Rea ŽIVKOVIĆ

MEMORIES OF WAR

Rea Živković Reiss was born in Sarajevo on November 23, 1932. Her father, architect and engineer Isidor Reiss, was born in Sarajevo and her mother, Dr Kete (née Podebrat) in Prague. Her father was killed in Jasenovac on the eve of the breakout in April, 1945. Her mother is believed to have been killed after the Đakovo camp was evacuated. Her paternal grandmother died of typhus in Đakovo on June 10, 1942, and her paternal grandfather died in Jasenovac in 1941. Her mother's entire family from Czechoslovakia was killed in various European camps.

She worked for Jugometal and then for the Central Committee of the Union of Communist Youth while studying part time. After graduating she worked as a primary school teacher of English and then in the Serbian Ministry of Information from 1961 until her retirement.

She married Duško Živković in 1959 and has two sons, Marko (born 1961) and Bora (born 1966), both of whom are postgraduate students in the United States. She also has two grandchildren.

I was nine years old when the war began. I remember many events and various people and situations. The memories are fragmented of course, and merged with stories and knowledge learned subsequently, but they reach far back into the past.

I remember very clearly our apartment in Sokolska Street in Sarajevo and I know that this apartment was in a building designed by my father. Our apartment was furnished in a completely different way from those I remember my grandmother and cousins living in at the time. It had three rooms and my father had his office in the apartment. The furniture in the sitting room wasn't finished in wood veneer, instead it was painted red. The floor was covered with a thin, woven wool carpet. There weren't many ornaments and I don't remember any paintings on the walls. The bedroom was large with three day-beds, not the traditional bedroom with double beds. Each bed was covered with three large cushions which at night were turned over to make a mattress. The bed linen was stored in trunks below the mattresses. There was a smallish cupboard in the room but most of the clothes were kept in tall wardrobes which stretched the entire length of the long hall.

My mother was Czech and moved from Prague to Sarajevo after she married my father. She had beautiful black hair, black eyes and carried herself with dignity. I remember her as a calm and steady person. She had graduated in philosophy from the Karlov University in Prague and in Sarajevo she learned our language quickly and was soon working in a company. I always remember her with a book in her hands; she would bring books home from the library behind the Minerva bookstore. I remember her taking lessons in Spanish. She also went to classes in glove-making because before the war it was considered useful for everyone to learn a trade. She chose to learn to make leather gloves! I would often break off from playing to take my mother a piece of paper or a short thread to mark the page in her book where she had left off her reading. I would sit on her lap and ask her to play with me. I remember she taught me English and French.

Sarajevo was a completely new atmosphere for my mother, but I think she very quickly became accustomed to it, fitting in and adjusting. My father's family accepted her warmly and this Sarajevo family also accepted her family from Prague. They especially loved my grandmother from Prague and would call her "Goldige", the golden woman.

My mother met my father when he went to Prague for further studies after finishing his architectural degree in Zagreb. They decided to marry within weeks of meeting. They became engaged in Prague and my grandfather attended with one of his daughters. This was when my mother was given her engagement ring which, by sheer luck, has survived until today and which I treasure.

I remember my mother sitting reading a letter one evening and weeping as my father held and comforted her. It was bad news from Prague: my mother's family was in danger from the Germans or had already been taken to a camp. Her large family spent some time in Terezin before all finishing in Auschwitz.

Before Hitler's troops arrived in Prague we had visited my mother's family there several times. I have hazy memories of scenes and events, but I remember visiting my great grandmother. She would lie in bed and every day there would be a bar of Nestle chocolate in its shiny red wrapping waiting for me on her dressing table. I remember very clearly one morning we found our great grandmother was not in bed and we were all excited. I didn't understand then, but she had died that day.

My father worked long hours but would take us for outings in his car. I remember the hot sand of the Boračko lake. I remember the wild strawberries we would gather behind the sanatorium in Pale (which was designed by my father). My clearest memories are of our frequent visits to my grandmother and grandfather and the gatherings of the whole family on Friday evenings and on holidays. There were a lot of children and it was always fun and cheerful. I know that my grandmother ate a strict kosher diet, but I used to like ham so I was not allowed to eat from a plate at the table, but instead ate from paper on a chair. During the day we children would play on the large terrace of my grandmother's house. My grandfather's big cleaning and dying business, Reiss, was also in the house, and he also had several branches around the town. As well as cleaning and dyeing, the business also pleated fabrics and covered buttons.

