

24. ON THE WAY TO REEDUCATION

Mid of July 1945

In the first weeks of July our prison room emptied and soon there were only a few of us left. I didn't want to have any contact with that still with me and kept conversation to the minimum of daily banalities. I hadn't been able to find out who was the informant so I kept it to myself. We had nothing to read but depended for information on the loudspeakers from nearby barracks, which were loud enough to wake even a deaf man from sleep. To kill time, I started again playing blind chess with myself. I had made myself some simple chessmen out of whatever I could find cardboard, stones and buttons. When recalled the last position of game of the day before I went into the next move "playing" it in my mind. Seeing me sit there, meditating and mumbling to myself, my inmates began to worry that I was turning mad.

A little while later I found an opponent in one of the guards but he very often was on duty and so we could play only occasionally. I had taught myself to play chess in my mind in the autumn and winter of 1942/43, when together with some of my schoolmates I had had to guard the railway lines from Osijek against any sabotage from the partisans. Then on one of these warm and wearisome afternoons, we saw a group of four men coming through the main entrance. Two of them were in uniform and wearing automatic rifles, the other two had their hands tied with wire. With a shock I realized that one of the latter was Paul, my former schoolmate, whom I had last seen after the battle near Mali Grdjevac as a prisoner of the Croatian army. What was he doing now as a prisoner again?

Paul wore the insignia of a soldier in the People's Army, so why did he have his hands tied? I had no chance to talk to him as all newcomers were kept aside and not allowed to mingle with the other prisoners. Later, during the evening meal I did get the chance to sit down next to him and asked him quite casually where he had come from. What he then told me was as in credit was pathetic. Paul had been freed after our last meeting and had gone on with Colonel Stier's group westward in the direction of Slovenia. At the first chance, he changed colours again and returned to the People's Army. He had kept his papers from his previous unit that he seemed to have deserted at Grdjevac and managed to locate it again, later coming to Osijek as a soldier in the People's Army.

He went to see his family as soon as he could and on his return to his barracks met another schoolmate of ours with the nickname "Ile". As Paul's bad luck would have it, Ile was the People's plaintiff at the Special Court of Osijek dealing with war criminals and having had a talk with Paul when they met, Ile had him arrested a few hours after his return to barracks. Knowing that Paul had indeed been connected with the Ustasa and their secret police and not trusting him for his frequent change of colours I left him after our conversation glad not to be mixed up in any of his fishy business. A few months later I heard that Paul had been brought to trial and was sentenced to death for espionage and contra-revolutionary activities. Whether the sentence was carried out I don't know, as Paul did not turn up any more in my life.

Next day, at morning call the sergeant on duty told me to get ready for the journey to the camp for reeducation but could not tell me where I was going to go. It was Thursday, July 5 and a very hot day, when a swim in the Drava would have been all one wanted to do. Instead I was packing up my few belongings hoping that my reeducation would be carried

out somewhere in Yugoslavia. Soon a soldier, not much older than I was, came to take me on my journey. Once we were out of the prison I asked him where we were going but he didn't answer. He seemed terribly nervous about his task of guarding a prisoner who had been an enemy officer and I couldn't help laughing at his anxiety. I promised him however, that I would behave properly and not try anything against his orders.

As we were walking to the station I purposely chose the way through Krezmina Ulica where our house stood. My guard agreed to grant me a few moments with my parents before my departure from Osijek. There wasn't much time for explanations or good-byes, as we had to catch the morning train to Vinkovci and from there go on to the East. That was all my guard knew and all I could tell my parents. After we had been given some food for the two of us and a flask of hot tea with rum, we set off again. My father accompanied us as far as the station but wasn't allowed on the platform.

As my guard didn't quite know where to take me I suggested we talk to the official in the post wagon. He told the train conductor that his prisoner must be well guarded and was not allowed to talk to any of the travellers. This story satisfied both my guard and the conductor so that they left me in a corner of the post wagon under the supervision of the train guard. He was quite concerned about my fate but not willing to make any friendly gesture, as one never knew with prisoners, especially in those days of political change.

After a while my guard came back with some provisions he had got at the station kitchen and with the news that he had to take me to Novi Sad via Petrovaradin. It pleased him that it would not be a long journey and that we might make it before nightfall or, at the latest next morning, depending on the train connections we would find at Vinkovci. The conductor joined in our conversation and advised us about our travel route. When I asked him regarding his reluctance to talk to me, he explained that his brother had not come back from the war yet. Anyway I did not look too trustworthy in my stubble of beard and hair cut haphazardly by one of the guards in prison. And both, the guard and the conductor, took a few steps away from me when I started scratching unintentionally.

