

22. IN PRISON OF OSIJEK ON MY 20TH BIRTHDAY

Monday, June 12, 1945

It was one of the mornings when I returned from the food distribution with a bowl of hot soup made of brown bread and another piece of bread in my hand. This was one of the two meals we were given in the prison of Sremska Mitrovica. This prison had a sort of reputation as a place for political prisoners during times of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Many of the prisoners were members of the Communist Party though the prison was originally intended for regular criminals.

I had a cell to myself on the ground floor the door of which was never been locked. It was not in the main prison's building itself but in one of the outer blocks that looked more like barracks. There was no furniture in my cell and I had to sleep on the floor planks onto that I had spread some hay topping up with a new blanket I got as for my bed. By dipping my bread into the soup I extending my breakfast into a real meal and thus prolonged the pleasure of eating. Well, I thought, a birthday in prison! That's a first time for me, too. But never mind for the place - the main thing is to be alive. Your teeth are feeling better and you are getting stronger now that you have some regular food and time for rest.

Still my only worries were my soles, the skin of which was very tender and sore even now. My many blisters had broken open and I had the strange sensation of constantly wet socks. I had no ointment and salve to treat the blisters but decided to look at them regularly to see if I could do to avoid infection. Perhaps I would be able to persuade the prison medic to let me stay a few days longer until my blisters had dried up completely. My wounded soles had been the main reason for leaving me behind when the others from the group of former officers who had been ordered to walk on to Ruma and Novi Sad, I was told the day they left. They had gathered on orders issued by the prison command and several guard strong group accompanied the few hundreds of prisoners of war to march further on.

We had travelled by train from Osijek to Sremska Mitrovica squeezed into a cattle wagon at the railway station of Donji Grad. My present situation could be called safe and even comfortable to a certain extend compared to all that had happened to me before. Only a week ago it hadn't been like this at all.

After the night on the football field we received a steady run of visitors all through the following Sunday morning. Though the guards tried to keep them away from us we somehow managed to get the things that had been brought for us: food, clothing and footwear. I received my father's sandals, some woollen socks and a pair of old trousers, a shirt with long sleeves, an old sweater and a towel. My rucksack remained pretty empty still as I threw out all the old dirty stuff that I had been carrying with me before. I was able to walk about slowly and without too much pain with feet covered by thick socks and in sandals using the walking stick my sister had brought me too.

Some time during that Sunday morning the order came to get moving and we marched followed by a crowd of relatives and onlookers down the Vukovarska Street and to the Lower Town of Osijek. We had not been told where we were going and this made our followers rather nervous so they started arguing with the sentries. When we passed the

railway station at the Lower Town, the sugar refinery and the burned out oil refinery we were led finally into a large compound next to the Kolar's brickyard.

I knew this place quite well because we had visited it on school excursions and because Mr. Kolar was my father's client too. Behind the compound yard started the forest that spread along and next to the Drava's wide riverbed. We were to rest in this big yard that was fully fenced in and had soft, grassy ground with some white poplars and a few mulberry trees providing a pleasant shade. We were not the only ones in that yard as there were quite a number of other POWs, soldiers and officers and they seemed to have found some sort of routine already. Soon we were issued soup and bread from a kitchen that was part of the factory.

We heard a new kind of marching music from the loudspeakers of the office block. There were some songs about partisans' fights and sacrifices or similar events under Tito's leadership. From time to time this racket was interrupted by some orders or what sounded like a speech. There was a constant coming and going around the place of rest as if some groups were leaving or other arriving, but I didn't pay much attention to what went on around me. My main concern was to treat the wounds on my soles with the small medical kit my sister had been able to bring me. I was beginning to feel more confident that I would survive after all and that the worst was over but still worried a great deal about what lay ahead of us.

