

01. THE INTRODUCTION

IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG MAN

My hometown is Osijek that is the biggest and most important town of East Croatia situated along the Right Bank of Drava River. The city stretches for over 15km and from its center is about 22 km to the confluence of Drava into Danube River. Osijek has a long and complex history that was important for the town prosperity and the development of its wider environments too. Each historical period left special characteristics as to an important strategic center of communication at crossways of continental and water routes. The town had several names like MURSA during Roman's times or ESSEGG and OSIJEK as it was called later. During town's over thousand years recorded past it was destroyed and reconstructed several times too.

I was born June 12, 1925 in Osijek and given the name ZVONKO that is the short form of ZVONIMIR. Most of old Croatian names are ending at "-mir" which means peace thus my name means in English "Bell-ringer for peace". It was given to me after the prominent Croatian King Dmitar Zvonimir (1074-1089). In 1925 one celebrated the coronation millennium of Duke Tomislav (920-924) that with Roman Pontiff's approval became the first King of Croatia (924-928). A young linden-tree (a sacred tree to most Slavic tribes) has been planted on this occasion the tree grows of which had suffered severely during Serbs' dominance that started after World War I. ended in 1918.

My first "political" encounter with the dictatorial regime happened when the King Alexander I. was assassinated in Marseilles 1934. My teacher Knezevic in Primary school was a Serb and mourned the loss of Serbs' King a lot. I was accused of whistling in a cinema when the newsreel showed the mortal attempt on King's life. I was loudly scolded and cried down in front of my class and sent home to report to father about my vile behavior. Very frightened and weeping bitterly I was explaining to father what happened in the school and about the accusations against me. It was a bad luck for the director Mr. Leka as he got onto my father who was a well-known lawyer and the president of Home & School Society. Father threatened him bringing my case to the Court because I wasn't in the school being sick on that day when the class visited the cinema. Thus, all ended with a few public apologies but I got my first lesson of a prosecution

I spent many days and sometimes a week or so at grandfather's Fishery near Nasice where uncle Pista (Stephen) was in charge living in a mansion at the farm "Lilla". An earthen road of say 3km linked it to the Fishery compound and offices where I preferred to go on a man driven 4-wheel "bicycle" on a 600mm narrow track. These tracks linked the many artificial fishponds so I often joined fishermen on their inspections or went with my uncle shooting wild birds that were not liked at fishponds at all. The dams around ponds were much endangered by Bisam rats (traded as water minks' fur) and uncle paid for every presented tail 5 Dinars that a lot of money at that time. Once in winter I wanted to see how a fisherman picks out fresh fishes for cooking at a small winter pond where normally young fish and breeding specimen were kept through cold seasons. He would cut a hole in the ice cover and let a mesh to go down slowly feeling the rope he would draw out to see the catch. Without much worrying about I stepped on ice covered with snow and walked towards him slowly when suddenly it gave way. I fell in an old hole and started howling for help and stretched both arms out that slowed my downfall

for crucial moments. The fisherman heard me instantly and approached creeping on his belly and pulled me out carefully, took off his heavy fur coat wrapping me in it and ran to the nearby office. Once there they unclothed me, put a woolen blanket around, sat me in front of an open fire in the mantelpiece and I had to gulp down hot tea with a lot of rum. Afterwards I didn't remember anything.

Parents had good friends at Karanac some 15km north of Osijek in Baranja. The Rosenbergs had there a large farm and on mighty fields they grew mainly maize that stocks were well over 2,5m high. With their son Gjuri (George) we went out with other youngsters to play "gendarmes and thieves" but one could get lost between maize stocks so we carried a compass on us often. The best places I liked were wheel-right and smith workshops where I learned the usage of so many hand tools. A fixed locomotive turned a transmission shaft to that one could attach a few leather belts to turn machines - so a turbine produced electricity too. The best time I had sitting on one of locomotives linked to another rather far away by steel ropes so they pulled for and back a huge plough with mighty 3 blades deep furrows in rich loamy soil for the next maize harvest. At the farm they kept a pony named "Golomb" for children so I got my first riding lessons here too. There are so many memories linked to these two places where I spent so many happy days of my childhood.

After finishing the Primary school in 1935 and subsequently continued my secondary education in the First Male Real Gymnasium in Osijek in school year 1935/6. About the same time I joined a recognized youth organization named HRVATSKI SOKOL ("Croatian Falcon"). Their meeting grounds were just over our garden rear fence some 2m high timber boards. At this sport's fields I've started my training in gymnastics and light athletics a few years later. Around 1938 I've joined a youth political group Hrvatski Krizari ("Croatian Crusaders") which members met in Franciscan cloisters in the Citadel of Osijek. The Grey Friars have been known as steadfast Croats and keepers' of religious Faith through many centuries even during medieval Turkish Occupation.

However, my father found out that this organization wasn't the right one for a young teenager so I became member of the Marijina Kongregacija ("St. Mary's Congregation"). This clerical youth organization was led by Padre Krist of the Society of Jesus who was a perfect and versatile organizer of young students. By 1939 many students of Secondary school joined St. Mary's Congregation achieving considerable successes in public too. Besides usual religious duties we had volleyball grounds used for skating in winter, played table tennis and billiards at basement rooms and an orchestra band and amateur theater group (in which I was an important factotum) performed in public too. I stayed with the Congregation until my graduation in summer 1943. Parallel to my Congregation's membership I started training light-athletics at "ZRINSKI" sports clubs on fields just beyond our house rear wooden fence too.

The family moved into a house bought and subsequently slightly rearranging and renovating the interior according to mother's instructions and under her strict supervision late 1936. Our house was a single standing and two-story structure called "Villa" that was situated in Krezmina Street that had a wide tarmac road lined by Japanese cheery-trees and pedestrian walks at both sides. All houses at the opposite side were built as attached ones. The night before my 12th birthday I have crept into parent's bedroom after I heard that something "big" was brought to parent's adjacent room. I jumped out of bed and quietly went to their darkened room making sure that parents were still downstairs at the living room. And there stood MY FIRST BICYCLE

covered with colored papers just waiting for me to touch it at least. I did it very carefully not making any noise or change positions of papers. I could hardly wait the next morning to see it in full splendor of the light on June 12, 1937.

In the following years I used my bicycle quite a lot and with friends had great fun riding on river dams on Sundays disturbing lovers (mostly soldiers) in their doings on grassy flanks. My bike had a torch mounted that could be turned so to throw light upon couples sitting on benches along the edge of fortress old mount. We approached in darkness the mount and driving on a known footpath below it switched on light at a correct position. One hadn't had enough time to look around as the disturbed persons started shouting and throwing stones at us. These happy days of my childhood wouldn't last for too long as very disturbing news were closing in on us with the rise of Hitler's regime in Germany.

I was a rather ailing child particularly during long winter months suffering of angina that kept me in bed for many days so I was absent from school for about 100 hours each year. I had high fevers and swollen throat for weeks until our pediatrician Dr. Marijana Bedenic prescribed the use of a new medicine "Prontosil" that just came on market late 1938. The "aunt" Licika, as we called her, was the wife of Dr. Milan Bedenic who was the Chief of Medical Center, just few houses away from ours. The "uncle" Milan was a good friend of our family too and I had him as a lecturer in a few classes where he taught about the body and mental hygiene including some facts regarding physiology and sexuality. We rather liked his lectures as there were always so many new interesting details and showed pictures or posters that any teenager was keen to view and look at too.

As a small boy I suffered of bronchial asthma so I spent winters at mountain resorts and for summers the whole family went to the Adriatic coast. Although it wasn't simple to travel with a family of four we stayed at a health center at Crikvenica and then we visited Islands of Korcula, Brac and Lopud near Dubrovnik. On Korcula I remember vividly when father killed a rather poisonous snake "poskok", a kind of horned viper, with a stone becoming a hero of the day (I'm sure he didn't know how poisonous it was!). Also on Korcula we were invited to visit the large British battle ship "Queen Elisabeth" anchored outside the harbor where I was taken down into huge guns emplacement.

My father must have had a real nightmare during the railway voyage to Dubrovnik as four of us plus all the luggage had to change trains several times. First change was in Vinkovci to a train for Slavonski Brod and then again at Bosanski Brod on a 700mm narrow gauge train for Sarajevo arriving around midnight. There we had to get on the cogwheel railway for Mostar and as the last one onto a 700mm-gauge train for Dubrovnik at last. Back we traveled by ship to Rijeka and from there to Zagreb and Osijek with standard gauge railways. In late 1930's mother got some troubles with her knees and went to a thermal bath for a cure. Therefore I accompanied father on his mountaineering trips into the Velebit massive (northern Adriatic Coast) and to the mountains in western Slovenia. These were rather tiresome holidays for a young teenager particularly following father long and fast strides. One thing made me nervous following father's choice of short cuts that turned too often into disasters because he didn't have any feeling for the orientation at all so I had to step in to get us on the right path. He never acknowledged it though!

