

02. ON PARTING - FARE WELL

Friday, April 13, 1945

The last night before my departure I spent at my parents' house in the centre of the town of Osijek. The night had been relatively quiet though one could hear long and heavy cannonade from the German bridgehead on the other side of the river Drava. This bridgehead had been built about three months ago some 40 kilometres west of Osijek at Donji Miholjac. By now, we were quite used to this noise and the almost standard procedure: Russian aircraft attacked the bridge in the morning, stopping all traffic for the day. The Germans rebuilt the pontoon bridge during the night in order to bring supplies to their troops north of the river's left bank.

I took my bicycle and left from home shortly after 6 a.m. to be at our howitzer battery command post before roll call at seven. Riding in the open space towards the river was a little dangerous because of the snipers on the left bank. The street in which my parents' villa stood was lined on both sides with Japanese plum trees. It was open to the north but protected by an old park with tall trees from the enemy's sight. Though life in town had settled to a certain routine since the beginning of 1945, and people had learned to live with the war, one never knew whether the enemy would suddenly launch another shell attack bringing death and havoc, especially on market days. After all, the front line ran along the river, and the town spread on its Right Bank for about 20 kilometres in west-east direction.

I passed the railway station, deserted as usual during the daytime, and proceeded to a point where one could cross the rails and hurry on the main road. There was very little traffic, a few peasants on horse carts bringing their goods to the market and some army trucks, mostly German. The air was very still and filled with a sort of tension in spite of the green and an occasional bloom that the warmth of an early spring had brought out.

For several hundred meters an abandoned clay pit ran along the road on the right side which had filled up with water and now looked like a small lake. Our command post was in one of the houses typical for this area with direct entrance from the road. A cluster of houses and sheds that we used for the battery's crew and equipment surrounded it.

I got off my bicycle in front of the house of Sergeant Major Gregl and immediately noticed that strange activities were going on, not at all the routine we had gotten used to in the past weeks. Gregl had an incredible collection of almost every kind of infantry weapon including some heavy mines, most of them stolen from German rail transports in stealthy night raids. Now Gregl was supervising several soldiers who were bringing his collection out of the house and putting it on the ground in small piles of rifles, mortars, and automatic weapons and so on. I was impressed and shocked at the same time by the enormous amount of ammunition lying there. Good God, I thought, what would happen to us all and people around here if an enemy grenade hits this targets. Gregl saw me standing by the garden gate.

He made a few steps towards me and shouted: "Lieutenant, you better get your guns ready to move. There is no roll call this morning." From the very beginning I had joined the battery shortly after Christmas, I did not like Gregl. My mate and I were two out of

the twenty Junior Lieutenants fresh from military school at Stockerau near Vienna, which we had left shortly after the attempt to assassinate Hitler had been made by the group around Count Stauffenberg. We had first been sent to Zagreb where we stayed a few months waiting for our transfer to a regular unit of the Croatian army. Gregl, elegantly attired in perfect breeches and matching boots, used to make fun of us two lieutenants dressed haphazardly in ill fitting uniforms from the limited stock available at army stores that late in the war. He used to call us greenhorns and played some very funny games with the two of us who had to wear ordinary shoes with galoshes used by the infantry though we were supposed to be officers in an artillery unit and ride on horseback.

"What the hell are you talking about, Gregl? Is this another one of your jokes to make a show of your collection?" - "Stop arguing, lieutenant, better go and see Zorko. He's waiting for you at the command post.

I was scared and the fear of inevitable fate ahead made me weak-kneed as I pushed my bicycle the hundred meters or so to the house where the company commander had his offices and quarters. Zorko, my fellow officer and schoolmate from secondary school and the military training, was waiting for me at the entrance door.

"Good morning to you", I said and without waiting for a reply went straight on to the commandant's office. But Zorko stopped me to say that the captain was not in, which was not unusual as he often stayed in town with his girlfriend. But today I could not understand it as Gregl had talked about a move. "The captain is in town with the division commander. Seems the German bridgehead collapsed during the night. Bulgarians and Russians are moving westward on the left bank of the Drava." Zorko seemed well informed.

