

## 27. RETURNING HOME - A DREAM BECOMING TRUE

**Wednesday, August 15, 1945**

On Sunday, August 5, the camp at Kovin looked more like a beehive than a silkworm factory. Prisoners were running from here to there and in a constant motion. Before that day, they had moved around lethargically or dozed on their tables or at places under the mulberry trees. When I returned from my duty with the water bearers I saw that a sort of hazy dust cloud was hovering over the camp. The dry and pulverized soil whirled up by these hundreds of feet stood almost in the still August air. The guards had told us that the camp commander had informed them of a decree about the general pardon and amnesty issued by the AVNOJ to release all Domobrans as of August 3.

This was then announced via the loudspeakers together with the information that a Great Mass was to be held later in the morning. After their morning meal the prisoners walked over to the open field and under the adjacent mulberry trees and assembled around the makeshift altar. Every one of the men at Kovin camp must have come here because I'd never seen so many of them in one place. There must have been about three thousand that gathered in this crowd of shabby looking people. Their haggard faces were lit up by smiles, greetings were exchanged and words of recognition by men who had passed each other every day without so much as a glance at each other.

Groups had formed everywhere and were discussing the chances of getting home any day from now on. Who would be the next tomorrow or day after tomorrow? There was a general air of expectancy and peace in the camp. Then the sermon started and a hush fell over the crowd of three thousand, although only the ones close to the altar could understand what the elderly chaplain was saying. He must have held field services like this before but I doubt that he ever had a more attentive congregation than us on that hot August day at Kovin. He spoke to us about the peace we would find once we had left this place and would be united with our families.

The chaplain continued telling us that we should try to find the rest in our bodies and minds and to profit from the well earned freedom after all that suffering and hardships we had gone through. We should not forget all those who had given their lives for us. However we should try to forgive and forget all the injustice and humiliation we had been put through by others. We should use all our experiences to grow in ourselves and to become stronger in our beliefs so that united with God we should be able to build a better future for all of us. We should leave this place in peace with each other and take the message with us to whatever place we would be bound for. Go in peace and live in peace now on and in the future and forever. Amen!

When the chaplain had ended there was a moment of absolute silence then the three thousand erupted in one shout of joy and jubilation. We were free! We are men again not prisoners, members of the world around us, not outcasts anymore! Everyone was hugging the man next to him, shaking hands all around, shouting and sobbing and rejoicing in this miracle of being free. Only a few of us, I'm sure, were beginning to think of what lay ahead and of what we would be facing once we got home. Is the home still there where we had left going into the war? Had not our families been dislocated in this general upheaval of World War II? These thoughts were there, but for the moment we had pushed them back in our minds, at this moment of general jubilation after the days of

captivity were over. We were free to go wherever we wanted to go at last. When the chaplain started the "Te Deum" everyone joined in uncaring whether he knew the words correctly or whether he was singing out of tune. And the hymn rose to the sky as one combined Thanksgiving.

When the mass was over the crowd dispersed slowly, not quite sure how to take up to the usual routine. Few started card games and chess contests continued but a little bit half-heartedly as we were all waiting to hear how we would be set free. One wondered about how the procedure of liquidating this POWs' camp would be carried out.

Nothing happened any more this Sunday and the next morning I started out with the water carriers as usual. The villagers at the well knew about the proclaimed amnesty and when we would be leaving soon. I talked to my farmer friend too and neither of us could tell when that day would be. He seemed very concerned about my well being in future and so dared to ask him whether he perhaps knew Petar or Branislav, the two soldiers from Smederevo who had brought me to Kovin. As I didn't know their family names it was difficult for the farmer to decide whether he knew them or not. Then he told me that he was still waiting for news from his oldest son who had been taken for service into the Peoples' Army early in 1945. He became quite worried as we talked about this and all of a sudden he remembered that I was still a war prisoner and that we had been enemies. As I walked back to the camp I wondered how this deep rift between the peoples of my country could heal so that we could live as one nation in new State of Yugoslavia.