In 1939 the BANOVINIJA HRVATSKA ("County Province Croatia") got the autonomy within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The strongest political in Croatia was the Peasants' Party (HSS) that founded its Youth Party Wing called HRVATSKI JUNAK ("Croatian Brave"). Boys and girls wore a kind of uniform that was topped up with a blue cap. I didn't care much about the Junaks' doings being busy in the St. Mary Congregation until the new-sprung regime of Independent State of Croatia (known as "NDH") changed its name into a new youths organization named Ustaska Mladez ("Ustasa Youth") by summer 1941. The later organization was a compulsory one similar to the Hitler's Youth organization. So everybody had to become its member and particularly all university students as from the fall of 1941. So I had become an obligatory member of it too but I never attended meetings that were held by this fascistic oriented youth's organization.

On March 27, 1941 a military Coup d'etat dismissed the Yugoslav civilian government and the generals enthroned the under-aged Petar Karadjordjevic II as the new King of Yugoslavia. This all happened in defiance to Hitler's Germany with whom the former civilian Yugoslav government entered into the "Three partite pact" only a few days before on March 23, 1941. The mutinous Yugoslav Military Command announced the general mobilization by end of March. On April 6, 1941 early morning consequently German "Stukas" bombarded Belgrade without any warning. Subsequently the German Army occupied the whole country of former Kingdom of Yugoslavia by April 10, 1941.

A few days my father got a letter from the Municipality Center ordering me to report with my bicycle immediately even before the general mobilization. The Center was at the TVRDJA - the Citadel of Osijek - that was within its medieval bastion fortifications. I took a day off from school lucky I could stay away from a class-work in Latin held by a professor I didn't like at all. On arrival at the office I found a crowd there including some other youngsters waiting to receive their orders. We had to register our bicycles and got a cipher plate fixed to the front and rear mud-breakers. After an hour of waiting I got some dozens of sheets addressed to various persons at a certain city's part. I left the Center with a bunch of letters and was instructed to return the undelivered ones next morning.

The whole day I had pedaled delivering letters of unknown content to peoples living in streets or at places I never knew that they exist in my hometown. The person whom I had delivered this ominous looking letter had to sign a receipt that I put away for the Center's archive. If I couldn't deliver the letter I had to leave a notice to the addressee person with instruction to call at the Center in 24 hours under threat of a severe punishment. Then on the next day I had learned what letters' content was all about. Some of these were for persons to report to their army units and the other ones were for vehicles of any kind including bicycles to be delivered to Municipality's collection places. I worked my ways for two full days already when I picked up my third bunch of letters of calls for the third day in succession. I was really fed up with this rather unpleasant and dispirited courier's business and to return home dog-tired late on afternoons.

On the third day my father has closed his lawyer's office as usual and went looking after me. He had a rather unhappy mien on his face when he handed over to me the letter that from I knew so well now by delivering it during past three days. I opened the letter and my heart stopped beating for a moment at reading its content. I was ordered to deliver my bicycle to the Municipality the next day. Oh, of all the horrors, I did not want to believe getting this letter at all. I couldn't sleep the whole night thinking about how to prevent my bicycle to be dispossessed of by the Center. I worked for that Center very

hard for three days and I just couldn't believe that it wants my bicycle after all. Why should the Government need it and for what purpose at all? Who would ride on my bicycle my beautiful black "Wanderer Waffenrad" touring bicycle? How could a bike be used in defending the State?

On the next morning my father took me into his huge arms and pressed me sobbing to his big chest. He said: "Son, that's one of life's hardships. Soon many more ones would fall upon us. There might be even more dramatic or tragic ones than this one which you feel so unhappy about. You go and deliver your bicycle at the Center now." So I gave up my first bicycle on a day early in April 1941. I never saw it after. Thus my bicycle went to the war just two years before his owner but that I couldn't possibly know at that moment.

After passing the Lower baccalaureate in summer of 1940 I continued my study in the 5th grade of Male Real-Gymnasium Osijek. [Note of explanation: A Real-Gymnasium is a natural science oriented secondary school with 8 grades that ends up with a "Matura" alias the baccalaureate as the final examination.] With entering the higher classes it was time for me to learn dancing too. I entered Topalovic Dancing School that held its dancing lessons at the Casino's biggest hall. Casino was the place where burghers from Osijek Upper City met in a café or reading room and played cards in separate rooms. My father went there after he closed his office for the day to play the card game "Preference" with his comrades particularly during winter long months.

We learned to dance at the tune of an accompanying pianist who must have been rather bored repeating the same tunes too often. At the beginning lessons I wore knickerbockers and got my first full clothing with long trousers for the final school's dancing-party only. The coronet, as it was called, was held at the largest hall of the HRVATSKI DOM ("Croatian Home") a center for various cultural and social activities. Parents and invited friends congregated for the coronet and everybody had a lot of fun and dancing together to the tunes of a proper band.

It was customary that children from burghers' families went to learn playing any musical instrument and Osijek had reputable Musical school too. I stopped playing violin after long last some time when we moved to our new house in Krezmina Street late 1936. I even got separate violin lessons but my teacher was so happy about when I terminated it commenting that the World was spared of a non-enthusiastic violinist with no proper sense of hearing too. My mother insisted me playing some other instrument so she got hold of a military musician and teacher who encouraged me to learn playing the accordion (a wind instrument) at last. Thus I started my band player's career on a dark-red Hohner accordion having 84 basses but no registers.

When settled for the accordion at last I continued my exercises to play the instrument quite well after a while. In my exultation I even contemplated to compose a musical probably as a result of former composition tutorial at Musical school. Our neighbor's son two years elder Zdenko Kljunic heard my accordion playing and suggested we create a band as he played violin and clarinet quite well. Soon after Slavko Vanicek about my age joined us and liked to play the saxophone. The band was almost complete by the time of 1940 summer holidays and we had many working sessions. By fall our band got ready to go public and we offered our services to Topalovic's dancing school too. Not for long our band became quite popular and played at most dancing parties held in Osijek. We could afford buying a few new instruments from savings we made of

compensation and of gratuitous payments. Slavko was our cashier and economic adviser -- no wonder as he was studying economics then.

We named our band "Snow White and Seven Dwarfs" as it had eight members. Posters on each of the 7 note-stands depicted dwarfs from Walt Disney's movie. Peter, our piano player, had a large Snow White's poster standing on his instrument that collapsed sometimes when the playing became too furious or Peter didn't fix its one-leg rear support properly. I got on a new black & white Hohner's accordion with 108 basses and a few registers that represented a great advantage for me. Sometimes I accompanied the band on a guitar or drums as required. My note-stand poster was of the dwarf "Sleepy" despite the fact that I was almost the busiest one of all others. Our band was quite busy until the World War 2 came to our town Osijek when the German Army attacked Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

I was 16 years old when German Army unexpectedly bombarded Belgrade on the morning of April 6, 1941. A few days later German mostly motorized units passed through Osijek where very numerous people cheered at them on crowded streets. Many of them wore a red armband on left upper arm with 4-hooked black of a "swastika" on a white background and cheered "SIEG HEIL" stretching out the right hand. Many citizens of Osijek were of German origins that were known as the "Danube Swabians" in regions. I was so fascinated and mesmerized by all these happenings and coming home I started drawing the "swastika" on a white paper to glue it onto a red one preparing an armband similar to the worn one by those excited people on streets. At a sudden my cousin entered the room and seeing what I was doing became so very outrageous and shouting at me grabbed and tore to pieces my stupid "work of art". I would learn what dangers and anxieties waited on ahead too soon.

The INDEPENDENT STATE OF CROATIA (or shortened as "NDH") was proclaimed on April 10, 1941. Few days later arrived Dr. Ante Pavelic and on April 16, as self appointed new state's ruler, he nominated his government that had to be fully cooperative with the new USTASA (read: ustasha) regime. Pavelic's autocratic regime was allied to Hitler's NAZI and Mussolini's Fascist regimes as such. During next few months the regime started eliminating its assumed or prospective enemies and anybody else who opposed regime's intentions in general. It pursued persons either of their race like Gypsies or because their faith like Jewish or Orthodox as well as Serb nationals presuming them to be opponents of the regime too. My father, a renowned lawyer in Osijek, has learned too soon about many cases of police arrests, lawless abductions of many people and about disappearing of persons without any trace.

By end of June 1941 we have received a Memorial Certificate for the previous school year in that I completed the 6th grade (equivalent say to K9). However we couldn't have any summer holidays under prevailing circumstances of the summer 1941. All students aged 15+ years had to become members of Ustasa Youth organization and to dedicate all our efforts to build the new State. One could either start a paramilitary training or join a group for any kind of voluntary construction work. Father decided that I should join a builder's works group although and with 16 years I the youngest in that cluster. The group counted some 40 students and we left the railway station of Osijek early in July 1941.

