

Excerpt from The Tadjina

Jovana sighed. She got up and started pacing.

"Lane moje, little lamb, she said, "your grandmother lived in Sjeničak, but I grew up in a neighboring town, Perna. And we were ready. When the gunfire, the screaming and the wailing in Poljans drifted up from the valley in July 1941 to Perna, the word went out and we poured out to the designated rendezvous in minutes." She pantomimed holding a rifle. "We lay in ambush and attacked the Ustaša."

Srđa cut in, "We were nothing but a bunch of scantily armed peasants, but we stood up to a 20th Century army and held out for months. That's why the first aviation strikes of the Independent State of Croatia were on us. It wasn't until September that we began to weaken."

Jovana continued, "My uncle was among those first members of the Partisans. The Partisans are the only reason there are any of us still alive. But our family paid the price when Ustaša committed their reprisal on us.

"All our men were in the field, among the first volunteers to the Partisans. Even daddy," she said to Miloš, smiling. "He volunteered also, gave up his drinking, just like that, and before you know it, he was his old self again. A super marksman.

"But then, in the very early morning hours of September 14, 1941 the Ustaša pulled into our compound. As luck, or God would have it, I was in the outhouse when they burst into our courtyard. So I climbed the tree next to the outhouse and hid.

"From the height I had climbed I saw the first stabbing. A Ustaša bayoneted my father's first cousin, Milka Tanasije Roknić. He pulled the blade out of her body, ran his finger along it and licked his finger. I threw up.

"Later I found out why they knew so much about us. Among them was a young Croat who had done deliveries for the feed merchant and had often eaten at our home. Often we had shown him our hospitality. He could never make a delivery without being fed and entertained like a member of the family.

"He's the one who led them to the Poštic *zadruga* nearby, our cousins. He took them straight to the cottage of the Poštic man at the head of the Partisans. My best friend, Milka, was nursing her baby, Evica, and making bread.

"Let me tell you how we make our bread. She would have had to wake up throughout the night to keep a good fire burning, so there would be lots of coals. She'd set out several litres of dough the night before, then in the morning she would have cleared a circle in the center of the fireplace, then placed some large squash leaves on the fireplace floor. As she was about to empty the dough onto the leaves, the Ustaša burst into the house, awakening everyone.

"There were six little kids in the house, shrieking in fear, but the Ustaša quickly quieted them with the ends of their bayonets. In general, Ustaša never liked wasting bullets on Serbs, of any age.

"What should have happened that morning, was Milka should have poured that dough into the fireplace and covered it with a baking lid." Jovana clasped her hands and made a triangle shape with her arms. "The potter makes it. Like a Chinese hat. It would already be piping hot, then it covers the dough, and coals cover it. Everybody was supposed to wake up to the scent of some wonderful, fresh-baked bread that morning, but no.

"Instead they grabbed little Evica and put her under the lid."

Leslie gasped and felt nauseous. "That little baby?"

"Someday you can go see that lid at the Military Museum in Belgrade. And bring some flowers for little Evica."

"Then the commanding officer said to Milka, 'Serve that dish to your uncle, Mirko, in hell,' I know, because she told me, but she did not tell me this in Hell. She told me this in Heaven.

"Then they took Milka, shrieking, half-mad, out into the yard. Several of them raped her and her aunt Kata while the others were setting the house on fire. While being raped, her mind left her body and regained its clarity, and she saw, in the doorway of her burning house, a beautiful angel holding Evica.

"Then the Ustaša stabbed her, and while she was still alive, threw her into the burning house. Within fifteen minutes everyone in the house had been killed and was being burnt up in the fire. Once dead, they departed from their front doors and began their ascent, looking back at the unfortunate soldiers who were now as damned as they were blessed.

"But back at the Roknić zadruga, I saw with my own eyes as my cousin, Boja Radicanin, ran into the woods with several Ustaša chasing her. In minutes, they brought her back to the burning houses, pulling her by her hair. One then bayoneted her, and while she still lived, threw her into the inferno inside the house. She screamed her agony and then was heard no more on earth.

"The last cottage they came to was that of my hero, Anka Roknić. She told me about it later, in Heaven. She had moments to think of an escape. She had a thought to send her children out the window in back, but there was a soldier stationed there. She hid her two youngest under the bed. She was in the kitchen brandishing a kitchen knife when the fascist thugs entered. Immediately they bayoneted her.

"She fell to the floor while they moved on to the others. Her head was clearing when she heard her invalid mother-in-law screaming from across the house. One of the soldiers had lingered in her kitchen, tearing off a piece of bread from the large loaf she'd baked the day before. She leapt out at him with her kitchen knife. She went for his throat, but

he blocked it and she only cut a deep gash along his shoulder. They fell to the floor, with him screaming, as she continued slashing at him. "You scream like a girl," she hissed in his ear.

"Two Ustaša ran into the room and finally managed to bayonet Anka once more. As she lay dying, the soldiers hurriedly left, dragging their bleeding comrade with them, anxious to get him to the medic. They set the house on fire.

"In their haste they had missed Anka's two youngest children she'd hidden under the bed. The children could hear the trucks departing and slipped out of the burning house in time. Somehow, in all the smoke and confusion, we missed each other and fled in different directions. I did not know of their survival till much later.

"I also learned of another person who survived, another young mother, Evica Roknić. She'd been bayoneted in the courtyard and left for dead, with her three-year-old son, who'd been killed while in her arms. She was found and taken to the hospital, where her wounds were healing. Ustaša, nonetheless, found her in the hospital and finished her off while she lay convalescing in her bed.

"By the time the sun was fully risen, 105 people lay dead, 57 of them little kids. There was even a newborn who was thrown, uninjured, into one of the burning houses."

Srđa jumped in. "If the intent of the reprisal was to discourage participation in the Partisans it failed. People joined, not expecting to survive, only wishing to destroy as many of our savage enemies as we could before those enemies could harm more of our loved ones. And that is how we have survived 600 years of relentlessly repeating wars."