybody agreed, and I thought of my father. Finally, the time had come – the time for revenge! Perhaps my father was somewhere in the woods with the partisans. If I could, I, too, would have left to fight the Germans for our freedom.

Night fell. It was time to go to bed. I was in our "bedroom" with my aunt.

"You've become a pretty young girl. You know it, don't you?"

"No. I don't know it."

"You must be very careful with Andrea and Alex."

"Why?"

"They will surely try to flirt with you. You know how to behave don't you?"

I wondered what she wanted of me, and where she got those ideas from.

"They hardly look at me. I don't know what you are talking about," I replied astonished.

"What do you mean? They follow you with their eyes all the time, and both of them."

I didn't reply, but I felt terribly troubled. What did they see? I felt very uncomfortable under my skin. I wished that nobody would look at me or speak to me.

"In any case, I'm sure you are a serious girl and you will not let them touch you."

"Certainly not!" I replied.

She left to look for the twins and I remained there, dumbfounded.

What was she trying to tell me? I could see Alex in front of me. He was a handsome young man, tall, with expressive, big eyes – a young man any young girl would be very happy to attract. He looked at me? I watched him, but in his eyes I only saw curiosity. It couldn't be otherwise. But what if my aunt was right? Then I really wanted to be

away from there. What could I talk about with him or with his brother? I didn't know what interested other young people. I didn't know what made them laugh, what music they liked, what dances they danced. And I didn't want even to think of my ignorance compared to their knowledge. They had studied. During these past three years, they had knocked about: they had had boy and girl friends; they had had fun; they had had quarrels, and they had made up; they had danced; they had told stories; they had gone on strolls; they had discussed politics and the war; they had had confrontations with their parents; and they had waited for the end of the war. What did I have in common with them? Waiting for the end of the war, the desire to join the partisans, revenge? Wasn't that all? To think that only yesterday these kinds of thoughts did not enter my mind!

I quickly washed myself. We were lucky to have water still. I lay down next to Miryana. We talked and laughed. We found the situation amusing and, finally, we fell asleep. Miryana held my hand in hers. I was not alone any more. I could hear them breathing and snoring.

What a change! Only yesterday, I was all alone in my little cell, in my bed; it was the thick of the Occupation; the nightmares; Boutza and Dragi; the games of rummy... And now: "They will certainly try to flirt with you. Don't let them touch you!"

I tried to grasp the meaning of all of this. I went back over the events of the day. It had been an extraordinary day. Until yesterday, I was a hunted person, whose only thoughts were of survival, of overcoming my fear of the Germans. And today? Today I had to overcome and deal with my fear of life, of people.

I recalled our house, where we would shortly return, if it were still there. Soon, I would go back to school. How would I make up for all the time lost?

And now, what was this: "Don't let them touch you"? I couldn't imagine that anyone would want to touch me. But I knew that I wouldn't let them. This side of things was on my mind, but much less than my studies. But, even so, why couldn't I look these boys in the eye or talk freely with them? Why did I feel older than they?

I fell asleep and woke up to the sound of the siren. We held hands and got up. It was very cold and dark. We couldn't see anything before us.

"We must stay away from the windows," said Uncle Yova.

"We must lie down on the floor," said his brother.

"Perhaps they are going to Hungary. We've had our share for today," said Alex.

In total silence, we listened, hoping not to hear anything. A few terrible minutes of tension passed. Then, we made out the throbbing of planes

straight away followed by the whistling sound of the bombs, and then explosions.

We were lying on the floor.

"Keep your mouth open," shouted Uncle Yova.

How could I say the "Shema Yisrael" with my mouth open?

Aunt Mitza called on Jesus, and ten voices in unison told her to be quiet.

We had to listen to the bombs falling. We had become experts. From the explosions we knew at what distance they had fallen and, if we followed their descent, we could prevent them falling on us! Miryana cried softly and I covered her almost completely with my own body. Since I knew that nothing would happen to me, nothing would happen to any of us.

At this distance, I don't remember how long the bombing lasted, but, after a few long minutes of deathly silence, the howling of the siren announced the end of the attack. We got up and, groping around, found our places back in bed.

"We must go to the city to see the apartment," said my aunt.

"There's nothing for you to see. The windows are boarded up, and, if the house has been destroyed, it will wait for us forever," replied my uncle from the other room.

I wondered how many more people died in the bombardment.

"I don't want them to bomb us," said Miryana right beside me. "I wish the war would end," she whispered.

"Me, too," I told her. "We all do. Now, let's go back to sleep." She fell asleep on my arm. I didn't dare move so as not to wake her. My arm felt uncomfortable, but I was happy to feel her breath on my face.

In the morning, while it was still dark, we heard voices speaking in German. My stomach tensed. My heart became too big for my chest. Everybody was already in "our" bedroom, their eyes fixed on me.

"You've got your papers, haven't you?" my uncle whispered.

"Yes, I've got them," I replied, calmly.

"You can't say that you are my daughter now that we are all together. You must tell them that it was Dragi who picked you up at the camp." He ran to look for him in his corner.

"No! I refuse! I don't want to tell a different story now and take the whole responsibility on my shoulders. I didn't want to bring her here. It was your decision. Now you sort it out."

In a nervous and strained voice, my uncle turned to me and whispered: "You just tell them the same thing. You have lived with the Babovitchs because my wife refused to have you in the house."

"Very well."

My voice sounded detached, and I wondered how it even came out at all when my throat was so tight. Then it was not over yet! Once again, and

perhaps more than ever, I was on one side and all of them were on the other. My old companions: fear, loneliness and responsibility took hold of me again.

The Germans continued to talk, but with their voices, other voices joined that were not German or Serbian. We became aware that a group of soldiers was at the bottom of the hill.

"They are speaking Italian," said Andrea.

"Italian? How can that be?"

Unfortunately, from the factory, we could see nothing of what was going on.

The moment of danger was passed, but for me, nothing would be the same. As long as the Germans were there, they could discover who I was and kill us all, I thought despairingly.

"I can return to the Babovitch's house by myself," I suggested to my aunt.

"Aren't you afraid?"

"No. I can see how frightened you are with me here. I'd rather go."

"Rada proposes to return to the Babovitch's house by herself," said my aunt out loud.

"No!" my cousins replied in chorus.

"You must really despise us if you think that we would let you go," said Andrea. But his parents said nothing.

"If they let you go, then Alex and I will go home, too."

"Nobody has asked her to go. It was her idea. As far as we are concerned, she can very well stay here," said their mother. The others agreed with a nod of their heads.

"Thank you," I replied. But how could I forget the looks, full of accusation, in their eyes thrown at me only a few minutes before? If I could have chosen, I would have left.

"We must go and see what happened," said Dragi.

At any rate, we had to go out, because the toilet, a small, wooden shed was at the end of the grounds, right before the downward slope of the hill. We had to go, but no one wanted to be first. Finally, Aunt Mitza, the oldest of the women, decided to do the reconnoitring. She risked less. They would not harm a woman.

She went out. We followed her with our eyes. She arrived at the end of the yard and stopped. Someone seemed to be talking to her. It looked as if she was replying. A few minutes later, she came back walking very slowly. We wished that she would run, but she didn't seem to be in a hurry. The door opened. She looked happy. "They are Italian prisoners of war finishing the construction of a shelter for the Germans in the nearby barracks. There is only one soldier supervising them. The shelter will be ready in two days. I asked the soldier if we could also use

it in a possible raid. He said that he would speak to his commander. He knows that the shelter will only be used at night."

"Mother! How could you ask such a thing? Hide with the Germans! I'd rather die than be their guest!" reacted Andrea to his mother's news.

"Don't be an idiot! What does it matter who is inside the shelter? What matters is not to be killed now that the end is near. Besides, they haven't yet sent the invitations."

I must have been dreaming! Did I hear what she said correctly? I would find protection from American bombs in a German shelter? And with them? But that would be monstrous! It would be like becoming a collaborator! I told myself that I would never put foot inside that shelter!

On the horizon, the same picture as the evening before: a red sky, a lot of smoke covering the city and a crowd on the road continuing its endless procession.

We washed ourselves, tidied the rooms and organised breakfast. All of us were feeling tense and tired, as if drained of all energy.

I had to go to the toilet desperately. All the others had already been. The Italians were working. We could hear them singing.

"Don't look at them and hurry up," my aunt told me.

I crossed the yard very quickly, arriving where they could see me. They whistled, laughed, and threw words at me that I couldn't understand. As

soon as they saw me come out, they began again, and I, head down, raced away from the ragging that continued for a good few minutes.

My aunt had followed my "sortie" with her eyes. "What did you do to provoke all this?" there was reproach in her voice.

"I didn't do anything. I didn't even look at them."

"Your behaviour is not normal. You must not show that you are afraid of them. You can smile a little without staring at them."

"What do you want from her, aunt? They saw a pretty girl and reacted accordingly. What could be more normal? It's got absolutely nothing to do with her behaviour," said Andrea.

"Italians love women," said my uncle.

I tried to think of a way to avoid using the toilet. I would get up early in the morning before the soldiers arrived. Then I could use it again in the afternoon after they had left. It was the same as I did at the Babovitch's house even though the situation was very different. With this taken care of, I felt much better.

Andrea's words came back to my mind: "They saw a pretty girl and they whistled." Was I this pretty girl who caused all the noise? Andrea was twenty. He must have known what he was saying. But, nonetheless, it was a matter of taste.

Time slipped by, and, every day, we experienced bombings, some more serious than others. The Flying Fortresses flew very high in the sky,

leaving behind fires and death. Standing under the overhanging roof, we followed them with our eyes, and from experience we could tell by their position if the bombs would explode right away on us or farther away. When there was danger, we could lie down, cover our heads with kitchen pots, and pray. It was Miki who came up with this means of protection. Each one of us kept his pot at hand, day and night. It was a comical and curious sight. These utensils, without handles, in a variety of colours, and larger than our heads, covered our faces and our mouths. One could have thought that we were something from the world of Jules Verne. Lying on the floor, we suffered the pots, which hurt our noses. But what was this pain, when we felt much more protected?

While the bombs fell, nobody spoke. We held hands so tightly that our nails made marks in the flesh, more or less deeply according to the distance of the exploding projectiles. Often one wanted to cry, but crying was for babies and we were all grown up, including the twins. Sometimes the bombs fell on the fields, killing those who had sought shelter there. In a few minutes, for them, it was all over.

CHAPTER 16

About a week after our arrival at the factory, the lack of provisions began to be noticed. "We must go back to the house to get more, if the house is still there," said my uncle.

