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Sonja BARUH

## I HID THE CHILDREN'S DEATH FROM MY MOTHER



*Sonja Baruh was born in Požarevac on March 5, 1922, to Ilija (Elijahu) Baruh and Bulina, née Jarhi.*

*She grew up in one of the best-known Jewish families in Belgrade as one of seven children, of whom one, Haim, died as a child.*

*The Baruh family had been progressive and patriotically oriented, even before the war; but did not escape the tragic fate of many Jewish families in the second world war. Sonja's three elder brothers, Isidor-Isa, Bora and Josif-Joža, perished in the first years of the war. Isa and Joža were killed in Užice in 1941 fighting in Partisan units against an enemy which far outnumbered them. Bora was executed by firing squad in Jajinci in July, 1942.*

*Nor did her sisters, Berta-Bela and Rašela-Šela, survive the war. They perished in the Banjica camp. Of her large family, only Sonja, her mother Bulina and her father Ilija survived the war.*

*Sonja and her husband Armando Moreno had a daughter, Dolores-Šela, and in her second marriage to Solomon "Moni" Alkalaj she had a son, Isa. She had four grandchildren.*

*Sonja Baruh worked in a number of organisations and institutions. She died in Italy in 1999 and was buried there.*

*She was the recipient of a number of decorations and society awards.*

I don't know how far I am capable of separating my life from that of the family in which I was born and raised and which I lost before I had realised what having a family means, or from the family which I created and again lost, this time in a different, but equally painful way.

I don't know how far I am capable of separating my life from that of the country in which I was born because we are, perhaps precisely because we are Jews, perennial wanderers, deeply devoted to the soil in which we take root, to which we come to live and on which we feel "at home". More so than those who have been given this as their natural and inalienable right.

The Požarevac of my birth... March 5, 1922... a small town... a location... a village... there's not much of it I remember. It's with Niš and Belgrade I connect my childhood... mine and the childhood of my three elder brothers, my younger sister and my elder sister. My fourth brother, Haim, died as a child. The memory of him has faded.

We had to move frequently... father was a tailor for the army and the state, he was often transferred... and sometimes we had to move because we had no money to pay the rent.

Niš, a flood in which we lost, overnight, our house, furniture, everything... a dress rehearsal of what awaited us. These are the memories of my earliest childhood.

My mother Bulina, her hands always full with work, with children.

I remember the stories from her past and her childhood in Vidin as I remember her head bowed over a darned mushroom, mending socks... Out of these unrelated fragments and memories there springs, as though from a fairytale, a grassy yard near the Vidin synagogue, with a huge cherry tree in the middle. My grandfather, her father, was a cantor at the *kal* and assisted at the rituals of slaughtering cattle and other animals. I remember her explaining to me, this way, what "kosher" meant, although we were never great traditionalists.

The sweetest story from her girlhood was that of how she married my father Ilija (Elijahu) Baruh, a Belgrade tailor.

Her Serbian was odd – a strange mixture of Serbian, Bulgarian and Sephardic words and we would often tease her about this. Despite that, it is as though I see a young girl wearing glasses, as do all we Baruchs. I see her secretly, being careful not to be seen by her father, climb the cherry tree with a book in her hand so she can read in peace. At that time, in the 1880s, in little Vidin, reading books wasn't exactly the best recommendation for a girl of marriageable age.

One such summer afternoon she heard that someone had come to visit her parents. She decided to stay in the tree at any cost and so avoid the inevitable coffee making, the serving of sweets. Later, as the dusk thickened, her father's voice recalled her from the world of imagination in which she had submersed herself while reading.



*Elijahu (Ilija) and Bulina Baruh with their sons Isa (standing) and Bora (on her lap) in Belgrade, 1912*

There was nothing she could do. She climbed down and learned that she had just been promised in marriage. Her future husband, Ilija Baruh, a tall, well-built young man with a thick moustache was not very talkative (and what use would it be if he was in any case, when she still didn't speak Serbian!). He took her to Belgrade. Could she count on love and happiness? What was she hoping for? This she never told

us, but her long letters to her brothers in Vidin testified to the great love and longing she felt for her home.

