

## 13. NIGHT OF SURRENDER

**Monday, May 14, 1945**

All since Saturday of May 12, we had been moving at a very snail's pace. One got the feeling that the rush to get west had somehow been stopped by the number of people who were trying to get there. We were pressed through a bottleneck on the road leading towards Dravograd following upstream the Paka River. There are only 24 kilometres from Celje to Velenje but we didn't pass through there before midnight, after a very slow, nerve-racking march and the constant fear of an attack or falling into a trap. We didn't know where the attack would come from and there was no chance to put the guns in a position anyway, due to the terrible congestion in the narrow road that was flanked by woods on both sides.

Were the partisans on our left or to the right? We knew that the infantry was guarding our rear only a few hundred meters down the road but any gap would give room for partisan infiltration and any sniper or enemy mortar would create havoc among the convoy. Virag was sitting next to me on the cart holding the reins and we chatted off and on keeping our voices low not to draw unwanted attention.

After a long interval I turned over to Virag asking him: "Virag, what do you think we could do in case of an attack? Imagine what would happen with so many people and animals in this narrow road?"

He looked at me and said: "Jump off the cart and look for the next boulder to hide behind. But it would be a massacre, for sure."

I reiterated: "Massacre, that's exactly it. I feel we ought to make some arrangements for our defence as long as it's dark."

Virag asked surprised: "What do you mean by arrangements, sir?"

"Virag, in case of panic there's sure to be a stampede. We might lose our cart and possibly the contact with the battery itself. I'll sort out my things and get those I can grab quickly if we have to run and hide."

Virag nodded and said assuring: "I've everything at hand, including the light arms and a little ammunition to make sure I can defend myself. I don't really want to go on with this retreat anymore."

"You know very well, Virag that we cannot just decide to go and jump off. We have to wait for the right time, most of all we have to know where those black headmen are going to be. I don't want any Bobans' or Luburics' between the partisans and us. Or do you see a chance, Virag?"

"My god, sir, I don't know this part of the world. I've never been in Slovenia before and I don't like mountains after all. I hate these narrow closed-in roads, they make me afraid."

I looked at him closely because I, too, had a queasy feeling in the stomach. "Are you afraid?" I asked him.

"Yes, I am and I am not ashamed to admit it," Virag said. Then after a small pause he added: "You've learned your lessons fast. My respects, sir, if I may say so to the way you reacted back in Krapina."

"Thank you, Virag, but there wasn't really anything else I could do. But, looks here old chap, I trust you more than my father and I want to ask you a favour. Ever since I've seen that burned man without feet I can hear his screams asking to be shot. Will you promise me to do this for me if it should happen to me? I cannot possibly bear such pain, so you must promise me to make it as short as possible to me."

"God Almighty, sir, stop that talk!" replied rather embarrassed Virag.

Virag's face was ashen, and I could almost feel his fear. In the distance, slightly uphill, we saw something ablaze and as we came closer and into the wide plain in which Velenje is situated, we saw that it must be a building above the town that was on fire. It was a ghostly view: the blazing fire and the deep shadows all around it and it deepened our mood of desperation.

After Velenje the road started to ascend following the river and somehow the murmur of water had a soothing effect on our nerves though fording the river did present a problem for the heavy vehicles and their teams. Especially the narrow bridges and sharp turns were a hardship for the horse teams of four or six though the animals walked on following their instinct and without much lead.

At dawn we had reached Dolic and shortly after crossed the watershed at Mislinja, following the road and a small gauge railway track along the river. At Straze we stopped and the commander appeared in front of us. He was very upset and greeted us with the angry question as to where the hell we had been all this time. "We've been waiting for the battery to support an attack by the Ustasas near Smartno. They had wanted to cut through to Kotlje and Gustanj in order to bypass Dravograd."

There was no point in arguing with him, so I just stood there and listened with our men standing close by. When he had finished his accusations one of the men asked him: "Where are we going, captain, Sir?" - But the captain did not bother to reply.

He took no notice of my uniform change as I'd made myself less conspicuous than in the uniform I had been wearing before. But he went right on shouting his accusations at me: "Where have you been? I shall I shall put you under martial law for disobedience, you know that, lieutenant."

"Sir, with all due respect, may I ask when this disobedience has occurred?" I asked quite calmly.

"Well, lieutenant, I want my orders carried out and you see to it, that's all. I hope you understand. It's for the good of all of us." He lowered his voice for the last words and stepping up closer to me said in almost a whisper: "It was a bloody stupid idea, and I told them that a howitzer would be of little use with all these troops milling around. But Colonel Stier wanted the guns to follow up that steep hill leading up to Plesivec claiming that you had done it at Bilogora. They're all frightened stiffs, particularly the Ustasas, because there

are rumours that the Americans will turn them over to the Russians. And you know what that means!"