I listened with interest. I wanted very much to go, but I was sure that they would not let me. As if he were reading my thoughts, Miki suggested: "Father, Rada and I could go on our bikes. The unexpected answer came straight back.

"You will leave early in the morning," said my aunt.

So I could go, too! Half that night I spent awake. Go on our bikes! How many times had I dreamed of cycling in the city streets? It would not exactly be a pleasure trip, but for *me* it would be just that.

In the morning, approaching rain could be felt in the air. We wondered how long it would be before the showers would begin. Probably, as was normal for the season, it would be short but stormy.

"Try to bring as much as you can," enjoined my aunt.

Then I was going! We each had a bicycle with a big basket on the carrier. We were ready to go down the hill, when aunt gave her final instructions: "Be careful. If the sirens go, you must stay together, get off your bikes and look for shelter!"

"Do you think we are going to a pub for a drink?" replied my uncle.

My bicycle was a little too big for me and I felt very clumsy. We pedalled, one behind the other, my uncle in front, and I followed Miki. Luckily they couldn't me.

The bicycle didn't obey me, and I rode as if I were drunk. I was afraid of falling and making them lose time. We had to be back before ten o'clock – the usual time for "the visit of our friends". I soon gained confidence, and began to feel the wind caressing my face. What joy! We were pedalling like old hands. However, very soon, we had to take the bikes on our shoulders to get over huge heaps of rubble. "On the way back,

we'll have to take another road. With our baskets full, it will be even more difficult," said uncle, breathlessly.

We were near the city. What devastation! There was a terrible smell wafting everywhere. I thought of all the people entombed under those mountains of ruins, and I found it hard to grasp the reality. How horrific war was! When I looked at the people anxiously looking through their ruined homes, I realised how lucky I had been to have survived all this.

After making a number of detours, we arrived at the house. It stood there, intact. I was so happy to see it again, after so long.

While Miki filled up our baskets, I was astonished to see the amount of supplies my relatives had. Were they so afraid of famine to have accumulated all this? My uncle nailed more boards here and there to reinforce doors and windows. Time wore on. We finished our job and hastily left the house. Wherever we able, we pedalled faster than when we came. Often, we were forced to shuttle back and forth several times, as we couldn't get the bikes, together with the baskets through. When we reached Lipov-Lad, we found a crowd, like the one that could be found in the city of a Sunday morning. Some were leaving the city, and, like we were, were carrying heavy loads, while others were going toward it. They all went quickly, worried and absorbed in their own thoughts. I noticed the number of dogs that were running, looking for their owners. The poor things! I wanted so much to give them something to eat, or

even better, to have taken one with me. But how could I dare ask such a thing?

My legs began to ache and I was tired – tired of having to pedal. But how wonderful it was! For more than three years, I hadn't felt any physical fatigue. Today had been a real experience. I looked at my watch. In fifteen minutes, our "ride" would be over. What a pity!

Then, suddenly, came the deafening throbbing of the familiar engines, right behind the clouds. But it couldn't be! There wasn't an alert! The bombs were falling already. Then the sirens wailed. There were explosions everywhere. People in panic left their suitcases, baskets and strollers behind them on the road and went round in circles, liked trapped animals, not knowing where to look for shelter. My uncle made a signal for us to continue, and an absolutely mad race began. They went faster than I did, weaving like acrobats to avoid people on foot. I couldn't handle the bicycle as well as they could and they were soon out of sight. It was each for him self. I knew only to keep going straight ahead. The bombing was terrible. I felt as if the bombs were following me, and that, if I stopped, it would be the end. The fact of not being able to see the planes, and the direction of their flight, made the situation much more frightening. I didn't think of anything. The road was full of stones and muddy. The military trucks were speeding wildly, and splashing me with mud. It was a question of not getting run over. I cursed them, and

hoped that they would all get hit by the bombs. But I immediately regained control of myself, for the bombs could kill us, too!

It seemed as if I had been pedalling for hours, and I felt that I was covered in mud and sweat. Just a little longer, a last effort, and the factory appeared – the castle of fairy tales. Up the hill, and I arrived. My uncle and Miki were already there. Only then, looking toward the city, did I realise that I had been in a blue funk. Bombs were falling very close. I got off the bicycle, put my basket near the door, and lay down on the floor. My aunt, from under her pot, said to me: "Thank God you arrived safely!"

The others said nothing to me. The ground shook, and I felt that this time it was the end. I didn't want to die now, before having seen my parents and my brother. I prayed and fought against my doubts. How long would all this last?

The end of the bombing came as unexpectedly as it began. We simply stopped hearing the noise of the planes, the bombs and the artillery. It was the silence of death. We remained all lying there, our heads vacant and with no power, and without the slightest envy even to change position. Not even Micha and Miryana moved.

After each bombing, it took us all a good hour before we could get going again. To survive a bombing was like surviving major surgery. We were

happy to open our eyes again after the anaesthesia, but we had no strength to open our mouths, and we couldn't think at all.

Little by little, we related our experiences. They all looked at us with admiration. We told them how the bombs literally followed us; how, spurred by fear rather than by courage, we kept going, knowing that the factory, our safest shelter, was very near.

One evening, shortly after an alert, when we were waiting hand in hand for the planes, we heard someone knocking at the door of the room where we slept. The room also opened onto the yard.

Out of the silence, a voice, in German, said, "Open up! Don't be afraid. I know that you are there!"

My uncle moved forward, groping in the dark. I couldn't see anyone, but I could sense all their eyes and thoughts were on me. I quickly repeated "my story" in my mind. I was as petrified as ever.

"The German officer will let women and children go into their shelter." The soldier did not expect an answer from my uncle. He was giving orders.

We had to hurry, as he was waiting. We didn't argue. My aunt started to move forward. Miryana's hand did not let go of mine. I asked her to let go. I would stay with the men.

"How many women and children are there?" asked the soldier.

My uncle told him, and I realised that I was included in the number. We went out. We were dressed for even at night we kept our clothes on.

The sky was full of stars. We followed the soldier, who walked very fast. The bombing had started. We went down the hill and several steps made in the ground before we could sidle into the German shelter. As I went down the steps, I felt as if I were entering a vipers' pit. The smell of uniforms, sweat and petrol caught my breath. It was very hot. By the light of a petrol lamp, I met the eyes of some thirty soldiers and officers. Most of them smiled and made places for us. I felt that I was suffocating. I wanted to get out. Couldn't they hear my heart beating?

"Come inside! Come! You see how we want to save your lives, while your so-called friends are trying to kill you. They are dropping bombs everywhere. They are destroying your country. They have no pity for your children."

I reached the bottom of the shelter. I felt my body brushing against the Germans. The hands of an enemy soldier, in a gesture of protection, touched my shoulders. My shoulders burned under his hands, and I felt that I was going to vomit. I thought of my parents. I was in the act of betraying them. We were collaborators. If a bomb should fall on the shelter, we would die with them. I would die with the hands of a German soldier on my shoulders. The walls of the shelter shook. We heard the whistling sound of the bombs, and I believed these were the last minutes

of my life. I vomited into my handkerchief. The soldier thought that it was from fear. He tried to calm me. I wanted to scream. In Serbian, I told him that I must get outside – that I couldn't breathe. Aunt Mitza translated. They let me go. Once outside, I breathed deeply and I was crying very softly. It was a mistake to accept the invitation to enter that shelter, and I promised never to go there again.

If my aunt were to try to force me, I would go back alone to Belgrade. I didn't want to have to thank the Germans for saving my life, if a bomb were to fall on the factory. I would rather die than breathe the same air that they breathed; feel their uniforms touch my clothes; hear them curse and mock the Americans. I suffered because I committed a crime that I could never explain and that I could never excuse.

After the bombing stopped, and before I went to bed, I told my aunt of my decision.

"You behaved like a mad thing. You've done everything to arouse suspicion. Why were you vomiting? Do you think that I like this situation? But we are safer there. What difference does it make?"

"We are collaborators," I told her out loud.

"You are mad!" she shouted.

"I won't go either. I will not go back to shelter with the Boches. I'll stay with father. Rada is right," said Miki.

"Don't forget that they ordered us to go. We didn't go looking for them."

"Aunt Mitza asked their permission," I replied.

I felt that my aunt was furious, but nothing would make me change my mind. I would not obey her.

"We'll see what we can tell them next time," she said before saying goodnight.

I couldn't sleep. I had to do something drastic against the Germans to erase the cowardly act I had just committed. I felt that in saving my life by sharing their shelter, I had lost my character, and that all my parents' suffering, as well as mine, had been in vain.

The Germans knew that their end was near, and they wanted to show us that they were humane. But how late? They wanted to save their skins thinking that perhaps we would help them when the time came.

A few days later, we heard that all the unit had been killed by a bomb, which fell directly on their truck when they were coming back from the city. They couldn't brag about having being humanitarian, saving the lives of Serbian women and children. Their death, in some way, liberated me from my guilt feelings.

Hours were spent listening to the radio. We heard that, very soon, there would be an invasion by the Allied forces, who were going to open a new front, which would quickly bring an end to the Third Reich. We looked for news from other sources. They were all very encouraging.

I was adjusting to life with other people: laughing, talking, saying, "No!" to Andrea when he tried to embrace me, and regretting afterwards not letting him.

Each day, we looked forward to our future life. The two brothers told of their intention to join the partisans. Their mother opposed them. They talked and quarrelled and finally agreed to do it after the liberation of Belgrade.

The bombings continued and we lived only to survive.

June came. On the sixth, I would be fifteen! As with each year, as the day approached, I thought of my last birthday at home, when we all celebrated my twelfth birthday. Mother had baked a beautiful cake, that we ate with father and Atza, when they returned from work. My parents had asked me what I wanted for a present, and, since I didn't know what to say, they promised to give me something really special after the war. Since that day, no one had ever thought of my birthday, probably because that event would only have complicated their lives. My younger cousins celebrated their birthday on the twelfth of June, which made me think that my aunt should readily have remembered mine.

From the whisperings behind my back, I understood that this time, though, my day would not pass unnoticed, and I was thrilled.

On the sixth of June, I awoke when it was still dark. As usual, I felt the presence of my parents and my brother, but this time, I knew that they

were there very near, and that, in fact, only two or three months separated us. I thought of mother's promise. She missed it by over three years! Now we could start counting the days – our last days as prisoners. I would have wanted so much... Well, this was not the moment to be crying. I could see the future, and it would be wonderful. Until I was eleven and a half, I had had a magical childhood. From fifteen on I would have a fabulous adolescence. Each day of my life would be like a party, at home with my family who loved me. I would study. I would forget these horrible years, and I would become a young girl like the others. I would not be afraid to fall asleep because of nightmares. I would not be forced to say "yes" when I wanted to scream "no". I would not have to keep secrets – to lie. I would be Relly!

