

16. DISTRESSED AND HOPELESS

Saturday, May 19, 1945

I woke up with a start feeling cold and damp all over. At first, I wasn't quite sure where I was but soon my drowsiness cleared when I heard several shots fired into the air and echoing in the gorge of Savinja River. Soon people were getting up all around me; there were shouts and orders mingled with their own echo ricocheting from the steep rocks on both sides of the gorge. March continued and soon we had reached the railway line crossing with the main line leading from Zagreb to Ljubljana. The bridge across the river had been destroyed but we turned of to the left on the road that opened into the wide valley of the Sava River eastwards.

As soon as first daylight came everybody started looking for its companions and the group one belonged to. We had all got a bit mixed up due to the late night stop in full darkness so the sudden order to get moving this morning got us into walking without any particular formation - a tired flock of thousands of prisoners.

I remembered the railway station of Zidani Most lying at our right that was badly damaged now but I didn't look back at because I had to watch my steps my soles being bare now. There hadn't been any time this morning to replace worn thin clothing that wrapped my feet until late last night. Every time I stepped on something sharp or even only edged it felt as if lightning went from the soles of my feet hit right through to my brain. The long walking had a numbing effect on all muscles, however, and gradually I was able to forget the pain in my feet and to manage a sort of physical switch off. I had the feeling as if my body as such didn't really exist any longer: it was just my legs that kept on walking like the limbs of an automaton. But how long would this work?

I wondered as the sunrise lit up the widening plain along the Sava. We crossed a timber bridge of which most of the planks were missing and soon passed through Radece. We continued eastwards on a main road that would lead us all the way back to Croatia and home! But for the time being we were still in Slovenia. Soon and once more we had to run for safety, when the column was again squeezed through a row of waiting soldiers and their carts on both sides of the road at Hotemez. I only noticed the danger at the last moment being preoccupied with my bare feet and their protection. I was thinking what a good hiding place the ruins of a mediaeval castle would be those were visible in the distance where the two rivers Savinja and Sava meet. Now running for safety, with my head down and my rucksack and blanket to protect me I passed the dangerous place at last. Soon after I met up the other prisoners just out of Hotemez and with surprise noticed that no guards were accompanying us anymore.

The mass of prisoners was becoming larger that started spilling over into the flat green meadow that changed into a sandy beach near the river. There were patches of fine sand with a thick growth of bushes, mostly willows along riverside. It looked very tempting and I was dying to have a bath and clean myself but I knew how dangerous this could be even in this unusual situation of being without guards. There was a lot of activity around; the prisoners were trailing around looking for their groups. Some discussed excitedly about the possibilities of being able to reach home. I, too, started looking for my comrades and soon found the group of the Osijek military district. It seemed that some of the officers had taken over the command and started organizing the prisoners. They tried to explain our

rights as prisoners-of war under the Geneva Convention, which so far had not been observed at all by the Yugoslav Army.

We had no idea how many of the prisoners-of-war were missing from the large group that started from the camp at Slovenj Gradec or how many had been killed of some 40.000 men imprisoned there. It seemed to me that a large group had been left behind at Zidani Most due to our sudden departure. I was contemplating all this when a voice took me out of my reverie: "Hey you, gunner without shoes, come over here and have some fresh Sava water. Nobody will prevent us from drinking this time. There are no guards around."

I looked up and was glad to see the veterinarian from our battery and said: "Glad to see you, Vet. Are you the only one from our battery? I didn't see any of our gunners since I led them back to Slovenj Gradec. Did you see anybody?"

"I saw a few of them but they were all from other districts. I was with the colonel's unit and went beyond Dravograd but still kept on the right side of the Drava. I came back to the camp at Slovenj Gradec the night before we left there, whenever that was. I was lucky to come to Celje with what seems to be all the Domobrans. I hear those that were taken to Maribor were the Ustasas? Still, I wonder what happened to the Domobrans that were with them. Would they ever get home?"

"Will we ever get home, Vet, what do you think about? As you can see, I'm walking barefoot because I lost my boots in one of those fanatic exchanges. Where is your rucksack or blanket?"

"Well, I was able to save my shoes by cutting off the top part so they look like sandals, but I lost everything else including my blanket. Here's all I have: a pouch with a metal food bowl, a knife and some zwieback."