My mother was working, so I had a German woman to take care of me. I don't remember, but they say that I learned German well with her and spoke it excellently. My mother spoke German to me and I remember that I would reply to her in Serbian.

When I grew up a little and began going to school, I also started learning ballet in my Aunt Anika's private school. She was also a Czech and she and my mother were great friends. They both had the same problems adjusting to their new environment, learning new ways and fitting into a new society. I learned to play the piano and the accordion. I adored Anika and loved dancing. I remember the ballet classes clearly and our preparations for public appearances, together with the first and only performance of *Collegium Artisticum* in Sokol House. I

remember the costumes and even some steps from the two parts in which I had a role. These were noticed and noted in a book on the history of ballet in Sarajevo! I was barely eight years old at the time.

Everyone was very well aware of what was going on in Europe and we had a lot of information about what had happened to our family in Czechoslovakia. One of our cousins who had escaped from Czechoslovakia before the Nazis entered the country was living with us. We knew everything, but still we waited. Fortunately, part of the family managed to flee from Sarajevo to Split in time and thus they saved themselves. Only my grandmother, grandfather, father, mother and I stayed in Sarajevo. My father had a written certificate guaranteeing his safety, and once he woke me during the night and showed me the paper to convince me we were safe now and nothing could happen to us. His friends and colleagues also assured him they would protect him.

In the autumn of 1941, I was in the third grade of primary school. One day, in the middle of a class, a tall, heavy man with a fez on his head appeared in the classroom. He approached the teacher and said something to her. She looked at me and said "Rahel, you have to go home at once." I was surprised and frightened because I had no idea why the man was taking me home. I knew him, he was the doorman or lift attendant in the building we lived in.

There was a large truck covered with a tarpaulin in front of the house. In front of the truck were men, women and children standing in silence. Then they began getting into the truck, each carrying a bundle, a sack or a suitcase. Inside the apartment I found my mother and a friend of hers who was living with us packing food and other items. There were some people I didn't know standing in the hall hurrying us along. They took us to a camp. My father was at work and they didn't find him: he stayed in hiding at a friend's house. The truck took us to the barracks near our house. There we found my grandmother and grandfather and many relatives and friends. I don't remember many details of our ten-day stay in the barracks. I only remember that it was nice weather and that we children played in the yard. Ten days later they sent us all home, so we returned to Sarajevo. Our apartment had been sealed up, so we went to stay with my grandmother and grandfather. A few days later, my father emerged from hiding, convinced that the danger had passed and that nobody would bother us any more.

One Sunday after lunch, while we were still sitting at the table chatting, an Ustasha wearing a fez appeared. My father produced his

letters and certificate, but the Ustasha wouldn't even look at them or discuss it and only insisted that we move immediately. Again there was a truck waiting in the street, full with the same people with whom we'd been confined in the barracks for ten days. Everyone had believed that the danger had passed when they let us go home. Again we were taken to the same barracks. We children were already asleep on our bags when my father and grandfather came that evening to say goodbye. They took all the men out and put them on a train for an unknown destination. Later we discovered that they had been taken to Jasenovac. I was still sleepy, having been awakened from my first dream, so I didn't even say goodbye to my father when he kissed and hugged me. I just half-opened my eyes and went back to sleep. I only remember hearing the adults through my dream, agitated and weeping.

I know that my grandfather was among a group of elderly people who were forced to stand in the Sava River until they were exhausted and fell into the water. My father, as an architect, had a different destiny. He worked in the drawing room of the architecture office, which meant that he didn't freeze like the others, or have to work in the marshes or on the dikes, and that he was probably spared the physical mistreatment and hunger. I have several postcards which he wrote to me during 1944 in which he asked for tobacco, saccharin and fruit. I heard a lot about the way my father lived in Jasenovac from the stories of the camp survivors. Right up to the last moment, until the end of the war and the liberation of Jasenovac, he believed that a fellow-architect who was his boss and a commander would save him. However he was killed on April 21, 1945, the day before the mass breakout from the camp.

