

THE WAR YEARS, 1941-1945: FROM MY EXPERIENCES

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Preface

The events taking place in Slovenia after the attack on 6 April 1941 and during the occupation by the Axis Powers, 1941–45 were tragic and cataclysmic in the truest sense of the words. Thousands of people lost their lives, many were tortured, imprisoned, placed in concentration and forced labor camps, or forcibly resettled outside their home territories. The resistance movements, although many, did not find a common denominator for joint and appropriate action against the enemies. This multiplicity led at first to internal struggle among the resistance movements and later to civil war, while occupation authorities possessed and exercised full, unjust, and merciless power over the population.

The end of tragedies for the Slovene people did not coincide with the cessation of hostilities in Europe on 8 May 1945. The anti-communist forces, who sought and were granted protection by the British forces in the Klagenfurt/Celovec area of Austria, were two weeks later betrayed and returned by the British military authorities to Yugoslavia under the pretense that they were being transported to Italy. Between ten and twelve thousand members of these forces, among them some civilians, were then, without any legal process or trials, summarily executed by Tito's forces at the end of May and during the first two weeks of June 1945.

The author of the following article was an eyewitness to many of the events, was exposed to various practices and ideologies of the combatants, and lost many friends in this struggle. He is now working on his war memoirs.

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Although the narratives this article contains are separated in time and place, I hope to be able to thread them together into a coherent account. Fifty years have passed but my memory of the events is as vivid as ever.

Prewar Years

I grew up in the Meža Valley (Mežiška dolina) south of the Austrian border. As far back as I remember, I heard about the lost plebiscite in Carinthia of 10 October 1920 and the oppression of the Slovenes on the other side of the border. As a result of the plebiscite, the border separated our families; one half, from both parental sides, was now residing in Austria. Occasional visits to the relatives across the border, although exciting in many ways, always left me unhappy.

My first awareness of the Nazis came in 1934 during the July Putsch in Austria. After the Nazis were defeated, many escaped to Yugoslavia, most to the territory under my father's jurisdiction.¹ While debriefing these Austrian Nazis at his headquarters, which at that time were located in Prevalje, my father learned that one of my cousins, Hans Legat, had fallen victim to a Nazi bullet near Eisenkappel (Železna Kapla).²

Attack on Yugoslavia

On 6 April 1941, at five in the morning, the efforts of a few courageous Serb and Montenegrin border guards (*graničarji*) prevented a quick German advance toward Dravograd, only four kilometers south of the Austrian border. My father was thus able to move his government offices southward across the Drava River and escape capture before the only bridge and escape route was blown up by the Yugoslav army.

¹ My father was the chief administrative officer of Dravograd County (Okraj/Srez). Between the two world wars Slovenia was divided into twenty-four counties.

² I attended Hans Legat's funeral in Železna Kapla, on the Austrian side of the border. It was a state military funeral attended not only by high-ranking Austrian military and government officials, but to the best of my recollection, by two Italian officers also.

In the course of these events I came into contact with many people; for a few I remember their names, for many I do not. Here I include the names of those who held official positions of some kind or those who were of help to me, for others I use initials only. In the cases I no longer remember the first names I use the letter X; for family names I substitute the letter Y.

On that day, Palm Sunday, we lost everything and became refugees. For me, the war with Yugoslavia ended on 10 April, the day my father arrived at my student residence in Ljubljana, tired and depressed, with only a briefcase and the Yugoslav flag from his headquarters in Dravograd under his arm.

Thanks to the Italian policy of non-extradition of refugees formerly residing in now German-occupied Slovenia, we were safe for the time being. However, during the first month after the Yugoslav surrender Gestapo agents kidnapped one of my father's colleagues from the plebiscite years in the middle of Ljubljana, and we were told by friends that Gestapo agents were also inquiring about my father's whereabouts.³ From then on, my brother Ciril and I or our friends always accompanied my father to work and back.

