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BELGRADE
Underneath
BELGRADE

Translation from Serbian by
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■ Laguna ■

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Recommendation from
The Honorable Taleb Rifai,
Secretary-General,
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There are treasures beneath the bustling streets of Belgrade and *Belgrade underneath Belgrade* is revealing them to the world. From underground cities, to forgotten Roman passages and hidden bunkers, Zoran Nikolić and Vidoje Golubović take us on an unexpected journey through Belgrade's rich history uncovering some of the city's best kept secrets.

Hundreds of thousands of tourists currently visit Serbia each year, many passing through Belgrade. *Belgrade underneath Belgrade* offers these tourists a new and exciting perspective on the city and its underground sites. Carefully developed and managed, these sites will bring the many tourists of Belgrade and its people closer to the city's history, as well as preserving them for the future.

(2012)

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Foreword

The dead have much more contributed to the creation of this city than those of us who are living. This is only an attempt to reach out to one another, and for us to understand them at least a little bit.

RESEARCHING unfamiliar underground constructions underneath Belgrade is similar to an attempt to understand its unconventional history: it resembles reaching out with one's hand into a bottomless pit, pulling out some kind of wonder out of it every time, or at least touching or feeling out something significant therewithin. And while there is a notion of whereto the hand is going when it is reaching into semi-darkness, as the past seems real and tangible.

The confusion starts when there is no more certainty as to whereto this "journey" has reached, and sometimes even, whether there's a hand left at all.

It would be proper to admit that this book would never have been written if it weren't for those who have helped us,

and who have been interested, same as ourselves, in the lives of people from the past, as well as the constructions of this city that have vanished. Then again, if we only talked about the underground locations failing to study the constructions having emerged above them or in their vicinity, that would have been absurd.

Therefore, we do not see ourselves but as reporters or notaries, striving to achieve that what Belgrade once was does not remain uncovered and forgotten in the shapelessness of the present time. That cruel adjective designating the time wherein we live is primarily directed at tackling poor memory of our contemporaries, since forgetting that which was achieved before our time is sometimes even more cruel than the transience itself.

The whole story is, perhaps, a mere attempt at putting up an honest fight with death, since the desire prompting us to act and wonder is, indeed, based on a question whether it is fair to have all that was done by those who lived before us be erased, same as the cemeteries wherein they were buried.

We were focusing exclusively on those edifices underneath the ground, or the remains thereof, that have been recognized as Belgrade landmarks, and which have still been contributing secretly to its identity to this day even, while the public has little knowledge of them or none at all. All this with a view to uncovering and bringing our city's past a little bit closer to those with whom we share its present time. We also wanted, with a bit of luck, to bring attention to both what this city has to offer, be it as its historical scars or as its capital space, and one topic that for years had been forbidden to be discussed, thus having been forgotten quickly. Indeed, where there is fear, forgetfulness comes much faster.

Belgrade is one of the most unusual and the most ancient settlements in Europe. Those who also take Vinča culture into consideration will say that our city may be on a par with Athens and Rome in terms of age, but in any case, if one should listen to historians, then one will definitely come to a conclusion that Berlin or Paris are “cities of boy age” with much shorter history than Belgrade history.

*Zoran Lj. Nikolić
Vidoje D. Golubović, PhD*

*What Did the Germans Look for
during the Second World War
in the Basement of the Oldest House in Belgrade*

I

KATARINA BASTL was an ordinary woman living in extraordinary time in Belgrade. Even though the statement about *extraordinary time* in Belgrade may not be completely true, since this city does not recall long-term peaceful and restful periods. The Second World War was a difficult and troubled time. Especially for those living in Dorćol, in a house in today's 10 Cara Dušana Street.

One day, in the spring of 1941, she was awakened by a fierce sound of an automobile breaking, when a luxurious black German car stopped below her window, with five high-ranking German officers from Wehrmacht and SS coming out of it. They spread a large military map over an improvised wooden table below the window, making animated gestures with their hands and commenting loudly. At least, that's what she was able to see. And while they were pointing at something indicated on this paper to one another, they were waving at the entrance door of the basement located below the building.