There were dirty railway wagons waiting for us. We set off in them to our unknown destination, travelling for a very long time. We spent a lot of time stationary on the railway line in open country. Time passed and we had no idea how many days and nights we had spent jostling up against one another in the suffocating wagons. There was no space to lie down and barely enough to sit, as the wagons were packed with children and women, young and old. There was no food of course and the air was heavy. We weren't even allowed to get out to relieve ourselves when the train stopped. On only a handful of occasions, the doors were suddenly opened and strangers brought us some food and refreshments. I think this was organised by the Jewish community, or perhaps the Red Cross. They let us out only once. "You can't get through me! Go around!" the women would yell, shoving one another to get back into

the wagons as if it was some kind of good luck to get back inside. These were the older women who spoke Ladino and didn't know our language very well, which made us laugh. It's difficult for me to work out how many days we spent on this train. We finally found out that the Ustashas were taking us to Loborgrad, but there was no room there so they returned us to Sarajevo.

We travelled in third-class wagons, sitting on wooden benches, hoping they would let us go again. Nobody could grasp what was happening to us and nor did they want to believe that there was no hope. It was my birthday, November 23, just before we reached Sarajevo. Because of this I can work out when all this happened, although my dates don't correspond to those of other inmates, and it's not important in any case. Everyone from our convoy was accommodated in the primary school in Marijin Dvor, just a few metres away from the building in which we had originally lived and from which we were taken to the camp. The accommodation was decent, friends brought quilts for us and the Germans would bring us food in large pots. We children would play in the schoolyard and were free to visit the families living within the school yard.

A few days later we were on the move again. We packed up and again set off by train for an unknown destination, again not knowing how long the journey would take. We finally reached Đakovo and were taken into a large, one-storey building. It was empty, with straw spread on the floor. We set about making ourselves comfortable. Someone collected some stale bread to make bread mash for dinner. Next morning there were long trestles with washbowls full of water waiting for us in the mill yard in front of the building. There were even enough toilets. This is how we were welcomed by the Jewish Community in Osijek whose members had converted this flour mill for our new accommodation.

The Osijek Municipality, like that in Vinkovci, had managed strike a deal with the Ustashas allowing a certain number of children to be released from the camp. My mother decided to send me to Osijek. I later discovered that Juliška Kraus had been the leader in organising assistance for the camp and also took the initiative in getting as many children as possible out of the camp. She and my mother knew each other from a vacation on Mt Trebević before the war and she persuaded my mother to let me go, promising that she would place me with a family who would take good care of me and save me.

It was an early winter morning, December 7, 1941, as far as I remember. There were about thirty children lined up in the yard saying goodbye to their mothers, grandmothers and aunts. Everyone was hugging one another and assuring one other that we would be back together soon and that we would be allowed to visit. My mother and I kissed each other quickly, optimistic that we would see each other soon. As we left the yard I looked back and saw my mother crying. They hurried us along to the railway station.

Today I understand how brave those mothers were. It needed a strong character to take the decision to send their children into the unknown, with little or no hope of ever seeing them again. On top of their own suffering, the sorrow of these women at the departure of their children must have been impossible to express.

We arrived in Osijek on Sunday afternoon. I didn't know the city. There were people we didn't know waiting for us and they took us to the Jewish Community and offered us tea and sandwiches. As far as I can remember, not one of us ate anything.

More people arrived, coming to choose either a boy or a girl. They all chose children according to age and gender, so that they would fit in more easily with their own children. I was the only one who knew where I was going, and that was to the Schmuckler family. Their younger daughter, Rut, came for me, Mrs Kraus having already made the arrangements. When we arrived at the house, Julija Schmuckler was waiting for me with her husband, Dr Vili and their elder daughter, Belica. Rut was 14 and Belica 18. They first took me to the bathroom and completely undressed me to wash me properly. This was my first shock. I shyly whispered: "I don't want to have a bath here, the water is dirty!" And in fact the water in Osijek was yellow, as though it had mud in it. They used well water for drinking while the water from the pipes was dark yellow. Anyway, they managed to persuade me, gave me a bath and then took me to the children's room to sleep. My new hosts went to another room, leaving me to sleep alone. Once I was alone, what had happened to me began to sink in. I had been separated from my mother and brought to this strange city, to strangers. I began to cry, silently at first, then louder and louder until I was shouting: "I'll go crazy in this house, I'll go crazy without my mother." They somehow calmed me down, promising that I could go to see my mother the next day, and I fell asleep. The same thing happened the next night and for several nights after that. It was easier during the day, but the nights were

so hard: as soon as they left me alone I would be in crisis again. Because I wouldn't eat and I was suffering from dysentery, they began to wonder seriously what they should do. I had brought the dysentery from the camp but didn't want to admit that I was sick for fear they would take me to a doctor. But in the end, everything gradually worked itself out.

