

14. SURRENDER AND IMPRISONMENT

Tuesday, May 15, 1945

So we were marching on everyone subduing his fears and anxieties. I perspired intensely in mulling over too many unstable thoughts mostly about whether I am not going straight to my final destiny. Would I be shot at any moment or what kind of uncertainty should I expected in a few moments? I walked on right into the night following the road whiteness and felt the sweat running profusely down my back dampening my shirt. It was real a nuisance and the quietness became almost unbearable.

I cannot remember how I've been walking and felt the cold sweat running down my spine in total fear. I opened the holster and put my hand on the pistol shaft feeling just a little bit better. My body hair arose in the anticipation of a mortal danger. Would somebody shoot at us from the darkness? My momentary deliberation was snapped off suddenly by a gripping voice out of nowhere: "Stoj! Stoj! Stop instantly where you are. DO NOT MOVE otherwise you will be shot!" As enthralled I stood nailed to the ground waiting what would happen next. I was not sure whether I saw a reflection of light on a weapon ahead of me in the road and whether somebody was standing there blocking our way. The voice came from somebody invisible in the darkness and we stopped dead in our tracks.

There was a total silence around me as I was not aware if my comrades heard this command. "We've stopped marching as ordered!" I shouted back and made sure that all crunching of the boots stopped.

"Who are you and where are you going? Speak up so we can hear you!" The voice out of the dark was resolute and firm but not too aggressive. Instinctively I felt as a bit of my bravery returning and collecting all my guts I shouted back in the voice's direction: "I am an officer leading Domobran servicemen back to Slovenj Gradec to meet the partisans or the Yugoslav army. We want to surrender. The war is over for us."

A few seconds passed when the same voice asked again: "Are you commanding officer of the unit? What is your rank? What a unit you are commandeering?" As I wasn't sure of whom we had met here. If they are partisans or the Yugoslav Army standing in front of us we would have probably some chance? If we were confronting some Ustasas we might confront a massacre inevitably? I truly prayed fervently that this would be the troops of the Yugoslav army otherwise there might be carnage.

Carefully considering my words I said: "I will say my rank and named the unit I am leading provided I am talking to the partisans or Yugoslav army. I do not want to endanger the lives of my companions to be killed by Ustasas."

It didn't last long till the reply came but this time from a different speaker: "Understood! We are the Yugoslav Peoples' army. You, comrade officer, walk forward. You alone! Just you alone! Did you understand?"

I turned back looking for Virag and grasping for his hand shackled it firmly in a quick farewell and left them all without saying any word of parting. My mouth was dry and I felt the cold sweat running down my spine deeply. In holding the automatic against my chest and I started walking into the darkness in the direction from where the last order came

from. I was trembling all over and it took me a few seconds only walking the short distance that seemed to me like eternity. I stopped when another voice called out: "Stoj! Stop right there and don't move! Who are you and which unit are you with?"

Gathering all my strength I tried hard to reply as calmly as possible: "I'm a lieutenant junior of the Domobran 1. Howitzer Battery. Most of my soldiers are waiting behind me there on the road. We want to surrender to the Yugoslav army."

"I did understand you, comrade officer! Are you armed?" Soon a swift answer came from the darkness again.

Again I had to answer: "Yes. I carry with me light infantry arms only. The gunmen do have infantry weapons with them only too. About one kilometre behind we left our howitzer guns with the carts and ammo-carriers. Also horses are bridled to trees of a road nearby forest."

"Where is your commander?" asked the same voice out of obscurity again.

"We don't know. He left the battery with the other officers this afternoon without leaving any orders. We want to surrender now."

After a while came back the same speaker: "Yes, I understand you, comrade, it's alright with you now. The war is over for you. Start walking slowly forward and keep your arms crossed over your head. Go now!"

Then I started walking slowly down the whitish road holding hands on my head and my heart was beating so loud that I believed it could be heard far. I felt the rucksack bearing on my spine that was cold wet of perspiration. The automatic was hitting my chest with every step I made forward like in a slow motion. However I hardly made a few dozens of steps when a new voice came out of the night: "Walk slowly along the road right side and stop after ten strides. Throw away all arms that you have with you. I repeat ALL ARMS! Throw away ALL ARMS you carry, comrade. Did you understand?"

