

## 20. FLASH OF HUMAN KINDNESS ON THE WAY TO REEDUCATION

Wednesday, May 30, 1945

The rest of that happy Saturday was wet and dreary time. We were soaked to the skin by a rain that kept coming down until nightfall. More and more prisoners joined us coming from the direction we had come to Daruvar past morning, but it was impossible to talk to any of the newcomers as they formed a new "square" on that wet grassy plain. The number of guards was also increased, no doubt to prevent an outbreak or any other form of upheaval as the good women of Daruvar kept up their supply of soup and bread all day long.

The guards were also nervous because the good women and their children had found many relatives or even husbands between the prisoners and the danger that they would help them to escape was quite evident. My companions and I tried to stick together and to find a better, dryer place for the coming night which was rather difficult in the confinement of our "square", that place we were not allowed to leave. Being on the alert the sentries were patrolling the corridors that were formed in between the squares containing the prisoners.

However, we managed to arrange better sleeping quarters by forming a group of common interest. One man had a piece of tarpaulin which was spread on the ground. On top we had put on everything that was dry so that one dry blanket covered as many sleepers as it was possible. It was all topped up with another bit of cloth or oilcloth to guard against the rain. Everyone turned to one the same side, say the right hip, and remained so pressed close to the other companions. It was possible that 5-6 men sleep in this fashion with only one or two blankets to keep them warm and dry. To turn to the other side the entire group, of course, had to turn the same way too. The main problem consisted of keeping warm those who were at either end of the group. But we were all so exhausted that no one really bothered about the hard ground or the wet grass or the hip that might hurt after a while. It was strange that we always started sleeping on our right hip because somebody had explained that this would be better for the heart not to get too close to the humid ground. I guess it shows that in circumstances such as were ours; a human will do anything in the hope to survive.

During the night the skies cleared but the morning turned to be rather cool. I was grateful to be in the inner part of our "compartment" of sleepers but I noticed that everyone was shivering and pressing closer together. It was a cold night but peaceful and in the following morning of Sunday the women had arrived early with their gifts of food and my group was lucky to get some of it for breakfast. The warm soup was delicious and sort of glowed through the insides of our starving bodies while the gentle bowl's heat unfroze our stiff fingers, thus presenting us with a double effect of comfort.

I tried hard to manage to converse to one of the women in order to get some cloth for my feet. The guards were vigilant and rudely prevented any conversation by threatening that they would stop the food supply immediately. I still took my chance and whispered to one of the women my request for some cloth pointing to my feet. She stared at me, then at my feet, and I could see the horror and pity in her eyes before she quickly turned and went

away. I had to move on in the row and going back to my place but the hope filled my heart that this kind woman would certainly help me, if she could.

Later that morning we were presented with the revolutionary innovation of a loudspeaker. Nobody had noticed that several had been placed at top of the slight incline formed by the grassy plain that sloped down from the back of several gardens. At the bottom of that minor rise flowed a brook and a dirt road leading near it too. Soon we knew the few slogans by heart that was repeated in short intervals. These dealt mainly with the partisans' fight for freedom from fascism under the leadership of the hero Tito, comrade Tito and victorious warrior Tito. His name was also in all the songs as far as one could understand that distorted blare coming from several loudspeakers.

After some music with slogans stopped out of the loudspeakers echoed some kind of commands or was it a sort of speech? Nobody quite understood what had been said. When the music started again we saw several uniformed men coming down the path from houses on top of the rise. More people in different uniform and a few in civilian clothes followed them. They broke up and walked to the squares with prisoners' in-groups of two or three. Seeing this we got up in our "squares" and with some excitement waited for their arrival. In the meantime the message spread from the loudspeakers had been understood at last and made the rounds among the prisoners. Before the uniformed men reached us we knew what the command was about. The imprisoned officers were to step forward and separate from the rest of the prisoners. Anyone belonging to the Ustasas units was to do the same on pain of being found out later and declared the war criminal.

