

סאנסקי מוסט

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SURVIVED...4

YUGOSLAV JEWS ON THE HOLOCAUST

סקופייה

SKOPLJE

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Ivan NINIĆ

THE PERISHING OF MY DEAREST



Ivan Ninić was born at the end of 1932 in Belgrade, of father Miodrag Ninić and mother Irma-Jelena, née Rosenzweig. He grew up in Belgrade and Novi Sad under the watchful eyes of his maternal grandparents. Ninić witnessed the German bombing of Belgrade on 6 April 1941 and the atrocities of January 1942 during the Novi Sad Raid perpetrated by the Hungarian Fascists.

He was the only Holocaust survivor in his family, all others from his mother's side perished in the Holocaust.

Ninić lives in Israel.

I am writing this as a 73 years old man as memories of a 12 years old child who had no previous opportunity to evoke and revisit these memories with adults, since the whole family died or otherwise perished during the war.

In the mid 1980's I visited Eugen Verber in Belgrade in the Maršala Birjuzova street. He had just moved there from the Belgrade district of Zvezdara. Looking around his apartment I took a look through the window into the street. My eyes were stuck on the building across the street. I was looking at it for so long that Verber asked me: „What are you looking so hard at?“ I said: „That is the window of the room where I was at the onset of World War Two. That was where my bed was at the moment when the bombs started to fall down on the city on 6 April 1941.“

Kosmajnska street 45, second floor, the apartment to the right. The apartment of Josip and Margita Rosenzweig, my grandfather and my *omama*. In

March the school was interrupted „due to the war“. As I was growing up with my grandparents I wanted to spend my vacation at their place. I came from Novi Sad to Belgrade. Mother obviously did not think that the war was so close and she granted my wish.

Irma-Jelena Rosenzweig, whom everyone called Manci, my mother, had lived for years in Belgrade, where she met my father, Miodrag Ninić, known among friends as *Lepi Bata* (the handsome Bata). That was where I was born at the end of 1932. The marriage, however, did not last long and my mother, at age 22, sent me to my grandmother in Novi Sad. However, in March 1940 she married a wonderful man, Oto Zahnbauer, and she came back home and grandfather moved to Belgrade. He was a representative of a factory producing carpets from Banat. His other, younger daughter Valerija lived in Belgrade. She was married to Rudi Fassbender, an Englishman, who worked for the UK Embassy.

*Four generations
of the family with
whom destiny
played a cruel
game*



On 27 March I was walking on the Belgrade main square Terazije with my grandfather. I remember the shouting „Better a War than the Pact“! More important than the demonstrations for me was to persuade my grandfather to buy for me the attachment to the children’s illustrated magazine *Politikin zabavnik* about Captain Green, the hero of my boyhood imagination. In those days aunt Vali came to us and begged *omama* to let me go with them to England. The UK Embassy was preparing to evacuate. Only a few members of the staff were to remain in Belgrade, among them my uncle. *Omama* had said that she could not let me go, as my mother would be displeased. To this, my aunt responded with her somewhat bitter tone: „Mother, do you understand that there is going to be a war?“ The answer was: „Yes, I do“. But it is clear to me today that she did not at all understand what was to happen in the coming days.

On Sunday 6 April 1941, I woke up to terrible noise. The German aircrafts were coming down on Belgrade. Bombs, counter aviation artillery, and Hitler's roaring on the radio made me fully awake. *Omama* was asking grandfather „What is this?“, to which he briefly responded „Must be some exercise“. For many years I wondered whether he believed what he said or whether he was just suppressing the reality. That was why at a very early age I started to show interest in international politics. My whole life I have been listening carefully to news on the radio in order to stay well informed about what is going on around me, so as not to find myself surprised some day as they had been. During the year 1944 the Allied forces continually bombed Europe, and already at that time I was following the news on the radio *Luftlagemeldung*. The attack also included Novi Sad. Neighbors would ask me, somewhat jokingly: „Hanzi, will there be bombing today?“, as if asking whether it would rain.

Omama said: „We are going to the basement“. I was surprised at the number of people in the basement. They were sitting there, in a stupor, looking blankly around themselves and at every new arrival. There was no longer sufficient room for sitting down, but people made room for us to get in. The bombing went on the whole day. People were arriving in with horrifying news. Fire everywhere, many dead in the streets.