"What's happening at the East?" I asked. The eastern front between Dunav (Danube) and Sava, the two rivers that enclose Srijem, the most eastern part of the Independent State of Croatia, had not changed for many months. However Zorko had not heard anything about this front while he had been on night duty.

"We'll have to pull out of Osijek and leave Srijem to the partisans. Otherwise we'll be cut off if the enemy crosses the Drava west of the town. The captain will soon be back, no doubt, but I don't think we'll move during the day. Get the cannons ready for a quick shift but don't say anything about withdrawal..."

The four 100mm bore howitzers were positioned near a farm next to a large nursery the trees of which hid the guns better than the previous post between and near two railway lines where enemy grenades had hit too often dangerously close. I had learned real fear when grenades exploded all around us while we tried to keep our heads down in the hastily dug trenches of frozen soil.

Now, I took my bicycle and rushed down the dirt road leading through open fields to the nursery only a few hundred meters away. It was a warm spring day. The fields had been ploughed and were getting green, the trees in a nearby orchard were already in bloom, and the sun was shining. But there was a constant ominous rumbling in the west, reminding you that this was no peaceful spring day. As I approached the battery station, almost hidden now by the green of the trees, I noticed that here too, there was an unusual commotion. The guard saw me coming and without even waiting for the

password asked: "What's going on in town? Are the Germans pulling out, and what about us?" Stunned by his questions I forgot for the moment that I was his superior officer. Taking a deep breath after my fast ride I then said: "I don't know either, but keep our eyes open for visitors. Where is Virag?"

Virag, our most senior soldier with the rank of corporal, was in charge of the first platoon of two guns, each with a crew of six men. The Gun Two was first to shoot when our battery was aiming at a target. Virag, who could have been my father, was our most experienced gunner; most of the others being young boys from villages in Slavonia who had had very little training before this the 1st Battery formed in late 1944. Some of the gunners had come from other units that had dispersed during the withdrawals of last year and in theory should be counted as deserters. But our captain had been anxious to replenish the ranks of the newly formed battery, and was perhaps also thinking of those who came from Slavonska Pozega, his own home town. As a result, we had an assortment of all ranks and ages though most of the men belonged to the regular Croatian army called Hrvatski Domobran.

I found Virag near a barn close to the kitchen with most of the other crew having their morning meal. Word had come through that there would be no roll call this morning. Virag offered me some Ersatz coffee and asked what the orders were. "Dear old chap, I don't know either," I said in a low voice continuing: "There are no orders yet but we must prepare everything for a fast move to another camp. Get all ammunition packed and loaded on the carts and everything else that we can take with us. Have the men check the horses and get them ready for pulling out at a moment's now!"

"Very well, sir, we'll get all guns and the horses ready. Could you see, sir, that we'll get a few more carts as we have more ammunition than we can load right now?" - Virag was right. We had accumulated a lot of ammunition from German transports passing through the nearby railway station. It was not always out of simple stealing as some sort of exchange of goods existed between the German and the Croatian soldiers. However, if you got caught the measures were dramatic, and drastic. Once, three of our best "suppliers" were caught by a German patrol and brought to our command post in the morning. The commander condemned them to a certain number of lashes with the bull's whip. Gregl was in charge of the operation and took the culprits to a shed from where we soon heard terrible screams. A little later he came out with blood dripping from the whip, which was not unlike a cat-o'-nine-tails.

The Germans were quite embarrassed and did not want to take the men with them for further punishment after such medieval treatment. As soon as the German patrol had left, out came the three "culprits" in fairly good spirits. Obviously the punishment had not been half as bad as the screaming, and the blood had come from the pig that had been killed this morning.

Virag and the other corporals came with me. They were all Domobranci from villages in northern Croatia and had known each other for some time. They didn't really trust the others who were not gunners but simply infantrymen. The 250 soldiers we had in the battery were really far more than was normal to man four howitzers, which were each drawn by six horses, whereas the ammunition carts had only four each. Each pair of horses had a rider and a spare rider who actually was the groom.

The corporals had obviously been discussing the situation because their first question was which way we would be leaving Osijek. "Who told you that we are leaving town?"

Surprised I asked them but without great conviction. It was more and more clear to me that the great move was underway. "Well, you know, sir, all we want to know is whether we will pass through our villages. Our families are waiting there to move with us to Zagreb."