We didn't have much choice and as we were already more or less a group of officers it was decided that all of us go to the place indicated where officers had to assemble. I noticed with some misgivings that very few prisoners followed our example and wondered whether this was yet another trap set for us, possibly ending in maltreatment or torture. I talked to Vet and Dr. Franjo that perhaps it might be a better idea to turn back staying with the main body of prisoners. But it was too late for that now. Later we would observe how other the prisoners were moving to another place and, as far as we could make out, some were released after what looked like a registration procedure. To us it looked alike that our former fellow prisoners seemed all to be happy about what was happening to them as few walked or even run down the field as if they are freed. Later I would not meet anybody of those prisoners of war who were our companions during the past weeks of long marching after all. Only what I could hope for them that the freedom was waiting for them after all.

For us the future was still uncertain as we waited in the place that was indicated for the officers. We felt forlorn in this small group compared to the mass of humanity we had been walking and sleeping in during the past weeks. A few guards were standing around us pointing their automatic rifles in our direction, but nobody approached us later. After a while, we sat down and quietly discussed the various possibilities of our fate. Our group was small so we felt uncomfortable and exposed to the eyes of guards and their weapons.

It was almost after lunchtime when a few men in uniform followed by some civilians came to us finally. A political commissary was the first to address us explaining to distinguish his rank that differed from officers of the Yugoslav army. The comrade commissary stressed in his speech the victory won for the Yugoslav people against the fascism and suppression. He then told us how despicable we were to have fought with the German occupier and their lackeys, the Ustasas, who made us an enemy of the peoples. Anyone who was found to be a war criminal would have to face a trial and get the appropriate punishment. All

former Domobran officers would have to be reeducated to understand better their mistakes and learn how to serve the Peoples of Yugoslavia.

The word "REEDUCATION" was appearing so often in the commissary's speech that it was quite obvious that the main objective would be to get us back to the right way of living and how to behave under the new Yugoslav government headed by Marshal Tito. That was the gist of the speech and as far as we understood we were going to be sent to a reeducation course to turn us into proper officers able to serve in the Peoples Liberation Army. Well, we all thought, whatever it might mean to be reeducated into proper officers let's get on with it but where does it take us? Where would we be going from here? Nobody has told us this so far!

Our group of former officers consisted of about 20 men, all from the eastern part of Croatia, mostly from Osijek. There was nothing we could do really but wait and see whether we would be spending another night there in that wet grassy field or whether they would move us somewhere else. I was looking around for something I could use for my feet and as we were now closer to the gardens I hoped to find a discarded rubber tire or some such thing. The trouble was that the guards were now far more alert and watching us quite keenly. Also our group had dwindled down to haggard looking some twenty former officers. As it turned out there were some more surprises in store for us that Sunday afternoon.

The civilian, whom we had already seen at the first meeting, came again with a few more guards and then we started moving in the direction of town we were joined by the political commissary as well. Nobody had bothered to tell us where we were going so we just walked on, passing through the centre of town and finally arriving at a large building which turned out to be the spa's thermal baths. We could hardly believe it when, after having walked into the large entrance hall, we were told to strip end to leave all our clothes and belongings on the floor of a corridor, then to proceed stark naked into the main swimming hall. We must have been the real sights to anybody!

Covered in dirt from head to toe possibly a bit cleaner around the abdomen, greyer in colour than white, with hair and beard a greyish crust out of which our eyes and teeth gleamed with a sort of fluorescent sparkle. It was an awkward situation for us and we stood there with mixed feelings of embarrassment and joy at the chance to have a bath after so many days of dust and dirt. So we splashed into the water like schoolboys and took our time to wash and scrub off the layers of sand and dust and grit. In the end we sat on a bench by the side of the basin falling into a sort of daze from the warmth and the thermal vapours. I wonder what colour had the water in basin after we got out of it.

Reality caught up with us an hour later when we were ordered out of the hall warmth and go back into the corridor to collect our belongings. They seemed to have been searched but we were assured that nothing would be missing. The search had been for hidden weapons only. It felt rather pity having to put on ones filthy clothes again after all that washing and scrubbing which felt nasty on our clean skins. And would we be taken back to that wet field again and spend the night in the open?

Not at all! We were awarded another Sunday surprise when they led us to an open shed where the floor was equally hard but at least dry. We spread our bedding and slept like children until the next morning. Our shed seemed to be close to a military command post as our guards changed frequently. We were not allowed to leave the shed except to follow

the call of nature and that only if we happened to have a friendly guard, which we did just around the corner next to a dunghill.

