

11. WAY IN UNCERTAINTY

Wednesday, May 9, 1945

For many hours we had been moving slowly through the still night, passing as through ghostly deserted villages except for the sound of feet and hooves and the creaking of wheels and axles. Because of the darkness, riders were leading the horses not riding them. We had lost quite a number of them and the replacements needed breaking in for the tasks we required. There were also fewer carts and much less ammunition than we had had before. Fortunately, we had no casualties among the men, apart from a few bruises and injuries we were all in good health, though hardly in good spirits.

I was dozing on the seat of my cart and recollecting the events of the past weeks. I was very depressed by the lack of loyalty and fellowship among the officers and the fact that I couldn't expect help or sympathy from anybody. I had been with the unit for too short a period to establish what was known as a common bond between those who had seen danger together. I had neither a friend to talk to nor to rely on, let alone express my worries about the immediate future.

The gunners and gun leaders were all much older than my twenty years and far more experienced in life and battle. So far, most of them were with us still, though there were rumours that some had deserted from the convoy, including a few grooms. The latter were a difficult type of soldier, anyway, known for theft and plunder, probably even looting. But who was I to judge their moral in these difficult times when saving one's life was the main objective of everyone. Destroy and kill - or you'll be killed! That's what it boiled down to.

About an hour after we had left Krizevci, it was already dark when we passed Orehovec. Virag had joined me on the cart. He took the reins and sent the driver for some food for us. The man seemed to be glad to go, and he never came back.

"Sir, may I talk to you frankly?" Virag opened the conversation.

"Yes, of course! Provide you feel like talking at this late and unfriendly hour."

"You were so cross with me and all the others back in Krizevci. Believe me, please, we hadn't forgotten about you and I wouldn't have left without you. We know very well that you're the only officer who cares and who stayed with the crews all the time since we left Osijek. But we are so scared and, I'm sure you realize how desperate we feel about our situation. Have you heard anything about the armistice? Have the Germans surrendered?"

"I am sorry, Virag, I don't know any more than you do. Remember, I was up there at the observation post looking through my field glasses and most of the time out of touch with you and the rest of the unit. Who told you about an armistice?"

"Well, the rumours say Zagreb is occupied by the Yugoslav army, and that Poglavnik fled some days before to Carinthia. The Croatian government is gone, too, they say, trying to get through to the Western armies. Surely we're doing the same?"

"Virag, what do I know about this idiotic retreat? I hated the idea from the beginning but didn't have a chance to do what Zorko did back there at Nasice."

"So you were going to go over to the partisans, too?"

"Yes, Virag, that's what I had in mind but I've missed the right moment or I wasn't aware of it when it was there. But I guess you know that I have very little reason to fight for this government that's now run out on us, it seems. But did we have another chance? Did anybody ask us what we wanted to do? No! So many have been arrested, imprisoned, sent to camps. But nobody returned and who knows whether anyone of those is still alive when this bloody war is over. This mess we're in - my God, why do we have to go throughout with it. I'm sorry, Virag, I shouldn't be talking like this but you asked me."

"So it's true what I heard about your family. Your father was much respected, and he's helped many people. Some relatives of mine, too. You can trust me, sir, if I can help you, please say so. You can rely on me. You see I've sent the driver away because I know he's from this area and he wants to disappear while it's dark. You won't report us, sir, will you?"

"No, Virag, why should I? Everybody has his own fate and he must try to get out of this mess if he can. I just wonder whether the war is over and to whom we shall surrender if we manage to stay alive in this useless bloodshed and risk of lives."

"You know, sir, I've stored enough food and ammunition on this cart to last for a while, and I have some civilian clothes if you need them. I've prepared this for the chance that we can get out of this trek. If you would try it, believe me, there are a few of us absolutely reliable who would go with you. We could try and get back home somehow. We thought of getting back towards Zagreb as soon as we reach the road leading south. Will you come with us?"