"I know most of you are from northern Slavonia but how can you expect to march along the Drava when the Russians and Bulgarians have thrown the Germans from their bridgehead at Donji Miholjac?" - I immediately realized that I had said too much and voiced my own fears. Shut up, I told myself, you are better off just to listen.

"Sir, are we going south towards Slavonska Pozega?" - This was Miro, another chief gunner and responsible for cannons Three and Four, who had his family in this part of Slavonia. Like some of the other soldiers, he had joined this battery rather than the partisans who, by late 1944, had withdrawn from Slavonia to a great extends which is why I could not get in touch with my contact on my way to Osijek just before Christmas.

"Stop with all this nonsense. Get to your duties!" I shouted. I had to put an end to all this questioning or I was going to make even more problems for myself. I decided to go back to the command post and start packing my personal belongings. - "Sir, I will get a cart with two good horses for your luggage and our personal things. As soon as your baggage is ready I will look after it". - Virag seemed to sense my confusion and had enough experience to get me out of a difficult situation. I was happy for this break and grateful not to have to issue further orders. Also I wanted to see whether the captain had returned and what latest news he had.

When I reached the office, I found that Zorko had left to replace an officer at the observation post in town. On duty was Vlatko now, a lieutenant two years older than some sort of political commissar and I. He had joined the battery together with Gregl when the Domobrancs and Ustaska Vojnica formally merged to have the joint command. "Ustasa" and the military branch of the political party was the "Ustaska Vojnica. In principle it was similar like the "Sturmstaffel" known as "SS" in Germany and its army units named "Waffen-SS" too. The command of the Ustaska Vojnica was not the same as for the Domobran regular army units.

However, in late 1944, the Ministry of War had decided to merge the two and have all soldiers' wear the same uniforms and badges. That this was not carried out was due partly to a general shortage in supplies and partly to the fact that the Domobrancs did not like the idea of being put together with the Ustasas. Yet, we had quite a few of them in the battery and most of them, including Gregl, came from an infantry unit that had been dissolved.

One could still distinguish the difference between the two armies, not so much by the uniform a soldier was wearing, as by now it consisted of a mixture of all sorts and shapes, but by the badges. For Domobrancs the distinguishing mark was their cap's badge and uniform insignias showing the Croatian coat of arms that is a sort of chessboard of five by five fields alternating in white and red, and a small letter "U" on top. Ustasas' badge and insignias were different having a large "U" that encompassed a round flaring bomb bearing the Croatian coat of arms on it.

I went to my provisional room that was small and only allowed a large bed with a straw mattress, a small chest of drawers and a chair next to the window giving out onto a little

yard. I had rarely slept here because I was allowed to go home when not on duty. My landlady, an elderly woman, knew my father who was a lawyer and had kept his office going in spite of difficulties with the present regime. She had prepared some breakfast for me in return for the things I had given her from my rations. Now, she was very worried and seemed to know that we would be moving out, as to my surprise I found that the bedding had been removed from my room.

Turning to her I said: "There are rumours that the front has collapsed and the army will be pulling out during the day. The Yugoslav army is approaching and Vukovar seems to have fallen already." One never knew where the news came from but bad news spread like fire, and this was bad news. The old lady nodded and said: "I've removed the bedding so that you have more room for packing. Please make sure you take everything that is to do with the army or weapons. I don't want any trouble when the partisans come. It's enough that you had to be put into my house." - With these encouraging words she left me alone.

I took out my small suitcase and the rucksack my father had given me when I left for the army. I had carried the two pieces with me since then and knew what they would hold and how much I could carry, even for long distances, such as the long hike from Vinkovci to Osijek last year just before Christmas and before we joined the First Battery. We had left Zagreb with the order to join the Battery unit somewhere near Osijek, we that meant Zorko, Franjo and I. However, I was also supposed to get in touch with a contact at Vinkovci who would arrange for my "transfer" to the partisans. When we arrived at Vinkovci after a long and tedious journey it was already late night. Neither anybody waited for me nor did the contact show up. After several hours wait, we decided to move on to Osijek but as there was neither train nor truck we had no choice but to walk the 40 Kilometres. I can still remember to this day how heavy my two pieces of luggage became as we drudged through fields to avoid all contact with army patrols.