"THE ALLIES HAVE LANDED IN NORMANDY!" A voice that would have awakened the dead made us jump out of bed. My uncle was standing in front of us, trembling with emotion, surprise and joy. We all cried, the children like the adults. We hugged each other. We would have liked to have gone outside to shout the good news to the sky, to announce it to all our compatriots, who were now sleeping under the stars, who didn't know that today, June 6th, the great day, the greatest day of all had arrived! Today would be the day when the Germans were going to lose the war.

Glued to the small box, still shaking from the shock, we listened to the distant voice of our friend, who announced that June 6th would go down in history as the day that marked the end of the reign of evil. The people, who had caused the death of millions, would pay their debt to humanity and would experience the total destruction of their own country.

What a birthday present! It was time for the Germans to suffer. The incredible had happened: Hitler was going to lose the war!

My uncle went out to see what was happening on the road, and, on his return, he described the atmosphere of celebration, the joy, the desire of the people to fight, to help. The Germans? People avoided, ignored them. They moved only by car or motorcycle.

The first moments passed. We began to ask questions. What if the Germans repelled them? We all thought of this possibility, but no one dared to discuss it. I thought of all the soldiers who were dying for our future, for the liberation of Europe. How many millions of people were praying for them, encouraging them in their thoughts, begging them to go on, to save us from hell.

Hours passed. Grouped around the radio, we waited for the news hour, the voice that would apprise us of our salvation or our death warrant.

"If God exists, they will succeed," said Aunt Mitza, who, for a moment, stopped her appeal for help from all the saints of the orthodox religion.

"God has been on vacation for years. He has become deaf," said Alex. Everybody got angry. How dared he! What blasphemy! His father wanted to chase him out of the room.

"What are you afraid of? Mother prays day and night, and He ignores her prayers. What then? He is not going to make us lose the war because I've said that He is deaf, is He?"

More than ever before, the Germans jammed the waves over Radio London broadcast. Finally, the voice that helped us through the dark years reached us. We had a lot of difficulty hearing and understanding what it said, but the conclusion of the first day was certain: the Allies were on French soil and the Germans had not been able to repel them. A giant army, composed of different peoples, speaking different languages, but united by the same objective, was fighting against the same enemy who had dominated Europe with brutality, cruelty and bestiality, and who had brought the world back to the Middle Ages.

The battle was terrible, the losses enormous. In a grave voice, the speaker asked a question: "Have men ever given their lives for such a just cause?"

Our first day of joy was the last day of life for thousands of men who died in order that we might live.

I looked at my relatives. How could they be so passive when London was asking them to join the partisans, to sabotage the trains, to bomb

the bridges, so as to stop the transportation of German troops and supplies? Lucky were those men who knew what their duty was and who had the courage to fulfil it.

"The right time has not yet arrived. We don't know where to go. We mustn't get killed for nothing," said my uncle. No one contradicted him.

As the days went by, things were changing. Each night, on the map, we studied the advance of the Russians, on the one hand, and the progress of the Allies, on the other. The armies were going to meet in Berlin! Germany was being bombed day and night. I thought that, if the intense hatred that we felt for them could drown them, they would perish forever. Where we were, there were no more massive bombings. We thought of returning home.

Boutza and Dragi were the first to leave. I was happy not to have to go with them. Looking back at the past years with them, I realised how selfish Boutza was and how often she had been unkind to me. Her behaviour had been harsh and unfair, but I knew that I had absolutely no right to judge her. Being forced to risk her life to keep a Jewish child because she couldn't do otherwise, brought out a conduct difficult to understand. But could I understand the behaviour of my own relatives? Just thinking about it made me unhappy. I had to attribute it to the fact that during times of war, fear was stronger than any other feeling, and I didn't want to doubt, not even for a moment, their love for me. I so

desperately needed to feel loved. During the entire stay at the factory, Boutza kept her distance. I finally understood that the less I feared the Germans, the more she feared me. I was the only person there who knew her secret. Was she afraid that I wouldn't keep my promise?

Dragi, on the other hand, and in spite of his incomprehensible behaviour toward his wife, never failed to do all he could to make my life easier. And, for that, on the return of my mother and father, I wanted us all to go and see them and thank them.

We returned to the city, and I returned to the apartment and the bedroom where I slept after my mother had left.

In the basement of the house, lived the concierge. Aunt Mathilde asked her whether we could find shelter with her when the battle in Belgrade would begin.

"It will be my pleasure. It's always better to be together at such times."

A few days later, when we paid careful attention, we could hear the distant sound of the artillery.

Obviously, I didn't leave the house, but I didn't really run any risk. We were not afraid any more. My uncle brought news from the front – news passed along by word of mouth.

Aunt Mathilde, who had been a Christian for over fifteen years, spoke of the Jews with admiration and praised their intelligence and ability. My

uncle bore these declarations with bad grace, and didn't hide his anger. His house was very Christian and my cousins, conscious and proud of their religion, were embarrassed and confused.

My uncle, who was an anti-communist, feared the arrival of the Russians, while my aunt awaited their coming impatiently. At times, their daily arguments took a very disagreeable turn and, most of the time, we children didn't leave our room. I agreed with my aunt. The Russians were dying to liberate us. They would bring my parents back to me. What did it matter what they did during the October Revolution? After all, before the revolution, they were an oppressed people. Didn't they have the right to be free? What did we really know of what happened there? Only lies from the German propaganda. I admired them. It was the Russians who dug Hitler's grave.

These primitives and savages, as the Germans called them, were now beating the unbeatable, the bearers of the flag of culture, the barbarians of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 17

The battle for Belgrade began. It went on day and night and we spent that time in the concierge's apartment, lying on the rug. The Russians bombed strategic targets, flying very low, and, unfortunately, often having their planes shot down. Sometimes the pilot would manage to jump from his burning plane and open his parachute, but the Germans would aim at him and shoot him down. We would see him swinging between the sky and the ground, trying to avoid the bullets, and there, before our eyes, he would lose his last battle, dying, suspended from the ropes of his parachute. Crying, we would look at him, without being able to help him.

The Katyushas made a noise much more terrible than anything that we had known so far. I was less sure of surviving. We would have freedom

tomorrow, or, at the latest, in two or three days. This was really not the time to lose faith. I did my utmost to think of the future, and my parents. People had fought for every neighbourhood, for almost every street for several days. We knew that very soon it would be our turn.

The following morning, an unexpected and all the more menacing silence put all our senses on alert. Through the basement windows, which opened onto the street, and which only allowed us to see the raised part of the road, we could hear the sound of disorderly footsteps of people on the run – the footsteps that had been my nightmare for so many years! We saw torn and dirty boots passing in a crazy race, and heard hysterical German voices, of men who were facing the last moments of their lives. Before being able to understand what was happening, we heard other footsteps pounding the road, and other voices, sure and decisive, speaking Russian. Our liberators had come. We wanted to scream for joy, but we didn't dare. It was too soon. Often the Germans retook a street or a neighbourhood after they retreated and took revenge on the population. We waited. We didn't move or speak. It was a short street and the Russian soldiers were numerous. A few minutes, which seemed like ages, passed in silence and ended with screams and machine-gun fire.

For me, the earth had stopped turning. My heart was bursting in my chest. I couldn't breathe. The last moment of servitude! Freedom had

just passed before my eyes in Smederevska Street and was continuing to other neighbourhoods.

I thought again of my parents – of my father's: "We must hold tight till the war is over."

I had held tight. I thought of these unknown soldiers who had just passed by and to whom I would be grateful all my life. It was a time for contemplation. Uncertainty was written all over my uncle's face. What was he afraid of? Here and there, we still heard artillery and machine guns.

Night fell, and we decided to go up and sleep in the apartment. In total darkness, with the shutters closed, all was silent. It seemed as if the whole city was holding its breath, waiting to come to life again.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening. Opposite the house, there was an empty lot. I thought that the building that had occupied it could have been destroyed by bombs, or perhaps there had never been a building there. My aunt's apartment was on the second floor of the existing building, overlooking the vacant land.

Suddenly, we heard Russian voices coming from the direction of the lot. In the silence, we distinguished clearly the voices of two men talking to themselves. Then: "Hello, friends! Come out! You are free! Don't be afraid! All is over with the Germans!" they shouted.

We understood what they were saying, but before we had time to react, my uncle ordered us to stay where we were and not to move. He himself went to the shutters, observed the men outside and signalled us to join him.

Two soldiers were sitting in front of a campfire, surrounded by the night in the city that they had just liberated – the city whose citizens feared them. They were eating. From time to time, they raised their heads to shout into the silence, "Svoboda! Svoboda!" A mute Belgrade could not free itself from the German propaganda of fear and mistrust. Then, one of them began to sing. His voice was marvellous, and all in our street were carried away by the "Volga" and "Kalinka". I was crying in the dark, and hated my uncle for staying there and not permitting us to run toward them to hug them, to thank them and to offer them food and drink. What must these poor soldiers think of the reception we were giving them after so many days of battle? What a disappointment it must have been for them and for us, too.

My aunt broke the silence. "If you don't go out there, I will go out and talk to them and bring them something to eat.

My uncle, without having to be asked twice, and, as if he was waiting only to be told what to do, to overcome his fear, opened the door and disappeared. I imagined that all the other people in the street must have felt the same, for, before my uncle got to the door of the building, people

carrying candles ran toward the patch of land, toward the soldiers. In a few minutes, all the doors opened and all who were able to walk wanted to be first to touch them. They hugged them. They hoisted them up on their shoulders. They spoke to them in Serbian, and the soldiers sang in Russian. From all the windows, lit by candles, came crying and shouts of joy. The taste of freedom!

Then, the soldiers making a great effort to free themselves from the hands of those who were hugging them, unloaded a few boxes from their truck. Some minutes later, as if by magic, the sky over Belgrade, which until a few hours ago, had been covered with smoke, and which had been, during three and a half years, witness to terrible suffering, glittered with the lights of thousands of fireworks, the most beautiful, the biggest fire of hope, gratitude and victory of men against evil, of heaven against hell. From every corner of the city, the Russian army sent its friendship in dazzling colours to the people of the city they had just liberated.