I felt very sorry for the Vet when he showed his meagre belongings, so I said: "I haven't left much more in my rucksack either, but we can share my blanket as it is big enough for both of us. Let's go and see if we can find any of the others, and most of all, let's get some water, if you really think it's safe and we won't be shot."

Together we walked to a large cluster of willows where I found most of the friends I had lost the night before. It was a happy reunion and I felt somehow secure now that I was again among people I could trust and who would take care of each other in the sight of danger.

The day grew hot as the sun approached the zenith. It was a wonderful feeling to be able to wash and to drink the clear river water that was so refreshing. I turned my attention to preparing another set of foot wrappings by cutting strips from the sacking I still had. I knew that I had to be as economical as possible because that was all I had to protect my feet. In fact, this question became my main concern at each stop that we made. I wanted to keep the blanket as a last resort as it would have to warm two of us now. I cut up the last piece of bacon I had and kept the rind of it. In circumstances as extreme as ours one gets loath to throw away anything even the last crumbs of zwieback were eaten piece by piece.

I felt myself lucky to still possess a few pieces of sugar, my only remaining food except for a bit of cheese which had formed into one lumpy mess with the zwieback crumbs. The

heat was good for all of us as it warmed our tired bodies while we lay there, resting and dozing in the shade of the bushes and willows.

But not everyone was dozing. After a while word came round that no one should try and make his way home alone. The POWs should form in-groups according to their home districts and start off in the early afternoon even without any guard. Everybody would have rested enough by then and the heat would somewhat subsided too. I was glad to see that somebody, or possible several among us, was still able to act as a sort of mastermind and that it would prevent another start resulting in panic run at Hotemez after the last night.

However, soon after the midday a new set of guards arrived so our plans were postponed for the time being. All we could hope for was that our guards would walk us in the direction of our homes in Croatia. At least our precaution measures had the effect that now one group after the other got up in proper order, moved towards the road and started the march again. The districts of eastern Croatia were at the head of the column and I found in the Vet a companion for better or worse, I hoped so. We didn't talk much but shared the blanket that formed a link between us in the coming weeks.

Our new guards came from a unit that obviously was better equipped than those ones before. They were Serbs and cursed a good deal when not shouting at us to march faster. Our stops were fewer and soon our bodies were numb with exhaustion. With nothing to drink or eat the marching on this road along the Right Bank of Sava River became soon a sheer torture so the memory of resting under the willows evaporated like a dream experience. Nobody talked as it cost far too much of strength to just put one foot in front of the other. The thousands of feet stirred up the dust of the gravel road to a constant whitish cloud. I forgot my handicap and walked on like the others, in a sort of trance, leaning on my neighbour for support or supporting him whenever it was necessary.

A stop was announced only when those in front fell to the ground wearily and one could see the entire column collapsing row for row. The dust settled on us as we lay there in the road while the guards sat on the roadsides with their rifles at the ready. There were hardly any villages along this road and it was dark when we passed Bostanj without stopping. That drumbeat of Beethoven's Fifth had started to pester me again. I could hear its tune as if it were played for real in that mild night with the stars twinkling above us. My eyes ached from the dust baked together with the sweat running down my face but I was too tired to fumble for my handkerchief to wipe it off. Better wait till the music stops in my ears or wait until the next stop. What's that? There's nobody in front; the cool night air touches my face - another stop. I know I should clean my face and do something about my foot wrappings but I am so tired - so very tired...

I lick my dust-covered lips and fall into a doze only for a few minutes. Just do it for a little bit until I could gather some strength to wipe my eyes and to look after my feet. Just for a little while only. But then the usual shouting and cursing wakes me and I see everybody around getting up - we are on the move again. Vet is up too and pulls at the blanket. With a sigh I heaved myself up and doing a rush-repair to my foot wrappings fell in the trot with the others. The moon was coming up behind the hills on the other riverside and cast a splendid glistening on the water.

What was that poem? I addressed Vet but he seemed to be dozing marching, as we were both in the safety of the inner rows. Now, I remember it! It's from the poem "Putnik", the traveller, and slowly come the lines to me:

"God Almighty, where did I come to?
Night has caught me in foreign parts,
Where I know no road or paths.
Only bare rock under dragging feet,
Weary feet walking in the desert."

