

ESCAPE FROM DESPAIR:
A CROATIAN FAMILY'S SURVIVAL

A MEMOIR

KATARINA TEPESH

“Escape from Despair,” by Katarina Tepesh. ISBN 978-1-60264-041-2.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007933255.

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TO CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS AND SURVIVORS
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

My deepest appreciation to all of the people who contributed to the creation of “Escape from Despair: A Croatian Family’s Survival,” offering their insight and critical support.

Bernadette Miller, Cathy C. Craig, Diane Patrick, Andrea Beaman, Elizabeth Wilen-Berg, Judy Rabinor, Judy Frank Mearian, Hannelore Hahn, Elizabeth Julia Stoutmen, Carol Thoma, Robert Wolf, Vivina Ciolli, Martin & Maya Ben-Ari, Sanja Crnkovic Cooklin, Nada Khodlova, Ellen & Roy Schoenberg, Dorothy Hampton Marcus, Patrick Healy, Roz Gregor, Donna Rauch, Shqipe Malushi, Carmen G. Delgado, Lidia & Nubia Rios, Glen Raucher, Bernard Luketich, Vjekoslav Krsnik, Nenad Bach, Marko Puljic, Branka Bezic Filipovic, James V. Debevec, Silvester Subotnjicki, Phil Hrvatin, Tim Percic, Dr. Gilda Glasinovich and Stephanie Sorensen.

This narrative is a true account of events, according to my memory and family stories. Besides talks with relatives, I used correspondence, documents and photos.

The names of some people and places have been changed.

TOO MANY WOMEN
IN TOO MANY COUNTRIES
SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE.
SILENCE. . . .

—ANASUYA SENGUPTA

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1.

BOZENA AND IVAN

My turbulent family history mirrors the history of two countries, Croatia and Slovenia. For centuries, Croatia and Slovenia have been caught in turmoil between powerful empires or invaded by aggressive neighbors. Just as Croatians and Slovenians always wanted to gain their freedom from their conquerors and live in peace, my own family was abused and sought freedom.

My mother, Bozena Kanic, was born in 1923, the third of seven children, five of whom survived. The Kanic clan lived in the village of Cerine, Croatia, which at that time was part of the kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Later the name changed to Yugoslavia.

The family was poor, working on their small farm in the Zagorje region among hills strewn with vineyards and green meadows. They grew everything they ate and

sustained themselves with farming and livestock breeding. Located within a cluster of villages, Cerine consisted of nine farmhouses and a muddy winding road. The Kanics lived in an old house plastered over with mud, thatched with straw, and held up by heavy oak beams. At night, they used candles and a petroleum lantern for light.

The Kanics were Roman Catholic, attending Mass at a neo-Romanesque parish church in the nearby village of Taborsko. Services were filled with prayers, songs, and long sermons about rewards in heaven and punishment in hell. The school, where nuns taught children between the ages of six and ten, was next door to the church. Village life consisted of working in the fields, attending church services and ceremonies, such as funerals, weddings, and fairs, along with their beliefs, superstitions, and the changing seasons.

Following tradition, each generation of peasant women had to obey their husbands, stay silent at public meetings, and keep their heads covered with a handkerchief as a sign of submission.

Though an unpaved road, rough and narrow, often chopped and muddied by cattle hooves, runs through Cerine, the local people took a shortcut, hiking nine kilometers over the mountains to reach the nearest town, Rogatec, a border-zone village along the Slovenian border.

In Cerine, villagers would greet each other with “*Bog daj!* God bless!” When the bell rang every day at noon in the three-hundred-year-old Church of Saint John, the

peasants stopped working for a minute, looked toward the church, and crossed themselves.

During the summer, the most beautiful time of year in the village, they held a religious festival. The meadows, not yet cut, were covered with wildflowers and tall grass. The hills of hardwood forests were green and lush.

As a young man, Stjepan, the head of the Kanic family, traveled to Vienna with the help of his uncle to work in a factory. When World War I erupted in 1914, Stjepan had to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army. Wounded in the stomach and left leg, he returned to Cerine to recuperate. Stjepan married a young woman named Teresa, but couldn't find a job anywhere in Croatia. Fortunately, the small farm sustained them. Like other peasants, they bartered goods and services to survive the Great Depression.

