

3/2/08

## ***ESCAPE FROM COMMUNISM - PART II***

*By Anton Žakelj, translated and edited by John Žakelj*

### **Tuesday, May 1, 1945 (in German-occupied Kranj, Slovenia)**

For the past 16 months, I've been the assistant manager of a shoemakers' cooperative factory. We have had up to 40 workers, all refugees from our home-town of Žiri (about 23 miles away). We left Žiri because we did not want to be under communist control. Many of us, including myself and my fiancée, were drafted at gunpoint to fight for the partisans (the communists), but we escaped. If we tried to return to communist-controlled territory, we would probably be killed or imprisoned. Here in Kranj, we could be killed by a bomb or by the Germans, but at least we're safe from the communists (most of the time).

During the past year, we've seen large numbers of American and British bombers flying overhead - sometimes hundreds of them covering the sky - usually headed for targets in Austria, but sometimes dropping bombs on Kranj. For a time, we didn't bother going into the bomb shelters when the air-raid sirens went off. But then some people were killed and we started being more careful. Sometimes the bombers arrive without warning and there is no time to go to a shelter. And sometimes the bombs don't come from the sky, but are planted by partisan guerrillas.

Somehow, through all this, we've managed to continue making shoes. In order to stay in business, I think my boss has helped both the Germans and the communists. When I agreed to take this job, I told him I didn't want to know about anything like that, and he has kept our agreement.

Sometimes, we've had to take unusual steps to fill our orders. For example, we received a

complaint from a merchant in Vienna that he had not received 800 pairs of shoes which he had ordered from us. My boss sent his brother to Vienna to find out what happened to our shipment. He learned that our shipment was in the Wiener Neustadt railroad station when the station was destroyed by bombs. He paid some workers to dig through the rubble. They found the four large containers that we had used to ship the shoes, and inside were all 800 pairs. They delivered them to the merchant, undamaged.

I have often had to use the trains to travel on business, and the trains (when they run at all) have often been attacked by airplanes or partisans. Somehow, I have escaped without injury, but I have started using my bicycle more often (even on long trips) because it's safer.

My boss Franc Gantar and I talked about what we would do after the war. He said we should both try to flee north as soon as it became apparent that the war would end. I replied: "Even though you've helped the partisans, we will probably both be hung from the same lamp post." "No," he said, "we'll probably get about 10 years in prison." (In fact, he stayed after the war and the communists did put him in prison for 10 years.)

### **Wednesday, May 2, 1945**

Today we received the news that Hitler died in Berlin. Nobody is mourning his death.

People are talking about peace, but the planes are still bombing and the Germans are still digging anti-tank ditches. Rumor has it that the partisans have taken over certain Slovenian cities.

I went to the bank to withdraw 10,000 Reich Marks from the cooperative's account for our workers' wages, but they refused to release any money. How will we pay our workers?

### **Friday, May 4, 1945**

Just before midnight last night, the church bells in Kranj began ringing and continued ringing for two hours. Meanwhile, hundreds of German vehicles and horse-drawn wagons moved quietly through the city, preparing for their retreat.

There has been no official announcement, but people assume that World War II is over.

### **Saturday, May 5, 1945**

Today we heard conflicting and disturbing news that the "Domobranci" (Home Guard) are in retreat all across Slovenia, and the partisans are advancing.

I went to church at Šmartno near Kranj (May devotions) in the afternoon. After the service, we were standing outside, watching hundreds of cars and horse-drawn wagons passing by, all heading north toward Austria. We were surprised to see a large black automobile with the license plate "1A." Inside were General Rupnik (the leader of the Domobranci), his driver Luka Milharčič, Dr. Kociper and their wives. Apparently, the general was retreating to Austria. More than anything else, it was the sight of this automobile that convinced me that the end must be near.

### **Sunday, May 6, 1945**

I couldn't sleep last night. I heard something outside, so I got up and went out onto the balcony to see what was happening. Stretching into the distance was the German army, in a long unbroken column, on foot and in vehicles. Four years ago, they arrived powerful and victorious. Now they are leaving so quietly, they seem like ghosts.

During the daytime, the moving column became denser. Civilians began to join the soldiers, and soon there were three lines on the road: civilian refugees on foot, civilians in vehicles, and the military. In all the tragedy there was even some comedy. For example, I saw a German officer in a beautiful, shining automobile which was being pulled by a horse.

### **Monday, May 7, 1945**

I rode my bicycle to Škofja Loka (about 7 miles from Kranj) to say farewell to my parents and my sisters. The partisans (communists) forced them out of our home in Žiri about six months ago, and they've been living in a small room in a monastery since then. My mother encouraged me to leave before the partisans take control. My parents plan to stay in Slovenia, come what may. We said our farewells, not knowing when we would see each other again. (In fact, I would not see them again for more than 20 years.)

I returned to Kranj. Since there wasn't enough cash at the cooperative, I used all of my personal savings - 2,000 Reich Marks (about 10 months worth of salary) - to pay our workers. In exchange, I took an equivalent value of leather from the cooperative's warehouse. I couldn't find my boss - he disappeared somewhere. Later, I saw an acquaintance who agreed to buy that leather from me. I sold it to him in exchange for a promise that he would pay me back. (He never did.)

The procession of refugees heading north continues to grow. The cooperative has a number of finished shoes in stock, and I considered giving them away to the refugees. But I didn't see anybody who needed shoes.

Some of the local people support the partisans and don't understand the refugees. A farmer, from whom I had sometimes bought milk and eggs, asked me: "What do these people think they are doing? We are on the threshold of freedom and these people are fleeing to the unknown. Are they expecting milk and honey in Austria?" "Let's ask this one," I said, and I pointed to a person who was using two cows to pull a small wagon, on which were his wife and a number of small children. My friend asked the man with the wagon, "For God's sake, why are you fleeing?" The man replied, "Three years ago, we fled when the partisans took over Dolenjsko, and we'll flee again to the end of the earth, if we have to." My friend still didn't understand. (A year later, I wrote to my friend to ask him to give my sister some cloth that I had left with him. He wrote back: "I can't give her anything. I don't have anything left. The communists took my land and everything I had." Now he understood.)