Dr Schmuckler was a well-known and highly-regarded ophthalmologist who had graduated in Vienna. He was an extraordinary man, educated, intelligent and very disciplined, with both himself and other people. He demanded absolute and strict hygiene, sometimes bordering on the excessive. He demanded that we constantly wash our hands and would not allow us to touch anything he considered dirty. He followed everyone around, wiping the doorknobs with cotton and alcohol if anyone else touched them. He would follow us to the bathroom and turn the tap on for us, so that we didn't touch the "clean" tap with our "dirty" hands. We had to take notice of this and finally became accustomed to it as though it was completely normal. Had he not been so stubborn, we would probably have fallen ill during the war from the various diseases to which we were exposed.

Julija Schmuckler, whom we called Auntie, was Russian. She was a strong personality, capable and hard-working. Because they had no housemaid and there were already a lot of us, she took on all the housework herself. She cooked, did the laundry and the cleaning and during the war learnt various manual skills with no difficulty and without complaining.

Rutika, the younger daughter, was mature for her age, very independent and communicative, while Belica, the elder, was calm, silent, serious and reserved. Within a few weeks of arriving in Osijek, after overcoming my crisis, I began to get used to my new family. I would cuddle up to my new auntie, because I really needed a lot of warmth and understanding and she knew how to give me that. I became very close to her, and started to feel secure as I helped her with the household chores.

The Jewish Community in Osijek arranged schooling for all of us. They enrolled me in the third grade of primary school.

When the second transport arrived, a little dark-haired girl named Betika came from the camp to my new family. She didn't know how old she was and still wet her bed. The Schmuckler family accepted Betika in the same way they had accepted me. With the third convoy, a boy arrived, but unfortunately for him his aunt took him away a little later.

We heard that he was taken to a camp with the rest of his family and they were all killed.

One day Mr Maestro appeared at the Schmucklers. I knew him from Sarajevo where he was a kindergarten teacher. He had brought a permit for me to travel to Split to my Aunt Anika and Uncle Neđo (Ani and Nathan Reiss). Although I really loved Anika and Neđo, I wasn't sure that I wanted to go to them. I had just got over the first shock of being separated from my mother and settled in with the Schmucklers and now I was supposed to leave them. Aunt Julija and Uncle Vili were confused and asked Mr Maestro to come back in the afternoon for my answer, as they expected me to decide for myself. That afternoon, my answer was no. The Schmucklers hadn't wanted to persuade me to go, because they didn't want to feel responsible later if anything had happened to me on the way. There was war raging throughout the entire country and it was extremely dangerous to travel.

I stayed in touch with my mother through postcards from the camp. These were double cards, my mother would write on one half, then I would tear off the other half and write my reply on it. I received lots of postcards from her, but had to destroy them all before I left Osijek. We wanted to hide the fact that Betika and I were children from the camp so keeping the postcards could have been dangerous. We were always introduced as the Schmucklers' children. Aunt Julija didn't ever want us to call her "mother", but we learned to address her using familiar forms and we didn't ever address her at all in front of other people.

They took a photograph of me and sent copies to my mother in the camp and to Aunt Anika and Uncle Neđo in Split. It was a good photograph and it certainly meant a lot to both my mother and my other relatives because they could see from it that I was being taken good care of. Much later, this same photograph was to play an interesting role in eastern Bosnia.

When people in Osijek heard that they had begun deporting Jews from the city we packed only our essentials, sat on our bundles, sacks and suitcases and waited for the trucks to pull up in front of the house and the Ustashas to climb out of them. I knew the whole scenario well. But then a colleague of my father found out about this and, knowing that I was with the Schmucklers, came to pick up Uncle Vili and they went into the town together. They returned before the Ustashas arrived and Dr Schmuckler had in his hand an order for his transfer to eastern Bosnia. He was being sent with his family to a village to begin treating

syphilis. So instead of going to a camp we caught the train to Gračanica, taking all the furniture and other belongings, even the piano. We set up house in an empty school in the village of Doborovci, not far from Gračanica. There was plenty of space although, of course, there was no running water or sewerage and there were a lot of mice. Dr Schmuckler set up an office in the village with the help of his daughter, Belica, acquired a stock of drugs and syringes and began a serious campaign to treat the syphilis endemic in the area. All the inhabitants of this Muslim village were infected congenitally.

