

## 21. AT LAST IN OSIJEK

Friday, June 2, 1945

The last day of May was mild and pleasant particularly at mid morning when we arrived to Virovitica. We did not get to the town's centre because our guards told us to stop at a small empty plot next to the main road right that runs parallel to Drava River. Six weeks ago we had been marching west on this same road after we had crossed the Bilogora hills for that terrible battle in the night of April 28th. I was reminded of all my fears and anxieties of that night as I sat there on the ground cutting up the white trousers I'd been given by the old woman.

It was good linen but wouldn't really do as wrappings for my feet so I used some bits of sacking I had and the woollen socks making a sort of a cushion under my soles and then wrapped it tight with the linen strips. I would have preferred wire or some elastic band but beggars cannot be choosing, so I made do with what I had in the way of footwear. I was so absorbed in my work that I nearly jumped when I heard suddenly somebody's call: "Peggy, Peggy, is it you from Osijek? Peggy, please come here! Don't worry, come, I know you from the school in Tvrđja."

When I looked up I saw a young woman wearing a partisan cap with the red star over her long hair falling down below it. She also wore a blue blouse with some sort of army insignia and just I simply couldn't believe that somebody would know me in Virovitica. Was this a trap? I got up and walked over to the girl whom I seemed to know from somewhere. Who is that slim figure, that long reddish hair and those smiling big eyes, I wondered? Then it came to me: she was one of the girls I had met at the few dances we had shared in dancing school and later she had come there when I was playing somewhere with the band. She had been known to be a "Red" and I had lost track of her when our boys' class was moved out of the old school in Tvrđja to another building in Lower Town of Osijek. She must have joined the partisans some time ago, as she wouldn't have that uniform, I thought. Few moments later she told me that she is a politic commissar or a "politico" now and she had been looking for relatives or friends among the prisoners.

"You don't look too well, Peggy, but cheer up, all will turn for the better soon. I wish I could take you out of this group but that I cannot do after all. Tell me if there is anything else I can do for you or your friends?"

I looked at her and realized she meant what she said. "Do you know where we shall be going?" I asked her. "Are we walking in the direction of Osijek?"

"They're changing your guards here and the new orders haven't come in yet. But probably you'll go back to your military districts and be released there provided you're not a war criminal."

This constant talk of a war criminal made me angry. - "Look, I'm certainly not a criminal whatsoever nor are the others. But what's happening to us is far from anything agreed upon in the Convention about for the treatment of Prisoners of war." - This made her smile unpromisingly and she replied: "Don't forget how the partisans were treated in their long fight for freedom."

I felt that she was patronizing me and therefore replied somewhat heatedly: "Listen, my dear, the war is over and I think it's about time we all started how to live and rebuild but not to think about how to revenge all that's happened on to each other. Thanks for offering me your help but if you've just called me over to give me yet another lecture on war criminals and repression, I think I should better go back and finish my footgear. It's a long way home and I've lost my boots to one of your comrades."

As soon as I'd said this, I wondered whether it was wise at all but the girl didn't seem to be a died-in-the-wool party member because she said: "Peggy, you're being stupid. I do want to help you. Here, take something to eat. Sure, you can take it from me. And do try to get back to Osijek. I'd try and pass on the message that you and your friends are on the way." She had pressed a bundle with food into my hand and thanking her I asked: "Do you think you could find me some sort of shoes or boots?"

She turned without a word as one of the soldiers had called out to her. Probably she had been talking too long as a politico with a prisoner. I took the bundle and went back to my group. When we opened it later we saw that it contained a large crust of white bread and some bacon cut into square pieces. To my dismay I found out that I couldn't chew the bacon any more because my teeth were too weak for it. I then started, very much like an old toothless grandfather, to munch on the bread first keeping the bacon in my mouth till the saliva had softened it.

Vet, who not only shared the food with me but also the tooth problem, explained to me that this weakness was a result of malnutrition and strain but mainly of the lack of vitamins. We might well lose all our teeth unless we would be given some proper food soon. As for now our living conditions didn't change except for the fact that the guards were more decent and humane during our march eastwards.

