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Tuzla of My Youth, Foreword

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Quite unexpectedly, but silently and steadily, the town started to sink. Clearly, it did not sink equally everywhere, nor in all its parts. This was an endless subterranean and insidious destruction. It usually started with doors or windows not being able to close, some cracks would appear, and plaster and mortar would start falling off. 'In the evening we closed the door' – one could hear from all sides – 'and in the morning we could not open it.' The underground waters and hidden cavities – the secret paths of salt and brine – sucked the buildings, settlements, streets and entire quarters into themselves. The house of the Antić family, on the way to the Salty Spa, built just before the war, became a measurable indicator of the monthly and yearly sinking, since it was sinking evenly, with its whole foundation. In the decades that followed the war, the destruction started taking the shape of a natural disaster. Some buildings were depopulated and emptied, while others were erected to accept the tenants from the houses marked by the colour of sinking. The Administration for Sinking became the most significant institution, in a town that was losing its original form. The parts of the town dating from the pre-war period, which represented the central points of the urban area, were gradually disappearing, turning into grassy surfaces, more or less meaningfully arranged. One after another, the town symbols disappeared – the town's focal points, the structures that created and shaped its cultural and historical ambience. The Hotel Bristol, a tall and proudly-standing building in the very centre, on the main road, with its spacious café and cinema, was demolished, and the explosives that were used to destroy its foundations and walls echoed in the heads of the townspeople like blows right into the heart and backbone of the town. The District Court, the Circle of Serbian Sisters, the Stone Court, the Army Home, the Regional Military District building, the Vocational School, the Sekulić residential building with its bookstore, as well as the whole of the Serbian quarter, found themselves on the sad list of the buildings destined to death and execution. At that time, a friend of mine told me: 'If they tear down our Grammar School – I will not come back to Tuzla again.' That sad day came, as well – the huge yellow building of the Grammar School vanished, and with it, a part of ourselves and our youth.

Sinking, a magical and inexorable fate of everything that sinks, was so abrupt and extensive since the 60s, to the degree that the destroying force swept more than could have been expected. Over time, the sinking caused such changes of the town's layout and appearance that many of those who had been away for decades, upon seeing the changed image of the town, felt shock, and if somebody, after many years, happened

to return to their hometown, they could no longer recognise some of its parts.

The destruction caused painful reactions, since every house kept lots of memories – dear faces that, leaning out the window, watched the streets, the building facades which decorated the town, yard greenery around the houses which disappeared along with them.

No author has yet described Tuzla in such great detail as did James Joyce, a reliable guide for Dublin. Joyce described his ‘dear, dirty Dublin’ so accurately that even after an earthquake one could reconstruct it according to his outline. As such, it will never stop existing, even though the city has changed completely. The writer has put his city into words. What a pity that there has not yet been a writer whose work could record the history and revive the old Tuzla, as it drowns into the oblivion of sinking and soil erosion. The Tuzla we remember differs immensely from the postcard of today’s Tuzla. The town was distinctly bordered, harmoniously constructed, without great contrasts, with its well-planned downtown, and compact, discrete communities; with its quarters laid out across the gentle, hilly slopes descending towards the bed of the small river Jala – towards the industrial suburbs of Tuzla, in the direction of Kreka, Bukinje, Moluhe, from where the natural landscape began.

The town’s bearings gradually started to loosen. The invisible springs that had kept it founded and fixed came undone, and its contours, woven into our souls and recollections, began to change their form. On every visit to the town, we noted with horror what had gone for good – erased spaces opened up, and blanks with no purpose or logical connection.

Time took its toll, and the day came when one could ask oneself – What was my street’s name? – the moment when one felt the need to write down what he had remembered about those disappeared streets. At the turning point between what the town had been and the new arrangement that was coming in, I got the idea of writing down my vision of ‘the old Tuzla’.

Sinking, oblivion, disappearance of the people, as well as the final straw in the form of the ruinous social upheaval and war in Bosnia, have driven me, although I did not have any inclination towards writing, to make notes about the town and testify to it and, above all, to its people as they used to be and as they have remained in my memory.

In order to hear the voices of the days gone by and their hidden messages, we need to bring back the memory of that time in all its details and remembered facts, so as to save from extinction the long-lost virtues: community life, tolerance, patriarchal decorum and respect for people.

That is why it is difficult to resolve the uncertainty about how to write one’s memories of childhood. Should we accurately reconstruct every remembered detail and every person worthy of attention, or should we leave it to our imagination based on what we have remembered, and from within evoke the atmosphere and the disappeared world? Since I am not naturally gifted for the latter, nicer, literary version, I have decided to reconstruct the facts, with as much credibility as possible, so that this writing could achieve at least one aim – factuality and extensiveness of the information.

People mostly write about themselves when composing their memoirs. My wish was to write as little as possible about myself, and more about those who could not leave any written record, nor speak any longer, so as to show their unforgettable personalities, viewed through the prism of my perception and memory as a child.

French herbalist Maurice Mességué, who had a deep love for plants and for his father, wrote in his book 'Of People and Plants': 'They say in my region - to know a river you have to know its source. My father is my source ... He is the source of clear and fresh water, singing water, surrounded by wild plants, bitter and gentle. I owe everything to him - my love for life, my knowledge and success. He has marked the whole of my life, which can be understood only when one understands my love for him.'

I would be able to sign my name to this entire quotation, in full accordance with what it states, with only one thing different: instead of 'surrounded by wild plants', I would put 'surrounded by babies and little children.'

By reviving the memories of the days spent together in Tuzla, these lines are also written with my wish and intention to express my gratitude and indebtedness to the man who was killed by his frenzied fellow-countrymen at the age of 42. I can say with certainty that the first 15 years of my life, the happy time woven with the golden threads of my childhood, lit by my father's bright personality, are the happiest part of my life that has never been reached again.

That is why my childhood was and still is - my lighthouse.



Vera Mujbegović with her father, Dr Mustafa Mujbegović, in their flat in Tuzla, 1939

Note: Vera Mujbegović was born in Zagreb, 1927. Until 1947, she lived in Tuzla, where she attended her elementary and grammar school. Vera studied philosophy at

the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade from 1947 until 1951, and defended her PhD thesis in Ljubljana, 1965, in the area of modern German history. She worked at the Institute for International Labour Movement in Belgrade until 1980.

Translated with note by Ana Stanović Obradović and Mirjana Savić-Obradović.

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