Monday passed, Tuesday and Wednesday as well and still nothing decisive had happened, except that at roll call the commander had asked for volunteers who were able to write in Cyrillic. The form had arrived for each prisoner that has to sign for his release and everyone was awaiting the next roll call with great anticipation on Thursday. Then the news spread about that the first group of prisoners would be leaving the camp this same afternoon. To our surprise and very disappointment, the release permits' distribution was started in the alphabetical order. We had rather expected to be let out according to our military district, but in this we obviously had been wrong. Now started the feverish reckoning as to how long prisoners with names beginning at the end of alphabet would have to wait to be released.

Sometime during the night of August 9, the first batch of prisoners left the camp but no one knew how and where they went. Each prisoner was given his release and travel permit with an additional slice of bread before he had to report to the special compound behind the command building. As from then on nobody could talk to those who were going to leave the camp for good. It seemed strange that it should be done in this secretive way when the amnesty had been declared officially. We didn't really care too much about it - the main thing was to leave this place and be gone.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday passed without any difference for me, except that there was no service held the Sunday anymore. Also, one could notice that the camp was getting less populated by any of the day as well as one absolved one's own daily visit to the latrines. No news was exchanged much any more except for the rumour that the camp's commander didn't really follow the alphabet. He was picking up a batch of forms at random though the clerks did their best to prepare as many of the forms as they could each day.

Then it came Vet's turn to leave. He went with several of the men I had come to know better here in the camp recently. Our parting was brief and without any sentimentality. We wished each other a safe journey home and happiness ever after. Nothing was said about seeing each other in the future or arranging a meeting. Just few words farewell and good luck was all what was said. We haven't exchanged our addresses including full family name either. I'm ashamed to say that I cannot even remember his full name that's why I am calling him "Vet" in this account. Why none of us mentioned that we should meet the future, I just don't know? Perhaps none of us did want to push our luck! My comrade who shared with me so much hardship and friendship left me standing there after a hug and long handshake. I never saw him again!

On Monday, August 13 started with an unexpected inconvenience: rain! It started during the night and those of us who still camped outside were running for cover into the huge building of silk worm hatchery. There was ample room now but the rubbish and dirt left behind by those who had already left the camp was appalling. The smell that permeated through the entire house was equally disgusting. Therefore, I preferred to stay as near to the entrance as possible and sitting on the steps was waiting for the rain to stop or for the dawn to come so I could go to my duties with the water bearers.

I had to take my rucksack with me in that I had packed in all my belongings, as there was nobody left of our group whom I could have trusted with it. I lugged it with me when we went to the well where we hardly met any people due to the rain. We didn't have to fill up the tank full, as there were fewer people in camp now. We would be coming back to camp sooner as before too. I started looking around for a new place to sleep when I heard the call for the morning meal and for the roll call afterward. I walked over and lined up the queue still carrying my rucksack. Some time later I heard my name called out and suddenly it became clear to me that it was my turn to pack up and leave the camp this afternoon.

A feeling of happiness mingled with some sort of trepidation that something might prevent my leaving filled me for the rest of the day. Time passed terribly slowly as I sat under the mulberry tree which had been my shelter for the past three weeks. The camp was beginning to look deserted with half of the prisoners gone already. I estimated that about 400 of prisoners were released every day. This number would fit into a trainload of about a dozen wagons. As there was only one train to Kovin each day, this might be the explanation for the secret departure during the night to avoid all contact with the local population.

Still, I was grateful for the fact that we would travel home by train. As the evening approached my name was called out again ordering me to the command post to collect my travel papers and my piece of bread. As I went to pick up both I didn't bother to turn around for a last look. This place had ceased to exist for me as soon as I had that piece of paper in my hand. It was written in Cyrillic and stating my name, birth date and birthplace and my father's name too. I took it and the slice of bread and then walked on into the enclosure where some hundred men were assembled already. Then I sat down there near the fence. Why again, I don't know?

It was too dark to read my permit, so I folded it and put it into my safety pouch, that I had kept around my neck for the past weeks glad not to have to carry it next to my crotch anymore. It was too dark also to recognize anybody, so we all sat in silence and just waited. I was reminded of similar situations where I had just sat and wait for what was

going to come next. Only now I was full of hope and anticipation which kept me awake when before I would have dozed off like some of the men around me.