Sometime in the morning a few women came pulling a small cart with pots of soup and some bags of bread. The woman I had asked for some foot wrappings was among them and she smiled at me pointing at the guard and then at the cart. We were not allowed to talk to the women who started to dish out the food without a word, but when I was handed my ration of bread I noticed it was wrapped in something that felt like wool. I blessed my benefactor and turning into a quiet corner found that she had given me a pair of old woollen socks on which thin leather soles had been sewn on. They wouldn't last long unless I found something that I could wrap around them for protection, and I was still a long way from Osijek.

Monday passed and found us still in the shed. There was no more food but on Tuesday morning another group of women came and brought us hot potato soup and freshly baked bread that was still warm. We heard how difficult it was for them to feed us and they expected that we would soon be moved. But Tuesday dragged on just as the two days before and at night we spread our bedding and lay down in the accustomed fashion. Only the floor seemed to get harder. We hadn't had any visitors, apart from the women; not even the "politico" had come to see us. So what about reeducation he had talked about so enthusiastically? That reeducation had become our main theme in the murmured talks we held when the guards were not too near. We were all nervous about it not knowing what to make of it.

On Wednesday morning we waited in vain for our charitable angels to come with bread and soup but I was lucky to find an old sack in the shed which I cut into strips as best I could. It took my nearly all day and so time went fast. At about lunchtime we were served strangely tasting soup that had no doubt been prepared in an army pot by leaving the remnants of previous meals inside. We asked ourselves whether this was an attempt to poison us or it was simply that they did not want civilians to feed any prisoners of war anymore. It was against the rules of the Convention we were told by the politico who came a little later to inform us that we would soon be leaving in order to start our reeducation. As we had destroyed everything on our retreat there was no transport for us, he explained, and we would have to carry on foot. Oh God, I thought, where would be this place for reeducation and how far would I still have to walk without shoes or boots?

We left Daruvar later in the afternoon and headed north. The difference in our marching was soon apparent now that we were a small group of prisoners led by six guards. We walked for about an hour, were allowed to rest for 15 minutes, and then walked on again. Night came, quiet and warm, as we marched through Koncanica and at Veliki Zdenci we had a longer stop.

As we passed near by the big fisheries at Koncanica and that reminded me of long talks my grandfather and uncle had with others who were in the same fishery business. Marching turned out to be less difficult and dangerous in such a small group. Our guards changed at Zdenci so we continued onwards to Grubisno Polje to start ascending the gentle slopes of Bilogora hills.

Only a month ago I had been in that night battle near Mali Grdjevac, no more than 5 kilometres from here as the crow flies from here. It seemed ages ago to me now. So much had happened since. Now I was a prisoner of war and may have shot at probably just few

of these men who were our guards now. And what had I been fighting for? Was it for my life? Or was it for my people? Or even for my country? Or had I simply followed the instinct of self-preservation. Was it perhaps that of the hunter testing his intelligence against the unknown force of the animal he hunts?

What strange coincidence that I should return to the place where for the first time in my life I had felt the mortal fear. Now there was almost more reason to be afraid, as we had no way of knowing what fate lay ahead of us - we were prisoners or even war criminals by winner's opinion. Without a chance to fight back and to arrange matters or improve ones situation, there was nothing we could do but walk and continue walking in the direction we were led.

Dawn was coming up as we passed through Loncarica, the highest point on the road to Virovitica. We stopped near a house that stood on its own far from all the others. A woman came out of the front door, still sleepy and wondering that had stopped by her house. The guard permitted that we drink some water from the well. In the meantime the good women run in all directions trying to help us the best way she could. I asked her if she could find something I might use as wrappings for my feet and she brought back to me an old pair of trousers of her husband. He had not come home as yet and the woman did not know whether he was dead or taken as a prisoner. I took the trousers and thanked her though I saw that I would not be able to wear them because they were too small for me. But they would do fine to be cut up into strips and worn wrapped around my feet. Soon after this encounter we marched on and by mid morning reached Virovitica, after a march of some 16 hours and a distance of about 50 kilometres.



**Prisoners of War are waiting in a formless group prior continuing their march.**

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