**Wednesday, May 9, 1945**

We had hoped that Slovenia would be occupied by the Americans or the British, but it's becoming clearer that it will be controlled by the communists. Two of my friends arrived yesterday and wanted me to go north with them. I asked them to stay for the night, since I had not yet made up my mind to leave.

I talked with my fiancée, Cilka. We had planned to get married before the war began, but we delayed our marriage for many years because of the war. Today she said, "If you're thinking about leaving, we'd better go now!" I was surprised she said that, because I had not expected that she would be willing to go with me when we didn't even know where we would go. I loved her, but I didn't think I could ask her to go with me under such dangerous and uncertain circumstances. I had thought more about the practical difficulties and not how I felt

about her. (Many years later, I'm still grateful to her for saying that sentence.)

And so we decided to go. About 10 of our co-workers and friends (all men) decided to go with us. Some of the others think we will return in 14 days. But I remember how my father said the same thing when he was drafted to fight in World War I. He didn't return for more than four years.

Cilka and I stuffed some clothes in a suitcase and a briefcase, put some cans and other food in a mesh bag and hung it all on my bike. I went to the cooperative one last time and borrowed 500 Reich Marks. At 11 a.m., we joined the river of refugees.

We left what some people were calling the beginning of freedom for Slovenia - the promised workers' paradise - and headed for the unknown.

The bike was too loaded to ride on it, so we walked alongside it, with me pushing from behind and Cilka steering the front.

After three hours we were tired and hungry. We sat down in the grass by the road and opened a can of sauerkraut. Sauerkraut had never tasted so good!

As we sat by the side of the road, a squad of Cossack soldiers went by on their horses. They skillfully pulled the pins from their grenades and threw them high into the air, so they exploded just at their highest point. But one grenade must have exploded in a young Cossack's hands. When he rode by in a horse-drawn carriage, I heard his penetrating moans and I saw him holding up the bloody stumps of both arms. I felt sorry for him

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I'm still grateful to her for saying that.*

We met some people who had looted a factory and a warehouse. They had shoes, leather and food which they had taken. They encouraged us to do the same. I refused. I've never stolen anything and I'm not about to start now!

After our snack, we continued walking and soon caught up with other people we knew. Near Tržič (about 11 miles from Kranj) we met a woman who used to live in our home town of Žiri. She warned us to go back home. She said there were a large number of partisans up ahead, along the Drava river, and they were not allowing anyone to get across. But she didn't scare us off.

(I learned later that the partisans wanted to capture the home guard troops and possibly prevent the civilian refugees from leaving. The partisans also hoped to extend Yugoslavia's borders to include the "Koroško" region of

Austria, where there is a large Slovenian population.)

As we walked on, we came closer to the Ljubelj mountain pass and the road became steeper and more difficult. Alongside the road, we saw more and more abandoned and broken bicycles, motorcycles and automobiles.

Just before night fell, we finally reached the Ljubelj pass and tunnel (about 17 miles from Kranj). There was a very large crowd of people waiting to go through the tunnel. Part of our group decided to go through the tunnel, but Cilka and I decided to stay in a nearby barracks. We found some empty rooms with beds and even a clean kitchen in a part of the barracks that had been a hospital for workers who were building the tunnel. (Another part of the barracks had been used by the Germans for French prisoners of war.) On one of the rooms we found a sign that says "Dr. Bauer." (Later I read in the newspaper that this doctor was tried



*The heavy line from Kranj to Vetrinje shows our journey - about 30 miles - all on foot, over the steep mountain pass into Austria. There were many other Slovenians for whom the journey was even longer or more difficult in other ways. Some families, such as the Rihtars, made the trip with babies and small children.*

for war crimes: he "treated" sick prisoners by injecting them with gasoline.)

Across the street from the barracks we found a bus full of coffee, tea, macaroni and other food. Nearby we found a large container of butter, and buried in the hillside we found huge quantities of potatoes. Now we have food and a place to sleep until we decide what to do next.

**Thursday, May 10, 1945** (on the Yugoslav side of the Ljubelj mountain pass)

Today is a holy day, the feast of the Ascension. We went to the nearby church of St. Anne's, but we didn't stay for the whole service. We went back to the barracks, watched the moving masses of people, made coffee, and handed it out. Cilka's brother-in-law Mire joined us, and Cilka was glad she could serve him some coffee. About 8 other people from Žiri arrived with him. I think Mire actually likes all this danger and adventure.

When Cilka and I went to the washroom (which is outside the barracks), Cilka took off her wristwatch and set it to the side of the wash basin. She didn't remember it until later, when we were back in the barracks. She went back to look for it, but it was already gone. "I will really miss my watch," she said, "but the important thing is that I have you!"

The river of refugees and retreating soldiers continued to flow by all day, some on the road and some taking a short cut through a nearby meadow. There were people on foot, in cars, on bikes, on motorcycle, and in wagons drawn by horses or other farm animals. German soldiers and

Serbian Četniks marched by in a disciplined manner. One squad of young Germans marched by, singing loudly like they were in a parade. A group of young, healthy Domobranci also marched by, with such enthusiasm that you would think there were beautiful girls waiting for them up at the top of the mountain pass.

This morning, a soldier offered me a nice pistol for 300 cigarettes. I had brought some cigarettes along to use for barter. I almost agreed to the trade, but then the soldier's officer came up and scolded him. The officer beat the soldier and ordered him to go back to pushing their wagon up the steep mountain incline.



*Anton and Cilka Žakelj in happier times back home in the woods near Žiri, around 1938. Photo on self-timer by Anton Žakelj.*

One of us often went to check on the tunnel, but always came back with the report that it was too crowded. Two of our friends, who had made it through the tunnel the day before, came back and said there was heavy fighting in Austria along the Drava river. They advised us to go back. We decided to sleep in the barracks one more night.

### **Friday, May 11, 1945**

I got up at 6 and went to the tunnel. Only the military was being allowed through. Civilians had to climb the steep pass across the mountain. Cilka and I decided to stay at the barracks a while longer.

