

15. BEGIN OF MY WAY OF CROSS

Thursday, May 17, 1945

The order to move out of the orchard came rather unexpectedly. We had noticed some agitation far down near the building but did not connect it with an imminent departure. There had been a great deal of coming and going up and down the orchard, as new prisoners were brought in and were looking for their comrades, relatives or friends. There was also the rumour that one could get food down somewhere near the building but few from our group tried but they had found out that there usually was a big crowd and very often nothing was left once they got there. There had also been raids after some Ustasas that had tried to hide among the Domobrancs, which was almost impossible, unless you had somebody who helped you. Otherwise it was difficult not to be noticed.

The Osijek group was quite close to the upper fence so now the order came up here for the groups from the eastern Croatia's military districts to get ready to start the march. Soon it was our turn to walk through an opening in the fence watched by guards who held their rifles at the ready and by a crowd of curious onlookers who were not at all friendly at all. In order to join the column of prisoners down below one had to run more or less in a single file after leaving the compound and pass through rows of soldiers and the crowd behind them. This was my first encounter with being beaten with a rifle butt or any sort of whip or being tripped and brought to fall.



Croatian Prisoners of War gathered together on the field between Pamece and Slovenj Gradec.

By sheer good fortune I came down unharmed and soon was joined by the others from our group of which several of the older ones had not been able to escape the rifle butts or whips. I had found that running in my riding boots was a fairly hard job though I had cut open most of the outer seams to make them more comfortable but also look more worn out in order not to lose them. After all, these were my first boots made to my order and I had paid for them with my own money. My childish memory kept reminding me of the loss of my bicycle in April 1941. I had been given it for my birthday and was very proud of it until the day the magistrate ordered me to distribute letters of requisitioning vehicles that included bicycles. And sure enough a few days later my own bicycle was requisitioned too, a very distressing experience for a sixteen-year-old boy. I could still feel the hate that had filled me against these people who took "my property" for nothing.

It was about mid day when we marched through Slovenj Gradec Township in a column four deep and filling the road for as long as one could see in front and behind. Our group seemed to be somewhere in the column's middle and we heard that the Ustasas were marching up in front. As we came closer to the gorge of Mislinja we had stopped for our first break. Our escorts were very young, with crudely cut short hair, a bread bag and flask hanging over their shoulders looking as new and unused as the cartridge belts around their middles, and a rifle held at the ready once we stopped. These boys were positioned on both sides of our column, about 10 to 15 meters apart from each other and watching us very carefully.



Croatian Prisoners of War amass prior to form a four-row deep marching column.

In this mass of humans there must have been some 40.000 prisoners-of-war who started this march into the unknown. The silence and absolute quietness in such a large group of people was ghostly somehow and made one shiver. There were only the occasional shouts of "Stoj! Stoj!" followed by a shot and then this deathlike stillness again. Our guards were quite nervous and their rifles pointed at us a serious threat because one could see that they would shoot without much of a qualm. The break was soon over, one could see how the men in front got up and like a wave it reached us till the entire column stood up again. We had soon learned that it was better to get up quickly and avoid any gap in the marching order or the rifle butt or the whip would teach you.

There were again shots in front and as we came up to the spot we saw a dead or nearly dead prisoner being dragged away. It made our guards very nervous, they started shouting for us to stick together and keep within the four-deep rows. Then we were sent through a "run and hit" stretch between troops watching us on foot or atop some carts and treating us to rather vicious whip lashings. Keeping close to the next man was essential and I found out that holding my rucksack over my head warded off the blows. The cruel tormentors had created a narrow bottleneck for us to squeeze through hardly in doubles in spite of telling us to march four in a row. The result was of course that one had to watch out not to run into anybody in front and to avoid stepping on those who had stumbled and fallen. When you heard shouts and shots you knew what happened to those poor souls.

When we had come out of Smartno and that running of the gauntlet our guards were very bad-tempered. They were probably maltreated too and now ready to vent the anger and hate on anyone weaker and unable to retaliate. Their chance came when a man in front stepped out of the column to relieve himself. The shout of "Stoj" was followed by a shot and the man fell as if struck with an axe. They had murdered him right in front of our eyes, and for nothing. It was not going to be the only incident on this first day of our march with death, however, though war was over for the winners and for us who had lost it.

As the sun was going down behind the mountains in the west we were topping for another halt close to the place of the attempted breakthrough bellow the Razborca Mountains. We saw that some people were busy filling in a wide anti-tank trench with mounds of cadavers. That these had been human beings nobody seemed to think about let alone care about. The chance that one could be one of those dead bodies was too close. But I shivered and felt full of sorrow for the living and the dead.

