

17. RACE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Monday, May 21, 1945

We were left to rest and sleep for the entire night after some hot broth was distributed to the prisoners. That was the first meal we have been offered since the march begins. The distribution itself had been a near chaos as the brutal force of the guards and prisoners' deathlike fatigue made for some sort of order in the end as the container with lukewarm "soup" was handed round. Unfortunately, the long rest gave the sentries times to propose exchanges again, if propose is the right word as one did not have any chance of declining. I kept my small bag of valuables well hidden in that secret place on my body and it became so much a part of me that I sometimes forgot to check whether it was still there.

I had to find new wrappings for my feet and used whatever I could find from shirt to dirty handkerchief. After the soup I started masticating on the bacon rind covered in crumbs and felt as if I had had a proper meal. Then Vet and I started looking for a place to sleep which wasn't that difficult as the ground was soft with moss, but there were also a lot of ants so we had to shift a few times. We finally decided to cut the blanket in two parts, as I wanted a narrow strip for my feet. Not only was this easier and safer for us to carry two smaller parts that would also attract less attention for exchange than one large, double sized blanket. However, cutting up the blanket wasn't that easy because the material was thick and strong and we had to avoid attracting any attention or we'd have no blanket at all. We managed in the end with the help of a razor blade that I found in my hygiene kit.

Morning came and promised a warm day. Somebody had discovered a well, so we could organize some water once we had the information that directed us in the right direction. In such groups of tired men thrown together haphazardly by ill fortune it was not always to be expected. To "organize" something soon became a word for things we found or discovered that had to be hidden from the guards, but it also became a bond between the prisoners. Organizing also meant sharing the goods with the companions. Then somebody organized some maize so by mere chance I got a handful of it. There was no time or opportunity to cook it as the order came to get up and start marching again. I put the handful of maize into the pocket of my trousers, a sort of loose hanging knickerbockers, so Vet and I munched it whenever we felt in need of succour.

We were out on the road again in broad sunshine shortly before midday and marched through Samobor. After a while I noticed with dismay that we were not turning left on the main road to Zagreb but continued on another one more or less straight ahead at a very slow pace. We soon found out that the reason for our slow progress that was not only the heat but also that we were marching up a hill at the top of which one could see a village and a church. The village was called Sveta Nedelja, Saint Sunday, and the road leading to it was steep and gravelly. Suddenly we noticed another bottleneck that had been formed ahead of us with carts on both sides of the road. This caused our four-deep rows to squeeze together to two-deep ones causing backwards a wave like motion through the entire column.

As we came closer to this trap we could hear shouts and screams of the prisoners followed by the thudding of blows and the whistling of whips in the air. The prisoners staggered uphill on a road leading in a slight curve towards the church there. I saw what lay ahead of us and showed Vet how to spread the blanket under the rucksack straps to

make it into some sort of cover for the shoulders and backs. Now we could see that soldiers were sitting or standing on the carts or standing in front of them leaving a very narrow path for the prisoners to walk through. These made it sure that no one would escape their blows and lashings. We were pushed into this trap from behind and knowing that there was nothing but to run forward and through it as fast as possible. I started to run when my chance opened to it.

I tried to keep as far away as possible from the roadsides running as fast as I could. My mouth was getting dry and my lungs were near bursting, sweat poured over my face and into eyes almost blinding me. In addition I hitched the rucksack over my head and somehow managed to get through with a few blows only evading several fallen bodies lying in the road. Some of them were crouching and others ones stretched out full length. Sometimes hands were extended towards them to help them up or, as more often were the case, to knock them down again. These obstacles made it even more difficult to get through, of course. Not only did I not want to step on anyone - I also did not want to fall and become yet another bundle on the road. I just kept on running keeping my eyes down on the road for any obstacles in my path. After a while, I had covered the stretch of a few hundred meters feeling relieved and guilty at the same time, because I had not looked back and tried to help those who had fallen.

Self-preservation is a very strong instinct and becomes even stronger when you realize that death is so close. These tormenting soldiers were not Serbs as they must have been Macedonians or Albanians, of minorities who had been under pressure during the regime of the King of Yugoslavia. The King had been ruling more or less like a dictator ever since 1921. But what had we Croatian Domobrans done to them to hate us so much? Stop thinking, run and try to get away because they'll finish you the moment you stumble and fall down on the road. Of this I was pretty sure!

