
Nada NEUMANN

THIS IS WHAT I REMEMBER



Nada Neumann was born Nadežda Vinterštajn in Belgrade on March 23, 1923. Her parents, Pavle and Elza Vinterštajn (née Koen) both died in the USA and were buried in the Jewish cemetery for Yugoslav immigrants. In Belgrade, Pavle Vinterštajn, a lawyer, was a member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities until 1941. In this capacity he toured private emigrant camps. He was also a leading member of B'nai

B'rith, of the charitable society Potpora and other Jewish organisations. When the body of Dr Aleksandar Licht, a well-known Zionist, was transferred to Israel, Pavle Vinterštajn was sent to Israel to attend the funeral as a representative of Yugoslav Jews in the US. Elza Vinterštajn was an active member of the Jewish organisation Dobrotvor and of the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO).

Nada's elder brother, Aleksandar, was born in Belgrade in 1921 and died in the US in 1997. As a research chemist he worked in university and scientific institutions and in industrial companies.

Nada lived in Belgrade from her birth until the bombing of the city on April 6, 1941. She was about to complete the eighth grade at the Second Girls' Secondary School but, immediately after the bombing, fled with her family to Geneva in Switzerland, via Sarajevo, Dubrovnik, Split and Milan. While in Split, she matriculated and sub-

sequently graduated from the School for Interpreters in the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences of the University of Geneva.

She has lived in the US since 1948, working as head of a department at the Institute of International Education in New York from 1948 to 1960. In 1960, she moved to Montclair, New Jersey, with her husband, Oleg Orebić, who died in 1970. She taught French at the Montclair High School for 27 years. In 1974 she married Vienna-born Herman Neumann. She has two children from her first marriage. She now lives in California, close to her children and grandchildren.

In 1941 I was a student at the Second Girls Secondary School in Belgrade. I was in my senior year of high school. I studied, I practised the piano, I learned English and I danced to my heart's content. We lived in a one-family house at 23 Simina Street, near the National Theatre in Belgrade.

There was a lot of talk about the unsettled, horrendous political situation in Europe in the thirties. My father was a lawyer. My parents were well-read, well-informed and well-connected people. They sheltered Austrian and German refugees in Belgrade. My father helped some of these refugees get temporary residence permits through his connections. Professor Herbert Elias and his wife, Dr Ada Elias, who had escaped from Vienna, were hidden in our house until my father was able to get them temporary residence permits, which allowed them to stay in Belgrade until the arrival of their USA immigration visas. I distinctly remember Professor Elias' last words: "*Geben Sie mir die Kinder*" (Give me the children). He wanted to take my brother and me with him to the United States. My parents answered him, however, that whatever happened in Austria would never happen in Yugoslavia.

We were great nationalists, and we loved our country. My father was a leading member of B'nai B'rith and my mother was active in the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO). We did not experience any anti-Semitism, especially not in Serbia. We had no intention of escaping. However, the Yugoslav government fell on March 27, 1941. Belgrade was heavily bombed by the Germans on April 6, 1941. Our cellar was reinforced and, all of a sudden, it became crowded with people who came to take refuge from the exploding bombs. The vice-president of the Yugoslav Government, Professor Slobodan Jovanović, lived next

door to us. He took refuge in our cellar too, while the city was burning. The Red Cross was nearby and, perhaps, that saved us from a direct hit. My father saw my great fear. He made me sit very close to him and he held me so tight that I can still feel his arms around me. I was petrified.

Slobodan Jovanović was my father's professor of constitutional law at the University of Belgrade Law School and the relationship continued in good neighbourly fashion. During a lull, the government had sent a car to get Professor Jovanović out of the city. As the Nazis captured young men first, my mother implored him to take my brother with him and send a car back for us as soon as he was safe and out of danger. And he did! That's how my parents and I drove – literally through flames – across the burning city to Avala, the nearest railroad station. We got into a boxcar and stayed in it with dozens of other people, with no food or water for three days and three nights. We travelled south, away from the exploding bombs and the Nazis who were occupying the country.



Pavle and Elza Vinterštajn, the parents of Nada Vinterštajn-Neumann

We experienced heavy air raids in Sarajevo and all the way to Dubrovnik, which was also heavily bombed. We were starving and we survived miraculously. It was in Dubrovnik that we heard from a Belgrade refugee that my brother, unable to follow Vice-President Jovanović, who was evacuated with the government to London,

returned to Belgrade not knowing of my parents' and my whereabouts. In Belgrade he had to wear a yellow star marked "Jew" and work as a hard labourer on a road.

My mother was devastated. One day I went with her into a tea-room to warm up and get a hot cup of tea. As my mother was crying, Miss Job, a total stranger and a true Christian, joined us. After finding out the reason for my mother's despair, Miss Job offered to get my brother false papers, pretending that he was her son. It so happened that Miss Job's brother was going from Dubrovnik to Belgrade that evening and, at great risk, he took the papers with him and delivered them to my brother. When my father's secretary, Rudolf Dasović, also a true Christian, heard how my brother was going to flee, he offered to accompany him to Dubrovnik, so that if the Nazis were to catch him on the train, Dasović would try to vouch for him. The reunion was most exciting. How does one reciprocate favours like the ones given by Professor Jovanović, Dasović, Miss Job and her brother? Only God or a supernatural power could reward them.