Shortly after that, they had forbidden entrance to that space, and this went on for several months during these

war years. Mrs. Bastl was able to hear the pounding of hammers and the rattling of different tools from the basement every day, but she couldn't possibly have fathomed what the German experts had been exploring. Of course, she didn't dare ask, not only while they were working, but even long after the war, when anything remotely resembling a military secret could have threatened one's life. It was only in 1963, when the grip of fear had loosened a little bit, that she had opened her heart to a Belgrade journalist, which was published by a professional magazine called *Construction*. She was pointing toward the basement vaults indicating where the banging was coming from.

It was then that, for a short while, the question was reopened as to what the Germans had been looking for in the basement of the house during the entire war. We are still looking for the answer today.

II

THIS HOUSE was constructed in 1727 and it was built by Elias Fleischmann, a German living in Belgrade at that time, as one of seven identical edifices. Looking from Kalemegdan, it was the second in a row. Today, this is the only one that has remained, since the other six buildings could not have sustained the subsequent Turkish, then again Austrian, and in the end air raids and bombs of the German Nazi Army.

It was erected ten years after Austrian military commander Eugen of Savoy had taken over Belgrade from the Turks in a battle, which was perhaps one of the greatest battles for this city ever, drafting hundreds of thousands of soldiers, presaging the impending massacre. Austria had

decided to subsequently turn this Turkish-style provincial town into a western-style urban settlement, with the majority of German, mostly Roman Catholic population, as recorded in the *History of Belgrade*, published by the SASA* Institute for Balkan Studies: “The part of town lying alongside the Danube, the one in Dorćol, was mostly comprised of the Germans, moreover, at that time the 333 German families mostly from Worms and Mainz had settled there, having been granted special ten-year benefits. The Serbs were ordered to leave that part of town, so they became predominant on the Sava riverbank.”

Austrian ruler Carlo VI even stressed that in German Belgrade only the Germans were allowed to be settled, and that law went in effect in 1726. The Tzintzars, Greeks, Serbs, and Armenians had to relocate to the other side of the Belgrade ridge, where they founded a new settlement, called the Sava Downtown Quarter.

This was all happening only one year before Fleischmann started to build his seven edifices, which was apparently witnessed by only a few Serbian onlookers.

In the vicinity of this edifice, there was Austrian High Command, a building which no longer exists, but in the period following the Austrian rule, when the Turks regained control of the city again, it was known as a building, which had become *Pirinčana* (a name derived from “pirinč-han”, nevertheless, according to some claims, the first part of the name was a clumsily interpreted German word “Prince”). At that time, this was one of the most important buildings in Belgrade. At the top of the ridge, in today’s Rajičeva Street, there was a great *Maurer*, i.e. Cavalry barracks, and the Kalemegdan fortress was not far away. And, since we know

* Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, *note by Translator.*

that Austrians had been very well versed in construction then, and also known for their traditional precision and careful attention given to noting down data and keeping neat records, as well as developing good quality construction designs and maps, that area must have been quite interesting to the rulers of this city.

III

THE AUSTRIANS had had a specially developed military construction doctrine, linking up all significant constructions by underground passages. Due to the perils inherent in warfare back in those days, this kind of architectural approach was providing a sense of security to those who might have been besieged or closed up for some reason, thus a spare, auxiliary exit had often been a matter of life or death, especially in tending to the barracks or the most important person in the city.

This is why it's logical that the Germans in the Second World War had so tenaciously been looking for the remains of their rule predecessors throughout the basement of this building, talking about, as Katarina Bastl recalls, this building becoming a museum of Eugen of Savoy, as well as that there were some secret passages even toward the Sava, through the central part of the city.

At the same time, there were recollections that the Germans had often blocked the Lower Kalemegdan Quarter during the same war, that they named it Prinz-Eugen-Park, and that they had rarely let the Serbs set foot therein. Those who had been sneaking in there, though, were mostly the boys, who had innocently been playing football. What the Germans guarded there, remains inconclusive.

The only sure thing is that they had maps of this part of town, wherein all of the underground passageways were carefully marked, and that they had taken these with them when they were retreating.