I arrived in front of the church with bursting lungs and weak knees where I joined up the other prisoners who had made it. We lay down in the road trying to catch our breath, then sat up to look around for our comrades and it was then that I realized that Vet had not come running uphill behind me. I walked back a few steps to see if he was coming with some of the others that made up the rear, but he was not among them. I felt close to tears and utterly lonely again. As the new column formed in rows of four there I had no choice but to fall in with the men none of whom I knew better. Nobody said a word or bothered about the man next to him as we started slowly, very slowly to march again. All doors and windows on houses of Sveta Nedelja were closed - not a soul was to be seen and there was no help or sympathy for us as we marched on in the grey misery.

Again, I lost all sense of time and place walking on like an automaton wondering, in a half-demented way, why so much hate was turned on us. The war was over now for almost two weeks and people should be rejoicing and turning back to the routine of their everyday lives as well as the soldiers returning to their families and homes. Why sit in the road and beat up others who were in a situation far worse than theirs? What had we done to these brutes from the Far East of Yugoslavia that they felt they had the right to strike at us like on beasts? What had happened that turned these human beings into such vicious, cruel monsters?

I was dying of thirst, if only I could have a bit of water, half a cup at least of. Then I remembered the handful of maize which I had put into my pocket and started eating the

crushed corn, chewing and re-chewing it to make it last longer. Only an hour ago I had shared this unexpected bounty with a friend, now I was alone.

We were approaching Zagreb from the Southwest in the midday haze and one could recognize the twin towers of the cathedral already. Where we going to stay at Zagreb and would I find somebody kind enough to give me something to drink, perhaps a little food even? We stopped frequently more often than before, probably due to the fact that the prisoners behind us couldn't catch up with those in front due to the beating they'd received back in Sveta Nedelja. There were only a few sentries on either side of the column and I was beginning to wonder whether I should be able to sneak away to jump in the river now that we were so close to Zagreb. I remembered that two bridges crossed the river in the southern part of the town: one for the railway and the other one for the main road both leading towards Karlovac. But are they both still intact and would we be able to cross them in bright daylight?

At one of the last stops before the road we trotted on joined the main road to Karlovac, the fate had a present for me. Suddenly Vet came walking up to me, he was in good shape and unharmed, but full of commiseration for those that had to be left behind. He had lost his blanket because somebody tore it from him and while trying to hold on to it he had fallen behind and lost touch with the rest of our group. Being without the blanket he was able to run faster and managed to reach the church only few minutes after we had left.

He continued walking after us without stopping for a rest and finally reached me almost at the head of column. I felt as happy as if I had been given a longed for Christmas present even happier because somehow I felt stronger and more capable now for having not only survived the attack but also managed to save my half of the blanket. It would still do for both of us I told my friend and wished I could throw my arms around him to show how happy I was to have him near me again.

A sort of nervous expectation had settled on all of us now as we were approaching Zagreb and all of us hoped that there we would find some solution to our problems. As we came closer up to the main bridge there were more and more soldiers lining the road at both sides. They greeted us with all those good known "little" animosities, such as curses or pebbles thrown at us or simply obscenities shouted about our fathers and mothers. The tension was mounting with every step we draw nearer to Zagreb when the full impact of violence hit us at the old tollhouse. Soldiers holding their rifles at the ready, some of that had bayonets at the top blocked off the road. We were not to cross the bridge and enter town at all! That was clearly the message that hit us all like as a strong blow but most of all, no doubt, those for whom Zagreb was home.

I was on the left column side and was too stunned by this unexpected turn of events that I missed my group turning right onto the road leading to Remetinec and Velika Gorica. A soldier grabbed my blanket and pulled me towards him but a hand stretched out from the right and quickly brought me back into the ranks. I felt my blanket slip along my back under the rucksack. Better my blanket gone than I separated from the group, I thought. Then I felt Vet's hand slip from my arm and looking at him saw that he was tucking our precious blanket under his bag to keep it out of sight. Once again I felt as if I had been given a present. But this mood did not last long.

A feeling of defeat and hopelessness was spreading among the prisoners after we had turned away from the bridge. Behind us, we heard shouts but didn't dare to stop and look

back as we knew only too well what happened to those who lost touch with the main column and were singled out as stragglers. Even later, we never dared talk about it or make an estimate as to how many we had lost of the original number of men. It was simply not possible to hold a count or some sort of briefing because the guards were watching us like hawks. To escape this terrible setup, where we had to run for our lives was just impossible like keeping a name record as such. Obviously our captors felt we deserved that all what we got from them.

