

Our journey from Spittal, Austria.....



.....to America!



Pepca Stepec, 1949

NOTE: The following represents an English translation of a personal chronicle written by Teta Pepca describing her experience of leaving the camp in Spittal for America.

Just for reference . . . Joze and Jozefa Stepec are Pepca's parents also referred to as Ata and Mama. Mara, Vida and Ani are Pepca's sisters and Ciril and Tone are her brothers. Pepca's, "real" name is Jozefa as well.

On May 31, 1949 at 9:00am, we departed Spittal by truck for the railroad station. From there, we boarded a train at 10:00am that took us to Beljak (Villach). Before we left camp, we were told that we would have to walk from Beljak to St. Martin and were permitted to only carry hand luggage, but Ludvik Gornik and Marko Malovrh waited for us with a taxi so that we would not have to walk. Instead, a truck arrived and took us all to St. Martin, except Vida, who stayed and came by taxi. We had to immediately report at the police station, where we would be taken to a barrack and arrive overnight. At 11:00am, Ata, Mama and Ani traveled by car to town; but Mara, Vida, Marko, and myself walked. We were immediately provided an excellent meal with wine. After our meal, we walked through the town and slowly returned to St. Martin, where we had to be by 6:00pm. Immediately, each person was given an identification number. Ludvik arrived at 7:00pm with a car to take Mama and a few others, including Dr. Mersol. Mara, Ata, Vida, Tone and Marko walked. They slept in beautiful rooms and beds. Of course, a meal and other goodies were given. Ciril, Ani and I overnighted in the barrack.

On June 1st at 7:30am, we were taken by truck to the railroad station in Beljak. We waited on the train until 10:00am. Ludvik and Marko visited us for a chat on the train. At 10am we departed and traveled towards Spittal. The whole time I stayed by the window and was anxious to see the camp! Large crowds of people were present, all waving and yelling - our voices were hoarse!

At the Spittal railway station, there were more people there, than there were at the camp. We were all happy to see each other once again and were offered coffee, cherries, candy, etc. We stayed there only 15 minutes. I was still on the ground when the train whistled and had to hurry to board, waved a few times and Spittal disappeared. In my mind we were saying goodbye to Spittal, acquaintances, and friends.

On the way to Salzburg, I stood by the window and saw many interesting sights. We arrived to Salzburg at 4:00pm and were greeted by rain, which soon stopped. Immediately, a man arrived with a car and took us to a barrack, where we immediately had to register. On the morning of June 2nd, we were given breakfast and in the afternoon, we went to town. We saw local girls who could not tell us apart, since we all wore the same blouses given to us. We were repeatedly asked what kind of a uniform we wore. While in the stores, others had asked if we were girl scouts and we replied that we were foreigners. On the next day, June 3rd, it rained in the morning, however the afternoon was beautiful. I was left all alone, as all the others went to town sightseeing the castle and other interesting sights.

On Saturday June 4th, we arose at 7:00am and attended Holy Mass. It again rained in the morning, but the afternoon turned out nice. Again, I was alone all day in the barrack with my thoughts on Spittal, acquaintances, friends and thinking of my birth home. I was sad and cried all afternoon. After dinner, some of the girls and I went to church to pray the rosary and then walked through town. It started raining again with thunder and lightning, so we ran back to the barracks.

On Sunday June 5th, we arose at 7:00am, as it was arranged that we would go to a shrine about an hour away. Since it looked as though it would rain again, we decided to stay in the barrack, however the others went. We went to church to attend Mass, but a priest came and told us Mass was cancelled.

We decided to go to another church. I was sad listening to a German priest, as there were many Slovenian priests in the camp and now I had to listen to German sermons. At 11:00am, there was, however, a Croatian Mass with a sermon and I was happy to hear a familiar language. When we returned to the barrack, we had received mail from Spittal and a letter from Stefi Smolic. We were surprised to get news from the camp. We had lunch of soup with rice, salad, one spoon of potatoes and meat patty. We decided to go after lunch to the castle, but it rained again. In the evening at 7:00pm, we went to cathedral Mass.

