

### 03. DEATH OF ZELENKO

**Saturday, April 14, 1945**

When I returned to the garrison there I had noticed a lot of movements and a general commotion. The retreat obviously had started and it had created an atmosphere of nervousness that I hadn't ever experienced before. Convoys of trucks and horse-drawn carts were leaving in two main directions, some heading for the main square and further to the west end of Osijek and the others going towards the railway station meaning southwards. It took me quite some time to find the captain in this chaos of humans and animals, and when I did finally get to him, I saw that he too seemed nervous and preoccupied.

"It's time we got to our battery," captain said when he saw me. - "We'll be moving out early tonight. You are looking more like a soldier now, except for that bundle under your arm. Did your mother give you some goodies for the way?"

The captain just couldn't hold his tongue and his comments smarted, but as soon as we were sitting together on his cart he became a little friendlier, almost human, I thought at least. He wasn't much older than I was and, as I was to find out later, did not have much more combat experience either as he was staying in his hometown for most of his time in the army. I knew the country around Slavenska Pozega that lies in a valley in central Slavonia and is surrounded by the Panonic Mountains, long ridges stretching in west-east direction and opening like a horseshoe towards the south. I also knew that the captain had a girlfriend in Donji Miholjac and now obviously must be wondering what had happened to her this morning. Miholjac was only about 2 kilometres away from the German bridgehead and that was pretty dangerous.

"Sir, can you tell me what is going on at Miholjac?" — "There was no fighting since this morning when the Germans withdrew from their bridgehead. It's calm all along the south bank of Drava. My girl left with a convoy at lunchtime to join her family. So she won't be coming with us, if that's what you wanted to know."

We chatted on as well as we could amidst the entire din the soldiers, carts and horses were making on the cobblestones. It was getting dark when we reached our former command post that looked forlorn and deserted now. The battery was ready to move, waiting for their orders. The senior staff members were assembled in the captain's office which looked much the same as usual a yet different because of the things that had been removed.

Even the captain looked different now, smaller somehow than before but he wasted not time. Orders were issued and after a short briefing we left the room. Outside, my groom Janko was waiting for me with the horses. It was the first this happened and I felt my importance growing while at the same time worrying about mounting the horse with so many eyes watching me. Janko not only solved the problem of my bundle he also gave me a good push to make sure I got into the saddle all right. He was a short fellow and could not deny his gypsy origin, I liked him because he was good with horses and also because he reminded me of one of the men on my uncle's farm near Nasice.

As we trotted off to give the gunners their orders I felt excitement rising and some sort of exhilaration to be riding my own horse after a day of so much frustration. As we reached the camp I saw the gunners waiting near the orchard. All of a sudden it was simple to give orders, and I felt the sensation of being listened to. It was not so simple to pull the guns out of their resting-places with horses harnessed in pairs to the gun. The rear pair was harnessed to the gun's carriage and had to pull it towards the gun. Once a gun and carriage were joined the middle and the front pair of horses were harnessed. The riders then mounted the left horse of each pair and the gun was ready to be moved by all six horses. In a case like this, it is essential that the front pair of horses move first, otherwise the ropes get entangled, and the middle and rear pair have to move only seconds later or the front pair will give up and chaos reigns.

It was getting dark and close to 8 p.m. when the runner brought the orders to get the battery out of the orchard and onto the main road leading to Cepin, which meant we were going south and not along the Drava towards the West. I wasted no time, mounted Zelenko without Janko's help and started shouting loud orders. The only trouble was that I had learned them in German due to my training in Stockerau, and so I had to improvise occasionally in Croatian which didn't make me very convincing. But I got the first gun onto the main road, followed by its ammunition cart, and the second, and soon we were on the way.

Virag passed on the second gun and informed me that all my belongings were stored on a cart he had chosen with Janko's help and that they were quite safe. The baggage train with all of Gregl's soldiers and infantry equipment was supposed to fall in at the end of the convoy but the road was crowded with other units on the move intermixed with civilian carts heading in the same direction. I was just going to leave my place and join the front of the convoy, when Zorko rode up with a small group of soldiers who I saw belonged to the observation unit. He told me that they were ordered to ride in front of us and that Vlatko would be joining him soon. Would I watch out for him and also see that the battery kept moving at a steady pace.

