

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND - Summary**

After a military Coup d'Etat in Belgrade on 27th March 1941, against the Tripartite Agreement between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's fascist regime, the operation "Penal Court" started. It began with an air raid on Belgrade on the morning of 6th April as Hitler ordered the attack on Yugoslavia to help the Italian Army after their disaster in Greece and Albania in 1940. Simultaneously the German Armies marched into Yugoslavia from the former Austrian territory, also from Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Germans started the attack on eastern Greece from Bulgaria.

The Yugoslav Army capitulated on 17th April. Various parts of former Yugoslavia were occupied by different army's commands. The Germans were in Slovenia and Serbia, Italians in Dalmatia and Monte Negro, Bulgarians in Macedonia and Hungarians in Vojvodina. On April 10, 1941 Croats declared their independent state following the autonomous status of Banovina Hrvatska (County of Croatia) in the late Kingdom after August 1939. Thus was formed the "Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska" (short NDH) that entered into an alliance with the fascistic regimes soon after.

Dr. Ante Pavelic declared himself the Head of NDH and titled himself "Poglavnik". He was a "Quisling" using Croats' old national and republican feelings as well as their desire for independence too. His regime was dictatorial following Hitler's tyrannical aims too. Italians wanted their Prince of Spoleto to become the new King of Croatia but this was turned down soon after as disputes went on about the NDH territory particularly about Dalmatia region and Adriatic islands. The NDH territory included all regions of the ex-Banovina Hrvatska with some parts of Bosnia, Herzegovina and of Dalmatia. The NDH regular army was the "Hrvatski Domobran" (Croatian Home Guard). The "Ustasa" (read Ustasha) were Pavelic's political and police forces where as "Ustaska Vojnica" was the army units (corresponding to German "SS" and "Waffen-SS" respectively).

The German operation "Barbarossa" started two months later as originally planned against Stalin's Russia that is on 22nd June 1941. Already in July started the first raids against the occupation powers in former Yugoslavia's regions. The underground Communist party of Yugoslavia under its General Secretary Josip Broz Tito organized the raids. The drastic retaliation followed by the occupation forces at various places instantly. The Ustasa regime had to fight a new enemy that is the communistic "partisans" and started with arbitrary executions of imprisoned hostages and of accused adversaries. The general prosecution of Ustasa's political opponents followed too.

The political enemies of Ustasa's regime were Communists, Serbs and Cetniks (read "Chetnik") that remained faithful to the young king Petar II Karadzordjevic at first. Some of the Chetnik's groups joined Tito's Partisans at first but later turned against them joining Italians and Germans after 1943. The Ustasa's regime prosecuted some Orthodox believers (mostly Serbs) as well as those of Jewish and of Gypsy communities following Nazi's extermination laws.

The war events with many social and political changes proved to be a profound experience for 16 years old boy from a well known family living in Osijek. Osijek is a large town on Drava River right bank located at the eastern part of Slavonia of NDH's territory. The town's population consisted of many different nationalities mostly Croatian

and minorities of Hungarian, German and Serb minorities. Many Jewish families lived there too as merchants and intellectuals like lawyers, doctors etc. The Jews were the first to fall under Nazis' political reprisals and had to wear the yellow David's star in public. Many families were of "mixed marriages" where one of the partners was of Jewish faith or origin. It was a surprise seeing a person to wear that yellow star that one knew as a Roman Catholic. For such "mixed marriages" a new law settled that at least one the partners had to prove his Aryan origin so that the other partner did no longer have to wear the yellow star. By then many acquaintances and relatives disappeared or were abducted never to return.

Students and schoolboys aged over 15 were called to join the youth organization "Ustaska mladez" by summer of 1941. This was obligatory as to show the acceptance of the new regime and ones readiness to fight for the "independence". The paramilitary youth service was an option too but members helped abducting regime's enemies and escorted the unfortunate to concentration camps somewhere in Lika. There was another option as one could join the Youth Work Service.

It was father's foresight that I joined such a Work group going to Vocin where labored on hard construction work for two months. In autumn 1941 we returned to our schools and I continued my studies at the Boys Secondary School in the Old Town (Citadel) of Osijek despite mother's stigmatization because of her Jewish relation. In May 1943 Himmler came personally to Zagreb and ordered the final raid on Jews and Gypsies living in NDH. My mother's parents and some nearest relatives were also deported so we felt that they would never return. I graduated from the Secondary School by end of July 1943 at last. From then on we waited to be called into the army service at a short notice.

For some time one heard a lot about Tito's Partisans. They fought off several offensives from the combined German, Italian and Ustasa armed forces during 1942 and early 1943. A big reward was promised for capturing Tito dead or alive. Partisans were not considered as a regular army of an internationally accepted state. This caused awful atrocities and many massacres as well as heavy casualties among civilians. Besides all there were many victims of the fratricidal fights and political turmoil too.

