

23. IN PRISON OF OZNA 3 WAITING FOR REEDUCATION

In later half of June, 1945

I could make out a plank bed in one of the corners and sat down on it. I needed time to get accustomed to my new situation in the dim light shed by the small opening near the ceiling. So much had happened since my birthday yesterday. For some inexplicable reason I started to recite some verses of my favorite poet Silvije Strahimir Kranjcevic. Particularly one poem kept coming to my mind: "Eli! Eli! Lama azavtani?" - Jesus Christ's last words on Golgotha addressing his Father. I was fond of Kranjcevic's poems though they were difficult to remember and learn by heart, that I've found out preparing myself for final exams in 1943. Because I did well in the written exams I was exempted from the oral test and so my professors never heard my recital. Would it help me to recite them keeping my mind sane now?



One views down the steps to catacombs with few cells at the background.

After some time the door was opened and I was asked to come up to collect my dinner consisting of a piece of bread and a bowl of potato soup. I was allowed to eat my meal sitting out on a low wall in the small yard. I saw that there were a few other prisoners but we were not allowed to talk to each other. One of the soldiers amused him playing an accordion but his efforts were a torment for my more musical ears. At last, I got up and walked over to him offering him to teach him to play it well. But he insisted that I start playing the accordion instead, which I firmly but politely refused not knowing any of the songs he and his comrades might want to hear. But he kept insisting and finally I had to give in. I started to play a tune but my finger weren't with it, nor was my mind. The thought that I would have to return to my horrible cell kept tormenting me and prevented my playing well.

Still, my music seemed to have had a positive effect on the soldiers because when I was led back to my cell my guard told to be patient. He promised that I would soon be taken into a room above ground with some of the other prisoners but for the time being there was no place for me there. He did find me a bulb, however, and so I had some light until it was switched off for the night. I arranged myself on the plank bed and finally fell asleep, not without being visited by some rats which, I felt, might be less dangerous than some of their human relatives.

Next day, when I was having my morning meal, my musician "friend" came up to me and started a rather mystifying conversation: "Do you have a sister called Cvijeta?" - When I nodded in confirmation he said: "And could it be that she is a nurse in the army hospital?" Again I nodded and told him where the hospital was and what my sister looked like. This seemed to satisfy him because he said: "Well, comrade, it's time you get your bucket and clean your cell. You'll get the water from the Drava."

I was so surprised at this that it never came to my mind that this might be a plot. I took two buckets and followed him down the steps and out through the gate. Turning around the corner of the bastion mighty wall I could see the small opening near road level that gave light to my cell. There was the old cannon barrel still leaning against the basement wall, a several steps further on we walked under the Water Gate and down to the sandy banks of the Drava River. In the summer the river has no high waters and there are heaps of debris and stones stocked along the bank. As we arrived down to the bank there my sister suddenly came out from behind one of these heaps.

I was filled with joy to see her even though my guard told us that we didn't have much time. My sister checked my soles and was satisfied that they were healing though there were scabs still and dried up blisters, which made walking painful. But I hadn't got an infection or fever, probably due to the many tetanus injections I had been given during my training. My sister had also brought some fruit and other food for me that I put in one bucket and filled the other one with water. When I had returned to my prison I felt much better. The second day passed with some more accordion practice in the yard but later I had to return to sleep in the company of my rat friends again.

On the third day I was ordered to a room on the ground floor which had a wooden plank floor and two heavily barred windows with slanted boards to block the view. About ten prisoners had spread blankets and coats on the floor on which they rested. I found a place below one of the windows that I figured to be well above the street level and facing eastwards and down on the way to the Water Gate.

The man next to me didn't look as if he belonged to any of the Yugoslav nationalities. Soon I found out that he was a former officer of the German Wehrmacht but was born and lived in the Alsace. He asked if I would speak French and seemed happy when I said that I do. Alsacean then tried to explain to me that he was trying hard to prove his not being a German although he had served in the Wehrmacht. He also warned me in a very low voice that we had an informant in our midst. For this reason, he felt, we should keep all conversation to a minimum not to draw too much attention to ourselves.

It was warm in this room but dry and the floor was no harder than my plank bed in the dungeon. So I arranged my "bedding" on the floor and enjoyed the fact of having human companions rather than the four-legged ones. The only trouble was that the lice had come back even though I had changed some of my clothing and there might be fleas as well.

In the morning of the fourth day, just after I had had my meal, I was called out by a soldier and taken to a room on the same floor as ours but under a porch at the rear of the yard. I was told that I was going to be interrogated. At entering the room I was facing a young man across a desk that was only a few years older than I was and was dressed in a gray suit without any military insignia. The morning sunlight came through two windows and lit the entire room except the corner in which the man was sitting in the shadow cast by a pillar between the two windows. I noticed that he held a FN pistol in his hand and was

playing with it and pointing it at me for a few seconds several times during the oncoming conversation.

"Sit down on that chair in front of my desk, Zvonko!" - he said and the soldier left the room. Again the man pointed the pistol at me and waiting a little while said finally: "You are Ustasa and shouldn't be sitting here, you know."