Now, I was packing these two pieces of luggage again. And where would they accompany me? Better to be prepared for all eventualities and pack some civilian clothes as well as my uniform. Not to forget the boots, who had only just been made for me from soft calfskin and strong brown hide, making them water-resistant? I also took my blue flannel long-coat made for use in Russia but never worn there, as the Croatian brigade had been withdrawn from the Russian front some years ago. My eyes fell on the beautiful cashmere blanket my mother had given me, it was warm and yet very light but what good would it do me now, that summer was coming?

As it was, my bicycle was heavily loaded with bundles of all sorts. I left it at the house to collect it later and walked off with my rucksack and my suitcase and the small arms I had been able to acquire with Gregl's help. It was a German 08' pistol and an automatic short automatic gun made in Croatia. I had proved to be rather good in sharp shooting when I trained on the many rats interested in our horses and supplies, and therefore liked the feel of the revolver.

Perspiring heavily under this entire load I marched toward the command post. Vlatko was just coming out of the door and on seeing me said in a mocking voice: "You look very smart today but we are not going to a party. I see you've got your things packed. Good, you can take the commander's buggy that would get you to the battery. Stay there and have the guns ready for action."

"Vlatko, what's going on?" - I asked seeing that the command post was busy with soldiers moving crates and arms. "Are we leaving soon?" - "All I know is that the Germans had to withdraw from their bridgehead on the left bank of the river but the front runs still along the Drava. But there are rumours about a breakthrough in the eastern frontline at Srijem. Vukovar is a hot spot now. - "With some hope I said: "I do hope there will be enough time to say good bye at home?"

I suddenly felt that this was going to be more of a departure than I could imagine. Just a little while ago I had felt so strong carrying all my arms and ammunition but now matters looked a little different. Apart from the few times our guns had been fired while at Osijek I didn't have any combat experience. If and when grenades did fall short of our guns we had always been well protected in the trenches. And the only time I was nearly wounded was when astray bullet hit my bicycle. It was torn out of hold but I went unharmed, and I hadn't even been on a military mission but on my way home from courting a girl on a nearby farm.

Another time, I had to dive for shelter when the railway station was under a barrage of grenades, as I happened to be there. But neither experience could be counted as a trial by fire and so my stomach felt a little queasy at the prospect of coming into direct combat. Perhaps it would help if I got something to eat before it was too late for that. I had this sort of fixed idea throughout my training and my brief time with the army that having had one's breakfast one could stand up much better to the trials of the day.

But the captain's buggy was waiting and I had to get my things to the battery. When I got there, I saw that Virag and the other corporals had used the time well. All gun carriages were ready for departure, all ammunition carts loaded. The horses, though still in the stables and munching their hay, were harnessed and looked trim and strong. Most of our grooms were gypsies from villages between Pitomaca and Djurdjevac and they understood about horses, and quite a few of our horses had been stolen by them or simply taken away from the German transports by cunning little tricks.

I knew that the commander didn't check his thieving soldiers too thoroughly; However the German patrol looking for stray horses and those missing on a rail transport was something different. Well, it was none of my business As long as we had 80 or more horses the battery was able to function, and that's what counted. The commander, of course, had a striking black mare and the two horses pulling his buggy were not bad either, but then, I had been lucky too. I had a dapple grey stallion named "Zelenko" and it had been love at first sight when we met.

Zelenko was a riding horse but sturdy and good-natured, and as he was my first horse I had very strong feelings about him. As a child, I had been allowed to ride a pony on a large farm belonging to one of my father's friends and only a few kilometres from Osijek, now, this was enemy territory, and where would my father's friend be? His parents had been Jews and we hadn't heard from them almost since the beginning of the war.

I was startled out of my sad thoughts by the grumbling of my empty stomach, which answered to the enticing smell wafting over from the kitchen tent. I devoured a good portion of the excellent stew the cooks had managed to make for us. I was quite sure that they had used up most of the perishable supplies knowing that we would be on the road soon.