So I fell in with the slow pace of the draught horses and soon I felt tiredness come over me as I slogged along on Zelenko's back. My eyes grew heavy with sleep. Soon, Vlatko passed with only his groom by his side and disappeared in Zorko's direction, after a short exchange of words. Cepin is only 9 kilometres from Osijek, so it did not take us too long to reach this village. A messenger was waiting for us with the order to turn right onto the road to Podgorac about 30 kilometres away at the foot of the Krndija hills. I had been there a few times on school outings to a nearby ruin, and I remembered how I had hated to lug my heavy accordion along to play for my classmates. I was very proud of this instrument otherwise, as I had bought it myself after saving up for a long time. I also liked playing it I only hated having to carry it around on excursions.

Well, those days were over now and I was on my way to Podgorac as a soldier and without my accordion. The road we turned on was too rough for riders and carts. It was one of the side roads which consisted of a bed of coarse stones with the gaps filled in with crushed stone, and all this then pressed tight by steamrollers. My father had told me that the work was done by peasants who couldn't pay their taxes, and I remember being fascinated by the steamrollers as they sprayed sand and water and again and again rumbled over the flattened surface of the road. Stone macadam it was called, and it was only shortly before the war started that bitumen and petrol driven rollers were

introduced. The villagers kept the roads in repair, or so it was supposed, but now we were in the fourth year of the war and the roads were in poor shape.

It was pitch dark by the time we made our laborious way over the potholes and wheel tracks of the Podgorac road. I was beginning to feel the discomfort of the hard saddle even though fatigue sent me into a sort of slumber interrupted only when Zelenko changed his pace according to the condition of the road. At Martinci Cepinski, about 20 kilometres from Osijek, we were ordered to halt for a short rest. I remembered what I had been taught and told the men to carry on foot after the break to prevent them from falling asleep and also to give the horses a rest. There was some grumbling when we started again, but soon we were all walking along beside the guns onto which we had loaded our arms and the heavier parts of uniform. I noticed some soldiers holding on to the handlebars of the gun carriages and soon found this to be a good method for walking and dozing at the same time.

My father's face appeared before me and reminded me of the long hikes we used to take together during my holidays my father being the president of Mountaineering society in Osijek for many years. These outings had hardly been a pleasure for a young boy, as they meant getting up early in the morning and then walking or climbing for hours behind my father and his mountaineering friends. I remember holding back my tears as I got hungrier and hungrier because we started on an empty stomach, with breakfast to be held at the first stop or whatever other breaks the group had decided on. My father tended to take shortcuts but lacked a sure sense of orientation that I had been able to acquire. Thus, we occasionally arrived at the dramatic moment when I told my father that we were on the wrong track and refused to walk on sometimes. He would take my advice and we would reach our destination, but he would never tell the others that it was due to my direction. Was he at least proud of this talent his weakling of a son possessed, I wondered, as I marched on in the dark. A soldier now, an officer too, who is expected to bear responsibility for himself and for his men.

At our next stop in the village of Poganovci, I went to find our carts and get something to eat. I found Virag on the first cart, to which a few horses had been hitched by their reins. "Hello, sir, I suppose you're hungry and tired? It was a good thing you ordered to dismount after the last stop. Leave Zelenko with this cart as it follows the guns as the first of." — "Virag, do you know where we're going?" — "No, sir, but it looks as if we'll be marching until sunrise so the spotter plane won't find us so easily."

I felt ashamed that I hadn't thought of this myself, Virag was right, of course. Our march continued and the first rays of sun were coming up as we passed Budimci. We had come some 40 kilometres by now and I expected to find out what our plans were, once we had reached Podgorac. I was walking beside the cart Zelenko had been hitched to when the captain rode up followed by his groom, a constant shadow by now.

"You seem to get tired of riding easily," the captain bellowed at me. "Get on your horse and with the battery. You have no business being here behind it."

Instant hate came over me, but I held my tongue and turned to collect Zelenko's reins and mount before the captain could utter any more abuse. As I rode forward, I saw the rising silhouette of Krndija in the morning light and thought that I would at least see the sun rise in its full splendour.

"Sir, get the first platoon ready for action. Quick!" - It was one of Zorko's messengers who pulled me out of my reverie with this order for immediate action. The guns Number 1 and 2 represented the First Platoon and were to get into position immediately. I briefly wondered what might have happened to Gregl and his men, and the large baggage train. I hadn't noticed anyone passing us during the night.