Two days passed without any particular events except that some prisoners were taken to the office for interrogation and some of them didn't return from there after. Groups were constantly forming and reforming but we were left alone in our corner of the yard. One late morning I thought I heard my name being called from the loudspeaker. When this was confirmed by some of my mates I started walking like "on eggs" with my badly swollen feet in the direction of the office building.

"Stop! Where are you going, comrade?" - A sentry near the office entrance stopped me asking where I'm going. I told him that my name had been called on the loudspeaker and he ordered me to sit down and wait until he comes back. I didn't have to wait long but saw a few other prisoners coming out of the door and being led by few soldiers to another way. The sentry returned and ordered me to follow him to a door on the ground floor, which he opened and then gently pushed me through.

I remembered the room from a previous visit with my father and this time I was facing an officer with his back to the window. His face was in the shadow but I could recognize his politico's insignia. He addressed me by asking: "Are you, comrade, Zvonko, an officer stationed with an Ustasa unit here in Osijek?"

"Yes, this is my name but I was not with an Ustasa unit. I was a Domobran lieutenant junior with the First Howitzer Battery stationed in Osijek from 28 December 1944 until 13 April 1945."

"You were an Ustasa! I know it and there are witnesses to prove this" said energetically my examiner.

I replied determinately: "I am telling you, I was with a Domobran unit, the First Battery and I can bring witnesses too, if you will let me."

After a pause he said: "So you were a Domobran, comrade, but you were still fighting the partisans and the People's Army, is it no?"

"That's correct, comrade politico. I was an officer with an artillery unit fighting against the People's Army."

The interrogator looked at me puzzled but with some interest. "How strange that you're telling me you've been fighting the People's Army when all the other Domobrants have tried their best to convince me that they had been in the rear with a supply unit or in the administration. You are the first to admit having been in a fighting unit. Well, you can go back to your group. Wait! What's the matter with your feet?"

"That's loser's luck, comrade politico. I had to walk on bare feet from Dravograd to Osijek in about two and a half weeks."

"As soon as you reach your place of reeducation you should see that you get some medical care. Reeducation should enable you to become an officer in the People's Army. Go now! Zdravo!"

As I was slowly walking back to my group I wondered what this conversation had been for but couldn't find any explanation except possibly that somebody had wanted to find out whether I had returned to Osijek. My friends in the group had worried about it, too, fearing that I might not come back as they had heard about some of the prisoners that were led away after the interrogation. The afternoon gave us the opportunity to find water and to wash off the worst of dust and dirt that caked on us. The most difficult of course were hair and beard, which had become a matted mess. And of course, we all had lice and other lovely bugs so if one had a little bit of time one started immediately to hunt for these nice little animals which were pestering us.

On Thursday, after our morning meal, we were ordered to line up in fours. My soles were still hurting me, blood had congealed under the skin and most of the blisters were filled with liquid. I didn't dare to open them for the fear of infection. On our way out some of us managed to send a message home that we were leaving. The distance from the yard to the railway station of Lower Town was rather short. Thanks to God, I managed to hobble along by supporting myself on my walking stick. At the station we were herded into boxed up cattle wagons, about 50 of us per wagon. It was a new experience for us but hopefully better than marching another hundred kilometres or more. The doors were slammed shut and we arranged ourselves on the hard floor as best we could. The heat and resulting perspiration from all these bodies made the trip less comfortable than it could have been.

Early in November 1943 it had all started in a cattle wagon too when a German unit had rounded us up after evening-call in our barracks in Zagreb. Normally, we spent the night with relatives but not this time as we were pushed into the same type of wagon for a journey that lasted for four nights and three days. That journey was more comfortable, it must be said, because we were only 25 men to the wagon and we had benches to sit on. It was rather cold on that past journey compared to the riding in a cattle wagon rather warm and sticky now. Our train started moving late afternoon and went on travelling all the night with a few stops only. Those close to the tiny windows near the roof of the car were able to check the station names. Sometime in the night we rolled through Vinkovci railway station to roll on through the warm night. I was wondering where they would be taking us. Would it be to the Reeducation? It seemed to be a silly thing for men who had gone

through so much and not just for themselves but in defence of their country. Ah, well, there wasn't anything I could do about but wait and see.