We were all very thirsty, with lips that felt crusty and parched from constant licking and dry spittle. Sweat and dust had dried on our faces into some sort of mask and the eyelids nearly closed under the weight of this itchy crust. Never mind, try to get some rest, I told myself, who knows for how long they'll keep you marching. A shot very loud and close brought me out of my doze and made me witness another execution a man seemed to have tried to get some water from a well. They had let him get as far as the well and he was just reaching for a rope of the pail when the bullet hit him. One of the young guards ran up to him and shot once more at the figure lying prostrate on the ground and then pulled the rope to show us that no pail was attached. But why shoot a man for trying to get water from a well even if there is no water in it? What a useless way to die after having survived the war, I thought, but at least the man had died quickly.



A four-row deep column of Prisoners of War are marching somewhere in Slovenia.

A little later we were on the move again, but the tension between the prisoners and their young guards had grown to such an extent that one could feel it in the air. These boys of sixteen or seventeen shot down their own countrymen without warning and without proper cause, and they had not even been forced into doing so by a threat to their lives. True they order was to shoot at anybody leaving the column, but shoot at does not mean shoot dead, except in those days it obviously did. Nobody was going to leave prisoner's ranks alive seemed to be the parole of our young guards. It was sad to see the effect a weapon in their hands had on these boys. I asked myself whether it was the result of hate against those who had had the power to order them about before. Most of the prisoners were older men, probably a father or relative or whatever else to these youngsters. What could it be to make killers of these boys? Was it the primordial fear or just mortal fear?

We soon learned to stay clear of such a danger that lay in trying to get water from a well, just as we realized quickly that there was no use in trying anyway. The wells were all without a pail to the rope or with the broken handle for cranking the rope too. There simply

was no chance to get water for us all along that route and it seemed people had followed an order to make this march even more miserable for the prisoners.

Darkness fell but we kept on marching, stopping only for a short break every hour or so. We passed through Straze and Mislinja and turned towards Dolic - the way we had come just a week ago. After Dolic I realized that we were following another road, slightly ascending and guarded by forest on both sides. Nobody knew which way we were turning but I remembered having seen a shortcut on my map that lead to the road from Celje to Maribor. Tiredness and thirst dulled our minds until we marched on like automatons. Walk, stay together, watch your neighbour and get down to the floor when you see the row in front do the same. Get up quickly when the shouting starts and the crunching footsteps bring you to your senses. And so on and so on till you felt like a walking corpse.

We carried on this way right through the night. Even our guards got weary but they didn't tire of their habit to shoot at anyone stepping out of the ranks, in fact, it got worse as we could gather from the frequent shots during the night. We were on the move now for over twelve hours and had covered about 40 kilometres when we reached Stranice on the main road to Maribor. There we turned right, which meant that we would be walking to Celje. We only realized this after we had struggled up a steep ascent in the road. In the first dim light of the new day, Friday, May 18, I noticed a large fortress on a rise left of the road that I depicted as being Grascina Visnjavas. Nobody around me really cared to hear this as we soon reached Vojnik and our first stop this morning.

We felt something strange had happened when we wearily lowered ourselves into the wet grass by the roadside and only then realized that our group was now more or less at the head of the marching column. Where had the other prisoners gone, the Ustasas who so far had been in front of us? Soon it became clear that the front column part with about half of the prisoners had been walked off at Stranice towards Maribor. Thus the second part with Domobranci was led in the other direction towards Celje. We never heard or saw anything of these prisoners and briefly wondered about their fate. At this moment our main concern was to get something to drink. The only answer to this was to lick and suck the dew from the wet grass and the leaves of the trees. I took my handkerchief and soaked it in whatever water I could find, even in the brackish rivulet in a ditch before we were told to move on.

Very early in the morning we reached Celje and were marched towards the town's centre, keeping on the right side of the road as some military traffic was going the other way. This invited some of the soldiers to start the "exchange" game again with us but as long we were walking nobody dared to stop us. The only trouble being that again we had short stretches of single runs, which brought the usual blows and lashes. As long as we were marching as one body there was little chance for the victorious soldiers to get at the prisoners for "exchange" or simple theft of any valuables we might have on us. The only danger was being separated from the main column and forced to catch up with it in a more or less single-file. If this happened one was likely to lose whatever caught victors' eyes: watches, rings, then if those were gone came every good piece of clothing, blankets, belts, shoes and boots. We seemed to be a walking market for the glorious victors to pick from.