We made coffee again and handed it out to people who were passing by. Among them we saw some people we knew. Almost everyone was grateful for the coffee, but there were some exceptions. A man and a woman came by on a large wagon pulled by a pair of strong horses. The woman said, "Father is so sick; only a swallow of brandy can make him feel better." Our friend Ivo Kermavner had a similar request. I talked to another friend who had some brandy and I asked him to save these people. Reluctantly, my friend let them have some brandy, but he held on to the bottle to make sure they didn't drink it all.

We kept hearing more bad news all day. A Domobranec (home guard soldier) killed himself in front of the church. Serbian Četniks killed the German officer who was preventing civilians from going through the tunnel. Major Lehman (a Domobranec) decided there was no hope for the Domobranci and he killed himself. We heard that the partisans had attacked refugees in Tržič (which we had just passed a few days ago); those refugees left their horses and wagons and fled on foot.

In the midst of all this confusion, Franc Demšar found a way to be useful. He found broken bicycles that people had abandoned, took them apart and used the good parts to make three new bicycles.

An impromptu group of refugee leaders began to meet in a large building next to the tunnel entrance. I heard that it included some members of the former Slovenian government. They issued some announcements about the situation up ahead. They said that Rev. Odilo, who is an American citizen, had gone on ahead. Our fate would be decided by whomever reached the American army first - us or the partisans.

In the evening, someone arranged for a wondrously beautiful - and horrible - night.

Many-colored rockets began to fly over the barracks from all directions. Soon the first barracks caught fire, and then the others (there were about 40 barracks in all). We realized that we had to leave. Everyone left the barracks except for a sick French prisoner who was in a section that was designated for typhoid and blocked by barbed wire. I don't think he survived.

Before we left, I stuffed an aluminum can full of butter from the large container that was lying next to the bus outside the barracks. I also found some tea and gave that to a friend so we could make tea tomorrow. And we took six nice blankets (which later turned out to be very useful.)

We left around 8 p.m., with the glow from the burning barracks lighting our way. At the tunnel, there was still a large mass of people. Among them, we saw an especially troubling scene: An old man was leading two cows, which were pulling a farm wagon. A younger woman, probably his daughter, was sitting on the wagon. They argued about which road to take - through the tunnel or over the mountain.

*... someone arranged for a wondrously beautiful - and horrible - night.*

The man took out his whip, whipped the cows, and then the woman, and won his argument.

The tunnel had just recently been cut through the mountain; people who had come back through the tunnel told us there were no lights inside, and in some places the water and mud were knee-deep. Cilka and I and a few friends decided to take the steep road across the mountain pass.

At first, the light from the burning barracks helped us see where we were going, but it soon became completely dark. We groped about and somehow we managed to stay on the narrow mountain road. It was after midnight when our small group of about 10 people reached the other side of the pass. At the first house, we looked for a place to lie down. We looked for a spot in the stable, but we felt manure everywhere. We took down a large barn door and slept on the door.

**Saturday, May 12, 1945** (on the Austrian side of the Ljubelj pass)

In the morning we were awakened by a beautiful clear day (fortunately, the weather has been unusually beautiful ever since we left Kranj). We hung the door back on the barn and went onward, downhill from the mountain pass towards the valley below.

As we continued on, the road was often blocked by overturned vehicles, so we had to walk around those places through the wet grass. When we reached the valley at noon, we saw many signs of a recent battle between the partisans and the Domobranci. A dead partisan lay here, another there. In the meadows were dead horses with distended bellies.

In the village of Podljubelj, we saw a large group of Domobranci marching past their commander, General Krener, who was standing in the balcony of a house.

Apparently, the Domobranci had succeeded in pushing back the partisans enough to allow us to leave Slovenia.

Cilka and I were part of a large group of refugees that stopped to rest in a meadow next to the road. There we met the mayor from our village, who told us how the partisans had beaten and tortured him in ways that I cannot describe. It was so horrible that while we were listening to him, a man who had looked strong and healthy became very pale.

I myself was feeling tired, thirsty and hungry. I opened a can of pork, which tasted just heavenly. As hard as I tried to control myself, I couldn't resist eating the whole can. It wasn't long before my gluttony had its revenge.

After lunch, we were ordered to move on, but I became so sick that I could hardly stand up. I told our friends to go on ahead, that I would meet them at our next stop. Cilka and two young men stayed with me and we slowly followed behind the larger group.

As we approached the Drava River, we passed a group of Germans who had a truck loaded with barrels of Italian red wine. I was certain that one glass of that wine would make me healthy again. But I couldn't bring myself to ask for a glass, even though the Germans were drinking some of that wine themselves.

After we crossed the Drava River, the road again began a steep uphill climb. There we met our first British soldier. A Domobranec tried using his limited English to talk with him, but the soldier didn't pay any attention.

As we climbed the hill, I became so weary that I had to lie down (or perhaps it was more like falling down) in the shade of a bush next to the road. Cilka brought me some water into which she had mixed some sugar. After I drank that, I regained my energy and I was again able to resume our journey.

At the top of the hill, we met another British soldier. Whenever he saw people walk by with weapons, he motioned to them to throw their weapons into the ditch at the side of the road. In the ditch was a large pile of weapons, binoculars, telephones and other equipment. A Domobranec came by and started looking through the pile, but the British soldier just waved his stick (that was his only weapon) and the Domobranec disappeared.

Germans, Russians, Serbs, Greeks and Domobranci all had to give up their weapons, but we were very disappointed to see that partisans were allowed to keep theirs. The British were supposed to be our allies to set us free from the Germans, but now they're siding with the partisans.

We started seeing more and more British soldiers in tanks and other vehicles. When we passed a large country mansion, we saw two partisans on horses coming towards us from the mansion. We were terrified that we might be ordered back to Yugoslavia. A woman in our group started swearing at them in the strongest possible language. The partisans paid no attention to her and went on by.

We continued our long journey downhill through a woods and arrived at a barracks towards evening. We stopped there and considered spending the night in that barracks. But Mr. Kermavner came by and said that the Red Cross had arranged for hotel rooms for us at a nearby lake. (I often marveled at that man's optimism.)