All riders mounted the left horse in the pairs, the gunners climbed onto their seats. Three were sitting in front, the other two at the rear right and left of the gun's shield. I didn't know what to do with the ammo carriers but decided to get them ready too. Then came the moment of great expectation for all of us, a beautiful sunrise on a full spring day, when first houses of Podgorac came into view at our right.

"First platoon marsh!" - I shouted when the same messenger as before returned to tell me the new orders. We galloped onto a crossroads, turned left and shortly afterwards into a field. Everything went smoothly, as in training so I felt rather proud that the First Platoon did so well under my command, especially as we had never had the chance for any training together.

The two guns were positioned just behind a ridge, about 20 meters apart. Crates with shells were unloaded and put beside the guns, the gun carriages drawn away and the ammo carriages still waiting on the road. What do I do with them? - I asked myself, not even knowing in which direction we would be firing our guns. In the end, I ordered them to face due south with the church of Podgorac at our right, in this way keeping the men busy providing some sort of protective embankment for the guns. In the meantime I turned my attention to the ammo carriages and the horses standing around them on the road. I saw the rest of the battery coming to the crossroads and turning right towards Podgorac. What on earth were we supposed to be doing here? - I wondered what I'm supposed to do here when suddenly Vlatko came galloping up towards us.

"Get the guns to the top of the ridge and aim them down into the valley. There are partisans coming at us. You will see them from the ridge!"

I was not at all ready for this. Normally howitzers are not employed in direct combat but an observer directs the fire further up the front that is in contact with the gun's commander by a messenger system or telecommunication. We had our telephone unit with us but no line was laid as yet. Still, what else could I do but order: "Get the guns up to the crest fast! Aim into small valley. Remove horses! All men get to the guns. Do fast!"

I ran over the side of the ridge to look for the best place where to position the two guns, and completely forgot how exposed I was to the enemy's fire. The guns crushed clumsily over the ridge and were rolling down the slight incline. A clump of trees with a hedge nearby would have been a good place for our guns but the sight was bad. Then Vlatko came up behind me and pointed to a rise opposite to where we were standing and about 3000 meters away. I couldn't see anything but small puffs of smoke but whether it came from light firearms or the muzzle of a gun I couldn't tell. Then I heard the staccato of a machinegun, obviously coming from the woods stretching along slopes of Krndija hill. I recognized it is the place where the ruin must be that I had visited so often on more pleasant occasions.

"Get a few rounds down there into the woods. You see the fire coming from? Down there! More to the left take it with the first gun!" - Vlatko was excited and I could feel excitement rising in my veins, as well. I ran over to the first gun and told the marker where to direct the gun's sight to, quickly estimating the distance.



*A crew at firing training with a Czech howitzer gun in Stockerau March 1944.*

This Czech gun was excellent and easy to handle, even by only one gunner. I was strong enough to lift and turn the gun by pushing a long handle over the skid spur while another man had to press down this handle when the first shot was fired to get the spur grinding into the ground properly. The gun was turned and aimed, a grenade pushed into the barrel followed by a cartridge. For direct shooting one had to stuff seven small powder bags into a cartridge that had to be taken from yet another crate.

I turned to Vlatko who was standing between the two guns and shouted: "First gun ready to fire!" - "Aim and fire instantly! Then get the next shot ready!" - The first shot went out with a roaring noise; while the gun kicked back throwing the poor gunner who hadn't held it down properly. I was amazed to see the spur nearly hitting the crates stacked up in the back, and then heard Vlatko shriek: "Straight in! Great shot! Fire both guns now!"

Both howitzers were loaded and aimed, with the lead gunner lifting his right arm to signal readiness. I commanded fast: "Fire!" This time, there was a double echo, and though both guns pushed back they were held better and nobody was hurt. Vlatko watched the impact through his field glasses, smoke clouds out of the forest. All was quiet now even the shooting stopped for a moment. Vlatko was watching for some other machinegun fire and after a while it started again, but far more to the left. We swung the guns over towards the new target, took aim and were just about to fire the first weapon when we noticed some commotion behind us on the far right. It was our commander coming over the ridge and making straight for me with a wild look in his eyes.

"Are you crazy to expose the guns like this?" he shouted. "Who ordered you to open fire?" - I was completely dumbfounded, unable to get out one word, with the loaded howitzer behind waiting to be fired and all eyes on me. Vlatko came charging up and taking the captain further back seemed to explain the situation. I didn't know what to do, so I turned around and looked to see what was going on down below. It looked as if all firing had stopped.