I looked at Virag with surprise. How could he have prepared all this without anyone noticing? But could we take the chance? Then I spoke out: "Thank you, Virag, for telling me all this and for offering to take me along. The next road to Zagreb would be the one coming from Varazdin. Perhaps we'll have a chance to get away then. Mind you, if the government has left Zagreb there is no choice but to continue westward. Let us see if we would find another chance for getting out of this. We can surrender to anybody but the Russians or Bulgarians. With them we wouldn't have any chance of getting home ever. We should better die fighting."

This was the longest and most intimate conversation I had had with anybody since I joined the battery, and it made me feel good. I no longer felt so lonely and depressed but had a sudden surge of energy and the desire for action. The convoy was moving on at a slow pace but without any rest at all that night. We passed through Vukovec and came to Sudovec where we turned sharp right again into the western ridge of Mount Kalnik. So we didn't get to the main road to Zagreb and our plan of sneaking off did not come to pass. We stopped just outside Novi Marof to give the horses and men a rest in spite of the prevailing darkness. I did not concern myself with questions about where the buckets of water came from or any of the other supplies the men brought. It was too late to start lecturing them on respect for the property of others.

Dawn was coming up promising a beautiful spring day when the convoy got on the move again, more or less forcing its way into the never-ending traffic on the road leading from Novi Marof to the north along the river Lonja. We were going northwards, and it became evident that returning to Zagreb was out of the question. Though still on Croatian territory we were swept along in this tide of human beings and animals, vehicles of all shapes and

dimensions except for motorcars which rarely existed. All the traffic went on in the one direction only. On the tired faces showed the anxiety and sorrow felt by these people on the run.

I was watching the sad procession with apprehension and grief, wondering what was going on in peoples' minds. What fears and hopes might fill their hearts as they trudged on silently in the dawn that was quiet except for some flares and rockets that lit up the sky occasionally? The sun rose as we were coming to the top of Varazdinski Breg where we turned left at Knežinec onto a small gravel road built for local traffic only. The stream of military vehicles and armed units forced off the few civilians on this road. Due to the constantly winding road and the narrow track it became more and more difficult to keep the horse teams pulling evenly. A great deal of shouting and swearing was heard up and down the convoy.

The fear of an accident kept us all awake in spite of a sleepless night as well as the thought of any snipers hiding along the road. But we plodded on at varying speed with a brief stop when we collided with another convoy coming from Varazdin. Finally we turned onto a wider road again running in southwest direction at the foot of the Ivanscica Mountain and following upstream the Bednja River. When we marched through Lepoglava, I remembered that my father had told me about this place having a prison for unwanted regime's political criminals or persons. They were quite often executed here without proper trial. He himself found out when looking for one of his clients who had vanished.

It was somewhere after Golubovec, when the road started winding steeply into the mountain that an accident happened which nearly cost my life. Coming from a sharp right turn I noticed a brawl ahead in which some of our gunners were involved. In front of an underground pantry, which is used for keeping food stores and wines fresh and cool, an old woman was being abused and hit by two soldiers while others were trying to force the heavy wooden door open. Suddenly, there were some rifle shots sending the horses neighing and stamping and everyone immediately feared a stampede.

The riders and drivers tried their best to keep the horses steady and I could see Virag having a hard time but managing his pair but the first pair of the team for Gun No. 1 was unattended and ready to tear off any moment.

I jumped off my cart and drawing my automatic rifle started running towards the group. I started shouting at them: "Leave off! Get away and back to your places! That's an order!" - I was addressing the soldiers standing around the old woman who was lying on the ground, bleeding from a wound on one hand. At this instant, one soldier carrying a small barrel came out of the vault while others were rummaging inside and several others tried to force their way in. I aimed my automatic at them and shouted: "Put that barrel down, gunner, or you're a dead man. And all of you - put your hands up!"