There are lots of reasons, and it's not a secret that among the greatest German historical and strategic ambitions, the so-called expansion towards the East had been an eternal German obsession. That route, of course, would have to lead precisely through the Danube Basin, including Belgrade as well. There had always been clearly developed long-term plans for this, thus the construction of *Djerdap* itself had not been devised by Tito's communist system, but by the Germans long ago. Tito only implemented it. Also, it was German ambition to inaugurate today's Belgrade within what they projected as and called the "Danube Basin Reich" as a capital city of that part of the country. Had that notion been achieved, then this city would have been called PrinzEugen-Stadt, in honor of the great military Commander himself who had taken over the city from the Turks, and was recognized in Austrian history as a top strategist and a military legend.

The maps of the city underneath the ground, nevertheless, were of great help to the occupation army at that time, and it is certain that substantial German and Russian-partisan casualties had been incurred in the battles in Belgrade underground, making it their last resting place. A large part of that documentation still exists in the Vienna War Archives. It was our task to research what is available and what is it that we may see, and then draw our own conclusions. We were assisted by the enthusiasts from the Academic Speleologist-Alpinist Club (ASAC) from the Natural Sciences and Mathematics Faculty in Belgrade. It was them who climbed down to some of the places where we couldn't have easily made it ourselves and inspected their safety.



We will probably never know where the secret tunnels below the oldest house in Belgrade, in 10 Cara Dušana Street, were leading to.

IV

THE BASEMENT OF THIS BUILDING has today been swamped with water, going up to one's waist, and the mud wherein boots easily sink. The culprit for the flood in the basement, that no one has set foot in for several decades, has been the *Djerdap* hydro plant, whose construction had raised the water level of the Danube throughout Dorćol. Thus a considerable part of Belgrade legacy had been swamped, but also some of its secrets as well.

Nevertheless, trudging through the mud and sludge, we have reached the places that Katarina Bastl was once

pointing at. Below a large semicircular arch holding the plate whereon the residential part of the building is lying, one may see that the bricks are different than those the vaults are made of. Some works were taking place there, but what kind is a question for historians, speleologists, all of us to try to answer.



Deserted Underground of Kosančićev Venac

I

WHEN ONE IS CROSSING BRANKO'S BRIDGE from the side of Novi Beograd towards the old part of the city, one may see a unique vista of Belgrade, flanked by the Cathedral Church. That prospect has long since been a landmark whereby this capital is recognized, as well as the most frequent inspiration theme for many artists, painters, wood-carving craftsmen, and photographers who have undertaken the mission to record this city's appearance and save it for those who are yet to be born.

The underground space beneath this landscape, from the bridge itself all the way to Kalemegdan, conceals underground chambers accessed from Karadjordjeva Street and situated underneath one of the most beautiful city quarters - Kosančićev Venac.

For a long time, no one either talked about them or knew about them. After the Second World War, the public was not supposed to be informed about them in detail because they were designated as places where, in case of dire need, during a war or possible future military operations, cultural

and material heritage of this part of the capital would be evacuated to and hidden, should official shelters prove to be insufficient.

Besides, these underground chambers had served as shelters, notably for the population, during both German and Allied Forces' bombing of Belgrade respectively in 1941 and 1944. Many surviving Belgraders, such as Milutin Kepa Rudaković or Director of the Aircraft Museum Čedomir Janić still remember war days, when they were going to these underground chambers as children, closely monitored by their worrying parents, seeking refuge therein from German Stukas and Allied Forces' bombers.

Nevertheless, as the years went by, it became clear that such location has developed into an almost totally unsuitable solution for such purpose – at least in case of sheltering humans. This is because both dirt cover and stone base – being the protective layer above the space itself – has become too thin for modern military means and bombs with large armor-piercing power. On the other hand, none of the subsequent city authorities have apparently come to the bottom of the question: what other purpose this large space underneath the city may be designated for? This has, more or less, been its status to date. And this is why underground chambers remained stuck where they were – with everything else around them changing, except for a fact that they were unkept, which remained the only constant.