Sitting in front of my cell in a barrack and after I finished my morning meal there was plenty of time to contemplate. I was thinking of all what it happened to me and gratefully acknowledged that life looked much better today than it been the day we arrived at Sremska Mitrovica. The train had taken us right into the prison compound as there was a railway track leading straight from the station here. When we disembarked from the wagons one distributed a soup and bread to the rather weary travellers. Later on this afternoon the loudspeakers announced that anyone feeling sick or in need of medical care should report at the command post taking all belongings with him.

It wasn't an easy making the decision to leave the safety of the group and to venture out on one's own. I did not have much of a choice if I wanted to take care of my injured feet. After saying good-bye to my friends I hobbled over to the command post to find there the Red Cross man whom, after a brief examination of my feet, sent me over to the cell I was occupying now. I felt my strength returning and started thinking about how to prolong my stay in the comfort of a single cell before reporting to be ready for that indefinite business of reeducation wherever it might be taking place.

"Comrade Zvonko from Osijek report to command instantly," the loudspeaker blared out. The order was repeated several times while I was packing my rucksack. One never left one's own things behind whenever one went to some other place.

When I came close to the command post I simply couldn't believe my eyes seeing my father standing there. I saw him for the first time after almost two months and noticed that he had aged or was it the worrying about me that made him look older and distressed? He came to me and embracing me with his strong bear's hug nearly lifted me off the ground. "Son, Zvonko, my son, it is good to see you at last. Happy birthday to you! You're coming home with me, you just have to go in and see the commander."

At this point I stood like rooted to the ground. I simply couldn't believe what I had heard but father gently pushed me into the camp command office. The officer there was signing an order, which he then handed to a soldier, a young man of about my age. He was to accompany me back to Osijek and we would be going by train the same way I had come only a week ago. Everything has happened so fast that I couldn't comprehend it all.

Father put his arm around my waist and almost carried me most of the way from the prison to Mitrovica town where he stopped in front of a house as a lady came out from the front door of it. It was the wife of the German veterinary who had stayed at my parents' house for several months. He was a "Volksdeutscher", a member of the German minority group and the poor woman was rather alarmed seeing three of us where one was in uniform and with an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder. My father explained cautiously who we were and in what situation we were after that she quickly ushered us into the house.

When the guard left us for a moment to follow the call of nature, she anxiously inquired after her husband but father didn't have much of news for her. She gave us a loaf of bread straight out of the oven, some bacon and a few spring onions together with a bottle of sljivovica, the popular plum brandy. We had left shortly after to catch the next train on time. We caught a train first to Vinkovci and from there one going to Osijek where we arrived early on Wednesday morning. It was the market day on which one would expect a crowd

of farmers taking their goods to town. Our travel companions were quite different though all of them as everybody carried bundles of some sort. Later I was told that this was the time of "travelling craze" of people making them to move and shift from one place to another for any imaginable reason or doing they had.

The railway guard at Osijek stopped us to check our travel permits and made a few snide remarks to my guard about not letting this vagabond escape. Even the pitiful contents of my rucksack were checked. But my guard was compassionate or was it that the brandy softened him so he permitted my father to take me home for two hours. We had to walk rather slowly with my father supporting me and the guard carrying my father's travels bag. As I came up the path, I had left two months ago; I felt a strange sensation to see it in the sunlight and in peacetime. Yes, the war was over and perhaps peace would really begin now even for some one like me in nearby future.

My mother was not at home when we arrived but our Doberman bitch started barking fiercely when she saw a uniformed man with us. Not even my voice could calm Peggy, as my smell was so different from all she had been used to. My first pleasure was to go up to the bathroom on first floor and to turn on the hot water tap. I peeled off all my clothes and started rubbing and scrubbing me until the water had turned a sluggish brown colour. Incredible what dirt I had on me especially in my hair and beard.