Despite our weariness, we continued onward, following a long stream of refugees. Just before midnight we arrived at a meadow next to the small village of Vetrinje ("Viktring" in German). We found a deserted house and a barn where we might sleep. But there were already so many people, there was no room to lie down. Everywhere people were sleeping as if they were dead. So we continued on and

found some tall grass where we spread our blankets and lay down, exhausted.

**Sunday, May 13, 1945** (at Vetrinje)

In the morning we realized that we were in a field of oats. We were glad we had the blankets we had taken from the barracks at Ljubelj.

A good farm woman made us some coffee. At 9 a.m. we went to Mass in the nearby 800-year old Benedictine monastery.

At noon an acquaintance arrived from Celovec (Klagenfurt) and said he had found food and shelter for us in an Ursuline nunnery. We decided to go there, since we had neither food nor shelter in the Vetrinje meadow.

On the way to Celovec (about 3 miles), we met some people from our home village. Among them was Konstantin Mlekuš, who took our picture (unfortunately, as far as I know, that picture was lost and never recovered.) Another person told us that our friend Vinko Kokelj was missing. He was with a group of Domobranci who were probably captured by the partisans.

We found the city of Celovec in ruins from the lengthy Allied bombardment. More than half of the stores were closed. Bulldozers were trying to push mountains of debris from the streets. Even so, there was lots of traffic.

At the nunnery, we were told there was no room for us. One nun even threatened to call the police, but we convinced her to not do that. We received some food ration cards and permission to sleep one night in the nunnery's yard.

**Monday, May 14, 1945**

This morning, we were fed at the nunnery and then had to walk back to Vetrinje. The monastery at Vetrinje has an overhanging roof next to its courtyard and we were hoping we



could stay the night under that roof, but we could not get permission. We heard that there is a new factory nearby where people could sleep, but only mothers with young children are being allowed there. Finally, we lay down under some trees and spent the night there.

## **Tuesday, May 15, 1945**

The men and boys in our group made three tents out of branches for 33 people. There are 7 people in our "tent": Cilka, her brother Rupert, her brother-in-law Mire, our friends Vinko Kržišnik, Franc and Pavel Kokelj, and me.

Our group of 33 includes some men who had been Domobranci, but who gave up their weapons when they realized that they no longer had a mission.

In order to better understand the conditions in Vetrinje, the following is an excerpt from a book by Janez Arnež, titled (translated) *Slovenian Publishing in Refugee Camps in Austria 1945-49*:

*In May 1945, the British stopped a large group of Slovenian refugees at a meadow near Vetrinje. John Corsellis was a 22-year old British Quaker, a member of the Friends Ambulance Unit, which was assigned to help the refugees at Vetrinje. Quakers are against the use of force and refuse to serve in the military, but they are prepared to help in humanitarian ways. At Vetrinje, Corsellis quickly understood the situation; he looked for appropriate temporary solutions to the many problems that arose. He often wrote to his mother about his work and experiences. This is how he described the Slovenian encampment at Vetrinje:*

*"The camp is on the edge of a wide plain and consists of a large field surrounded on three sides by small streams and further large fields and then rapidly climbing pine-covered hills on one side, the latter developing into quite respectable mountains. On one side also is a*

*large and attractive monastery planned round three courtyards, and beyond that up a hill a textile factory which during the war was turned into an aero-engine parts factory and is now occupied by some 600 of the refugees - mainly women and children. Most live in the open in the field, using for shelter what material they can find - some have tents made from sacking, gas capes, overcoats and blankets, some have shacks made of wood and bark, some live in their carts with material stretched over the top."*

Arnež continues:

*This first encampment ... represented a new life style which was entirely foreign to most of the refugees. The conditions were difficult. Everything was lacking - all the material things which civilized people at that time considered to be essential for normal life.*

One more description of the encampment comes from a report by the British Quakers to their headquarters in London (written by Corsellis' superiors):

*... a quite astonishing camp ... A group of Slovenes .. had fled across the border carrying in their horse-drawn vehicles many of their household possessions and other assets. Included in the group were doctors, teachers and local government officials, making up the nucleus of a self-contained community. This group created a fantastic shanty-town built of bark, branches and every conceivable material. ... Inside .. the camp was remarkably well-kept by the refugees themselves, most of whom seemed to be engaged industriously in building, cooking, laundry or some similar occupation. We also learned that they had their own secondary school already in operation!*

## **Wednesday, May 16, 1945 (at Vetrinje)**

The 3 "tents" which we had made for our group out of branches and oiled paper soon proved to

be very inadequate. Last night, rain soaked through the paper so we began to feel not only drops but liters of water pouring down on us. Today our men went into the woods where they stripped all the bark off some large pine trees so we could use the bark to cover our "tents". It was strange to see all the maypoles in the woods. When I asked a friend: "Isn't it a shame to destroy so many trees?" he replied, "I had many more trees back home and I've lost them all."

Next to our tents we set up three firepits where we cooked coffee, polenta, oat flakes and whatever else people brought. We obtained some horsemeat from the Domobranci, and six loaves of bread from the authorities. Fortunately, this part of Austria still uses the same food ration cards that we had back in Kranj. I was able to use cards I had brought with me to get some food in Celovec.

Some of the other refugees had better shelters - they had brought with them covered wagons or real tents. Some had also brought larger supplies of food, while we had next to nothing.

We began to hear disturbing news, that the partisans were sneaking around the camp at night, looking for people to capture or kill, and that the British and the Serbs had a battle with the partisans in the city.

The British have instructed us to immediately call out "Police!" if we see anything suspicious. But there are only a few British soldiers to guard about 60,000 people, and they don't care much about us. The camp is managed by the Slovenians, with the British mainly concerning themselves with the water supply. The water comes from a stream which is treated with chlorine tablets so we can use it for drinking, cooking and washing.

#### **Thursday, May 17, 1945**

We received our first "normal" food in three

days, but we had to cook it ourselves. I think it came from the Austrian government.

We also received some tent material which the Germans left behind. The Domobranci cut enough empty gasoline barrels in half so each group could use one as a kettle for cooking. (For the next six weeks we cooked horsemeat in those barrels, until we could no longer stand the smell.)

Cilka is sick with dysentery (a disease that usually involves severe diarrhea and abdominal cramps, and is usually caused by unsanitary food or water). Many of the others have diarrhea, but so far I am staying healthy.

