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*Benjamin VINTER*

A BOY HIDDEN IN BELGRADE



**B**enjamin Vinter, known as Benja, was born in 1934 in Belgrade, to father Samuel and mother Jozefina (known as Finka) Vinterštajn. His father, Samuel Vinter, was born in 1897 in Bijeljina and perished in November 1941 at the Topovske Šupe camp in Belgrade. His mother Jozefina was born in Šabac in Serbia and perished in May 1942 in the Sajmište camp near Belgrade.

After the war, in 1946, Benja's uncle, Pavle Vinterštajn, managed to bring Benja to live with him in exile in Switzerland. He moved to New York with the Vinterštajns in 1950. He worked his way through secondary school and mathematical studies. After being awarded a doctorate, and having full command of both English and French, he was appointed to a teaching position at the University of Ottawa, the Canadian capital. He retired in 1995 as a full professor. He has two daughters and a son from his first marriage.

*Father's ancestors and family*

My father's parents were Vilim Vinter and Regina, née Alkalaj. Their surviving descendants know very little about them. It seems that Vilim was born and grew up in Slovakia, but was expelled from medical school there because he took an examination for another student. Apparently he then somehow settled in Bijeljina, at the other end of the

Austro-Hungarian Empire. It also appears that Ladino was spoken in Regina's family and the old Sephardic romances were an integral part of her culture. They nurtured friendly relations with Muslim families and were, in a way, under the influence of the culture of their environment.

In Bijeljina, Vilim was a businessman. For many years his business bought poultry from local farmers. He processed the poultry into various delicatessen items which were successfully exported to Vienna. His youngest son remembered him as a tall, slim man with a white beard, kind and polite, who had command of four or more languages. He was about 75 when he died, probably in 1931.

Vilim and Regina had twelve children. Four died in early childhood. The others, five boys and three girls, grew up in Bijeljina. After Vilim's death, in 1932, the family moved to Zagreb. After a time some moved on to Belgrade while the others remained in Zagreb.

In 1942 the Ustaša, the Croatian Fascists, caught my grandmother Regina and pushed her into a truck with other Jews. They were driven off in an unknown direction and never returned. The fate of her children was as follows:

The youngest, Gabor (1917–2002) was sent to the Jasenovac concentration camp in May, 1942. He managed to escape and join the Partisans. He was wounded in battle but survived. He married Vera Barišić. Two sons were born of this marriage: Goran and Darko.

Berta (? –1955) joined the Partisans and survived.

Reza (1914 –1996) fled Zagreb to part of Yugoslavia which belonged to Hungary. When the Germans seized power in this country, in 1944, she was sent to concentration camps, including Theresienstadt, but remained alive. She married Đorđe Zelmanović, with whom she had two sons, Đurđ and Andrija.

Izidor (? –1942) was taken away at the same time as his mother.

Laza (? – probably 1943) lived in Belgrade where he registered as a Jew as ordered by the Germans. Later he obtained false documents and changed his surname to Zimić. After some time he disappeared, probably executed for treason.

Laura (1908–2000) married Leo Polak before the war. After an attack on an Ustaša, a large group of hostages was shot. Leo was among them, having being arrested because of his communist connections. Soon afterwards, Laura gave birth to Vesna. She gave Vesna to a Catholic family to take care of her and joined the Partisans. She survived the war and took Vesna back after she returned to Zagreb.

Žak (? –1955) was captured during the war. He survived the war but his health was so impaired that he did not live long after he returned to Belgrade.

Samuel (1897–1941), the eldest, did not survive.



*From the family album: Regina Vinter with her children, 1934. Standing (L to R): Gabor, Laza, Berta, Izidor, Žak; sitting: Laura, Regina, Reza and Samuel*

### *My mother's family*

My mother's parents were Ignjat Vinterštajn (? –1938) and Irena, née Štuks (1869–1942) from Slovakia. For many years they lived in Budapest. Ignjat had a successful company, working with plum products from Serbia which he exported as delicacies into Western Europe. In 1898 Ignjat moved with his family to Šabac in order to be closer to the source of his product. After World War I he moved to Belgrade.

Ignjat and Irena had three children: my Uncle Pavle (1891–1960), my Aunt Ruža (1892–1976) and my mother Jozefina (1901–1942) whose nickname was Finka. Ignjat died before the second world war. With his family, Pavle fled occupied Yugoslavia and survived the war. My uncle's daughter, Nada Neumann, described her salvation in the book "We Survived 2". Irena and Finka did not survive, but Ruža did.

## *Before the war*

Sam and Finka were married in Belgrade in 1932. I was born in Belgrade in February 1934, their only child. I was given the name Benja as a child but am now know as Ben.