We disembarked at Mikleus station and got onto trucks that drove us to the village Vocin. We were accommodated in the local Primary school where in a few classrooms

the benches were piled up at side. As for the bedding one got hay and dried out maize leaves on which we spread our bed-sheets and blankets that everybody had to bring with him from home. For dinner we got something to eat from a provisional kitchen put up in a disused school's shed. Outside of it one placed several crude benches and a few dirty makeshift tables. I never before stayed in such an environment so the whole day was too strange and disheartening to me. I grew up in a burgher's family that was a rather comfortable and favorable surrounding in that I was well cared after. Now I was hungry and too tired just wanting to sleep and I fell asleep instantly on a straw bed without undressing or washing and cleaning teeth too.

Next morning at 6 o'clock I was awakened out of deepest slumber by whistles and shouting. I never had to get up so early before! I went out dressed the same as on arrival to attend my first of roll calls also to learn about our day's chores. After a breakfast of fresh-warm white bread and milk we left the domicile close to 7 AM to pick up tools and equipment needed for our day's task. One marched us out of Vocin to the nearby almost dry Vocinka stream that source is on Papuk mountain northern slope not so far away from Vocin village. Vocinka rivulet has a mountainous character here and its riverbed had plenty of good gravel of mixed grain sizes. We had to sieve the gravel into 3 sizes of which the largest grain went for road construction and the two smaller sizes would be used for concrete works.

We put three sieves of different mesh gauge in a row at riverbed's leveled place at a distance of about 3 m in between to enable a pair with shovels throwing gravel onto the next sieve. Others had to excavate the gravel and wheelbarrow it to a hip in front of the largest gauged sieve. From there onwards it was shoveled through sieves one by one until large enough hips formed in between sieves to be wheeled up to the river bank for dispatch. This rather hard work was lasting 7 full hours with an hour lunch break at makeshift canteen. The total day's work lasted 8 hours - very long hours for somebody not used to it at all.

I had an accident after about a week of this muscle-tearing hard works. The pairs working with shovels had to synchronize their action avoiding any accidental contact with his opposite's shovel. Suddenly, I still don't know how it had happened when my opposite's shovel hit me straight into the face. Blood run over my lips like me being a slaughtered hog as my nose bone was hit at its route by one shovel's stroke. Blood streamed down to mouth and I fell unconscious for a few moments when our first-aid man Zagar (a student of medicine) rushed in. By gently pressing gauze on my nose so the bleeding stopped after-a-while. Zagar helped me blood stained to ascend from the riverbed and to place me in the waiting peasant's farm cart that one used for the gravel transport. Thus ended for me the hard work but I had to stay in Vocin until the end, as the commander didn't want to inform my parents about this accident at all.

Several days later I felt no more pain and the wound healed without any complications besides a rather visible scar under my nose bone. Zagar got me in his heart and looked after me like at a dear younger brother. He told me also that camp's commander didn't dare to send me home earlier for some unknown reasons. He proposed me taking on a duty that wouldn't ask for too much effort from me and so I became camp's caterer soon after. The night guard woke me up each morning at 02:45 and by 3 o'clock a peasant with his one-horse cart arrived at the gate. The horse pulled the cart at a steady pace for about an hour or so with two us dozing until it stopped - we had arrived at the turning point. I never discovered where we went but the cart driver woke instantly asking me to

show the list of items supposed to collect on our way back. We returned stopping at one house after the other where women with candle in hand arrived carrying some milk and other goods ordered day before. I put milk in a 50litre can dotting down its quantity for payment later or paid other goods instantly. We were back by 5 o'clock with dawn lighting up eastern skies. Never later did I see dawn coming up so often!

After the breakfast I was free for rest of the day so some times I climbed up to the ruin of Vocin fortress spending several hours there talking to or listening to Zagar's lecturing. His hobby was hypnotism but he couldn't get me hypnotized. One evening on my suggestion Zagar made an experiment of mass hypnosis when some mates bit into onions "assuming" that these were apples. After the last evening meal in the camp one organized a farewell fete that included a real show when Zagar performed mass hypnosis making us cheering and laughing for hours. We didn't go to sleep at all and packed our belongings to clear up our domicile after the very 6 long weeks we spent there. We left Vocin in an old truck and traveling on a train I was back home dirty and smelling awfully by mid of next morning. After a thorough bathing and too good mother's meal I fell asleep like a hog in my bed. After a while I woke up of some horrible odor as I dirtied my clean and soft bed all over as well as myself too. I was so ashamed but I have learned something from this awful incident as to "never drink or eat too much at once after you dehydrated and/or starved for a longer period of time".

During my 6 weeks absence many things changed in daily routines at home. I noticed that mother wouldn't go out of the house without wearing a yellow armband with a Jewish star on it. Subsequently I learned many facts about the regime's persecution of Jews and that of my parents living in a mixed marriage. I didn't knew anything about my parents "mixed marriage" before as one observed and celebrated all the Roman-Catholic festivities like any body else. All I knew was that mother changed her religion when marrying my father so long time ago in 1923. The other colleagues who went for a paramilitary training in a students' brigade reported that they were helping Police's officers or Ustasa's secret police agents arresting or abducting different persons. They had to accompany the unfortunates into prisons or camps from which a few would return alive. My father's foresight to send me to hard work out of Osijek was too accurate in regard of all the anxieties and dangers that lie ahead.

Later in fall of 1941 our band came together again so we offered our services to the re-opened Dancing School first. Now we had to watch what to play and changed to our repertoire too. Lambent-walk craze was out and dancing of Swing or English Waltz was not allowed either. Instead we would play for dancing foxtrots, slow-fox, tangos or waltzes. Slavko or Zdenko acted as band's musical arrangers and were quite busy and responsible for pounding of the correct rhythm at play's start. It wasn't an easy task at all because dancers asked for faster rhythms too often. Band would easily go to Swing tunes that weren't allowed at all that could bring us in jeopardy of loosing our license too.

Band couldn't continue playing as a team of eight in the long run as one couldn't find a party organizer capable of paying for a big band as ours anymore. Thus Slavko relieved one the other team's member occasionally and we would play in smaller groups as required or as an organizer was prepared to pay for. An accordion player can entertain and play music alone any time so I played either accordion or guitar in such a smaller team. Mostly it consisted of Zdenko (violin or clarinet), Peter (piano or drums) and Slavko (saxophone or clarinet) and me. We took orders and went playing in suburbs

and in several villages in vicinity of Osijek and had to travel there on horse drawn carts or by railway.

Playing outside Osijek the dancing sessions would end late at night too often so we couldn't return home the same night due to prevailing curfews. We played in inns or taverns where people liked to stay after agreed (or paid for) dancing hours until the police closure time arrived. Often persons ordered drinks and started singing popular or native songs so the accordion player would be invited to accompany a small crowd even if the regular time paid for was expired already. What to do when my companions were not invited or refused to join the party? Well, I took my accordion playing to crowd's demands as good as I could and when I got tired late at night wanting to have some rest I had to say that don't know the tune (or pretended so) to escape my "tormentors". There is no mercy for an accordion player who must continue to play as he gets extra money for it. As the instrument is to be played with both hands the paying person would take a money note, spit on and "glue" it on accordion player's forehead. Well, it wasn't pleasant at all being the last of band's team to be paid this way, believe me.

The general situation worsened as the war protracted into 1943 so Snow White's band had dispersed and we stopped playing even in a smaller group too. Zdenko and few other band's members went into the army service and the younger ones had to prepare themselves for the final examination that would be followed by army service soon after too. The Band never came together after the World War II ended - many died or disappeared forever.

During my last school year of 1942/43 in the Real-Gymnasium the partisans' activities spread into Slavonia and northern regions of Croatia by the fall of 1942. Partisans were attacking smaller townships and traffic lines mainly the railways there. The army command in Osijek ordered all students of uppermost classes to go on security watches along the rails during daylight only. The rail watchers had to report one hour before their two hours patrol would start at the main railway station. We'd gather in one of station's waiting rooms where everybody was trying not to think about that what could happen to us outside. The explosives and land mines were the real danger for us walking along the rails stepping from one sleeper to the other one. Did you ever walk on sleepers as they are placed at a rather unpleasant distance for a normal pace?

Several of my colleagues as myself were members of the local Chess Club where we have spent many training hours playing this interesting game. Chess playing was our favorite past time during those gloomy war days too besides a few other ones like visiting cinema or theater. We learned many game openings, played on internal tournaments often as well as on few inter schools or city play-offs. I became quite proficient playing chess and brought my pocket size game box to the station's waiting room. Using these small figures did not make any difference to me but this was not so when my turn came to go out on the patrol.