Resistance Group

In June 1941 I ran into Dušan Pleničar in the center of Ljubljana.⁴ I knew him from the Bishop's Gymnasium at St. Vid. He was a few years older than I, and from the scout movement. Because I trusted him, I agreed to help in the underground organization of the Yugoslav army (YA) resistance efforts in occupied Yugoslavia. I believed that out of the initial efforts a strong organization would soon be formed to help defeat the occupying forces with the help of the Allies. Some time in the future, according to Dušan, this participation would

³ This person was Sergeant (*narednik*) Rajko Kotnik, a key member of the Malgaj troops in Carinthia from 1918 to 1920. He is often mentioned in Prežihov Voranc's *Požganica*. Kotnik was imprisoned in Klagenfurt (Celovec) during the war and, according to one report, executed in his cell there before the Nazis retreated from the city. Another version maintains that he was beheaded together with twenty hostages from the Carinthian village of Sele in a prison yard in Graz. I was not able to verify which version is correct. However, there is no disputing the fact that Rajko Kotnik was executed by the Nazis during the war years.

⁴ His name in the underground organization was Bratko.

mean the formation of armed resistance units in the mountains of Slovenia.⁵

Partisans

On 28 June 1942, my brother Ciril and I were taken into custody during an early morning Italian raid (*razzia*). Late in the evening we were herded aboard a freight train, destination—a concentration camp somewhere in Italy.

About ten minutes after midnight, just after we crossed the great railroad viaduct at Borovnica in the direction of the train station Verd, we heard the train whistle, the breaks were applied, and rifle bullets began hitting the cars. We hit the floor and started screaming. Because the train had come to a halt, someone heard our desperate cries and the shooting soon stopped. It was probably less than a minute before a partisan reached our car, yelled to us to get away from the door, and shot off the lock.

I was among the last who jumped into the darkness.

It is remarkable how quickly a person's athletic abilities improve when bullets fly. Right then the Italian guards had recuperated from the initial shock and started pounding the hill from their armored car with everything they had. A small, narrow ravine probably protected me from being hit. I did not see the others, but heard them all around me, trying to get away from the train and over the first ridge. I stopped when, in spite of the darkness, I saw the first partisan, a woman in khaki pants, a short jacket and a red star on her cap. Standing calmly with a raised fist and a rifle in her left hand, she greeted me with, "Death to fascism" (*smrt fašizmu*), to which at the time I did not know the correct reply. I saluted her the old way.⁶

⁵ Dušan's appeal to join an underground effort, in this case the Yugoslav army resistance group, was the first but certainly not the only one I would receive. Knowing and trusting the liaison person(s), under difficult circumstances, was for me the deciding factor.

⁶ I am using the word "partisan" as a general term for those members and units of the resistance movements in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, which

In the morning, the partisans assembled us and led us farther into the hills. Most of the first day we spent at a provisional camp. Approximately 330 prisoners escaped. Half of the train cars had not been opened because of the Italian covering fire.⁷

Around noon on 29 July, my brother was taken aside by one of the partisans. This person, a tradesman from our prewar home of Dravograd, was very direct in saying that people like my father—referring to his Slovene People's Party (SLS) affiliation—were summarily executed here.

This person, who commanded a unit of ten partisans, including two women, approached us again in the afternoon. He suggested that we join his unit, which was about to depart for Carinthia and Styria, "to put some fear into the Nazis in our home territory." He told us again that the situation here was not safe for us. Under the circumstances, we agreed to join.

Toward evening the Italians attacked. As they came closer, our new acquaintance left with his unit to hold back the advancing Italians. He told us that he could not take us along, but that he would try again to

were under the control of the Front of Liberation (Osvobodilna fronta [OF]), even though the term itself has a much broader meaning.

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Ivan Ferlež provides some details about the attack on the train at Verd. He also states that approximately forty of those rescued from the train were released on their own request and that they all returned home. The number is definitely not correct. I recall only ten or twelve, since I was present at the time they were led away under heavy guard. See *Druga grupa odredov in Stajerski partizani, 1941–1942* (Ljubljana: Knjižnica NOV in POS 2, 1972) 318-321.