While Finka was young she worked in a bank and then in a tourist agency. Because she was fluent in several languages she read information on the radio in various languages. Sam was owner of the Jugopapir wholesale company. Working diligently, he developed the business. He was doing so well that Sam and Finka bought a beautiful house with a large garden in Osmana Đikića Street. There were lots of books and a piano in the house. I began school and learnt French at home. On Saturdays they lit candles and festivals were celebrated, although the family wasn't particularly religious, so *kashrut* wasn't observed. It was a pleasant and decent middle class family in which life was peaceful and comfortable.



(L) *Benja's father and mother, Samuel and Jozefina Vinter, 1932,*  
(R) *Benja, 1938*

## *1941–1942*

Although everyone was concerned at the developments at the end of March 1941, when Yugoslavia broke its pact with Germany, the unheralded bombing on April 6 was a surprise and a shock. We took shelter in the basement, beside a pile of coal. One bomb fell close to our house, making a crater whose edge reached to our garden, but no one was hurt. We survived.

When the mobilisation of the Yugoslav Army was proclaimed in 1941, Sam reported for duty as a reserve lieutenant. When Yugoslavia collapsed, Sam fell into captivity. After some time, probably a month or two, he was released and returned home. At the time we little suspected what a misery this was. Had he remained as a prisoner of war, in all likelihood he would have survived the war.

But Sam didn't survive. Soon after his return from captivity, he did what all Jewish men were ordered to do. On a certain day he went to a designated place. From there, the German occupiers took them to a concentration camp and used them as compulsory labourers. In a letter from 1959, the Jewish Community in Belgrade reported his fate: "The Gestapo took Sam to the Topovske Šupe concentration camp in the first half of October 1941, and from there, in November that same year, to an unknown destination. Historic research has revealed that a *Wermacht* firing squad killed men from this camp at the end of October and the beginning of November, 1941." (According to *Fateful Months*, by Christopher Browning, revised edition 1991, pp. 48–55)

I vaguely remember an occasion when Mother and I briefly saw Sam at compulsory labour – I think the group was unloading river boats – and another occasion when Mother and I paid him a brief visit in the camp. I cannot describe the horror, the fear, the pain and the sorrow I feel when I try in vain to imagine what Sam and Finka thought and felt during this period.

Finka did not survive. The same letter from the Jewish Community describes the bare facts: "The Gestapo took Jozefina to the concentration camp at Sajmište on December 10, 1941, and from there, in May 1942, together with other Jewish women to an unknown destination." When the German occupying force ordered that Jewish women, children and the elderly were to report on a certain day at a designated place, my mother Finka and her mother Irena obeyed. According to the German orders I was also supposed to be there, but I wasn't. They were killed and I survived.

My Aunt Ruža had married Radiša Jovanović in 1920 and converted to the Serbian Orthodox religion. Radiša died in 1928. Their daughters, Vera and Ivanka, were born in 1921 and 1922 respectively. It seems that, according to the criteria applied by the Germans in Serbia, Vera and Ivanka – "half-Jews" with only two Jewish grandparents – were not required to register as Jews. Ruža, however, was. With four

Jewish grandparents, she was regarded as a pure Jew, despite her religious conversion.

However, because their father was not alive, Vera and Ivanka, as minors, would have been left without parents if anything were to happen to their mother. For this reason, Ruža's name did not appear on the list of women who were required to assemble and who were then taken to Sajmište.

Although no one could imagine the horror which lay ahead, it was clear that these were dangerous times and that the brutal treatment of Jews could easily become worse. Everyone was uneasy and concerned. Finka was very burdened. Fear of misery was weighing down on her. Her husband was no longer there. The money was melting away. Her mother - whose nerves were extremely fragile, even in times of peace - lived with Finka in a joint household. And I was there too, a quite impossible child who drove her to distraction. In order to ease her burden a little, Finka and Ruža decided that I should live with Ruža for some time. And so it happened that when Finka and Irena were taken to Sajmište, I was not with them. I was at Ruža's house, which is where I remained until 1946.

### 1942-1943

Finka was killed on May 10, 1942. Irena died, or was killed, before that.

In her memoir, written many years after the war, Ruža describes two meetings which brought her news from the camp at Sajmište. An old and sick woman who was released in February 1942, brought information to Ruža which she described in the following words: "Despite the horrors of the camp, Irena was holding up well. The former inmate spoke of Finka with great admiration, about how she organised her own labour group, taught them to maintain strict personal hygiene and how, whenever she could, she would steal a few potatoes or onions for them." She also describes the second meeting. "On May 12, a young Romanian woman visited me. She had been released from the camp that day as the last inmate, because it had finally emerged that she had been arrested by mistake... On May 10, all the women with their belongings had been pushed into trucks and driven off to an unknown destination."

