

26. NEWS ABOUT AMNESTY - A WHISPER OF FREEDOM

Friday, August 3, 1945

I had slept rather late that first morning in camp of Kovin. What has woken me up was a general coming and going from the building nearby. This was not surprising considering the number of people that had to dwell in that space originally intended for much smaller occupants, the silk worms. When I realized that what was going on it was because the first meal was dished out. I went to stand in the queue and got my soup with a slice of white bread. The bread was expected to last for the entire day and the soups were something I would go on loathing for years, as it consisted mainly of water with some kind of vegetable brewed in. One was lucky if one could find out what vegetable had been used by the self-appointed cooks and more often than not that it was barleycorn or turnip. But it was warm and it was what we got and ate it, with a spoon if we had one or slurping it out of the aluminium dishes if we had none of.

Some prisoners who used discarded fuel containers dropped by American bombers on their way to Ploesti in Romania, where they bombed the large petrol distilleries had started the production of aluminium hardware. The aluminium was fairly easily cut into simple shapes and beaten into bowls or plates. Spoons were produced too and that was all we needed as knives and forks were unnecessary for the kind of meals we got possible except of the chunk of white bread. The bread came from a bakery in Kovin and must have been made from UNRRA supplies as the flour had quite a different taste to the one we were used to.

Harvest time was over but I was sure there had been very little to harvest this year due to the devastation of war, though we did see some maize standing high just beyond our fence. Maize was the major crop in this part of Vojvodina and I remember that in pre-war years it was even exported. In between the maize the farmers used to grow pumpkins and watermelons so that harvest time was a great feast for everybody. My mouths watered as I thought of these delicacies lying there before my eyes and yet out of reach.

Our morning toilette consisted of a visit to the latrines that reminded me so much of the horrors of Novi Sad. Although I had to admit that here they were better placed and hidden by some shrubs all around. The narrow trenches had boards around the edges and there was even a round timber seat one could use if one wasn't too disgusted by the foul surroundings and the pervading stench. The regular use of burned lime made it nearly sanitary. There was a sort of an organization and an order to be observed by prisoners concerning the maintenance of latrines as well as during the distribution of food. In a way these tasks helped me to get accustomed to it, as there was not much else to do in this camp which housed about three thousand former Domobran officers.

Despite of latrines' uninviting look I have soon found out that this place had become important regarding the exchange of news and dissemination of gossips. Soon after the morning call that was combined with the distribution of a brew of the day and of bread one returned to the places where friends were waiting already. There one sat and ate to continue with gossiping or playing various games using figures made of pebbles, pieces of timber or cardboard that had been found somewhere. There were chess players surrounded by a group of onlookers, and card-game players whose games ended sometimes with a quarrel, which erupted quite suddenly. A card-game called "Preference"

was the most popular one and I was called to join in as soon as one some fellows prisoners remembered that my father excelled in this game. I was expected from me to prove myself his equal. There were various tournaments going on continuing long into the night and often scores were marked down for the next day. This was often the very reason for disputes and angry discussions. There really was nothing for us to do in this camp and I often asked myself what kind of reeducation we were expected to get here.

Some of the inmates had been here since June, I was told, and the present number of three thousand was pretty constant. Only a few newcomers would arrive from Vrsac after their interrogation finished there. Like me, they had been told that in Kovin they would be reeducated in order to understand the aims of the Revolution following that they would be able to serve in the Yugoslav Peoples Army. All the others, like myself, asked themselves when the reeducation would begin at last. There were some wild stories about men who had been kept at Vrsac, but as I didn't know the names of those officers that were talked about I didn't pay much attention. Most of the men were my father's generation so that I was usually introduced as "You know, he's the lawyer's son", when I met people from Osijek.

Until one of the evenings when we were lining up in front of the kitchen for a bowl of soup when I thought I have recognized a face in the crowd. However, the man looked so shabby and not at all the way had I known him so that I couldn't be sure. At a sudden I was sure and called out: "Captain? Captain Matijevic? Is it you? I know you from..." but I could not have to finish my query, when he replied: "Alright, yes I am! I was Captain Matijevic, but don't make such a fuss about it for heaven's sake. Get your soup and see me under the mulberry tree over there if you want to!"