After a while, Vlatko came back and told us to pull out. "But, Vlatko, the first gun is loaded and aimed for firing. What can we do?" — "Get it fired but at the highest

elevation and as far as possible." - Vlatko left, and I gave order to fire. God knows where this shot landed.

At this point, I guess, I must explain the problem of loaded cannon. To extract the cartridge from the barrel does not present a problem. By pulling the shutter open one pulls out the cartridge a bit that can be taken out by gunman's hand standing on the right who is also holding the firing rope. But to get the shell out is a rather dangerous operation as with a timber butt it gets its copper ring cut into the barrel's grooves when hammered in properly. There is a long pole with a hollow cylinder attached to fit over the fuse of the shell that must never be touched. By pushing the pole from the barrel's mouth one is supposed to get the cylinder over the fuse and press it against the shell body. With light strokes one then tries to dislodge the shell from the gripping grooves. When shell gets moving out it would fall on the soft bedding prepared at the other end of the barrel - hoping all the time that it won't explode during the operation. Theoretically, it should work but when training this method we had used blank shells and our instructor had warned us against using it with the real thing even in case of greatest emergency. This is why Vlatko and I had decided to fire a blind round rather than have our men extract the shell.

After the gun had been fired, I gave orders to pull out and ran back up the ridge. This time we used the cover of a hedge. Soon I was over on the other side and waved to the carriages to come and pull out the two guns. This was done without any great trouble, and soon we were back at the crossroads with a lot of traffic moving in the direction of Podgorac. Some troops were coming up the road we had turned in from around an hour earlier. I looked at one man in particular, a tall figure on horseback faintly reminding me of the Don Quixote. As he came closer I couldn't believe my eyes - it was Franjo. He was friend we had lost upon our arrival at Osijek when his orders had told him to join a unit the whereabouts of which we didn't know.

"Franjo, what are you doing here? Where is your unit?" — "Was that you firing a howitzer?" he asked me in return. — "Yes, we were shooting over there to that ridge you can see. Now our commander is furious because he claims we had no orders. A stupid thing to do anyway, direct combat with a howitzer." - I was getting quite blasé about my first experience at war.

"We did some fighting during our night retreat from Djakovo. I'm with the infantry and we have two short infantry guns and two anti-armours guns with smaller bore, you know those, the long Czech ones. They're very good."

Our conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the colonel accompanied by our commander. The colonel Stier addressed Franjo: "Good thing you're here sooner than expected. Get your platoon over that ridge and find a better shelter for your guns. We don't want to lose them that early in the game."

The colonel knew Franjo well and had obviously been waiting for him and his infantry guns to protect the retreat. Turning to me, he said with a sneer: "I was quite amazed to see howitzers move in for direct combat so fast, but your commander convinced me that it is better to have you protected by our infantry. Now, get on and move out of here fast."

I didn't need to be told twice, and wishing Franjo good luck I got on my horse and rode after the platoon. Soon I reached the four gun carriages though they had made good progress, overtaking the carts and troops on foot as well as the baggage train which, I noticed, had taken on a few civilians all on the road towards Nasice.

Nasice, 11 kilometres away, was yet another place I knew well since my childhood days. My grandfather had taken over some fishing business from the Count Pejacevic - after a great deal of legal haggling, I was told, in which my father had proved rather successful. I had spent many happy holidays fishing, hunting, riding and playing around the large farm and the many fishponds. I had been my grandfather's idea that I study civil engineering to solve the rather acute problem of fresh-water supply to the many ponds, some of which measured more than 100 hectares. The entire estate covered a sort of incline north of Nasice stretching out towards the Drava River. I had always admired how the spillways and water gates managed to keep the water level right and, at the same time, ensure a constant flow of fresh water in the ponds.

Childhood memories came flooding over me as our convoy made its way towards Nasice. How, as a six-year-old boy, I had broken through the ice on one of the ponds. A fisherman who wrapped me in his huge fur coat saved me and made me drink some of the home made "sljivovica", the plum brandy everybody considered to be medicine as well as a pleasant drink. Of my first romance with a girl who was a deaf mute. She was the daughter of the general manager, and I suppose it was her handicap which drew me to her, making me feel useful and strong when we were together, Ah, but these were days gone by.