Cilka's brother-in-law, Mire, is an experienced butcher. Today he slaughtered a mule (there are many abandoned mules and horses just roaming around in the pastures.) We have enough meat, but we need potatoes or pasta or anything to have with the meat.

**Friday, May 18, 1945**

This morning we ate cornmeal. Then a Domobranec major ordered us to move to a different part of the camp. The Russians departed and left behind many horses and wagons. We used three of their wagons to move our things to new tents.

Vinko Kokelj arrived, exhausted, and joined our group, which has now grown to 40 people. Vinko was a Domobranec in Slovenia. He walked across the hills by himself, always in danger that he might be killed by the partisans. After he crossed the border into Austria, he threw away his weapons and his military uniform, and continued on as a civilian. Nobody knew where he was for a week, so we were glad to see him today.

**Saturday, May 19, 1945**

At 8 a.m., Vinko Kržišnik served coffee to everyone in our tent.

This morning, the Domobranci had a large



*Cooking food in a makeshift kettle at Vetrinje, May or June, 1945. The Domobranci cut enough empty gasoline barrels in half so each group could use one as a kettle for cooking. Photo by Marjan Kocmur.*

parade through the camp. They've been drilling every day. In the afternoon, the partisans had a parade in the nearby city of Celovec.

**Sunday, May 20, 1945**

Domobranci from Novo Mesto arrived this afternoon. They suffered great losses during their retreat.

**Monday, May 21, 1945**

This morning, I decided to try to find my brother Jože and sister Mici, who had left Slovenia about 14 days ago, heading for Feldkirchen (about 20 miles from Vetrinje). I bicycled about 15 miles to the village of Loče. Along the way, I saw many British tanks and vehicles, and one partisan vehicle. At Loče, I stopped at the church, where I saw a large group of Slovenians. Among them I found my brother and my sister. We were very happy to find each other.

We talked with a family who told us that partisans had entered a nearby refugee camp and stolen things from thousands of refugees. They stole jewelry that was worth millions of lire, and killed some of the refugees. But we also saw signs on some of the houses in support of the partisans: "Koroška is ours! Long live Marshall Tito!" There were partisan newspapers everywhere. The local people supported the partisans because they thought the partisans would liberate them from the Germans.

We heard on a radio today that British Fieldmarshal Alexander and Yugoslav Marshall Tito had fallen out with each other, and that Fieldmarshal Alexander had ordered the partisans out of Austria and out of Trieste. The partisans had hoped to control the "Koroško" region in Austria and Trieste in Italy, where there are a large number of Slovenians.

We were very pleased to see partisans retreating back to Yugoslavia. But as they were leaving, they destroyed everything they could not take back with them. Along the roads, I saw many vehicles with bullet-riddled tires and damaged engines. The partisan retreat is encouraging me to think that the British might still overcome the Russians, and that we might be able to go back home.

### **Tuesday, May 22, 1945**

This morning, I rode my bicycle back to Vetrinje. In the refugee camp, the authorities gave each group enough food for four days. It seems like a lot of food, but after we divide it up among everyone in our group, it is not very much for each person.

People are slaughtering the cows that they had brought with them and selling the meat for Italian lire, or preferably for Ljubljana lire. Many people hope to go back to Slovenia and they think that Ljubljana lire will be the only money worth having. The word is that nobody in Ljubljana wants German marks (which is

what I brought with me.) Here in the camp, people exchange money with each other, with one German mark equaling one Austrian crown or 5 Italian lire.

In the evenings, I have heard many people praying in their tents and reading May devotions to the Virgin Mary.

### **Wednesday, May 23, 1945**

I have a cold, but many others have diarrhea, probably from eating too much horse meat or from drinking contaminated water. Our drinking water comes from the same stream where we wash ourselves. The British try to treat the drinking water with chlorine, but it's not enough for the thousands of people in this camp.

This morning, a newly ordained priest from Dolenjsko said his first Mass. Usually, this would have been a very festive occasion in a beautiful church.

The British moved the Serbians out of the camp - we don't know where they took them.

Marija Demšar (Franc Demšar's wife) arrived from Gorenja Vas. Considering the circumstances, her trip is a tremendous accomplishment. She told Franc that peace and order has returned to Slovenia; everyone is working, but without much pay. Her husband, a staunch individualist, refuses to return to that type of social order. (It's probably also too dangerous for him to return.) Marija wanted to stay longer with her husband, but she heard that the borders were closing soon, so she left the camp and went back to her daughter in Žiri. (Unfortunately, Marija and Franc did not see each other again for 8 years.)

### **Thursday, May 24, 1945**

A group of Croatian "Ustaši" arrived in the camp.

There are rumors that General Rupnik (leader of the Domobranci) and bishop Rožman are in the nearby city of Lienz, but nobody knows whether they are free or imprisoned.

### **Saturday, May 26, 1945**

Our group has grown to 45 people. We received 15 kilos (about 33 pounds) of flour, which we took to a baker, who gave us 19.5 kilos of bread. For the first time, we also received some food from the British - biscuits.

Since I am the only one in our group who knows German, I am taking care of all the many requests we are receiving from the authorities. It seems they are constantly asking for information about each of us.

### **Sunday, May 27, 1945**

Another newly ordained priest, Rev. Vinko Žakelj from Št. Jošt, said his first Mass. To celebrate the occasion, Cilka's brother-in-law Mire cooked a special dinner for our group: horse soup, horsemeat, peas and oatmeal.

Last night, the British moved out a first group of Domobranci. They say they will be moving the rest of us out soon as well. The Domobranci think they are going to Italy, where they will receive new uniforms, weapons and equipment, and that they will then be sent to fight the partisans. They are all enthusiastic.

Before the first group of Domobranci left, the British took all of their remaining weapons and vehicles. They put them into trucks, which (we were told) would take them to Villach, where they would be put into trains for Italy.

Our group received 13 kilos of flour. Two of our people used the flour to make 16 kilos of bread in an oven which another group had constructed in a field. It was good white bread, which we had not seen in 4 years. Unfortunately, there was not much for each

person.