He left me there standing and walked away quickly in the direction of tree he had indicated to me. I rushed after my mates and told Vet I had just seen my former battery commander. Vet wasn't surprised at all and told me that he had seen him before also, but had once talked to him briefly only. It seemed the captain wasn't too anxious for anybody's company from his former unit. Nevertheless, I was too curious to find out what had happened to him and some of the others in his company so after I received my bowl of soup walked over to the mulberry tree to finish my meal. Then went to the tree captain his indicated to me but as it would be getting dark soon, I wasn't too sure to find him waiting there.

The captain wasn't there except for a few other men eating their soup and chatting, so after a little while I slowly walked away wondering why the captain wouldn't want to talk to me. I had nearly arrived at our place nearby the fence when I heard a voice calling behind me: "Zvonko, wait, don't run off..." - I turned around and saw that Captain Matijevic was coming up behind me. He looked friendlier now and when he stood beside me put his hand on my arm.

"Sorry, Zvonko, of course you are right, it's me and I'm touched that you seemed so pleased to see me. Although, Zvonko, I was your commander until a few months ago, you do not know me anymore now. You do not know me as the commander of First Howitzer Battery that you joined in Osijek. You see I have deserted from another unit before as you probably hear about. Please, you must understand my situation."

He took of his hand from my arm or I had shaken it off as I was going to reply somewhat tersely: "That's fine with me, captain, don't worry. But would you mind telling me what

happened to you, after you left the battery that afternoon of May 14 and rode away in direction of Dravograd or to some other destination in the west?"

He stiffened a bit and said: "It's none of your concern what happened to me. I am not asking you either what had happened to you or what is your doing here. Therefore, I want to ask you to mind your business only. Is that clear?"

His reply made me fuming and answered sharply: "It's clear enough to me. This doesn't explain why you left the battery without a word of concern or advice to your men. You have deserted us your companions and just not another unit. I don't care much what stories you tell about now, as you say they don't concern me. All I can say is that I am glad I do not have anything to do with you and your arrogant ways any more. I am delighted not to call you my former commander." I had got quite heated up and was about to turn away when he spoke once more.

"You've changed a lot, Zvonko, since I last saw you. You must have gone through a good deal of hardship and frustration that you can talk to me that way. Yes, I left the battery! There wasn't anything I could do but try to save my own life! You know that for sure. But I didn't manage to get across the Drava, though we did get quite as far away West short of the riverbank. We heard that the British disarmed Croats and returned them Tito to be slaughtered by the partisans afterwards. But this all over now and the best we can do is to forget it. Forget the war! Forget me, Zvonko that's the best what I can tell you. Pretend you didn't meet me here. Please go away and forget it all."

With that he turned and soon was lost in the crowd of prisoners that used the last evening for a little stroll before turning in. I could well understand Captain Matijevic's wish to forget everything but was still wondering about his real reasons for not wanting me to mention his time of service in Osijek from January to April 1945. He couldn't possibly have done something that would make him a criminal as he just wasn't the type for it and he was much too soft and concerned with the pleasures of life such as wine and women. I shook my head and decided to forget all about him. He had never shown any concern or solidarity for any of his fellow officers and I wasn't going to waste any of my time thinking about him in future. I never saw Captain Matijevic again or heard of what happened to him after.

About the third day at Kovin, a Sunday, my daily routine was interrupted a little. Later I have found that it helped me to conquer feelings of unease and anxiety that had started to worry me. The change was due to a very special divine service that held for all prisoners us that day. Under a large mulberry tree a simple altar had been erected and in the open space around most of the prisoners assembled for a service that was held for all three religious groups represented in the camp: Roman-catholic, Orthodox and Islamic. As I stood there among these men who shared my loss of freedom, I felt sure all of a sudden that the worst lay behind me and that I was going to survive and live freedom again. The spirits of all of us had been very low indeed. We had nothing to give to each other and very little hope for the future. We worried about such simple matters like say rain or what would happen to us when fall came and then winter?

We had no newspapers, no letters and so were completely cut off from the rest of world, I am sure, and that was even harder to bear than any of the physical discomfort. From time to time, we were given some information through the loudspeakers, though it did not really inform us about the things we wanted to know most: how were our families and where were they? How was daily life going to go on in Yugoslavia after the war? What chances

did we have, we who were young and still at the beginning of our lives? All these thoughts went through my mind as I stood there. I have joined the others in singing chorales that I had heard in church before. We were attending to the sermon given by a young Catholic priest. For an hour or so we were able to shake off our lethargy and hopelessness as we heard his words about love and forgiving, hope for the future and the chances for life in freedom.

