

19. LONG 100-KILOMETER MARCH

Friday, May 25, 1945

We started leaving our "camp" at the former brick factory in the late afternoon. There were now many more soldiers in and around the factory and it looked as if we would be well looked after during the forthcoming march though we did not know our destination. Soon we found that we would cross into the Lonjsko Polje when we crossed the Sava River over an old bridge near Galdovo. We marched at a steady pace in the beginning with regular stops about every hour or so but soon we lost control of time when the night came and darkness surrounded us. With my foot bindings in good shape I didn't have to bother so much about where to step on and even when bindings started to get undone I didn't care much anymore. The hours passed on and on so we fell into a sort of trance as marching on.

One tried to keep touch with the man at the left and at the right or watched the outer line if one was marching in one of the outside rows. As there was no traffic in the road marching column had taken over the entire width of the stony macadam road that dust was pleasant to the many bare feet such as mine. And so we walked on, for hour after hour, collapsing to the ground at each stop in the place where one happened to stand as soon as one saw the rows in front lowering themselves to the ground. Curling against each other for the animal warmth and for a certain feeling of safety one carried on just as a herd would do driven to an unknown destination. We would rest until it was time to move on again.

I do not remember much of that long march except that we crossed another river, possibly the Lonja, and kept on walking never stopping in a village or any form of a settlement with human population. During this endless night I must have been in some kind of frenzy, as was probably everyone around me. We barely spoke to each other, just made the routine changes of position in the inner line, then after the next stop, in the outer line and so on.

My mind kept bringing back memories of the long walks with my father. He was a fanatic when it came to the walking. In the summer of 1940 he was called into army service (he was then 47 years old) and that was for him the first time to do a military duty. We all thought that somebody must have done it on spite, perhaps because of one of his court cases or something of the kind. Anyhow, my father went to his place of duty that was close to the Italian border at Nova Gorica in Slovenia.

His first problem came when they couldn't find a proper uniform for him as he weighed close to 125 kilos and had a chest of double the width of a normal man's. The second problem were the boots as he needed a special large size so in the end my father did his two months of army service in his civilian clothes and shoes combined with those parts of army outfit that suited him such as the belt and the cap only. It was a totally outrageous outfit as I remembered from a snapshot I had seen. Father's duty consisted of picking up the mail and any other errand for those serving at the border. He had to walk about 35 kilometres every day and in any kind of weather, up and down the hills, but he was busy and happy and fit as if he was spending one of his mountaineering holidays. My father had a healthy appetite, he ate for two at least and he slept soundly for eight hours and then started on his walk again.

As the sun was rising on this Friday, May 25, it was ten days after my surrender but I was still a long way from home. We may have marched something over 200 kilometres by now,

and without any proper food let alone the treatment one could expect under the Geneva Convention for Prisoners of War. Nobody bothered about us, officers were kept among the enlisted men and there was no record of checking of our names or numbers. We were outcasts and undesirables as long as we were alive. We would be rather uncomfortable to any regime in Yugoslavia considering the fact that we all could be eyewitnesses to what had happened in the past ten days. As a martyr one would have lost one's own life and not be able to remember anything for the future.

It therefore stood to reason that any regime would do everything in suppressing any memories or records to what had happened during the first weeks after the war was over and the peace returned to this tortured country. These considerations had taken over all my thoughts and I kept reciting the verses of the poem "The Traveller" over and over again. Sometimes, Beethoven's March Funeral would be playing in my mind until it came to one of our brief stops with a short sleep and we were on the march again. At some point we crossed a railway line south of a place Kutina.

The light was getting dull, clouds were closing up in the sky and we hoped for rain. For a while I amused myself thinking what it would be like walking in the rain, in wet clothes and wading through the mud. It would be warm enough, I felt, and the rain would wash off some of that dirt that had accumulated on each one of us. It would quench our thirst a little too. Incredible that one could get so thirsty. The thirst was really the worst of discomforts tormenting us so we used all or any trick just to feel some moisture on lips and tongue. The best was to keep a towel or similar cloth handy to dip into any pool or puddle that came our way and then to suck on it. As we used this same cloth for wiping our faces from sweat and dust the sucking was accompanied by a taste of clay or even grit between ones teeth.