Now that the immediate family was reunited I came down with malaria (45.5° C) and the pro-German Ustasha (the Croat Nazis) were going to occupy Dubrovnik the next day. Dr Popov, who diagnosed malaria, insisted that we leave Dubrovnik for Split, which was in the Italian zone, by the first ship. I had to be carried, but escape we did!

We rented two furnished rooms, with the use of the kitchen, in a one-family house on the outskirts of Split, near the beach. The landlords had just completed the construction of their house and needed the money. Mr Pavlović was a modest employee and Mrs Pavlović went to church at six in the morning every day. She kept a clean house and she sang opera tunes while she was dusting. Their young daughter, Mira, was refreshing. We stayed there for a few months. I took and passed the high school *matura* exam to qualify for admission to any university in Europe.

One day my father was taken to the police headquarters, he was interrogated for hours and we thought we would never see him again. When he was released, however, we decided that we had to get to Switzerland, a neutral country, because the Germans were winning the war. The closest Swiss consulate was in Milan, Italy. It was there, we thought, we could obtain visas for Switzerland. That is when my mother discovered a lump in her breast and had to have a mastectomy under very primitive conditions. Food was rationed. The black market

was rampant. Sometimes we did not know where the next meal would come from. We were friendly with Dr Joso Rismondo and, especially, with his wife, Anka. The peasants paid the doctor for his services with eggs, butter and fish. Sometimes we were able to get food through the Rismondos.

The Italian occupation was tolerable. The Italians were benevolent and certainly much more humane than the Germans. The Italian priests, in their black robes, played soccer with the local boys. We got reports from the front through people who were not afraid to listen to the BBC. The news was not good. We had to get to Switzerland, but how?

My mother, who did not speak a word of Italian, took with her our landlady who was able to communicate in Italian to the *Prefettura*, the highest office established by the Italian occupation forces. Without an appointment, the two women walked into the *Prefetto's* office and asked for four *lasciopassare*, permits to get to Milan. My mother clearly described our fears, indicating that we were Jewish. The *Prefetto* was touched by my mother's tears or her frankness and he promised that he would see what he could do. A few weeks later, the permits arrived and the four of us were able to legally get on board ship to Trieste, which in those days was virtually impossible for Jews. We were constantly watched by the police, which was humiliating but unavoidable.

From Trieste we took the train to Milan where we rented two rooms in the Pensione Durini, across the street from Toscanini's home and behind the Duomo, the cathedral. The detectives watched us closely and we had to report to the police station regularly. In the Pensione, we befriended Alfredo Pizzoni, the director of the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro. He listened to the BBC and reported to us daily what was happening on the front. Little did we know at that time that he was also the secretary of the Treasury of the Italian Underground.

Through the Swiss Consulate, we applied several times for visas but we were turned down each time. The Nazis had asked the Italian Government to extradite *all* Jews. The Italians refused to turn over their own Jews, but they could not protect foreign Jews like us. My mother got sick again. We called a doctor who diagnosed the flu but suggested that we illegally cross the Swiss border. He knew two smugglers who would get us across the border for a sizeable amount of money. We lived on gold coins brought along from Belgrade and we

had some left over, so that was okay. However the Allies continued bombing Milan very heavily and we decided to escape to Fiumelatte on Lake Como. My brother said that he had to go back to Milan to see a friend. He came back from Milan very fast and told us that the doctor wanted us in a Como café the next afternoon. That is where we met one of our guides and paid the requested sum.

I was numb with fear. My parents, who had never taken any long hikes or enjoyed sports, did not realise the gravity of our undertaking. The guides drove us to a farm and hid us in a barn. They served us some food and at 9.00 p.m. took off our shoes, wrapped our feet in burlap, put our rucksacks on their backs and guided us out of the barn. It was a beautiful night. I can still see the full moon and the shining stars. The little path, with room for only two feet, was flat and my parents commented how easy it was going to be. It was March 4, 1942.



*Aca and Nada Vinterštajn, brother and sister,
from their childhood days in Belgrade*

We walked and walked and walked. The path was very narrow, at times there was a ravine on the right or on the left. One guide was in front of us, the other was in back of us. As we proceeded, there was more and more snow on the ground. At each step the snow was deeper and deeper. It came up to our knees at times. There was also lots of ice, but we did not skid because of the burlap wrapped around our feet. The mountains looked like spectacular theatre sets. They were very silent, as if they were indicating to us that they were going to keep

our secret of illegality, because it was a matter of life or death. We could barely hear our footsteps. We stopped occasionally to catch our breath. We climbed gradually and the air became very rare. I had no more fear. The Nazis were far away, I thought, I knew that we were going to make it. The idea of getting caught never entered my mind. There were more ravines and dangerous paths. My father had trouble breathing and he was going to give up. He wanted us to go ahead and leave him there to die in the ravine. I do not remember exactly what I said to him, but I will never forget the look in his eyes. He looked straight into my eyes which were telling him lovingly that he must go on living for his own sake, for my sake and for the sake of a better future.