In the evening, we received 100 kilos of food from a group of Domobranci who will be leaving tomorrow.

### **Monday, May 28, 1945**

Five members of our group left with the Domobranci. They were soon replaced by five new arrivals. Among them was Paul Jesenko, a young man who had been a German soldier in a tank unit. We allowed him to join our group after he assured us that he did not have lice. Later in the day, when he left to go into town, somebody looked in his coat and noticed that it was teeming with lice. We immediately threw it into our kettle, poured water on it and boiled it for a long time. After we took it out of the boiling water, we looked in the pockets and found a watch, which was still ticking. It was a high quality German watch which had been made specifically for tank units.

There are rumors in the camp that the British are not taking the Domobranci to Italy, but instead to Področca, where they are delivering them to the Yugoslav partisans. A Domobranec escaped from Področca, returned to our camp, and told everyone what was happening. But the leadership of the Domobranci scolded him and accused him of spreading lies and confusion.

### **Tuesday, May 29, 1945**

We are hearing that we will soon be moved and that we will be able to take with us our wagons, animals, bicycles, everything. The Domobranci were not allowed to take anything but their backpacks.

### **Wednesday, May 30, 1945**

We still have some food ration coupons, but the merchants in town are increasingly reluctant to give us any food for these coupons.

**Thursday, May 31, 1945**

General Krener and some other officers, who were still here in the camp yesterday, disappeared last night. After Mass this morning, the news spread like lightning that the British had taken the Domobranci to Yugoslavia, and that the partisans had killed 80% of them. We could not believe this news, but it was confirmed in the evening by some gentlemen who had just arrived from Celovec. The entire camp is in shock.

At 6 p.m., there was a meeting of representatives from each group of refugees (we are organized according to our home villages). Dr. V. Meršol reported that we had received orders to prepare to move out. He then talked with British Majors Barre (*editor's note: Barre was actually Canadian*) and Johnson, who talked with the commander and reached agreement that anyone who wants to return home can go, and anyone who wants to stay, can stay.

Allow me to quote again from the book by Janez Arnež:

*Fear of communist persecution induced over 20,000 Slovenians in May of 1945 to seek refuge in the territories that were in the process of being occupied by British and American Armed Forces, in Austria and Italy. Well over ten thousand Slovenian refugees belonged to the Slovenian anti-communist defense forces, organized for the self-defense against communist guerillas. At that time the British Army in Austria made a deal with Yugoslav communists. The British promised to forcibly repatriate Slovenian anti-communists to Yugoslavia if the Yugoslavs promised to pull their military detachments from Austria. The British, using the ruse of sending these Slovenians to Italy coolly handed them over to Yugoslav Communists on the Austro-Yugoslav border. Over ten thousand of these forcibly repatriated Slovenians were executed by Yugoslav Communists and buried in mass*

*graves.*

30 years later, I wrote my own thoughts about this horrible event:

*How could this have happened? Why didn't the Domobranci disperse and not allow themselves to be sent back to the partisans? Why did they still trust the British after the British forced them to give up their weapons? Why did they continue their military drills and continue to prepare for another battle with the partisans? I think the only explanation must be that the Domobranci had, after many victories over the partisans, become so self-assured and so confident of ultimate victory, that they would have beaten up their own leaders if they had been told to disband. They thought they would be safe from partisan attack only if they stayed together.*

*I think it has been the misfortune of Slovenia to be led by unrealistic idealists at its most important points in history. When Yugoslavia was first created, Dr. Janez Ev. Krek was one of the leaders who got everyone enthusiastic about supporting a union of Slovenians, Croatians and Serbians. How surprised he would have been if he had lived to see the Greater Serbia that Yugoslavia came to be!*

*During the war, the Domobranci knew that the British were giving the partisans weapons, ammunition, uniforms and other things. But the Domobranci leadership insisted that the British were our allies.*

*But I know that we also had some excellent leaders. I knew Dr. Miha Krek, who was a good and honest man to the core. He did many good things for our country and for us as refugees, many of which we will never know since he did not keep any memoirs. If the British had listened to him in 1945, Slovenia would not have suffered as it did for the next 30 years.*

*Bishop Gregory Rožman was another excellent*

*leader who was a realist. I have a letter which Bishop Rožman wrote to a Domobranec general just before Easter 1945, when many people thought the Domobranci would soon defeat the partisans. In his letter, the bishop expresses his fears that the path to victory would be long and difficult.*

*As the Domobranci were being led away, I was tempted to go with them. I was always on their side during the war. I could not support the partisans because I could see that they cared more about controlling their brothers than fighting the Germans. The partisans were willing to commit any atrocities just to come into power. But I didn't join the Domobranci because I had work (managing the dairy and the shoemakers' cooperative) where I thought I could do more good. I often asked my friend Janez Homc to tell me when I should leave my work and join the Domobranci. He always told me to wait. I finally confronted him and asked him why they didn't want me. He replied, "You are not the right kind of person for what we have to do! I am often disillusioned myself, and you would be even more disillusioned."*

#### **Friday, June 1, 1945** (at Vetrinje)

Dr. Edvard Vračko spoke to us at a meeting. With tears in his eyes, he told us that the Domobranci were betrayed. One or two of his own sons were included in the group that the British sent back to Yugoslavia. He cried when he reported to us that our men had been tortured.

A Serb told us how he had been part of a group that the partisans had tied together with wire. He escaped while they were on a forced march near Radovljica. He said the partisans killed about 200 Serbs and that the British were sending more Domobranci to Yugoslavia.

#### **Saturday, June 2, 1945**

I went to town and visited 7 meatshops before I

finally found one that was willing to give me some meat in exchange for our ration cards.

This afternoon, the men cleaned up the area where the Domobranci had been camped.

There were about 200 civilians in our camp who had voluntarily signed up to go back home, but their departure has now been delayed. About 100 of them are changing their minds. Only one person from our group, a farmer from Žirovski Vrh, is planning to return.

#### **Sunday, June 3, 1945**

A small group of people, including our farmer from Žirovski Vrh, went back to Yugoslavia today (voluntarily). With them were also four people we knew who had not actually been in the camp, but had been living and working in the surrounding area for the past 2 - 4 years.