Each patrol unit consisted of two students and one could choose his partner. Of course, my partner was always a chess club mate and from my class too. The patrols were taken out on open flat wagons pulled by a motor driven working machine. We drove out from the station to the further most point where an old patrolmen pair was picked up and the new one went on walking for one hour onwards and back to the starting point. Thus each patrolmen pair walked for two good hours supposedly watching for mines placed

in the sleepers' gravel bed. Probably it would be too late if you did not watch or notice a disturbance accurately anyway. Fortunately nothing happened to anybody of us during all our daylight patrols.

Soon it became obvious to us that we cannot proceed playing a started chess game keeping in hand that small game box with figures stuck in board's holes. One had to watch each step from one sleeper to the other one looking for any possible disturbances of gravel bed the same time. How to balance that small box in one hand, not losing any of figures and looking at their position on board to be able playing the next stride after all? The solution of our problem was rather simple: play "blind" chess. In time with some practice we have managed playing chess this way but don't ask me how often we'd quarreled about the correct position on board or who was swindling about it. In most cases our game ended in a polemic forgotten as soon as we've been back on that flat wagon driving back to the station and to a warm classroom or the home.

Poglavnik Dr. Ante Pavelic was in principle a Nazi's Quisling who had ruled Croatian Independent State (NDH) from April 10, 1941 until May 5, 1945. NDH's regular army was the Hrvatski Domobran ("Croatian Home Guard") but their units had to fight together with the Ustasas who were state's political army wing. Thus both were sited together to Hitler's German Army fighting against the Allied Forces in World War II. I made my baccalaureate that is passed the higher Matura at the Real-Gymnasium in Osijek in July 1943 and completed my secondary education. A few months later I was called to join army service for the Hrvatski Domobran and to congregate in Zagreb where we had to pass the army medical check-up. I was declared able-bodied "A" that meant I'm going to an army fighting outfit. We were accommodated in the "Ljubljanska" barracks and had the permission to go out during the daytimes but had to return to the barracks for the nights. Late one evening during a regular roll call German Army police surrounded the barracks. Soon after we were escorted to Zagreb main railway station where we embarked into cattle turned into simple troop carries.

Some 1.200 recruits traveled in this railway transport still wearing civilian cloths and the voyage lasted four nights and three days. During third day we passed Wiener Neustadt and Vienna arriving at Stockerau railway station some 25km from Vienna near midnight of the fourth night. There we disembarked into pitch darkness and cold northerly wind blowing fiercely driving the rain and sleet almost horizontally at us tired and miserable ones. After more than an hour walk under this harsh weather condition we reached the "Senninger Lager" situated west outside of Stockerau at last. We were there drenched throughout - what ever we had on became wet so that one had the filling wetness penetrated even the skin reaching bones. We were herded into a longish strange smelling shack but it was dry and warmer there at least. One group after the other one entered a little lit room with few tables in it. We were ordered to fully undress and to wrap all belongings into a bundle except any food stuff that was all gone during this grueling and long transport.

Stark naked and shivering we moved into another room where each one had to pass a medical examination carried out by tough looking paramedics. They checked thoroughly by pulling at hairs on heads, in armpits and at genitals. After that procedure everyone got a palm full of an awfully smelling liquid soap. Thus we passed our first check-up for body and hair lice! We had to be moving on and entered a shower room where commands blared from loudspeakers: "Soap you thoroughly from head to toes! You have 3 minutes do make it!" Soon after sprinklers started spraying streams of hot water

engulfing us in a steam mist that made us blind. One had to close eyes anyway because soap foam was hurting too.

After a while sprinklers stopped and another door opened and from loudspeakers yelled: "Go there instantly!" That new room was warm and vented by dry steam so that our wet bodies were dry within few minutes. Soon we had to leave it for the next one with tables but it was much cooler here making us shivering and goose fleshing. There we waited for our bundles, which arrived with vapor still evaporating from them. We dressed into the warm clothing but our footwear remained wet as before. It was rather unpleasant to leave warm rooms of the "Entlausungsstation" (anti-lice shack) and get out into night's coldness and wetness for a shorter walk again. In company of my comrades I entered in one of the several darkened and cold shacks. At the entrance everyone received two thin blankets and we were ordered to go to the only longish room in which rows of bunk beds stood along walls. I selected the closest and free one with a blank straw-filled mattress on it. I took off my wet footwear and wrapped myself into the blankets to keep cloths warmth as long as possible. Soon I was asleep in a strange bed in a very cold room in which some dozens of bodies snored already. I slept like a hog until the next day's late morning call. No wonder - we all were so very tired after four nights of sleeping on cattle-wagon's floor.

The next morning turned out sunny but cold with loud shouting and whistle's blowing awakened us quite late. We went to the canteen barrack to collect first German army's breakfast that we devoured almost instantly. It was near noon when we were ordered out taking all our belongings with us to form a U-shaped formation on the white graveled drilling ground. As soon our formation became fairly organized and quite a German colonel appeared and walked along asking for volunteers to different kinds of army services. I was waiting a call from him for the artillery that my uncle (a former artillery officer) suggested being the safest in warlike actions. Suddenly the colonel stood in front of our group from Osijek and pointed at me to go over to a waiting corporal wearing pink color assigns. Next I asked him whether he is an artillerist and then I shouted over to my comrades to volunteer instantly to the colonel. By mere coincidence I was chosen out of recruits' mass for the artillery and calling back to my group 12 more comrades from Osijek could still join the group of twenty. Later the corporal brought in a horse drawn flat wagon on that we journeyed to the "Jaeger Kaserne" (the Hunter's barracks) located at eastern side of Stockerau. We came here for a training to become artillery officers in the Croatian army early November 1943 and would return to Zagreb by end of October 1944.



Zvonko's graduation picture July 1943 and as a recruit in Stockerau December 1943.

We journeyed through the township of Stockerau from its West to East ends bypassing Prince Eugene's barracks where some of our comrades would be trained on heavy infantry armament first. Continuing along the main street we passed the main square and the parish church and in short time entered through the mighty gate into one of the two internal yards of Hunter's barracks. Corporal, a tall and blond German, told us to get off the wagon and take our luggage to the canteen where we got the first taste on food we'd be eating for about a year. After this strange tasting lunch the corporal led us to the main staircase and up to first floor where long corridors stretched both sides. Turning right and half way in the corridor we entered into the room "Stube #21" that would become a "domicile" for 20 recruits during next 5 months. Later we'd move to opposite corridor and have two rooms for 10 each of us promoted to full corporals.

Then we had to go to the armory to fetch bed sheets and hard cushions, thin woolen blankets and wooden clogs and returning to the room were shown how to make beds. I choose the upper bed on a 2-storyed wooden frame that contained rough mattresses filled thick with straw so rustled and dusted quite a lot. That was one of the reasons why I choose to be up and my comrade Zorko below me often complained about me moving in bed too much. There was a large cast iron stove at room's center, a long wide table with benches at both sides and 2x10 chest-boxes narrow and man high each side too. Although it was cold we didn't dare to light a fire in the stove due to short time as had to go to canteen for a "dinner". After this quite unfamiliar meal we returned to the room each carrying a large chunk of bread with a lump of marmalade on it. We got two large aluminum decanters filled up full with some kind of black liquid called "coffee". The room was in a real mess with personal luggage and items not stowed way properly so we went to bed still wearing our civilian night gear falling deep asleep at about 8 PM that was too early for the evening call.

Suddenly lights went on; somebody shouted orders and a whistle blow mercilessly so it would wake up even a half-dead one. The a corporal appeared between the two rows of bunk beds and lifting blankets got into real rage of shouting and cursing. It was the "Unteroffizier vom Dienst" or brief "UvD" (the corporal on duty) who didn't get his rapport from the room "elderly on duty" as it should be in proper soldier's order. He was so bewildered that nobody stirred instead there was an outcry and cursing from the sleepy bunch. He rushed out leaving lights on to return in a few minutes accompanied by the "Offizier vom Dienst" or short "OvD" (the officer on duty) a smart fellow who spoke Croatian too. One of our comrades recognized him instantly, the officer was from Osijek too, and called loud to him: "Hey, Tico, what's the racket about?" The officer knew immediately how to deal with this sleepy bunch of not soldiers yet and said to the waiting stringent UvD: "Let them sleep until morning and then wake them up properly to a new soldier's life!" So we slept until next morning 6AM when loud whistling and shouting brought back into the reality right away.