Many things about her life remained a mystery to us, only hinted at through the Sephardic songs which she softly sang to us before bed-time, a life rolled up in a little bundle in which she kept her father's *kipa*, and a bundle of the faded letters she had once exchanged with her brothers.

## DORĆOL, MY CENTRE OF THE WORLD

Our life was rich in events, laughter and loud conversations, the constant comings and goings of brothers and sisters, the constant concern about money. Sometimes it seemed to me that I didn't exist as an individual, we were important as a family, as a group of individuals who didn't just live beside one another but also because of one another.



*Bulina with her six children. From left to right: Joži, Bora, Isa, Šela, Sonja and Bela. Požarevac, 1925*

In a large family the elder ones are important. If I were to say that I was brought up more by my brothers than by my parents, that I looked up to them, I wouldn't be wrong.

How could my mother pay enough attention to everyone? Whoever gets up first is better dressed and gets more attention, love; one after another we grew up holding close to one another.

We were bonded by a great love. With music, books, paintings and poverty I came to love and grow very close to the people who surrounded me more than I felt alienated and labelled as a Jew.

In 1929 we all finally moved to Belgrade again.

Dorćol became for me the centre of the world.

Closed yards with taps in the middle, surrounded by houses whose windows, overlooking the balcony, faced the white sails of washing, slender blades of grass between the stone cobbles in which the courtyards were paved, the grass thick and green only around the tap, the laundry copper breathing steam in the cold winter morning, the neighbourhood which linked us all in fate: all this gave my childhood a feeling of security, despite the poverty and the constant struggle. We were together.

Dorćol was a Balkan melting-pot. As well as Jews there were Serbs, Turks, Gypsies, Albanians... we were united not only in poverty but also by a deep feeling of understanding and warmth. At least that's the way it seemed to me.

Life began to settle into a routine.

## ARRESTS: MY FAMILY'S JOURNEY OF NO RETURN

My three brothers at their studies: books and learning were sacred in our house. Isidor-Isa graduated as a technological engineer, Baruh-Bora finished law (although painting was his only true interest and passion), Josif-Joži studied philosophy and Rašela-Šela chemistry. There was never enough money: my brothers studied and worked, they delivered milk, gave lessons and, of course, worked for the Party.

The first arrest happened early, in 1934: Joži, because of the demonstrations for autonomy in his faculty.

It was followed by his departure for the camp in Višegrad. This was just the beginning and would mark, until 1941, the journey of no return for me and my family into the tragedy which followed.

But there were some good times. Bora won a scholarship and in 1935, once he had graduated from law school, went to Paris to study painting. A brother who loved me, whose love and protection kept me warm.

That same year father again lost his job, finally this time, not only because he was a Jew but mainly because of the Communist activities of his sons. This time it wasn't so easy to get back on our feet. The

reason is not completely clear to me – I was too young to understand – but we saw his departure from home to Sarajevo to look for a job as his withdrawing from us. This was very difficult for us at the beginning, but people can get used to anything. My mother and the six of us (Haim had already died) continued our day-to-day struggle for survival.

Arrests, police surveillance... these were the years of my youth. There were Party meetings in our house, clandestine and dangerous, at which we youngest kept guard, ran messages and gave signals if some agent approached. These only served to strengthen my bond with my family and my awareness of the world surrounding us.

My older sister, Šela, was forced to drop her studies and she found a job at the Elka factory. In 1937, as a union worker, she was arrested and taken to Glavnjača and to the camp on Ada Ciganlija. There was a happy moment after she was released: her wedding to Lazar Simić. Great love and shared passion for the Party and the struggle. Their witnesses at the wedding were Anđa and Aleksandar Ranković... my family grew and filled my world.

News from Paris: Bora was painting, and managing to sell something from time to time... he fell in love and was married! He was exposed for cooperating in sending fighters to Spain and he was banished from Paris.