I was in the street, speechless with emotion, bedazzled with joy. October 20th, 1944. the first night of freedom! My chest was not big enough to cope with this avalanche of feelings which overwhelmed me. I was finished with war, with fear, and with being confined behind four walls! I was in the street. I walked. I laughed. I talked and sobbed like everybody else. I was alive! I walked to the other end of the street, because it was from there that my family would arrive, if not tonight, then

tomorrow. We would go back to our house, and I would be, with my brother, the first of my parents' list of priorities. I was so happy to have "held on" and to have had nothing to be ashamed of in front of my parents and Atza. I was stronger than the Germans! I could see the four of us sitting together, next to each other. No, I would sit in my usual place, on the knees of my father and mother. I knew that I couldn't do that now – I was too big. But I wanted to catch up on three years of lost caresses. I had to regain my childhood before I became a "young girl".

I spent the rest of the night on the balcony of the apartment. I wanted to sense every minute and see the dawn of the first day of freedom.

"We can't leave the house yet. The Germans are hiding everywhere. That's the reason for the shooting we hear. Let's wait a few more days," said my uncle.

I knew that he was right, but I didn't like the idea of obeying him without protest.

Aunt Mathilde looked in her wardrobe for some clothes to give me and found a dark-blue skirt and a yellow blouse. I was to wear them with a pair of new, black, high-heeled shoes that my mother had not yet used.

"But she will need them when she comes back," I told her, refusing to try them on.

"You don't have to worry. When she comes back, we'll get her others."

"I think that she and Atza could be here at any minute, don't you?"

"You know, we don't know anything precisely, but we've heard that they were deported from Saimichte."

"Deported? But where? When?" I felt my colour draining from me.

"I don't know where nor when, but one thing is certain. They will not return tomorrow. You must be patient. I'm counting on you. You're a big girl now."

She hugged me, and I read in her eyes something that made me afraid.

"Perhaps they have been deported to where my father is."

"It's very possible. But don't forget that Yugoslavia is a big country. They could be somewhere far from here, and since there won't be trains immediately, it's useless for you to wait for them at the window."

What she was saying made sense, but I had a mad urge to cry. I no longer wanted them to count on me. I wanted them to help me. I had an unbearable need to be small, very small.

"Look at yourself in the mirror. You are pretty. Yellow suits you.

I looked at myself, but I didn't like the skirt, or the blouse, or the shoes.

"Nothing suits me and I'm not pretty," I replied glumly.

"We are what we are, and you have nothing to complain about."

"I'm not complaining."

I thought of the beautiful dresses that my mother would have made for me. But I would have to wait a few more days.

My aunt and uncle spoke to me of what was expected from a well-behaved girl. That meant me.

"You will start going to school. You must remember that you have your name and your reputation to maintain," said my uncle.

"Maintain them for whom? I don't understand."

"You don't imagine that now you will start running around the streets? No strolling or walking by yourself! Get it into your head that other than school, I will not allow you to your friends' houses or to go out without my permission," said my uncle pronouncing each word distinctly.

"Why?" I asked stupefied.

"Precisely because you don't understand why."

"I would like to go to my friend, Voika."

"You can go to her place with Miryana."

Why did he look so upset? I had no intention of spending my time in the streets. I had to study. But there was something in his voice that I didn't like. He spoke to me as if I were still a prisoner. I thought that I would be able to find my girl friends again, go out with them, and be as free as they were. Perhaps, all girls of my age could not go out for a stroll or have friends. It all seemed absurd to me. Happily, I would not have to obey my uncle for too much longer. With my parents, it would be different. So there was no need to take my uncle's pronouncements too seriously.

I recalled the walks with my father, and I was happy that he would be the one to tell me what I could or could not do. Knowing him as I did, I doubted that he would not let me go for a walk by myself.

Although I was always glad to be together with my relatives, I did miss my hours spent in solitude. I needed to be alone, without having to talk or reply. When we were at the factory, the place was big and I could always find a corner, in which to be alone. In my aunt's three-bed-room apartment, it was impossible, but I tried to get used to it.

My first outing was to see Voika. With Miryana, I reached the neighbourhood where I had spent the happy years of my childhood. I avoided our street. I didn't want to go near our house. I would return there only with my parents.

There I stood, in front of my friend's apartment. Holding back my tears with difficulty, I put on a face that I hoped looked normal. I rang the bell and Voika's mother opened the door to me. I heard my heart beating. I didn't talk. She looked at me in disbelief.

"My God! Is that you, Relly? How did you manage to stay alive?" she cried out loud.

She let me in. "And your parents and brother?"

"I'm waiting for them. They should be back any day now.

She didn't try to hide her astonishment. I wanted to run away.

"Where have you been all this time?"

"In Belgrade."

"How did you manage to stay? Weren't all the Jews deported?"

I told her in a few words.

"You have been locked in for all these years? What about school? You must be far behind. What are you going to do?"

"I will do like all the Jews who weren't able to study," I heard my voice replying. I got up. I was suffocating. "I must go. They are waiting for me."

"It's a pity that Voika 's not at home. I'm sure that she will remember you."

"I'll come back some other time," I replied, moving toward the door. At that moment, the door opened and Voika came in with two young girls.

"Relly! Is it truly you? How did you stay alive? People said that the Germans killed all the Jews."

"It's not true. They deported them."

She shook my hand. I felt their questioning looks fixed on me. I became aware of my straight skirt and my high heels. I felt old fashioned and out of place.

"This is my friend from childhood," she said introducing me. "In what class were we together?"

I had a big lump in my throat. How could she forget those six years that we spent sitting together at the same desk?

"I can't remember any more," I replied.

She spoke with her friends about their studies, about movies, about their last stroll to the park before the liberation, and about the dance that they must begin to organise at the high school to celebrate the liberation. They forgot about me. I felt as though I had come from another planet. I discovered that I did not occupy any place in my friend's memories of childhood. How could I start to understand and accept this as a fact?

I got up. They examined me from top to toe, stopping at my shoes, which they looked at with amusement. Did I see some sarcasm in their smiles? They were wearing flat shoes and their skirts were full. I was out of date.

Voika accompanied me to the door. "I'm happy that you are alive."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

The door closed very quickly behind me. I was back in the street. I gripped Miryana's hand very tightly. I felt like crying, but her presence stopped me. How many hours did I spend imagining this meeting? How much I had counted on this friendship, which had remained as important for me, and so insignificant for her. What disillusionment! I realised that it would be difficult for me to make new friendships. Too many movies, walks, parties, gossip and examinations separated me from those of my

own age. I knew that they, too, had lived through the war, had suffered fear, hunger, and often, the imprisonment of a loved one. But they had something to do each day. They lived the more or less important situations of a normal everyday life. They were in familiar surroundings, with their parents, and in their own rooms. They shared the same problems with all the young Yugoslavs united by the war.

My circumstances estranged me from society, or, rather, were the reason that made people uncomfortable in my presence. The fact that I was still alive was unexpected, and, because of that, in a way, difficult to accept.

"All this will change when the Jews start to come back. For now, you are a real exception. Don't take things too much to heart," said my aunt, when I told her about my visit.

CHAPTER 18

The government opened schools and courses for those who had been unable to study during the war. I went into the second year of a girls' high school. In the class there were about twenty students, both girls and boys, partisans still in uniform, two young, pregnant women, and four Jews: Rouja Polak, a splendid, dark-haired, young girl, who had a pair of stupendous blue eyes, and whom I knew from before the war, when we used to go to religion school together, once a week; Vera

Boscovitch, a young and very intelligent girl, who was, at that time, a full-blown communist; Micha Albahari, who was the handsome young man for whom all the girls in the class sighed; and I. They had spent the years of the war in Albania.

My aunt and uncle didn't encourage me to study. I felt that they would have happily accepted the idea of having me stay home to help my aunt with the household chores. But they didn't try to stop me from going to school.

I worked very seriously, and my marks were excellent. I was considered one of the best students in the class, but I was the only one who knew the truth: Luck and good fortune were helping me, for, basically, I was weak in every subject. We finished one class after the other. All the teachers wanted to help us regain our place in society, and they generously rewarded us for our efforts. I knew that the way we studied was far from being the best, but what choice did we have? My success at school did not free me from my inferiority complex. I knew that I was running after something that, unluckily, I would never attain.

The government published a list of the Yugoslavian Jews, who survived the war. Of my family, from what I was told, only my name appeared.

I ignored that list, and didn't want people to talk to me about it. I didn't need any information. I knew that my parents and my brother would

return. The war was not over yet, and from what the newspapers published, the camps were full of deported people. It would take some time before each one of them would be able to return home. I was not one of those who discussed, who sought to find out about them, and who believed everything that was written or said. My parents promised me that they would return and they would keep their promise. I didn't have to listen to what other people said. Aunt Mathilde, who went regularly to the Jewish Community Centre, respected my point of view on the subject, and never tried to give me information. The whispering behind my back did not concern me. I studied day and night because I knew that that was the only thing that my parents expected of me.

It was winter already. One day, on her return from the centre, my aunt brought me a big parcel full of dresses, skirts, shoes, sweaters and a beautiful winter coat – all new and wonderful clothes – a gift from the Jews of America.

Nobody wore anything so beautiful in the streets or at school. I felt somewhat embarrassed when I saw the envious looks of others, but I had nothing else to wear. Now I really liked what I saw in the mirror, and I remembered my father's words: "Clothes do not make the monk," but they also did not prevent him from existing. I was sure that this time my father would agree with me.

I wore flat shoes, a beautiful dress and a blue coat. My hair was long. I felt people were looking at me. I hadn't yet lost the habit of walking with my eyes lowered, but I enjoyed every minute.

To get home from school was a half hour's walk.

It was winter; it was cold; and it was snowing. I walked filling my lungs and being elated with the wind and the snow in my face. I lifted my head to look at the trees. I was happy.

Rounding a street corner, I found myself face to face with a dozen German soldiers surrounded by armed partisans. Through their summer uniforms, torn and dirty, one could see blue flesh. They walked barefoot, their backs bent and their faces distraught. Among them there were some wounded. Their bandages were filthy and stained with long-dried blood. My eyes took in this scene of degrading misery. They passed very near to me, and they asked me for bread. I wanted to spit in their faces, to kick them, but I stood there paralysed, conscious of the pity that wrung my heart. This incident did not last more than a few seconds. I turned my back on them. I was disgusted with myself! I was ashamed of myself! Pity for the Germans! I ran to put as much distance as I could between them and myself.

Before my eyes, I saw my mother dragging the German soldier's suitcase. I saw her kneeling on the ground at the camp gate. I saw my father, his hair turned white over night, and Atza on his knees in front of

the German, who threatened with a revolver. How could these people be so cruel, so beastly, toward people who hadn't done anything to them? And I? How could I have pity for these soldiers who crushed us, humiliated us, beat us and even killed us? I despised myself. I wanted to punish myself. Who gave me the right to have human feelings for them?