Their fate, on the other hand, is at least implied, if not confirmed, by Edvard Kocbek. Kocbek refers to a letter from a friend whose brother-in-law was killed by the partisans. This person was one of those rescued from the train at Verd. He, according to Kocbek, refused to join either the partisan army or the labor battalion and remained with those who opted for release. See *Tovarišija* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1949) 292, 308-309.

get us after the immediate danger was over. Our paths never crossed again.⁸

A few days later, we were assembled in a clearing in the middle of the forest. Top partisan commanders were present. The thirty of the liberated prisoners who had volunteered for fighting units were called and left after a short ceremony. Among them was one of my classmates, I.K., who, during the preceding days tried to be of assistance by telling me a few basic facts about the Liberation Front (Osvobodilna fronta).⁹

What happened next came as a shock. Twelve names were called; Ciril and I were numbers three and four. We were immediately surrounded by armed partisans and separated from the rest. One among the twelve became hysterical and started yelling, how was it possible that he, a member of a communist troika in Ljubljana, was selected for this group of white guards.¹⁰ His desperate appeal was directed especially toward Bojan Polak-Stjenka, his colleague from Ljubljana University, who, with his famous horse, was among the command group. Nobody responded or reacted; the hysterical fellow was just pushed back into the group.

⁸ Even though I am not certain that our intended destination with our new acquaintance was the mountain region of Pohorje, many years after the war I searched through the book by France Filipič, *Pohorski bataljon* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1968), to trace our acquaintance's path after we separated. The Pohorski bataljon, possibly a successor to the unit he belonged to, was surrounded by a strong German force on 8 January 1943 and annihilated to the last person near the village of Osankarica, Pohorje. Only one wounded partisan was captured. He was later executed as a hostage. The name of our countryman is not listed among those who perished (*Pohorski bataljon*, 600-652). I did hear rumors that he survived the war. In July 1995, while visiting Dravograd, a person in the town told me that this was actually the case and also gave me the name of the individual. He died ten or fifteen years after the war.

⁹ I saw I.K. only once more, a month later, when his unit passed by our location. He looked very tired but determined. We waived to each other but were not permitted to talk.

¹⁰ One of the two troika names surprised me. I never mentioned to this

We were immediately led away, a single partisan in the lead, five others, all armed, in a V-formation behind us. We walked close to each other down a narrow country road. No one said a word; all you could hear were heavy footsteps, ours and theirs. As we approached a forest, after an approximately one-hour march, the son of a Ljubljana industrialist, M.L.—his name was called first—whispered what we all sensed, "They will execute us in that forest."

A minute later a partisan on horseback caught up with our group. After talking to the newcomer, our guards were visibly relieved. Their leader then told us that he had received new orders and that we were to join a partisan group in the Polhograjski Dolomiti, some distance away. Our armed escort then left; only the leader remained.

Since I was used to the outdoors, life in the mountains was not difficult for me. For a young person it was exciting to cross railroad tracks only one hundred yards from the Italian bunkers; it was exciting to carry a barrel of soup to the advance positions; it was also exciting, during many retreats, to outmaneuver the pursuing Italians.

My stay with the partisans ended abruptly one month and a half later, on 15 August 1942, at 9 A.M., in the abandoned village of Topla Reber during the Italian August offensive.¹¹ While running through the village, after hearing rifle shots, Ciril and I found ourselves suddenly in the midst of black shirts, members of an elite Italian M division. The other ten students of our unit were captured minutes earlier in the village school building while preparing a meal. The two partisans who were armed remained in the woods and escaped capture. Thus we were in the category "captured unarmed."

After brief prison terms in the cities of Novo mesto and Ljubljana, our captors handed us over to the Italian navy at Rijeka (Fiume) for shipment to an unknown destination.

person to this day that he was named in this incident.

¹¹ We were members of the First Pioneer Unit (Prvi pionirski vod), assigned to prepare storage facilities for the winter period. In the village of Topla Reber, left empty by the German nationals who were re-settled in the German-occupied areas of Slovenia, we were cleaning water wells intended for the storage of food and other supplies.

Concentration Camp Rab

My first sight of the concentration camp was, from a distance, impressive and unexpected; a glimpse of more than a thousand tents surrounded by barbed wire and high guard towers, spread out in military precision on a slight incline below a modest hill. We arrived there on a clear night at the end of August 1942.