The following day, Monday, we started on foot to Mali Mokri Lug. Along the Sremska street, via Terazije to Aleksandrova street, and along the boulevard to the village. I cannot say how long this took, but I do still to this day remember the horror which I saw. Destroyed buildings, ruins, dead bodies, dead horses. I walked on as if through a nightmare, with heavy steps, disbelieving what I was seeing.

Another cartoon that I was fascinated by at that time was about the Head of Steel, after the Serbian folk story. I always wondered whether there really existed creatures with eagle and snake heads. Walking along the Aleksandrova street I was also wondering if what I was seeing was real. Until that time my life was so simple and boring, always with my grandparents and their friends, who always asked „How are you, Hanzi?“.

I remember Mali Mokri Lug by the tiny house that we lived in and slept on an improvised bed on the floor. There were many children there and I liked that. They let me drink black coffee, and I felt „as if grown-up“. We were watching in the direction of Belgrade and seeing the fighter planes drop bombs on our city. It was as if it was raining.

When the bombing stopped we stayed on for some time in the village and then someone informed us: „The Germans are in town“!

We returned to Belgrade. Along the Aleksandrova street, at Terazije square I saw men hanged in front of the hotel Moskva.

At home, the door to our apartment was broken, all windows but one were shattered, the one with the canary was still intact, and so the canary survived the bombing. The food preserves in our pantry and all the food were gone, everything was upside down.

Grandfather got sick, and to me it seemed that the reason for it was all the change, the new reality. Although optimistic all his life, he was suddenly depressed. We just stayed at home, there were notices everywhere about Jews having to report to the authorities, or otherwise ...

The doctor who was treating grandfather was telling us how his house was destroyed in the bombing. Grandfather said: „Well, move in here; we will be going to Novi Sad. I refuse to go and report to the authorities “.

They took with them only as much as two elderly persons could carry. Their whole life stayed on in that house. Doctor Jovanović moved into our apartment and I do not know what happened with him, or with our belongings. All that was left to me from my grandmother and grandfather were two albums of photographs and a prayer book, *Tefilot Israel* (Izrael imadšagai), by Feredi Ignac from 1899. It was a present to Margita Handler, which was my grandmother's maiden name, by someone in Vienna, dated 10.9.1900. The albums and the prayer books happened to be with me. I remember that every evening before going to sleep I had to say a prayer with grandmother and to say the names of those that I want God to keep.

We travelled to Novi Sad by train. We had to get off at the Petrovaradin station, as the bridge on the Danube for Novi Sad was destroyed. However, at the check point, during the checking of documents, the Hungarian authorities did not let my grandparents enter the occupied Novi Sad. We did not know what to do, so we were closed in the office where passes were issued. We were sitting in a corner alone, my grandmother, grandfather and I. I was watching them, looking helplessly around themselves, and at me. Grandmother was the model of tidiness. I remember her always punctually and completely setting the table for me every morning at 8 AM, as if it was an important ceremony. I think that that was the reason why grandfather was always either travelling on business or going hunting, mother was working far away, in Belgrade, my aunt married at an early age and left home, and uncle Victor did his studies in Zagreb. The 8 o'clock breakfast stayed in my memory as a symbol of the family getting together, discipline and tidiness, and it was now all gone during this trip from Belgrade under the German occupation, via Srem which was governed by the Ustaša, on the way to Novi Sad which was taken by the Hungarians! Two state borders at a distance of only about 70 kilometers.

At 8 in the morning, after a sleepless night, we were looking around us, terrified, not knowing what was going to happen with us. Clerks come into the office and through the window they were issuing passes for Novi Sad. All

of a sudden, unbelievably, it was as if I heard my mother's voice. I jumped, went to the window, and really I saw my mother! She was coming back from Belgrade, where she went to get me, but we were already on the way to Novi Sad. Good luck for me! The Hungarians let me get through to Novi Sad with my mother. But, where would grandmother and grandfather go? The only option for them was to go to the village Mandelos, near Ruma, where grandfather was born. He did not know anyone there. I never found out why it was that a Jewish family would settle in a place like that. All I knew was that grandfather had a sister living in Budapest and was married to a supporter of Bela Kun, and he also had a brother but I did not know where.