Now, I needed to find a place to hide and get out of this idiotic war. I remembered Dr. Pavle's house at the corner of the Market Square. Just opposite lay the mansion of Count Pejacevic's family amidst a large garden and I knew how to get in there. The centre of Nasice was built on the northern slope of Krndija hill, and we were on the road coming in from the East whereas the main road from Osijek entered Nasice from northeast. We had driven over this bumpy road many times in Uncle Milan's elegant BMW 1936 model, with my sister and I sitting in the rear on two retractable seats looking forward with childish greed to the sumptuous meals served on the occasion of these hunting parties.

Merely thinking of it made my stomach rumble, and when a stop was called just out of Podgorac, I immediately made for the cooks'. I passed Gregl's convoy and noticed that the horses were being fed and watered, while the cooks dished out hot soup to the men. I thought it strange to stop so unprotected in the open road, with the horses still in harness, but nobody seemed to bother about it in their preoccupation to get something to eat and to drink.

Zorko walked up to me. I told him about our combat experience and how I had met Franjo, and then learned from him that we were proceeding to Nasice, and possibly on to Pozega. The roads were not good at all in that part of the country, very steep in some places and with good many turns, which would make progress difficult for the guns on their carriages. As we were eating and talking, the captain and Vlatko joined us, and for the first time we had some sort of combat briefing. It was decided that the captain and Vlatko would ride in front with a mounted reconnaissance unit together with the telecom detachment and some of Gregl's special troops on carts. Next would be the guns with

ammo carriages followed by the baggage train, with the rest of Gregl's men and carts making up the rear.

It was mid morning when our long convoy, stretching for over 1,000 meters, started on the road again. Zorko was in front with the second platoon and closer to the first one and to Virag's cart at the head of the baggage train. I couldn't see much of what went on ahead of me because of the dust stirred up by all the horses. Better to watch the sky anyway, I thought, for one of those nasty Russian JAKs might come swooping down on us. I was also trying to remember where this road met with the main road from Osijek, but it simply wouldn't come to mind. Whatever happened, I must try and find Dr. Pavle's house and see if he would hide me somewhere.

Dr. Pavle had helped my uncle one night when he had had trouble with the partisans coming to the farm he was staying at. The partisans seemed to know exactly where to look for the double-barrelled guns and the rifles my uncle had been hiding. They also took most of the food and other supplies they needed to survive the winter, and they cut down some of the beautiful old furniture found in the house. But my uncle didn't go with the partisans then and I didn't understand at all what was going on at the time. I did remember my father talking about Dr. Pavle and how he had been concerned for my uncle's safety. Some of the partisans may well have been workers from my uncle's fisheries, and in a way it was a pity that he hadn't gone with them, he might still have been alive that way.

There wasn't much point in these speculations, however. The important thing for me was to find a chance to hide somewhere, perhaps even find a hiding place for several of us because I could feel it in my bones that this retreat was going to end in disaster.

We were approaching Nasice and soon entered the market place lying in the centre of town. Our convoy was slowed down by a trek of civilians coming into the square from the right. I used the general confusion resulting from this collusion to ride off to the left. Soon I had found Dr. Pavle's house and jumping down from Zelenko's back I hitched his bridle to the nearest lamppost.

My knock was answered by a wary voice. "Who's there?" - But the door remained closed. "It's me, Zvonko, Dr. Zlatko's son from Osijek. Please let me in, I cannot stand about here much longer!"

I was beginning to worry that some of Gregl's men might see me enter the house. Mrs. Pavle opened the door: "Come in, come in. Oh, my boy, how did you get here?"

"Please, can I see your husband? It's rather urgent; I have no time to lose." - I couldn't very well tell the old lady that we had given up Osijek and that I was looking for a hiding place for myself.

"Oh, but my husband is not here. He had to leave because we were not sure what would happen when the Ustasas withdraw." — "Oh, then the doctor has joined the partisans? How do I get to them?"

"No, no, my husband didn't go with the partisans. He is much too old to bear such strain, you know him. Oh, he has been so weak these last months. Tell me, what happened to your uncle?"



"Madam, I have no idea whether he is alive or dead, but it's me I've to worry about now. I must get out of this chaos before it is too late."

The old lady looked at me with troubled eyes. Then she said: "Oh, please do come in and have something to eat. You must be hungry and thirsty." - We went together to the kitchen, and there was Dr. Pavle waiting for me and said: "I saw you coming from the basement window. But as you know, I have to be very careful now; we have to take great care that we let into the house. I hope to find a hiding place for a short while till the worst is over. For you Zvonko, I am sorry, I cannot hide you here. Or anywhere else, for that matter. It's just too late for this sort of thing. Too late and too dangerous to try and contact the partisans. I told your uncle a long time ago that he should join them, but he wouldn't listen and now he is in one of those German labour camps. Oh, my God, the times we're in!"

