

# One Morning in Sarajevo

David James Smith

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# ONE MORNING IN SARAJEVO

28 JUNE 1914

DAVID JAMES SMITH



PHOENIX

# 1

## June 1914 – the Dreaming Assassin

The mystic journey of Gavrilo Princip came to an end on 5 June 1914, when he finally arrived in Sarajevo after a long overland adventure across 300 kilometres of mountains and muddy passes with a heavy load of guns and bombs that he had only just succeeded in smuggling from Belgrade with considerable help from others.

He was exhausted and broke and, like many a young amateur assassin before and since, he was not thinking clearly or carefully and had no idea how best to hide himself or his intentions during the next three weeks.

He would soon be lying in bed, the weapons stashed in a Gladstone bag beneath his mattress, sleeping and dreaming of the heroic deed to come, imagining himself as a political murderer, seeing himself in his dreams, in a remarkably prescient vision, struggling with soldiers and policemen.

On 28 June he would live out his dreams and stand among the thin crowd on a street corner and fire two shots at the over-dressed passengers in an open-topped car parading down the riverside road in the centre of Sarajevo. His victims, the Heir Apparent to the Austrian imperial throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, would die, a world war would start and Gavrilo would become the most notorious assassin in history, but that did not mean he was a highly trained killer nor even that he had a well-devised plan.

He was not yet 20 years old and in many respects was a naive and unworldly young man, who apparently gave no thought to the need to cover his tracks against the inevitable police investigation that would ensue. Or perhaps he did give it some brief thought and deemed such a precaution unnecessary, as he planned to kill himself, in any event, and hoped to become a Serbian martyr, a suicide assassin.

On his arrival in Sarajevo, Gavrilo went first to the home of his friend Danilo Ilic, who lived with his mother, Stoja, a washerwoman, at 3 Oprkanj (Operkany) Street, a long, thin house with an overhanging roof and a front door that opened directly onto the narrow, winding lane on the edge of town.

Gavrilo said he chose to stay there because it was in a back street and Ilic was a quiet young man who did not draw attention to himself. It must have helped, too, that he did not need to make any arrangement to pay rent to Ilic's mother, especially since he had to borrow 50 crowns from Ilic to buy food.

The police would have little difficulty tracing Gavrilo's whereabouts, following the assassination, as he registered with them soon after his arrival – an obligation required of all visitors to the city – and gave Ilic's home as his lodging address, an act of unfathomable recklessness, since Ilic was not merely Gavrilo's old friend but also the chief organizer of the assassination, and remained busy even at this late state, recruiting the rest of the team of assassins.

Still, at least the two young men made sure they kept the bedroom door closed, so that Stoja, who liked to keep a tidy house, would not enter, start cleaning and discover the Gladstone bag full of weapons.

They would leave from the house on the morning of 28 June to meet their co-conspirators and take their places along the route. Soon after, the now empty Gladstone bag, still in the bedroom where it had been left, would be photographed for police records, the house too, inside and out, recorded for posterity and then all but forgotten, along with so many of the details of that day, and the events of nearly a century ago that preceded it.

Despite the relatively central location it took a while for the researcher Alex Todorovic and myself to find the house and stand before it, in the autumn of 2006. Once we had located the street the house was unmissable because it still looked almost identical to the black and white images from the police files of all those years earlier, though it was now across the road from one of Sarajevo's more elegant small hotels.

It seemed fitting that, in the end, we had stumbled across the street by chance, as almost everything about the Sarajevo assassination of 1914 was driven by fate and accident; not just the remarkable series of coincidences that morning, that delivered the Archduke and his

wife to Gavrilo, virtually as sitting ducks – a hunting metaphor the Archduke might have appreciated in other circumstances – but also in the twists and turns of the loosely organized plot and the many lives it casually touched and destroyed as it ran its course.

Gavrilo, for example, had been taken to lodge with Ilic for the first time some years earlier, when still a child, the house selected more or less at random by Gavrilo's respectable older brother Jovo, a young merchant who was looking for somewhere safe and decent where Gavrilo could stay while he continued his schooling in the Bosnian capital, far from the rural world of their peasant parents.

In his attempt to do the best thing for little Gavrilo, Jovo had inadvertently set him on the path to ruin, lodging him with a fervent revolutionary, Danilo Ilic, whose fanaticism – and library of Russian socialist literature – would soon make an impression on Gavrilo.

Jovo never intended to turn his brother into a blinkered assassin. But then Gavrilo never intended to start a world war. Instead, his mind was fixed on the Serbian people and five hundred years of oppression. He acted, Gavrilo would later say, out of love for the former, and revenge for the latter; his pride, you could say, had blinded him to the wider context of history and the fatal teetering of the world's empires as they readied to implode, taking with them millions of lives.