Historical research has shown that the women and children were asphyxiated in the *dušegupka*, a special truck with a hermetically sealed

cargo chamber into which the exhaust gases from the engine was introduced. In this way the victims were put to death while being transported to the final destination. The victims would be told they were being moved to another camp. The Germans would order the victim to put their things in another truck before getting into the *dušegupka*, to lend credence to the lie. The *dušegupka* made many trips from Sajmište, through the heart of Belgrade, to a clearing in a forest near Mt Avala. On arrival at the execution site, the asphyxiated victims would be dumped in mass graves. The last journey was on May 10, 1942. During the systematic destruction of mass graves in Russia and other countries, the remains of inmates were exhumed and burnt in December, 1943. (See pp. 70–83 of the monograph by Christopher Browning mentioned earlier).



*Benja with Vera, Ruža and Ivanka (L to R), 1944*

Had the Germans discovered that Ruža, Vera and Ivanka were hiding a Jewish boy, all three of them would probably have been shot. And they must have know that, without me in their home, they would have been almost certain to survive the occupation. Despite this they took me in without hesitation. In a memoir written for her daughters, Ruža says: “Fortunately Benja was still at our place when Irena and Finka were taken. When they proclaimed the death sentence for any person har-

bouring a Jew, I was not long troubled by my responsibility for you. I saw this as something which was the least I could do and, fortunately, you agreed with it.”

The Jovanović family lived on the third floor of an elegant building at 26 Krunska Street, directly opposite the German Embassy. Aleksandar Cincar-Marković lived on the first and second floors. As foreign affairs minister of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia it had been he who, in March 1941, signed the pact which made the country dependent on the Nazis. Along with other members of the royal government he believed that Yugoslavia had two options: to sign the pact or to face defeat in a war with Nazi Germany. Unfortunately, he was right.

Throughout the occupation Cincar-Marković lived in this apartment. I don't know why, but there was always a police officer there. They were most certainly aware of my presence. Ivanka told me that they even knew who and what I was. They told no one. I survived.

At first I would only leave the apartment to go to the big garden behind the house. There was a high wall around the garden and one could not be seen inside the garden from the street. In time I was allowed to leave the house, to go into the city for visits to family friends, to stand in queues for bread, even to spend time with a group of children who used to gather in a neighbouring street. They used to call me Bane, a common Serb name which they thought was less dangerous than Benja. I didn't attend school and, legally, I didn't exist. It is rather strange, but true, that no one asked: who is this child, who are his parents, where did he come from, why isn't he going to school? I was in great danger of being exposed, but nothing happened. I survived.

Ruža would give me piano lessons. Vera and Ivanka taught me school subjects. They shared the work. For example, one was my Serbian language and history teacher and the other taught me mathematics and geography. They did a good job. After the liberation when I should have been in the fourth grade, I went back to the school where I had been a first grade student when the war began. I found my first-grade teacher and explained my situation to her. She asked me a few questions to test me and, satisfied with my answers, she gave me a report card showing that I had really reached fourth grade level. After that I continued my schooling normally.

During the war, while Vera and Ivanka were my teachers, I was a good student. But I wasn't a good child. In fact I was an awful brat. I lied and stole and engaged in various stupid and mischievous activities.



No, I won't go into details! Ruža and her daughters had put themselves in danger to protect a real monster! As I grew up my stupid and bad behaviour became less frequent and less obvious. However it took a long time for me to become civilised.

Food, clothing and toys required improvised solutions. It was already difficult to find food, but Ruža and her daughters would always find a way. They even managed to make cakes and sweets for festivals, and even sweet wheat with walnuts for the family's saint's day, St Toma on October 19. They remodelled clothes, new jumpers were knitted using wool from unravelling old ones. Old toys which had been put in the attic long ago would be taken out and made into new ones. For example, I loved anything to do with Walt Disney characters and jigsaw puzzles. So Ivanka made an extraordinary birthday present for me. She drew and coloured a picture with Disney characters on a piece of plywood, then cut it up with a fretsaw into little pieces which I had to put together to make a whole.



*A bench, in fact a trunk with a seat,  
similar to the one in this photo, saved  
Vinter's life*

ting on the seat in her nightgown, trying to look nonchalant and calm. The Gestapo left. We survived.