While the men ate, there was a lot of speculation where we would be heading, south or west, where the Germans were standing right now, and what was going on near the German bridgehead at Miholjac. Strange, no Russian JAKs had been flying over the town this morning, as had been their custom in the past weeks around the time of our roll call. One of the Russian fighter planes had actually been shot down once by a German anti aircraft gun mounted on a freight train and stationed for the night at our railway station. But the next morning, another pair of "twins" had been on duty up there in the air.

The rumbling of cannons in the direction of the German bridgehead had subsided too and my feeling of anxiety grew. Would I be able to see my family before leaving? Or even better, was there a chance to hide in my hometown and wait out those last days of turmoil and retreat in this long and terrible war? But my imagination left me without any clue to the near future - all I felt was a strange foreboding of danger and death. What would it be like to die? Would it hurt and did one have time to think about dying or would I be just matter exploding into the air?

Zorko's voice snapped me out of my morbid thoughts. Time certainly did fly! By now, it was early afternoon Zorko had been at home and come back with all his belongings on a cart that brought the telemeter and other equipment from the observation post. He told me that our line to the observation post had been disconnected which could only mean that the time of departure was near. As the others bombarded Zorko with questions, I regarded him thoughtfully. He had dressed in the best uniform parts he possessed and seemed ready for action when, in fact, I had expected him to disappear and hide somewhere in Osijek till the war was over. I was determined to follow Zorko's example. Not only was he older than I was, I knew that he also had some connections with the partisans. He had told me so on our march to Osijek just before Christmas.

"Yes, I have been home and said good bye," he was saying now. "But God the Almighty alone knows whether we will ever return." - Zorko looked tired and harassed and I wondered what he had been through since this morning when I had seen him last. He turned to me. - "When I came to take over the observation post from Vlatko, he was gone already. So I packed up everything there and came to the command post for further orders afterwards. The commander had a red face and seemed very excited. He told me to go home and say good bye, as we would be leaving in the afternoon. He wants you to come and pick him up in his buggy. You know him; he has to show off even at a time like this."

I didn't have to be told twice to leave and in no time was on my way. I picked up my bicycle and bundles loading all on the buggy and soon we were on the way by road leading to the Garrison command post in the centre of town. There was even less traffic on the road than this morning and I felt very conspicuous to all snipers as I trotted along the open road without any protection from the other side of the river. But soon I reached town and the wheels were rattling on the old cobblestones of yellow brick our town was famous for.

The Garrison command was stationed in an old brick barracks dating from the time of the Austrian monarchy and facing a large square used mainly for parades and markets. Since early childhood I had had a dislike for this place full of badly smelling soldiers and paved with the uneven stones grazed your knees and hands if you happened to fall in a ball game or playing hide-and-seek.

I took the buggy through the main archway into the wide yard behind the building. The barracks was mostly used by infantry and the strong stench of human perspiration everywhere made me long for the smell of horses. I took me some time to find the captain, and when I finally found him it was because of his impatient voice I remembered so well from our first encounter three and a half months earlier.

The Battery commander came seeing me walking towards him and angrily started asking me: "Where have you been all this time? What took you so long? Is the battery ready to move? You report instantly!" - He nearly shouted at me. I hastened to inform the captain that the battery was almost ready to move, when he shouted at me: "What do you mean as ALMOST? As an officer you are supposed to give an intelligent report if facts. Where is my buggy? Let's go fast!"

I presume I must have looked so scared and nonplussed that the captain feared I might lose my nerve. He took me aside and said: "Pull yourself together and forget all ideas about escaping your duty. The time is over when you could get by with silly excuses, Go home and say your farewells and report back here by 5 PM."

The captain's reference to my silly excuses was due to something that had happened last Christmas, when the three of us had finally reached Osijek after our long and exhausting march from Vinkovci. Feeling that Christmas and the long separation from our families together with the fact that no one had any instructions for us at Vinkovci gave us the chance to spend the holidays at home, we had reported three days after our arrival. Nobody would have been any the wiser if Franjo's father, in irrepressible happiness to have his son safely at home, had not mentioned it to his neighbour, the Garrison commander, Colonel Stier. We just escaped a court martial for desertion, and I must admit that our excuses were very poor indeed.