On that new day we had returned to the armory to pick up uniforms, boots and other soldier's equipment like a rifle, shaft blade, helmet, gas mask etc. The room would be in a mess again when we'd try to dress ourselves with mostly non-matching items but for too long as the military grindstones started turning on us to become proper soldiers. We learned that we shave every morning and to get dressed in less than 3 minutes if just for fun to change from one kind of uniform into another one. That the rifle has to be spotlessly clean as well as the boots at all times and that the stove had to be cleaned before going to sleep removing any ash etc. Sleeping was permitted in nightgowns only and if anybody was caught having socks on then a hell broke out that was followed by

so called "angels' night watch". Everybody had to get out of bed in the nightgown, put on the belt and helmet, take out of cupboard the rifle and gas mask and get into boots bare footed that is without shoe-tatters. This whole dressing process shouldn't have lasted more than 3 minutes and not to forget his metal identification plate to wear on neck at all times. We got out in the cold corridor to stand there shivering for the call to pass but the view of us was a real laughing stock. The nightgowns were of unequal length some reaching just below the belt depending upon how many shoe-tatters had been made of.

The barracks consisted of a rather large massive two-storied building around two internal yards having thick brick walls as on built in 19th century. There was a large shower room where one would go once in a week before getting new underwear including nightgowns and shoe-tatters that we wore in boots - no socks. The guns' store was at one side of wide drilling grounds and two wide stables at the opposite side. We started training on heavy howitzer of 150mm bore first but later continued on a lighter one with 105mm bore. All guns were horse-drawn and there were plenty riding or heavy working horses housed in the two stables. We started the riding training a few weeks after arrival already. One part of our training was to carry out the night duty at stables so it happened that each of us got his turn at least once in a week. One could get such a duty as a "punishment" for any disobedience at a shorter interval too. As matter of bad luck I spent my Christmas' Eve 1943 on the night stable's duty with some 60 restless horses in two separated stables. Horses did not have to work hard in the past few days so the regular evening oats made them rather adventurous that night too.

A stable had a central wide corridor between boxes for horses and the central main passage divided it in two sections. This passage had sliding doors at each side providing an access wide enough to get through it a pair of the heaviest horses fully harnessed. These heavy horses were the pole pair that is the first pair of three pairs pulling a howitzer canon. Two pairs pulled an ammunition carrier only. At each side of the central corridor were 2 x 20 boxes and at the far ends were chambers for fodder, straw and large boxes containing oats. One also kept there various harnesses, implements, cleaning tools and wheelbarrows. The straw chamber was the best place to spend the night provided horses did not make too many problems. Night watcher had to keep corridors clean of any straw, to dry with straw an outflow of horse's urine and to collect horse's "apples" during all times. The Sergeant or Officer in Charge would inspect stables mostly during night's wee-hours. Being caught sleeping or with spilled straw or "apples" in the corridor would be reported immediately that would result in one or more repetitions of the night watches.

The morning of Christmas Day was gray and cold wind blew icicles over wide drill grounds. One comrade returned from the canteen with mugs of hot coffee for four of us. We were waiting for the morning call to pass after that we'd be relieved from our duty in stables before lunchtime. When the morning call was over without any particularities for us we returned to other stable's chores to be completed before the replacement arrives. One had to substitute straw, comb the horses (a really hard work, believe me), sweep clean and dust off saddles, bridles and hanged harnesses. The rest of Battery's crew visited the Christmas sermon held at the nearby parish church of Stockerau to return about an hour before the shift changing time. All of a sudden a comrade rushed into stable shouting: "Christmas parcel had arrived for us. Merry Christmas! Hurrah!" This was the best news since two months we had left our homes. We got red parcel-stamps few weeks ago that we sent home by military letter post. We knew that every letter

would be censored by a military agency with that we didn't have any experience it yet. We couldn't know whether our parcel-stamps arrived at home in time before Christmas or how long it would take until a parcel would arrive here. Thus the parcels' arrival was the best news of the Christmas Day 1943.

Half an hour later we handed over the stables to the new shift and run over the wind swept drill grounds to have lunch at the canteen first. Do eat first then go to the next doing - this was one of the first axioms I have learned during my early war times. After the meal we rushed back to our room "Stube 21" where we spend the rest of afternoon as we didn't have any other duty after a night watch. My parcel was waiting still unopened for me on room's long table but I noticed that other comrades had opened their parcels already. The room was in a real mess: wrapping papers everywhere, it smelled of homemade food mixed with common soldiers' ones including some strong drinks' whiff too. I took my parcel noticing that the address wasn't in my mother's handwriting as my aunt sent it from Zagreb and there was none other from my parents who lived in the province's main town Osijek. I opened the one parcel in that I found aunt's short note wishing me all the best and to enjoy the contents thoroughly. I wondered why there wasn't any parcel from home or at least a note from my mother. Why that I wondered because I sent parcel stamps included to my letters to home only and none to Zagreb at all. I started worrying about why this parcel was send from Zagreb? What's going on or did anything ominous happen at home?

I opened my parcel carefully investigating its contents thoroughly before deciding where to start tasting those many goodies. There were many cakes and pastries my mother used to prepare for Christmas including few of quince-cheese forms, few smoked sausages and a bottle of "sljivovica" (home plum brandy) wrapped in woolen socks, etc. I recognized so many things as my mother's true made. I did "stole" so many Christmas cakes from closed drawers often and sometimes assisted by father too. It struck me that the packing could be by mother only. As first to taste I picked up that "little cock" of formed quince-cheese. Mother made it always especially for me - it was my "form" and part of my childhood forever. Now, a question started bothering me and it would continue for weeks - why mother didn't send this parcel?

Later that afternoon I wrote two letters: first one was addressed to my aunt in Zagreb to acknowledge the receipt if parcel. I asked also in a most innocent way about her other sisters' doing thus not mentioning mother's name at all. The second letter was then for my parents in which I cautiously asked about their health and mentioned the receipt of aunt's parcel. I have inquired also whether they had got the parcel-stamps I have sent to them several weeks ago. It bothered me profoundly why was the parcel send from Zagreb and not from Osijek?

Some weeks later I got mother's reply informing me that she made that parcel herself. She gave the parcel to somebody in Osijek to bring it to my aunt in Zagreb thus making sure that it arrives for Christmas on time. Haven't I recognize that quince-cheese form of a "little cock" she always made for me for Christmas? I felt so very ashamed because of my misapprehension indeed! Mother told me several years later how she felt sorry for me and was saddened by my letter written on that Christmas Day of 1943.

Early February 1944 we were promoted to junior corporals after we completed our basic training. From then on we had narrow silver strip fixed around the lapel and on sleeves as well as on shoulder straps cum insignia. We could spend our free weekends to travel

to Vienna and even stay there over night but had to be back on Sunday 11PM sharp. On my first visit I went see my relatives living in Vienna and spent a night with them in their rather small flat. I made plans for future visits with my uncle Nutti that were often assisted by my aunt Susi worrying about me going astray in darkened Vienna. How true she was when I left them on Sunday early night when I got in the correct tram number but going opposite direction. Just on time I found out my mistake switched into the tram going the right direction to arrive at the Vienna's "Nordwest Bahnhof" (N-W Railway Station) catching the train for Stockerau. I was back in the barracks in good time!

One had to appeal for a weekend absence to the Sergeant Major who would decide if one could go to the commander to get the final approval. On one my next visits I passed this procedure and the major asked me what I'd be doing in Vienna this time. I explained that my uncle got a ticket in the State Opera House for me when the major jumped up saying: "You cannot go to the Opera in that uniform you have. Go to the armory and ask Corporal Huber to get an adequate outfit for yourself". This happened indeed so I left for Vienna looking like a "Christmas tree" decorated with a lot of silver strips on a rather smart uniform of a former Austrian artilleryman.

I arrived at the Opera house and collected my ticket from an elderly doorkeeper handing him 2 parcels of cigarettes and paying for the ticket too. He was so surprised seeing me in my parade uniform consisting of long dark green coat with artillery's red assigns and long gray trousers with two red strips on leggings. He mumbled out: "My God, you look like an officer of former Austrian army!" I've tried to appease him saying that I'm just an ensign artillery officer to be so would he guide me to my seat please. We went to the first floor and he opened the door of a box there and I entered seeing two high rank officers sitting in front I clasped the heels and saluted smartly to them. Both officers jumped up responding my salute when one of them astounded said: "Oh, you're not an officer! What kind of a uniform do you wear corporal?" I had to explain about my uniform and they turned to their front places a little bit flabbergasted. I took a rear chair enjoying the whole performance thoroughly. This story was greatly enjoyed by everybody in the Battery.

Completing our basic training we didn't have to make the stable's shifts and duties any more but had more riding exercises outside the riding school barrack. First we learned how to ride and guide a six-horse team put to a howitzer canon. The riders sat on the left horse in a pair with the strongest pair was put to against the pole of canon's front ammunition cart on that 3 comrades sat worrying about when their turn would come. First we exercised on the sizeable drilling ground but sun turned out in the more difficult and undulated terrain outside barracks where earthen trails existed only. Often one asked oneself why this training is necessary at all but I found it quite useful for not so too long after. The "crown" of our achievement was the riding and guiding a six-horse team came few weeks later when the sergeant in charge ordered to drive two guns with carriages through streets of Stockerau. Wow, citizens and some known girls to us looked surprised as we passed through narrow streets taking sharp corners to finish parading over the main square in front of a large audience.