II

GOING FROM KARADJORDJEVA STREET, there are entrances to 13 large underground chambers, which have long



Belgrade pier in the 1930s

since been situated underneath this slope. How long have they been there is a question Belgraders themselves may not be able to answer; nevertheless, the oldest ones among those living in this area remember they have been there long since. They were behind edifices, which were prized as Belgrade treasure back in their own time, such as then luxurious hotel *Kragujevac*, and of course, the *Djumrukana* building, which is, alas, no more, as well.

Previously this was a Customs Office, called *Djumrukana*^{*}, a building that all newcomers to Belgrade had to go

^{*} Name derived from the Turkish word for such building *Gümrük*, note by Translator.

through That building was located in the vicinity of today's Port Director's Office, and later on, it served even as a theater building, since it was the largest and the most suitable building for such purpose. Across the street, alongside hotel *Kragujevac*, the elite circles of Prince Miloš's times had lived in then most luxurious houses in Belgrade. These buildings are, alas, no more, they were demolished by allied forces aircraft bombing in 1944.

The significance of this part of town was depicted in the town chronicles of the time, describing this area as part of town that the most famous and the most significant persons of the time had once lived in. Those are the recollections of Nikola Trajković in *Old Belgrade Scrap Book*, wherein he describes *Djumrukana* as a building having a significant role during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, because all of the travelers arriving from or departing to those parts had to go through this building to have their passports and visas checked. This is why this building was always swarming with people.

“Right next to the Commissariat (Djumrukana), there was a narrow alley, leading directly to the riverbank, separating the Commissariat from the coffeehouse ‘Pigeon’ (‘Golub’), frequented mostly by shipmen and porters.

Next to the coffeehouse, there was a one-storey building, owned by a very well-known merchant of that time, Hadži Toma. This was an elegant building, which was a home to Hadži Toma's four daughters as well, living there with their parents. From this house, all four daughters married influential suitors, all having been Ministers as well, so it happened that on occasion, in Hadži Toma's house, almost entire government of the small, pre-Kumanovo Serbia of that time was in session.“

That period and the edifices in this part of the city are charmingly depicted by the chronicler Milan Jovanović Stojimirović in the book *Silhouettes of Old Belgrade*, where he even says, describing Prince Miloš, that he was “a developer of its own kind.” Talking about the edifices erected in this part of the city, Stojimirović says that their solidity is best witnessed by those who, at the time, had to pull the walls of Miloš’s *Djumrukana* down.

Nevertheless, the way in which Miloš knew how to motivate construction workers became legendary, as noted down by the chronicler in detail. According to his writing, whenever Miloš started out the construction of new buildings, at the same time, he would erect the gallows alongside the construction site. “Should the building prove to be no good, the gallows are right here,” he was saying to his construction workers.

As this chronicler further explains, this story came from blind Djura Milutinović Crnogorac, who was one of the most famous and prominent Belgraders of his time. Blind Uncle Djura was saying that “at the very beginning, Prince Miloš would have a wood post propped, with its foot placed in the ground and metal hooks mounted thereon, in order to hang the master mason should the building turn out to be no good.”

Alongside the pier itself, built on the Sava riverbank and not on the Danube riverbank, because the former had always been more tame and sheltered from severe blows of strong winds, underground chambers used to be excavated. The largest one among them has two entrances and it is located right next to where a hotel building used to be, and today this is a space filled with empty large barrels, each the

size of a small studio, and countless scattered crates and bottles from the mid-20th century that look like they were left over by the Romans, and not some city folk from some fifty years back.

This was the seat of a company from Skopje distributing and selling alcoholic beverages *Lazar*, which was awarded the right to use this space by the former authorities. Leftover barrels have the volume of up to ten hectoliters, and except for the thick layer brought on by dripping from the upper plate of the underground chamber, they are covered in dust, which sticks to the fingers for a long time after one has touched them. Precise documents from the Public Enterprise “*Shelters of Serbia*” (“*Skloništa Srbije*”) confirm that *Lazar* was leaseholder of the underground chamber in 17 Karadjordjeva Street, while in 13 Karadjordjeva Street, on the same street apparently, the owner of the underground chamber to date has been the *Jagodina Brewery*. Similar construction in the underground chamber near number 13 was used by the City Office for Photogrammetry and Geo-engineering, while those around numbers 25 through 27 were used by company *Intermetal*. The underground chamber in number 33 was used by company *Tehnohemija*.