When I got home, I felt sick, and, without saying a word about what had just happened, I found some solace under my blanket. In the room, all by myself, I tried to put my thoughts in some sort of order, and finally came to the conclusion that, in spite of all their efforts, the Germans had not succeeded in killing in me the one feeling that was uniquely human: compassion. But, morally, I believed that no Jew had the right to harbour any feeling for them other than hatred. Then, why? Could the mind always control our feelings? It didn't seem to work that way – at least, not in my case. Then I had to protect myself from myself! With my head between my hands, I swore that, for the rest of my life, I would hold for them a cold and merciless hatred, and, if I were unable to avenge myself, I would do whatever it would take to avoid them. They would be for me what we Jews were for them.

Almost every day, people spoke about the families who returned from Italy and Albania, where they had spent the war years. There was no news yet of the deported.

The months went by. At school, my classmates wanted my friendship. They liked me very much, and I felt comfortable with them. We were a group in which each one of us had experienced more or less difficult times, but about which we didn't ever speak. With time, I met a number of young people who invited me to go out, to go dancing, or simply to go for a walk. I felt embarrassed at having to say that I was forbidden to go out – that my uncle waited for me with his watch in his hand. I was sure that they misconstrued my behaviour, but they didn't discuss it.

To be truthful, going out did not interest me very much. I lived in wait for my parents, and hence, nothing was yet really normal for me.

I didn't make any plans. I denied myself all the things that seemed to form the normal rhythms of life.

Every day, every single day of the week, my return from school was made at the double. After having accepted the idea that, in any case, my parents would not return together, I felt a pang of anguish every time I opened the door to the apartment. I would look for one of them, only to face, once more, the reality that their camp must not yet have been liberated. I heard, without wanting to, that, throughout Europe, there were camps full of deportees who had no possibility of arranging their return for lack of transportation.

"What would you say if we made you convert? Anyway, aren't you already Christian?" asked my uncle. "You would only have to take your wartime name, even in general life, and everything would then be much easier for you as well as for us."

"I don't understand why it should be so important to you. I don't feel like a Christian, and, even if I did, I would change my religion ever. Please don't talk to me about it. Only my parents can decide on this matter. I would rather you all called me Relly, because it is my only name."

It was springtime. Hitler had committed suicide in his bunker. Germany, crushed and destroyed, signed its capitulation, and Europe was finally free.

Now the major return of the Jews would begin.

Toward the end of summer, my aunts Nety and Mathilde returned from Albania with their husbands and my cousin, Itzo. The meeting with them was very difficult for all of us. They remembered the day, as I did, when they came to ask us to leave with them and father had refused, thinking that he didn't have the right to risk our lives for a doubtful future.

Their life in Albania had been very thorny, but they had returned safe and sound. My Aunt Nety spoiled me and gave me the best things that she had in her wardrobe. I was happy. Mother would have less to worry about when she returned.

I loved Nety and Bata dearly, and I felt loved in return. They wanted to take me with them while I waited for my parents, but living in a small bachelor flat, as they did, the idea didn't seem practical.

One day we went to look for the things mother had left with our neighbour to look after until her return.

"Me?" She never gave me anything! Who would have risked his life for a few rags? Relly was too small to remember if her mother gave items from their house to anyone. In any case, it wasn't to us.

I apologised for my bad memory. Yes, I understood very well how unpleasant it was to have people come and talk about things that they knew nothing about.

"I am very happy that you survived. How did you manage?"

Aunt Mathilde told her. As we stood at the door making our farewells, she gave me our last family photograph! "I found it in the street in front of the house, after your mother's deportation.

I took hold of it. It was folded in two. The voice of my father sounded in my ears: "This photograph will remain as a remembrance of your parents, of your childhood."

They were looking at me, but I couldn't tell them that I didn't need a remembrance; that the photo was burning my hands; that my parents

and my brother would return; and that we would take many more photographs before I needed to keep this one as a last remembrance.

I decided, on the spot, not to try to recover our belongings. I told Aunt Mathilde that I really couldn't recall with whom my mother had left things.

"You have all the household linen, your father's suits and your mother's dresses. Those are the most important things, because one can't buy them now. Your mother can take care of the rest when she comes back."

The more the time passed, the more anguished my daily return from school became. Climbing the steps, I listened to the noises coming from the apartment. Often, I thought that I recognised the voice of one of my parents or of my brother. I would try to catch my breath and calm my heart, only to realise, in front of the door, that the voice was coming from the radio. I didn't want to admit that I was deceiving myself because to doubt would be to influence fate. So I never doubted. I waited.

One day, when my aunt and her friends were playing cards, I opened the door of the apartment to find eight pairs of eyes staring at me in silent suspense. My aunt gave me a letter sent from Shanghai and addressed to my father. I blushed. Why couldn't I be alone to open it? Thousands of thoughts crossed my mind. I glanced at the letter and the signature of Mr. Amente. In a non-committal voice, I said, "It's a letter from Mr. Amente, my father's business associate."

All that my aunt said was, "Ah!" The letter had been typed in German. Mr. Amente wrote to my parents about his misadventures, his flight from one country to another, without finding one that would give him a permit to stay. He asked for our news and the details of our life during the war. I folded the letter.

"Will you answer him?" my aunt asked.

"No. Father will answer him."

Aunt Rebecca arrived from Italy with her four children. Her husband, Uncle Samuel, who had been a prisoner of war, had returned right after the liberation of Belgrade.

In fact, they had all returned, except for my family and my mother's three brothers and their families. That meant that the return of all those who had been deported was being delayed.

My aunt's house was full of joy. I helped her prepare fabulous meals. While we sat around the table, we listened to accounts of their flight, their life at the camp in Ferramonti, the kindness of the Italians, and their efforts to save as many Jews from the clutches of the Germans.

My cousin Olga, who was one year younger than I, sat beside me. We looked at each other; we talked; but only like two old acquaintances who met up again by chance. Olga knew what she wanted. She was down to earth, and, to my mind, rather aggressive. I, on the other hand, was

never sure of myself, always splitting hairs and daydreaming. In general, I couldn't understand her. She told me about a sailor whom she had met on the ship on her return trip. He had kissed her. I envied her that kiss. I would have liked to have invented a partisan or a student with whom I had had a similar experience. But, to my great disappointment, my imagination, at the time, failed me. She knew that Uncle Yova followed my comings and goings, always with watch in hand. She settled the matter by saying, "You'll be an old maid!"

I thought about what she told me. Perhaps she was right. My life was very humdrum, but, for the most part, it was my own fault. Quite often, young people offered to walk home with me, but I always refused, not so much from fear of my uncle, but mainly because I wanted to run home, perhaps to find one member of my family who had just returned.

Voika, Olga's older sister, was in uniform. Very intelligent, independent, and an active communist, she despised the middle-class spirit of her parents and of us all. She seemed to be the only one of her family who appeared to understand my many problems without my telling her what they were. She took me to the theatre; spoke to me about the importance of education; and tried to help me with my mathematics, the only subject that I really dreaded. I was afraid of showing her how stupid I was, but she had the patience of an angel. With time, I, more or less, overcame my difficulties. One day, during our lesson, she said, "Do you

know that a great number of the concentration camps, where the Germans killed millions of people, have been liberated."

"I am waiting for my parents' return. I know that they will return," I replied in anger.

Voika didn't touch the subject again.

Almost every day, she told me about the partisans, of their struggle against the Germans during the war, and of their desire to create a society based on justice and equality. She despised anything that was a reminder of Yugoslavia from before the war.

In spite of the fondness that I had for her, I didn't like her extremism. She trotted out the same slogans that I heard on the radio or read in the newspapers. People who only yesterday were considered patriots, had become traitors, condemned as such to forced labour. If we were not communists, then we were fascists, and, therefore, criminals! This was one of Tito's beliefs which was, for me, absolutely unacceptable. Over and over again, we were told that the communists were the only Yugoslavs of honour and that the government would do whatever was necessary to re-educate the people. Fear reigned everywhere and the prisons were crowded. People were afraid of their own children, the foremost supporters of Tito, who would denounce their own mothers for buying milk on the black market. The mother would be condemned to prison, while the child would be rewarded for his fidelity to Tito.

It was very difficult for me to listen to the so-called truths of the moment, and the distortions of the facts that I had known from a totally different point of view.

The proceedings against General Mihajlovic began, and were broadcast on the radio. I thought about the man who had been for many years the symbol of the struggle of the resistance. I knew that thousands of people had followed him and had risked their lives to help him. Now, this man was confessing to having collaborated with the Germans! dragging down, in his fall, all those who had supported him.¹⁶

The witnesses gave proof of his collaboration, and his own children testified against him.

Together with a large part of the population, I was nonplussed. Where was the real truth to be found? Those who believed in the resistance and in being faithful to their country now chose to deny those facts. Secretly, people said that the whole process had been set up, that Mihajlovic had been drugged and didn't know what he was saying and that his children had to choose between life and faithfulness to their father. What we could not explain was that Radio London confirmed the facts of the accusation! Therefore, thousands of innocent people would have to spend their lives keeping the secret of the age – their heroism having to forego the well-deserved medal of the resistance. They now

¹⁶ General Mihajlovic was captured in 1946 and indicted for treason. He, together with eight Chetnik leaders, was executed.

discovered that they were collaborators who deserved imprisonment! The only explanation that I could give was that at a certain point, under orders from Mihajlovic, the heads of the resistance realised that communism would be more dangerous for the future of a royalist Yugoslavia than the Germans. They then began to collaborate with the enemy, without letting the people know the truth.

Once, during the history course, I contradicted the ideas put forward by the teacher. He, in embarrassment, replied that he taught from the book he had in his hands; that he was fulfilling his duty; and that I had only to fulfil mine without discussing things that I didn't understand and didn't know about. "The partisans opened the door to your prison. You are the last person who has the right to criticise them."

"I am grateful to them, but that doesn't stop me from saying what I think."

"And I tell you, for your own good, to think less about it, and to say nothing."

During the recess, my friends, the partisans, surrounded me and, offended, they tried to explain to me their version of the truth and prove my ignorance.

Had the people come out of one prison only to enter another?

"We can't have a revolution without prisons. Those who don't want to co-operate must disappear. They are fascists and traitors."

"I, too?"

"No. You are lucky to be Jewish!"

Ah! for the first time in my life, I was lucky to be Jewish! There was nothing more to say! Such well-deserved luck!

To tell the truth, personally, I had nothing to complain about. But how could I feel free if I had to keep my mouth shut? Why did prison have to be the basis of this new society where all men were equal, except those who did not feel equal – where all were communists, except those who were in prison or who kept quiet?