When times were good, the family had a cow or two. The soft mooing woke them up every morning because the cow lived in a stable close to the old wooden house where Teresa, Stjepan, and their five surviving children slept on three large beds with straw mattresses. During the brutal winters, they filled the comforters with goose feathers. The parents' bed was in the middle of the bedroom they all shared. The boys, Viktor and Dragec, slept in the bed on the right side against the wall. The girls, Bozena, Anica and Jozica, shared a bed on the left of the bedroom.

The house was decorated with pictures of the Virgin Mary and Jesus and had crosses hanging on every wall.

Next to the bedroom was a small, dark kitchen with one tiny window. The stove was the heart of the kitchen, drawing the family to its warmth. Wreaths of garlic and red hot peppers decorated the tiny kitchen. In spring, when baby chicks were born, they lived in a box kept close to the stove for warmth. Another medium-sized room was used as a workroom and for storage.

The house had dirt floors. Home improvements in Kanic's house meant chopping trees to make the kitchen floor. Then it was a woman's job to scrub it. The father and brothers did the heavy work; plowing the fields and chopping trees to build a new cabin for pigs. The family owned a few parcels of forested land, which supplied wood for heating and raw materials to make tools, such as wooden rakes and poles for vineyards.

The stable was separated into four parts. On the right side was the cow, tied down so she wouldn't run away. A wooden partition separated the cow's stall from the pigsty. Beside it was a separate room, dark, windowless and cool, used as a wine cellar. On the left side of the stable, they kept the hay. During hot, muggy summers, the children slept in the hay. To the left of the house was a chicken coop and the outhouse was on the right, on a grassy area near a willow tree, thirty steps from the house.

Teresa and her daughters, Anica, Bozena, and Jozica, began and ended their day by milking their cow. After milking, Anica took her wooden pail to the kitchen to strain the milk. Some milk they drank fresh while the rest was left to sour in a pot. When they had collected enough

sour milk, they heated the pot, strained out the curds, and then salted the curds and kneaded the new cheese into a ball, which they left to dry.

The children walked four kilometers to school. When a hole appeared in their shoe sole, they traced the outline of their shoe on a cardboard box and put the cardboard cutout into their shoe as an insole.

On a pleasant spring day, my parents, Bozena Kanic and Ivan Tepesh, saw each other for the first time, walking in opposite directions on the main street of Rogatec. Ivan's Croatian family moved from the tiny village of Rusnice to a larger, run-down house with a large piece of land on the Slovenian side of the River Sutla. The Tepesh family lived on the outskirts of Rogatec, eleven kilometers from Cerine. Ivan, then twenty years old, was tall and blond, with sky-blue eyes. Although his nose was broken from a fight over a girl, he was dressed nicely in a new brown suit and a neat, checkered tie.

Bozena was eighteen, with long, dark pigtails, a pretty face, and an easy smile. Their eyes met and locked.

Ivan nodded and said, "Good day!"

Bozena blushed, stammered, and melted inside, pleased that such a handsome young man had noticed her.

The following Sunday, Ivan had a choice of going to Mass in Rogatec or walking up the hill to the church in Taborsko. Hoping to see that pretty girl, he waited outside the church in Taborsko where he and his younger brother, Martin, had served as altar boys during their childhood,

knowing that, sooner or later, a peasant girl with pigtails had to come out. Finally she did, with nuns in tow! The strict nuns didn't allow any interaction among young people of different sexes, so Bozena and Ivan exchanged meaningful glances but didn't speak.

It was 1941, and World War II was spreading throughout Europe. People thought they had seen the worst during the 1930s, when it was difficult dealing with the Great Depression, unemployment, workers without money and peasants without land, but now a German invasion was imminent.

While she was delivering milk to a family in Rogatec, on the border of German-occupied Slovenia, Bozena spotted German trucks and tanks coming toward her, followed by German soldiers marching by with guns and bayonets. That same day, the German Gestapo took command in many parts of Yugoslavia. They ordered a strict curfew, controlling the whereabouts of the population and checking everyone's identification. They captured the biggest house in town and set it up as their command post.

Young men were ordered to join the military. Ivan received an official letter ordering him to immediately report to the German army in Graz, Austria. Instead, he mailed them a doctor's excuse explaining that he was too sickly to join the army because he had shingles.