It made me remember a summer holiday we had spent on Velebit Mountain in 1939. We stayed at a tourist house just below the summit called "Kubus" on the road from Ostarije to Karlobag on the northern coast of Primorje. This road was very dangerous due to frequent narrow turns and the steep incline. When the bura was blowing, that is an ominous north wind, there was no traffic on the road and we had to stay near the house for safety too. We would fish for river crabs that were great fun unless one got caught in a bear thicket. A primordial forest stretched down from the road towards Ostarije and long walks in that direction were pleasant as well as the other along the Velebit summit and on the seaward side that were very tiring and tedious. Velebit is a typical limestone formation dropping sharply for nearly 1000 meters to the Adriatic Sea, just a barren rock of Karsts.

My father and his friends were eager to explore the secrets of the numerous small valleys that to me looked more like funnels and if there is some entrance into caves or grottos. It was very, very hot up there and it was difficult to estimate the distances properly as all the rocks looked always the same. Consequently, we often walked for two or three hours when we had expected it to be no more than an hour or so. We therefore kept a donkey with us carrying water and other supplies for our group. The donkey became a dear friend to me because he seemed to know better than anyone where to find a hidden water hole or when to turn in the direction of home if it got too much for him. I really liked that donkey in spite of the fact that he was called "Zvonko" too, just as I was. He always replied by whinnying when he was called in the morning for starting off with our group but he did the same when he wanted to go home or felt annoyed with us. I used to stick close to him on these walks letting him pull me along at his leisurely but sure pace over those treacherous rocks.

Now, so many years later, I was longing for my donkey friend to guide me along this dreadful path. But there was no Zvonko, the donkey, with a barrel of lukewarm rainwater I hadn't liked so many six years ago but now I would drink like manna. For a moment this dream was so real that I turned and pulled at Vet's arm before I realized that I was only daydreaming. I called myself a fool for letting my thoughts run wild simply because of a memory. Oh, Zvonko, my donkey friend, where are you now? Are you alive and where would you lead us? To a hidden cave with a steep and narrow entrance with a cool place at the bottom where one could rest and wash in a Karsts pool, drink the refreshing water and forget all our weariness and sorrow.

It did start raining then, though it was more like drizzle as we were walking through Banova Jaruga, an important junction on the river Pakra that was coming down from the Ravna Gora and the Psunj Mountains. Soon we realized that we were heading north until the head of our convoy turned eastwards at Medjuric following the railway track and the Pakra River. When the afternoon draw closer it was still raining and soon we were soaking wet. Only for our bare soles the cooling effect felt fine of the wet mud on road.

Now it wasn't thirst that tormented me but the hunger, a ravenous hunger. I countered it by chewing on my bacon rind but I knew that it was only a placebo. Fatigue and lack of food slowed us down and we made very little progress. Nobody noticed that our guards changed at some time as everyone was concerned with the idea of survival only, the need to keep in line and close to the others and the constant endeavour to fight ones own hunger and thirst. We didn't even take any notice when one of us stepped out or didn't get up after a stop off, as we had to move - move inexorably forward.

We were still headed in the direction of our homes and I was beginning to think of Osijek. It was still quite far away - would I be able to make it? Would we go there even? God Almighty, this hunger was turning my insides upside down! If only I had something to eat or at least to chew or suck on! Come on, Zvonko, look for some kind of root, an onion or a beet root, a head of lettuce even anything. I started talking to myself trying to give myself some courage. And as we came through the village of Gaj I was lucky. I found a kind of vegetable or root that was quite tasty. I offered some of it to Vet who took it with a grimace after I had convinced him that this was better than nothing at all.

It was getting darker and for sure there were some prisoners from villages on our way but none dared to sneak away or to ask for help. I don't remember whether we even saw any villagers for after a short while we were ordered to start walking again. As we trudged along I started thinking back into my childhood trying to remember whether I had ever felt so hungry before.

It could only be that one time when, at the age of twelve, I was accompanying my father on a trip to the Velika near the peak of the Papuk Mountain. We spent the night at a simple guesthouse in Slavenska Pozega where we had arrived by train from Osijek. The next day, at about 11 a.m., the opening of another guesthouse of the Alpine Society of Pozega was to take place. My father being president of the Society in Osijek had been asked to give a speech and therefore wanted to be there well in time. So we rose at four o'clock in the morning - a ghastly hour for any child - and without breakfast started on our way up the mountain. It was still dark and I remember crying quietly to myself because I felt so hungry and miserable.