I did it as ordered at next command saying: "Put down your arms now". Instinctively I took off my automatic, pulled out the trigger throwing it in one direction and the weapon into another one. Then I took out my German "08" pistol, drew out the pin and the ammunition clip throwing them all in different directions. After I took the hand-grenade turning of its head-shell let it slowly rolling down the roadside trench and threw away its shaft with firing cord after. As in an afterthought I undid the holster and the belt tossing them away too as I would not need them anymore either. Now I was an unarmed soldier ready to become somebody's prisoner of war.

Then I notified towards the former voice that I was carried out his orders and that I do not hold any arms anymore. Then the same voice ordered me to continue walking down the road until the next command comes. I thought, you are a prisoner of war now but you do not know what all is about or what are your prospect in the future. My way led me into the imprisonment by way of a total darkness not only because of the moonless night but more because of the obscurity and the uncertainty of my fate.

All I could perceive behind me that was the metallic sound of more weapons being thrown away as I had done just a few minutes ago. I also could hear some steps behind me but I did not dare turn around or call out to find out who was behind me. I walked on and on but

the sound of pounding boots on the gravelled road surface was almost the same before. However it was somehow different now as my situation changed significantly during the past hour or so. "Alea jacta sunt!" I was telling to myself feeling the uncertainty of my future like a heavy burden on my shoulders. How close are we to Pamece I wondered? I had not been aware of being watched by anybody when a sudden command out of the darkness shocked me stopping me in my reveries again.

The new order instructed: "Turn left and off the road! Do it instantly!" I followed the instructions and stumbled into a ditch first. When I came up to the next side I felt a flat and soft ground under my feet. Somehow it seemed familiar to me but at the same moment I felt the vicinity of other humans too. I realized that this field must be crowded with civilians or soldiers who had surrendered before me and that this must be some sort of camp closer to Slovenj Gradec.

Then I had nearly stumbled over a body curled up on the damp ground. I asked in a hushed whisper: "Please, can you tell me where to go? Are you also a prisoner?"

"Shut up and lie down wherever you can find a place" answered a voice in a tired grumble.

I walked on and stumbled over yet another body who answered with a curse. Finally I went down on my hands and knees trying to find a spot where I myself could lie down for a rest. When I had found a place within a group of people, lying about without any particular order, I lay down and turned my attention to the sounds coming from all directions of the night. There was occasional firing coming from afar and then a flare went up in the direction we had come from. A metallic click from somewhere near was followed by some short orders. After that there was silence again broken only by the snoring of some of the sleepers around me. I put my blanket on the wet grass and placing my rucksack under my head I dozed off.

I must have been sleeping deeply and for hours because when I woke the dawn had come already. I sat up and looked around and found to my satisfaction that this was indeed a place I knew. It was the fields from where Vlatko had the battery fire its last volleys only yesterday. It suddenly seemed much longer ago than just twenty four hours as I looked around and saw the hundreds and hundreds of people resting in this field now with myself being one of them, a prisoner of war.

I turned my attention to the soldier next to me who was still in his Domobran uniform like most of the others. Only a few wore civilian clothes or a combination of uniform and civilian garb. I asked a man closest to me: "Friend, when did you get here and where are you from?"

The anonymous voice whispered: "Don't get up, sir. Lie down and we can talk. We were caught late last afternoon, after all our officers had left us running ahead with those Ustasas. Suddenly we found we'd been encircled on all sides, so we threw away our weapons and surrendered to the partisans. That's all. But you are an officer. Why are you here? Why don't you change into some other clothes or at least take off your insignia?"