Innocent people were arrested. Peasants, feeling lost and terrified, were abandoned by their king, who had signed a pact cooperating with Hitler and then escaped to

England before the German airplanes began bombarding still-sleeping people early one April morning in 1941.

A brutal civil war raged, with a number of groups fighting each other for control of Yugoslavia. The Croatian population, including Ivan, was fearful, uninformed, and terribly confused as to which group to join. They were no longer sure whom they could trust. Families broke apart, sometimes joining opposing sides. The Ustashe, a Croatian far-right organization consisting of 75,000 militia put in charge of the Independent State of Croatia by the Axis Powers on April 6, 1941, pursued Nazi policies. The Domobrani, or Home Guard, was composed of 160,000 inadequately trained enlisted men. Croatia also had 15,000 police auxiliaries. Other Croatians joined underground Communist Partisans to fight against Germans, Domobrani and the Ustashe.

A year later, Bozena and Ivan spotted each other again at a wedding in the nearby village of Lopert. Bozena was working in the kitchen, wearing an apron and a white handkerchief around her head to keep her long brown hair away from her face. It was a custom among marriageable girls to help out at their friends' weddings. They knew that the time would come when the favor was reciprocated with labor, food, flowers, wine, and anything else that was needed.

Ivan was part of a local *tamburitza*, a band consisting solely of stringed instruments, playing with the neighborhood boys for fun and to meet girls. Usually, there was plenty of wine and *rakija*, potent liquor

containing sixty percent alcohol. The band used a variety of stringed instruments played with a pick, including a guitarlike rhythm instrument called a *bugarija*; a *brac*, which has a D string, an A string, and two F sharp strings; a small, round instrument called a *prim* or *bisernica*; the larger *celo*, and the *berda*, a large, upright fretted bass played by Ivan. The band was on the lookout for an accordion player and a violin player.

The bride entered the kitchen and told the helpers, “Make sure that you feed the musicians. Otherwise, they’ll get too drunk and won’t play for long.”

As soon as Ivan spotted the girl with pigtails in the kitchen, he smiled and asked her for her name.

She blushed and mumbled, “Bozena.”

“Hey, Bozena, why don’t we go outside and look at the stars?”

“Oh, I’m working here,” responded Bozena. “There’s so much to do.” She pointed to the dirty dishes and glasses, which were in short supply and had to be constantly washed by hand with great care, so as not to break anything.

Ivan winked at her and said, “I can walk you home later.”

Weddings were important events. Everyone from the village was invited. The eating, drinking, singing, and dancing went on all night. Outside, on the open fire, a pig was roasting and the pleasant aroma of burning wood and meat was everywhere. Men were drinking and watching a circle of women dancing the *kolo*. Shoulder to shoulder,

with their arms in a basket-weave hold, right arm over left, the women moved counterclockwise, putting right foot in front of left foot with the grace acquired from dancing to *tamburitza* music since childhood.

Bozena didn't finish her work until morning. The sun was coming up, with rays peeping among the apple trees, when she started the half-hour walk home from Lopert to Cerine.

Ivan was right behind her, puffing on a cigarette to calm his nerves. The cigarette was a present from one of the wedding guests, who worked in far-away Vienna and could afford such luxuries as cigarettes.

As he caught up with her and spoke her name, Bozena noticed that Ivan's beautiful blue eyes were now bloodshot, and his voice was hoarse from singing and drinking all night.

"You're slurring your words because you're drunk," she told him. "You'd better go home. Don't follow me."

"Yeah, you're taking me in the opposite direction from my home. Do you see how I'm going out of my way for you? Only for you, nobody else."

"Oh, you're a musician and you like to flirt. If you didn't follow me, you'd follow some other girl."

Ivan was persistent. After walking a few miles in the fresh air, he seemed to sober up, telling Bozena about himself in a slow but coherent manner.

"I have a job as a carpenter in Zagreb. I'm good with numbers and measurements. I know all about oak, maple,

mahogany, birch, ash, walnut, and cherry, and how to make sure that they're aged properly."

"Do you make new chairs and tables or fix old ones?" asked Bozena.

"Both. I completed three years as an apprentice, working ten-hour days and six-day weeks from 1936 until 1940."