Engraved on one of the barrels in the largest underground chamber, the one behind number 17 was year 1921, as we were able to see ourselves. Apparently, the changes following the war did not decide the use of this space, since even before that time it represented a large cellar storing wine shipments. Thus, the new authorities after the Second World War had only taken over the existing status. Or, to use a more appropriate word for that time – they nationalized this space. What is also interesting is that each of the

barrels has been larger than the entrance to the underground chamber itself; hence they must have been brought in as parts and subsequently assembled therein. That part of the work was performed by specialized craftsmen – coopers. When the company from Skopje left this space as well, apparently no one was able to pull out the barrels. It's either that they didn't know how to do that since, perhaps, it was too expensive, or simply, this whole endeavor seemed trivial and insignificant back in those days. It seems clear now that it was easier to just abandon everything.

This might be a good opportunity to bring to mind how the most elite parts of different European capitals came into being, such as Paris or Budapest. Karadjordjeva Street might have been Belgrade Monmartre, or what not, but it was destined to be otherwise. It remained forgotten and unkept. And this is how it is to date. As if “retaliating”, it has thus held luxurious space underneath the city in captivity.



The largest underground chamber in Karadjordjeva Street and one of 17 deserted barrels in the same chamber



Unprecedented space underneath Kosančičev Venac, unused and forgotten

III

IN FRONT OF THE CITY there had been a pier for centuries, due to the fact that our capital had always been a vital post on various trade routes, while goods had mostly been shipped by river. Underground chambers had had storage role back then, since the temperature therein had always been the same, thus they had been used to store wine, grain, and other goods. The Sava river had been reaching up to the place where today there are tram tracks going toward Kalemegdan, and it was only in the 1930s that it was “pushed back” by an embankment to a place where it flows to date. Before that time, the river had been forming the deepest part in its course before the mouth right in front of these



It was exactly in this particular spot that the Sava had been flooding mercilessly – a flood right before the Second World War, as seen from Karadjordjeva Street, below King Alexander's Bridge. (Photo: Biljana Plaznić Collection.)

underground chambers, exactly in such place where this largest underground chamber lies today. The place itself where the biggest two rivers in this part of Europe were merging created a whirlpool, the river having its deepest bed herein. This place precisely, where the river had been the deepest, was an ideal place to clear the ships and store whatever was shipped into the city.

Right here, only several dozen meters from Branko's Bridge one may also find the remains of the hoist from that time, which was used to lift the goods upward, toward

upper parts of the city, wherefrom it was subsequently transported by wagons to markets and other final destinations. To date, there have been two forgotten and walled posts there,



Former hoist behind where the three underground chambers are hidden.

whereon one can see the remains of rusty rungs, once having been parts of the hoist.

Today, there have been three underground chambers behind it, going deeply below Kosačićev Venac, their entrance being right on Karadjordjeva Street.

Nikola Trajković, an enthusiast quite taken by this part of the city, describes how this area, once having dense traffic and now being forgotten and unkept, looked before. Large stairwell, connecting the central parts of the city with the pier, represented “a window looking towards Europe”, something that Jovan Skerlić used to comment on as well.

“Whatever came from Austria and other parts of Europe had to go through this area, as the railway bridge was built only in 1884, when the first engine crossed the Sava – records Trajković – The people were swarming around, carrying bundles and luggage, hurrying to either catch their boat or not miss their dear ones whom they were waiting for – all this accounting for constant, indescribable turmoil. People were sitting around, waiting for the ship to arrive, and it sometimes happened that it would arrive late at night or depart at dawn, so people were forced to sit in nearby cafés. This was the place where the state border was as well, so import and export of goods went via this pier, and all of the surrounding streets were constantly clogged with wagons. The fiacres carrying passengers and heavy four-wheels overloaded with goods were also trying to make their way through these packed streets, which in turn accounted for lots of noise.

And while up on the hill Belgrade slept peacefully, with its street lamps casting their flickering light on occasional belated street goers, as it was quite appalling to see someone in the street late at night, down at the pier and around the