I awoke at 8:00am on June 6th and was planning to go to church, but instead had to work in the kitchen. We attended the 10:00am and 11:00am Masses. After lunch we went to the shrine, Maria Plain, about 1 hour away. We went to see Fr. Skerbec, but he was not home. From there we could see Bavaria as we were only a half an hour away from the border. We returned to the camp at 6:00pm.

Tuesday, June 7th - We got up at 7:00am and went to church to attend Holy Mass. After that I stayed in the barrack and started writing. In the evening, we went to church again. Later we had a lot of fun.

Wednesday, June 8th - Got up at 6:30am and went to church. Stayed home until 2 p.m. and joined the other girls for a walk. It was beautiful! Upon our return, I arranged things in the suitcase and went to bed early.

Thursday, June 9th - Arose at 5:00am., went to church and returned to pack. At 10:00am, we boarded a truck with our hand luggage for the railroad station in Salzburg. The train was already waiting and our family was assigned a 1 and a half compartment. The last Slovenians who were still there, came to the station, among them Fr. Skerbec who went through every compartment to bid us farewell and then even walked along the train and shook everyone's hand. There was also a seminarian – but I did not know his name. Also there was Milka Jakus, who had to remain behind, as her child was too small to travel and was to travel by plane. You find a Slovenian wherever you go! The train left at 2:30pm, traveling toward Hamburg and on to Bremen. I was so sad that I cried. There was a Russian priest standing by the train that cried and was blessing those of us who

were leaving Austria. Only now did I start thinking more seriously about leaving my homeland, my birthplace and going to a faraway foreign land. I silently cried farewell to my homeland, my dear brothers, who were buried in Kocevski Rog and other mines and Spittal.

The parting from Austria was sad, as there I was, close to my homeland, but I knew I will be going far away. While still in Salzburg, some people boarded the train that were not supposed to – we had no idea what was their purpose. An American came through the compartments to register and check our assigned numbers, but saw that there were a man and two women too many on the train. The German police was immediately notified and arrived. One of the women tried hiding in the lavatory, but was not successful and they took all three of them. This happened on the second stop in Germany –Traunstein. Then, they started registering again and discovered there were 2 men too many again. The Police came and took them away. One man counterfeited his traveling papers hoping to stay on the train. The Police asked us if we noticed any of them leaving any luggage or packages behind on the train. We were told that on one Brazilian transport ship, a smuggler brought explosives, but the captain noticed it and the man was jailed. We traveled through Munich, a very large city. We traveled through other towns that were destroyed. We saw many interesting sights. The further we traveled, the more I was saddened. Upon darkness, I stayed in the corridor and talked to a conductor, who was showing us maps. I then went back to the compartment and fell asleep, but because of the train noise, I did not sleep well.

Friday, June 10th - We started singing at 5:00am and at 7:00am, we were served breakfast of coffee and bread. They cooked on the train, however, it was hard to clean the dishes, as there was no water. Because it was cool, I had to put on long stockings. Lunch was served at 11:00am and it was quite good. We then started getting our luggage together as we arrived to Bremen station at 1:00pm. We waited there for a while and then the train continued on through Bremen, which was quite damaged.

We stopped at the next train station where cars awaited to transport us to the barracks. First we had to get cards for food and lodging. We continued to see a doctor for medical powder, for head and throat ailments. In the next room, our hand luggage was checked. They let me keep everything but the iron, which they said I would get back. Even those carrying bread or crackers were taken. After arranging our places, we went to dinner of dark unsweetened coffee, macaroni with milk and 3 thin slices of bread. We did not have to do our dishes. After dinner, we went to the chapel where a Russian priest prayed the Litany. As I was tired, I went to sleep at 8:00pm.

On Saturday, June 11th - Arose at 7:00am and went to church. After breakfast, we went to the office to change from our separate assigned rooms so that we could be together. At noon, we had lunch, which was pretty good and consisted of mashed potatoes, meat with gravy, spinach and a piece of bread and it was quite filling. At 3:00pm, we went again to a doctor for an examination and had to prove we had been previously vaccinated. Returned to our place where we had much fun and laughter. After 6:00pm dinner, we went to church and then to sleep.