He too served time in Glavnjača... And my mother, my younger sister Bela and I were detained and interrogated on suspicion of collaborating with the Comintern.

That, too, was youth. With my sixteen years, in 1938 I felt that I belonged to something greater and more important than Sunday dances and chatting in patisseries. Of course I also left school, partly because of the persecution to which I was exposed and partly because of the constant lack of money. By working, at least I contributed something to the household, but more important than that was the satisfaction that by doing this I was closer to the things my brothers and sisters were fighting for.

My first employment was in the Darling dressmaking salon in Uskočka Street, my first salary... In September, 1938, I joined Polet, through Rada Levi, who was later shot in Banjica. Polet, although officially a sports association, was on the inside a collection of young, progressive, courageous and wonderful people who, in 1939, founded the first SKOJ organisation in Belgrade. The members included Jaša

Rajter, Rade Kušić, Moša Bošković, Branko Tasovac, Milada Rajter and Agnesa Sas.

This was the best part of my youth: our excursions, lectures, the drama club, working with younger children – all this, along with a great deal of laughter and a feeling of belonging made it easier to bear the grey and arduous days which hung over the whole progressive society in our country, and the Jews in particular.

## BROTHERS IN CAMPS, BEFORE THE WAR

Harsh winter, December 1940. I remember these days by the police raid in our apartment. They took Bora and Joži to the Bileća camp, while Isa and Šela went underground. What could my younger sister and I do but continue their work? We collected money to help the inmates in Bileća, took them food, organised help for the comrades who had lost their jobs because of politics.

Years of fear and danger, but also of hope and satisfaction, which is difficult to understand for anyone who didn't share this feeling of belonging and dedication, boundless confidence in friends and a courage in one's own convictions.

The situation peaked on March 27, 1941, when from inside all of us a great dissatisfaction erupted, a feeling of rebelliousness and the determination not to succumb to what had already pitched half of democratic Europe into the darkness of Fascism. My friends from Polet and I were among the first there. Youth and truth, rebelliousness and the desire to change the world made no distinction between Jews and non-Jews, there was only a huge abyss between those who wanted freedom and those who, out of fear, were prepared to make any kind of compromise.

The bombing of Belgrade on the spring morning of April 6, 1941.

My new, freshly-ironed dress was hanging on the wardrobe ready for an outing we had planned for that day. It fluttered in the wind where three of our apartment walls had been as an enormous cloud of dust carried our hope and youth irretrievably away.

Whenever I think of that day when, for the last time, even if just for a moment, our family was together, I see this dress of mine exposed to the whole world... I see a wound on my city, on my country, I see the rubble of the youth of thousands and thousands of people who were born in that place and that time...

## DREAMS AND A WORLD UNDER THE RUBBLE

What remained buried under the rubble were dreams and a whole world which would never again emerge. In the Balkans the phoenix is exhausted from too many fires.

The shelter in the basement of the Elka factory. My mother, a queen bee, with my sisters and brothers gathered around. They escaped from their prisons under the bombing. My sister-in-law Elvira, little Žan, Bora's son.

That morning everything was scattered, like a reflection in the water shattered by an enormous stone, thrown from the hand of a giant arrogant brat. We scattered, some underground, some into the Partisans, some fled. Words in dry mouths, not comprehending that all of this around us is the truth, not just a bad dream from which we can awake by the power of will. This nightmare, this night, went on and on. To this day I sleep with my door open, in case all those who walked out of my life that day walk back in, in case I have to run again.

Thousands of times I have replayed those images, those sounds, that pungent taste of death and destruction in the air, the howling of the sirens and the dull rumbling of the bombers in the Belgrade skies.

Not for the last time, unfortunately! And the latest rape of our freedom, some new sounds of bombers, some new abyss, some new despair. The summer of 1999 is only *déjà vu*, I hope the last I have to survive. Or is it?

And what happened to us on that April morning in 1941? What didn't!