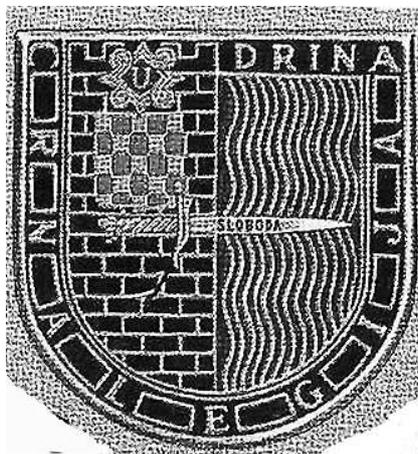
The man with the barrel was so surprised he dropped it and with frightened eyes raised his hands above his head. I then fired a shot into the doorframe and slowly the others raised their hands as well. The shot had alerted the soldiers inside and blinking in the sunlight after the darkness of the vault they gaped into the muzzle of my automatic. Still holding a bottle or a piece of food they had found inside they raised their hands. The old woman started moaning and whimpering but I could see that she wasn't really injured so I kept my attention on the soldiers, feeling how their eyes made my hair stand up at the back of my head.

"Drop everything and get back to your places!" - I said sharply still aiming my rifle and when they showed a certain reluctance to follow my order I sent another shot into the door frame this time a little closer to the boots of the soldier standing next to it. That did it! They must have realized, I meant business and it was no joke. Mumbling and protesting under their breath they put down whatever they had pilfered and went back to their places in the convoy.

The woman had started to collect her belongings by the time Virag came up to me with his cart. I jumped on and we soon were on the move again, up that road which needed all our skill and concentration to keep the horse teams on it. At midday it got worse when we turned onto a very narrow and winding road just after Risek that took us first to Radoboj. After a while we were approaching the main road from Zagreb to Krapina, which run along the Krapinica River next to the railway tracks.

After extremely strenuous eight kilometres we joined the stream of traffic again flowing in the direction of Krapina just ahead of us. By mid afternoon we stopped for a short rest by the roadside near Krapina after a continuous march of 22 hours in which we had covered 90 kilometres. All traffic was heading towards Slovenia, the border of which was only about 10 kilometres away. At the next junction of Djurmanec after Krapina one road leads north to Maribor, a larger town of Slovenia, and the other one passed through Rogatec and Rogaska Slatina to Celje, about 55 kilometres away and also in Slovenia.

During our protracted stay at roadside near Krapina, one could gather together all kinds of rumours circulating between peoples passing by in this enormous exodus leaving their homeland. So we heard rumours about a group of Domobrans who had tried to get back to Zagreb this morning but had been massacred by an Ustasa's unit belonging to those ill reputed commands of colonels Boban and Luburic. Like the German SS-troops they wore black uniforms with the insignia of white skulls in a large letter "U". Certain soldiers in the units commandeered by Boban and Luburic had carried out most of the massacres among Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and other unfortunates enough to cross their path. When fighting against the Partisans these units never made any prisoners nor would any single one of them ever be captured alive. Killing was their business and that is why they were called ominously as "headmen". Most of them came from the southern parts of Croatia or the mountain regions of Herzegovina. Now these black and fearsome troops were marching towards Krapina and passing on the road near to us.



At left the insignia of the Black Legion and the cap badge of the Ustasa soldiers.

It was late afternoon when Virag approached and I expected that he would report about some new orders. I had been sitting on my cart waiting to hear from the captain or from Vlatko both of whom I hadn't seen since leaving Krizevci the day before. Gregl's men were no longer with us, which was somewhat mysterious but didn't really bother us. They were not gunners and belonged to the Ustaska Vojnica whereas the Battery consisted of Domobran soldiers. As Virag came closer I saw that his face was very serious and concerned. He said: "They want to execute you, sir."

"Who? What on earth are you talking about, Virag?"

"They want to kill you. Those guys you prevented from looting that cellar of the old woman up there on that road."

"How many are they? Tell me their names and rank."

"There is that gun leader of Number One, and then some of the riders and grooms. An ill tempered lot, all of them. They are spreading the rumour that you did it so the partisans would get the supplies rather than us. What are you going to do? They mean business and they'll be here soon."

"Virag, go back and tell them I did it for their own good. There was a lot of booze back there and without any doubt they would all have been dead drunk in no time and then what? The horses would have shied and run off causing a disaster, and horses are our most prized possession right now. Go and tell them that. But also tell them that I'm armed and I won't let anyone near me without killing one of them first. I don't want any bloodshed but I won't permit anybody to execute me for having done my duty. Go and tell them that."