They were elderly men and as it turned out, they had been with the partisans more or less from the beginning. They had suffered a great deal during the times when they had to hide, march long distances in cold and bitter weather and they knew what it meant to have to struggle for survival. They helped us as best they could and the simple fact that this was done gave us encouragement and the necessary support to continue on our walk home. We were still the same small group of former officers with six sentries and when we passed by Suhopolje, with longing I thought of the large farm where the battery had such pleasant quarters not so long ago.

Our guards wouldn't permit us to leave the road but did not interfere when we were given food or drink by anyone friendly enough whom we met on our long march. One of the soldiers used to speed us up when we were approaching a smaller settlement to arrange with the good willing people there to hand us any supplies. They had put up what ever they had available at a certain place that was mostly a little out of the settlement. When we arrived there we would be allowed a longer rest but in turn we had to march longer afterwards to make up for the time.

In the course of our march we learned why the guards wouldn't stop at the centre of a town: it was mostly at this place where the political and military command posts were stationed. They did not want to have any problems with politicos or officers keeping to the given time schedule as far as likely. They also intended to remain with us for as long as possible because they hoped to visit their families living somewhere south of the Sava

River from this route. All of them were from northern Bosnia and were either Serbs or Muslims so they all had good reasons to hate the Germans or the Ustasas.

It was dark, perhaps near midnight, when we reached Podravska Slatina after a march of some 30 kilometres. We hoped that we would stop there for a while and to carry on to Nasice the next morning. But not - our guards rushed us through the town and when we turned to the left road on reaching the centre.

"Where are we going, and what's the hurry?" we asked. We were told to shut up and keep walking fast. As soon as we were out of Slatina the guards turned us into a grove just off the road where we were allowed to rest. We were so exhausted after that hasty march so we didn't notice that some of the sentries had left us. To our surprise they came back after a while with bread and milk for us. One of them even had some sacking for me and he apologized that it wasn't proper footwear, which he hadn't been able to find now. He promised he would be looking for a piece of rubber tire to make an opanak for me. Then he explained they had to rush us through Slatina for fear of being detained there as they were in a hurry to get us as far as possible to Osijek. In doing this they hoped to get in Osijek a better chance to visit their families near Vinkovci and Zupanja before they had return to the unit they left back in Virovitica.

A little before dawn we started marching again and before long we passed through village Senkovac and later Cadjavica with the objective to reach Donji Miholjac by daytime. It meant for us to cover a distance of some 40 kilometres but as one of the soldiers knew the road well it was hoped that we would succeed. The villages in this part of Slavonia lie further apart and we had to walk for about two hours to get a place where some food and drink was waiting for us and we could have a rest. Under normal circumstances this wouldn't seem too much of a walk but our strength had been taxed to its physical limit and we stumbled along in helping each other in moments of weakness as best we could.

Still, we made quite a good progress and, unbelievable though it seems today and after all we had been through, thanks to our guards who helped us by supporting those who were the weakest and encouraging the rest to keep on walking. They even went so far as to apologize for the ordeal they had to put us through in such a heat. I was wondering about these old partisans and asking myself if they would act like this if one of us had been a direct adversary at one time of war or an another one. After all these men had been suffering hardships and misery themselves. I managed to start a conversation with the man who had brought me the sacking for my feet. I learned that all the men from his village in Bosnia had to run from the Germans and the Ustasas, hiding in the woods and joining the partisans after their families had been driven out of their homes and houses been set on fire. He didn't know where his family was now or whether they were still alive because he had been fighting all over Bosnia and Dalmatia.

"That's a relief for me" I said and continued: "Because I've never been fighting in Bosnia, and I was worrying that I might have shot at you."

"Don't worry about it, son. Because you could be my son, you know. If you had to shoot at us it was because of the war. It's our fate that we had to shoot at each other - all men from the same country. But the war is over now and we have to help each other to return to our homes - if they're still standing. We must join our families and friends and build up again what the war has destroyed. We must trust each other now so that we can live in peace.