Parting with grandmother and grandfather was very sad. I would have been devastated had I known that it was the last time for me ever to see them. I grew up with them. I never lived with my father, I spent only weekends with my mother, as she used to come on weekends from Belgrade to Novi Sad to see me, between her age of 21 and 28.

The fact that I was to go with my mother to Novi Sad was great happiness for me. I was very happy that we would be together. My step father was prisoner of war.



*From boyhood days –
IVAN NINIĆ with
relatives*

It was, I think, the month of May 1941.

We were living in a family house that grandfather bought in 1939. The garden was a true rose-garden: twenty-two rose bushes! Omama always talked about it with pride. Later on they got out some bushes and grew grass out in order to make room for me to play. When grandfather went hunting I was always in the garden hunting sparrows, instead of pheasants. Grandfather took me hunting with him only once, but I was so loud that it was also the last time.

The house in Novi Sad, where I used to live with my grandparents, had four bedrooms and a dining-room which was connected to three rooms: theirs, the one for my mother and me, and Viktor's. Viktor was my mother's

younger brother, born in 1914. He studied first in Belgrade, but he had to leave the city due to his leftist activity, and he moved to Zagreb. There, he continued his political activity and the Yugoslav police arrested him on 30 March 1941, before the Ustaša came to power, and he was detained in the camp Kerestinec, where he was executed on 9 July 1941 along with Božidar Adžija, Otokar Keršovani and seven other intellectuals. He was the youngest among them; he was only 27 years old.

Viktor was restless. He read a lot. He wrote poetry published in the magazines in Belgrade, Zagreb and Novi Sad: *Glas omladine*, *Časopis živih*, *Naš život*, *Vojvođanski zbornik*, *Letopis Matice srpske*. This was how his associate and friend, writer Živan Milisavac, in 1945 described his restless spirit: „Viktor Rosenzweig is one of those young men who struggled with his inner controversies, vague aspirations and desires, unrealistic in his attempts to get closer to reality, in his striving to solve the major problems of man and of society on his own. He read feverishly, took part in strikes, got into prison, founded reading-rooms, started his studies in Belgrade and continued in Zagreb, moved from technical to veterinary studies, took part in organizing the youth movement and finally parted with his friends with whom he cooperated for a long time. He was always overwhelmed with plans to resolve problems exceeding his individual capacity. He strived to present himself as an unusual man, different from others, both through his appearance and his inner life. Actually, he was a serious young man with a shadow of melancholy about him, who was ahead of his generation. Yet, he could not make use of his strengths in the circumstances around him, nor would he build links with the older ones who had more knowledge and experience. Thus, in his struggle with himself he found himself isolated from the events and surroundings that he grew up in. His collection of poetry *Naš život* (Orbis, Zagreb 1939) illustrates the inner battles and torments of a person who lost old friends without having found new ones“.

My favorite pastime, apart from chasing sparrows and reading cartoons, was looking through Viktor's collection of books, and going through his drawers with his personal possessions. The first thing he would ask me on the rare visits home would be: „Have you been touching anything?“ He seemed to me somehow strict. He wore a wide-brimmed hat which to me seemed mysterious. I remember one occasion when we were sitting together at a table over lunch, omama asked him why he was not eating, and he replied that he could not eat while his comrades were starving in prison.

At the beginning of July 1941 we had a visit by Žigmund Žiga Handler, my grandmother's brother, a well-known attorney and a Jewish activist from Novi Sad. Franja Ofner once told me that he was the one who brought Zionism to Novi Sad. Žiga Handler, as an officer of Austria-Hungary in the

World War One, was taken as prisoner of war by the Russians and while in Russia he learned a lot about the Jewish nation, not only religion. After the War, in January 1921, together with Bargjor Brandajs he initiated the publishing of the magazine *Judisches Volksblatt* (Jewish People's Magazine), in the German language, because the majority of Jews in Vojvodina at that time were not fluent in the Serbian language. He got together young people who managed the magazine around political, social and economic issues. The Handlers lived nearby, in the Nikola Tesla street, on the side of the hotel Park, while our house was in Riterova bašta 5 (renamed after the war into Paje Jovanovića street). My life for the most part happened between those two streets, because in my earliest childhood I was cared for mostly by my great grandmother, the mother of my omama and Žiga, and she lived with the Handlers in a courtyard building. She was a piano teacher. She died aged 93 in 1939. There are many photographs of her in the album that I kept.