We stopped again and again. After about nine hours of walking, the guides showed us a marker made out of stone. On one side was engraved *Italia* and on the other side *Swizzera*. We believed we were safe. The guides told us that they could not go any further with us, we should take the burlap off our feet and walk towards the lights in the valley. A chauffeur-driven car would be waiting for us at the village bakery. We said goodbye to our saviours, who handed us our meagre belongings. Nothing was missing. They could have robbed us or even killed us, and no one would have known. My parents and my brother sat down. I cut the burlap off their frozen feet and rubbed them with the palms of my hands. They put on their shoes with difficulty and we walked slowly towards the lights. We were in a Swiss village near Lugano. The chauffeur-driven car took us to the railroad station and we purchased train tickets to Geneva where we had friends.

We were silent for hours until my mother spoke up. She complemented me on my ability to pull my father out of a depression and save his life. I loved my dad dearly.

In Geneva we stayed overnight at the house of Mika Pinto, who became wealthy importing poultry from Yugoslavia to Switzerland. I took a hot bath, but I was so stiff that I could barely walk. My father knew Mr Jurišić, the Yugoslav ambassador in Bern. When my father phoned him to tell him that we had crossed the Swiss border illegally, he said that we should come to Bern so that he could help us legalise our stay in Switzerland. Therefore we went to the Geneva railroad station to catch a train for Bern. Of course we did not look like ordinary Swiss citizens. A cop of the *Police Federale* stopped us and asked for our identification. We handed him our expired Yugoslav passports. It

was clear that we were illegal refugees. We were escorted into a police van with bars on the windows. I cried bitterly saying that we were honest people. We were taken to the school Les Charmilles, which was converted into a temporary refugee camp. We were cross-examined during the entire night. Many refugees were sent back over the border, which they had crossed illegally. That could have happened to us too. However, the police were able to ascertain after a few days that we had funds in a Swiss bank to live on in Switzerland, and that we had good connections, which my father had acquired while he was studying and working in Switzerland as a young man.

While at Les Charmilles we slept on sacks filled with straw, lined up like sardines in empty classrooms. There was a lot of crying and there was unbelievable stress and fear among the refugees from all over Europe. Otherwise we were treated well. One day, the man in charge of buying food for the camp asked me if I wanted to help him food shop for the refugees. I was overjoyed to get out of there for a few hours. He took me to a tearoom on our way back to camp. To my surprise, the owner, Randel, was a Serb whom the International Red Cross had brought to Switzerland during World War I. He was adopted by two lovely single women and never went back to Yugoslavia. Randel was most generous. He let me eat whatever I wanted and he gave me lots of cakes and all sorts of goodies to take back to camp for the other refugees.

As soon as my parents and I were cleared by the Federal Police, we were released. They kept my brother with all the other young males. We had to stay at one of the most expensive hotels, La Residence, because the tourist industry was very bad. My mother went into another one of her despairs. One morning, a very handsome Catholic priest joined my parents for breakfast at the hotel. He promised to get my brother out of the camp. And he did. My parents made a donation to his church and they were happy to have my brother free.

We started leading a more or less normal life. We were able to rent an affordable apartment in a nice residential area. The Allies continued to bomb northern Italy. The airplanes flew over Geneva and we would stand on our balcony and fearlessly watch them fly over our heads, knowing well that they would not bomb neutral Switzerland. We listened to the Swiss radio and to the BBC daily. Unfortunately, almost my entire family was killed by the Nazis near Belgrade. My parents' closest friends, Matilda and Majer Pinkas, whom I loved

dearly, were also killed by the Nazis. My parents were very strict and if I had a problem as a child, I would go to my Uncle Majer who gave the impression of being an old grouch, but who was gentle, encouraging and understanding when I needed him.

My brother and I were admitted to the University of Geneva where, of course, all classes and exams were given in French. We both graduated, my brother from the Ecole de Chimie, and I from the Ecole d'Interpretes and from the Faculte des Sciences Economiques et Sociales.

It was absolutely impossible for us to be gainfully employed, because the Swiss refused to give work permits to people like us. My father worked as a volunteer for the International Red Cross, providing Yugoslav prisoners of war in Germany with food packages and other necessities. I believe that I remember correctly that Stanislav Vinaver, one of the POWs wanted to have a piano and my father got it for him². His superb piano playing was a boost to the prisoners' morale. My mother ran the household and helped many refugees who followed us. One of the first POWs to be released from Germany to Switzerland at the end of World War II was Vladimir Simić. He stayed with us in Geneva for a short while before returning to Yugoslavia.

We were overjoyed to obtain our USA immigration visas in 1948, after a four-year-long screening process. That is when a productive, stable life started for us.

² Pavle Vinterštajn probably managed to do this through his work at the International Red Cross where he organised assistance for prisoners of war. [Ed.]