Sunday, June 12th - Got up at 7:30am, had breakfast and then went to church. The weather was quite nice. After 1:00pm lunch, I took a nap. Had 5:00pm dinner and then many of us went to a bay, which was full of ships and boats. We sat there thinking that soon we will be sailing. Returned to our place quite tired, so I went to sleep.

Monday, June 13th - Arose at 7:00am, went to breakfast and then to church. We attending a Greek Catholic Mass, which differed from the Roman Catholic Mass. Soon after we returned, it was announced that we are on the list to see the consulate. We went to look to verify and it was true. We could hardly wait to be called. After we were called, we had to go to another room. Ata and Mama sat and the rest of us waited for the outcome. First they counted us and said I was one too many. They asked me if I was Ata and Mama's daughter and after I confirmed, they asked me why I did not leave two months earlier for USA since I had the visa. I told them I waited so that we could go together. I was afraid to wait for the result, to see if I would be on the list for departure.

Tuesday, June 14th - Went to Mass, then had breakfast. At 9:00am, went to work in the kitchen cooking potatoes. For lunch, we had mashed potatoes, gravy, cucumbers and soup. In the afternoon, I stayed inside to write.

Wednesday, June 15th - Went to church and after breakfast, saw that we were listed for the departure from Bremen. We were all happy. Lunch was the same as yesterday. Stayed inside in the afternoon, but after dinner, went to church and then to bed.

Thursday, June 16th – the feast of Corpus Christi - Went to Mass and then breakfast. Immediately after breakfast, I went to a doctor for an examination. There were many people waiting. It went well, however, I was told I cannot go to America as I did not have the required stamp. Thank God the doctor signed the release anyway. After the examination, each one was given a bag from Red Cross containing powder, lipstick, soap, toothpaste, toothbrush and some other items. I had never worked on a holy day, but now I was washing just as on an ordinary day. In the afternoon, I stayed in to write to Spittal and Joze. I also arranged my suitcase for the trip and went to bed.

Friday, June 17th - We finished our packing, went to church and ate breakfast. We all had to assemble by 7:30am in front of the garage. Every 5 meters they checked us to see if our numbers were in order. Before entering the truck, they once again called us by name. Each truck was loaded with 15 – 20 people and took us to the Bremen station. The train left at 9:00am and we arrived at 11:00am, but we had to stay on the train until 1:00pm. Upon getting off the train, we were assembled by our travel numbers and we were slowly moving. The ship was already there and at 1:10pm, I left land and stepped onto the ship. We were assigned rooms. My head hurt and the smell of the ship was bad. The ship left shore at 4:00pm and dinner was served at the same time. I was debating whether to go to dinner or watch the departure and decided to watch the ship as it sailed. The ship was named General M.L. Hershey. I imagined that it would be much harder departing from the land than it actually was, but God gives you strength. By 8:00pm, many people were already vomiting, but I chose to remain on deck since the air was better. By 10:00pm,

my sister, Mara and Mama were soon vomiting. Corridors were crowded with sick women for whom I felt sorry, since I was quite well. A woman had collapsed. I picked her up and took her to her room and got her some milk. By 11:00pm, I was also beginning to feel ill. That night, I did not sleep at all and held a bag in my hand in case I needed it, but I did not.

Saturday, June 18th - Went to breakfast at 6:30am, however did not feel like eating. I was told that it would be better for me to eat. The food was better than ever. We had 2 eggs, bacon, pudding, coffee, apple and bread with jam. Many people were feeling better by now, but still had no appetite. Every one felt “drunk” since the sea was rough, but by afternoon, it became calmer. Around 4:00pm, we were passing England, so we saw land again. I stayed on the deck all day. That day we also forwarded the clock by one hour. Dinner was at 4:00pm and I did not feel like eating. I was sleepy since I did not sleep the night before, so I went to bed early. Since the sea was calm, I slept well.

Sunday, June 19th – The sea became rougher so many people were sick again. Mara, Ani and Ciril were sick all day and we had to help them get to the dining area. Since there was no priest on board, there was no Mass today. Lunch at noon was very good – had meat, chocolate pudding, soup, bread, butter, beans and coffee. After lunch, we stayed on the deck and I felt good. I stayed on the deck until 10:00pm.