"I am not Ustasa and never have been," I replied and continued: "you know that I was an officer in a Domobran Unit."

The commissar shot back: "That's a lie, you're Ustasa and we know it."

"I wasn't with the Ustasa and I've never applied to be with them."

"Don't dish me any lies. You're Ustasa and will stand before the People's Court and get the punishment you deserve. You are a war criminal." The interrogator instructed me sternly.

"I am not a war criminal. I have been an officer of the regular Croatian army called Domobranci. I served with the First Battery stationed here in Osijek until 13 April. Do you want further details?" - I insisted vehemently.

But the commissar would not listen to me and cut in: "For me you belong to the Ustasa. The First Battery was part of the Ustaski Zdrug under Colonel Stier, wasn't it so? You are an Ustasa!"

"That's correct but the First Battery was manned by Domobranci. At the end of 1944 the Croatian Army High Command wanted to merge the Domobranci with the Ustaska Vojnica, the military branch of the political movement and their special units called Ustasa. But surely you know all this, comrade."

He threw me a glance and said: "I'm not your comrade. I am an interrogator of OZNA with the code name "Deer" and you don't have to address me at all. You have to reply my questions and that's all. You are the Ustasa."

"I'm not! I am not! How could I be Ustasa with a family like mine? Surely you know about that situation of mixed marriages."

"I don't bother or care about your family problems. Of course we are well informed about your father, your mother and the sister you've met yesterday."

At this point I realized that the entire interview could be as prearranged as the one at Suho Polje. And I felt a certain satisfaction that I was considered worthwhile to be reeducated which after all was a way to get out of this mess and to be free. But I decided to play it my way and said: "Please believe me, comrade interrogator, if I had been or still be an Ustasa I would not be here after all. I had the chance to make my decision."

"What do you mean by that? When did you have a chance to make decisions, you lackey of the Nazis!" - His pistol was again pointing at me.

"In the night of 15 May I led most of the battery contingent into surrender to the Yugoslav Army hoping for their observance of the regulations of the Geneva Convention. The war was over and so we surrendered."

At this "Deer" became quite furious and shouted at me accusing me again and again of participation in the "Ustaski pokret" but I managed to keep calm in spite of the pistol he kept pointing at me. Suddenly he changed his tune: "Where did you surrender to the Yugoslav Army?"

"Just short of a few kilometers before of Dravograd I had walked some 500 kilometers back to Osijek. Most of this way I had to transverse on bare feet in less than three weeks."

"What do you mean by that? Where you not treated properly by the People's Army? Is that what you want to imply?" asked he double-tongued.

"My footwear was taken in "exchange" but that was probably my fault. As for proper treatment, I've had my share but I managed to survive and come back to Osijek."

"You don't seem to be afraid at all of the People's Court of Justice aren't you?"

"My only fear, comrade interrogator, is that this pistol you keep pointing at me might lose a shot, and then we are both in trouble. As for the People's Court I feel confident that they will find out the truth about me and that I have nothing to fear. I am ready to face the court and its decision."

My own courage and eloquence using some of the slogans the loudspeakers had been blaring at us from morning to night certainly surprised me. My opponent seemed equally surprised because he pointed the pistol at me and said: "It's not loaded, the magazine is empty. See for yourself if you want. And you don't have to be afraid of me, either."

"Well thanks, that's a relief. But why all that play about my being in the Ustasa when you know so much about me already?"

"I just wondered why neither you nor another member of your family joined up with the partisans? Why? Don't you believe in the rights of the people?"

That was a difficult question and I had to think quickly before I could answer it. Deer looked at me and placing the pistol in the drawer of the desk he pointed at me with the forefinger of his right hand: "Well, what's your answer to that, Zvonko, son of an advocate?"

"There are very few heroes who were born that way and I certainly am not one of them. I would say the circumstances of my life during the war were such that I could not take a heroic step. I did try several times to find out how I could run over to the People's Army, only nothing came of it until that day when I took my men to surrender to them. By then the war was over and I guess, you would say it was too late then. I'm afraid, comrade interrogator, I am too young and inexperienced to fully understand all that has happened, let alone the intricacies of politics. I suppose many will need to go through some sort of reeducation to understand the aspects of the Revolution."

Deer was stunned by my outburst and we just sat there looking at each other for some time. It must have been almost lunchtime when Deer finally got up and turning his back on me stood at the window for a while looking out into the opposite military yard. Turning round to face me he then said: "I'm sure we should both like a good swim in the Drava now, but you'll have to write down brief curriculum vitae. Do you know how to type on this typewriter?"

I replied vigorously: "Yes, I'll manage. Would you tell from when should I start?"

At last Deer came to the point by instructing me: "Write down all you did from the beginning of the war as from the summer of 1941. You were a member of the Ustasa youth organization, isn't it?"

"Yes, we all had to join even though it was more a formality. Those of my schoolmates who sympathized with the People's Movement signed up too in order to avoid any repression. I did it mainly to prevent any additional threat to my parents, especially my mother."

"I see, because she was considered to be in a "mixed marriage", if I remember correctly. Start writing now, I'll be back soon. Make two copies, and sign all of them. You'll find paper there in that drawer."

