

## 12. WITHDRAWAL OF CROATIANS

Saturday, May 12, 1945

It was early Saturday afternoon when our convoy passed through Celje, an important industrial centre lying south of the Pohorje Mountains in Slovenia. Celje had a large railway station that at the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy had been on the Southern Line linking Graz and Vienna with the city of Zagreb. I remembered Celje well because my father and I had stayed there for a several days in 1936. On one of our hiking holidays and only shortly afterwards we had an accident on the road to Solcava, which was so narrow that traffic had to alternate every hour in one direction or the other.

I had played an active part in this accident because it was I who had noticed a black cat crossing the road and shouted: "Watch out, a black cat!" Few moments later the bus driver had hit the rocks on the right roadside trying to avoid an oncoming car. It hit the bus on the bumper and got hooked to it that was fortunate because otherwise the car would have somersaulted into the valley below. It was all very frightening and exciting though I am glad to say we did not have any casualties or great damage on either car.



*The etching by J. Gojkovic shows the Citadel of Osijek with the north bulwark in front.*

Now our convoy was marching along this same road and I was wondering which way we would be heading. As we didn't have any good maps so I had to rely on my childhood memories and the happy circumstance of my good sense of orientation. It soon became obvious that for our retreat we would have to follow the same course as the black clad Ustasas commandeered by ominous colonels Boban and Luburic. The Black Ustasas dominated the scene anyway and were seen marching past whenever our convoy stopped for a rest. It would be dangerous to get caught with that bunch of doubtful compatriots whom we feared as much as the partisans or any other enemy. What a stupid situation for a young man of twenty to know that any moment the trap door might close and to be hold as prisoner for God knows how long by unknowns, if one didn't get killed first.

Two days ago, our first night at Krapina had passed without further incident. Every one of us was so tired that even the sentries had fallen asleep. The next morning we had learned from some Domobrans retreating along Drava upstream to Maribor that the following Cossacks left destruction and corpses lining their path. They had killed without asking any question especially those that tried to go in the opposite direction of them probably hoping to join the partisans. All the armed units coming from central or southern Croatia had to pass through Zagreb on their way to the west and were crowding on that road to Krapina now.

There was no other way out of Croatia, and the Boban and Luburic troops coming from the furthest corners of Croatia were the last to be on their way in the western direction. They were doing very often what the Cossacks had done, the only difference being that they killed their own countrymen and that they carried on killing at a time when the Germans had stopped fighting and had surrendered already. We discovered all this on the same day we noticed that there were no longer any German units on the road. Whatever happened to them, I wondered. Did they reach the Americans or did the Russians or Bulgarians catch them?

On that Thursday in Krapina we were tending to our various minor wounds and injuries, speculating among ourselves what our next orders would be. We had even set up our guns pointing south along the railway tracks. Strangely enough we saw a few trains coming from Zagreb with some of the carriages marked with a Red Cross. We learned later that these trains carried a great number of wounded Ustasas but also certain number of officials of the Croatian government with their families who hoped to escape to the west. All day long soldiers in various uniforms, some on horseback some in carts had been streaming through the town as well as civilians on wagons packed high with their household goods.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw some bearded soldiers in a black uniform and a fur cap and recognized them as Cetniks, the Serb guerrillas who had remained faithful to exiled King Peter II who lived in London since 1941. At first, the Cetniks had been the archenemy of the Ustasas before and ever since the beginning of the war for Yugoslavia in April 1941. Later, certain groups of Cetniks had joined the Partisans but a few other ones had also joined up with German troops in their battle against Tito's Partisans. Whatever they had done, however, they had always shied the Ustasas and now they were fleeing together with their declared enemy No.1. What a strange alliance war made possible? Or perhaps it was the typical outcome of this hopeless situation everybody crawling along that road that found himself in. Where is the enemy and who is it? Is he right behind the next bend in the road or is he watching us from those peaks over there?