I did not waste any time, saluted and smartly turned on my heels. Taking my bicycle with all my bundles fixed on and pushed the bicycle walking slowly to my parents' house that was only two blocks away. My parent's house was a villa built in the early Thirties. It was in that part of town near the old centre or The Fortress, as people used to call it, which dated back to the Romans. Mursa our town had been called as a Roman settlement. Much later, the Austrians built their barracks from the strong Roman bricks when they were fighting here against the Turks. Next to our house stood the villa of a Jewish family who had left some time ago, a German commanding general now occupied it. The street was tree-lined and the houses stood surrounded by large gardens, as this was the residential district of the well-to-do middle class.

Now, my way home was rather exposed to the enemy's view from the other side of Drava River, and as I passed the new park I was grateful for the protection of the trees in their spring foliage. By turning right into our street, I came to the large building of the Health Centre, where my godfather, Uncle Milan, was working as a doctor of social medicine. Having been a student of the famous Professor Adler in Vienna, Uncle Milan had turned to preventive psychiatry. Together with his wife, a paediatrician, he had looked after me during my frequent attacks of angina as a child. He had also taught a subject called "Social Hygiene" at our school, and his lectures, sometimes touching on social taboos such as human physiology, had left a deep impression on me.

I needed his help more than any of the others, being the youngest in class and suffering from a strong inferiority complex on account of my many illnesses. I was weak in any

fight with my classmates, rather bad in any kind of sport, sluggish and a bit overweight. On top of it all, I was supposed to wear glasses because of some minor eye defect and my father kept threatening me with a brace because of my bad posture. I certainly was not the warrior type!

Remembering all this, I suddenly decided to go and see my uncle in his office. There were only a few people waiting in the hall outside the various consulting rooms. I went straight up to the third floor and was greeted by a nurse I remembered from the days of our schoolboy checkups. "Your uncle is in," she said. "You can go in as there is nobody with him. They've all gone home. Aren't you going to withdraw with the army?" - She didn't wait for an answer turning back to packing her handbag.

I found my uncle busy sorting out papers that were strewn all over his desk and the nearby floor. He looked up as if he had expected me and said: "Good that you've come now. I'll be going home soon. Have you been at home yet? What did your father say? When will the Garrison leave?"

I was so taken aback by this flood of questions that I could not answer right away. It was I who had come for help and advice, and now he was asking me all these things. My uncle had been in the artillery in World War I, fighting at the Italian front, and I had always been admiring his collection of ashtrays made from various grenade parts. It had been he, who suggested that I join the artillery, as it would allow me to be behind the immediate frontline most of the time.

"No, I haven't been home yet. I came to see you first because I don't know what is going to happen and how I can explain it all to my parents. Uncle, I am frightened. Where are we supposed to go?" - I sat down opposite my uncle, perspiring in my heavy uniform and very uncomfortable in the closeness of room with all windows tightly shut. I felt close to a collapse and gratefully took the glass of water Milan handed to me. He then closed the panelled door and sitting down behind his desk, the way he had done so often when I consulted him on some teenage problem, he looked at me and asked: "So you are going to move west with the army?"

"Do I have any choice? I certainly don't want to leave but where could I hide without endangering my family? Can you help me?" - Milan gave me a long look through his glasses and said: "Hide you here somewhere? That's impossible. They even want the doctors to go with the army but I will stay here and wait for the partisans. The Germans have lost the war you know as well as I do it. You don't have to fight for them anymore. But I don't know how I can help you."

My heart sank. "Oh, Uncle, where shall I go from here? I don't want to do anything that would prolong the war and all the fear we've been living with in the last four years. I want to get out, and live, even in a different social system, but I need help now. Now don't you have any contact with the partisans or somebody who sympathizes? Say, one of your patients?"

Suddenly my uncle looked very old with his furrowed balding head and the drooping grey moustaches, his eyes full of tiredness and sorrow - was that a tear rolling down his cheek? Oh, no, please don't let me down, I thought. - "My dear son, I can't help you. I am so sorry. I don't even know what to do with my wife and myself. Where should we hide to survive the next few days? All I can give you to take with you and wear is this,

here, take it and use it to show that you appreciate the Reds." - With this he handed me a dark red handkerchief looking like silk, like those one used to wear with a lounge jacket. My uncle suggested making a red star out of it and wears it as a cockade when getting in contact with the partisans.