Among the leaders of the country, there were many Jewish communists, who had been in the resistance with Tito. Thanks to them, and, according to personal political convictions, Jews were either loved or hated.

My arm hurt more and more, and I finally told Aunt Mathilde. The visit to the doctor would be very expensive, and this made me very unhappy.

"I believe I have done enough for her. She can ask Rebecca to take her to the doctor," I heard my uncle's voice behind a closed door.

Aunt Rebecca accepted, but she was not in a hurry to do it. The moment I understood this, with a tight throat, I told her not to worry – that, after all, we could postpone the visit. I didn't want to miss school for an entire afternoon.

Some time later, Aunt Rebecca took possession of my family's household linen, and my father's shirts and suits.

"If your parents were back, they would have shared all they had left with Aunt Rebecca," said Aunt Mathilde.

"I know, but you are giving them everything!"

"When they return they will have all they need. I promise."

"But how? The stores will be empty for who knows how long."

"Don't worry. They will not go naked."

With an aching heart, I saw them take all my father's shirts.

Finally, after repeated requests, from Aunt Mathilde, Aunt Rebecca took me to the doctor. She paid for the visit, making me aware how great her sacrifice was, considering herself to have accomplished a feat of exceptional charity.

The doctor could not do much for me. My arm had grown deformed during the years of the war. There was no surgical intervention that could repair the damage. As for the pain, he prescribed some pills and wished me good luck. I promised myself never to talk about my arm to anyone,

After a while, without consulting me, they decided that I would spend the winter with Aunt Rebecca. After their return from Italy, the families of my two aunts became very close, and I felt out of their circle. The news that I had to leave the house made me sad. I would share Olga's bedroom.

She looked neither happy nor unhappy at the prospect. I arrived at their house, a big apartment, as cold as my heart.

If at Aunt Mathilde's house I didn't always feel at home, at least I was sure of her affection; but here I knew that my presence was accepted only because of a sense of duty, and this weighed on me terribly.

CHAPTER 19

Around May, 1946, great news arrived from Nice. Anna, my father's sister, whom I didn't know, because she lived in France, found my name and those of Aunt Mathilde and Nety on the Red Cross lists. She had spent the war years in Morocco, and now had French citizenship and lived in Nice with Vittorio, her second husband, whom she had recently

married after her divorce. She was planning to come and see us towards July.

Anna was father's youngest sister. I remembered having seen her pictures at home, and that my parents avoided talking about her. When I asked Aunt Nety, she too, tried to cut short the conversation, saying that Anna's behaviour in her youth wasn't always approved of by the family, and that was why I knew so little about her.

"All that belongs to the past. It's not important any more. We'll be happy to meet her again. Her past has long since been forgotten."

Ill with pneumonia, I returned to Aunt Mathilde's house to find a heavy and disagreeable atmosphere. The political divergences of my aunt and uncle, from what their children told me, was making life at home impossible for them all. My aunt, more for the advantage and comfort than out of conviction, defended the regime and its ideas. My uncle opposed them. Their daily arguments became more and more virulent. Uncle Yova ended by attacking the Jews whom he accused of always siding with the government and lacking a sense of constancy. I had goose bumps!

A second letter from Aunt Anna announced her arrival in Zagreb on July 17th. She would not be able to come to Belgrade. We had to go and meet her there.

We arrived in Zagreb the night before her arrival. We found accommodation in two bedrooms at a modest boarding house. The war had taught us to be content with what we had. Besides, the financial outlook of my uncles was limited.

We were all at the station, dressed in our Sunday best, and prey to emotions poorly disguised.

The train arrived after some delay, and I saw a young woman, dressed in black, very elegant and pretty, get off. Tears of joy streamed down my face, while I watched the sisters re-unite. Then it was my turn.

"You are a big girl now! It's incredible how much you resemble me!"

A whiff of her perfume enveloped me, and I felt many little kisses touch my cheeks. I was dumbfounded. In all my life, I had never met such a creature! She spoke incessantly, telling of her last years spent in Morocco and of her divorce. "Thanks to Pierre, I was not deported. Since he was the captain of a merchant navy ship, he was able to help evacuate all those who wanted to flee France and who could find a place on the ship. Pierre is a great fellow!"

"Then did you divorce him?" Aunt Nety asked.

"Because Vittorio is better than he is. It's as simple as that!"

A little embarrassment permeated the air. We turned to other things.

In an hour, she had won all my admiration and all my love. I found her alive, intelligent, and sure of herself, as if the entire world were at her

feet. Without asking if I wanted to, she decided right then and there, to take me with her into the room that she had booked at the best hotel in the city. I found the hotel extraordinary and the room magnificent. Anna didn't share my feelings. She complained at the desk that the hot water was not really hot enough and that the shower didn't work. She spoke in an aggressive tone of voice, which perplexed me. She noticed my discomfort and, back in our room, she explained: "I represent the Chamber of Commerce of Nice. I have the power to conclude big business on behalf of the largest industrial enterprises in France."

"You must be a very important person in France, because I know that very few foreigners can get a visa to enter the country."

"Precisely. But you don't understand anything at all! When I knew that in July, the government would open the first commercial exposition after the war in Zagreb, my friends in Nice helped me to become a so-called representative of the Chamber of Commerce in order to obtain the visa. You see, I don't represent anything or anyone, but I have to play the role of someone who comes to do business in Yugoslavia.

I followed her everywhere and I attended all her "business meetings". I observed, with astonishment, how she had the courage to contradict, to raise her voice and to behave like a benevolent society for the welfare of starving people.

After a few days, Anna, who conducted business meetings even at night, preferring not to leave me alone in the hotel, sent me back to the pension with my aunts. I tried, in vain, to explain to her that, for me, being alone meant being with myself – that I was used to being in my own company, and that I liked solitude. But she chose to return me to the inn as the best solution for her own peace of mind.

So, while Anna worked, we strolled about the town and at the agreed-upon time, we met her to have our meals together. At the restaurant, she would order the meals and send back the dishes either because the meat was overcooked or not cooked enough. Her impertinent behaviour embarrassed us.

"You don't understand that we have just come through a war. The economy of the country is a disaster. Meat here is a luxury even for the privileged," said Uncle Bata.

"I pay and I have the right to be served well."

"When in Rome do as the Romans do!"

"I am French. I'm not afraid of anybody."

"You don't know what it was like in the war nor what a communist regime is."

"Luckily, no. And I don't want to know. I feel free and rich, and I don't need to hide it."

When we were alone, she told me about France, of freedom of speech, of her painter and writer friends, and I realised than abyss separated me from her. To me, she was truly unreal, coming from a marvellous world where great spirits and free thinkers were to be found right and left. France! The great country of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Lamartine, Victor Hugo and many other friends who had helped remove me from the dark night which had nearly swallowed me up, during my long years of solitude.

"Would you like to come to Nice and live with me and Toio?"

"But how? I can't. Mother, father and Atza must return. I wait for them every day."

"You can wait for them in Nice just as well, if you are not old enough to understand that there is no one left to wait for."

I looked at her, taken aback. "What do you know about it? You don't understand anything! Every day, there are people coming back. The newspapers are filled with the stories of survivors. The hospitals, almost everywhere in Europe, are taking care of sick people who have lost their memories. I know that they will return, and that has nothing to do with my age."

"Very well. As soon as they come back, you can return to Belgrade."

"But nobody can leave the country. I think that even passports don't exist any more."

"Passports can be printed whenever we want. I have travelled recently with some Yugoslavs. You have only to go to the Minister for the Interior and make your request. Since you are a war orphan, they will surely grant it to you."

"How dare you? I am not an orphan. Why do you tell me such things?"

I could hardly hold back my tears.

"Oh, don't get so upset. Tell them what you like, but get on to it as soon as possible."

When I told this news to Aunt Nety, she didn't look at all happy.

"Aren't you pleased that I'll be able to get away, if only for a month until my parents get back?"

"Yes, I'm very happy, but I doubt that it will be possible."

I returned to Belgrade a different person. Leave the country – visit France – what a plan for the future!"

Aunt Mathilde found Anna's idea to be fearsome, but, like Aunt Nety, she too, thought that I would never obtain the permit.

"Don't get ideas in your head! And while you are waiting, concentrate on passing your examinations. Don't count too much on this trip or you will be terribly disappointed if it doesn't eventuate."

How could I study in France? I didn't even know the language.

"You will learn it quickly and you can study there much better than you can here."

"Mother and father will be disappointed if they don't find me on their return."

"You can come back right away. Two or three more days will not make much difference."

How could I explain to her that, for me, even five minutes made a big difference?

Before doing anything, I had to wait for a letter from Anna who had to ask for her husband's consent in the matter.

It would soon be three years since the war ended. I continued to study as in the past. I lived a rather dull life.

With Miki and some of his friends, we made up a group, and spent our free time discussing politics, the problems of adolescence and books. We even wrote short stories and seriously appraised them. I was the oldest in the group, and the others liked to listen to what I wrote.

The condition of the city, the ruins, the poverty that we found on all sides, and the fear of the police were proof enough, for me, that nothing was yet normal. My hope for my family's return became stronger than ever.

At home, my uncle persisted with his idea of my becoming a Christian. This was especially so during holidays. "Why are you keeping up the act? You haven't been Jewish for a long time."

"Perhaps I am not being a very good Jew, but I am not a Christian. To convert would be like betraying my parents. I will never do it."

"You talk a lot of nonsense. We insist for your own god. Your future would be far less complicated if you were a Christian."

"If we didn't do it before the war, why would we do it now?"

"Because we don't know what could happen to your children."

"Today there is no difference any more. Communism has brought atheism with it. Religion no longer plays a role in social relationships."

I told them this, knowing that it wasn't true. How many times had I heard someone saying: "You know, he is a Jew," a detail pronounced with indifference, but underlined, nonetheless.

"You are wasting your time. The only person who would be able to make me convert is my father. But since I know that he would never do it, we will remain Jews."

I recounted this conversation to Aunt Nety.

"What! Aren't they ashamed to talk to you about your religion after all that we have endured? What will your parents say?"

"They'll say nothing at all because I'll remain who I am. But to be honest, I don't know why. How much have we suffered because our god is not their god? After all, Jesus, too, was a Jew, wasn't he? Where I'm concerned, my faith is a deep feeling, but it has nothing to do with my religion. If I stop being Rely, to become Rada, I will not change my faith. I will only change my name.

What fear I saw in my aunts eyes!

"Don't worry. I'll never do it because it's the name my parents gave me. But I find that the attachment we place on our religion is not logical. Look at this country! Officially, there is no more religion! God has finished his career. He is no longer in fashion!"