1944

There were air raids in the spring of 1944. The sirens wailed and the American and British bombers flew in and continued on their way, not attacking Belgrade. It was commonly believed that they were flying

The furniture in Ruža's apartment included some nice pieces in traditional Serbian, or perhaps Montenegrin, folk style. Among these was a seat much like the one shown in the photograph. The one in the apartment was much nicer, with engravings in the dark wood and a large chest for linen storage under the seat. On two occasions the Gestapo came to Ruža's apartment at night and searched every room. While they were in the apartment I was in the chest with Vera sitting

to Romania to bomb the oil fields at Ploesti. On Easter Monday, in beautiful sunny weather, the sirens sounded, the bombers came, but this time they did not continue on. From very high up they carpet bombed, causing great damage and many casualties, both wounded and dead. The building next to ours was hit, but ours wasn't. I survived.

The Allied bombing of Belgrade continued. There were rumours that it would soon be even heavier. People were frightened and began fleeing. Ruža, her daughters and I went to Jajinci, a village on the way to Mt Avala. The four of us, together with other people, slept on the earth floor in the basement of a village house. Vera or Ivanka would sometimes go to Belgrade by bicycle to bring supplies from home. When the bombing stopped at the end of summer and rumours began that the Russians were close, we returned to the city.

One night, in mid-October, at about three or four in the morning, we were awoken by an unusual loud noise and found ourselves wrapped in a thick cloud of red dust. We soon realised that our building had been hit by an artillery shell or rocket from a Russian *katyusha*. The red dust came from the pulverised bricks. The hit had been right above the room in which we slept, but the force of the explosion had gone upwards and part of the roof had been destroyed. However there was no damage under the attic. We survived, and immediately went to the basement.

A few days later, the Partisans and the Soviets entered Belgrade, pushing back the Germans who put up a strong defence and withdrew slowly. Our neighbourhood was liberated on October 19, the day of the Jovanović family's saint's day. The following day I went out into the street, outside the house, together with several people and soldiers. Our street and those surrounding it were free, but the Germans were still holding out in the king's palace, a few blocks down at the other end of Krunska Street. Suddenly a whistling sound was heard and a Partisan standing next to me fell to the ground. The bullet had come from somewhere, probably fired by Germans from inside the palace. Just a small deviation from its path and it would have hit me. But it didn't. The Partisan was killed. I survived.

### *After the war*

Somehow, using their good connections, my Uncle Pavle in Geneva and Ruža in Belgrade managed to get me a passport and permission to leave the country, as well as a visa for a three-month visit to Switzerland. In September 1946, twelve years old, I set off by train

from Belgrade, through occupied Austria, to Switzerland. A few months later, with Pavle's family, I left Geneva to continue my schooling, first in the German part of Switzerland and later in Montreux and Lausanne. My Swiss residence permit was extended a couple of times and a charitable organisation was covering the costs of my stay while I was in boarding schools, which is where I lived while I was educated by the state. I was too young to understand what was happening to me. Everything was being taken care of by the adults around me.

I became Bar Mitzvah in a synagogue in Geneva.

Pavle and his family emigrated to New York in 1948. They applied for an immigrant visa for me as well. I received it two years later so, in October 1950, I too disembarked in New York. I worked during the day and at night went to secondary school and began studying. In 1952 I moved to the University of California at Berkley, where I worked and studied at the same time.

I lived in various American cities, always working to support my family and studying at the university part time. From 1972, when I was



*Benja in 1966 with his children Kler, Toni and Džesika*

awarded a doctorate in mathematics, I taught in both English and French and did research work in Canada, at the University of Ottawa. Life in the academic jungle was sometimes very difficult, but I survived. I retired in 1995 as a full professor.

In 1956 I married Frances Solnit, the daughter of a Jewish immigrant from Russia. Although neither she nor I were religious, the fact that we were Jewish played an important role in our lives. For this reason we chose to be married before a rabbi. We had three children: Kler Jozefina, Anton Samuel and Džesika Lorejn. We used to call our son Toni, but he now calls himself Tristan. The marriage fell apart after twelve years. The breakup of the family was very painful for me, but I survived.

I was married again, in 1972, to Meridi Alen, an agnostic humanitarian with English and Irish ancestry. We have no children, but Meridi has proved a good stepmother to my children from my first marriage. We now live in Victoria, a Canadian province in which the winters aren't as cold nor the summers as hot as those in Belgrade.

Kler lives in California, Džesika lives with my two granddaughters in Scotland and Tristan also lives in Europe, fighting for affirmation and establishing a reputation as a painter.

Although we feel clearly and strongly that we are Jewish, neither Tristan nor I nurture Jewish traditions or religious customs. However my daughters, somewhat informally, do celebrate some Jewish festivals. My Scottish granddaughters will probably do the same.

Some family memorabilia were preserved throughout the war. Among them was my father's *tallit*. It served as a *hupa* for Džesika's wedding. It was held by Tristan and three cousins from their mother's side.