Next we started horse riding lessons that were much simpler particularly when a dozen of us we rode out to the Danube side arms overgrown with thicket and young forest. We enjoyed trotting along narrow earthen cart tracks but sometimes we got into gallops until the sergeant's whistled to stop it instantly. Of course, gallops were not allowed too often because we had to dry the horse with straw first and clean it as well as the harness

afterwards that took more time than provided in our daily routine. On one occasion we had to ride between tree trunks that weren't so easy at all. One has to estimate the free distance between trunks. Miles, a comrade from Osijek, got it wrong one day and became the laughing stock when his horse went on and the rider clutching two trees with his arms.



Fellow comrades from Stube 21 in Jaeger Barracks Stockerau visited Vienna in April 1944.

One day the sergeant major asked if anybody of us plays accordion or a similar instrument. Normally we never volunteered for any similar question as they turned mostly into some unpleasant duties but I couldn't resist my musical talent. This time it was a pleasant mission because on Fridays our trainers - corporals and sergeants - took two horse-drawn cars to visit a pub at Danube's side arm where they had a long drinking session. I was invited to go with them and played tunes on a rather taken down accordion they found at the pub. Of course we got back to the barracks in good spirits before midnight trying hard not to awaken the garrison. I had a free morning next day that was good, as there were no lectures or similar daily routines on Saturdays' afternoon. Since this time I went to Vienna more often spending weekends seeing performances in Burg Theater, State Opera House, Volksoper and almost regularly visited Hagenbeck's Circus housed on Praterstern Square. Saturday nights I stayed with my relatives, as my aunt wanted to keep a good control over my movements in Vienna. She had promised it to my mother to watch that I wouldn't go astray on Kaertner Street or some other "bad" places too.

With some expectation I was waiting for the Whitsuntide's weekend as tickets were ordered for two operas when I got seriously ill few days before. We had to march under most awkward weather conditions and the next day one side of my neck swelled up so battery's physician thought that is just a bad cold. When I turned in next day with both cheeks and neck swollen up she barked at me: "How old are you? You've got mums a children's infectious illness. Get out of barracks and go straight to the quarantine". So I spent the Whitsuntide there eating well light meals and milky cakes trying to forget the good performances in Vienna. Uncle came to visit me and brought with him candle, spoon, woolen shawl, cotton wool and a small bottle with oil for me to make a poultice around the neck and cheeks.

On Sunday a commotion started with several trucks arriving to camp's entrance when a comrade came to see me dressed in full battle dress. He explained that everybody was ordered to collect rifles cum ammunition and to get on trucks fast. Mid afternoon they were back dirty and tired but the mystery of this Whitsuntide's action was lifted after all:

they searched after several enemy pilots who parachuted from their damaged aircraft. My informant couldn't tell me whether they found anybody in thick wooded and swampy Danube's side arms.

The only bug I knew about to plague a human was the domestic flea. My mother bought a puppy of a black Doberman with brown-red markings in spring of 1937. The young bitch got the name PEGGY that became my nickname soon after too. Thus the domestic fleas moved into our house but one keep them under control by using chrysanthemum insect-powder. Mother controlled Peggy regularly looking after any flea the very moment it started scratching itself. Then I gained knowledge of another bug when our group of twenty recruits attended a lecture in Stockerau. It happened several months since our arrival there when we were advanced to full corporals already. We moved from "Stube #21" where we had wooden twin bunk beds to new two rooms, which got normal steel framed beds for each ten of us in one room only.

A paper was handed from hand to hand landing in front of the officer in charge of the lecture. Within the penciled round "boundary" on paper was something creeping around and the officer stared at it for a moment shouted astounded: "It's a louse! Lice! Who has lice in your room?" The result of this dramatic event turned into a case of emergency in our rooms. A few days later we had to bundle up all our belongings (except food staff) and marched of to the railway station. We had free wagon for us all at once when passengers there learned about the dangerous bugs we were carrying in our bundles. The "Entlausungsstation" at Vienna's West railway station was our destination where we had to undergo the procedure as described already at the arrival to Senninger Lager before.

Before leaving we had to remove straw-filled mattresses from our beds, carry them to the yard where had to take out the straw filling to be burned afterwards. We left the empty mattresses in our rooms and then after all windows and doors had been sealed off with gluey paper. Even our wardrobes had to be left open and furniture as well as soldier's metal equipment remained there too. Later our rooms were disinfected with gas to get rid of lice and bedbugs the later once could be found in old buildings too often. I knew about the existence of bedbugs too and that the sting is rather nasty causing strong itching too. I saw bedbugs during my first night on duty as sergeant-in-charge already.

The night duty room was next to the stairwell in that there was just enough space for a bed and in front of the only window for a table with a chair. An open bulb scarcely lit this ward but a large candle was on the table in case electricity failure. Next to the door was a narrow wardrobe for cloths and arms of two charges on night duty. One of them could rest on the bed but had to get up when his comrade went out on his compulsory hourly round now and then. After some time bedbugs felt the human body's heat and crept out of the many crevices in this barracks old building.

After a while it became impossible to lie on the bed at all so both charges preferred sitting at the table. The bedbugs found the position of human radiation fast, climbed up the wall and crept on the ceiling to fall down straight onto the new radiation source. A genius contrived a simple method how to catch the "parachuting" bugs. One had to put a helmet upside down, fill it with little water and to place it close to the burning candle. The candle's flame attracted bedbugs on the ceiling above a heat source from where they parachuted straight into the helmet. The charge's new duty was to pick out

bedbugs from the helmet and fry them dead on candle's flame. Had anyone smelled "fried" bedbugs ever? Bedbugs alone stink awfully but the fried ones reek even worse. The disinfected rooms with gas became more homely afterwards and the demand for candles diminished.

The time came to have our first and only home leave and after packing our belongings and dressed in the best uniform and high boots boarded the train at Stockerau station. It was two days later after the Allied Forces landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944 when left the barracks somehow relieved that we would go home despite the newly opened Western front. We traveled eastward bypassing Vienna central station to arrive to the township Neusiedel that barracks were almost at the Neusiedler Lakeshore. We stayed here several days in the company of some 1.000 officer's trainees that came here from different camps. All of us were recruits of the Croatian Home Guard who were called into army service late October of 1943. First all of us had to train the German parade marching step that is rather hard and difficult. Our small group of 20 artillerist couldn't participate in this training because as we wore heavy artillery-riding boots. One cannot match in them to the short infantry boots worn by other comrades.

Thus we were ordained to the sentry's duties during the several days other comrades perspired profoundly marching up and down the drilling ground defaming they bad fate. One day few of us were ordered to get into two low boats and taking long polls got out to the Lake searching after two parachuted pilots. Neusiedler Lake is rather shallow particularly closer to northern shores but its biggest depth is around 1,2m or so. It took as some time to view two small pecks on the lake that turned to be the pilots sitting in shallowness. We approached them pushing boats as close to them as possible calling to get up and get into the boat. No said the pilots so we had to get out and wading in mud brought the boats next to them. Then they got up standing in ankle deep water and stepped over in our boats without saying a word. Their weight made us really sweating to get both boats back into deeper waters but still not reaching into our long boots. We had some hard time to clean and get them dry after all.

The whole batch of officer's trainees left Neusiedel on June 11, 1944 in a long train of mostly cattle-wagons turned into troupe transporters. We were on our way to the military parade to be held at Zagreb in front of Poglavnik Pavelic at midday of June 12, 1944. Our group of artillerists from Stockerau shared a wagon and some slept on wagon's floor like me where as others occupied the benches. Late afternoon the train full of young expectant officers stopped at Bregana station at the border between Slovenia and Croatia and some 30km from Zagreb. Our train halted between two other that waited to continue their journeys early next morning too. Closest to station buildings was the train with wagons loaded with kerosene in barrels and several closed wagons containing ammunition or so. At both ends of this train were flat wagons with mounted "Vierlings" anti-aircraft automatic four-barrel guns. These AAA-guns manned by German soldiers were dreaded by low flying aircraft's or especially attacking infantry. At the opposite side to us a train loaded coal and some other material in open wagons. At far side of the station and beyond few empty tracks stretched meadows with some hovels at distance. The night was mild and quite so we left wagon doors open to catch some evening breeze. We didn't have any arms, as rifles would be distributed in Zagreb to those participating in the parade only.

Shortly before midnight and out of nothing machine guns opened fire followed by noisy clanks of "Vierlings". Soon sky became red of burning fuel as barrels flew into air and

exploding sprayed fire all around. Above all this din commands echoed "Partisan's attack" and "Get out of wagons" or "Run for safety". One could hear aircraft flying at low level above the trains. I jumped out of the wagon, squirmed under the nearest one loaded with coal and looked back. The night was blaze with dancing fires of ignited and exploded kerosene and fuel. Some coal started burning on open wagons too and our train was just amid this horrible inferno.