The train was rumbling on towards the east and I settled down in my corner of the wagon, finding it quite cosy. I slept most of the time even after we changed trains at Vinkovci in the afternoon and boarded a train which took us first to Sid and then to Sremska Mitrovica arriving there early in the evening. The conductor advised us that we should go as far as Stara Pazova where we should disembark at the station and find a train that would take us to Petrovaradin the next morning. As the Railway Bridge over the Danube had been destroyed there was no possibility to cross the river by train to Novi Sad. Night had fallen by the time we got off the train at Stara Pazova and made our beds on some of the benches in the waiting room of the station.

My guard was quite nervous at the thought how to watch me during the night but I set him at ease by promising solemnly not to do anything to upset the routine laid out for us by the People's Army. He made me swear this by God, the Almighty, and on my mother's life, something I had not expected. Afterwards however, we both went to sleep instantly and slept soundly until the next morning.

Friday, July 6, presented me with the joy of some hygienic comforts available at the station but the unwelcome news was that the station master had no idea when we would have a train to travel on as far as Petrovaradin. I didn't care all that much but my guard became very nervous and started cursing his fate of having to look after a prisoner all on his own.

As the morning went on some farmers came to the station intending to catch a train for Ruma or Zemun to sell some of their wares there. All trains that came through were filled to the full capacity with people or goods even on the roofs of the wagons, and it seemed that travel was free of charge though I couldn't verify this at the time. My guard and I certainly had not bought any tickets.

My jolly pastime of observing all that went on at the station came to an end when a short train pulled by an old locomotive appeared and proved to be our missing link to the next stop at Petrovaradin. The old engine puffed and smoked its way up the Fruska Gora (= Mountain) and through this lovely countryside with the famous vineyards in all directions. The soil there is very rich because the Danube carries a good deal of silt. The train was getting a little faster as we came down the Fruska Gora and saw the Danube wide and sluggish in its summer richness.

After we had passed the demolished station of Sremski Karlovci we reached Petrovaradin soon. When the train had stopped everybody got out and my guard and I stood somewhat forlornly in the crowd not knowing where the military prison was. The militiaman at the station could give us the direction and I understood that we would have to go down to the river where some military barracks were still in use. This confused my poor guard even more. How on earth could I possibly know where we would have to go when he had been given his orders in my absence?

I am sure my young guard had one of the happiest moments of his life when he finally led me through the large gate of the military prison and was able to hand over all responsibility for me to some one else. But life wasn't to be as easy for him as it turned out the corporal in charge was the only guard in this prison that was empty. After some discussion it was agreed that I should stay here and my sentry handed over an envelope, which probably contained my papers and the orders for a prisoner sent by OZNA 3 to the reeducation camp. My guard said goodbye hurriedly to me and rushed off glad to get rid of the responsibility for a "dangerous" POW. I stayed with the corporal in his room next to the main entrance of the rather large prison building, which looked as if it contained 40 cells at least. But where were the other prisoners?

As the dusk came a stream of men that looked like workmen to me started coming through the gates exchanging cheerful greetings with the guard before going to their various cells. What kind of a prison was this, I asked myself watching with growing astonishment all that went on.

Then the prison commandant came. Seeing me he asked: "What shall I do with you, comrade? You are an officer. You cannot stay with us. Everyone here is a mechanic or an electrician, a few machinists, but not a single one an officer. You are not supposed to work like the other POWs." - The commandant looked at me with genuine concern. So I said: "I'm very sorry to cause you so much trouble but perhaps I could stay here for the time being until you have found out where I'm supposed to go?"

He considered this and finally agreed that it might be the best way and asked: "Have you had anything to eat? I doubt that there will be anything left in the kitchen because the men are always very hungry when they come back from work." I assured him that I still had some of the food given to me by my mother and that all I needed was something to drink and a place to sleep.

"That won't be difficult," he said. "There are plenty of empty cells on the ground floor, just choose one and let the guard corporal know which one you'll use." - I hardly believed this but then remembered the good nature of the people in this region. So I took my rucksack, chose one of the cells and left it there while I went back to report the number of my cell to the corporal. The ground floor was dimly lit compared to the upper floors where the electricians must have been at work. When I reported to the corporal that I had taken the fourth cell from the entrance he suggested another one further down the corridor where I would have a washbasin and a proper bed though alas, without mattress.

