

## 25. AFTER ALL - TOGETHER AGAIN

Friday, July 20, 1945

As the days passed I fell into a routine with my newly acquired companions. We would get up from our soft straw beds early in the morning with one of us left to put the room in order. We had some hot soup and bread and then the clerks went to work in the office preparing long lists of names of the German prisoners. These records though were never up-to-date as so many of them died daily. After the morning call by German prisoners their representatives brought last day's losses that included the metal plates worn around the neck by anyone of German soldiers with their name and rank and army unit. The metal plates could be broken in two parts so one could be left on the dead and other one used for recording purposes. There was a lunch break for the clerks who were allowed to walk down to the Danube and swim mostly naked in the warm and gently flowing water. Few even managed to lie in the sun for a while or to wash socks and underwear trying to get rid of the lice as best as one could.

On such occasions we were always accompanied by several soldiers some of whom dared to swim or were taught it by those of who knew how to swim. We were about 120 kilometres down river of the confluence at Aljmas of Drava River in the Danube here. Aljmas was only 20 kilometres away from Osijek and my father used to row down to there where he and his friends had marvellous picnics on fresh fish stew. Novi Sad was too far away from Osijek to try and reach it by swimming against the river flow though! I had to watch out a bit for sunburn but in general these excursions did a good deal to replenish my energy and physical condition. Only my feelings were still haunted by all the dreadful pictures and memories I had lived through the past months. The horror simply wouldn't leave me! The thought of the German prisoners' living in an abyss of human existence made it even worse.

These were daily mementos of man's brutality and there wasn't anything I could do. I went back to the routine of doing everything to improve my living conditions in order to survive, same as all my companions did in this hazardous environment. Canny and adapting to every situation they managed to find additional food for us so that in the evenings we often shared meals of unexpected richness under the circumstances. After such a meal we would sit till late at night playing cards or just talking, forgetting that we were still prisoners in this unexpected luxury of living.

After a few nights, when I had overcome most of the shock of what I had seen of the German Prisoners of War, I joined in with the card playing. We played a game called "Fresh Four" and for some unknown reason I was generally lucky with my cards so that at the day of my departure, I had won nearly half a million of old Kunas. As there was no point in taking them with me, I gave them to the cook thanking him for the good care he had taken of me. I had certainly put on weight there in the prison at Novi Sad.

On Wednesday, July 18, Karl came running to our room shortly after he had left it going to the office. The commandant had ordered my departure and I was to report to him instantly. I was sorry to leave this place and the friends I had made here, and who had helped me so much in restoring my will to carry on. At the office building I saw a sergeant and six tall soldiers well armed and with the badges of a special army unit. I was stunned by the thought that such a large contingent was necessary to guard one single officer. I couldn't

help asking the commandant whether he really took me to be so dangerous. He burst out laughing and when everybody looked at us at his outburst he shouted scoffing: "Just look at this fucking Domobran officer! He thinks that seven best soldiers of the First Proletarian Brigade have turned up just for a fucking him! It's too much, fucking much. Comrade Sergeant! You better watch out for this man, he is used to have a guard of honours. I'll see you, you fucking son of a bitch when you've finished your reeducation." - The commander continued with his standard outbursts of curses and bad words to those I didn't want to listen anymore.

I didn't wait for the commander to finish his cursing tirade and went to the waiting group of soldiers. The sergeant told me in a low voice to walk over to the nearby waiting lorry and to climb on. It didn't take too long when a group of German prisoners approached walking very slowly. As far as I could make out from their insignia these men were all high-ranking officers like majors and colonels. They were all very weak and immediately sat down on the floor of the lorry platform opposite to the guards and myself sitting on a bench. The guards held their Russian automatics at the ready and when the awning flap was closed the lorry started moving. I had noticed a white star painted on the lorry's side as it must have been one from UNRRA's supply. After a shorter ride in complete silence the lorry stopped and we disembarked on a platform of the railway station of Novi Sad.