I scrambled out of my shelter and walked fast towards adjacent meadows. The next I was running for my life as fast as I could in those heavy boots. Suddenly I stumbled incautiously over a rail, lost balance and fell on another rail straight on my chest bone. The impact took out of me all my wits and senses for few long moments. I couldn't breathe or feel anything and just lie prostrate there like rooted. Then I saw tracer bullets of an assaulting aircraft coming straight at me! The noise was paralyzing, flames and sparks everywhere, more explosions and more bullets coming my way. Dear God, I cannot move! Soon I heard calls: "Peggy is hit" or "Zvonko is dead". Still I couldn't move and no sound would come out of my throat. My lungs were like paralyzed. From somewhere two pals came for me, pulled me up and drew me away over remaining tracks into meadows. They deposited me there and I lied for a while until I got to my breath again. Gradually I could start speaking but with a rather strange croaking voice coming out of my aching chest.

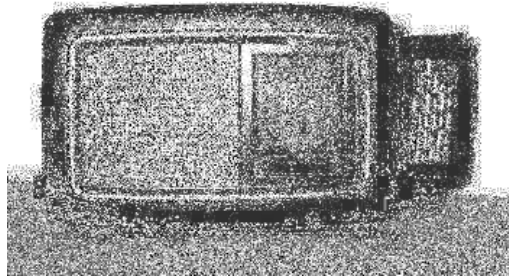
The rest of night I spent sleeping in a barn on freshly smelling hay. At sunrise I extricated myself out of the hay and slowly returned to the station. But what havoc was there! Few coal loads were still smoldering and about half of German fuel train had burned out completely remaining a twisted ruin only. German soldiers were looking after dead comrades in burned out wagons. Never before have I seen a human body being reduced to such a small charred lump. The stench was repulsive and horrid that I would never forget. During the onslaught our train was pulled out of the station. One comrade stirred the locomotive pulling wagons out of the dangerous neighborhood - fortunately his father taught him how to drive it. In no time we embarked into wagons and soon were on our way to Zagreb. The parade at Zagreb was cancelled as the officer's trainees looked uneasy ruffled and dirtied by night's air raid. On the arrival to Zagreb our group picked dry rations and got travel orders so I could leave the capital on the first train traveling towards my hometown Osijek.

Same afternoon we arrived at Slavonski Brod station that is half way to Osijek. That day's morning USAF bombarded the station so we had to disembark far out of it. Station buildings got several hits, there were many craters and some fires along tracks of which certain stretches were destroyed and rail twisted. We learned about the first air raid against Osijek on the same morning too. USAF "Liberators" flew regularly to Ploesti, Rumania's important fuel refinery that had strong air-defenses. Returning to Italy some airplanes would discharge their non-released bombs on targets like Osijek or Brod that both had smaller refineries and some industries. So I expected that the Lower Town of Osijek would be severely damaged and that refinery there was the target too. I wondered what happened to my home situated in the Tvrdja (Citadel of Osijek) that is situated midway between Osijek Upper and Lower Town communities.

We got on a train at the other side of Brod station and had to change at Vinkovci into another bringing me to Osijek late afternoon. On my way home I passed several still smoldering and damaged houses when I saw trees and houses in Krezmina Street to be undamaged. I rang at doorbell and I entered garden's front being confronted by a

loud barking dog showing of its Doberman's strong teeth. Peggy was obviously rather irritated by this oddly smelling and dirty looking uniformed man. After all I returned home after 8 months on my 19th birthday and I would have to leave it after a fortnight to return to Stockerau again. Would I have to take part in World War II tragic end in several months later - I wondered almost daily during my home leave?

Our entire group of twelve from Osijek returned to Hunter's barracks in Stockerau a fortnight later. My father succeeded in purchasing a Volksempfänger (Folks' radio receiver or short "VEMP") that was a small radio in a brown casing of Bakelite. Bakelite was a hard plastic produced by German IG Farbenindustrie during WWII and as good isolator used in electrical appliances too. Any radio and so the VEMP too must have had a seal on its rear removal cover (hard cartoon) attesting that the short waves (SWL) had been incapacitated. One could bridge over this gap with short wire using a small splice carefully bringing in a piece of wire through vent-holes of rear cover. I used a longer pair of nail scissors to place a prepared wire overcoming VEMP's incapacitation.



The "Volksempfänger" was a most popular radio receiver during WWII.

During WWII one wasn't allowed listening SWL at all. Anybody discovered or disclosed of hearing SWL transmissions like BBC or Swiss Radio Beromuenster had to expect severe punishment or even deportation close to a death penalty. This was the case with listening to radio news in all German controlled or occupied territories. My father had a large box of a TELEFUNKEN radio incapacitated in the same way but a bridge-over splice was kept in proper place almost through all times of WW2. He had to tune it down on the BBC's signal-call of "Boom-Boom-Boom-Boom" each time when wanting to hear it though. It was always a dangerous listening at all times.

On my way back to Stockerau I had carried on me a large sack, a suitcase and a knapsack full of various food provisions some of were for our relatives in Vienna. Mother had placed VEMP somewhere at sack's center well protected by softer provisions. At sack's top was the melted butter packaged in few parcels. [Note: Melted butter could be preserved for a longer period.] The train towards Zagreb stopped short of Brod railway compound because the station was hit by an air-raid previous night. Air smelt heavy, few fires were still on, soil blackened by fire, debris and lot of ashes everywhere. We have passed several burned out railcars and tangled rails near bomb craters in between. It was a rather bad sight and experience walking over to the other station's side where another train waited for onward traveling passengers.

All twelve of our group from Osijek had many parcels to carry on foot along about a mile long track. One carried 1 or 2 parcels at once stopping along at a reasonably long stretch and then returned for those ones left behind. One had managed the whole length in say 3-4 stops on that very hot noon of June 1944. It was so very hot, air smelling of burned flesh which choked breathing, everyone perspired profusely mouths

went bone dry. Get me just a sip of water for a Kingdom (which one?) - I murmured to myself. Each time I lifted my sack it felt more and more soft. Did the butter at its top started melting? Would it leak to VEMP and flood it? No, it didn't happen due to my mother's precautions and wrapping skills making parcels tight enough.

All of us returned to the rooms and there was a great feast held after everybody unpacked his parcels. Evenings we went to the canteen just to collect bread, margarine, potatoes and coffee cans and improved our meals with goodies we brought. Of course, we invited German corporals and sergeants on some special occasions and were most delighted tasting various sausages, smoke dried ham and cakes they haven't eaten for years. We had more lectures and shouting practices with model guns on targets built in a large sandbox to learn aiming commands etc. On July 20th there was a considerable consternation in the garrison and we were ordered to stay in our rooms not moving anywhere out. Later during the day we learned about the assassination attempt on Hitler but by the evening we still didn't know what repercussions it would make on us. We took out the remains of drinkable and eatable goods and prepared a grand fiesta with idea that it's better to devour everything before somebody takes it from us. Somebody offered me a full glass of dark red liquid and thinking that is red wine I gulped it in one go down. I don't remember what happened afterwards but found myself in my bed next morning with a heavy head - no wonder I drunk in one go a full glass of Old Jamaica rum.

Some weeks later we were attending a lecture on military strategies that a German senior officer held it in a large room with few maps on a wall. His face was badly crippled but his eyes looked at us sternly and with some sorrow. He had been explaining Allies' strategies on the Normandy peninsula regarding options they had to cut it from the rest of France. Suddenly, one comrade said aloud: "It had happened already!" Dead silence followed for few seconds when the officer asked: "How do you know this? The OKW did not reveal this fact yet!" ["OKW" means "Oberkommando der Wehrmacht" or the German Supreme Army Command.] Nobody dared to explain about that is it wasn't necessary at all - we sat there like dogs getting wetted. As soon we were back to rooms I removed VEMP's wire-bridge and instantly stowed it away carefully. Fortunately there wasn't any inspection afterwards as OKW admitted German Army's defeat in Normandy the same day that was the August 1, 1944.