Ivan liked talking about himself, impressing the pretty peasant girl with his knowledge of the big city of Zagreb, a place of opportunity.

"You know, my father makes and sells wine," Ivan continued. "That's how he met my boss, Vlado Miletic. My father gave him quite a bit of free wine as a favor for taking me on in the carpentry shop. One hand washes the other, so to speak. The family Miletic also makes staves, the wooden strips used for making barrels to store wine and beer. Now that we're in a war, my boss says we'll be making a lot of caskets. But I don't want to think about the war."

"Everyone is scared of war," said Bozena quietly. "For a while, I had a job as a domestic working for Ludwig Krechi, the German in charge of running the glass factory. They were nice, but they moved away after the war broke out."

"Like I said, I don't want to talk about the war. Yeah, I'm a good carpenter. I asked around about you, and everyone tells me you're very religious, always praying. I could make a small wooden crucifix for you, if you were my girl. It would probably take me all day. First, I'll need

to spend time in the woods to find the right tree branch. But for you, I would do it.”

Bozena wasn't sure how to respond, but she thought the idea for the crucifix was sweet. If he made a small one, she could wear it around her neck all the time.

When they reached Bozena's home, they found her mother, Teresa, dressed in black from head to toe, standing outside, ready to go to the morning Mass. Glaring at Bozena for being in the company of a stranger, she silently looked Ivan up and down, arching her eyebrows to show her disapproval.

“How soon can I see you again?” whispered Ivan to Bozena.

Bozena gazed intently at him for a moment and silently waved good-bye before entering her family home. She rather liked Ivan and was pleased that he had approached her. Like all girls, she was expected to get married and move away so that the oldest son could take over the homestead and start his own family, sharing the tiny house with his parents.

And yet, Bozena couldn't ignore Ivan's singing off-key, his talking loudly and cursing in the company of other men, and his unprovoked arguing. She had seen Ivan's band get so drunk that they looked cross-eyed, spoke incoherently, vomited, and laughed uncontrollably for no apparent reason.

As the horrors of war continued, men in villages like Cerine took it upon themselves to keep watch at night, patrolling the streets. There were rumors that the

Croatians' archenemies, the Serb Chetniks, were coming. These soldiers were rumored to be criminals who burned houses, raped girls and women, and tortured and killed Croats.

Bozena's father, Stjepan, was trying to protect the house that he had built with his own hands, which would easily burn because it was made of wood and thatched with straw. He had inherited the land from his parents and planned to share it with his oldest son, Viktor. During the vicious war, the Chetniks did burn houses and commit other atrocities, but not in Cerine, which was far from Serbia. Still, one morning in the fall of 1943, Stjepan was found dead from a heart attack.

Bozena's family couldn't afford a coffin, so her mother pointed to the nearest tree outside their house, a beautiful linden.

"This was his favorite tree," she said. "In full blossom, the flowers release a lovely honey scent. We used to sit in the shade of a linden tree on a hot summer's day and if at all possible, perform chores there or sip a glass of wine." Her lips quivering, Teresa wiped her tears with her long, ever-present black apron and said, "Take it down and make a coffin!"

As World War II raged on, the Croatians were starving and feared for their lives. Bozena's brother Viktor joined the Domobrani. He was twenty-one years old, without any army training. He had never even seen a gun until he was forced to defend his family's home and the village where he was born. The first time the enemy launched an all-out

attack on Cerine, Viktor was struck by a bullet that lodged between his ribs. Teresa removed the bullet with a knife but had no antiseptic to prevent an infection. The women held a prayer vigil all night, praying to the Virgin Mary to save their oldest son and brother. Burning with fever, he suffered a slow, torturous death.

Again, the Kanic family had no money for the coffin. Down went another linden tree.

Soon afterward, the youngest son, Dragec, while walking to church with another boy, spotted something shiny in the grass along the dirt road. The other boy touched it and was blown to pieces by the German mine. Dragec lost his left eye, his entire left arm and had shrapnel wounds all over his body. His condition was critical for weeks, but, finally, he pulled through, remaining an invalid for the rest of his life.

Ivan's family suffered casualties, too. As Milica, his brother Martin's wife, was wading across the River Sutla, as she had done a thousand times, she stepped on a mine planted by Germans. Seeing her leg, which looked like a red rose, blown open and bursting with blood, Milica fainted.