There we boarded a train and we were given in a compartment the 3rd class wagon at once. We had it to ourselves so the atmosphere became a little less tense. I started a conversation with one of the soldiers and soon the sergeant and the other guards joined in. I was asked whether I could speak German to the prisoners. I wasn't too sure about that question but when I realized that there was no alternate motive to it I admitted to speaking it quite fluently. Then the sergeant asked me to tell the German prisoners that they need not be afraid at all. They were being transferred to the officers' camp at Vrsac. They should tell the guards if they were hungry or thirsty and he would try to help them.

The German officers reacted with a very surprise when I addressed them in German and according to their rank. They were visibly relieved and introduced themselves in the correct German fashion too. It was a little ridiculous as each of them got up, saluted and reported his name and rank then shook hands with me. In turn I introduced them to the sergeant very formally which all of a sudden had put me into an important position of the intermediate. The first reaction from the guards was to offer the Germans cigarettes that worked like a miracle on the Germans.

As we travelled through the plains of Vojvodina I saw that most of the stations we passed were in good shape with only a few of them damaged. However, in all of them we saw crowds of people getting on or off trains. Our guards brought water, bread, some cheese and a sort of sausage all of which they distributed among us. I was offered the first and best pieces but I had little time to eat as I was constantly asked to translate between the soldiers and the Germans. The Germans at times were a little reluctant to answer the many questions, especially when it came to where they had been fighting. I soon realized that it was the best to pretend that I couldn't quite understand their answers or that it seemed as they have been fighting somewhere in Greece or something like that.

The travelling time was passing quickly and soon we had passed through stations of Kac, Sajkas, Titel where we crossed the Tisa River over a bridge that had been damaged and repaired by now and then stopped shortly at Orlovat. I didn't know this part of the country and pretended to look out of the window with great interest in order to escape from

constant services as a translator. Nevertheless, I had to keep the favour with the guards and couldn't risk seeming unhelpful. Fortunately, the Germans were so tired that they soon dozed off swaying gently in the monotonous movement of the train. At Veliki Bechkerek (now named Zrenjanin) the train stopped for a longer time and I watched crowds milling around shouting and pushing, running to catch some train etc. Suddenly I saw a familiar face standing before a wagon window and I started shouting out the window: "Uncle Mitre, uncle Mitre! Here, look here. Uncle. please!"

My uncle didn't hear me and I became quite agitated till the sergeant calmed me down. He escorted me out onto the platform where he told me to run after my uncle. So I did and sure enough it was my uncle. At first, he didn't recognize me but when I rattled off a few names he took me in one of those bear hugs that always embarrassed me. So I wriggled out of his arms and asked him to come with me to our train as it might start any moment. I noticed that one of the guards making signs to me to let me know that I still had enough time and I should relax. My uncle was tired and upset because he was searching in vain for his son-in-law, Mede, who had married his eldest daughter. Mede had been an officer with the Ustasas of Poglavnik's personal guard (PTS). I couldn't give him much news because I didn't know what had happened to the Ustasas who were taken prisoner with us in Slovenj Gradec or later. I knew that they didn't have much of chances as POWs at all and particularly not those who were close to Poglavnik. My uncle was very distressed but promised to inform my parents of our meeting as soon as he got home to Zagreb. He told me that there were several POW camps for officers near Vrsac and one in Kovin.

After about ten minutes I had to get back on the train that headed on east towards Vrsac near the Rumanian border. I thanked the sergeant for letting me talk to my uncle and he seemed concerned that my parents should know where I was going. We chatted on for a while about war and life at home before all the trouble started. Our guards didn't know anything about the reeducation camps but were interested to hear that there was one in Kovin as well, as two of the soldiers had their homes near Smederevo, a large town just across the Danube River from Kovin. Time went on and by nightfall we rolled into the Vrsac railway station.