The second night at Krapina had not brought anything new either. We were all nervous and anxious to know what lay ahead. As the traffic west was slackening we realized that we would probably have to join the rear guard of the retreating Croatian army. The night was cool but bright with flares in the sky and there was some distant rifle fire though no artillery. Were we the only artillery unit left in this area?

In the early morning of Friday, May 11, we received a somewhat confused order to get ready for moving out of our encampment. We got ourselves warm with the help of a warm liquid, neither coffee nor soup, and held the horse teams harnessed to start at the first signal. When it was given we started moving into the erratic cart traffic flowing on the road but didn't manage to get in as a closed convoy. At Djurmanec we turned left and at first the

road ascended then went down again into the valley of the upper Sutla River that was the natural border between Croatia and Slovenia.

The country around here is very beautiful and we would have enjoyed it in different circumstances but that it was. We marched on with irregular lasting stops, waiting or talking to passing infantry units hoping to get some worthwhile information. It was soon confirmed that the war was really over as far as the German army was involved. The Government of Croatia had asked the population and its forces to withdraw westward and to surrender to the Americans or the British as this was a far better chance for staying alive than being caught by the Russians, Bulgarians or by Tito's Partisans.

When we marched through villages like Sveti Rok or Rogatec one had the feeling of being watched though the place looked completely deserted. We had been ordered to stay together and on the road as any departure from the unit, however briefly, would be treated as desertion. There seemed to be an agreement with the Slovenians to let all Croats pass through their territories, provided no harm was done in any way to the Slovenian population or their property. This did not present a real problem to us except for the need of water and feed for our horses. As long as we marched along a river or brook all was well but how would we manage to cross the mountains that lay ahead?

Darkness was falling when we reached Rogaska Slatina, a well known spa with hotels and guesthouses, a hospital, and a glass factory producing not only bottles for the export of mineral water but also fairly famous crystal glass. By sheer coincidence I ran into an acquaintance of mine from Osijek. He was few years older than I and wore an Ustasa uniform. Hoping to get some up-to-date news I said: "Good evening, Drago. Remember me? From the school in Tvrdja?"

"Good God, Suckling, what're you doing here? When did you leave Osijek?" - I gave him a brief account of my experiences during the past four weeks and asked how he happened to be here. - "Well, I wanted to complete my studies, and the only way of doing so was to join a Students' armed unit under the direct command of one of Poglavnik's top-ranking officers. But I soon saw that once I had joined that outfit, I didn't have any other chance."

I knew only too well what he meant by that because the Ustasa students' unit was one of the most indoctrinated units of young people in our country. A distant relative of mine had joined it for personal reasons, too, but there were many in this special task force who had less humane motives. I almost hated the man standing in front of me for belonging to this outfit.

"We left Zagreb on the 5th May," Drago continued "some of us by train, the rest in cars and trucks. We were to escort the Poglavnik and some members of the government. I am joining my unit here as I've just completed another assignment. You know we'll have to get over the mountains and fight our way through to get west. Our only chance is to reach the Americans. Do you want to come with me? I've got a car and enough petrol. What about it?"

I was stunned by this sudden offer of escape, but thinking of the men who had come with me so far I said: "Thank you, Drago. It's very generous of you but I must stay with my gunners and horses. Good luck to you and convey my regards to cousin Mede, if you should see him."

I could see that Drago was thinking me a sentimental fool as he answered: "And good luck to you, Suckling! I think you're making the wrong decision, but never mind." - I was sad and infuriated at the same time because Drago remembered my school nickname the older boys had used. I had been rather weak and tried to avoid any fight whenever I could. The older boys were always teasing us, often quite brutally, and didn't miss a chance for showing off, especially if the butt of their teasing was younger and weaker and forced into submissiveness. The nickname of a "Suckling" originated from my mathematics professor Sofic who gave it me because I was the youngest in his class, better to say through all of my secondary schooling times.

As I went back to my cart, I was thinking over what Drago had told me. So Poglavnik and his staff had left Zagreb the day we marched out of Krizevci. What a great "Poglavnik", the title Pavelic choose for himself that meant the same as "Fuehrer" in German. Poglavnik was the supreme commander of the Croatian Army! In principle Poglavnik deserted his own soldiers and his country as well. At least I knew now that the trap was closing and that there was very little time left to decide about my own actions and future. Quo vadis, Suckling?