I felt proud of myself for having remembered this poem that suited my situation so well now. But soon reality called me to pay attention to my feet as I started to feel the cool road dust between my toes. Watch out for sharp objects, do not put your full weight down on your foot before you feel where you would step on. Watch out, your friend is swaying and you have to hold him. It is your turn now. You are talking to yourself, Zvonko, that is the beginning of becoming mentally deranged, they say, but perhaps it's just you getting older. Old people talk to themselves, don't they? Or are these the lonely ones?

I am lonely in this beautiful starlit night, with the moon's rays playing this lovely pattern on the Sava. If we stop close to the river the next time why shouldn't I try to swim down river until I reach Zagreb? Great idea, but how can I stay afloat for some 60 kilometres or so that must be so far to Zagreb? I was excited by this plan and started working on it. I would have to sneak away without anybody noticing. Otherwise I'd be stopped as we had agreed to not venture out of the column on our own. But perhaps I could get a raft or hang on to a log drifting in the water?

My mind wouldn't dare off this idea till I called myself to order and started thinking of the poem again. With every step I concentrated on the verse's rhythm until my body ceased to exist. I was only in this chaos of thoughts when the bars of Beethoven's Fifth and the drumbeat intermixed with pictures of me split into two people arguing against each other. The argument went on about the stupidity of the plan, of my present situation and of this entire crazy world. I was on the brink of insanity, I think, when all of a sudden the poem came back:

"Dear mother, my beloved mother,
If you could see me now, your son!
If you could only see him
Surrounded by all the misery,
You would weep bitterly.
Your hand would shake of all
The grief not holding him in your arms!"

Well, mother what would you say now if you could see your son in this desperate situation? Your son who was ill so often with so many and lengthy infections of angina, who was too weak to have his tonsils taken out. He, your son, who was shy and indecisive, feeling inferior to everybody, towards his relatives and his schoolmates, and most of all to his father. It was my father who so wanted to be proud of a manly son.

What if I simply jump into the river and made an end to it all? It certainly was preferable to being shot or worse still, injured and left to die. NO! No, come out of it - there's always a chance. Perhaps you will get to Zagreb, swimming in the river or otherwise. There you have relatives who will help you and get you out of this nightmare. Then you'll think back on it as a bad dream. What if I simply step out of the ranks and walk off? What does it feel

like to be hit by a bullet? Does one die instantly or would it take long until all was over? Would the pain be worse than this aching body and the tortured soles of my feet now?



Croatian civilians and soldiers gather at a crossroad some 3km far from Bleiburg only.

Step out, get out of this misery, you might just be lucky and disappear before anyone of the guards' notices. And then, what? What would I do once I got free of this congregation of marching corpses, without a proper pass and in the condition I was in? These thoughts kept attacking my mind like a swarm of bees and kept me so very occupied that I hardly noticed when the row in front of me collapsed for another stop.

After that stop - it was probably just behind Sevnica where we took a rest again - I fell back into the old routine. Getting up when I heard the others do so, folding the blanket with my marching companion, Vet, and taking my place in the inner row or outside, according to my turn. It was my turn now to walk in inner row so I closed eyes to be led by Vet.

As I did so, all of a sudden it was no longer Beethoven's Fifth that accompanied me but the tunes from the second movement the Funeral March of his Third Symphony. Uncle Milan had played it so often, explaining to me what had caused the famous composer to write such a depressing tune. Did Beethoven feel as badly as I did now? I wondered as I dragged myself on. Vet nudged me: "Look, up there on the other side of the river. Can you see the lights? People are probably celebrating a mass to thank God the war is over."

This reminded me of another occasion when I had visited a Trappists' monastery with my father near Banja Luka on his way to a court there. Trappists are not allowed to speak except for the prior who welcomed us into a large building and invited us for a meal. These monks are well known for their dairy products, in particular their cheeses, so elderly monk took me around to show me where cheeses were made. This was something they did not show to grownups in order to guard their secret recipe. I was very proud to be singled out thus and still remembered monk's soft voice that broke his silence to explain to me the various steps in cheese making. These pictures came floating up now to my tired mind, and I wondered if I would find shelter up there in the church if I would manage to escape?