The German officers were delivered to a camp quite near the station but I presented more of a problem, as according to the orders from OZNA 3 I had to be put into a camp for Domobran officers. The sergeant sent the two soldiers from Smederevo off in search for such a camp for me. They came back with news that the commandant of Vrsac camp wouldn't take me due to the fact that I had been already checked by OZNA 3. I was not supposed to mingle with prisoners who had not yet been interrogated and might well be members of the Ustasa or other collaborators. I was to be transferred to the camp at Kovin, an order that pleased the two from Smederevo no end. Seeing how it all fell into place, the sergeant ordered the two - whose names were Petar and Branislav - to get the necessary travel permit and to accompany me to Kovin first after which they could return to Novi Sad via Smederevo.

My two guards were so happy they started off on a fast trot to the indicated camp, which I had difficulty to keep up. Seeing this, one took my rucksack and the other my arm to help me walking. Once in sight of this particular camp they reverted to the official pose of a prisoner and guards. We entered through a gate in a high wall and found a gatehouse with a corporal on duty as camp guard. My two guards explained my difficult situation after that another problem arose yet: there was no clerk around who could write out the travel permits. Trying to be of help I explained that I could fill out the form on a typewriter

provided there was such a form. No sooner said than done. I had a little trouble with the typing as the typewriter was in Latin characters whereas the text was in Cyrillic, but in the end I managed and handed the paper to be signed to the corporal. The three men looked at me as if I was some sort of magician: typing on that machine, reading and writing in both languages and producing a written document! To be honest, I wasn't sure whether any of the three could read and write but the corporal put a stamp to the bottom of each sheet and signed it with something not unlike three crosses.

Whatever it was, it solved our problems, and with papers in hand and with Petar carrying my rucksack, three of us left the gatehouse to return to the railway station to get on a train that would take us to Kovin. The station, as we soon found out, had been closed for the night. All lights were out and the waiting room locked so we had to look for some sheltered place to wait the next morning. When we had found such a place I spread my blanket for the three of us as Petar and Branislav. They didn't have anything with them except their arms that they couldn't very well leave with me unguarded. Finally it was decided that Petar would go and look for something to eat and drink, while Branislav would try to obtain entry into the waiting room or an office of the station. So before I knew where I was, I was left alone sitting there on the platform worrying what might happen if a military patrol found me alone without any papers.

Fortunately it didn't take long until Branislav came back with good news that he had found a safer place in a corridor between the two offices that were locked up. Shortly after we had arranged ourselves there, Petar returned with a modest supply of bread and cheese, some milk and a huge melon. We ate and drank and washed ourselves at a tap and then settled down for the night. All of a sudden Petar asked: "Zvonko, are you afraid of us? You are so quiet all this time?"

"Am I afraid of you? Just because you wear a uniform of the First Proletarian Brigade? No, of course not. I've been too close to death to be afraid it now."

"I didn't mean because of the uniform. I meant because Branislav and I are both Serbs and you are a Croat so there might be some reasons to be afraid of us," Peter said seriously.

So I told them that there shouldn't be any hate or fear between Croats and Serbs who, according to the legend, had been the two tribes of the total of seven Southern Slavs who had come to these parts of the world led by two sisters and five brothers. It was said to have happened a long time ago, some time before the 7th century and the names of the sisters are reported to have been Tuga and Buga.

"Oh, well, we know that legend but tell us more about the Serbs and Croats. We were told that the Croats did bad things to the Serbs under the rule of Poglavnik Pavelic."

I had to admit to myself that there seemed some truth to this. I continued, "This was not just the Serbs who suffered under this regime. There were Croats who were considered enemies of the fascist rulers too. Fascism is nothing to do with the nationality. It is simply one of the worst forms of dictatorship, a rule of regimentation and rigid censorship, of suppression of all opposition, intolerant and nationalistic. Take King Alexander's declaration of Vidovdan in 1921 that was the start of a dictatorship in the old Yugoslavia. You've probably heard of the Obznana, the secret police that was dreaded by Serbs and Croats alike."

"But it was you, the Croats, who assassinated King Alexander in Marseilles in 1934. That was well before Pavelic come to power, wasn't it?" – Branislav shot in enquiringly.