Stupid, I thought, to have to be told a thing like that now that it was broad daylight and people were all around me. Still, I took out my civilian clothes and started taking off my boots who was no easy task as my feet had swollen terribly in the two days I had kept the boots on. Then I remembered the Italian army shoes Virag had brought me last night

before we left on our march into captivity. Where was Virag and where were the others? I wanted very much to look around for them and was just about to get up when I saw that some armed soldiers wearing a red star on their uniforms were slowly walking through the rows of prisoners.

They stopped occasionally and bending down pronged the body with their rifles, then picked up a thing here and there and walked on. Soon they were gone but were replaced by others who spread out in all directions. I realized that I had very little time left to change into civilian clothes and pack up my few belongings before one of the "scavengers" could get at them. I'd just finished when a shabbily dressed soldier stopped beside me and said: "That's a good pair of shoes you've got there - ugh, an officer's blouse, and pants too! That's just what I need. You wouldn't like to take my things in exchange, wouldn't you?"

I replied weakly: "No, comrade, just take those things. You need them more than I do."

"Thank you, comrade, I take it from you because you give it to me and you want nothing in exchange. Zdravo, death to fascism!" With my uniform under his arm he turned and left me looking after him wondering about my first encounter with the "enemy". So this was the army of liberators fighting to bring peace and order to the peoples of Yugoslavia.

Seeing that more "scavengers" were heading my way I decided to get rid of all my army bits and pieces and to hide my boots in my trouser legs if possible. During these changes I lost my felt covered flask, a present from my parents in my mountaineering days, and had to exchange my nice gleaming set of dishes complete with knife, fork and spoon, for a shabby, dented aluminium bowl dirty from many times of use.

My possessions dwindled rapidly and I began to worry about saving the rest, particularly those things vital to survive as well as the few valuables I still had on me. My life might depend on the chance of trading them in. I hid them as best I could on my body and in my rucksack. I still had what little food I had been able to bring along and my fine pocket-knife that so far had not been discovered. My greatest problem was where to hide my blanket and I finally decided to carry it between my back and the rucksack, folded up carefully and looped through the straps.

Fortunately, there wasn't more time left for "exchanges" as those close to the road started getting up and stepping into the road where some soldiers were already marching in the direction of Slovenj Gradec. Others were standing beside the road guarded by quite a number of red star soldiers who pointed their rifles at them. Shouts could be heard all over the field and I saw the prisoners getting up everywhere and streaming towards the exit to the road. It looked as if a flock was herded together and where are they supposed to go? I picked up my rucksack and joined my fellow-prisoners slowly advancing towards the "gate".

Coming closer to this exit, we heard the orders from the sentries lined up along the road: "Domobrans join up four deep and start marching. DO NOT STOP! Domobrans only! Ustasas stay put over to the left."

Curses followed shouts, cries, a shot and the constant repetition of the order to separate. There it was to be the first separation of the prisoners of war into "good" and "bad". It was obvious that many of the Ustasas would try to hide among the Domobrans and rather few civilians at present. At first glance one could have thought the civilians were dominant

among our group but at a second look it became evident that everyone had tried his best to change his army clothes or supplement them to make them look like civilian dress. People had been quite ingenious about it but one could still tell, in most cases at least, whether the man had belonged to the Domobrans or the Ustasas. All of these men were simple people, ordinary soldiers with hardly any crime to their conscience, as I thought it. A rather brutal and merciless procedure to pick out those that had belonged to an Ustasa unit and now tried to hide among the Domobrans. After all, most of us had been called to arms and had not been asked which unit we wanted to join. The real bad ones, I felt sure, were not in this group, they had either got away or got caught somewhere else.

Once through the bottle neck of the sorting out the column marched on at a steady pace and we had to run to join up with the front of them. This run was the first of many to follow in order to stay in the crowd. Soon I learned that a crowd was a safer place than marching or running on one's own when one was likely to get cursed, shouted at and spit on ... and the worse defamation, as I was to find out soon. Well, I had my first running of the gauntlet behind me and soon was marching with the others a four-deep column through the centre of Slovenj Gradec. Passing it we reached a large yard behind a large brown building that was either an army barracks or a school. As we came through the wide, vaulted gate I saw that there were thousands and thousands of people in-groups trying to find some shade under the trees in the orchard that spread up a hillside. That day had become rather hot by noontime.