The villagers immediately presented themselves for treatment, so there was a lot of work, not only for Uncle Vili, but also for the rest of us. Whenever patients would come for an injection or to have blood taken, they would bring gifts for the doctor. The women would bring a couple of apples, or a few peppers, perhaps a bunch of grapes or a little bundle of beans. It took a great deal of skill and effort to forge closer relationships with the villagers. They accepted us, appreciated us and, I think, liked us; they would invite us to their houses and cook meals for us.

The Muslim houses were very clean and tidy. Their custom was to take their shoes off at the door and enter the house only in clean socks or stockings, and they would wash several times a day. When the muezzin called from the minaret, everyone would wash their feet and their faces. The women and girls would put veils on before going out, but at home they remained uncovered. There wasn't a single family which wasn't infected with syphilis, so it was important to know how to avoid infection when being in contact with them.

I remember once we went to have lunch at the house of one important man in the village where we were greeted very warmly. We washed our hands and entered a large room where there were only men and we guests, the women came in only to serve us. We sat on the floor around a low table. Everyone had a spoon and the meal was served in a dish from which we all ate. It was put in the middle of the table and all of us had to use our own spoon. The first course was soup. We had agreed that we would serve ourselves with our spoons before anyone else put their spoon into the dish. Aunt Julija and Uncle Vili watched us children to see that we behaved the way we had been taught. With the pies which were served, alternatively sweet and savoury, it was easier. We would take a piece at a time and didn't have to touch pieces which other people's spoons had touched. At the end, they served halva. I couldn't eat

any more and so I put my spoon down beside me. I was sitting next to our host and he, in a very kind gesture, took a little halva on his spoon and put it into mine, beckoning me to eat it. All eyes were on me. What should I do? How should I react? How could I refuse our host's gesture without offending him? I succeeded, but it was a rather tense moment.

No matter how much we tried to keep our distance and be careful, there were still some invitations we could not avoid. It was important to win the trust and respect of the villagers: our lives depended on them. Both Aunt Julija and Uncle Vili showed great skill and courage in this.

Left: Rea in Osijek, in 1941 or 1942. After she left Đakovo, this photograph was sent to her mother in the camp and her relatives in Split. Right: April, 1945.

There were battles raging in the immediate vicinity and the Germans and the Ustashas were getting closer and closer. We began to think about leaving the village, to get as far away as possible from Gračanica. I remember Ibrahim, an Ustasha captain who was a frequent visitor. Rutika had caught his eye; she was cheerful, likeable and always good at striking up friendships. One day, knowing that we were in danger, Ibrahim offered to help us escape from the village. He got hold of some horse-drawn carts and that night we loaded almost all the furniture and set off for Trebava. Ibrahim had secured us safe passage across what was supposed to be the Chetnik territory. This was apparently safer, because the Germans and the Ustashas stayed away from it. We were a long way from any road or railway and no kind of regular army ever went there.

The people of Skipovac and Zelinje didn't have their own Chetnik army but they were afraid of the Partisans. They didn't ask us who we were or why we had come, but they did need a doctor. There was no syphilis here, instead there was tuberculosis and typhus.

I remember a number of events from that period. My Uncle Neđo visited us in Skipovac. He knew that we were in eastern Bosnia and when his Partisan unit arrived in our village he asked one of the locals whether he knew a Dr Schmuckler. The man he asked worked as a scout in Skipovac, sending information to the Partisans about military positions and the situation in the field. Uncle Neđo took my photograph from his pocket, the one we had sent from Osijek to Split in 1942. He was given precise information about where we were and, as soon as he got an opportunity, he sent us a message to come and meet him.

It was a warm summer afternoon. We all set off for the house, which was quite a distance away. We were excited and curious about this reunion after such a long time, especially after everything that had happened.

It was an exciting meeting. I remember Neđo and I standing facing each other for a moment before exclaiming at the same time "Look at you, with your hair cut like that!" Neđo had had wonderful, thick, black hair and I had had nice, thick curly hair. Now we both stood with our heads shaved and, after looking at each other for a moment, we quickly hugged. We met again not long afterwards. I remember we had just sat down to lunch one day when Neđo appeared on a white horse wearing a Partisan cap and a red star. We were surprised and pleased, but also rather frightened, because it was rather foolhardy to ride into a Chetnik village wearing a Partisan cap.