"But sir, there are at least six of them. You wouldn't stand a chance if they intend to kill you. Shouldn't I look for some help?"

"There isn't anybody who would help me around here, but you know I'm pretty good with that rifle and my pistol. So that's not too bad a chance. Go and tell them I'm waiting for them, armed."

Virag left at a trot and I followed him a few steps to see from which direction my executioners would be coming. Then I chose the nearest howitzer and sat down in the shadow of its shield. With the automatic rifle over my knees I was able to have two hand grenades at hand with just the pin to pull out. Having thus prepared myself I waited for the executioners to come. I felt surprisingly calm and master of what might happen. I was concentrating so hard on what I was expecting that I didn't notice the sun go down until it was almost dark. Did they want to creep up on me in the dark? Should I find a place to hide? Hide - where and from whom?

I was a fugitive, anyway, running for my life all these past weeks, fleeing the one enemy to find another one that I could surrender to. Did it matter if I was killed before that? Killed by my own comrades? Wasn't that better than falling into the hands of the Ustasas who were reported to have killed anyone surrendering to the partisans or wanting to. What choice did we have in these days of chaos? What was the word in our destiny? Sell your life at the highest price that's all. All of a sudden I heard subconsciously the tune "Boom - boom - boom - bam" out of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the first strains that is, and BBC's secret

station tune for enemy territories. I felt a strange exhilaration. Where are those bastards, let them come for me!

"Sir? Lieutenant, where are you? Please don't shoot, don't fire at us." I saw three figures in the shadow of the growing darkness and raised my rifle and replied aloud: "Stop! All of you stop right where you are. You, too Virag!"

"We've stopped just as you ordered. Please, we are not armed. Could we talk to you?" This wasn't Virag who was talking this time and I didn't recognize the voice. About 30 meters away the three men had stopped and were peering at me.

Aloud I ordered: "Virag, you and the spokesman of the group, come forward ten paces."

When they had followed my order I saw that it was Virag with the corporal of Gun No. 1. Oh, you bastard, I'll get you this time. This was the second case of insubordination within twelve hours. Then I reiterated: "Now put your hands up and come forward another ten paces."

I still aimed my rifle at them but the two men did as ordered and soon were quite close but still standing so that I had them all in my line of fire. But there was Virag standing with them - would I be able to shoot if needed? I would do it, I felt absolutely certain that I would pull the trigger if necessary.

"Sir, please, sir! We're sorry for what happened. We do not want to harm you, please put that automatic down."

"Why have you come then, if you don't want to execute me?"

"We wanted to tell you that we mean no harm to you. You've led us through the past weeks. You were with us all the time. Please forget our stupidity there with the old woman. We're all scared and we thought a little wine or brandy would do us good. But you were very right. It wouldn't help! Please come and talk to all the others, we've prepared some food. We are not armed. Virag wanted us to come like this."

"Is this true? Is what he is saying the truth, Virag?" I asked incredulously.

"It's true, sir. They've come unarmed and all they want is to talk to you and explain. I told them it would be stupid to kill the only officer who cares for us. And that we need friendship now to get through. The Germans have stopped fighting, they say, and there is a general armistice from midnight on. May we come closer now?"

Well, it seemed as if the spook was over, so I dropped my rifle and replaced the grenades to my belt with the safety catches fastened. But I still kept my hands on the grenades as the two men came forward towards me. Only when they were standing right in front of me and I could see that they were indeed unarmed, I dropped hands to my sides. Then on second thought put out my right hand. With a sigh of relief Virag took it and shook it vigorously followed in turn by the gun leader of Number One. Together we walked over to the cart where I left my automatic and the grenade belt and then continued on to join the group for our "meal of peace".

The story had made the rounds and so the group had become quite sizeable, as everyone wanted to see the officer who had prevented execution by his own men. Somehow this incident drew us all a bit closer together. We sat and talked and smoked and wondered what was going on only a few hundred kilometres away from us. Where were the Russians, and where the Americans and the British? And was there a general cease-fire?



This is the standard knob used on the Ustasa uniform.

* * * * *