Žiga Handler was always serious, almost gloomy. Two days before that day, on 7 July, there was a funeral of our cousin Alfred Rosenzweig, who committed suicide. What made him do it?! The Hungarian police initially took him for Viktor, and once they realized their mistake they asked him to tell them whatever he knew about the Novi Sad intellectuals: who they were, what were their political beliefs, and the like. Since he did not intend to tell them anything, and he was not certain whether he could sustain it if he were exposed to torture, he decided to commit suicide. He was a well-known pre-war poet, he wrote under pseudonym Nenad Mitrov. His poetry was published in three literary magazines and in three collections of poetry: *Dve duše*, *Kroz klance jadikovke*, *Tri prema jedan za poeziju* (with poets Leskovac, Vasiljević, and Mikić). His legacy included five collections of poetry and the so-called Zagreb Diary. Two days after his funeral the family Rosenzweig was faced with another tragedy. Žiga Handler told us that he received information that the Ustaša had executed Viktor, along with ten outstanding Yugoslav intellectuals. Mother was dumbfounded and was just staring at her uncle.

The sons of Žiga Handler, in Teslina street, had everything that I did not have. While I was growing up with grandparents, without parents, his three sons Josi, Dodi, Valti – seven, six and four years older than me – grew up in a wonderful home, surrounded with parents and friends. The children's birthdays were true feasts. Ruža, Žiga's wife, was always kind and with a smile on her face.

Žiga had another son – Deške – from his previous marriage, who lived in Budapest and occasionally came to Novi Sad. Franja Ofner told me that he was his *intimus*, the best friend from his days in grammar school. That whole world, my childhood, perished half a year later in the Novi Sad Raid.

I will never forget that January of 1942. It was 20 degrees Celsius below zero. We were sent back home from school. Mother asked a friend of hers to have her son sent over to our place and play with me. She told me not to say anything. Soldiers came, asking for my mother's documents. The step father's German name seemed convincing; they looked into the room where my friends and I were playing. They did not ask me my name. My bicycle document, the only ID that I had, stated that my name was Ivan Ninić. Had they seen it, it would certainly have raised suspicions and additional questions. Just when we thought that everything was fine, a neighbor came and told us that the Handlers were taken away – Ruža and her three sons. My whole life, even today, I wonder what it must have felt like to have stood there on the *Štrand* waiting to be executed. Žiga was not with them. When he heard about the executions in Šajkaška street, he went to Pest to ask for interventions by authorities, but obviously he failed. I never saw him again, nor did I hear anything about his destiny. For me, and especially for my mother, it was as if the whole world had collapsed! She knew nothing of her parents in Srem, or of her sister who was on her way to England, her brother had been executed in Zagreb, and her husband (my step father) was released from prisoner of war camp and soon afterwards mobilized by the Hungarian Army. And now the Handlers were gone, our closest relatives, with whom we were together on daily basis! We had many more relatives in Novi Sad, of whom I had lost sight over time, and with whom our contacts during the occupation were not as frequent, at least according to my memory. We avoided socializing. In fact, we were living under false identities. I remember my mother and I once met a relative of ours in the street and she asked my mother: „Aren't you wearing the star?“, implying the armband with the yellow Magen David that Jews were obliged to wear. Mother just said: „I have no intentions to wear it.“ The only Jewish woman that we were in contact with during the war, who was not our relative, was Mrs. Viner, the aunt of Klara Bek from Jerusalem. She also had a non-Jewish husband, and we saw them from time to time and agreed on how we should act and what we should do.