Milica's family was angry and blamed her when she told them she was on her way to attend the christening of a baby born to a local girl who had been raped by German soldiers. With the war going on and no money, the new mother was agonizing over what to do. Other women, in desperation, pushed a coat hanger into their vaginas to induce a miscarriage. Mostly these women bled to death.

Despite such tragedies, Ivan naively thought that he could avoid the war by working as a carpenter in Zagreb and hiding from the authorities who wanted to draft him. A procrastinator, he couldn't decide which group to join. He avoided the Germans, the Ustashe, the Domobrani, and the Communist partisans. Everyone called him *kukavica*, or coward, but besides the fear of death that kept him from joining an army, it was also fear of responsibility. The only thing he cared about was playing music with the local boys, drinking homemade wine, and chasing pretty girls.

One Sunday, his sister Milena and brother Martin managed to manipulate Bozena to come with them to visit Ivan in Zagreb. They all got drunk except Bozena, who never touched alcohol. Ivan saw to it that Bozena missed the last train back home, which forced them to spend the night in the same room. Milena and Martin passed out from drinking.

A good Catholic girl who had never spent a night away from her family, Bozena was terribly upset. Ivan, forceful and aggressive, pulled her to the floor. A scuffle broke out, with Bozena crying and screaming, "No, no, no!"

Ivan, on top of her, reached under her skirt and pulled down her underpants, ripping them. He whispered in her ear, "If you love me, you have to prove it to me and be mine."

"No! I don't want it to happen this way. Stop it!"

"I'm going off to war and you'll never see me again. I'll probably die like so many others."

Bozena cried and tried to push him away, but Ivan was much stronger and raped her. He believed that once he had taken her virginity, Bozena belonged only to him.

Deeply hurt, emotionally and physically, and bleeding heavily, Bozena cried. She had been taught by nuns to preserve her virginity and love for her future husband and to dedicate herself to him in complete fidelity.

In addition to fear of pregnancy, she felt guilty, knowing that to lose her virginity outside of wedlock was a sin in the church's view.

In church, Bozena prayed before a life-sized Pieta, depicting the sorrowful mother of God cradling the crucified body of Jesus, a sword piercing her heart. This image was always part of Bozena's thoughts.

The Croatian army kept demanding for Ivan to report immediately. He continued to hide from authorities at his job in Zagreb and at home in Rogatec. When the local Communist partisans came by his parents' house asking for him, they took the last food in the house, some smoked meat.

Finally, Ivan was caught and threatened with a pistol against his head. On October 11, 1944, he joined the Domobrani, now the National Guard for the Independent State of Croatia, which fought against Communist partisans in Croatian territory.

Within six weeks of the rape, Bozena suffered from nausea and vomiting. Cooking odors bothered her so much that she had to run to the outhouse all the time. Her monthly periods stopped and her breasts enlarged

and become tender. Crying and ashamed, she approached her mother. "I'm pregnant," she sobbed.

Bozena's mother, herself pregnant seven times, was horrified. "Pregnant? You're having a baby without being married? Oh, what shame! We're already worried sick over this brutal war. How will we feed the baby without any money for food? Oh, God help us!"

On October 24, 1944, Bozena's water broke and she went into labor. In a panic, her mother shouted to her youngest daughter, Jozica, "Run! Run as fast as you can for Anica. She'll help me."

Bozena was convulsing in labor, screaming from pain and gripping the sides of the bed. Wiping perspiration in between contractions, she was praying and moaning, "This is God's will."

Several hours later, Jozica returned with her older sister Anica, who was sweating and out of breath from running. Her own hand bandaged in a handkerchief, Anica sobbed, "We were attacked by wild dogs when we took a shortcut."

Bozena's labor was horrendous. She screamed all night, but no painkillers of any kind were available. When she was dilated, Teresa and Anica helped pull the baby out of the womb and cut the umbilical cord with scissors. The baby was quiet, not moving, with spots of blood all over her tiny body. Teresa slapped the baby's behind and they heard, "Ayaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Teresa and Anica exchanged glances and both said at the same time,

“Thank you, God!” Bozena named the healthy baby girl Marijana.

To slow Bozena’s bleeding, which was soaking the bed, Teresa and Anica put Bozena’s head lower than her hips.

