

introduction

VIDEO SAM
(SERBIAN FOR “I SAW IT”)

ALL THE GRANDCHILDREN call me *Saba*. In Hebrew it means “grandfather.” Saba tells stories and the grandchildren listen. You may have heard stories from members of your family, maybe even from your grandfather. Perhaps even about the World War. There were two of them and this story happened during the second. (I hope there hasn’t been a third war by the time you read this book that I am leaving; I don’t want to imagine such horrors.)

Living through the Second World War—the story of how I got here—was also a time of adventure. When I think about it as a period not just important to me but also to the world, this is how it occurs to me: Everything in the world went away fast and everything in the world came at me fast. Because of my father, we *acted*.

If my father hadn’t had the premonition and fear of what was happening I wouldn’t be here. My family’s escape during the war, across our homeland, across a sea, into another country—it can seem like everything happened so long ago, and at the same time feel like it was just the day before yesterday. Especially when it is contained in a photo I am looking at: a picture of my companions at C asa dello Studente in Italy, where I was able to attend college after the war. I had missed going to college. The

years between 16 and 20 I spent under bombardment and occupation, in the same grip of grief as much of the world.

Looking and remembering, I recall how before the war I had actually planned to go to Palestine. And what if I had gone where my father wanted to send me, to study at a textile school in Haifa? I could be in Israel like my fellow pioneer in HaShomer HaTzair, Netika Levy. We were friends as children in Belgrade. Now Netika lives on a kibbutz raising her own young scouts, as I did with Lucy in the United States raising ours. Netika and I are both great-grandparents.

I can only wonder.

As to what *I saw* (*video sam* means “I saw it” in Serbian), and what it all meant—well, you can try and be reflective about your stories, and some can be funny or tragic to think about. Perhaps try to think of these as not so far away from your life and times. Aren't we all related by our family story? Despite it having been a different time, I may have been a lot like you. The Mandil family was middle-class. We celebrated our Jewish holidays. We had a lovely place to grow up and we were going on vacations every year to the seashore.

And then everything changed.

PART I:
before the war

chapter one

DORĆOL

Growing up in Dorćol, where two rivers meet and then go their separate ways: river Sava south through Serbia, and the Danube to the Black Sea...

CONSIDER YOURSELF LUCKY if you grew up in a neighborhood like I did. Of course it would have been nothing like Dorćol, but even though—I wish for you it could have been. For Dorćol, in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, where I was born in July 1924, is a special place.

Close to a big park and sitting right between two rivers, you'll find yourself in a street in Dorćol called Jevrejska. It means "Jewish" street. Children play games all over it, up and down and everywhere, as a milkman with a horse and cart makes rumbling sounds on the cobblestones while delivering big containers right from his farm. He pours just the amount you want into Mother's container, because my mother knows what to tell him. The same way she tells the iceman shouting with his chunks of ice—she'll take one large cube every day. Don't laugh, children, at just "one cube of ice." You don't know how large that was!

Next comes the chimney sweeper announcing his offer to do such a dirty job needing to be done on Jevrejska. This is how you found work back then: Go right into the street and ask for

it. And across the street from our grade school, on the other side of the tram stop, sits the sweetshop owned by a Viennese émigré who can make all kinds of Austrian tortes, and I love to go there to buy them from the husband and wife Gruber, and *everybody* knows Gruber.

That is just one of the best among a host of lively events I looked forward to. So constant that I never thought once about spending time with computers like so much time gets devoted to today. Of course they were not invented, and neither was television yet. But you see, growing up in the middle of a European capital in the 1930s brings culture created right outside the door of your apartment.

Do you like concerts? Mother takes us to the best concerts she knows we should go to—classical of course—conducted outdoors in Kalemagden and the other parks. Or inside auditoriums near Students Park like Kolarceva Zaduzbina. It may look strange to you, but believe me it was very popular! Mother had permission to take us out of school to go with her—how about that?—and we also had entertainment from radio and went to films and lectures, and this was the rhythm to our lives within this period, this “whirligig of time” I want to tell you about. (That’s Shakespeare; I know they still teach you Shakespeare, right?)

Okay, before I forget to tell you this: Please understand that I will forget to tell you a few things and will remember, along the way, having to tell you a few more.

First, I am sorry to break up wonderful memories of Dorćol, but imagine having to give it all up.

Could you?

How could we? We were forced to. When Germans occupied the city, they introduced their own laws that ended, as you

may know from history, with the killing of most members of our family.

One more thing about Dorćol: It was the name for this neighborhood when the Turks lived here, hundreds of years ago when Belgrade was part of the Ottoman Empire. But what I remember is less world history of that period than a word I learned only recently had been left by Turkish speakers, and it was still there to be used by Serbs: *Cifutim*.

It comes from a word in Turkish, *cift*, meaning “taxes.” But some Serbs used it this way when they shouted: “Cifut! You! Yeah! Cifut!”

In other words, it was thrown (along with other words) at Jews like here you say *kike* and in other places it was *Zid* or *Jevren*; well, there in Serbia they would say “*Cifut!*” And after the word came, next came the fists. The Serb kids beat us with them, or tried to. There was one guy in particular in our neighborhood, I can remember passing his house, and curling myself up in a low stance, my neck craning to make sure he wasn’t not in the yard so he wouldn’t see me.

Because he would hit me, I’m telling you, for no reason. And during summer camp in Bana Kovinica this same fellow was there, the kind of counselor that obviously hated Jews. Imagine this guy in charge of physical fitness? *Gimnastika*? Running us up and down hills all day. No place to swim. All mountains.

“He treats us very badly!” somebody would say about him.

“Yeah! Why do they let him have a whip?”

Yes, during calisthenics, the same counselor whipped us a few times, with obvious delight and, we thought, also hatred. By this time, 1939, I was fourteen or fifteen and still obediently following all the rules Serb fellows like him instructed: how to walk, how to exercise where everywhere is hot and there is no

place to swim anywhere nearby...

Enough with such memories; I'll tell you instead about a restaurant in Belgrade where I used to go in 1940, right before the war, with allowance money from my father. It was called Tel Aviv, and I'd be there with friends talking to the owner, a guy named Kohen, who had sons who went to school with us and became active in the resistance. The parents also took us to a place on Kralja Petra on the corner of Strahinića Bana, where in the summer they had an open terrace, a really big one, and there was always music. For years later, as time went by, my mother would remind me how the concert music under the sky made me jump in her arms. She did it in order to make me smile, during tough situations, and I'd remember I was her beloved, bouncing baby boy. In fact, my grandmother Zumbula gave me my own special name. I was too young to remember it now, but she announced to all the relatives that I was not just Benjamin.

I was also to be known as *Izzu Grande*. That's Ladino for "Big Son." First male born to the Family Mandil.

HISTORY

Jews moved to the southern Balkans after the fall of the First Jerusalem Temple (587 BCE), when most of them were led from Israel into Babylonian slavery. They accompanied Roman legions as half-free or even free people, mostly craftsmen who were needed by the army. From Macedonia and Dalmatia to the Vojvodina, monuments and fragments have been found which prove the presence of Jews in this area at the beginning of the new era. So it is likely they had settled also at an important crossroads of land and sea-lanes such as Belgrade.

Until 'The Final Solution': The Jews in Belgrade 1521-1942, by Jennie Lebel. Translated from Serbian by Paul Münch Avotaynu, Bergenfield, NJ, 2007