After a brief processing and the loss of hair, we were taken into the camp and six men were assigned to each tent. We were given bales of straw, supposedly for comfort; they were full of lice. At one end of the camp six barracks were equipped with bathrooms, showers and toilets, but there was no water. The Italians provided fig coffee in the morning and soup twice a day. The only solid food was either a small apple or an onion, and a miniature piece of bread in the middle of the afternoon. Starvation started in approximately three weeks; before that we were only hungry.

In a situation such as existed at Rab, there was no need to torture or mistreat anybody; that was simply imbedded in the system. In the six months I was at Rab, of the twelve thousand men, women and children, almost five thousand died.¹²

Dysentery caused most of the deaths. It was heartbreaking to see how people deteriorated. They themselves were aware that they were dying. A person with dysentery was not able to keep any food in his system; everything passed through in a matter of minutes or less. Suffering from constipation, although usually not deadly, was also frequent.

The latrines were a nightmare—a big hole quite close to the tents with boards across. There you had to squat in the company of many, each an example of a unique intestinal problem. The view and the stench from that horrible hole more than anything else made Rab

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According to an unknown source on the electronic mail service Rok Press, a total of 4,641 people died in the period of one year in the camp. When the first prisoners arrived, I was not able to establish; it was probably sometime during the summer of 1942. The camp was liberated by the partisans in September 1943.

one of my worst experiences of the war. I still cannot get out of my mind that unfortunate man who was one day squatting next to me cleaning pus out of open wounds on both sides of his hips, deteriorated because starvation removed all protection from his hip bones; or the man who in the middle of the night missed the boards and stepped into that bloody stink up his knee.

With no water to drink or wash with, we were left for lice to eat us alive. These lice, they knew where to attack and where they were most protected from annihilation. Twice a day we would sit in our tent, three on each side, and kill these nasty intruders. At first it was embarrassing to no end to sit there and do your work in full view of your companions. After a while, we became immune even to that.

By December 1942 dysentery and other diseases were killing an increasing number of people every day. Prisoners walked around, if they were able to, half dazed, not hoping or even caring anymore.

A group of sixteen officers in various uniforms, Italian and other, some with Red Cross insignia, visited the camp in late December. As a result of this visit, as I learned later, the general conditions in the camp improved considerably starting in mid-January 1943.

Ciril and I were released the second week of January 1943, as were many others before and after us. Petitions for release were submitted to the Italian authorities by my high school, a track and field club (SK Planina) and by my parents. After returning to Ljubljana and two months of recuperation, I returned to school and graduated the first week of June 1944 from the Classical Gymnasium.

Gestapo prison

On 29 June 1944 at 3 A.M., three Gestapo agents entered my room in Ljubljana. I was arrested in the name of the Third Reich.

While the three agents searched my room, I was allowed to step into the bathroom. In a split second, I told my father about the British pistol which I had removed from my room only three hours earlier and placed behind some trash in the rear of the house.

About an hour later, I was pushed into cell number 147 of the Gestapo prison in Ljubljana. Because of a shortage of single cells I

became a roommate of Dore Matul, a railroad official and the conductor of the men's singing society Ljubljanski zvon.

It was clear to me why I was arrested, but I knew nothing about the circumstances leading to my arrest. My biggest concern was for my family because of that British pistol that I had accepted for safekeeping only the day before.

When a Slovene prison worker replaced our toilet pot on the second morning, he pointed to it. Inside was a brief note instructing me who I should name as my underground contact if under severe pressure.¹³

Dore Matul was a pleasant companion. Being both interested in music, we held many interesting conversations. We cooperated fully in our daily activities and so did our families by providing us the allowed necessities and supplemental food.¹⁴

Nothing made my three-month imprisonment more bearable than conversations with my neighbor in the next cell, Milojka Končar. Again, it was a prison guard who told me to place my ear to the wall as soon as I heard tapping in the corner of the room. It takes a little practice to communicate through a one-foot thick brick wall, but I mastered it in a short time. Milojka knew who I was. She was one of the highest ranking members in our underground organization, arrested by the Gestapo on 28 June 1944. With the help of a few identifiers, I was soon convinced that she really was from the same organization. Milojka prepared me very well for the interrogation, telling me in detail what happened to her. During her torture, she fainted several times and

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I do not know who provided that information. It was correct, soon confirmed by other means. I heard a few months later that this worker, who yelled at us to impress his German superiors, was arrested, severely beaten and later sent to the concentration camp Dachau. The reason—helping prisoners with messages and by any other means possible.