Soon we had passed through Remetinec, another village away of Zagreb, where not a single person came out to see if there was perhaps a relative or a friend among the prisoners who might need help. This complete isolation and being cut off from every aspect of normal life was, I think, what distressed us the most. We were outcasts unworthy of any help or even of only a simple sympathy it seemed to me so. Now we were in Croatia our fatherland and whom we had been fighting for if not for the people of Croatia? This I asked myself on and on now.

We marched on and not caring whether the sentries were close or not so by late afternoon we reached a larger village of Velika Gorica. Another stop was called for after we had covered about 40 kilometres since this morning but here was no chance to organize something to drink or any food. My tongue was sticking to the roof of my mouth, my lips dry and parched and the maize was gone too. I had started using some of the gritty road dust for chewing it with the maize to make lasting longer but even so it only carried me through that day.

I had no mirror so I couldn't see myself but I had a pretty good idea of how I looked alike. A crust of dust covered the skin and with spittle around my parched lips breaking in places so that a little blood mingled with the dust. My eyes were red and bloodshot, my hair matted with dust and sweat, my hands dirty, all of myself dirty and dusty and smelling - you're walking the desert, my son!

Now I was resting at a ditch on road right side short of first houses at Velika Gorica. There it was a garden close by and the fence's paling wide enough to allow my arm through it. Something green was protruding from the earth and I crawled over cautiously to see if it was edible. I pulled at the long green leaves and soon I had in my hand a vegetable that looked like an onion. I didn't care much whether it was or not and bit into the white root barely wiping off the soil. It wasn't an onion but it tasted a little like it, fresh and sharp and pleasantly moist. It was a leek, and after I had finished the first one I pushed my arm through for the next one. I managed three of them before the order came to get up and marched on but I felt a little refreshed at least.

Velika Gorica was as deserted as all the other places we had walked through. Later on, we learned that the sentries had order to send out an advance patrol always that chased villagers off the road sending them behind locked doors threatening to shoot anyone found outside his house. People were so frightened that they obeyed even if they could see, peeping through a crack a member of their family among the prisoners, a friend or another loved one. They would not dare to come out for help at all. It was a very cruel order and it made us despair of the hatred and wish for the revenge by the victorious army or what was called the People's Liberators.

We kept on marching into the darkness staying all along on the main road. My soles were bare once again and I could feel the grit and dust of the street between my toes. It was too

dark to do anything about it and in reality I didn't have any materials left that I could use as wrappings. The finding something to protect my feet became my main objective from now on. My main concern was the darkness now and my fear to get out of the column while we marched. I had a guard on my side and knew that he would shoot without much asking if I would make a move out of the column. Also, I had to support Vet who seemed to be dozing off as his grip lessened on my arm.

God, I'm thirsty! If only we would stop and find some water. The moon is coming out, that could be of help. Perhaps I'll find something for my feet soon an old rubber tire, some sacking or anything alike. Oh, good, we're stopping again so I whispered: "Vet, wake up, wake up and lie down, we are going to rest."

We were sleeping right in the road for how long nobody knew. My watch, which I still kept in the little bag next to my groin, had not been wound up for days. I had forgotten about it and in reality time did not matter at all now. Somebody told me that we had passed through Vukovina and crossed the Odra, a small tributary of Sava on its right side that transverses the Turopolje Plain too.

After we had started on our march again we came through yet another village, dead quiet as usual and without any help to us. The light of the moon was marvellous, putting a silvery light on everything except the grey, bedraggled column of thousands of prisoners walking on and on like a snake winding itself along the whiteness of the road. I was on the inside now, and guided by the vet didn't pay much attention to anything. It felt fine walking on this soft dust...

Soon after Busevac one led us off the road into a field with a brook nearby. I was so tired so I didn't care to be among the first to drink. I just spread out the blanket for both of us when Vet returned with a pot full of water. I rinsed my mouth and lips before I started to drink slowly this precious liquid. Then my friend and I curled up like two lovers to get some warmth into our tired and starved bodies. Soon like all the others around us, we fell asleep and slept for a long time in spite of all our misery and discomfort. The sleep as well as all the other things, that we take for granted in a normal life, had become a luxury for us.



Croatian Prisoners of War incarcerated at Precko camp near Zagreb.

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