Šela and her husband were in Belgrade, underground. They were working on the production of hand grenades and taking part in various operations. Explosions in the underground workshop, their flight through basements and yards... bloody and blinded. Their bloody tracks gave them away: they were caught and executed in Banjica. Just days before this explosion Šela managed to inform me that Isa was dead and Joži wounded. His death was the price of the Užice Republic and the first liberated territory in Europe! I kept these deaths to myself, because this news would have been demoralising for many people, especially my mother. Still, I couldn't believe it. I was to learn much later about Bora's activities in Užice, about his death. Because, from the first moment when my brothers managed to join the first Partisan units... within just a few months... they were no longer alive.



My younger sister, my mother and I were the only ones who had remained alive... for now. The grindstone of death turned relentlessly and there were so few of us left in the narrow groove of the stone.

Each of my family members who was killed could have written a novel about the last months of their lives. Every month has thirty days and every day has 24 hours in which each minute lasts an eternity while the awareness of certain death implants itself inescapably in our thoughts.

I don't believe any of the four of them had any illusion that they would return alive, although this certainty is often blurred by the instinctive hope for survival.

Bora had a son, a wife... Joži had a fiancée, Nada Ćurčić. Šela had a husband... life had only given a hint of itself to them. For me and Bela it had not yet even begun. For my mother, her life was only worth as much as ours were, and she had to be protected from the knowledge of what was happening to us.



*Sonja Baruh, 1944*

assume a different consciousness... the pain is such and so great that the less one remembers and thinks, the easier it is to bear. The day of the review was approaching, when all apartments were to be searched.

I, at the time, was Dragica Vučković, allegedly born in Sarajevo in 1926, a refugee... The fact that I was skinny and short allowed me to

December 10, 1941, arrived, the day we were to report to the camp at Sajmište.

At five in the morning we were ready to go underground and join the Partisans. Another parting, the last with what was left of my family.

Months passed. Dozens of rooms, hideouts, people whose names we weren't allowed to know in case we were caught, contacts, people to whom we owe our lives and a lot more – we owe them our faith in human beings.

We no longer had our own identity. Instead, with false identity papers, subconsciously we began to

pass for four years younger. Now even sheds in people's yards were no longer safe, nor ruins, nor basements.

The 1942 "March revelations", the day the press published the names and photographs of comrades who had been exposed as connections, was the last call to flee Belgrade. My contact was also among the names. I got documents for travel and set off by train towards south Serbia, without a plan, carrying my diary and a few photographs as my only connection with the outside world and my last connection with what had once been my world... and a chaos of memories and images which mixed with the events of the recent, unreal past. Belgrade lay behind me in ruins, desolate and deadly, while ahead lay a frozen tundra of uncertainty.

My only certainty was the knowledge of the death of my brothers and sister, while the fate of my mother and my younger sister was in the hands of my comrades. It was not until much later that I would learn where that fate was to take them.

I read in the papers that there was a camp for refugee children in Leskovac and made for there. In the train an elderly man chatted to me and offered to help me find a job in Jagodina. Can one accidental encounter have the power to turn someone's life around? He recommended me, through a woman, for work as a maid in the house of Dragi Bošković. Before the train stopped in Jagodina I had made my decision. It would be better to hide in a house than to be exposed to questioning. What if they asked me for details there in the camp?

## NEST OF VIPERS

Sonja Baruh set off from Belgrade with Dragica Vučković's identity card and, in Jagodina, Dragica Vučković stepped off the train with painful memories of Sonja Baruh, of twenty years spent in a dream because now what was happening had become the reality.

I got the job! It was only a few days later that I realised I was in a nest of vipers.

My boss was a Nedić man, a Fascist, the chief of the Jagodina district, formerly the police chief of Skopje. I was trapped.