I left the circle of men and sat down under a nearby tree from where I could still listen to the sermon from a loudspeaker in a further of tree. I looked at the prisoners and mused about the fact that most of them were much older than the other few younger ones or me in particular. The older ones didn't really want to mix with the younger fellows that seemed strange to me in the circumstances of our shared fate. There were differences in ranks and the diversities depending upon from where a prisoner had come and not only from the various military districts. I suddenly realized some of them must have come straight from their homes where they had been hiding during the last days of the war or for weeks' right after it ended. Those had not gone through the terrible hardships of the death march, as they had been able to take clothing and provisions with them to this camp here in Kovin.

I wondered what had made them come out of hiding. Fear of punishment if they were found after the general order had been proclaimed that all former officers had to be registered? In general, they all looked much better than the rest of us in minority, better as far the physical constitution went and were better clothed. I was told later that after June 1945 the general conditions for POWs had improved a good deal no doubt due to the intervention of the International Red Cross. The new men in power must have been forced probably to think about their political image in the eyes of Yugoslav public and the World.

As for the rest of us, those who had made that such a long march of say of nearly 500 kilometres and had managed to survive; we were the minority here. Though, the experience had hardened us and had put us beyond the sheer animal fear for one's own life. That is it, I thought, this is why we are different from the others as we have gone through fear and hardship and almost unbearable tensions. I knew, as I sat there this Sunday morning that these terrible experiences were behind me, they may be overcome but not forgotten.

When the Lord's Prayer was repeated aloud by the assembled crowd my thoughts turned to faith in the divine being. Could it really be that God preordained so much of pains and sufferings? Could it be His Will that turned his best creation against each other or was it that man was not really God's best and last creation? Here we are, under a new regime that proclaims the equality and shared rights by all men and look where they've put us after trying their best to kill us! My bitterness was welling up again and I had to force myself to stop this train of thoughts. I didn't lead anywhere and it certainly wouldn't help me to get through life in this camp, where everyone mistrusted the other and nobody was willing to tell the truth about him and where he came from. Better look at the chaplains performing the service and trying to unite different creeds.

Where did they spend the last months of the war? What had they prayed for? Are they praying for us now, us the poor silk worms assembled here for reeducation? What a mess it all was! Could we ever go back to a normal life? How could we ever become good lovers and husbands and to rise own children? I forced myself to stop this morbid thinking and getting up from under that tree joined the others as they dispersed now that mass was over. But after that our routine did no longer exist of the mere killing of time.

There were specialists and lecturers among the prisoners and they started to give lectures on various subjects. It wasn't always easy to hear about it in advance, especially for a newcomer like myself, as the lectures were not announced via the loudspeakers. However, the "news exchange" at the latrines functioned and I attended some of the lectures whenever I could free myself of the everlasting "Preference" tournament which, I'm sorry to say, wasn't too often.

A few days after that Sunday, I heard that volunteers were needed to fetch water for the kitchen. I had been warned by my comrades not to volunteer for any duty as it almost always resulted in heavy work, which we prisoners were not supposed to do. During the early days it happened at Kovin that volunteers were asked for to do some work outside the camp. All who signed up were taken to a place just outside Kovin and had to unload several wagons of old bags of cement, which was not only a very hard work but also an extremely dirty one. Not only did prisoners' get a chance to wash off the cement dust afterwards they also have a very bad food. Since then it had been decided that none of the POWs, all of whom had been officers, should volunteer for any kind of work unless it had been approved by the POW Committee as necessary and essential for the functioning of the camp.

In spite of all these stories I got up early next day and went to the kitchen to see if some work needed to be done. Soon a small group of us left the camp pulling a cart on which a cylindrical tank had been mounted, while an assortment of pails and buckets was dangling from sides of the cart making quite a racket. Accompanied by two guards we turned left onto the main road and passed the fence close to my "quarters" just behind it. Sure enough, somebody from my group saw me with the water cart crew. He was shaking his head in disapproval and put his finger to his forehead telling me that I was mad to volunteer. Other than that I somehow felt good to be pushing and pulling this jangling cart to fetch our water.