Ustasa considered Domobran unreliable to certain extend in fighting against the partisans who later turned into the Peoples' Liberation Army (short NOV). The Italian Government capitulated in September 1943 relieving the pressure on NOV to some extend. In November 1943 at Jajce Tito affirmed the Antifascist Committee of Peoples' Liberation of Yugoslavia (short AVNOJ) as the Supreme representative of the future State of Yugoslavia.

After a few-month of nervous waiting school graduates had to join the regular army service and turned up in Zagreb end of October 1943. We spent few weeks spent in barracks in Zagreb. German soldiers surprised us at an evening call by surrounding the barracks and lead us to the railway station after. The transport by train lasted four nights when we arrived at Stockerau a small town near Vienna. A group of twenty chosen recruits came to the "Jaeger Barracks" at Stockerau East to be trained for artillery officers. By mere coincidence a dozen in this group came from Osijek.

Following a 2-week home leave in June our training continued on until mid September 1944. From our home leave we brought two "castrated" radios in which the short wave

was cut off and a seal on the back cover. There was a simple trick that we learned how to bridge the gap with a piece of wire without touching the seal. Thus we could listen to the BBC news in our rooms but with a great caution not to be caught at. We learned about the progress of the offensive of Allied Forces in West of France, the invasion in South of France, the Liberation of Paris etc.

Since the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Hitler on 20th July 1944 rumors spread about the surrender of Croatian "Handzar Division" at the West Front. There German execution squads killed many Croatian soldiers of this unit. We also heard about the futile attempt of NDH's Minister Lorkovic and Domobran General Vokic who supposedly offered a free access at the northern Croatian Adriatic Sea coast to the British Army. Although Churchill probably liked this idea it was Tito who bluntly refused it as Tito had rather good relation with the British Government at that time already.

All this brought us a complex situation in Stockerau and we had to endure some difficult time in waiting there. We expected our deportation somewhere anytime but it was over abruptly over when suddenly when we were ordered to get back to Zagreb end of October 1944. We had ominous feelings that we would be involved soon in real combats of the last phase of the World War II. By the end of 1944 the renamed Yugoslav Peoples' Army (short JNA) liberated all of Macedonia, Serbia (liberating Belgrade on 20 October, 1944), Monte Negro and most of Croatian Dalmatia. About the same time Russian Armies liberated Rumania and Bulgaria helping Tito to recapture Belgrade from the Germans. Russians stayed beyond the left banks of rivers Danube and Drava. From there on Russian units continued westwards fighting through Hungary and further up to Austria. In the meantime several German divisions and other units started to withdraw from Greece passing through Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia. As the German units drew back into Croatia they left in their wake most of their heavy and motorized armors.

Some of us 1943's trainees were promoted to Lieutenant Juniors in Zagreb by mid December 1944. Three of us got the order for frontline duty with the 1st Howitzers Battery that was supposedly at the warfront somewhere near Osijek. We traveled by train from Zagreb and reached Vinkovci at night time. I expected to meet a "link" there, which would shove me over to the Partisan's side. For some unknown reasons to me the "link" did not turn up, most probably because the front line was not close enough to Vinkovci. At that time the JNA did not continue its westward offensive through Srijem to eastern Slavonia as one could anticipate. Srijem is the flat region between the rivers Danube and Sava.

At our arrival to Vinkovci there was no military command so we decided to walk towards Osijek that is some 40km northwards. We arrived at Osijek a day short of Christmas Eve and found the large town as deserted as we left Vinkovci. Nobody knew where the front lines were but the administration, police and military command fled expecting JNA's fast advance into Srijem. For them the situation would turn rather precarious if the Srijem and Vinkovci fell to JNA's advancing units.

The military command and the town's officials returned to Osijek few days after Christmas 1944 except for those who went over to join Partisans or were still hiding. Now Osijek became a frontier town as the frontline extended along the river Drava left bank and down to its confluence into the Danube. The 1st Howitzer Battery returned to Osijek several days after Christmas. Two of us went to join it as the third comrade got to

another unit under some command. Some weeks later German Army succeeded in opening a bridgehead over Drava near Donji Miholjac some 30km upstream of Osijek. German's advance reached hilly country near to Harkanyi on Hungarian side. By mid April 1945 JNA started its spring offensive at the northern front seeking to liberate the rest of Yugoslavia westwards of Osijek.

At the south front along the Adriatic coast the JNA's offensive was well underway at times earlier so Trieste was liberated on May 2, 1945. JNA advanced at a slower pace partly through central regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the mostly mountainous terrain there. German and Croatian armed forces kept a kind of front line there too, this enabling the retreat of their units north-westwards in the direction towards Austria. Their main aim was to reach the advancing Allied forces in Slovenia or possibly in Carinthia later.