"You cannot say that the Croats killed the king because it was done by a group of people, a well-organized group using an idea as for their disguise. The same can be said of Punisa Racic who killed Croatian politicians Stjepan and Pavle Radic in the parliament in Belgrade 1929. Do you know the reasons behind this assault?"

They were silent for a while so our conversation seemed to stop. The silence became oppressive and I wondered how I could appease my companions on whose goodwill I depended. Well, just try and explain your point of view before the two have more time to ponder about the hostility between our two nations. I wished I had paid better attention to the lessons of Professor Askocenski, our history teacher, and all the names and events and dates he had told us.

"Listen, Petar and Branislav, I didn't mean to start any argument about who started what in the history of Serbs and Croats. Since the days of the middle Ages our two nations never had any reason for conflict though they've gone through different historical development, and social and cultural evolution. I think one could say that only when the Kingdom of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia was formed at the end of 1918 that is after the end of World War One, the seeds of discontent and misunderstanding were sown then. Nonetheless, I believe that the right time is now, when all this could be remedied after all the suffering caused to all of us by forces from outside. We should get together and erase all traces of animosity and bloodshed."

Petar and Branislav were overcome by my eloquence and kept silent for a few moments. Then Branislav broke out: "You talk so different from our politicians who say too, that all nations are equal under Marshal Tito even though he is a Croat and that our first thought must be Yugoslavia. You sound very educated and convincing. How do you know so much about the history of our nations?"

This sounded like a sign of confidence and I concentrated on remembering all I'd learned in history and to recount it to them in the best possible way. It turned into a long lecture that lasted well into the night. I thought how strange it was that here, on my way to a prison camp, I was telling "my jailers" about the intricate history of our two nations. I told them of the first written documents that mention the Croatian leader Budimir mid of the 6th century. He followed Ljudevit, Trpimir and Domagoj who had fought against the Franks and Venetians, Byzantium and the Bulgarians. The first Croatian king became Tomislav in 925 for whom a millennium linden tree was planted in a park in Osijek in 1925 - the year I was born. I mentioned the great times that followed for Croats under King Dmitar Zvonimir and the fall of their kingdom under its last ruler, King Petar, who lost the battle against the Hungarians at Gvozd.

Since 1102, the Croatian noblemen had entered a personal union with the Hungarian kingdom under the Arpads. Later they had to fight against the Tatars and Turks until in 1493 Croatia was reduced to the "remnant of all remnants". Later the Habsburgs formed the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and Croatia became a part of it. The Croats had always been in direct contact with social, cultural and economic evolutions in the Middle Europe, especially as the Turks never conquered them entirely. I told my two listeners how the feudal system ended with the peasant's revolt and how their leader Matija Gubec was

crowned with a red-hot iron crown in 1573 on Kaptol Square in Zagreb. Then how Croatian Banus Jelacic saved the Habsburg Empire during the revolution in 1848 and he had put down the rebellious Hungarians.

This quick rundown of Croatian history had not presented much of a problem but when it came to that of Serbia I had to really dig back into my memory. I remembered that Stefan Nemanja had been ruling towards the end of 12th century and that Stefan Prvovencani had been the first king of the Serbs. Him followed Dusan Stefan Silni (the Mighty) as the emperor who had brought Serbia to its peak ruling also over Macedonia, Albania, Epirus and Tesalia in the mid of 14th century. The Serbs went down when they lost the battle against the Turks at Kosovo Polje in 1389 where Prince Lazar was killed.

I told them also of the Saints Cyril and Method who had brought Christianity to the Southern Slavs and translated the Bible and the liturgy into the old Slavic language thus preparing the basis for Slavic literacy in the late 9th century. Not to forget Saint Sava who in the 12th century created an independent Orthodox Church in Serbia and the Cyrillic alphabet. At the end of 15h century Serbia stopped to exist and all social, cultural and economic development came to a halt under the cruel rule of the Ottomans. Many Serbs fled and moved westward forming Serbs' enclaves even in Croatia bringing the orthodox faith to the parts that were parts of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Djordje Karadjordje led the first Serb revolt against the Turks early of the 18th century but Milos Obilic assassinated him.