Tired, thirsty and getting weaker by the hour we walked from one stop to the next, trying to get into the inner two rows of the column as these were the safest ones. But there was enough fairness left among the prisoners to make it a routine to change places after each stop so that everyone of us got his chance for being in the inner row and get protection

against the blows and whiplashes, as well as loss of one's meagre belongings. Soon we found out that the most dangerous position was that at the left side of the column and took turn there too.

At Celje others soldiers of the Yugoslav Liberation Army replaced our young guards and who had been recruited in the eastern part of the Yugoslav State when their villages had been liberated sometime in 1944. They were not partisans and yet they felt that it was their right to get even with us for all the suffering the partisans had gone through since 1941. They had come a long way to the far west of Yugoslavia and most likely had not been involved in any real fighting against the hated fascists, whoever these were. They couldn't distinguish between Ustasas and Domobrancs either. For them Croatian prisoners were all the same: the enemy and the reason for their suffering and their misery during the last months in finding themselves so far from home when finally the war was over. We prisoners were therefore to blame for everything and no arguing about it! This was the revolution!

Later that Friday morning we stopped again and it so happened that I was outside on the left as we marched towards the bridge over the river Savinja. An army unit was passing us in the other direction and it didn't take long before a stocky soldier in a shabby uniform walked up to me and pointing to my boots aid: "Comrade, you have very good boots. Let's exchange footwear." - I tried to discourage him by pointing out that the boots were no good at all: "See, the seams are all open."

"You cut them through, you swine of a fascist. Take them off and do it fast. I can't wait, my unit is moving on." - As he was pointing his rifle at my chest there was nothing I could do but take off my boots and hand them to him. I was so weak and my feet had swollen up in them so I had to get up from my rucksack on which I had been sitting.

The soldier bent down with a grin and helping me in getting off my boots said: "I see, young comrade fascist, you have even more than good boots. Here take them in return for my opanaks and then let me see what more I can do in useful exchange with you."

At that moment I hated this man with all my heart and I could have killed him with my bare hands but his rifle pointing at my rucksack paralyzed me, thank God, and probably saved my life. By sheer good luck the soldier in searching the rucksack found my grandfather's pocket-watch which I had wrapped in a dirty handkerchief and hidden in a small outside pocket. He nearly dropped it, as he had to manage his rifle as well as searching my rucksack. He was as pleased with his findings especially as he had pressed the winding knob and now the little tune started playing. He had satisfied himself with this bounty and said: "I will take this watch, comrade, as you won't need it anymore. No needs for exchange as you have my shoes already."

The little tune had brought a fleeting memory of my childhood, so very, very far from this disastrous present and the malicious grin of the soldier in front of me. I thought that my grandfather would probably have been pleased about the fact that his watch saved the life of his grandson. The soldier ran after his unit and I had just enough time to pick up my rucksack and the opanaks he had thrown at me with the tip of his foot now clad in my boots. Opanaks are a sort of boat shaped shoe with hardened soles worn in Serbia by the peasants. This pair was too small for my feet as I could hardly get the pointed part over my toes. So I pulled out the strings feeling they might be of use and decided to walk on

barefoot until I would be lucky enough to find some sort of footgear. I felt very tired and so terribly far away from home.

We walked rather slowly as we continued on through Celje, past the railway station and a hotel I had stayed in with my father only a few years ago. On the way there were several stops and the "exchange" business flourished. I still had something to lose: my gold coins and my wrist watch dangling in a small linen bag close to my groin. But for the moment my main concern was finding something I could put on my feet. It wasn't too bad walking in my socks as long as the streets had the asphalt or cobblestone paving - but what when we would get on the open road with stone macadam paving?

Fortunately, we were led into a small alley with buildings on both sides. All doors and windows were shut tight. Not a single pair of eyes watched us as we sat down wearily wherever we happened to be standing. The sun was high up in the sky and there was hardly any shade even in this alley. I was more or less in the front of the column and dared to venture out a bit further into the alley to find a door or a basement window which might give some sort of protection. Everything was shut and locked, no face appeared behind a window in spite of the shouts down below and knocking on doors. A few shots into the air silenced our haggard group and we rested in whatever place we could find.

A little later we heard a noise coming from the entrance into the alley and soon the news reached us that food was being distributed consisting of one tin of beans and a few packets of zwieback for every 100 people. Of course this brought on some shouting and haggling, as it was hardly enough for ten men so the authority of some of former officers made itself felt and a sensible distribution started. What little food reached us at the back of the alley one gave it to those men in our group who were weakest. The rest of us were left with a constant grumbling stomach. Men were dying already, whether from lack of food or general weakness I couldn't make out but I was shocked to see how they just passed away quietly and without any warning. A man would sit down and then slide sideways as if in sleep but when it was time to get up again and start marching one saw that he was dead.