So, there I was. I sat down at the typewriter and started to write down the facts of my life of twenty years. Keep it for short, I told myself, stick to the facts and dates as far as you can recall them and don't give any explanations. I wrote about my going into labor service at Vocin in order to avoid an early paramilitary service. With it there I might have had to arrest and escort some of the first victims of the new regime in Croatia, such as Jews, Serbs and Gypsies or just opponents of the new men on power.

In Vocin, I only had to face hard labor, sifting sand and gravel at the age of sixteen, getting my nose bone cut by a shovel and not receiving proper medical care. The early morning rounds getting supplies for the camp followed after that accident. On returning home after two months of hard labor, I found my mother wearing the Jewish star on living the house that she did less and less frequently. My father worrying about his law practice under the new government he did not care for, my last years at school and everything that happened after I had passed my finals. It was all over now but as I typed my story all the misery came back to me.

I had just about to finish when Deer came back into the room. I wondered whether he was watching me secretly. He had brought me a piece of oven warm bread, which I ate while he was reading what I had written. He read it carefully and slowly so I had time to munch my bread. Deer said: "You're quite a typist. Pity I can't keep you as my scribe because you are an Ustasa."

Deer said this with a mean smile as he looked at me to whom I responded quickly: "I can't follow you, comrade interrogator? Why do you keep harping on the same theme over and over again? You can check with a number of people here in Osijek and you'll find that I am telling the truth. Will I be taken to the court from here?"

"Well, we'll see. Forget it for the time being as you'll stay with us for a while until the decision is made what will become of the enemy's collaborators and their serfs that

includes Domobran officers too. You must be reeducated to become acceptable to the People's Army."

I simply couldn't understand this man and his constant change of mood so I decided to play it cool and wait for whatever might be in the stars for me. Deer requested a few changes in my biography and then asked me to sign all copies. Then he told me that the interrogation was over and I should return to my cell. I repeated: "Do you mean the dungeon, comrade Deer? Why do I have to be treated like the worst criminal?"

"No, no, relax. You can go back to the big cell where you've been taken this morning. By the way, I count on you to report to me all that might occur in there. What all the men are talking about and so on? Do you understand?"

"You cannot ask me to become an informant after all I've been through, comrade interrogator. We were talking about the start of reeducation for me that would make me acceptable to the People's Movement. Surely they don't want informants."

"No, no, you are not to be an informant. Just keep your eyes open and when you've something to tell me ask the guard and tell him you want to add something to your record." - I made no reply to that but left the room. When I came out into the yard, I saw that it had turned mid afternoon. I'd been in there for the interrogation for several long hours. When I came back to the big cell, the Alsaceian was visibly relieved to see me and told me that I had been gone for over five hours. Soon we were given our evening meal and I lay down on the floor to sleep and forget all that had happened.

The first week in prison passed quickly and without incident and I started on my second week with much the same routine as before: accordion lessons and occasional secret meetings with my mother or my sister down by the Drava. They supplied me with all the little pleasures that made life in prison bearable: some fruit, a little special food, medicine or a clean shirt. And so it went till one day one of my inmates was ordered to pack his belongings. He was frightened and didn't want to leave but two soldiers dragged him out in the end.

I remembered that the man had been looking for a piece of paper and a pencil obviously wanting to write a message and get it out. So there was an informant in our cell, just the Alsaceian had warned me. Later that day, Deer passed me in the yard and when he saw me ordered me to follow him into his office. As soon as the door had closed behind us he turned to me and shouted: "You saw how one of the prisoners wrote a note and threw it out of the window, didn't you? And why did you not report it to me immediately?"

Though a bit shaken at this accusation I managed to keep my voice steady when I replied: "I didn't notice anything of the kind and I don't think it's my business to spy on others. I'm quite sure you know of all that's going on anyway."

"Never mind that now. I want to know what you are talking about with the man next to whom you are sleeping. He is a German officer. Why don't you speak in German with him?"

"The man is not a German but he is from Alsace so we are talking French because it is his mother tongue and a good exercise for me too. I like to make use of the time I'm hanging around here awaiting what's going to happen to me."

"You'll find out soon enough what's going to happen to collaborators and the like criminals. However, first you must go through the reeducation to learn how to serve the People's Movement. Go now but next time be sure to watch what's going on in the room and report to me immediately."

This was the last I saw of Deer but the next day my neighbor, the Alsaceian, was ordered to pack his things and get ready to leave the prison. I felt that my turn would be coming soon and asked my sister at our next meeting to bring me a few things I would need on my journey. The skin on my soles had healed and I could have worn shoes but decided to keep my father's sandals as they would appeal less to people for "exchange".

It was summer and so I didn't have to bother much about warm clothing, but a sweater and a blanket were always handy to have. In the bundle I received from my mother the day after, I found 15 Dinars, the first notes I saw of the new Yugoslav currency. I was told that this was quite a respectable sum as the old Croatian Kunas were exchanged seven thousands to one new Dinar. I was ready for my journey to be reeducated to acceptance by the Peoples of Yugoslavia, whoever they might be who would be judging me.

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