"What way of talking is this? Yugoslavia is not the world! Besides, you know that people keep their religion in spite of the regime. Outside our borders, there is a Christian world, in front of which, today more than ever, we must keep our roots. Do you want to deny your parents?"

"I will not deny anyone. But it will not stop me from thinking that it's terrible to be Jewish! Why don't we have the right to choose a safer future, an easier life? I would like to be convinced that a new generation of Jewish children will not be forced to drag themselves in front of a concentration camp where their fathers and brothers have been incarcerated; who will not be separated from them and from their mothers; who will not have to hide for years without knowing why; who will not have to explain, almost begging for forgiveness, the fact that they have survived and feel guilty for it. For them I would like to choose a better future. I would want them to feel truly at home in this country, to be real Yugoslavs in their compatriots' eyes, and to share the same fate, no matter what happens."

"That will never happen because it doesn't depend on us."

"No, it will depend precisely upon our religion. If we really want to be Yugoslavs, we must stop being Jews!" I said.

"I feel Yugoslav. Why do you talk like that?"

"My father, too, felt Yugoslav. But when they were deported, our neighbours and even our friends said: 'They are persecuting the Jews. The Jews aren't allowed to use the trams. The Jews can't go to school.' I have never heard them say when referring to us: '*We* are made to do forced labour. *Our* women are forced to carry the Germans' suitcases. *We* have been deported to a concentration camp.' Then what kind of Yugoslavs are we? I would like to cease being *them* to become *us*. Do you understand?"

"No. I don't understand anything at all. You are hurting yourself, but I don't doubt that you will remain what you are. After this war, the world's relations with the Jews will change. We have only to wait."

After I left her, I felt ashamed and later I felt remorse. It was because of the Germans that I was afraid of the future. It was they who made us discover that, in case of danger, we had no nationality; that we would always be alone, defenceless and impotent. To remain Jewish was for me a question of duty, of fidelity towards my family. But I didn't believe that this feeling could help me overcome my fear of the future. Was there a solution?

CHAPTER 20

Spring, 1947. Anna and Uncle Toio were waiting for me with open arms. They sent me a medical report in which the orthopaedic surgeon, whom Anna had consulted about my arm, showing him the x-rays, advised immediate surgical intervention as the only way to save it. They were convinced that this report would help me to obtain a passport, the more so, because the doctors in Belgrade admitted their inability to cure me.

I had to get ready. Instead of being happy, my heart was heavy. I had been waiting for my family for six years. During this time, not a single day had gone by without my thinking about my folks. I had not been to see our house, having promised myself to return to it only with my family. And now, I was leaving Yugoslavia, and I felt that I would be even farther away from them. I used to tell myself that I had to stay there, where my mother had left me. I could see her coming back, running in a hurry to find the street, climbing the two floors, ringing at the door and not finding me there. I could see her face, disappointed, her eyes full of tears. I wiped my own.

"If it's impossible to leave the country, it's very easy to return to it," people would repeat to me.

Analysing the situation, I saw that my aunt wasn't to stop me from going. I would never know if it were because she thought that it was better for me to go for my own well being, or because the time had come for someone to take care of me.

As well, another thing bothered me. Aunt Nety, who helped me go from one office to another, didn't seem happy to see me go. I couldn't understand why. People risked their lives to find freedom again, like her own sister-in-law who, with her husband, escaped to Italy by sea, wearing only a swimsuit. One day, when for the tenth time, I asked her the same question, she told me, "I'm afraid for you. Anna probably doesn't have all the qualities that you attribute to her. She has a big imagination. She can make you see a picture of misfortune even in bright colours."

"What are you trying to say? That she is a liar?"

"No. I don't know her well enough. She left when she was eighteen. Since then she must have changed as we all have. But I don't want you to be disappointed. What I want to say is that you don't have to take literally everything that she has written to you. On the other hand, it's very difficult to refuse such an invitation. But think of all the effort that

you have made to catch up with your school years so as to get accepted at university."

"But I can also do it there!"

"Yes, but that will make you lose at least a year."

"I will study night and day. I'm used to it. Besides, there is my arm to be considered. I can have the operation there and put an end to the suffering."

"You are right. It's above all because of that that you must go. Perhaps straight after the operation you will decide to come back."

The rounds of the government offices were endless. The employees sent me from one to another, always asking for yet another document. The last one that they demanded was the confirmation of my parents' deportation and my status as a war orphan. I was not a child any more, but I rebelled against this condition that they wanted to impose on me.

"My parents are going to return!"

"That may be, but while you are waiting, they have not yet returned. Then either you stay here and wait for them, or you bring us the document."

I then went to the office of the Jewish community.

"I need a document testifying to the deportation of my parents and my brother, and to the fact that, until this moment, we know nothing of their fate."

The employee looked as though he wanted to tell me something, but my harsh look must have stopped him. He asked me to wait a moment for time to prepare the document. This place weighed on me. I had difficulty breathing. The walls were covered with long lists of all the names of the deported, but I didn't look for those of my family. The room was full of people. I covered my ears so as not to hear them telling their stories. I closed my eyes so as not to see them crying. They didn't respect my privacy, asking me who I was, and where I was, during the war. They wanted to touch my face – put their hands on my head. They wanted to make me enter into their gloomy, heart-breaking, and intimidating world. Between these walls, they cried over their tragedy and over their dead. I didn't belong to this hopeless world without a future. They lost their families, but I hadn't lost mine!

The employee gave me the document, and, even before I put it in my handbag, I was out of that cemetery of the living, toward the street and the sun. I breathed the air of my expectations, but anguish enclosed my heart. I understood that these poor people knew something that I denied with all my being. Breathless, I ran, repeating to myself, that , if I doubted, I would have to accept not seeing my family ever again. I didn't have the right to abandon them. They had promised me, and they would return, because they knew how I waited for them.

The ministry demanded a medical certificate stating that it was impossible to perform the operation in Belgrade.

The doctor who had been treating me refused to provide me with such a certificate.

"I can operate on you, but the damage has been done. Your hand is deformed, and no one will be able to correct that."

"But it hurts terribly. I can't stand the pain. In France they can help me."

"I don't think that they can do there what we cannot do here."

My trip became impossible. I was desperate. All of a sudden, I wanted, at all costs, to say, to argue, about all those things, which lead to forced labour.

My disappointment was so noticeable that it ruined my relationship with my aunt and uncle. Now they spoke sarcastically of France and made unpleasant remarks about Anna.

"It may be that very soon you will miss Yugoslavia and all of us."

"I miss you already. But you wanted me to go."

Every day, the distance between us became greater. I wondered how I would manage to continue to live with them. I felt that somehow I was no longer a part of the family and that made me very unhappy.

With Aunt Nety, I continued to look for a doctor who was willing to provide the necessary certificate. That was why I went to the rooms of Professor Yovtchich who had treated me before the war. Without having

to beg him, he wrote a detailed report advising an urgent operation in France.

Armed with all these documents, I finally made my request, begging the minister to grant me a permit for three months in France. The clerk who received me classified the papers and gave me a sidelong glance. "You will have the answer within a month."

The days passed and the mailbox remained empty. Now, along with news of my parents, I awaited an answer from the ministry.

What I wouldn't have given to have my parents back and not to have to leave Belgrade. I had the impression that all of the doors behind me had closed and that I wouldn't be able to open the one in front of me. The second month had just passed, when, one day, I found my aunt holding in her hands an official envelope. The answer was written on her face. "They have refused your request, and have returned all your documents," she told me, handing me the letter.

The minister wished me good health, and good luck for the operation, which I must have in Yugoslavia, like all the citizens who needed medical attention.

"You must get the idea of this trip out of head. We will do what we can to treat your arm here."

How could tell her that nothing had been done here for the last three years.

"You are right," I replied.

I spent the night thinking of what I could do, and, on the following morning, I took all my documents and went to the ministry. With a decisive voice, I told the clerk that I had to speak to the minister. She looked at me stupefied. "What an idea! Nobody can see him! Write down what you want to tell him, and we will give him your letter."

"No! I must see him. I have the right to see him!" My voice could be heard throughout the hall.

"Who are you? What have you got to tell him that is so urgent?"

"My name is Relly Alfandary. I am Jewish. I was locked in a room that was two metres by one metre for three-and-a-half years. Now I want to go to France where I have an aunt and where I can have the operation that will save my right arm. My request has been denied, and I want to speak to the minister."

"Very well. Go home, and we will let you know the day and time that he can see you."

"No, I will wait here for him."

She looked at me perplexed. The three-and-a-half years spent in a room had their effect. She got up and disappeared behind a door at the end of the corridor.

I wondered where I found the courage to do what I did. But during the night, I grew aware that no one had the right to stop me from putting an

end to my suffering and saving my arm. By asking to see the minister, I had nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

"Comrade come back tomorrow at ten o'clock. Comrade the Minister will see you then. You are really lucky," she added in a hushed voice.

Aunt Nety was happy. "Perhaps it was the only thing left for you to do."

Aunt Mathilde was less happy. "That was very dangerous. Where did you get such an idea? You will end up in prison."

"Why? They can't say that I'm a fascist. Besides I haven't forgotten that, thanks to them, I regained my freedom. This minister spent the years during the war in the forests. He will understand."

"Be careful not to get us involved in this trip of yours."

"You have nothing to fear. I am nearly eighteen. I am responsible for myself. What I am doing, I am doing alone, on my own behalf."

They were still afraid of what I might say or cause. This was one more reason for me to get away.

It was ten o'clock, the following morning. For half an hour I stood in front of Minister Rancovitch's office. I was scared. For the thousandth time, I wondered if Anna was the person I thought she was. Was the real reason for my trip not the operation that I had to have, but my desire to leave my relatives who had saved my life, but who were now tired of me? And what if this man, the minister, could guess my feelings better than I could?

They called me and let me enter a large office. In front of me, behind an impressive desk, sat a man, still young, who smiled at me. "Yes, Comrade Relly, what is so urgent that you didn't want to write to me? Speak, I'm listening."

I would like to go to France to have an operation on my right arm. I have an aunt there who will help me. My request for a passport has been denied. Since I can't bear the pain any more, I wanted to see you and personally explain my situation. I know that you wouldn't want me to lose the chance to save my arm."

"After reading your file, I am persuaded now, more than ever, that you will not be better off anywhere else than in your own country. You are a war orphan, aren't you?"

"No. I am waiting for my parents. I don't understand why you refuse to let me go."

"Are you a communist?"

"I'm Jewish. The communists liberated me, and I am grateful to them."