Around midnight, several of the guards came and told us to line up in rows of four. After the rows were formed they took us out of the camp through a gate at the rear. So this was why the people inside the camp never noticed the departure of the groups. As we marched through the darkness I noticed that we were heading in the direction of Kovin. It was very still and only a dog barked occasionally when it might have heard our quiet steps. There were no lights in any of the houses. I had a strong feeling of reviving something from the past marching through the night like that. I was glad when we reached Kovin station. We were herded into the normal livestock wagons and, when the first light came up far away in the east, the train started moving. The doors of the wagon were open and there was only a bar to prevent somebody from falling out. It was very pleasant to sit there and watch the countryside slide by as daylight slowly lit up the world for us.

The train sped through the flat plain passing Bavaniste and reaching Banatsko Novo Selo in full daylight. Only about three weeks ago I had come through here not knowing what to expect from the reeducation and full of unhappiness about my future. Now at last I was on my way home! I started looking around among the forty men or so who shared the wagon with me but I didn't recognize anybody. Most of them were better dressed than I was so I assumed that none of them had gone through the ordeal of a long march. I asked the man sitting next to me whether he knew any of the others. He just shook his head meaning a "No" but he didn't answer aloud. A feeling of loneliness crept up on me as I realized that I was back on my own, having to look out for myself alone and nothing else. Gone was the jubilant mood of the Sunday service in camp when we were told that we would soon be free, gone the feeling of companionship, we all were strangers on their way to different places and different futures.

After Banatsko Novo Selo the train went south, driving through sandy soil and high stacks of maize in the fields. I fingered open my pouch and took out the form issued by the Ministry of Defence, Department for Prisoners of War, with the printed camp number "XX-B". I knew that the 'B' stood for 'V' because all of the writing was in Cyrillic. The paper was dated Kovin, 8 August 1945, and stated that I had been captured by the Yugoslav Army on 14 May 1945, at Slovenj Gradec as the commandant of an artillery platoon. I was released following a General Amnesty by the Antifascist Council of the Peoples' Liberation of Yugoslavia, AVNOJ, which didn't mean anything to me. And yet, I was on my way to return to Osijek, my hometown, where I had to report to the Peoples' Command within 24 hours after my arrival. The form entitled me to a free passage by train and ship from Kovin to Osijek without the right to return. At this I had to laugh! Return? I would never return to this place where I had been held a prisoner, never ever! Never!

The train was rattling on through a flat country and it seemed that we were approaching a more verdant area, possibly coming closer to the Danube River. Somebody mentioned that we were travelling to Belgrade but that we should come to Pancevo first. Just outside the station of Pancevo the train stopped in a shunting yard and then proceeded in a different direction. After a while somebody pointed to a distant hill on which the fortress of Belgrade stood out against the sky. The train slowed down and continued at a snail's pace over a bridge that seemed to have been repaired only recently as one could see the makeshift work of provisional repair. The train continued to crawl along over a dike and

through swampy flats typical for the area around Belgrade. One was tempted to get off the train to avoid the heat in the wagon.

Suddenly we stopped again just outside a shunting yard and a few moments later heard some one yelling: "Get out! All passengers get out of the train. It stops here, no further travel!" Slowly and a little apprehensive the groups of POW came out of their wagons and lined up in front of them expecting further orders and instruction. But nobody came and nothing happened. We just saw that some of civilian passengers were walking towards the distant railway station. We had reached Krnjaca, only a few kilometres from Belgrade but on the northern side of the Danube here. Why didn't the train carry on into Belgrade station from where we could continue to Zemun station and further westwards?

We soon found an explanation: probably the suspension bridge had not been repaired yet. We stood around indecisively, not knowing what to do and becoming rather nervous. Where should we go from here? How could we reach Zemun? How to cross the Dunav River?

Suggestions were made and discarded. Some warned us of possible confrontation and provocation we might encounter if we carried on as a large group. Others felt we should proceed to Belgrade in a group for better safety. None of us had any idea what the political situation was like in the capital of the People's Republic of Yugoslavia and so we stood there, undecided and somewhat anxious. To go on via Belgrade would be feasible only if we stayed as a large group getting some kind of protection from the number of people we were in. We were about four hundred men and nobody was taking on the task of leadership. We just stood there debating our chances and getting heated up with every minute. The merciless August sun was adding its share to our discomfort.