Now come on son. You better watch your feet and the wrappings or you won't make it home."

And so we walked and walked stopping at places prearranged by one of the guards and resting there for a while to march on again. We were all so exhausted so we simply tottered along putting one foot in front of the other, step for step, not seeing or trying to understand what was going on around us. Even when we rested we did everything in a sort of trance losing touch with our surroundings and our companions. We had all become uncommunicative, lost in our own thoughts and feelings.

Around lunchtime, we passed through Moslavina village and saw the Drava riverbed close to the road, just a small backwater with the typical reeds, shrubbery and osiers. Places began to look familiar to me as we entered Donji Miholjac at mid-afternoon on Friday, June 1, 1945. We were led to a small mansion with a large garden and a yard that was filled with a convoy of soldiers who watched our arrival with great interest. Our group sat down under a large chestnut tree enjoying the shade and the soft grass underneath.

We were completely tired out and hoped for some peace and quietness, but it didn't take long for the first soldiers to come and start prodding us to get up for some "exchange". They looked haggard and badly dressed, having a darker complexion than the people had from the northern parts of Yugoslavia. I couldn't understand what they were saying and assumed that they came from Macedonia or even Albania, certainly from the farthest southeast of Yugoslavia. They certainly had nothing to do with developments in Croatia at all. They behaved rather arrogantly as being the victors and rudely pushed through our small group, very much like scavengers after an easy prey. Starting with prisoners at the outside of our group they worked their way in disappointed at the scant findings and forced us to stand up. Soon a proper search had started and we were robbed of the very few things we still possessed.



***The sentries force an "exchange" taking personal goods from the Prisoners of War.***

I was prodded and fingered by pockmarked, ill looking soldiers with gaps in teeth, who pointed an old rifle at me. I was so infuriated that I started cursing in the worst language I knew having lost all the fear and not really caring what would happen to me. I wanted it to end and to finish it quickly. The soldier was so startled by my outburst that he contented himself by rummaging through my rucksack. I took it from him, turned it upside down and spilled at its contents on the ground. There was a rather dirty dishcloth used for wrapping

food that was empty now, a few strips of cloth and the clasp knife that rolled under a bunch of grass. This movement attracted his attention and he jumped for it like a cat quickly pocketing it but left me in peace after that.

"Leave the prisoners alone! Off with you base at the instant! These are officers, you scum of the world!" - It was an order the scavengers understood and they obeyed immediately by withdrawing like dogs with their tails between the legs. But it came too late for all of us had been harassed one way or the other. A group of men came towards us led by a politico what we could observe from his insignia. He addressed us but we paid very little attention to what he was saying because we busied ourselves to pack up our meagre belongings. Probably he gave us the same speech as the others had done before but he also promised that we would get something to eat before proceeding on to Osijek. There we would be placed into a reeducation camp for the former enemy officers.

The food we received consisted of thin soup and one piece of old bread, which was so hard one could eat it only after soaking it in the soup. My teeth were very much aching and I could feel them moving in my gums. My tongue felt swollen and sensitive to the touch as I pressed it gently against my teeth just to check if they were moving.

When the night came we settled down to sleep in our usual "compartment" fashion. From time to time we had a few curious visitors who wanted to see what enemy officers look like as prisoners but we were not troubled any more.

We slept for what to us seemed a long time when shortly before dawn we were rudely awakened by a number of soldiers who told us to get up and move on. Our guards had been changed and there were more in number than before, all younger and probably recruited after the new Yugoslav army had liberated their villages. They came from Serbia and hadn't been with the army for more than six months.

We started out at a brisk pace with only short stops. I had hardly enough time to fix my foot wrappings and was soon walking on bare feet having lost most of my footgear by the time we passed through Crnkovci early in the morning. From there to Valpovo were about 11 kilometres, the region I knew well from earlier visit on a school excursion to the wood mills and tanning factory of the Guttmann's family at Belisce.