In the summer of 1942 there was a new shock for us. Neighbors from Srem sent information to my mother that her parents, my omama and grandfather, had been killed by the Ustaša. We did not know the circumstances of how it happened. We knew nothing except the fact that they were dead. Only many years later, somewhere during the 1980's, Ruža David, the mother of Miša and Filip, mentioned in the presence of Ana, my wife, that during the war she had been in Mandelos. When Ana asked Ruža: „Did you possibly know the Rosenzweigs?“ She replied „Of course I did“, and added „they were the only Jews in the village apart from us.“ After Ana had said

this, I wanted to know the details of how my grandparents had perished. She told me that in Mandelos and the surrounding settlements some locals who during the day went about their usual business would during the night form some para-military units taking the power into their hands and entertain themselves by killing Serbs and Jews. People would flee to the forests at night to hide. The Davids and the Rosenzweigs hid in this manner as well. One night, grandfather simply said: „I will not flee any longer” and the two of them stayed at home.

In order to make some income for survival in Srem my grandfather learnt how to make woven wicker baskets. I recently read the book *A Short History of Myth* by Karen Armstrong describing how the Neolithic men started to develop different trades, including weaving of baskets. My grandfather's example demonstrates how Nazism simply forced men of the 20th century to go back into prehistory!

The publication *Zločini okupatora u Vojvodini* (The Crimes Committed by Occupiers in Vojvodina), Volume 2, pages 303–315, described the action by Viktor Tomić and his improvised illegal court in Srem. In the Archives in Sremska Mitrovica I saw an announcement nr. 1553-42 from Hrvatska Mitrovica dated 8 September 1942, stating that „Josip Rosenzweig, aged 56, and Margita Rosenzweig, aged 52, were proclaimed guilty for fleeing into the woods where they used hunting guns and pistols to fight home guards, Ustaša and the German Army “.

The mobile courts of this kind convicted them to execution before the firing squad on 24 June 1942. The conviction was enforced on 7 July 1942.

I subsequently read about the crimes committed by Viktor Tomić in the book of memoirs by Mirko Tepavac. He had committed such atrocities that he was even disowned by the Ustaša authorities and his unit was no longer led by him. Tomić then disappeared and some years later died in Budapest, where he became an alcoholic and died as a result.

In my childhood I had linguistic issues. My omama, Margita Handler Rosenzweig, a Jew from Vojvodina, was born in Parabuć. She spoke Hungarian, German, and her Serbian was her weakest language. Grandfather Josip, born in Srem, spoke German and Serbian, but no Hungarian at all. My mother, aunt Babi, uncle Viktor, nicknamed Bubi, were born in Ruma and spoke German and Serbian. The common language for all in the family was German, thus my mother tongue was German as well. The earliest children's books that I read were in German. I was subscribed to the children's magazine *Politikin zabavnik* to help me learn Serbian. I was enrolled in the preparatory school year with the Jewish Community in Novi Sad. The classes were in the building next to the Temple, on the other side across the street from the present day municipal administration building. The window over-



Both perished in their youth: Ivan's mother IRMA with brother VIKTOR ROZENCVAJG

looking the street. All my classmates were in more or less the same situation. At home they spoke either German or Hungarian, so they were enrolled in order to improve their command of the Serbian language and be ready for regular school. I was enrolled in school in 1939. I was speaking Serbian for two years when the war started. They then made me learn Hungarian. I was by no means to disclose the fact that I spoke German because, if I am not a German and I speak the Ger-

man language someone could conclude that maybe I was Jewish, irrespective of my family name. I remember my friend Viner telling me, right after the war, when I was to enroll in school: „Sign your name in Cyrillic, so that I can see if you have forgotten the Serbian language“.

In our house, living with us, was a woman Etuška, with her son. Her mother, nanny Ana, had worked for years for my omama, so I knew her already at the time when she was a young girl. She took care of the house and me during the war, especially after my mother got sick and went for treatment from which she was never to return. When she was leaving for the hospital she told Etuška: „Take good care of Hanzi, he is so naive“. I lived with her and her son for a while even after the liberation.

At the time when the executions of the occupier's collaborators and those who were reported by someone started, I heard a neighbor say: „Now Hanzi has the best pedigree: half Serb and half Jewish“. I smiled, and the others looked at me with sympathy.

That is why I continue to be convinced even today that multi-ethnic communities are viable. People can also be good. Evil comes from certain regimes.