I had been dozing a little when I suddenly started by something I sat up. Captain Smit who had been sitting opposite of me leaning against the house wall had slid down into a crumpled position that had frightened me. I had known this man since my childhood because he, too, had a Doberman Hector that had been mated with our bitch, Peggy. Though living quite a distance from our house and being locked into the basement the dog had found his way to his bride after the "wedding-day". After a sprint of over more than ten kilometres, Hector woke us one morning howling and wailing in front of the garden gate. As nobody opened the gate for him he jumped the high fence straight into our garden.

It was a great dog romance and discussed all over town. I met Hector and Captain Smit again several years later when I took part in an amateur theatre production which we performed for a Military school in the fortress of Petrovaradin, of which the captain was the commander. Hector greeted me with such overwhelming joy that I nearly fell over backwards and the captain came running to rescue me in vain. Now this quiet, pleasant man had just gone from this world without a word. My eyes smarted from hot tears at the injustice of it all and the incident caused a deep depression that stayed with me all through the following weeks and months.

I was dozing again when I thought I heard soft footsteps behind the door I was leaning against. I knocked gently, and then started scratching the wood and after a little while the door opened just a crack. An elderly woman's face looked down at me with apprehension. I felt this to be my chance and mustering the few Slovenian phrases I knew said to her: "Dear mother, please, please help me. Only a little waters, please, or anything you have to quench my thirst. Please!"

The door was closed before I had finished so I sat there watching the door in despair. I took a piece of zwieback from my rucksack and started nibbling it, slowly and very consciously savouring the process of eating. Then I looked at my feet: I simply had to get something to wrap around them to protect the soles or I'd be walking on my skin within a matter of minutes once we got on the country road.

Just as I rummaged among my scant belongings the door behind me opened again for a narrow gap and the woman's voice told me to come to the last of basement windows. Very slowly to avoid any attention I started crawling on my hand and feet till I had reached the last window which was in deep shadow. The window opened, a hand holding a bottle of milk came out and a voice behind it said: "Empty it quickly into your bowl. You have one, don't you? I'll bring more."

"God bless you, mother, and thank you. Many, too many thanks. Forgive me if I ask you for one more thing: I have no shoes, can you give me an old flour bag and anything to wrap around my feet? Thank you for everything." - The hand disappeared and the window was shut, but in my bowl I had warm soup of browned flour which is very popular in Slovenia. I drank it slowly, enjoying every gulp of the warm liquid that was my first meal after these many days of starving. I felt some strength returning to my body with every mouthful of soup I took and even my depression lifted a little.

It was getting darker as the sun was settling into the west when the window opened again and a rolled up flour bag was hastily shoved towards me, followed by that wonderful bottle again that I quickly emptied into my bowl. The window was closed before I could say another word of thanks or blessing to this woman who was the only one to show some commiseration for a fellow human being in need.



Unknown Prisoners of War pass through Celje later in May 1945.

Shortly afterwards came the order to move on and people were struggling to their feet. I gave a last look to Captain Smit wishing I could give him a proper burial instead, and then I stuffed the flour bag into my rucksack and joined up with my group. I had to watch my

steps very carefully in order to avoid any sharp objects that might cut my soles. So we had walked in the direction of our homes but our main objective was to survive. Yet to achieve this we had still some 400 kilometres of walking.

Our march continued in the well-known manner: to march for about one hour, stop for 10 to 15 minutes and march again. At first I took care as to where I stepped but soon gave up because in the darkness it didn't help at all. I felt the road under the thin cover of my socks and it didn't take long for them to be worn through. As we marched on the macadam road following the Savinja River and the railway tracks, I began to feel the dust between my toes. Very soon that feeling stopped too and I didn't feel anything at all afterwards. There was no time to prepare the foot wrappings from out of the flour bag because stops got shorter or was it simply that we got more tired?

We kept the routine of four men in a row and changing the inside positions after every stop. Night fell as we marched through Lasko and with hardly any traffic on that road we soon passed Smarjeta and later Rimske Toplice, a well-known spa. It must have been near midnight when we entered a gorge at the end of which lay the railway junction of Zidani Most. I knew that station quite well from my earlier excursions and hoped that perhaps we might stop there for a rest. As it was we stopped little before of it and still within the gorge, but I was lucky enough to find a stack of railway sleepers and spread my blanket over them to fall asleep instantaneously.

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