My identification document and travel papers were in his hands, and so was I! In my hands were his two children, and I felt a special affection towards little Magdalena. Children! In them I found my allies, my sanctuary. Is it possible to describe something more than

physical harassment, that something more which leaves indelible traces? My heart pounded and buzzed in my ears when I heard the most abusive language used to describe Partisans, Communists and Jews. My days and nights were filled with impotent rage. It accumulated enough poison for not just one but a hundred lifetimes. I swore that never again would I tell a single lie, that never again would I swallow another insult.

People in battle could react, although they were in much worse conditions, they could give vent to the terrible pressure of humiliation and the inability to return an injustice. I tried to look at this from another angle. I collected information from what I managed to hear in informal discussions and decided to find a connection, a way to get this information through to our people. I found out which routes were being used to send assistance to the Chetniks, I found out who they were suspicious about.

I even found a contact! The risk was enormous. I didn't know the man, but he seemed to me like someone who could be trusted. He was Judge Davić. He often asked me questions about what was going on in our house. Pretending to be naive, I told him all the information I had collected, precisely and in detail. German officers would come to the house, there were official lunches. General Böm attended one of them.

The lion's den in which I was living was, nevertheless a source of information for our people. I was finally able to give some meaning to my misery. Just the same, preparing lunch for Fascist leaders was too much.

There were two hand grenades and a revolver in a room to which I had access, but I simply didn't know how to use them. Poison also crossed my mind. But which poison?

One opportunity passed me by. In February, 1944, a band of Chetniks invaded Jagodina and, during the night, slaughtered 177 people, including Judge Davić. I was left all alone in my own hell.

The days passed one by one, and only the children grew. I tried not to see them as the children of Fascists. I came to love them, although at the same time I feared their questioning looks, their unconsciously dangerous comments and questions. My shelter became a trap and it was closing on me all the time. In the meantime, my nerves had become so strained that suicide was the first thought which

came to my mind when I awoke and the last when I went to bed. I don't know what kept me going.

The lists with the names of Partisans who had been executed or otherwise killed which I sometimes found around the house, news about the crimes committed by the Chetniks in Jagodina and the surrounding villages, the discovery of the death of my brothers and sisters and the uncertainty of my mother's fate and that of so many other relatives and friends, this was a huge, far too huge a burden for me. It took me so much effort to restrain myself every day, 24 hours a day, to identify with Dragica! Once the curtains go down, actors can go back to their own lives, although sometimes the one they temporarily adopt feels comfortable for them. My role was difficult and odious, so far from me, yet the curtain never seemed to fall. If I happened to become confused, forget my lines or change them, a far more brutal punishment than rotten eggs would await me: it would be torture and death.

My employer was becoming more and more suspicious. Once, when a group of Chetniks arrived at the house unexpectedly in his absence, I was certain that they had found me out and come for me. It was winter, and only the deep snow softened my fall when I jumped from the first floor window into the yard.

The tragic and the comic are never far apart: beneath the snow was a septic tank and my dramatic jump ended in the filthiest place I could think of. I feel like crying when I think that my life could have ended in a septic tank.

Fortunately they hadn't found out about me on that occasion, but it became all the more unbearable for me to wait passively for the liberation, with all this risk involved.

By three months before the liberation I had fallen into a deep depression. One evening my employers sent me to fetch fresh water from the Đurić hill.

While I fetched the water I also made an irrevocable decision. When I returned to the house I told them that I wanted them to let me go. They couldn't understand the reason for this and my employer insisted that I tell him. I had to provoke him until he finally shouted at me and said that he also wasn't overjoyed to have a maid who reads all night long.

Of course I couldn't tell him that, as well as reading the books from his library, I would also find among them some documents

whose contents I used to send to Davić, my connection. One of them also contained a list of the names of Communists from Skopje whom he had sent to prison. I was really delighted when I discovered after the liberation that all this information I had supplied had been passed on to the illegal Party organisation, that at least I had been of some use.

Finally I saw losing my job as a liberation from the worst kind of imprisonment and left the house in which, despite the fact that I had survived, I had left behind my life, my nerves and my strength. I moved in with the Satirević family and, besides working for them, I also worked in other houses where I cleaned and ironed. I had the "luck" not to get any kind of recommendation from Bošković, only the remark that any person who left his employ didn't deserve to live or work!