I was stunned by these revelations and taking heart because of his friendly tone followed him to his cart. I started asking: "Do you think it's possible, Sir, that the Americans or the English would turn us back or even hand us over to the Russians? Why then are we still marching west? Why don't we surrender to them as a regular army and to be disarmed following the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War? The war is over, isn't it?"

"For Christ' sake, lieutenant, don't talk about surrender as long as those headmen are about. Haven't you heard what happened on the road from Zagreb to Krapina? Better look after yourself and your gunners. Let them have some rest and the horses too, but then prepare you for any defence that might be necessary. I'll be back with you soon."

So we rested at Straze for several hours as several infantry units coming through. Watching them we realized that there were far less in Ustasa uniforms among them especially those fearful black ones. After the infantry had disappeared altogether, suddenly we saw a group of people at the edge of the wood all carrying weapons but marching in the opposite direction. They stopped for a moment to unfold a flag in white, blue and red with the red star on top. The Partisans!

There was the "enemy" marching in open view only a few hundred meters away from us! As they came a little closer to us a ridiculous man shouted to them and so a conversation started: "Who are you, with that red star on your flag?"

"We are the Liberators, the Peoples' Army and you are the traitors, collaborators of fascism!"

"Why don't you stop us? Why are you marching the other way?" asked the questioner.

"We are going to join the Yugoslav army just behind you. They're on your heels and you won't escape them, don't worry. Traitors, lackeys of the Germans! The war is over! Death to the fascism - freedom to the people!"

So that was it! The war cry of the partisans I had heard so much about. What an idiotic situation to see the very people I wanted to join - so many of us wanted to join - and all we could do was stand there, hypnotized but frozen to our places. Soon the convoy started to move and we were on the road again, on this bright, sunny morning of Sunday, May 13th, 1945.

In the early afternoon of the same day we were marching through settlement of Turiska Vas approaching a wide-open valley. There was a church on the hill at the right and just opposite a mountain ridge showed the unmistakable trail of heavy fighting. The smoke was rising from burned down huts, trees and grass were smouldering still in some places. Dead animals and human corpses were lying among the trees killed in the futile attempt to force their way over the ridge.

As we marched on we heard stories of a very fierce battle between Partisans and Ustasas in black uniforms. So this was where they had wanted us to go. It seemed that their plan had succeeded and they broke through but nobody knew at what cost of lives. I'm sure that all us have had the same thought: "There but for the grace of God lie I!" or "I could be

that dead man over there or the one staring with broken eyes into the blackened leaves of the tree above him." Many hadn't made it across that ridge and were now no longer on the way west to the hope of freedom.

We heard that the attack had been fought by the Poglavnik's most devoted troops including some of the students' army. I was able to understand why the small partisan units were in such a hurry to join up with the main Yugoslav army behind us. Such desperate force as these last and bravest units of Bobans' and Luburics' were probably too strong an enemy for the normally small partisan groups, even though they knew the forest like their own hand and used every ravine, clearing and brook for their purposes.

Near Smartno we came upon a wide trench excavated across the entire width of the valley and supposed to present a chance for anti-tank defence but in reality it provided a path for pack animals to cross yet another ridge. There seemed that here another attempt was made to get west to Kotlje as corpses and goods were scattered all along the trench as far as the forest running up those hills. In continuation it took us all day long to march about 20 kilometres on this sad and depressing route. Sad and depressed were also thousands of people pressed into this constantly narrowing trap with that awkward feeling of the door would close on us any moment. Even the animals showed their fatigue and famine and became less and less than willing to follow orders.

For our horses, though, they were better off as we humans were, because the grooms tried their best to supply them feed and water. In the meantime, there was nothing left for us humans. There was neither food nor water. At the nearby houses or farm buildings all the handles and draw wheels had been removed from wells. No one from our units dared to venture further off the road for fear of endangering the convoy. We did not know what those hidden shadows watching us behind closed doors and windows might do if we came closer to their houses. So far we had not been attacked and therefore every one of us stuck to the supplies he had been able to hide and stack away on his cart.