I was flabbergasted at this idea and terribly frustrated as the same. I realized that I had no chance getting any help or even just reasonable advice from my uncle. I got up abruptly, thanked him for the handkerchief and said my good byes leaving my uncle seated at his desk, looking very frail and forlorn.

Back in the street, I was happy to find my bicycle with all the bundles still waiting for me and walked on to our house, full of rage and frustration about my hopeless situation. I noticed a lot of movement at the next door villa, where the commanding German general was stationed and now seemed to be moving out in great haste. I suddenly remembered the veterinarian who had been stationed in our house. He came from Srijem, where peoples consider themselves being of German origin, and had to join the German troops when their withdrawal started late in 1944. The veterinarian was well aware that my father did not sympathize with the Germans and that he was even on their list of suspects But he was not particularly happy in his uniform either and particularly when he was taken into an SS unit to look after their horses. He had won my father's confidence by telling him details of the German's records.

Occasionally, my father was also listening to Radio London, an extremely dangerous undertaking that could only be done with the greatest secrecy and care to keep the call signal barely audible. All radios were supposed to be "castrated" for short wave but one managed to fiddle with the lead seal confirming that the radio had been officially checked and short wave disrupted, and connect the necessary wires by a sort of "bridge". Needless to say, this bridge had to be removed every time after the use. This way, my father was quite well informed about all the latest news.

As I was leaning my bicycle against the wall by our front door and our Doberman "Peggy" came rushing out. She hated uniforms normally but had got used to the smell of mine during the past few months. She greeted me with a few happy barks than ran back to the kitchen to announce my arrival.

"Who's there?" - My mother came down the three steps to the kitchen entrance and on seeing me, said: "We've been waiting for you all day and we couldn't get in touch with the battery. Are you leaving too?" - My mother was a small woman in her mid forties and still a little plump in spite of all she had gone through since the beginning of the war. The Germans had taken both her parents, her brother and several other relatives of hers to a concentration camp in 1943, and no one knew what had happened to them. My parents never talked about them or any of the other people who had vanished over night. I could only put piece by piece together what I heard here and there and gradually came to realize that my family was in danger since the war had started but especially now that the Fascist were ruling in Croatia.

"Mother, I have very little time. Is father at home?" - Like all young men I had very little understanding of my mother's feelings. - "Yes, he is waiting for you as they were here asking after you." – I asked "Who was here?" taking my bundle with me into the house. I should have taken my bicycle inside as well, because when I came out a little later it

was gone. Obviously, people were by now taking whatever they could find as a means of transport for their flight.

My father told me that an army patrol had come into the house and asked about where I was and what I was doing. They left when my father told them that I had reported for duty at the Battery this morning, and that's the last he knew. The veterinarian had left already, assuming that he would be going to Miholjac with his unit, as this was where the German troops concentrated now.

In the dining room, the largest room in our house. Therefore, the one where most of the day was spent, my father, my mother and I stood together there and looked at each other, not knowing what to say. Slowly, I started to unpack my bundle and take out the things I could not take with this time, such as my camera and other personal bit and pieces. These things did not wait for me, when I came back home four months later, another patrol came the very next day and took whatever they found useful in the house. Only, this time the patrol belonged to the other side, they were the Reds - the Liberators.

"Father, I don't want to go. Couldn't I hide somewhere around here?" — "My son," father said, "son you can't hide anywhere here. You know they will come again and again to search for you and I wouldn't know what to do with your mother. I know how you feel and I am sorry and ashamed that I have no better advice for you. But, they would take us all, and we wouldn't have a chance to live and see the day, when these terrible times are over."

I continued excitedly: "Father, the Reds may be here tomorrow. Aren't you afraid of what's going to happen to you when we leave?" — "I don't know what the Partisans are like and what kind of regime we'll get if they come to power. All I know is, it will be the end of the war and of the constant danger we've been living in these past four years. You have no idea how difficult it was to prevent your mother being taken after all her family had been deported!"

I looked at him with shocked eyes and said: "I'm not sure I understand what you're talking about, father, though I do have an idea what could have happened to mother's family."

My father smiled sadly. "We've never talked about it for your sake. We know how difficult it would have been for you as you're in the Army. These are terrible times, son, when a man has to fight for his country under a government that he does not believe in, because it has no justice and no humane thought."