He then gave me a piece of bread and a slice of bacon in case my provisions wouldn't last and bade me good night. I moved to the cell he had suggested and lay down on the bed. Should I close the door? I really felt strange in this prison that seemed more like a guesthouse. There wasn't any light in my cell but what came from a lamp out in the corridor so I got up again and went back to the corporal asking whether I could eat there.

"Of course," he said. "Here, take this chair and take it outside, but beware of the mosquitoes. No need to close your door. We don't lock up here because all the comrades work hard all day down at the docks and they don't deserve being locked in. They are good people and they help the Liberation movement. Go and eat in peace and just put the chair back even if I'm not in." So I sat outside for a while and ate and mused about this prison, where no doors were locked and people called each other comrade and where I could hear singing from one of the upper floors.

The next morning, I was awakened by the noise of men getting ready for work. After the noise had subsided it was very quiet in the building. I got up and looked around my cell. It was quite clean with whitewashed walls and only a few graffiti on them. The washbasin was dirty but water came from the faucet and enabled me to have a full treat of washing and shaving. As nobody had called for me I took my time deciding that I was going to look my best in case I should be transferred to another post in town.

While I waited for the prison commandant in the guard's room, I was given a warm brown liquid tasting faintly of coffee and a slice of fresh white bread. When the commandant finally came I was surprised to see how young he was and that it was only his bruised face which made him seem older. All this I hadn't noticed last night in the dark. He greeted me and said: "You look much better this morning, comrade officer. Will you now accompany me to the Town command to find out what need be done about you?"

"Yes sir, sorry, yes comrade commandant, of course I'll come with you." And without any further delay we left the prison. There was no guard with us but I noticed that comrade Mihajlo, which was the commandant's name, had a pistol in his holster. When I asked him if he wasn't worried about walking alone with me like that, he replied happily that the war was over and we could begin to trust each other again. Then I asked him where I would be sent as a prisoner of OZNA 3, he replied that he didn't know of any reeducation camp for officers' in this area. All he did remember was a group of POWs, in fact several in the course of a month, who had come through Petrovaradin but had gone on to the other side of the Danube, to Novi Sad. What had happened to them he couldn't tell me but he knew of a large camp for German POWs in the old silkworm factory in Novi Sad?

We arrived at the Town command post that was located within the fortress of Petrovaradin, a remarkable structure built during the time of the Turkish raids into central Europe. It was

a typical building erected by the Austro-Hungarian engineers of the 18th century with massive walls and a magnificent vista over the plains on the Danube.

I was asked to wait outside while comrade Mihajlo went into the command post. I walked over to one of the nearby bastions in shade and where a pleasant breeze blew gently through one of the slits in stone wall. It was so calm and I nearly dozed off relaxing when suddenly Mihajlo was shaking me by the arm.

"Come on, get up, we have to go. They don't know either what to do with you, an officer sent from OZNA 3 to an officers' camp. They will inquire and let me know so you stay with us for the time being." - Mihajlo had a girl in town where he used to have his meals so he suggested we walk there and that I join him for lunch. We walked through the fortress and Mihajlo showed my several places of interest there. We sat down for a short rest on one of the highest towers, as I felt rather faint, probably because of the long exposure to the sun and all that fresh air after so many weeks in prison.

Then I told my story to Mihajlo and he became even more sympathetic. He suggested that I should get some medical care at an ambulance post near the docks. The story of Mihajlo was rather sad too as he had lost most of his family in the winter of 1941. The Hungarian army killed people by the thousands throwing them into the Danube where holes were cut into the ice. The Hungarians claimed Vojvodina as their territory after the Germans had occupied the eastern parts of Yugoslavia following their attack in April 1941. The Serbia proper became a German protectorate but the Hungarians tried to occupy some parts of it when the Germans became involved with the war in Russia in the autumn of 1941.

There was a good deal of fighting and killing and the Hungarians literally slaughtered thousands of innocent people and hostages they held before they withdrew from Serbia's Vojvodina. Mihajlo had managed to get across the Danube and join a partisan unit in Fruska Gora. Soon after his face was badly wounded by an explosion but he was lucky insofar as it affected only the skin. All this he told me while we slowly walked to his girl's place at the other side of Petrovaradin. On our way back we walked through the centre and Mihajlo ask me, with an apology, to walk in front of him so that it would look like prisoner and guard. I obeyed willingly telling him that his attention and friendship was far more than I could expect in the circumstances.