*This is a south-east postcard view at Slovenj Gradec now-a-days.*

In the dawn of Monday we reached Slovenj Gradec, a rather large settlement with an old centre and narrow streets with some difficult bends but still simpler for us than the narrow gorges and bridges we had behind us. Still, we heaved a sigh of relief when we were through and entered rather wide valley spreading towards Dravograd at the other end. Close to Pamece we were ordered off the road. It was early morning by now and a lot of

people were scattered around like on camping grounds with animals grazing and smoke coming from various cooking pots. The scene looked calm; almost serene so I wondered what the people might feel as for much it was the end of their exodus and possibly for some the end of their lives. Did they feel this? I asked myself.

Later in the morning the order came to get the guns into a fighting position aiming the barrels to true north. In front of us was a small church of St. Ana, we were told, on the south flank of the hill Otiski Vrh. Around noon, the captain and Vlatko appeared both looking haggard but excited. Both of them stayed with us and Vlatko ordered a few random volleys to be shot across the hill behind which the Drava River was flowing only about 5 kilometres away. It was a silly order and firing for the sake of firing or showing off, but it wasn't my concern anymore so Virag and I just stood by and watched it all.

The exercise completed the captain himself led the battery out of the encampment and back onto the road to Dravograd. But we didn't go very far. We stopped shortly before the junction of the roads from Hanzic and Kotlje and turned into a field close to a forest. We set up some kind of camp: the guns were detached from the carriers with the directive to take off harness from horses. Were we going to spend the night here was everybody's unasked question?



*This is an old postcard view of Dravograd with the wooden bridge over Drava River before WWII.*

By now it was late afternoon and the traffic in the direction of Dravograd had thinned out considerably, while the number of peoples settling in for an overnight stay in front of us grew accordingly. Around 5 PM the captain and Vlatko rode off on their horses followed by the captain's cart. Virag and I watched them riding away as we were sitting next to our cart munching on our meagre supplies.

"Virag, I've decided not to go any further. There is no chance to get through to the Americans or British at all. You've probably heard it?"

"Yes, Sir, I also have heard that Americans refused the surrender of Croatians armed forces or was it the British?"

"I don't know for sure, either. But something's going on because there are no Germans on the road any longer or Cetniks or even Cossacks. Even the black headmen cannot be seen anymore. It's all very strange. Don't you think so?"

So Virag answered promptly: "You are right, Sir. Even Gregl and his special unit disappeared and nobody knows when and where to." "

"Virag, let's decide what we'll do when night comes. There's no chance to surrender to the western allied forces. I've heard the Americans will turn over all Croatian prisoners to the Russians. I don't know whether this is true or not but I have no means of finding it out. I certainly would object to it because then we are bound for Siberia and for a long, long time." And Virag promptly replied asking: "You say it, sir, but what can we do?"

"Let's turn back. Will you come with me?" I asked to which Virag replied: "Yes, sir, with pleasure. Should we ask some of the others if they'd come too? It would be better not to go alone in case somebody will stop us."

"I don't mind if you ask some of the gunners if you feel that it is wise. Talk to the gun leaders first, and then let's ask the rest. Go, talk to gunners now but don't make a big thing of it and place some one to look out for the commander or any strangers."

When Virag had gone I had some time to think it all over. There really wasn't anything we could do but turn back and surrender to the Yugoslav Army. At least, we would be held prisoners in our own country or so I hoped. Anything else meant transportation out of the country and further and further away from home.

I started repackaging my rucksack as one piece of luggage was all each one of us could take. One weapon with ammunition and one hand-grenade if there was no other way to survive. I didn't feel like suffering if I should be wounded and I knew there wouldn't be any medical care for us. It didn't take long for Virag to come back.

"Sir, they all want to surrender. I mean the gunners and all our men. There might be a few of Gregl's people left but we needn't worry about them. The commander won't return, I was told. He's taken all of his belongings and Vlatko's too. And the rumour that the Allies are handing over the Croats to the Reds seems to be true. There's a lot of talk going round, about massacres, too. And they say the partisans have crossed the Drava and are marching into Austria. They've crossed at Maribor and are into Styria, they say. What do you think?"

"Virag, I've told you we must get back on this side of the Drava, and soon. I mean as soon as it's dark. Let's talk to the others." - It was getting darker and soon the sun would sink behind Tolsti Vrh in the west. The church of St. Peter down the road was catching the last rays of sun on its spires when Virag and I joined the others for a briefing.

There was not much I could tell them: "We've been left alone and without any orders. I, for myself, have decided to surrender to the Yugoslav army that has been following us since we left Osijek. We've been fighting as soldiers for a state that has ceased to exist and the war seems to be over for five days now. Let's destroy our arms and try to get back to our families. I see no reason to fight for a lost case when everywhere around us they're surrendering. I'm turning back as soon as it's dark. Anybody who wants to join me is welcome. Take only one piece of luggage and some light arms, only as much as each of you can carry. We'll leave the horses and carts where they are. Well, that's it. Destroy all other arms and ammunition; you know how to do it. Then let's go. Good luck to all of you!"