From my clandestine listening to the radio, it had become clear to me that it was only a matter of days before our people entered Jagodina. The fact that the Soviet Army was getting closer alerted me to the need to flee the city and go out to meet the Partisans. In an uneasy suspense, on the night of October 17, 1944, our people and the Soviets liberated Jagodina.

### BROTHERS AND SISTERS: MOVING INTO MEMORY

With the first light of dawn emerging around me and in me, having learnt where the district military command was, I went to report.

Years had passed since I had last said my name aloud: Sonja Baruh! I was even more delighted when I saw that the political officer of the military district was Tanasije Mladenović, my brothers' friend. He had known me as a little girl, but now a young woman stood before him, as tiny and skinny as she had always been, but strongly determined to finally place her life at the disposal of freedom and the future.

This was the happiest day I remember – my mobilisation! No longer the unbearable lie of hiding behind someone else's identity, the anxiety and despair, the fear and depression. I worked on the mobilisation of young people in Jagodina. My knowledge of the situation in the area was useful to the command and Commissar Mladenović

received detailed information about the crimes of the Chetniks in the past years and the names of the criminals.

There was only one, great and indescribable sorrow which kept dragging me to the depths each and every minute I was alone. Like an endless string of black holes in my universe, that was how the void, the absence, the death of my brothers and sisters hurt. Until that moment, not having any concrete proof apart from the scanty information I had received, I secretly hoped and, in the back of my mind, waited for them to return. Now, however, everything was certain: Joži, Isa and Bora, Šela and Bela were alive only in my memories.

As I put together the mosaic of my life in the years that followed, the centre of my existence, everything that was an integral part of me and my past had disappeared. Nothing and no one could fill the lacunae in the picture which, though full of details and colour, remained empty and destroyed forever. None of my own remained alive! There was only the hope that somewhere my mother was still alive. I asked Tanasije Mladenović to kindly allow me to go to Belgrade after October 20 in an attempt to discover something about her. Belgrade: the old and new ruins were just pieces of the stage setting in my tragedy. From Borka Nikezić and Đura Paripović, my pre-war comrades, I learned that my mother was alive! She was in Drugovac, a village near Požarevac, where they had found her a place to stay and taken care of her all this time.

In 1941, I had left my mother in Belgrade, a woman who had fought with all her heart and strength to keep her seven children together, to give us the strength to resist evil, but in Drugovac I now found an old woman, the shadow of my mother. For years she had hidden as a refugee from Romania, this was the only way in which she could explain her poor knowledge of our language, customs and religion. Walking unsteadily, with a broken left arm, without glasses. All these years she had been afraid to put them on, apart from a few, rare occasions when she introduced herself as a *daskalica*, a teacher.

As we returned to Belgrade, she told me how the Chetniks had broken her arm: one Sunday morning they chased everyone from the village into the church. She attempted to make the sign of the cross, but used her left hand by mistake, and paid with a blow from a baton.

## KEEPING THE TRUTH FROM MY MOTHER

From the moment we met, until some time later, we were separated by a great secret: she did not know about the execution, the death of any of her children, while for me the disappearance of my sisters and brothers had become certain knowledge of their death.



*Sonja with her daughter Dolores-Šela  
and son Isa in Zemun, 1962*

I had someone, someone dearest to me, still alive, my mother! I had to protect her from the truth for which she was not yet strong enough.

I was transferred from Jagodina to Belgrade, to the propaganda division of the Supreme Headquarters, so that I could take care of my mother and protect her from discovering the tragedy. Most of the comrades who visited had been warned not to say anything. No newspapers were brought into our house, we never listened to the radio. She was waiting for them to return, and the tangle of lies we invented about secret missions became all the more convoluted. Liberated

Belgrade, and later the general liberation, began arousing the strength which had abandoned me.

Despite that, we who survived were still not alive.