Present north front of a building complex at Slovenj Gradec that were the barracks of the border militia of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The main entrance in 1945 has been closed since.

"Every Domobran find his military district!" a command blared from several loudspeakers hanging around the vast whitish gravelled yard. The military districts were marked on large boards and there were smaller signs with arrows pointing in the various directions. It took me some time to find the military district of Osijek that was far up the slope of the orchard.

I slowly made my way up the grassy slope through the crowd of prisoners. I saw quite often there was a happy experience of reunion with a friend, a relative or even a member of one's immediate family and I hoped that I would find some of my comrades too. Somehow, I felt better today in this camp than in the one last night. There was a feeling of hope, of having a chance again, of the possibility of a happy end to all this futility of war. After some wrong turns, I finally found the district where many of our gunners were coming from and with great joy was greeted by some of my men from the battery. They told me

that most of the others had followed me as well but that they and Virag too were at the other side of the orchard.

I wanted very much to see them but felt it was time that I join the group of my district that was some way up in the left corner. It was beginning to get dimmer and I suddenly felt a weakness and spent after all that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. "Good God Almighty, isn't this Dr. Zlatko's son? Come here! Do come here. Oh, boy, how did you get into this mess?"

It was my father's younger colleague, Dr. Franjo Paser, who had recognized me and was now coming out of a larger group of people resting underneath an apple tree. Suddenly, a few heads turned and quite a few people greeted me with sympathy though I did not know them personally. As it turned out, many of them had been my father's clients and their esteem for him now rubbed off on me. There were also a few Domobran officers in the group, older than I was and of higher rank, and somehow all of this made me feel that I, too, was now reunited with family and friends.

The general feeling of anxious restlessness all around me, however, soon changed this happy frame in my mind. People moved about trying to find lost relatives or friends but also looking for food and water. No food was issued though, and water we had to get from a tap near the building or from a small ditch that had been dug through the orchard. There were no sanitary installations of any kind nor was there any medical service. This camp for prisoners had been put up only recently without any special preparations. It was to be an emergency and why should the winner giving much thought to the loser.

Soon I found out that officers were treated rather badly and told to forget their rank and consider them to be equal to all the others. It was best to keep one's mouth shut because there was always the risk of being picked out on account of a fake report or some denunciation. Officers in general were considered "the worse of enemy" because they had been leading and commanding the men in the fight against the partisans. So we were all put together into groups according to military districts. It was our captors' idea that the prisoners themselves would know who belonged to their group and who Ustasa was or still worse a war criminal. They hoped to achieve some sort of self-selection under the pressure of fear and the wish for survival.

Night came and a strange silence fell over the upper camp. This part must have held well over 20.000 people as one of us figured out considering the width of the orchard and the closeness of people. As these were supposedly Domobrants and civilians only and there must be a total number of about 40.000 prisoners taking into account the Ustasas that were gathered in another part of the camp somewhere below us. All the prisoners had been taken within the last 24 hours near Slovenj Gradec. From the loudspeakers orders blared from time to time that were followed by slogans against fascism, war criminals and the like. They were quite a different tune to the songs we had learned during our training, and I don't remember that we ever were singing during the few months I was with the battery.

There were no attempts of "exchanges" possibly because of the crowded situation and the fact that we were not expected to own much any more. The next day it was ordered that all prisoners under the age of 17 have to report to the camp commander down in the building. The boys didn't return and nobody knew what had happened to them. We would find out soon enough what it was and why.

The nights were clear and frosty. Small fires were burning wherever people had been successful to put them up to get a little warmth. In spite of the cold and a sort of mist lying over the orchard though, the many thousands of prisoners were soon overpowered by sleep, cuddled together for warmth or rolled up in their blankets if they were fortunate to possess one. I thanked my mother for her foresight before me, too, fell asleep.



After the end of hostilities the inn "Taubenwirt" at Pamece close to the field where the author spent the first morning after his surrender.

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