When dawn came and then daylight we were walking along an earth beaten track, up and down and seemingly never ending. Sometime my father felt that we were not making enough progress and would then start on a shortcut, usually a steep and narrow trail up the mountain that was bound to make me even more miserable and despairing. To make it worse, my father seemed to have lost the right direction because we suddenly found ourselves facing a clearance with the rock face of a quarry just behind which he wanted to make the by-pass using a steep path instead of the road which was leading slightly down.

I lost control and started crying in earnest and demanding some food so that in the end somebody took pity on me and stayed behind with me to give me something to eat. After I had eaten my saviours returned to the road and soon I found myself among other people going to the opening of a new guesthouse. Some were going in carts and as luck would have it, I found a seat on one of them. Soon I arrived at the guesthouse and was shown to the room reserved for my father. Father himself just managed to come in time for his speech and I only saw him after the ceremony was over. We never talked about this morning afterwards but I vividly remembered it now, especially the gnawing hunger and the exhaustion I felt. If only I were a boy again and some kind farmer would give me a lift on his cart!

Our next rest was extended but after it we were forced to make our way along a narrow road meandering through the thick forest for several kilometres. It seemed to be an earth beaten side road as its surface was somehow soft and slippery wetted by some rain or drizzle that accompanied us for hours now. I couldn't feel the road surface any more probably because my soles were dumb of sore so I had lost all the feeling of my legs except for the sense of walking. We had been marching now for more than 24 hours and yet we didn't know where we were going to and when this torture would end. I do not remember much about that second night except that it was wet and chilly. The prisoners marched in a non-real, aerie silence as nobody dared or just couldn't spoke aloud at all. I kept a close contact to Vet but hardly exchanged a single whisper with him for hours that passed without noticing time as such at all. At dawn we were descending again and soon approached what seemed to be a main road. It turned out to be the important road that transverses Slavonia from Okucani at the south to the town of Virovitica at the north via Pakrac and Daruvar. In the later place there was a well-known spa centre too.

Obviously our column had been led on a detour in order not to pass through Lipik and Pakrac during night. The main road at first went downhill after we had crumbled uphill all the night but soon started again to ascend after Badljevina. After Podborski Doljani I was afraid that I would never make that steep approach to Daruvar seeing in front that long column of prisoners who were helping each other to walk the ascending at a very snail's pace. Almighty God, what an ordeal it was for these exhausted and tired out prisoners who had been marching without food or proper rest for over 30 hours in that they marched more than ninety kilometres by now.

Slowly, oh, so very slowly we made our way up that road, some crawling on their hands and knees, some staggering from hunger and fatigue, others were falling from the sheer exhaustion. But they got up again and we all crawled, slid, fell and dragged ourselves up that hill. For all it seemed an eternity until we reached the meadow just below the first houses of the town of Daruvar. Hundreds of former soldiers fell into the wet green grass, soaked by the rain that had been falling all night. It didn't matter! Nothing mattered but to have a little peace and to rest for a while.

Suddenly all hell broke loose as we heard shouting and cursing as shrill women's voices reached us even before the women came down on the prisoners like an avalanche. They broke the ranks of tired sentries with such fury that not one of them dared to rise his rifle for a warning shot. We were frozen with fear until we heard what the women were shouting: "We have fed you partisans. Now we want to feed our sons and husbands, our relatives or just anyone that is dear to us. Get out of the way or we will kill you!"

The women of Daruvar were determined to help our sorry group. They were even joined in their effort by the town's Women's Antifascist organization that was rather incredible. They felt it to be in their right. They had fed and helped the partisans in the past, now it was time to help their own kin. They did it with such fervour and most probably saved the lives of many of us prisoners of war. For me, it was like a miracle when I was given a bowl of hot potato soup and a large chunk of bread that I ate very slowly savouring each bit of bread, each mouthful of the delicious warm soup. Suddenly I realized that I was eating my first proper meal since I had become a prisoner of war and it felt like a feast on this Saturday, May 26, 1945.



Prisoners of War gathered to an amorphous mass prior to continue their march.

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