#### **Monday, June 4, 1945**

Fieldmarshal Alexander arrived in the camp this morning with a large entourage. He is the commander of the VIII Army, in control of the entire Mediterranean area. He promised Dr. Meršol that no one will be forced to return home. Though we were all still worried about a forced repatriation, we felt reassured by this news.

The Fieldmarshal walked around the refugee camp in his Scottish checkered kilt.

#### **Tuesday, June 5, 1945**

At 4 a.m., everyone was up and excited about a report that the British were planning to occupy Slovenia and that the Domobranci were being armed. But soon even the most gullible people forgot all about this report.

#### **Wednesday, June 6, 1945**

In addition to diarrhea, many people in the camp

now also have lice. My sister Mici, who is still suffering from dysentery, has lice in her hair. The itching is terrible.

We are also running out of food. Most of the refugees have eaten the food they brought with them. We have each received a little from the authorities, but it's not enough. It appears that we will be starving.

#### **Thursday, June 7, 1945**

The camp leadership has asked the leaders of each group to provide information about each person in the camp: education, work skills, possessions, etc. It's not clear why they want this, nor what they plan to do with us.

I provided the required information for our group: 15 shoemakers, 7 farmers, 2 tailors, 2 leather-tanners, 1 butcher, 1 baker, 1 blacksmith, 1 driver, 1 carpenter, 1 seamstress and a few others. All together we have 19 bicycles.

Scabs are beginning to appear on my face, so I can no longer shave. I suppose they must be from the dirty water.

#### **Friday, June 8, 1945**

We received orders that everyone had to give up their German marks and Italian lire. (I don't think we ever received anything in return.)

#### **Saturday, June 9, 1945**

I lay in the tent all day. I feel like something hot is pressing on my stomach. I'm very weak.

The only food we receive now is bread. Our group includes some strong farm boys who are used to eating twice as much as I do. We've eaten almost everything we brought and everything that was left by the Domobranci.

It's a month since we left Kranj. We've come through some very difficult experiences, but we

have no regrets about leaving.

#### **Sunday, June 10, 1945**

We hear rumors that we will have to give up all books, animals, wagons and even bicycles.

This evening, we listened to Franc Erpič, who had just returned from a visit to Kranj. Everyone listened closely, but said nothing. We don't trust anyone who can go for a visit to Slovenia and come back; he must be a communist.

#### **Monday, June 11, 1945**

At Dr. Puc's orders, I got a ride in a Red Cross auto to a hospital so they could treat me for the scabs on my face. When I arrived at the hospital, there was a partisan standing guard in front. The hospital was full, so they just gave me a prescription for an ointment.

#### **Tuesday, June 12, 1945**

Cilka and our friend Vinko went to a nearby village, where they obtained some pears and cornmeal for my birthday tomorrow.

We heard a rumor that 3,000 Domobranci are in prison in Škofja Loka.

#### **Wednesday, June 13, 1945**

Today we celebrated my 38<sup>th</sup> birthday. We ate the last two cans of sardines that we had brought from Kranj, and the pears and cornmeal that Cilka and Vinko obtained yesterday. We didn't need anything to drink because the rain poured through our roof all day.

We bought 20 kilos of beef, which will be enough for our group of 45 for 2 days. Oh, if only we had the potatoes that we saw buried in the ground at the Ljubelj barracks!

Tonight we have water standing on our tent



floor. (This was the first night that I felt the rheumatism which continued to bother me for years afterwards.)

#### **Thursday, June 14, 1945**

A Domobranec arrived from Škofja Loka today and reported that the partisans were torturing and killing the Domobranci in large numbers. He mentioned some of the victims by name.

#### **Friday, June 15, 1945**

People are saying we will have to move to a different camp next week. Everyone is afraid that we will be sent back to Slovenia.

The scabs on my face are getting better.

#### **Saturday, June 16, 1945**

Our butcher (Cilka's brother-in-law) slaughtered mules, oxen and cows all day. Now we have enough meat.

The authorities gave us identification cards; mine has the number 4786 M 38.

People are selling beef for 150 lire per kilo, horsemeat for 100 lire per kilo, bread for 250 lire per kilo. If you're lucky, you can exchange 10 cigarettes for 1 kilo of cornmeal.

Typhus has appeared in the tent next to ours. (Typhus is a disease which is transmitted by infected lice and usually involves high fever, pain in the muscles and joints, headache, sometimes delirium and sometimes death.) Even though this is a frightening disease for us, we hope it will cause the authorities to delay our move.

#### **Sunday, June 17, 1945**

Some of us walked to a nearby town, looking for food. We got a small piece of bread and a liter of milk, but no flour. Some of the local

residents sympathize with us, but most of them want us to leave as soon as possible.

When we returned to the camp, the others had cooked goulash.

This morning, three partisans arrived in the camp in an auto. When the police stopped them, the driver tried to escape. A crowd of people caught him and wanted to lynch him. The refugees' hatred for the partisans is unlimited.

#### **Monday, June 18, 1945**

Major Barry, who has been the British commander of our camp, left today. As a farewell, a group of refugees sang Slovenian songs for him. The new commander, Major Bell, repeated the promise that no one will be sent home against their will.

We did not receive any food today. We are hungry.

Last night, I dreamed about my parents. I'm worried about what will happen to them.

#### **Tuesday, June 19, 1945**

Fortunately, our friend Karl found some steel that could be used for fixing wagon wheels, and he sold that to a farmer for 50 kilos (about 110 pounds) of potatoes.

This afternoon, the authorities gave us more food than usual: 400 grams (about 1 pound) of bread per person, some beans, grits and other things. Maybe we will survive!

#### **Thursday, June 21, 1945**

Today we were told that we will be moved somewhere to the northern part of Koroška next week.

Last night, I dreamed that I was running away

from the partisans in the hills near Žiri.

### **Friday, June 22, 1945**

Next Tuesday, 2,000 refugees will be moved to Lienz; then on Wednesday, 1,400 to Spittal. Three members of our group asked to go to Lienz.