There was a strange silence when I had finished, not only among the men standing around me but all over the valley that was now filled with shadows after the sun had set. The sky was a crimson colour, a promise for good weather the following day and a clear and starry night. Would there be a moon, too, lighting the scene for us marching back on the road we had come on? Would there be a tomorrow for us at all?

But there was too much to do for lengthy contemplation and not much time left, so we all got busy. I supervised the gunlocks being taken out and took all the bolt pins that I intended to throw away in the dark while we were marching back. I wanted to hold on to them for the time being just in case something might turn up and we would need them. As for the gunlocks, I didn't check whether they were buried as ordered or just left behind. It didn't matter that much as the guns couldn't be used without the bolt pins. All gunpowder was strewn out; all other ammunition made useless except for a few shrapnel grenades we kept as our last defence. The grooms felt the greatest sorrow and the riders, when they heard that we would leave the horses behind. We all felt sorry to part from them; after all we owed them so much, these poor tired beasts, occasionally even our lives. I fed the last morsels of bread I had to Kestenko when I said goodbye to him.

I packed my civilian clothes and some underwear, a few items for personal hygiene and medical care in a small linen bag. I have put my wrist watch and my grandfather's gold watch and the four gold coins my mother had given me in a linen pouch and hung it around my neck on a piece of string. When I checked my foodstuffs I found that most of my tins had gone but there was a bit of bacon and some hard cheese as well as a few pieces of zwieback. It all went into my rucksack and the blanket was strapped to the top. I stuck my pistol in its holster and took my automatic with two rounds of ammunition. First I pocketed my jack-knife and then took a hand-grenade. Then I went to see where Virag was keeping himself.

Except for a few stars blinking high up in the sky it was pitch dark. There were several small groups about and after asking around I found Virag with most of the other corporals as far as I could gather from the voices murmuring in the dark. Apart from the occasional neighing of a horse it was very quiet all around us. I touched the arm of the person nearest to me and said: "Well, that's it. Let's go!"

The man turned around and recognizing me said: "Sir, is that you! We're ready to go. Isn't it too early still? We've just buried the gunlocks deep in the woods. Shouldn't we wait for a little longer?"

"No, we'll go now or never. I'm going straight down to the road. Anybody who wants to come with me let to join me there. But I'll wait only for a few minutes." - I went over to the wood and used the few minutes to get rid of the bolt pins. Then I returned to the guns, around which a large group of people had assembled standing around and gawking. There was a feeling of anxiety and fear about them and I could feel my hair standing up as if some electric current came off these people. Again I heard that inner beating of a drum, a sort of warning signal.

It was time to go I couldn't wait any longer. Quietly I said: "Anybody wanting to surrender to the partisans can come with me. I'm going back towards Slovenj Gradec and I am sure that before long we'll meet the advanced partisan units. Then we can surrender and be taken prisoners, but on home soil and perhaps we'd even get home someday soon. Let's hope and pray. But let's go now! Now!"

I turned and started walking towards the road over a soft and damp field and soon I heard that some of the men were following me. Soon I had the feeling that they had become a larger group and slowed down for them to join up with me. Virag stepped beside me and handed me a pair of shoes that I hadn't been able to find earlier on.

"I thought you might need these, Sir. Who knows what it will be like living in captivity? Are you all right, son? You've surely grown up fast in this one-month. God bless you for making up your mind for all of us, we'd never have come to a decision. Just march on, I'm beside you. Please march on before they start thinking what it's all about. Most of the crew is following us from what I saw."

I was grateful to Virag for this encouraging speech; little knowing that it would be his last one as I was to lose him and the rest of the gunners. I was not to meet anyone of them ever again but of this I had no idea as we marched through the dark night on this day of May 14, 1945 on a gravel road that stretched like a white ribbon into the unlimited darkness ahead.

I felt cold sweat on my skin and shivered, then drew my automatic closer to my chest. What was going to happen? Would they fire at us? Was I doing the right thing leading the men into such an unpredictable future? Around me I felt the night deadly silence in an utter darkness that surrounded us. From time to time a flare went up into the darkness causing the road ribbon appearing in an even more ghostly whiteness. The gravel crunched under our boots crunched the gravelled road surface and that was the only sound I had noticed in the night stillness. The time dragged on and on feeling like the eternity. I would not recall for how long we marched on in complete silence.



***Croatian civilians and soldiers amass at an undisclosed place.***

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