About two thirds of German soldiers could get through westwards so some 150.000 were caught by Tito's armies what was for them the final deadly verdict. The eastern most Croatian armed forces started to retreat from Osijek on April 13, 1945 the same day when Vienna was liberated by Russians. The Croatian withdrawal westwards swelled up soon turning into general exodus. Croatians feared reprisals from the Partisans whom they fought for about four years. Nobody counted the numbers of soldiers and civilians but one estimated that about one third of Croatian population was on the move then. There were about 200.000 armed soldiers of the say 1.5 million souls on the move in the early days of May 1945. Head and Army Commander in Chief of NDH Poglavnik Pavelic, his government officials and other political supporters fled from Zagreb as from 3rd May and the JNA's units liberated Zagreb on May 8, 1945.

Most of the Croatians stayed behind except for those who went on retreating through Slovenia on the way to Austria. The later expected to get through reaching American or British armed forces before being caught by the advancing Partisans or JNA units or even worse to be captured by Russians or Bulgarians. The later two armies were advancing consistently along Drava river's left bank reaching far into southern Austria's region. Nobody in the Croatian mass departure expected anything good from the victorious armies particularly not from those of Communist leadership. At first the British Command allowed and accepted the surrender of armed Serb's Cetniks who withdraw side by side with their worst foes the Ustasa. The British accepted the surrender of White Gardist's units from Slovenia and some Cossack's units, who fought under German command against Russian army. Before that the Germans' surrender started on the day of Armistice May 8, 1945 expecting a treatment of Prisoners of War as stipulated by the Geneva Conventions.

In this bewildered and perplexed mass pf people were Croatian civilians, some Domobran units and their counterparts in Ustaska Vojnica. Last not least retreated with them the remaining or late coming Ustasa' units some of most feared ones lead by Colonels Boban and Luburic. They lead the 'Black Ustasa' units renowned by their black uniforms and known as the most merciless and fearsome fighters particularly on their way to the West. Blacks were scared of anybody that stood in their way who either wanted to surrender to the pursuing JNA or who were too slow preventing a faster move westwards to a safety by the Allied Forces. Thus many lost their lives by their own kin becoming the post-war victims of the Peace in Europe in its first few weeks of.

Rumors spread from the front of retreating Croatian columns that the British turned over

captured Croatians to the JNA units. Some Croatian units did cross Drava and broke through advancing into Austria already. However certain units were turned away by British at Bleiburg near Klagenfurt as from 10th May onwards. The Croatian soldiers surrendered as Prisoners of War (short POW) to the British Commander at Bleiburg on May 13, 1945. The British Commander turned over POWs and large number of captured civilians to the JNA Commander as to be repatriated into Yugoslavia. Those unfortunates were led in long columns from Dravograd to Maribor along Drava river's left bank. A very few survived that inescapable and indiscriminate massacre done by Tito's murderous executioners.

This terrible news spread like wildfire stopping many Croatians in their further march westwards. They could not cross the Drava river anymore because of the destroyed bridge Dravograd. Those entire Croatians still at South of Drava that is river's right bank had to surrender to Partisans or JNA units as from May 14, 1945. Some Ustasa's units would try their luck and proceeded further upriver beyond Dravograd and Prevalje that is opposite of Bleiburg. Later some surrendered to the British whose commanders changed their attitude towards Croatian POWs because of the "bad experience" made with JNA Command at Bleiburg.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

My manuscript is a personal account that describes the period from April 13, 1945 the day when the 1st Howitzer Battery started its retreat from Osijek. The Battery westward withdrew all the way along Drava river's right bank through Slavonia and northern part of Croatia. On May 8 it crossed into Slovenia and arrived short of Dravograd on May 14. In a hopeless situation there remained nothing for us then the surrender to the JNA as the only our chance to stay alive. I was left as the only Battery's officer and lead the gunners back into surrender after midnight. We were a few of some 40.000 Prisoners of War that were herded up in a camp at Slovenj Gradec herded up in a camp the next day May 15, 1945.

I started as a captive in a very long column the lengthy and very deadly march now eastwards. As from May 17, 1945 I had to walk some 500 km, most of it barefooted to return alive to my hometown Osijek on 2nd June that is in 16 days only. Later I lived through a period of varying life conditions as a POW. One offered us an option to be "re-educated" before we could join JNA's armed forces. After some less trying and dangerous events I arrived in a POW's camp in Kovin at eastern Serbia where I joined other Domobran officers. The General Amnesty and Pardon proclaimed on August 3, 1945 after that the imprisoned POWs could return to their homes. My account ends with August 15 that is the day when I returned home at Osijek after four months of absence. At that time the Peace in Europe lasted for some time already!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~