"Father, this is not the time for philosophical thoughts or political discussion. In half an hour I have to be back at the Garrison and we will probably leave before nightfall. Let me just see what I should take with me, and then let's part quickly!"

This was the moment in my life when the bond between childhood and adult life is cut sharply and irretrievably. It was doubly hard for me because I this instant realized that from now on nobody, neither father, nor mother or any in our family would be looking after me or help me. It was up to me everything and I was solely responsible for what would happen to me from now on.

For the first time in my life, I had spoken to my father in a tone never used before. My father was a big man, weighing nearly 125 kilograms. His chest was about twice the size of my own and he had enormous strength in his two large hands. A slap in the face by my father was one of the things I'd been most afraid of. Not so much because of the pain but because of the fear it filled me with. This, and my mother's tears and attempts at consolation, were what had infuriated me so much as my weakness and myself. Why couldn't I stand up to my father like a man?

Well, now I was doing it, and the look on my father's face came as a shock. He was a very soft person in his innermost self, with a great deal of compassion and love. The hard outer shell had been formed during an extremely difficult childhood and youth as father had been put into an orphanage when his mother, a widow with four children, had married again. What made it worse was his stepfather was a well-known official in Osijek and that the entire family kept on living in this town where my father was.

My father's difficult nature could not accept his mother's remarriage and he paid her back by acting contrary and disrespectful to his stepfather. Thus, his childhood had been void of all warmth and family love. When in turn, he became a father, he probably felt impatient and frustrated, when I was not able to cope with the situations, which were far less difficult than the times he had gone through. And yet, I knew that he loved me very much.

There was no time to contemplate all these feelings and thoughts. Now as I had made my decision I started sorting out few things and say good bye before leaving for a most uncertain future. I took some of the food my mother had prepared for me. There was a first aid kit my sister had made for me from a white plastic box with a Red Cross on top. This was in fact a toy first aid box given to me by Uncle Milan some time ago. My mother had found a blanket I wanted to leave behind and bringing it for me said: "You must take this with you. It's light and it's warm, you never know when you will need it. Take whatever you can carry now ... you can always throw out things later."

She avoided my eyes but I knew without seeing them, that they were wet. The moment of departure had arrived at last there was no getting away from it. As we said good bye, my father presented me with four gold coins and grandfather's pocket watch, a rather expensive gift. I did not really need a watch, I had my wristwatch as parent's present for my graduation in June 1943, but I understood that such watches were handed down from one generation to the next and so accepted it with pride.

"Take this, son, you may need it, it might even save your life. Try to keep the watch if you can, it should always remind you of your grandfather, who most probably has found his death in a concentration camp. God only knows where. He wanted you to have it, you're his only grandson."

Somehow surprised by this memento I mumbled out: "But how will I carry all these valuables? They will get stolen from me?"

"Your mother has prepared a small pouch which you can keep in your pocket or wear it around your neck. There, that should do it!" - I felt my father's large hand nestles the string of the pouch over my head and I felt like crying. My heart was pounding and I had the feeling that I was going to cry any moment not. Thinking about my grandparents made me very sad. They had been taken in a raid in Zagreb, where they had been

hiding hoping for the protection of the archbishop and the Roman Catholic Church there. So many vanished in those days of May 1943, and they never would return.

"Zvonko, my son, look after you. Protect yourself the best you can. I've never been a soldier myself and I've never killed a man. God only knows what you will have to do and the events you will be involved in. God bless you, my son!" - There were tears in my father's eyes as he pressed me to his huge chest. My sister stood a little apart, caressing the dog, not knowing what to make of this outbreak of emotions. My father accompanied me to the front door and, just inside it, once more pressed me against him as if he needed this to brace himself.

I felt the pressure of the pouch against my chest and, knowing how much my father liked it, kissed him on his lips. Then, I turned and gave my mother a last look. She looked terribly fragile standing there with large eyes that brimmed over with tears. She raised her small hand to bless me with the sign of the cross.

I took my bundle, turned sharply and left home. I knew there was nothing else to do but to go where the battery would take me and hope for the best.



The 6-horse team pulling a Czech made Howitzer canon of a 100mm bore calibre.

* * * * *