The Guttmanns were rich entrepreneurs and had their own private railway - the Slavonia Podravska railway lines. Their centre was at Belisce that was quite near Valpovo but I recalled that the Nazis must have displaced the Guttmann's family or they fled before Nazis came for them. Their lawyer and tax expert had been my father's close friend and so I visited on several occasions the Guttmann's mansion in company of my cousin where we been treated royally. One of the Guttmann's daughters had been of our age and had taken us for long rides in her pony cart all over the estate or let us even riding on one of the few ponies they kept for that purpose. As I marched along the dusty road now I realized with a shock that those days were gone forever. None of the glories of my childhood days would return - there were memories only now. A deep sorrow spread in my thoughts to that nearly succumbed was it not for the rudimentary instinct for survival.

We stopped for a slightly longer rest near the exit of Valpovo where the Karasica flows by. Oh dear God, thanks for the memories this river brought on and the source of which lay near my grandfather's fisheries at Nasicka Breznica. I remembered so well where this river left the last sluice at the far end of the last of fishery ponds. This sluice was important as it

regulated the water level in the ponds and prevented floods when the Drava had high water and the Karasica had the tendency to flow "uphill". My father used to row us out in his heavy boat carrying mother, my sister, our dog and myself to where Karasica merges into the Drava. Sometimes we even had a party and took our picnic arrays to the one of comfortable sandbars and many were there in summer times. I had been riding my bicycle on that same road on that I was marching on so wearily now.

From Valpovo one approached Osijek from the west arriving first to the suburb called Retfala. The distance of about 35 kilometres was just a right one for a weekend bicycle trip but now I had none and we were walking and resting for a few minutes to continue to march on and on. The only good thing was that there were occasional benefactors waiting for us by the road curb to present something to eat and drink to us at the brink of final collapse. The guards were grateful for these interruptions too so we were in particular. My only trouble was that I couldn't chew any hard food and therefore prayed for milk and cheese to be offered for me. One woman gave me a shabby scarf that I tore into two and used for wrapping my feet. This wrapping lasted for a while but at Josipovac already I was back on my bare soles. We were all desperately tired and obsessed by the idea to reach home at any cost so we forgot all our fatigue when we finally reached Retfala after that anxious march of nearly 50 kilometres.

It was afternoon when our group staggered along the main road lined by many people hoping to see somebody's father or son or relative arriving back home. The guards had their hands full to keep these people away from us as we dragged ourselves on by helping and pushing each other forward. We were close to the Pejacevic's mansion just at the City's outskirts that had a generous stretch of gardens and fields where once I had seen the first airplane to land. Oh, it was so long, long ago, I thought, seeing the hangar of local flying club next to which stood the big boathouse where my father kept his boat and was the president of the Rowing Club too. This so many, many years before the war started.

"Oh, God Almighty, is this you, Doctor Paser?" - A woman's voice cut shrilly into the quiet afternoon. - "Who else is with you, doctor?" asked the same voice. One of the guards tried to push the woman away but she followed us until we turned right onto another street leading towards the Upper Town's centre. That woman was a client of Dr. Paser who managed somehow to convey a message to her that she should inform his family and mine of our arrival. She rushed quickly away while we marched on continuing in the direction of the main railway station.

I hardly saw where we were going as all my senses were tuned to my feet now bare again and hurting terribly. As long as there was a paved or smooth road surface I could just slide along but there were some rough stretches that were hurting like hell. However, I noticed when we passed the nearby main cemetery and went by the match factory to come to the main square, which I had crossed so often on my way to the battery command not so long ago. When had that been? Not more than seven weeks ago though it seemed more like the eternity. Nothing had changed here except that there were more people, carts, other kind of soldiers and our sad little group passing through it all. Even our guards got tired after this long march and were eager to get rid of us soonest.

On the square we turned slightly right into the road leading to Vinkovci and soon came to the railway crossings of it, from where one could enter into the railway compounds from the West Side. Just as we crossed the narrow tracks of Guttman's railway line, the guards took lead us across the general railway tracks and along them into the main

compound. Walking through this compound almost killed me! I felt every single stone of the gravel lining as my soles cried out for mercy. I was limping, sweating and cursing my way using the last of my willpower for every step I had to make. This walk was just a sheer torture for everybody. I did not bother to look whether a train was coming as we walked along the compound's south side. I don't remember how long it took to walk over the black cinder that was spread covering grounds here. I was aware of that the cinder wore off the skin of my soles even faster.