After the return to Stockerau I'd continue visiting Vienna and to see performances in Burg Theater or in State Opera House. However, almost all theaters gave their performances in early afternoons due to increasing air raids by Joined air forces. The stage décor was kept as simple as possible and there were hardly any objects on the scene so these could be stored away fast in case of an air alarm. Often I looked at the Prater entertainment places or sometimes visited Hagenbeck's Circus housed on Praterstern Square that program lost quite a lot of its quality too. One Sunday morning early in fall 1944 I went for a walk to the Schoebrunn Park when loud veiling of sirens announced a new air raid alert just as came up to the "Gloriette". I run for cover to the nearest trench from that I could observe bombs falling out of highflying planes. First it looked like if a carpet stretched out until one could recognize single bombs as they were closing nearer to the ground. At same time heavy anti-aircraft artillery opened fire and a "rain" of shell fragments was falling on the park area. I remember well the thunder of explosions and the trembling of soil as well as the outburst of fires farther away in the city below. After a while blazing hot draughts reached trenches where several of us took refuge. After the alert ceased I scrambled out finding that few grenade scraps caught

into my uniform too. Fortunately I wasn't hurt but with shaken spirits returned to Stockerau earlier than it was really needed. On my way to Vienna's Northwest station I passed through few streets where buildings were damaged or destroyed, peoples running around some of them crying or screaming. They were dazed and injured living beings like me.

USAF "Flying Fortresses" raided targets in Austria mostly by daylight flying in from airfields in England or later from France too. However British airplanes flew night air raids coming from bases in England. The targets of air raids were the refineries at places that were rather close by Stockerau either like Klosterneuburg or in Floridsdorf nearer to Vienna. During these air raids and bombardments I was at various places depending upon the daily orders for such events. I was seconded a few times to care for horses and when air raid sirens started we had to saddle horses fast and to ride them out to nearby thickly wooded Danube's backwater channels. Once there we would continue galloping up and down many paths for a while there but one had to take care about horses to be returned sweat-dry to the stables after the raid was over. On few occasions we had to man heavy machine-gun outposts built in the gravel pit near barracks. One wondered what could be achieved with the light machine-gun fire against high-flying bombers though. The safest place was the communication post in the barracks' basement. This old military building had rather thick brick walls of say 1,5m. Staying underground one felt as soil tremors when bombs exploded in nearby Klosterneuburg or Floridsdorf. Later one could observe black smoke rising at short distance if bombs struck at refineries there.

It was obvious to us that days of our training for artillery officers are getting to their impending end. Early October we were to ride out to the sharp shooting polygon with a six-horse team pulled the only good "LFH" (light field howitzer) of 105mm bore and another four-horse one towing an ammunition carriage. Some manned the gun brought into its fighting position, other were responsible for the phone communication but several of us were chosen to be at the command post that was linked to the so called advanced observation post at little off side to the former. The Battery's commander sat at the command post and didn't interfere in our doings at all. When the positions' survey of the one-gun battery was completed a comrade as nominated "commander" reported battery's readiness. There were several targets some of them moveable being pulled by long wire ropes from winches out of fire reach. There was a wooden hut from which a "machinegun" fired, a gun position was marked behind some trees, a "tank" made of wood could be moved for and pro etc.

After several comrades got through their gun aiming (not all us 20 were called for it) and shooting few grenades at the assigned target I took over the "command" over the one-gun battery. My target was an attacking infantry represented by a wide sheet of cloth pulled forward or backward making aiming more realistic. The first shot was just over the "infantry" some 100m a little bit asides so I should have to change the distance by 800m first, then 400m and 200m - so called forking in. I though it's stupid to follow this procedure when the first shot was so close to the target and I ordered 100m reduction slightly adjusting the side too. The gun went off and the grenade landed straight in the "infantry" sheet that stopped moving instantly. The colonel came rushing to the commanding post bellowing at me: "Officer, you haven't followed the aiming rules you were taught! That isn't allowed you should know it. Well, you hit the target with a second shot. That's very good!" So this was the end of my training for an enlisted artillery officer in Stockerau, I thought at that moment.

At the morning call late in October 1944 we got the order to return all the German military equipment like rifle, bayonet, gas mask etc. to the armory. There we would get the uniform of Croatian Home Guard and after changing into it we should return the rest of cloths and footwear we received on our arrival here. So, that was the end of our stay in Stockerau and everybody followed the orders accordingly. The Croatian uniforms were rather light ones and somehow shabby compared to the ones we were used to and in particular as we obtained normal infantry shoes instead of the good long boots. We looked at each other somehow embarrassing and went on to fix Croatian insignias of full corporals onto epaulettes and sleeves. The one of an enlisted officer was missing as well as the "checkerboard" on the left sleeve. We packed our civilian cloths together with personal utensils and I wrapped VEMP in soft items placing it carefully in my knapsack. Few days later we got our travel orders, said goodbye to German training staff and boarded a train to Vienna where we switched to another one with several wagons with comrades from other training posts. The voyage went on without any interruptions and didn't take so much time to reach Zagreb, as it was the case on our arrival here almost exactly of a year ago.

On our arrival in Zagreb we were stationed in the barracks at Kustosija where we occupied several empty rooms. Comrades kept together depending upon the Military District they came from. First days then weeks passed but we still could out in the town until the morning call was over during that a certain number of comrades was called upon to report at the Ministry of Defense. The number of returnees diminished daily and the waiting when your turn would come became more difficult as the time passed by. I left my VEMP radio with relatives in Zagreb leaving few notes for parents saying that I'm still waiting for my disposition in a particular army unit.

Two weeks before Christmas several of us artillerists were promoted to lieutenant-juniors of Croatian regular army. Three of us got the travel order to join the 1st Howitzer Battery in Osijek. We set on by train on December 21, 1944 a few days later. We arrived to Vinkovci via Slavonski Brod without any disturbance at darkness and had some difficulty finding a place a stay over night there. Our host an elderly lady explained that there aren't any officials or police or military in Vinkovci as they left expecting a partisans' offensive at any time. During the night one could hear some warlike noises not so far away from East. With first morning light we packed our belongings visiting the station first but were told that there are no trains going to Osijek at all. Three of us decided to continue on foot to Osijek some 30km away northwards. We had luck a few times to be picked up by a peasant who took several kilometers to his village. Then we went on marching on stony macadam road and late afternoon saw the parish church tower in Upper Town of Osijek at last.

I arrived home with the first dusk surprising parents and sister as well as their dog "Peggy" that got really alarmed seeing me in uniform again. So I arrived at home on December 22 just in time for Christmas 1944. The town was almost without any life on streets although there wasn't any shooting or warlike action to be heard. Later I would learn that higher governmental officials including police and army command had left Osijek few days ago expecting an onslaught of Yugoslav or even Russian army units any moment. So, I was back home as a combat artillerist with rather bad prospects for future in the never ending World War 2. I gained some important experiences for life that included a few of war dangers too but the training in Stockerau took place in a relatively safe and comfortable surrounding too.

I spent the Christmas holidays with my family staying in our house in Krezmina Street all the time. The town was quite and there was hardly any traffic on town's streets except for the pedestrians who went to church services or to visit friends and relatives. The nights were abnormally quite except for temporary warlike firing roar from far. On Thursday December 28 phone rang and Franjo, one of us three returnees, talk excitedly about the order to report to the garrison's commander Colonel Stier at the barracks on Ljudevit Gaj Square instantly. He has informed the other comrade Zorko already so I called him suggesting that we go together to see Colonel Stier as soon as possible.

The barracks were about 500m far from our houses so we met at the gate within an hour after Franjo's ominous call. Reporting our arrival to the Sergeant on Duty we were told that we could go to see the Colonel right away. The Colonel seeing us entering started a long tirade referring to our absence and raising his voice ominously said: "You also wanted to walk out from your duties but you should well know what this would lead to!" There wasn't any point to argue about the fact that there wasn't any army command in town to which we should have reported on our arrival few days ago. After all we got our mobilization orders to join the 1. Howitzer Battery stationed in Donji Miholjac and we should travel there by Slavonska Podravska Railway ("SPR") that had a narrow gauge 700mm line next morning. On Friday December 29 Zorko and I met at the Station and started looking for the next train to leave towards Donji Miholjac. Suddenly we noticed some commotion on one of the platforms with many wagons and soldiers busying themselves around. It was the 1. Battery that had just arrived to Osijek so we went nearer looking for a high-ranking officer between many soldiers and a few corporals. When we saw a captain we approached him saluting and reported that we're looking for the commander of the 1. Howitzer Battery. He responded rather gruffly that his name Captain Matijevic and that he is the Battery's commander adding sternly: "Here are you two deserters! Well, you should take on your duties instantly because the Battery came to Osijek where it will get in a new battle position on the front line. Go and look for Sergeant Major Gregl who'd tell you everything and where you should take over. Go immediately!"

For me this was the real beginning of soldier's life at the battlefield along Drava River near my hometown Osijek. In principle I was a late teenager that still missed important life experiences that would enable me to face situations and conditions accompanying the critical times of a war that could end without any doubt in near future. I didn't have much time left to contemplate about questions that would become imminent too soon. What would it be like being injured or shot, mutilated or caught as a Prisoner-of-War? How one would feel waiting for the final deathblow? Would I know when the death comes to me? Not in a too long time I would have to experience the primordial fears and to learn in the very hard way about the instincts of survival.

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