Mihajlo reminded me of the partisan guards that had taken us from Virovitica to Donji Miholjac. They were "victors of the first hour" and had still a feeling of general humanity and some concern for the prisoners. I mused about a pattern I found emerging in the way we Croats would be treated by the representatives of the new regime. The freedom fighters like the partisans of first hours (1941-1942) would have an attitude of reason and certain humanness towards us. As prisoners we could expect some sort of observance of the Geneva Convention from them whereas the "last hour recruits" were likely to cause us more troubles. This philosophy I found to be correct many times and later applied it as a guiding line in my work and other activities. But I still had a long way to go before I would be free to do what I wanted - of that I was sure.

Saturday night became very noisy in our compound as the workmen had got hold of some alcohol and celebrated the fact that they would not have to work on Sunday. Still, some of them were ordered down to the docks. Mihajlo came for me again and we left the Citadel through its western gate walking along a steep ridge with the Danube down below. The path was in the pleasant shade of chestnut trees, interspersed with a few mulberry bushes

and some white poplars. The path led to Kamenica and I suddenly remembered my visit with Captain Smit at the military school some three years ago and how Hector, his Doberman, had slobbered all over me. Poor Captain Smit, who he died so quietly at Celje, had to shut Hector before he surrendered to avoid anyone maltreating his dog. Nothing else but sad memories!

Mihajlo wanted to show me the place where he had run across the frozen river. We walked along a path leading to Srijemska Kamenica and somewhere along it. Mihajlo had pointed to me the path he came up here after crossing over frozen Danube late in 1941. We sat down for a long rest before we returned the same way we had come some hours later. Nobody passed by here so we held our picnic in peace and enjoyed the bottle of wine Mihajlo had brought along. The wine made me dizzy and without Mihajlo's help I probably wouldn't have made it back to the prison. But we managed it somehow and when I was back in my cell I fell down on my bed and slept like a log until morning not caring about missing the evening meal.

Monday and Tuesday passed without incident except that I got to know my fellow prisoners. They were all prisoners of war and had answered when inquiries were made for drivers, mechanics, machinists and electricians. Many of them regretted it as they were made to work long hours down at the docks repairing and reassembling all sorts of military equipment that had been left behind by the Germans, including some cargo's of arms and ammunition. It was considered the war booty by the Russian army and had to be loaded into barges, which were flown it to a Russian port at the far end of the Danube. But, as my fellow inmates told me, it wasn't only this war loot the Russians requested for themselves, there were also a great number of crates marked with "UNRRA" sign on. Obviously the later were coming from America and were full of machinery and equipment that had to go on the barges as well.

The white bread and other good foodstuffs, I saw here for the first time, were given to the prisoners as a sort of safeguard that they would keep the mouths shut. At any rate, they had been ordered under threat of heavy punishment not to reveal anything about their work. I was beginning to understand what those engines and trains had meant that kept coming through Stara Pazova. The engines had the UNRRA sign painted on as well but at the time I had no idea what these letters meant. Rumours had it - I was told now - that Tito had been asked to send all the war booty and UNRRA goods to the Great Brother. One wondered whether our new leader did so out of diplomacy or whether he was being forced. They soon we found out that taking something which was marked for shipment to Russia was not considered an offence. Of course, one must not be caught. I learned a lot from these Prisoners of War workmen there in Petrovaradin.

On Wednesday, Mihajlo came with the news that somebody would come from Novi Sad the next day and that I should be ready for departure in the morning. Sure enough, on Thursday, July 12, a soldier turned up in proper uniform and with a special red star on his cap and said he'd come for me. Mihajlo handed him the envelope with my papers from OZNA 3 and told the soldier to look after me well. My new guard was a young soldier armed with a Russian automatic rifle and he treated me very correctly. I had to walk in front of him as we walked down to the Danube. When we embarked on a ferryboat to the other side of the river, I could see the docks with all the barges and piles and piles of material and equipment ready for shipment waiting there.