After I had dried myself and looked at myself in the mirror. A hollow eyed face peered at me covered all over by hair and beard in one brown entangled mop. I couldn't run a comb through this matted mess so I took my mother's hairbrush with the metal bristles and started separating hair from beard. With a shock I realized all of a sudden that my hair had turned grey at the temples. Grey hair and just turned twenty!

When I stepped on my mother's scales I saw that I weighed less than 46 kilograms. I couldn't believe it and checked the scales but they were correct and so my weight was indeed 46 kilos. When I had left home two months ago it had been of good 92 kilograms of weight. I had felt the strength of a young bull then but now my body felt weak and abused, and I myself was tired, so very tired!

The dog's barking and my mother's voice brought me back to reality from a drowsy sitting on a bathroom chair. I stood up and was near a collapse but managed somehow to get up straightening to stand when my mother came into the bathroom. She immediately started fussing over me and made me sit down on the chair that I reverted to my childhood. I had changed into fresh underwear and a new shirt. I had put a thick layer of gauze around my wounds while my mother talked on and on. A new pair of socks finished my toilet and I was ready to report for "reeducation."

I had a light meal before we left my home. I knew to well what damage it could do to myself eating at my heart's content after weeks of hunger. I heard that my mother had been in a church when we arrived this morning to pray for my safe return to Osijek. My father had managed with the help of few friends to get the necessary transfer permit back to Osijek. He wasn't at all certain that he would reach me before I was transported off somewhere else.

Mother also had enlisted the help of some Jewish friends who came back to Osijek with the People's Army and were our good neighbours. Young woman in uniform of Peoples' army managed to get mothers the right contacts. She had to join the partisans as most of

her Jewish relatives when the life became too dangerous in Croatia's Ustasa regime. She was one of the few who had survived the four bitter years in camps or moving all over Yugoslavia with the partisans. My mother went to see the camp commander at the Lower Town about me but in her terrible excitement my mother got some names mixed up by naming the woman's one instead of mine. She was sent off without any success. The next day, the camp commander who didn't like any intervention from outside anyway, sent for me on his own account or after some intervention of this woman in uniform.

When the light meal was over I was ready for the "reeducation" procedure. I didn't care much what kind of education it would be. The guard was pressing to go as it was past noon already. He really was an obliging young fellow who probably enjoyed the attention he got from my parents. He didn't want to take any present that was quite different from the others who had come to our house the day after Osijek was liberated. Father told me about this incursion when I asked for some of the things I had taken home prior to my departure. Whatever looked like any part of an army outfit like my shirts and trousers, camera, binoculars and so on had to be confiscated as the enemy's property. It seemed that they were really looking for me, as somebody must have tipped them off and given them the details. When I heard this, I was even more proud of having safely brought the watch and the gold coins my parents had given me prior my hurried depart. Now, I left the watch at home now but took the coins hiding them well in my shaving kit.

Shortly after midday my guard and I left parents' house and took our way passing my former school building from which German soldiers had driven us out in 1942 to use it as their quarters. Soon after we crossed the main square with the St. Trinity monument in the centre of the Old Town called the Citadel. In the Town hall housed the offices of public administration and further on bypassed Girls secondary school turning right into a narrow lane. At last we stopped at a door that opened after my guard had rung the bell. We entered one of the oldest Citadel's buildings close to the "Watergate", a large arched gate giving access to the Drava. So I landed in the prison of OZNA3 that was the military branch of the Department of People's Defence, in fact the secret (political) military police.

After waiting for a short while in a small yard of the building a man in civilian clothes came out and ordered me to go down into a basement room. I did it as ordered when the heavy door closed shut behind me. I was standing in complete darkness and immediately noticed the rank and rotten smell of air in there. After a while I saw a small ray of light coming through a slit opening just below the ceiling and I knew now where I was - in one of the dungeons of citadel's fortifications.

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