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Neither Dore or I were given the customary prison privileges, such as a daily walk in the prison yard, library books or church attendance. Nor were we allowed to take a shower once a week. We did the best we could with the little water provided each day. We never had any disagreements on how to arrange our daily life.

each time was revived with cold water and forced gulps of strong brandy.¹⁵

Milojka did not survive the war. She died in the concentration camp Ravensbrück in 1945.

A month after my arrest, my mother went to the Gestapo headquarters in Ljubljana to seek permission to visit me. After a knock on the door at Gestapo headquarters, a schoolmate of mine, a refugee from Gorenjska who often visited our home, opened the door—a great shock for both of them.¹⁶

Auschwitz

On 27 September 1944, I entered the Auschwitz (Oświęcim) complex in occupied Poland with 130 others from the Gestapo prison in Ljubljana.

Even before we stepped off the train we noticed that some men and women wore strange looking striped uniforms. As we soon learned, they were inmates of the Auschwitz concentration camps. We were also amazed to see, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, a huge factory conglomerate, I.G. Farben Industrie. It was surrounded by many camps of all possible categories. Fortunately for us, we were classified as forced or slave laborers and not as concentration camp inmates.

On my first working day, I went with five other men, none from our Ljubljana group, to a water reservoir where six men in striped

¹⁵ Milojka's torture consisted of her hands being bound behind her back, the rope was then pulled through a hook on the top of the door and from there to the interrogator's desk. Initially, she was still touching the floor with her toes. However, to extract information, the rope was then pulled with strong and sudden jerks so that she was hanging in the air. With each jerk on the rope she experienced excruciating pain. Whether her shoulders became dislocated during several of these repeated actions, I do not know. Every time after she fainted, she woke up on the floor, still tied up, and then the process started again.

¹⁶ During my mother's visit I found out that the British pistol was no longer in the house and that there had been no additional visits from the Gestapo.

uniforms stood motionless next to a portable fire pump and hoses. another man in the same attire was laughing and exchanging cigarettes with two members of the Gestapo. After ten minutes or so, this man, apparently a capo, came over and started shouting commands. The six men went through the fire fighting drill with military precision and unbelievable speed. A second demonstration followed. Then it was our turn. None of us understood any commands and we had no preassigned positions. The results was complete chaos; we were falling over each other trying to drag the equipment to the water hole while the capo yelled and cursed. Five tries completely exhausted us. Only then did the first team receive orders to instruct us.

We discovered the truth about Auschwitz's other role only gradually. Polish prisoners told us that from 1941 on transports had arrived almost daily, but the number of people in the camps had remained roughly the same. They would say nothing more. In time we also found out about the crematoria and about the huge amount of clothes, shoes and other personal belongings stored in various warehouses. We did not know, however, that the killings were still going on while we were there.

The distant thunder in December 1944, hardly noticeable at first but gradually becoming more prominent, indicated a new Soviet offensive. We were also within the reach of the Western Allies and the Soviet air forces.

American planes always came during the day. Although the whole area had very extensive smoke screen making equipment, windy conditions often disclosed the location of the factories. The planes approached in waves, descended and released their bombs. I remember at least five raids.¹⁷ These raids were mostly on target; however, surrounding camps, some located only a few hundred yards from the

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In the official records the following days are listed on Auschwitz for the time I was there: 18 and 26 December 1944 and on 14 January 1945 a reconnaissance flight. Before that, the first aerial photographs were taken on 1 April 1944 and there were air raids on 20 August and 13 September 1944. See *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Combat Chronology, 1941-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, USAF, 1973).

factories, occasionally suffered near or even direct hits. My own camp was hit twice but we suffered no casualties. An attack on 26 December 1944 destroyed the central heating system, which was never repaired. From then on we were cold day and night.¹⁸

The Soviet air force attacked only at night and with only one plane at a time. These air raids were more nerve-wracking because of the darkness and the mosquito-like circling strategy. We waited for the next flares to be dropped, an action almost always followed by a bomb. The frequency of these attacks increased as the Soviets advanced.