I was surprised at the eager interest of my two listeners as I rattled off these dates and names. They seemed anxious to hear more so I went on telling them of Milan Obrenovic who formed a new Serbia state in the second half of 19th century that still depended on the support by the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. After the Serbs lost a war against Bulgaria followed a great deal of internal unrest and rebellion until King Alexander Obrenovic was slain by mutinous officers. The new king Petar Karadjordjevic loosened the ties to the Austrians after their Annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and entered a pact with Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece to drive out the Turks. Their fight got the full support of the Russian Tsar. After the successful war of 1913 against Bulgaria the new King Petar I. entered into the World War One on the side of the Russians. The Serbs were defeated and had to withdraw to Saloniki in Greece. From there they returned as the victors when the Austrians lost their control over the Balkan states. "And so you see, my friends, that our two nations were only separated by different destinies"

I concluded my long narrative saying: "Your Vuk Karadzic reformed the Serb language to be phonetic following the Croatian national movements under Bishop Strossmayer, Franjo Racki and Ljudevit Gaj whose aim was a Panslavic state. A more republican thinking emerged with Starcevic, Kvaternik and later, Trumbic and Supilo following that the Hungarian governor Khuen Hedervary was chased out from Zagreb. Even my father as a student was rebelling against Hungarians. The Croats were thinking of a parliamentary republic but they had the only choice to join the new monarchy in 1918."

"You mean to say, that the difficulties between our two nations started only then? Because of King Alexander's dictatorship and the Croats disliking him that he gave priority to the Serbs?" - I was at a loss for a good answer to that. In desperately searching for an answer I replied: "I don't know exactly when and how it happened that our two nations became so antagonistic and started fighting each other. But I do know that all that's happened during

and after the last war is the all wrong. We should all learn from this experience and try to manage better than our parents did, don't you think so?"

"You've got us all confused, Zvonko, with your story of our two peoples. However, you said some very good things, which I will remember. Let's get some sleep now. It is way past midnight." – When Branislav left us for a moment it was Petar who chose it to say in a low voice to me: "You must not be afraid of us because we are Serbs and belong to this famous brigade. We don't mean any harm to you even though you are a prisoner and a Croat. But I want you to know that I should like our King Petar to return to the throne of Yugoslavia. I only understand that Tito wants him out and to form a republic. Let's sleep now. Good night."

We didn't sleep for long or so it seemed to me at least, before people started coming into the station with the first morning light. We were lucky, as there was an early train to Kovin that consisted of the engine and two wagons and a few open freight cars at the end. Petar had managed again to procure something for breakfast and so we were munching away happily on bread and bacon, washing it down with some milk while we travelled south in a compartment to ourselves. We passed stations of Uljma and Banatski Karlovac and entered into the Delibatska Desert. After Devojacki Bunar we all were dozing in the heat that came through the window while the train made its slow way south.

After Bavaniste we came closer to the Danube and saw that the plains had turned green again. At the afternoon of Thursday, July 19, we got off the train at Kovin. The few people on the platform looked at us with some curiosity. I felt a little strange standing and waiting for Branislav who had gone to inquire about the POW camp. He came back with the news that the camp was on then way to the ferryboat, which they would have to take to reach Smederevo across the Danube. The idea of being with their families so soon put my two guards into an almost hilarious mood and they started off like two runners until I had to remind them that I wasn't able to walk that fast.

Again, they helped me as they had done the day before, with Petar carrying my rucksack and Branislav supporting me. As we reached a large, fenced in compound full of mulberry trees Petar handed the rucksack back to me as this seemed to be the camp in another silkworm plantation from the looks of it. As we walked along the fence, I saw the faces of men behind it watching us and one of them called out to me asking from where we were coming from. I realized that these must be my fellow prisoners and not wanting to embarrass my guards in any way, I simply replied that my military district was Osijek at which one man rushed off.