When we got off the ferry on the opposite riverbank of Danube we only had to walk a few hundred meters until we came to a wide gate. My guard, who had spoken hardly a word to me all the time, led me to a building that must have housed the administration offices of this former factory. Inside he handed my papers over to a clerk in civilian clothes who astonishingly said: "Good God Almighty! Are you the son of my advocate in Osijek? Don't you remember me from your father's office? I saw you typing in there with that nice secretary from Donji Grad." - The clerk looked at me with curiosity and concern but I couldn't place him right away.

"I am sorry, I cannot remember exactly having met you before, but what you say about my father's office is correct. I'm surprised you recognized me so quickly. I must have changed considerably since those days."

"Don't worry, we've all changed. You too, you look rather tired and worn out but we'll fix something for you. You've been an officer, haven't you? Wait here till I return." – He left the room. The other clerks looked at me with interest; some giving me an encouraging smile.

A few minutes later "my" clerk returned with a man in uniform looking at me as if I was some kind of rare animal. In a blustering tone he said: "What? Yet another fucking scribe from Osijek, and speaking German? I've got enough of you here and you're all from Osijek the whole fucking lot. You're an officer? Then I don't want you here at all. You're not supposed to work with these fucking lots of lazy bastards." And turning to "my" clerk said severely: "Take him to your place, Zdravko, and keep him there until I know where he'll go from here. But don't stay away all day, and you comrades, you all have worked to do, you fucking lot."

Well, this was a Serb cursing the proper way by employing any particular swear word in all modes and combinations. My new friend seemed unimpressed and pulled me at my sleeve to follow him. We left the building and turned to another gatehouse a few hundred meters away where once a railway track had brought the wagons right into the factory compound. This was a former silk worm factory all right as I could see several large buildings further on. In the small gatehouse all the clerks had their sleeping quarters with straw heaped high up on the floor of a large room. They also had a proper kitchen, a toilet and washing facilities. "What a luxury!" I blurted out to the pleasure of my new host. Later in the afternoon, Karl, for this was his name that I could not recall having met him before. He took me around to show me the place and the work they were doing.

We even went to the largest building further off and as we came closer to it I noticed that there were very many people walking around, some staggering, some swaying, and some even falling down. These were German prisoners of war that had been brought to this camp because it was one of the largest. All clerks who spoke German were employed by the camp administration to set up records of the inmates and there must have been several thousands of them living in the several large buildings that had housed the silkworm hatcheries. The buildings were several stories high without any partitions just for columns rising from the ground through all the floors up to the flat roof.

On some floors one could still see the tables on which silk worms had been fed. Now they were covered with bodies of weary men who rested there or on the barren floor. Most of the material used for these buildings consisted of timber that was dry and creaking making a ghostly combination with the moaning and screams and sobs that came from the men.

The most eerie thing was that in spite of these various noises one had the impression of a deadly silence.

Karl was greeted by one of the ghostlike creatures that asked him for some favours in very proper German. I was so shocked by this sight of human misery and suffering that I made a sign to Karl and rushed out before the smell of decay and death would make me sick. Karl was right behind me waving off all of the pleas and complaints that were directed at him in German. Once we were out of the earshot he told me that he, too, felt terrible about the way these German POWs were treated but that he could do very little to help them.

"If these members, of the master race had been told how they would end up. I'm sure they would have strung Hitler to the nearest tree, him and that fucking lot of generals around him. Come, come with me, I must show you how the bold German soldiers die." - Karl continued our "sight-seeing" tour thus.

We went behind the building where large holes had been dug in the ground for use as latrines. It was easy to dig deep in this sandy soil but it also made for crumbling edges particularly as there wasn't any boarding or planking for men walking to and from the holes. Many of them were so weak they could only crawl to relieve themselves as they all were suffering from dysentery or diarrhoea. Karl told me that quite often one of them would fall into the latrine's hole with its rotten and foul smelling contents and nobody would dare to pull him out for fear of falling in too. And so many had died in a most inhuman way! When one of the holes was full to the brim some of the POWs had to cover it with the soil they dug out digging another new hole nearby.

Anyone stepping onto one of these newly covered holes in the darkness would sink like in quicksand, Karl told me. I didn't want to believe what I saw with a shock happening right in front of my own eyes. A man had disappeared over the edge of one of the holes and for a second later I saw his raised arm and a hand waving frantically. Then there was nothing except for a few bubbles bursting through the thick brown mess. I turned and was violently sick against the next wall. I had seen a great deal of human suffering in the course of the war years but I had never thought that any human being could so disgrace and humiliate another. After all I had been through this too but this scene I witnessed struck me to the core and made me despair of humanity.

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