I had had enough of it and I turned to the man next to me said: "There isn't a chance to go on together. Some of the men have left already. Let us follow them too."

"I am going to Belgrade first; from there I know how to get to Zemun. If there is no train then there must be another way to cross the Sava," somebody said.

"But why first to Belgrade? Let's try to make it straight across to Zemun. We have to walk only a few kilometres to reach the Bank of Danube where we would find the way to cross it and how to reach to Zemun. I'm sure it's simpler and safer. Shall we?"

"No, no, I'm not willing to walk when I've got a ticket for travel by train or ship. I go to Belgrade like the others." - At this moment, Beethoven's four bars were suddenly sounding in my ear like a warning, just as they had done so often before. Without a word I turned and went away walking in the direction in which I expected to find means of crossing the river and reach the Zemun station.

Soon after I'd left the railway line I walked in what must have been outskirts of Krnjaca. I met some people that looked like peasants to me and responded when I greeted them. A little further on I saw an old woman working a vegetable garden and, as I had become quite hungry and thirsty, I stopped and addressed her: "Good mother, can you please tell me which is the best way to get to Zemun? And could you perhaps let me have a drink of water?"

"My son, dear God, where are you coming from? It's a long way to the ferry that will take you over the river. It is a very long way indeed!"

Surprised by woman's concerned voice I mumbled out: "Yes, yes, but I am a former prisoner of war and I want to get home as fast as possible. I have all my papers and permits. Please can you show me the quickest way?"

"Yes, of course, I'll show you! But first do come in and have something to eat and a little milk to drink, that's better than water." - So we sat down on her doorstep, in the shade that was pleasant after the scorching August sun, and I ate what the good woman had to offer. We talked for a while until I noticed that I was getting sleepy and would doze off if I didn't get moving. I got up and in spite of the woman's protests, that I should stay and rest a little longer, I bade her good-bye. I was suddenly in a great hurry to get going.

It wasn't difficult to follow the woman's given direction and so I walked on a path through the flat and rather marshy countryside. The path was dry enough but I still watched my steps, not only because of the swampy ground but also because the woman had told me of mines that were still about. I took off my shirt and stuffed it between my back and the rucksack to ward off the humidity at afternoon. I kept to the path taking my bearings from the sun and Kalemegdan, the fortress above Belgrade. After an hour or so I came to a river, probably more a backwater channel, that waters flowed so slowly one had the impression of almost no movement at all. Should I try swimming across, or would it be possible to wade through?

I saw a settlement just a little ahead upstream and a few wide boats with a shallow bed typical for this kind of river. For a moment I was thinking of taking one of the boats to paddle across the river, but I didn't know this one and deep pools could appear suddenly and be treacherous with whirlpools and/or unexpected currents. I started looking for a pole with which to fathom the river depth but couldn't find one. Walking a little onwards the reed cleared and I had an unhampered view of the water at last. There I saw a boatman coming across that river and by his using of pole I could judge that the water would be about a meter or so in depth.

I went down the narrow clearance and waded into shallow waters to meet the boatman. He was most surprised to see somebody waiting for him and stopped pushing his boat for a few moments. "Comrade Fisherman, can you help me? I want to get across the river to reach the ferry at Zemun. Please, don't row off..."

The boatman viewed me rather suspiciously and started his pole again bringing the boat nearer to the bank just a little away from where I stood. When I assured him that I was not a fugitive but one of the POWs who had been discharged lately, his face became friendly and he waved to me to get into his boat. "Good day to you, son. You're prudent to wait for some one to row you across. There must have been a few others of you who tried to swim across and got in trouble. Only a handful of them made it though. Come in the boat. I'll take you to the other side."

I mumbled my thanks and sat down in his boat. It didn't take him long to cross although one could see that the current was much stronger than one expected from the calm surface of the water. The boatman landed on a little sandbank where he could safely moor his boat and said: "You must go to that clearing in the reed, son. Over there, see?"

And keep to the new footpath only. There are still mines around so we've had lost some of cattle already. God bless you, son, and bring you home safely!"