### **Saturday, June 23, 1945**

Cilka's brother-in-law Mire slaughtered a cow and sold the meat. I collected the money. He bought the cow for 500 Reich Marks and sold the meat for 2,000. Some of the refugees are angry with Mire because they feel he's taking advantage of them, but they don't seem to be very resourceful themselves. Mire talks openly about his own shortcomings.

This evening, we made bonfires, as we usually did at home on this date, the last day of spring. (Bonfires on this day are a tradition with many people, but for Slovenians, they are referred to as "Kres" and they commemorate a time hundreds of years ago when Slovenians used large bonfires on hilltops to warn neighboring villages about the arrival of attacking Turks.)

### **Sunday, June 24, 1945**

The refugee leadership

arranged for a refugee group to perform a concert of Slovenian national songs at the church today. There were about 20 British soldiers and camp workers present. We hope this might instill in the British more appreciation for our plight. Everyone is still grieving for their relatives, friends and acquaintances who were sent back to die in Slovenia.

### **Monday, June 25, 1945**

Today, we were told that the Vetrinje camp must be evacuated by Sunday. Some of us will go to Lienz, some to Spittal, some to Št. Vid, and others to Judenburg. We applied to go to Št. Vid. Last year, I had talked with the dairy manager there about a possible job. Maybe I could still get work there.

### **Tuesday, June 26, 1945**

At 6 a.m. this morning, the camp was alive with



*After World War II, refugees in Europe were frequently transported in trucks such as these. I don't have a picture from Austria, so I am using a picture which was taken in Belgium. (From the book "D Ps: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951" by Mark Wyman.).*

activity. Everyone in the group next to ours is preparing to go to Lienz. Our group is down to 38 people. Of these, 3 will be staying with acquaintances near Celovec, 11 want to go to Lienz, and the rest of us want to go to Št. Vid.

At 5 p.m., Dr. Vračko told us that we will all go to Spittal tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. A few hours later, we were told we would leave on Thursday.

### Wednesday, June 27, 1945

This morning, 1,400 people left in trucks for Spittal.

Since we were receiving our food together with a neighboring group which left yesterday, there was a mixup and we didn't receive any food. I went back and forth between the camp offices and the warehouse and finally learned that our food went to another group. I finally found that other group - they had put our bread on a farm wagon, covered it, and kept it dry.

This afternoon we were told that all departures by train will be delayed.

### Thursday, June 28, 1945

300 people left for Št. Vid this morning. The camp now seems empty. This afternoon, the authorities counted who was left. A few hundred are not accounted for. Six

from our group left for Spittal, even though they weren't on that list.

Again, there was no food for our group today. I went to the camp office this morning, and they told me they first had to make a new list of everyone in the camp. By evening, there was still no list and no food. We became very hungry and very impatient.

I went to the warehouse, where I saw loaves of bread stacked up against a wall. The ones at the bottom of the pile were already becoming moldy. But they wouldn't give us so much as a crumb.

Since our group is composed almost entirely of men, I think some of the other refugees suspect us of being communists, or communist



*We lived in make-shift tents in the Vetrinje fields from May 10 to June 29, 1945. From there we were moved to a refugee camp named Liechtenstein, near the city of Judenburg, where we stayed until April 1948.*

sympathizers. If we're not communist sympathizers, why were we not included with the Domobranci who were sent back to Slovenia? Now these other refugees are acting on their suspicions by not letting us have any food. (The food distribution is run by our own refugee leadership.)

I know that even the most conscientious people can make mistakes, but not allowing us to have food in a situation like this is unforgivable. I no longer have faith in our refugee leadership.

### **Friday, June 29, 1945**

I got up at 5 a.m. and went to the camp office. I was informed that everyone in our group was designated to be moved to Judenburg at 8 a.m. I was told that our food was already packed and that we would get it later in the day, when we would stop to rest.

At 9:45 a.m. we were part of a group that was loaded onto 9 trucks with about 25 people on each truck. We were still worried that we might be taken back to Slovenia, so we made a plan for our escape: if the truck should turn towards Slovenia, Pavel Kokelj would throw a blanket across the windshield and stop the truck. But the truck headed north and we began to think that this time the British were being honest.

At 11 a.m., our convoy stopped near Althofen. The British made some coffee with milk for everyone. It was the first real coffee we had had in a long time! But still no food - we were told there was not enough time to open our food packages, and that we would get food when we got to Judenburg.

At 1 p.m., we arrived in Judenburg. For some reason, they took us past the city towards the river Mura. When we saw a red flag with a hammer and sickle on the other side of the Mura, we became very worried that the British would take us across the bridge to the

Russian sector. Again, Pavel got ready to throw a blanket across the truck's windshield. But - thank God - he didn't need to use it. At the last intersection before the bridge, the trucks turned back towards the city, to a former army barracks. It was the same barracks that my father had been in as a soldier for 3 years during his first period of military service around 1900 (he was drafted a second time for World War I.)

When we arrived, we had to give up our packages of food. Then they sprayed everyone with DDT insecticide, wrote down all our names and assigned us to a room - number 63A. Our group of 20 men and 3 women were all assigned to one room! My sister Mici was very upset. She thought I should have been able to arrange a separate room for the women.

*Mark Wyman has some interesting comments*



*Spraying refugees against body lice at the displaced persons camp in Linz, Austria, July 1945 (from U.S. Army Medicine History Archives).*

*about DDT spraying in his book "D Ps: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951":*

*Most DPs retain one bitter memory of the camps' health activities: the "dusting" with DDT powder in the delousing campaigns, aimed at blocking the spread of typhus. Dusting greeted them upon their arrival, was repeated in succeeding months, and continued until every nook and cranny of their living areas, clothing and bodies were familiar with DDT powder. They hated it.*

At 7 p.m., we finally got something to eat, at the same time they fed everyone else who was already there. We were upset to see that our special food packages, which we had awaited for so long, were simply included with the rest of the food. But thank God, after 3 days we finally got a decent meal!

At night, our room was so crowded that the Kokelj brothers, the tallest members of our group, had their feet sticking out the door. But we soon fell asleep. Compared to the wet fields of the past month and a half, it was a huge improvement to have a dry floor and a solid roof over our heads.

*To be continued  
Coming soon - "Life in the Refugee Camps"*