As I trudged on after the next stop and the thought of running away became more and more persistent. I regaled myself for not having done so down by the riverside when we had been without guards for a while. Now it was night but the moon has been bright and

clearly defined the contours of the swaying prisoners and the straight marching guards. Anybody stepping out of the column would make an excellent target and I didn't feel like providing this for the guards. Like nausea a wave of self-pity washed over me all of a sudden making me weak and drained of all energy.

Stop that instantly! Stop it I told myself. Stop that pity for your aching body and hurting feet. You're alive and still able to make a move. So get on, march towards the river and swim across to that monastery over there. You'll be safe with the monks. They are known for helping the poor and those in need. See that shadow cast across the road up there in front? That's where you'll do it. I must sneak over to the outside row somehow, how can I manage without raising any suspicion?

It's Vet on my left and he is bound to worry about me. You are stalling, you coward, you are just afraid to do it. Be honest, admit you are a coward, you always were. I know, I know - but, dear mother, don't you see I'm putting my feet down to walk, my bare feet on the rocky road in the desert.

I must have been near delirious when I suddenly felt the grip of Vet's hand on my arm and it was time for another stop. We lay down in the road, body against body, stretched out on the ground as if we had been mowed down. I must have fallen asleep then because I don't remember how long this rest lasted. Then we were on the road again. Marching in this monotonous rhythm caused us to lose all sense of time and place; instead a sort of complete numbness took over. There was nothing left to think of but to support your neighbour on the right because it was his turn now to sleep while walking.

All my feverish plans for escape were gone as we marched on in the cool morning mist and a slight breeze announcing the dawn of a new day. We passed through Krsko and now the road ran away from the river for about 35 kilometres. We were approaching the Croatian border and there was a good chance that once inside of it the matters would be better, much better. If only I wasn't so thirsty and so very tired, God was I tired! I don't remember anything of that march anymore. All I can remember was that I wanted to reach Zagreb the capital of Croatia where my relatives would help me. This where all would work out for the better, I believed at least.

Dawn came and somebody in front mentioned that we had just passed Brezice and shortly afterwards on our right we could see the ruins of Mokrice Castle. We'd be in Croatia soon now, so keep on walking, just keep on walking, never mind that your feet are bare, you must have lost all the wrappings during the night, but just keep on walking. After a little while we crossed a rivulet called Bregana that formed the border - and we were back in Croatia!

I remembered how in June 1944, our military transport had been waiting at Bregana station to go on to Zagreb for a parade and then to go on home leave, the first one after seven months of training in Austria. We were all thinking of that, when in the night two Lightning's came swooping down at the three trains stationed here. They attacked the trains and caused a real havoc at Bregana station. Petrol drums were exploding all over and we thought at first that this was an attack by the partisans. Everybody tried to run for safety into the nearby fields so crawled beneath the nearby train when all of a sudden it started moving. I nearly died of a shock when I found myself lying under a moving train but some good sense or instinct made me hold still until the train was gone. Then I was able to stand up and run over the tracks into the field. As I was getting up tripped over one rail and

I hit the next one full force on the chest. I was unable to breathe, shout or anything for several minutes. At last, after what seemed like an hour to me, colleagues pulled me to the wet grass where I slowly started to breathe again but with a strong pain in my chest. I'd never forget the shocking sight of charcoal bodies of German soldiers who died in this airplane attack. The parade at Zagreb was called off and we were allowed to go straight home.

All these memories came flooding back now as I was passing Bregana but under so much different circumstances. The war was over now, I reminded myself all the time, and soon all suffering would be over. I would be lying in the grass again or in freshly mown hay smelling that unique aroma. I would be washed and shaved to smell like a human being not like a man covered in dust and his own sour sweat!

The sun was up as we were approached Samobor without any stop for the past hour or so. We didn't enter Samobor though but were led into a park or small wood that mostly surrounds country mansions. There we were told to get together in-groups according to our military districts soonest. New troops were waiting for us to escorts us as guards. None of us really bothered much about it, as we were all so very tired. Fatigue rolled over every one of us and knocked us down right where we stood.

It was Sunday, May 20, 1945 and we were back in our country as prisoners-of-war. We were back in the country we had fled from only a fortnight ago. Then we had been a rather battered army but now we were human wracks or so I felt at least after this march of over 60 kilometres in twenty-four hours.

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