After washing Marijana, all three women took turns holding the baby, who had a strong heartbeat and clenched her fists upward.

Bozena’s mother, wearing a shapeless black dress and shawl, her gray hair in a tight bun, hissed to Anica, “If that Ivan Tepesh shows up ever again in our house, so help me God, I’ll strangle him myself!”

“Yeah, Ivan is no good,” added Anica. “Can you believe how he keeps postponing and making all kinds of excuses for not marrying Bozena? One time he said he didn’t have any furniture. Another time he said that war is raging, so who knows if we’ll survive.”

Exhausted and drifting in and out of sleep, Bozena whispered, “Anica, will you be my baby’s godmother?”

Anica, who had a lump in her throat and a fiery determination that no child of hers would ever be born out of wedlock, nodded in agreement.

Bozena breast-fed the baby for a few days and then ran out of milk. Swallowing her pride, Anica took it upon herself as the godmother to walk from house to house all over the neighboring villages, begging for milk and food for Marijana from her holier-than-thou neighbors.

After Marijana’s birth, Ivan sent Bozena a small black-and-white head photo of himself. He had removed his military jacket and hat, appearing in a dark shirt, looking

serious and clear eyed. On the back of the picture, he scribbled, "To Bozena and little daughter Marijana. Zagreb, December 1944."

Bozena thought that sending this photo was a sweet gesture. Her mother thought otherwise. "Ivan is a selfish, irresponsible procrastinator. The way he forced himself on you is a very bad sign. You should forget about him and move on with your life."

Bozena continued to live with her family, struggling to feed Marijana with the help of Anica and Teresa, all of them waiting for the war to end.

Ivan came back home on May 5, 1945, looking pale and withdrawn, refusing to talk to anybody. His hair was totally gray. On top of his head he had a permanent injury, a bump the size of a walnut. The war had unleashed a terrible raw rage within Ivan. Anything could set him off.

In the absence of conversation, Bozena made wild assumptions that perhaps Ivan was part of the Ustashe. There were rumors that some Ustashe soldiers had committed violent crimes, as did the Communist partisans, but she was confused as to who was who in the military. She thought badly of all sides and knew that asking questions was dangerous. Deep inside, she was full of disgust at the politicians who used ordinary people's lives as political footballs.

Despite her doubts, Bozena felt sorry for Ivan and viewed their child as a bond between them. She became a loyal, obedient girlfriend, helping him in every way she

could think of. Every day, she prayed to God to make Ivan see how much she wanted to save him from alcoholism and love him despite his disturbed behavior. If only God could somehow change Ivan so they could have a pleasant life.

Bozena and Marijana moved in with Ivan's family in Rogatec.

On June 11, 1945, Bozena ran to a neighbor to borrow a dress and to another friend for a pair of shoes. Ivan wore the same outfit he had worn when they saw each other for the first time in Rogatec. The church ceremony was brief and simple. Bozena promised to obey. They scrounged around the neighborhood for some food and cheap wine and that was their wedding reception.

For generations, both the Tepesh and the Kanic families were filled with rivalries and recriminations, holding grudges forever, yet bound by traditional family ties. The family was viewed as sacrosanct, and each generation was expected to be grateful for the sacrifices that parents made on their behalf. Divorce was a sin.

In 1945, the defeated Germans withdrew from Yugoslavia, leaving behind total destruction. Many local people were wounded and many dead. Entire families were shattered.

The Communist partisans took over Yugoslavia and aggressively proclaimed themselves the winners, taking revenge on anyone who dared to speak up against them. They copied German Gestapo tactics by killing innocent people. Ivan received a two-year working jail sentence as a

punishment for serving with the Domobrani. On June 12, 1945, one day after his wedding, Ivan had to report to the recently established Yugoslav Army, for which he worked as a carpentry supervisor, producing new doors and windows to help build the future Communist Yugoslavia.

The new Communist government had an official version of history, and people who disagreed or tried to present another side were put in prison. The government officials demanded that Ivan and all the other men sign documents with the Communist mantra, "*Smrt fasizmu—svobodo ljudstvu!* Death to Fascists—Freedom to the people!"

My father, Ivan Tepesh, had come home from the war with silence on his lips. He spent the rest of his life considering his wife and children as his enemies.