Quite close to village we arrived at a draw well with a blue metal hood and two large wheels on either side. A few civilians were at the well too turning large wheels by their handlebars with the shaft creaking and groaning awfully due to its dirty grease nipples. The people left soon without paying any attention to us and we set about filling the tank. Pail after pail we drew turning the wheels, not an easy task but the only way we could get water for the camp as there was no other well or spring or similar place to get water for the camp. No wonder we were given little water for drinking only and one had to rely to an old abandoned well closer to the camp for washing. One could hear frogs calling deep down the well and the water was muddy and full of algae. Yet the need for the water was strong enough so one didn't look too closely what came up in the pails, which were leaking and lost much of the content on their way up, anyway.

During a break I went to inspect the grease nipples and asked the guard if perhaps he could find some grease while I was cleaning the nipples. Soon a farmer arrived and joined in helping me to turn off the nipples and to clean out the dirt from a narrow pipe and around the axle too. We had to take off the hood and then we could do the good job. Later, I realized how much this maintenance work had been needed of that artesian well and how much it was appreciated afterwards by all who came to the well for water, civilians and prisoners alike. The farmers who had helped me in my repair work invited me to join him for the breakfast later. It consisted of white bread, bacon and onion. Afterwards he gave me a huge watermelon to take into the camp. All that hearty food was washed down

with a few gulps of sljivovica, the popular plum brandy everywhere here that made me quite dizzy.

Contrary to my comrades' opinion this voluntary work turned out a blessing for me. Not only had I been given a good meal and some fresh fruit often. I had made contact with some of the local people and also had won guard's respect too. He asked that I come to the well every day to look after the pump as everyone appreciated my skill. So it came about that I became the "maintenance man" who didn't have to turn the wheels on the well or carry buckets full of water.

Though I did have to get up early every morning to join the water crew and I had to help pull and push the heavy cart. My farmer friend or others coming to the well with a watermelon or some bread or some other food also rewarded me. I was even able to buy one thing or the other with the few Dinars I had with me too. Only my card player friends resented my morning outings but by sharing my bounty of fresh fruit with them they forgave me in any case. For me, these outings to the well had become a step closer to freedom.

I had been in Kovin camp for two weeks now when one morning on returning to the camp, it was Saturday August 4, I felt a sort of tension and feeling of expectancy in the air that made my hair prickle. I walked over to "our" place carrying one of that huge watermelon and a bag full of bread and cheese. It had been a good morning at the well and I had been able to purchase a lot from country's women there as it was always easier to deal with women. They were more generous and charitable than men were so I had brought food for some of the other prisoners as well. As I came up to my group, I saw that the card game hadn't started yet. Instead everybody was standing around talking and gesticulating excitedly.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked putting down my purchases. "Why you did not started the game yet?"

A voice out of the chorus replied: "The professor's gone mad. He's shouting and dancing about back there at the latrines. Some of the men have gone to fetch him and bring him here."

"What about the latest latrine news?" I asked then.

Somebody out of the group voiced: "Nobody's come back from there yet. We thought you might know more about what happened at the command post."

"Sorry, I've been to the well and to the kitchen now. There all was as usual. Please help me with that melon, it's so heavy." After a few minutes we saw a group of men coming from behind the main building, obviously returning from latrines and among them, sort of held on, was Professor Sofic. He was still shouting on top of his voice and dancing like a dervish. As they came closer we could understand what he was shouting.

"AMNESTY! There is an amnesty! AMNESTY!"

At first we all reacted with a shock, the shock of unbelieving. We stood there, frozen to the ground staring at the professor. Had the poor man gone mad? Then slowly, as the men

with the professor came up to us, the rigid silence was broken by shouts and wildly gesticulating, hugging men throwing their arms around each other.

The poor professor was nearly smothered and when he succeeded to extricate himself, he came straight to where I was standing and wrapping his arms around me said in a voice breaking with emotion: "My dear, dear boy! Suckling, dear boy! I am so happy for you - for all of us. It is true! There is a general amnesty and pardon announced for all Domobrans. We'll be home soon. We'll be free men again! Oh, dear Suckling that you are not anymore. Believe me, my boy, there is an amnesty and pardon for all! "



"The Water Gate" of the Citadel in Osijek as shown on J. Gojkovic's etching..

* * * * *