On 17 January 1945 we knew that the last days of Auschwitz were fast approaching. From my camp, with a good view of the road running alongside the factories, we noticed, even though it was dark, a long column of concentration camp prisoners slowly walking toward the west. We soon realized that these prisoners, housed east of our camp, were being taken to a new location somewhere farther west. It was a typical, cold, windy, fairly clear Auschwitz late evening with light blowing snow. A single Soviet plane illuminated these unfortunate victims from time to time with flares and explosions. Fearing the SS guards who were walking on the side of the column, we did not dare to leave the camp for a closer look. Bombs were falling all around and very close to us. Amid this thunder, we heard occasional rifle fire. I cannot claim that I saw prisoners being shot because only glimpses of light provided opportunities for observing what was happening. However, we saw several prisoners falling out of the column to the side of the road and they did not get up.

On 17 January the men from Auschwitz concentration camp east of us were evacuated; on 18 January, the women.¹⁹

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In my memory it was the day before Christmas when a strong air attack destroyed one of our rare commodities—some warmth in the barracks. Maybe it was a case of, "Hit a target of opportunity!" and therefore that attack was not recorded in the official records.

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Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, other Slavs and Gypsies were some of the principal victims who perished in Auschwitz. However, specifically targeted for extermination were Jews, those who were or happened to come under the control of Nazi Germany. The number of Jews who

We left Auschwitz on Sunday, 21 January 1945 at midnight. Between forty and sixty thousand people were on the move that night. Several forced laborers, including some from our transport, sought hiding places either in the nearby Polish houses or remained in the camps, hoping that the Germans would not have time or people to search each camp before retreating.

My friend Hinko Špendl and I escaped in the early morning hours of 22 January 1945, while still on Polish territory. Our escape route led us through southern Poland, Czechoslovakia, to Vienna, and then to Maribor, Hinko's hometown. In Maribor we found shelter only a few houses away from the Gestapo headquarters, in the basement of a house destroyed by bombs. The owner of this house was a German lady, a friend of the Špendl family; we were hiding there with her permission.

Graz-Packsattel

Hinko and I were arrested again, in Maribor, in the first week of February 1945. We ended up in a hospital in Graz. Hinko became a medical orderly; my job was to shovel coal.

It was hard work. Shifts lasted from 7 A.M. to 6 P.M., longer if daily quotas were not met. Nevertheless, I am still proud of that team, an international assembly of six men, each of a different nationality. Cooperation and concern for each other within this group was exemplary.

In the beginning of April 1945, the great German retreat was underway from Hungary. For us the time was also ripe to consider another attempt to reach home.

We did well until we arrived at the heights south of Köflach. There were five of us. The German troops building a defense line there grabbed me as the only unattached male of the group. All pleading from Hinko's sister that I was her fiancée was of no use. My identification

perished in Auschwitz, far exceeds any other group that went through these horrible and unbelievable places of death.

was taken and I was warned that I would be shot if I tried to escape. I was again a prisoner.

There were around one hundred of us building this defense line.²⁰ Two Hollanders, a Croat and I made up one team. We received morning and afternoon assignments that had to be completed within a designated time. One late morning, while the four of us were comfortably sleeping next to a completed ditch, I was awakened by a pair of beautifully shined mountain boots right next to my face. In a split second I was standing at attention, right next to the commanding general and in the midst of a large group of high ranking and highly decorated German officers. They were accompanied by a large detachment of heavily armed SS troops. My three companions were already standing. The commanding general called the lieutenant who gave us our assignments and asked a few questions. A deadly silence followed and lasted an eternity. The young lieutenant jumped into the hole, measured the corners under the scrutiny of all present, climbed out, and reported in two words, "Alles gemacht." The general and three of his close assistants then discussed some changes, gave instructions and left without looking or saying anything to us. We could not stop trembling. When the lieutenant returned, he did not yell at us. He just said, "Sie haben Glück gehabt."²¹

Hinko and his sister Joža came back a few days later, determined to get me out of this imprisonment. When the commander refused to release me, even though Joža pleaded very convincingly, they volunteered to join the rest of us. Since there were no women at this encampment, Joža won. We were on our way to Maribor.