We did not make much progress during the last night. From flares and distant firing we imagined that some fighting must going on up somewhere in the front of us. All the convoys were moving at irregular intervals, so we slept or dozed whenever possible. We could have gone straight at Djurmanec towards north to Maribor but we were ordered to proceed west then. About midnight we passed through Podplat, then turned left towards Sentjur and finally on to Celje. As we crossed a railway track leading to Celje we saw that the night sky was glowing red from an enormous fire, and we soon found out that further down the road several wagons loaded with ammunition were on fire and with occasional explosions still going on. These were probably the last wagons that had got out of Zagreb and had been stopped or caught by the partisans.

Suddenly the still of the night was pierced by a screaming voice: "Kill me! For the mercy of God, please kill me!" - The man's voice sounded so frightening that it went straight to the core of one's being. He was lying in the ditch beside one of the wagons and was covered with a blanket that let us see his legs or rather what was left of them: whitish bone with patches of burned flesh and most of the toes gone. We hurried past him, all turning our eyes from the terrible sight and closing our ears.

To this day I don't know why not a single one of us was ready to answer this man's plea to put an end to his pain. As we heard later he had used a "Panzer Faust" (hand held AA-rocket) to sit on. It exploded and burned away almost all of his lower body. His pain must have been excruciating. For days I was haunted by the screams of this unfortunate man and called myself a coward for not having shot him.

The hours were dragging as we marched on and on following the railway track that was still intact and a softly murmuring brook on the other side of it. Dawn came and turned into a beautiful May morning when we finally reached Celje. We entered the town from its eastern suburb and saw with surprise that there were flags and banners, but all in the "wrong" colours. Obviously, people were preparing to receive the Partisans - now called the Yugoslav Army - as their Liberators. And here we had come: a defeated army, with many of the men in black uniform, the Blacks worst enemy of the partisans! Our battery consisted of Domobrans only by we were flanked by Ustasas in their black uniforms, obviously with the order to "protect" us that is to prevent us from running over to the

Yugoslav army. Those flags were something to behold. It took us a while to realize that blue-white-red was meant to represent the Yugoslav banner, and white, blue and red the flag's colours of Slovenia. What made it quite clear for which the greeting was intended was the five pointed red star on many of the flags.

We were not surprised to find it quite difficult to get drinking water for our horses and ourselves. People played dumb and deaf, very often were simply invisible though it was fairly obvious to us that their owners occupied most houses. At about noon, we received the order to join up with the rest of the main convoy in order to march through the centre of town. And suddenly all had changed: gone were the banners and flags and the welcoming slogans of which a few tattered pieces were still waving in the air. Soon we heard how our black-uniformed brothers-in-arms had "convinced" the population that it was much better to remove their welcome to the liberators - for a while at least.

I don't know how much force they used but I was glad to see that no blood had been shed. All our acquired news was rumours only. We never could find out from where they came really, but we heard that Ljubljana had been liberated in the morning of May 10, and that was why the people of Celje, which after all was only seventy kilometres from Ljubljana, had been expecting the Yugoslav Army since that day. But it seemed that Yugoslav forces coming from the south from Rijeka perhaps or even Trieste had liberated Ljubljana. As for us, we were now squeezed into one single possible direction: northwards between the two mountain ranges of Pohorje and Karavanke. Our convoy took the only road leading that way to Dravograd on the river Drava, passing through Levec, Piresica and Velenje.

Again, we were following a brook and that should have pleased us as it solved the problem of water, but we were all too depressed and nervous about what would happen to us, to be pleased about anything. So we drudged on and stopped, got on our way again and came to a halt for another short stop. Fear made us mute and fear was what reigned among all of us on this procession not unlike that of a Croatian funeral.



*The pass by of the enemies – at right the partisans to join the Yugoslav army.*

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