I waded over to the spot he had indicated and when I was on a firm ground turned to wave my thanks to my saviour but he was nearly back on the other side. When I shouted out to him and thanked him, he waved and pointed once more in the direction I was to go. I turned and walked on and soon could see far behind me Borca, the village on the other riverside from which the boatman came. It was early afternoon and despite the heat and humidity I felt fine because I had the good feeling that I was coming closer to Zemun on the opposite bank of Danube. I felt fine and strong and confident. Finding people willing to help me had bolstered my confidence and washed off some of the bitter feeling of being a prisoner, an outcast.

Was I going to be all right from now on and able to live a normal life again? Sooner than expected my meditations were cut off by the realization that I had arrived to the left bank of Danube. The path had become wider and it was running off in both directions but which way leads to the ferry?

I decided to go downstream figuring that this would take me closer to Belgrade and would probably present me with a better chance of finding a way to cross the river. I must have been under a lucky star that day because I didn't have to walk long before I found a fairly wide clearing with a wooden sort of platform on stilts in the water. A few people stood waiting on the platform and there were several pushcarts as well as a bigger one with a horse in front. As I came closer I noticed that there were a few men in the uniform of the People's Militia in the waiting crowd too who eyed me with a certain suspicion.

But before one of them could say anything I had taken out my papers and held them out to the nearest one: "Here you are! Please see for yourself, my papers are in order".

The militiaman waved them aside and said: "Come, comrade, come here. Anyone can see where you're coming from. Come and wait with us for the ferry. It won't be long." - Though I felt that this man had sympathy for me, he didn't speak to me any more nor did any of the others.

As I stood by the railing looking out onto waters for the ferryboat I felt a sudden dizziness. I had to grip the wooden railing hard as an urge to get away from all these people nearly made me turn and run. Why? Why did I have this terrible need to get away from people? Is it fear or is it just humiliation at the way I looked, so obviously different from all the others standing there. Come on, Zvonko, you're not going to give in now when you've nearly reached home, the haven you've been longing for all these months! Come on and pull yourself together, you're as good as the next man. You've proved yourself in danger and in hard times, so don't give up now.

The ferryboat came in slowly using the current only for the last few meters before it berthed beside the platform with a bump that shook everyone standing on it. The horse whinnied and started stamping with its left leg while its owner tried to calm it down. Only a few people had come with the ferry so we could soon get on and after the ropes that held it had been released we were on our way upstream. The trip was pleasant and calmed my nerves reminding me of the times I had used the ferryboat at Osijek, though it didn't have an engine but used the river current as the driving energy. Soon, we had reached the Danube's Right Bank and berthed again with a thump against the mooring platform.

The militiaman told me that I should walk straight up and into town for the railway station and I thanked him and was on my way.

It was still very hot and I was perspiring but didn't want to take off my shirt again which I'd put on before joining the people on the waiting platform. I looked scraggly enough, I thought, without catching people's eye with a bare torso. When I reached the town's square sat down to catch my breath after the steep ascend from the river to here. I was glad to see that nobody seemed to be particularly curious about me, not even a patrol of militiamen who marched across the square. After a while I felt it might be better to find the station and see how the train service was. I might miss a train and have to wait all night otherwise. Seeing a militiaman again in front of the station building I brandished my papers again but he just waved me over to the ticket office.

As I got out onto the platform I saw a few figures curled up on the benches that looked familiar. Well, I thought, seems a few other fellows have made it as well. Approaching one who was more sitting than lying I just wanted to say something when he greeted me: "Hi, compatriot, welcome to the crowd. You're also waiting for trains westwards, aren't you? Where are you coming from?"

"My group left Kovin last night but I've come on my own from Krnjaca when the train stopped there and wouldn't take us any further. How long have you been waiting for a train?"

"We've come from Vrsac but travelled and went over to Belgrade first. It's already the second day that we are waiting for a train west. It was stupid to go to Belgrade first, just a waste of time and a lot of humiliation. We didn't get any food as none of us has any Dinars. We had to beg for something to eat and we missed one train."

"How often is there a train going west? Is any regular service available?" I enquired my counterpart.