Monday, June 20th – After getting up, I had to rush on the deck, as the smell was bad in the room. We later went for breakfast and drank a little coffee. I skipped lunch as the smell of food sickened me. In the afternoon, the sickness really seized me and I always felt I would vomit, but it soon got better. I went to bed at 8:30pm.

Tuesday June 21st – After breakfast, I took Mara and Ani on the deck for fresh air. I felt as good as I was on land and ate some chocolate and cookies. Went to lunch that consisted of fried fish and ate everything. After dinner at 4:00pm, the ship started rocking again as the sea was rough. Sailors started preparing the rescue ships and were concerned. Because of fear and the ship’s rocking, I did not sleep through the night.

Wednesday June 22nd – The sea remained rough and I felt so bad, that I skipped breakfast, lunch and dinner. The afternoon became very windy and I could not stay on the deck for long. The ship was rocking so bad I was afraid we would drown. The doors were closed, but water was seeping in. We saw two steamboats and were happy to see there were other people around. Soon, the wind calmed down, but I felt so sick and held my head. I had chest pains and had trouble breathing. By 6:00pm, I went downstairs to go to bed, but while on the steps, I started vomiting. In the room I just threw myself on the bed and wished I had some whiskey. But, I could not go to get it as I felt so sick.

Thursday – June 23rd – After getting up, I felt so bad I could not wash or comb my hair. I just ran up to the deck. I did not eat all day. The sea did not get rough until the afternoon and stayed on the deck until 9:00pm, then I went to sleep.

Friday – June 24th – Awoke at 7:00am and went straight to the deck and had no strength to wash or comb my hair. Went to breakfast and was so happy to have an apple. While walking on the deck, a Slovenian man gave me another apple. It was better receiving the apple than money. In the afternoon, I saw another boat sailing in our direction. Every day we counted how many more days before we would reach New York as we were anxious to be on land. Went to bed at 10:00pm.

Saturday – June 25th – After breakfast at 7:00am, I went up to the deck. I was well all day long. After lunch, I went back to the deck. Dinner was at 4:00pm and had a good appetite. The weather was beautiful and the sea calm. Towards evening, we began worrying about meeting our benefactors. Many people were on the deck, some were singing, but I was just thinking. I was sad thinking of Joze, who was in Italy and wondered if he would be able to follow me. A comforting thought was that a letter from him would be waiting for me. I went to bed at 9:00pm.

Sunday – June 26th – This was the second Sunday with no Mass. Arose at 6:30am and was feeling pretty well, so I went for breakfast and ate it all. Again, I had an apple. After a stay on the deck, I went to our room as we had a doctor's examination, which was not bad. I arranged the bed and the suitcase. After lunch, I went back to the deck. Again, I was so sad and nervous. My thoughts turned to Italy and our homeland where my brothers and other young men were buried.

Monday – June 27th – Got up at 4:00am, had breakfast at 5:00am and then went to the deck. At 6:30am, we were happy to finally see land after a long journey, and it was not Europe, but this time America (New York). Stayed on the deck for a while and then through many inspections. At exactly 10 minutes before 11:00am, we disembarked the ship for New York. We were taken to a large garage, where we picked up our luggage. There, we checked all our belongings. After passing everything, we waited. We then were put on an elevator going downstairs. From there we went by truck to a railway station, where we waited until 7:30pm. In the meantime, we explored the huge station. We were met by Slovenians who instructed us where to go. At 8:00pm, we boarded the train to take us to Cleveland.

Tuesday – June 28th – We arrived in Cleveland at 11:00am and were met by our benefactors and sponsors Izanec, Skubic, their daughter, Fani, and Mrs. Izanec's nephew, Joze Novak. With their car, they took us home. We all had tears in our eyes when shaking their hands. We had lunch, dinner and in the evening had so many visitors, that both rooms were filled. Among them was Dr. Krek with his wife and son. We, the youngsters, went that evening with Joze Novak to Euclid Beach and saw many interesting sights. We were becoming accustomed to our new surroundings.

This was our trip from Austria where we lived 4 years before arriving to America.

Pepca Stepec