With the help of my Carinthian cousin, Franz Legat, who was stationed in Maribor, I was able to get to Klagenfurt. From there, with some luck, I came to Jesenice and then to my relatives at Viševak near Kranj. I arrived there toward the end of April 1945.

²⁰ These defense positions were on the Packsattel, right above the old Packstrasse (road) overlooking the approaches from the east, halfway between Graz and Wolfsberg.

²¹ The troops and officers in charge of this sector were from the Austrian Tyrol and so was the young man who saved us that day.

Vetrinj

I almost reached my home in Ljubljana at the beginning of May 1945. Then, just a mile south of the city of Kranj, while observing the greatest exodus of the Slovenes, I made my decision. I turned around and headed north. Not belonging to any group, I just walked on the side of the road next to thousands of military and civilians, all heading toward the Austrian border. After the Serb Chetniks forced the German military to share the Ljubelj tunnel, we began a terrifying walk through the half-finished passage.²²

Dark, muddy, rough and packed with people, animals and vehicles of all types, the memory of that passage through Ljubelj still haunts me every time I drive through the tunnel. I was walking with a bicycle as protection from the traffic in the other lane. Marija, my sister, was holding the seat of the bicycle and the back of my pack so that we did not get separated in the darkness.²³ People with flash lights or cigarette lighters tried to illuminate the interior. Scared horses presented special problems since there was no easy way to avoid them when they were out of control.

Once in Austria I was directed with thousands of others to the assembly camp designated for Slovene civilian refugees. It was an old, abandoned factory building near Viktring (Vetrinj), a few miles south of Klagenfurt. There I came under the jurisdiction of the British occupation forces.

In mid-morning of 30 May 1945, I went to see my brother Ciril before his scheduled departure, supposedly to a new camp at Palmanova in Italy. He came to Viktring with a unit of the Home Guards (Domobranci). Ciril was already in formation. I suggested that he leave the column so that the three of us, sister Marija included, would

²² The alternative was a strenuous and dangerous climb over the Ljubelj pass.

²³ Marija caught up with me just before the tunnel with her friend Ružica Dučkič, a Catholic Serb from Kosovo. This was the only time in my life that I was not pleased to see my sister. She left her temporary shelter with relatives in Gorenjsko after a few neighbors convinced her that it was the right thing to do. Our parents remained in Ljubljana.

stay together and depart later. He hesitated for a moment. Those around him hearing my plea chimed in, saying that my words implied panic and that there was no reason for any fear. We shook hands and Ciril rejoined the column. A few minutes later, he and his friends boarded a British army truck and left, guarded by British soldiers. It was 11 A.M. when I was standing on that field and waving to my brother, not knowing that it was for the last time.

At 3 P.M. that same afternoon I knew where he had been taken.²⁴

On the fields of Viktring, after the full truth of the British betrayal became known, an indescribable sorrow and agony came over those still in the camp. Half dazed, I walked around and heard desperate cries, prayers, sobbing and laments at every step. There was no hope left.

At approximately the same time, a prisoner I knew from Auschwitz and Graz, Jože Y., came to our home in Ljubljana and asked for me. At Auschwitz he claimed that he was arrested by the Gestapo while serving as a sergeant in a unit of the Home Guards. When he visited my home he was dressed in a brand new uniform with the rank of captain in Tito's secret police (OZNA). I don't know whether he came to help me or to arrest me.

Syracuse University

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The night before Ciril and I spent about half an hour together. He explained what he was told by his superiors. All those rumors about the Home Guards being returned to Tito's partisans were just that, rumors. There was nothing to be concerned about. However, that meeting was not a normal conversation between the two of us, who were always very close and went through difficult times in the past. Our inner feelings were strange, kind of unreal, like a nightmare, but neither of us revealed those feelings, even though I know we both felt them.