"Good lord, no! You've got to wait till a train is put together and then try to get on it. There are hardly any available carriages here. Most of them are freight cars. It's bad, really bad for us former war prisoners."

"Oh, well," I said. "I don't really care what I ride in as long as it takes me home. Do you happen to know when the next train's put together?"

"A few of the fellows went to find out but they haven't come back with any news yet. They are far out there. Down there by the building that looks like an engine shed, see?"

I looked in the direction he was pointing at and decided to walk over to see for myself. At the end of platform I found a water tap that worked and was able to wash off some of the dust and sweat which had started to irritate me. Why do us have to be treated worse than animals, I thought, and felt a wave of self-pity sweep over me. Why cannot they at least get us home in some sort of human condition after they have kept us like beasts for so long? I fought against these useless thoughts, telling myself that nothing would help anybody and me now, unless I myself started to help myself first. I must find a train and I must find a place on it. I must get myself back to Osijek where people know me and understand who I am.



As the shed came closer I saw that there were standing around a few figures like myself, all of them discharged POWs and the majority coming from Kovin. When I talked to some of them I was told that many had gone to Belgrade and then had to walk to Zemun, as they wouldn't be let on any train leaving the Belgrade station. In fact they were told by the guards to walk over to Zemun. There was none of the men who had left Kovin with me. I must have been really lucky to get to Zemun that fast. A little later we were told by an official that a train was being put together with freight cars that are turned into passenger carriages by putting benches in. Just before it got dark a little shunting engine puffed in pulling about a dozen wagons behind. Warned by our scouts we were soon aboard and ready to go.

I had chosen a wagon with some others who were also going as far as Vinkovci, where we would have to change trains again. Sitting in a corner I must have fallen asleep almost as soon as I put my head down because I didn't notice when the train was pulled into the station proper. I woke up with a start when, with a lot of noise and tumultuous shouting and banging of doors, a large crowd of normal passengers boarded the train. I tried to protect my corner as best I could heaving a sigh of relief when the train started moving and so it was on its way finally that was to be the last leg of my journey.

Most of this journey I must have been sleeping because I do not remember much of the rest of that night. Once, as I looked out I saw that we had stopped at Stara Pazova and that reminded me of my journey in the other direction some six weeks ago. But when the train started moving again I gave myself up to the feeling of safety. The swaying of train gave me knowing that I was homeward bound and despite that my future might be uncertain but it would be in the security of familiar surroundings. I woke when dawn was coming up and we were approaching Vinkovci, where I had to get off and change trains for Osijek. I scrambled over the lifeless bodies of other sleepers and jumped onto the platform when the train had stopped. What a feeling to stand there as a free man and see the sun rising just beyond the tracks.

Only a handful of POWs had stepped off the train and we looked a little out of place in the crowd of people who were surging on the platform trying to find a seat on another train. There were quite a few militiamen around, too, but I didn't mind them secure in the knowledge that I had my travel papers. Soon a short train pulled by a small steam engine came in and the scramble to get on started anew. There were many people going to Osijek I noticed and then realized that it might be market day. Just a normal market day for all these people but what a day this Wednesday, August 15, was for me!

Except for my filthy clothes and the lice that kept bothering me for too long, I felt like a king. Still, I chose a converted cattle wagon for this trip as well not wanting to have to face the situation of anyone moving away from me. Nonetheless people didn't pay much attention to me or any of the other POWs and soon the train was on its way. We stopped at every smallest station but the journey went on without any incident. Militiamen were patrolling the train in addition to the conductor who, after having checked my papers, just passed them back to me with a smile.

When the train had left Tenjski Antunovac station I knew that Osijek would be the next and a slow excitement started rising in my insides. Craning out of the open sliding door, I was watching for the first sight of the redbrick church tower and when we pulled into the station I was the last to get down from the wagon. I knew that nobody would be waiting

for me, as no one knew that I was coming but I still expected to see a familiar face in the crowd that was milling around on the platform. Here I was home again! Home again!

The others were hurrying in the direction of exit at the left side of station building and I followed as if in a dream. Slowly, as if I was a foreigner who had to find his way, I walked the well-known steps from the platform to the exit gate where the crowd had formed into a cluster before going through a check up singly or in pairs.