As we came closer to the entrance more and more prisoners were lining the fence on the other side watching our arrival. My two guards walked stiffly showing off the famous insignia of their unit and then handed me over to the camp commandant without any great ceremony when we had reached his office in a gatehouse. Just before one of the clerks was going to take me inside, Petar called out and handed me the big melon he had got from a farmer on our way to the camp and the remainder of his food supplies. "Here, Zvonko, take this. You and your inmates will need it more than we do. You were a very interesting prisoner and we hope that they'll let you go back home soon. Good luck, Zvonko!"

Then Branislav came up to me and handed me all he had left from his breakfast together with a few packets of cigarettes. "Here take it. I'm sure your friends will be happy to get

these and you must eat to get strong again. Thank you for all you told us about our nation's histories. Good luck to you and your comrades."

They both shook hands with me and then turned away and left for good. I stood there feeling almost forlorn without these two who brought me to the gate of an internal fence around the camp command post. The open space behind it was full of mulberry trees. As soon as I got through it, the inmates fellow prisoners of war surrounded me and started asking questions all at the same time. I stood there struggling with the big melon and the food I'd been given by my former two guardian angels for a while. Then I saw Dr. Franjo walking up to me with a group of men I remembered from the camp in Osijek.

"Welcome! Welcome, Zvonko! Nice of you to come and join us "Les Miserable", Dr. Franjo said taking the melon from me while Vet came rushing up to me and hugged me so that I nearly lost the packets of cigarettes. Feeling like the lost son coming home I let them guide me to a large building that I had noticed from outside already. Just as we were about to enter it the professor Sofic, one of my former teachers in mathematics and physics, came walking towards us exclaiming: "It's not possible! Is this really you, my dear Suckling?"

Tears were running down his cheeks as he pressed me against his chest and I felt faint for a moment so that he had to take me by the arm to steady me. "What happened to you? Why did they bring you alone these two heavily armed guards? Did you have any problem or trouble?"

I was again bombarded with questions, as everyone wanted to know what had happened to me after they had left me behind in Sremska Mitrovica. For the moment all I wanted was a place to rest and to put my things down. As for the cigarettes I had decided that I was going to give them all to my professor. The food I would dish out among all of us from the former group. The professor wanted me to come with him into the building and share a table he had been able to find as his "sleeping lodging". I dreaded the thought of going in and fearing that I might find a similar situation to the one, I had seen with the German prisoners' camp in Novi Sad. I turned to Vet and asked where he was staying. He hadn't changed much since I'd seen him last at Zeleno Polje and had still this haggard look. He showed me a nice place under one of the mulberry trees, close to the fence and yet quite private with a fine open view. It was July, dry and warm, and the thought of camping out in the open pleased me.

"What if it rains?" I asked. "Where do you go then?" — "It hasn't been raining yet and it's not likely for some time of the year now. It's been hot and dry ever since we arrived and there isn't much water for us at all. Most of it is used for cooking so the bugs enjoy staying with us. Inside the building it's like in a hell, smelly and noisy. I couldn't stand it there for a second."

I looked at him incredulously and asked: "Do you mean to say you haven't been able to wash since Daruvar? What about latrines?" - Vet nodding replied: "We haven't washed since Daruvar. For the latrines - you best see for yourself. They're large pits excavated from time to time when the old ones full and covered up. But we've got hold of some lime, which is some safeguard against infection at least. But always watch your step and go along the boards as nobody wants to dig you out of that muck if you fall in. Don't go by night. Best stay here with me, it's a good place. Food we get twice a day, some sort of a soup and a piece of bread."



I decided to stay and then Vet asked me whether I play "Preference", a card-game he enjoyed, acknowledging it I almost was beginning to feel like at "home" again. We sat down and ate the bread I had brought and then talked well into the night. It must have been past midnight when we finally spread my blanket and prepared our usual bedding on the soft grassy ground that felt fine after the hard floorboards I'd been sleeping on for several weeks. And so I slept into the dawn of Friday, July 20, a long way from home but back with the men with whom I had share so much of my fate in the last few months.

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