It was plain to see that there was no help to get from these two old people. They were just as helpless and frightened as I was. I asked again: "Can you at least tell me how to get in touch with the partisans?" - The old man shook his head and continued: "Not anymore. The partisans left this area some time ago because they expected trouble with all the Domobrans and Ustasas withdrawing. You best have something to eat and drink and then return to your unit."

I just didn't want to believe that this last chance was now also bursting like a soap bubble but clearly there was nothing to do but drink the weak Ersatz coffee and take the big sandwich Mrs. Pavle had prepared for me. When I had finished I thanked the old couple for the food and left the house hoping that nobody would have noticed my absence.

Zelenko was waiting for me outside. I could see that all the noise and commotion around him was beginning to make him nervous but he let me mount him all right in spite of my one armed effort as I was clutching the big sandwich with my other hand. Soon, we were making our way to the other end of the square. I noticed a group of soldiers and carts waiting in front of the count's house as I was looking around for our convoy, and hoped that it wouldn't be Gregl and his men that I'd run into. Fortunately, it was the ammo carts and the mobile kitchen that I first met up with when I reached the road leading west.

I passed them and continued in the direction of Slavonska Pozega on the main road that was quite wide and paved with large square cobblestones. At both sides of it were deep ditches sides behind which stood rows of chestnut trees and footpaths paved with bricks along house fronts. In spite of all the noise around me I could suddenly detect the noise of an airplane and soon after I saw it shadow through the green and white of the trees. Within a moment, all around me was in panic as people and horses, carts and soldiers were all diving for cover.

I had already had my first experience of an air raid some ten months earlier. We had been on a train waiting to get to Zagreb, when some Lightning airplanes attacked us during the night in Dobova railway station. All this experience came rushing back into my mind now, as Zelenko eared up and started to gallop down the road. I managed to steer him towards the nearest house and reaching for the garden wall, hitched myself up and over, falling onto soft soil on the other side. The attack stopped as suddenly as it

had started. After a while, I scrambled up and saw to my surprise that my nice, fat sandwich was still in my hand. Munching it, I walked up to the house and, to the great surprise of its owners who were assembled around the kitchen table, walked right through it and out the front door. I had been saved a second time!

The road was deserted but some soldiers and a few of the civilians were getting out of the ditches as I went on looking for Zelenko as he must have panicked and run off. As I was coming closer to the hill's foot I saw more and more overturned cars and people looking for their belongings. Some horses had been badly injured when the carts had collided in their downhill ride. At the crossroads, I met the first of our troops, a few men searching for bags of flour and other supplies that had been lost during the raid. They told me that the ammo carriages had not been hit but were stationed on the football field further on. I knew this place, and started for it in the hope to find our cart and Zelenko there too.

The Battery, I was told a little bit later, was on its way to Podravska Slatina, which came as a big surprise to all of us as we had expected we would be going to Pozega. But I quickened my pace and made for the next village on the road leading right to Donja Moticina. Moticina folk were known brawlers who used their knives with perfection, and my father had told me quite a few stories about the fatal end of their many fights. If the knife's user could prove that he had been filled up with liquor, murder was considered manslaughter and often only brought a sentence of three years in jail. It went on like this until one day a judge came who didn't believe so much in the "influence" of alcohol and started a more rigid interpretation of the law, with ten years in jail or more. As I walked on towards the village, I was remembering all this, and passed several soldiers from our Battery who seemed to be sorting out boxes of grenades lost from carts that had broken down or turned over.

I presumed that this part of our convoy had been passing me when I jumped over the wall in Nasice and hoped that Zelenko would have followed in this direction. I saw some dead horses, slaughtered probably by the cart drivers because they were badly wounded. I saw horses with the terrible wounds of shrapnel so different from bullet wounds. This meant that the air raid had been carried out also with small shrapnel bombs creating havoc on the ground, possibly even a stampede.

As I stepped off the road I ran into our veterinary we called shortly as VET. I didn't know this man very well having exchanged only a few words with him since he had joined our unit fresh from university. I didn't envy him his job having seen him with his entire arm in a horse's bowels trying to extract whatever block there was.