As soon as I came out the gate a corporal of guard holding a Russian automatic stopped me: "Your permit, comrade. This is a military control." I fumbled for my pouch while others behind me were getting impatient as I was blocking their way. The guard stepped aside to make room for me and let the others pass and I felt perspiration trickle down my back as I nervously presented my papers. He took them and checked them perfunctorily before returning them to me and saying in a rather unpleasant tone: "Ah, I see, a prisoner of war who's been discharged and is returning home! Well, get on!"

I took the papers and turned to go straight towards the other gate where a railway guard was checking the tickets. After a few steps I felt a sharp pain in my left side and was stopped short by a soldier boring his rifle into my stomach. His face had an evil look and reminded me immediately of that back in Sveta Nedjelja, who had made us run for our lives between their whips and poles and shovels. The soldier shouted at me: "Stop! Where do you think you're going? Get back into that queue. I want to see what you've got in your rucksack."

A sudden surge of red-hot anger and hate made me grasp the barrel of his rifle and twist it sharply. Crying out with pain he staggered back and let go of the weapon. I don't know whether I would have pointed it at him or thrown it at his feet because a corporal came running towards us shouting from afar: "Stop, comrade! Stop instantly! Let the man pass. He's been checked. Stop, that's an order."

When he was beside me, I simply handed him the rifle and turning to go heard him say: "That was a foolish thing to do, comrade. Better go quickly, now!" - He didn't have to tell me twice because no sooner had I turned then I noticed that my knees had gone weak and I had to lean against the nearby wall. I nearly gave out on the spot realizing what I had done.

Suddenly I saw my mother pushing her way through to me and then felt her hand on my arm pulling me away. We didn't speak a word until we were out in the square in front of the railway station and turned into the streets that lead to our house. My mother stopped for a moment and facing me held both my hands in hers and said lovingly: "Hush, hush Zvonko. You're home at last! Welcome home, my son! Take it easy, everything is going to be alright." Tears were flowing down her cheeks still holding me as for support.

I was shaking over my body as I burst out: "I hate them, mother! I loathe these bastards of human race. Those who take pleasure in tormenting anyone who are in a weaker position than themselves. I could kill them with my bare hands!"

Mother was trying to appease me by calming words: "Hush, hush, my son! You must not say such things. You're home now and in safety. Please try to calm yourself."

I turned and started walking in the direction of our house, when I noticed that she could not keep up with me I stopped to wait for her. "Please forgive me, mother. I thought the man wanted to go through my rucksack for another disgusting exchange. I have nothing left to exchange except my life. I am filthy and in rags that are full of lice. And yet they cannot leave me alone. Oh, mother, please take me home and let me strip off these things and burn them. I am yearning to wash myself and shave my beard and hair of so that I am free of all the vermin. I wish to be the man I was before when I left you and our house."

My mother's eyes were dry as she looked at me and slowly checked me from head to foot. Then she took my hand and we continued down the well-known street with its yellow clinker bricks on which traffic was rattling to and from. When we crossed the Vukovarska Street and entered the Krezmina Street, I could see with my overtired eyes the glimpse of the small roof tower on our house. Then I knew for sure, I have reached the long craving goal and that the dream became true at last.

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Somewhere inside me the bubble of hate humiliation burst and gave the way to an overpowering fatigue. My tormented body and the disgraceful humiliation of my personality gave away to the senseless of all encompassing tiredness. The heart-broken spirit was looking for a shelter under the omnipotent oblivion. My body was craving after a long and undisturbed rest - a very long and deep slumber. At this very moment all what I wanted was to sleep - just to SLEEP! My only desire was to sleep peacefully and for very long.

Would I be able to forget all the sufferings and horrors I went through during the past four months? In this short period of time I lost my childhood's dreams and my youth had gone for good too. A young and inexperienced man had lost his innocence and his faith in the existence of humanity. The credibility of righteousness was deeply shaken in him too. He was asking himself if one could forget all these disasters. Would I ever stop thinking about that or there is no end to it? Sleep now! Sleep ...



*The Main Square and the church of Sts. Paul & Peter in Osijek Upper Town (a postcard).*

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