All my attention was turned on my feet trying to avoid any sharp stone or other object when ever possible. We passed the locomotive sheds and came out at the compound's East End to cross there the road leading to the New Town with the silk factory on our right. Further down that road was a large public park, which I knew well, and just opposite the silk factory lay a football field to which we were led to as the last. When the guards told us to stop here we just dropped to the ground as if cut down by a scythe. We returned home at last! We were back home but wrecked in body and soul. My mind was still functioning but the tiredness took over and wrapped me into a sort of dozing after that over exhaustive march. I found a stretch on grassy ground I lay down and dozing off instantly.

Suddenly, as if from far away, I heard somebody calling my name. A hand was pulling me by the arm and gently shaking me and very slowly I came to. I saw that the sentries had some difficulties keeping people away from the approach to the football field. I focused on the one person who was waving to me I realized that it was my mother. She cried out loud: "Zvonko! Zvonko, please do come here! Zvonko!" - Mother called on again and again.

With considerable strain I called back: "Don't come closer! Please don't try to come in. Please! They'll shoot you without warning. Stop where you are!" - I was shouting as loudly as I could but my voice was too faint over the general din. I tried to get on my feet but I could not collapse whenever I tried to stand on my feet. I had no feeling in them at all. I even couldn't feel my soles or my toes.

So, I started to crawl on my hands and knees to where the people were standing and where I could see my mother blurred by the tears running down my cheeks. Suddenly I was crying uncontrollably my mind playing the trick on me. In my imagination I was a baby and crawling to my mother over the soft carpet in our living room. I was home!

I will forever bless the sentry who allowed my mother to nurse me and cuddle me when I finally reached her at the corner post. She had a thermos with hot soup and I drank it quickly as if it was the last thing I would ever get. Mother tried to slow me down but this warm liquid made and given by my mother seemed like a lifeline to force into me. I told her that I could not chew very well because my teeth were wobbly and wanted to show it to her but she stopped me: "Don't touch your gums with those dirty fingers!"

I just had to smile at this as if dirty fingers really would matter any more? Then I asked her if she could bring me a pair of my father's sandals. His feet were larger than mine were but with the swellings I had, so I felt that his sandals would be just the right things for me. Then I saw my sister arriving wearing a nurse's badge and a Red Cross band around her arm. She was working as a volunteer at the army hospital and had come out as soon as she heard of my arrival. My sister was three years younger than I but her youth and appearance must have impressed the sentry because he allowed her in as well.

By now many of the others had joined their dearest in our group as well and it was quite a problem for the guard to watch all this. He became more and more nervous and started to shout and to push people back out. I was a hard thing to do to separate the prisoners and their relatives. It took him a lot of persuasion and some shoving and pushing to finally have our group left alone in the football field as the sun set down on June 2, 1945.

I slowly crept back to the goal gate where Vet had prepared our bedding for this first night back home. It was seven weeks after I had left my own bed just few blocks away. Now, it wasn't a bed I was to sleep on but the hard ground of a football field on that mild evening so it wouldn't be cold to sleep in the open. I took the box my sister had handed me over advising to start taking the pills immediately. It was a 500-pill package of "Calcipot D" that was a vitamin compound sent by my uncle Milan, who had given me the red handkerchief for making a red star in case of a chance to defect to the partisans.

I had not deserted the Croatian army but I had surrendered to the new Yugoslav army. Now, look at me and see what a Prisoner of War looks like after 17 days in captivity and a march of 510 kilometres, nearly all of which I had walked without shoes. But did it matter now that I was back at home. Now that the war was over and in Osijek the peace was back too. Peace so longed for and almost forgotten. Suck your Calcipot, Suckling! Prepare yourself for the next day! Who knows what it will bring?

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