In Skipovac we lived in our own house, with plenty of space. We would collect water from the well and the toilet was in the yard. Summer was easier and we could find food more easily. There were a lot of orchards and plenty of wild fruit. If there was nothing for lunch we could always go to a plum orchard and stuff ourselves with plums. Every day we would go into the broad forest and collect wood, crushing dry branches and tying them into bundles to drag them home in preparation for winter.

The winters were long and harsh. We didn't have decent shoes and for days we couldn't go out into the snow and mud. At one time I was the only one who had proper winter shoes, which Neđo had given me. The others could only go out when the ground was frozen because they

only had peasant-style shoes. I didn't mind doing all the housework, I was strong and capable and knew how to cook and do the laundry. I could carry buckets of water from the well. I remember one winter when we had neither wheat nor corn flour. Instead of bread we cooked dry corn and ate it.

So as not to use our precious gas for lighting, we would go to bed early, especially during the winter. Sometimes all six of us would sleep in one room. On those winter nights Aunt and Uncle Schmuckler would talk about their lives and tell us stories from their younger days. Uncle Vili often sang operatic arias and I gradually began to like them. I could say that this was my first contact with opera!

I don't remember any of us ever being seriously ill. Uncle Vili would treat any minor aches and pains in the simplest of ways. If we caught a cold he would make us stay in bed and would put us on a diet if we had stomach problems, because there were no drugs. Not long before the end of the war, Aunt Julija fell seriously ill with what Uncle Vili diagnosed as a kidney problem. Again he prescribed a strict diet and plenty of bed rest. She was in bed for a long time so the household chores were divided up among us children.

We moved several times from house to house and from village to village. The last winter, 1944–45, we lived in the village of Zelinje. We stayed in the house of the local priest who gave us two of his rooms. By this time Uncle Vili had joined the Partisans. We remained in the village because of Aunt Julija being sick, which made our position rather difficult because someone could always point a finger at us, saying the doctor had joined the Partisans and we were a Partisan family. It was even worse when Chetnik units began arriving in the village. The war was nearing its end and the Chetniks were fleeing Montenegro as the Partisan attacks grew ever fiercer. For months on end we were in the crossfire day and night. The Partisans would be firing from one hill and the Chetniks from the other. Various people would arrive at our house, threatening us, wanting us to put them up and demanding food. There were drunken and crude men, bragging and boasting about their battle conquests, their slaughter and the torching of houses. We felt very unsafe and realised we had to get out of there. Luckily Dr Schmuckler was in Majevica and Neđo was also nearby and they organised for the Partisans to move us to the liberated territory. Next morning I woke up lying on the floor of a room with Dr Schmuckler there beside us. We

were all together again and it seemed we had been saved at the very last moment.

This could have been in about March, 1945. We eventually arrived in Belgrade on April 1 of that year, through Tuzla, Šabac and Loznica, travelling part of the way by car and the rest by various forms of transport. On the day of our arrival all six of us assembled on Cvetni Square, in front of the Složna Braća tavern, where we heartily enjoyed the stew for breakfast. We had arrived in the early dawn in the city where we were to start a new life.

Dr Schmuckler and Belica went to look for Uncle Neđo and found him about to leave on a business trip. He came to meet us and took us to the Hotel Astoria where he was living. There we freshened up and slept soundly after our days of travel. Anika was busy that day, but came to the hotel later in the evening.

The Schmucklers moved to a room in Jevremova Street the next day. Betika was put into an orphanage and suddenly I was alone in the hotel room. Anika and Neđo were both at work and I spent the whole day alone and miserable. I didn't know Belgrade and couldn't find my own way around. The problem was solved when Anika found me accommodation in the Red Cross kindergarten and enrolled me in school.

I was very distressed at being separated from the Schmucklers. I was crying and miserable, in the same kind of pain I felt after I was separated from my mother. I wept night after night. Once I began to learn my way around the city I visited them nearly every day until they returned to Osijek. Later I would spend my summer vacations, or at least part of them, there.

As time went by it became more and more obvious that my mother and father had been killed in the camp and that there was no longer any hope of them suddenly reappearing. Nevertheless, for a long time, I imagined this happening.

Anika and Neđo had learned of my parents' death long before I did and had already decided to adopt me before I arrived in Belgrade. Neđo had prepared me for this in a letter I received while we were on our way there. During our meeting in Bosnia, he had asked me if I would agree to be their daughter once the war was over. I told him straight away that this was also what I wanted. When the war ended I was twelve and a half years old.