All my life since then I have wondered how issues so miniature in scope can be important to people, how can they bicker over trivial matters. Is it possible, after everything that has happened, to live without love and tolerance? Can the new world we are building also contain the seeds of the darkness which destroyed the old one?

Two shipwrecked people adrift on a raft, my future husband Armando Moreno and I, didn't expect anything more than to try to resume life from the moment it was interrupted. One of us with more, and the other with less success. The first time music was heard in our house and a smile was coaxed onto my mother's face was in 1948 when my daughter Dolores-Šela was born.



*Monument to the Baruh brothers and sisters in the Walk of Heroes in the New Cemetery. (Stone relief by Božidar Obradović)*

Those many deaths began to retreat in the face of new life – or did a new life begin to grow in their shadow?

There was one dark area of our life which was never mentioned but which was constantly on our minds: my father's fate was unknown. The last news we heard about him was that he was alive, somewhere in Sarajevo, that he had managed to save himself thanks to the fact that he was living with a Muslim woman and had concealed his Jewish



identity. Whether he learned from the newspapers about his sons' death and that mother and I were still alive, I don't know. One morning, unexpected and unannounced, he turned up on our doorstep.

It was a painful meeting. I wanted at all costs to avoid him seeing my mother, who was only just managing to maintain her mental balance. That was the last time we saw each other... I still keep the watch he gave me that day.

Work, divorce and my second marriage to Solomon-Moni Alkalaj and happiness at the birth of my son Isa in 1958 finally brought me back to life. Now I, too, had a family again and my children would learn what it meant to have brothers and sisters, what great power it is that gives people a feeling of security when they find in their family, the one they have chosen and not just that based on blood relations, the confirmation of their values, love and warmth.

The years passed and grandchildren arrived, Leo, Igor, Simon and Jovana. Like a forest after a destructive fire, life was returning to my desert.

I began to paint. Every stroke of my brush was a memory of my brothers and sisters. I began to write, so that I could leave these memories to my children and grandchildren and anyone who doesn't hide from the truth and wants to use it to protect themselves from evil. Until 1991, when the ground began to shake, when life began to scatter away, until my children and grandchildren left Belgrade. Dolores and her three sons to Italy, and Isa to Israel. I understood their reasons – my life had served as a clear enough signpost for them to move their children away from the winds of war and senseless divisions. In no time at all I was also left without the country into whose fate I had woven myself, without my children and the laughter of my grandchildren, without Moni Alkalaj, my husband, who died just a year too soon to see his grandson and namesake, little Moni, born in Jerusalem.

Could I really find the strength to begin all over again, to become reconciled and to wait, to fight and to understand?

No. I buried myself in my solitude and sorrow, fixed myself to the past and, in the cave of events, waited for it to pass.

*The beginning of the end of 1999 was, for me, also the end of life. I didn't want to go down to the shelters. I stayed in my*

*apartment in my Dorćol with my son and night after night listened again... AGAIN!*

*For the last time I thought that perhaps I should not have survived after all, so that I would not have to watch all this once more. For the last time I looked at the Belgrade sky lit up with anti-aircraft missiles on their curved trajectories; for the last time I watched my Danube burn in the roaring of the aircraft and the ghastly wail of the sirens.*

*They pulled me out of Belgrade and took me to the false security of Italy. The only good thing about this was that my children were there.*

*While the newsreaders promised, in Italian and English, the efficient destruction of my dreams and the coup de grace for a past which had already been destroyed, with the last remnants of my strength I tried to understand.*

*I couldn't, and nor do I believe it is possible.*

*The two warm arms of my children were all that held me to the thread of life which no longer meant anything to me.*

*Liberation from physical pain and death would bring me peace, if only I could be sure that the constant, never-ending destruction of life could be stopped.*

*Can these lines help do that?*

*Despite the fact that we have survived, we will be alive only when life becomes something more than merely existing.*

*"And everything went to hell!" Those were the last words my children heard from me. I should have liked to be able to tell them something else.*

*I hope that they will to their children.*