"Vet, have you seen my Zelenko by chance?" — "Sorry, I wouldn't know if I had. I am so busy with all these wounded horses here. These shrapnel wounds are terrible; we've already had to shoot quite a number of them. And there are others with broken ankles due to the stampede. It's terrible everywhere around here, I tell you!" - He turned to one of the drivers and told him to shoot his horse that was bleeding from many small wounds but worse than this, had a broken front leg hanging limp and useless. Just as I was looking at horse's eyes, the sharp ring of a shot hurled the animal forward and then slowly to one side. A few shudders went through the body, and then it lay still. I turned away and briskly walked on over the grassy field shocked and dismayed by what I had just seen. Where was Zelenko?

"Look up there, near the woods, I haven't had time to go there yet," came the Vet's voice behind me. I turned around and saw that he was preparing another victim for the finishing stroke. "But the best thing would be not to waste any time trying to find your horse." - The Vet carried on his bloody business and I thought had detected a note of warning in his voice trailing after me: "Better hurry and join the battery. They're up there close to the tree's line, waiting to see how many of the horses we can save."

A feeling of impending loss and anguish came over me as I walked on. Soon, I met another group of Gregl's men who had just about finished reloading some carts and started moving towards the road. They told me that so far they had not heard of any casualties among our men but that the number of dead and wounded horses seemed alarming. They had had to do some re-harnessing as a result, the only good thing being that most of the weaker horses had died.

Still, it was a miracle that none of the crates with ammunition had been hit. As this group moved off, I noticed a white figure near the edge of the woods and started running towards it calling out: "Zelenko! Zelenko!" - It was a white horse I was running up to but it couldn't be Zelenko or he would follow my call. But as I came closer I saw that it was my horse, after all, only he looked so strange, something terrible must have happened to him. I had to slow down sweat was running down my face and soaking my uniform.

Zelenko stood there as if nailed to the ground. As I slowly walked up to him he turned his head in answer to my call and looked at me with such incredible pain in his eyes that my heart stopped for a moment. As my gaze slowly went down to his legs I realized with absolute horror what had happened to him. His legs, all of them, were shorter than before. At first, I thought that the grass was so high but that was not the case. All four legs of my lovely Zelenko were broken at the ankle and he was teetering on them, with all hooves bent sideways at a most unnatural angle. His pain must be unbearable, as his poor haunting eyes were telling me.

I approached him gently and caressed his forehead and warm nozzle. He didn't make a sound, neither of pleased recognition nor of pain. He just followed me with his eyes as I walked round his immobile body. Standing at Zelenko's left I slowly pulled out my heavy army pistol and stroked him all the while with my left hand. I put my hand over his eyes as with my right I pressed the muzzle of the weapon behind his left ear. I pulled the trigger again and again till I had emptied the entire magazine into his head. The noise was deafening and the smell of explosive and burned hair struck my nostrils like a blow. Zelenko slowly fell sideways, his poor legs sticking into the air with the broken hooves dangling like death bells.

My stomach turned, and sobbing like a child I vomited and heaved on and on until I had thrown up all I had in me. As the spasm subsided, I was able to turn back to my dead horse, released the stomach belt and pulling it free took the saddle off him. Zelenko was dead; already his head looked quite different than that of the lively horse I'd known. I heaved the saddle on my shoulders and started walking towards the road - back to this insane routine of marching and killing and trying to avoid being killed.

There was more traffic in the direction of Moticina now and soon I was able to put the saddle on one of our passing carts. As I came to the top of a small rise, I could see the first houses of the village and the dust clouds stirred up by our convoy. A man came walking up the road in the opposite direction and as he came closer, I saw that it was

Zorko. I noticed with surprise that he carried no arms except for the revolver in his holster and that he was without a helmet. "Are you hurt?" he asked me. "Where have you been all this time?"

"You know that I was at the rear of the convoy. The air raid got me in Nasice, and I had to walk all the way here. My horse was so badly hit I had to shoot him." - As I talked to him, I noticed for the first time that my uniform was spattered with blood. But it didn't matter any more. Then I asked Zorko: "Why are you walking back?"

"I've to see that all our men join up with us, and quickly. The battery is marching on to Fericanci, and there we all meet up. Those are the orders. Just carry on this way and keep an eye open for the JAKs. You seem to be out of luck with them." - I nodded and walked on, with Zorko going in the opposite direction. At that moment little did I know that I had seen Zorko for the last time in my life.



***A horse named "Lucky" is almost alike my first war horse "Zelenko".***

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