During the entire conversation, he had been looking at my papers, but at this reply, he lifted his head.

"Since the liberation, I have done nothing but study."

"You should have found time to participate actively in the reconstruction of your country, and your own re-education."

I had no reply to that. Suddenly, I developed severe cramps in the stomach.

"You will return at the end of three months, and that should be enough time for your recovery."

"Yes, certainly." My voice did not falter.

He pressed a button and a clerk entered.

"I grant Comrade Alfandary a passport valid for three months and a visa to leave the country. Please make the necessary arrangements to give it to her at once."

"There you are. You can leave right away," he said, smiling. "You don't lack courage. I hope your operation will be uncomplicated. Have a good journey and a still better return." He gave me his hand and shook mine energetically.

"Thank you." I felt myself blushing. My courage went on holiday!

An hour later, with my passport and visa in my purse, ready to conquer the world, I thought of the man who gave me a chance to start a new life. I felt a little guilty. What if I didn't return in three months? I would think about that situation when the time came. If my parents returned, I would come back even sooner.

At home, only the fact of seeing my passport succeeded in convincing them that the minister had not only received me but also had given me the authorisation to leave, wishing me a good journey.

The lesson that I drew from this experience was that if one didn't try, one would certainly get nothing. But if one persisted in attempting the impossible, there was always a chance that things would arrange themselves to suit one's wishes.

I wrote to Anna announcing the great news. As she had told me, I would have to leave by train to Milan, where Uncle Bata's sister and his brother-in-law would wait for me. From there, I would have to make a telephone call for her to come to pick me up and take me to Nice.

Before packing my suitcase, I had to request an entry visa from the French consulate. The following morning I went. I was told to return in two weeks. A fortnight! What a disappointment! But there was nothing I could do. I had to wait. In the meantime, I paid my farewell visits. Everybody envied me. No one could understand how I had accomplished the impossible.

Tito's government had given me the right to dispose of my parents' property – that is to say, our house. My uncle suggested that I should leave him the power of attorney so that he could act on my behalf, in case of need.

They also decided that I should not take all my clothing since Anna would buy me far more beautiful ones. The idea displeased me but I, but I couldn't say so.

The two weeks passed. I went again to the consulate with Aunt Nety.

"We are sorry, but we haven't received an answer for you."

"My permit to leave expires in a week. I'll never be able to obtain a new one." Tears started to flow in spite of my efforts to stop them.

"I truly want to help you. Come back in two days."

She left her place to accompany us to the door, and, before she opened it, she put her finger on her lips and whispered something in French.

The door closed in silence. "What did she tell you?" I asked.

"You will never get a visa, because France does not grant them to the citizens of communist countries."

I thought about all I had just lost; about the new life that I could not start; about the possibility of curing my arm; about the joy of living in France with Anna, who really wanted me. I wanted to be alone to get over my mortification. Aunt Nety left me. She already knew me well enough to know what I needed.

In the street, I walked with my teeth clenched. After all that I had done, it was now France that didn't want me! What was the use of crying?

Could I, perhaps, get an Italian visa – a transit visa? It would suffice to get me to Milan. Once there, Anna could explain my situation and the French would let me enter. I had nothing to lose. I decided to go to the Italian consulate.

"Young lady, you must have your French visa, in order for us to issue ours.."

"The visa awaits me in Milan.

"Wait a moment, please. I must ask if this is possible." She returned quickly.

"Are you travelling alone?" She stared at me.

"Yes. I must have the operation in France."

"Why is it that the visa awaits you in Milan and not here?"

"To gain time my aunt has requested it in Milan."

I wondered if my face was as calm as I wanted it to be. I had so much to lose.

"We can only grant you a stay of forty-eight hours."

"Thank you. That will be enough."

She took my passport and disappeared. I was scared by what I had just done, but I had no one to talk to. My head was spinning and my heart was racing. I started to count in order not to think, so as not to show my agitation.

I saw her coming back, and again it seemed as though her eyes were trying to read my thoughts.

"Don't forget, you must leave Italy after the forty-eight hours, otherwise you will be expelled and punished."

"I will leave right away."

"Have a nice trip."

"Thank You."

Outside the sun shone only for me.

I returned home to get the money that Anna had sent me, and went to the station to buy my ticket.

"You will take the Orient Express to Trieste and there take the connecting train to Milan. It's a long journey. You will spend the night on the train that will possibly be empty after a certain station. There will be some foreigners, but they usually travel in the sleepers."

I hardly listened to him. What did I care who would be on the train?

What mattered to me was that I would be!

Aunt Nety was sad and uneasy. "A young girl alone, at night, on an almost empty train! You must be careful! Lock the door of your compartment! Don't trust anyone!"

How could she be so old fashioned, my little aunt?

"Don't forget if you are not happy in France, return here right away. We will find another apartment, and we'll have a corner for you."

What was she afraid of? How could she understand Anna who was so dynamic, modern, broadminded and so different from all of us?

The day of my departure arrived. The whole family accompanied me to the station. I carried only one suitcase, but it was heavy as I had packed the books that I liked the most. They helped me to get settled in my

compartment. Looking at my cousins, I had a lump in my throat. They were my little brothers and sister. I was sorry to be leaving Belgrade – to be leaving them. The train started moving, and I realised that there were still so many things that I wanted to tell them. Through my tears, I watched the train as it distanced itself from all the things I loved and knew so well: my relatives, my friends, my studies, the city, the streets and the country that my parents loved so dearly. I was leaving all this behind to go and live in a country whose language I didn't speak and which didn't even want me, to live with an aunt whom I scarcely knew. But the future could never be as difficult as the past. Perhaps, in a few days, I would take this train again to return to Belgrade, and at the station my parents and Atza would be waiting for me.

My compartment was full. Some looked at me with curiosity, surprised to see me travelling alone and so far. The others mistrusted me. From their questions, I gathered that they thought that I must be the daughter of one of the leaders of the country.

Progressively, as we approached the border, the train began to empty, until it was completely deserted. Now I would face reality. What would I do if they denied me the visa in Milan? It was true that, at home, everybody agreed that my only problem was to cross the Yugoslav border; the French knew what it took to leave a communist country.

They would not refuse entrance to a young girl who would not be a burden on their country.

The future that, in spite of my fears, I had succeeded in painting brightly, only a few hours ago, became frighteningly menacing. If they expelled me, I would end up in a prison in Belgrade. I would have no one to blame, since the idea was all mine. I was responsible. Fear and loneliness, my old companions, invaded the compartment. Why was it that everything that I did had to be so complicated? Prison! A shut door that I could not open to get outside. Since the war, physical freedom was, for me, life itself. How did I dare gamble with it? Behind the prison door, I would die, for, in order to live, I had to feel that it was enough for me merely to want to open the door, in order to be able to step outside and walk freely. What would my mother and father say about my foolishness?

The night passed. I didn't close my eyes.

"In half an hour, we will be at the border. Have your cases and passport ready," announced the conductor, half asleep.

"Are there still any Yugoslavs on the train?" I asked him.

"No, Comrade. You are the only one. In the sleeper, there are many foreigners, and in your section there are also several British. That is all."

"Thank you."

"Have a good trip."

I quickly freshened up, prepared my suitcase and purse, and stepped into the corridor to wait for the border. Two young people were leaning against the window, and peering into the horizon. I did the same, but, other than the fields, one could see nothing. It was already morning.

The two young people approached me and introduced themselves. They were Danish journalists. They spoke to me in German. I replied in my bad English. German was the language that I would never speak again! They were returning from a month-long stay in Turkey and crossing through Yugoslavia by train. They noticed my nervousness, and offered to help me with my suitcase if I needed to carry it. They invited me to share their breakfast. Their presence encouraged me, but I refused their sandwich. I was not even able to swallow my own saliva!

The train stopped in the middle of wheat fields. This time, leaning against the windows, we could see, at about three hundred metres from the train, a sort of cabin. The border!

I was the only one who had to go through customs. All the other passengers, being in transit, had not left the train during the journey through Yugoslavian territory.

Two malicious-looking policemen examined the passports, and seeing mine, told me to take my suitcase to put it through customs.

"It's too heavy," I told them, shyly.

"You should have thought of that before," replied one of them without looking at me. "The train will leave in a few minutes, so take your case and hurry up."

One of the Danish journalists took it, but at the moment when we began to leave the train, the policeman explained that foreigners were forbidden to leave the train and that I must do it quickly if I wanted to continue my trip that day. I began to go down the steps, which were very high, when my suitcase slipped out of my hands, fell and opened, scattering all its contents. Madly, I tried to push the books and the clothing back into the case and finally succeeded in closing the lock on one side only. The travellers, including those from the sleeping car, followed the scene from the windows.

I dragged the case, feeling that, with each step, I was moving away from Milan and getting closer to prison.

The station was full of policemen and soldiers, all Croatians from their accent. This alone was enough to make me more anxious.

"Where do you come from?" And without waiting for my answer, "Where are you going? You have only an Italian transit visa! Who has permitted you to travel like this?"

My passport did the rounds of all those present.

"I come from Belgrade. My French visa is waiting for me in Milan."

"Why Milan? Why not Belgrade?"

"My aunt has obtained it there for me."

"What kind of a story is this? I have never heard of such a thing!"

"Phone the French consulate in Milan," suggested one of them.

"Are you crazy? It's five o'clock in the morning. There won't be any one there, and we'll make her miss her train. Besides, she only has a two-day stay in Italy. We only risk complicating matters."

"If she doesn't have her documents in order, we will have her back in a salad basket in two days," said another one, obviously accustomed to giving orders. Then, addressing me, he said, "What is the problem? Aren't our doctors good enough for you?"

"They advised me to have an operation in France."

He handed me back my passport while a soldier emptied my suitcase to the last pair of stockings. The locomotive whistled!

"It will leave without you. What are you waiting for? Pick all this up."

My hands were shaking. Under the mocking eyes of these heroes, I couldn't arrange the things and the case wouldn't close! The train whistled signalling its departure. I wanted to leave everything there and run.

"Do you think that they will wait for you all day?"

The case was on the point of opening but I succeeded in dragging it along. The travellers on the train applauded me and shouted cries of encouragement. On the steps of the first carriage, the Danes awaited

me, and when I finally arrived, their arms lifted me together with my case and the train began to move.

The conductor and two Italian soldiers smiled at me as they handed back my passport.

It was over. I was in Italy!

For some years, when I was homesick, I saw myself dragging my suitcase across the fields in the middle of nowhere and the sickness lightened considerably.

This was the last image I had of the country that was the fatherland of generations of my family, and which would be, for me, only the country of my origin.