

*MEMORIES
OF MY LIFE IN
A CONCENTRATION
CAMP ON THE
ISLAND OF RAB*



NIKO NOVAK

Isotein
od Mikko is Oshoan

Cover Picture

*Concentration camp on the Island of Rab.
Red dot shows the tent in which I lived for 5 months.*

P R E F A C E

As a result of the Second World War, the world bore witness to a multitude of war crimes. Caught in amongst those crimes against humanity were the people of Slovenia who were singled out by their war-time captors, and attempts were made to annihilate that very nation.

This book speaks about the crimes of those war-time occupiers, who deported thousands of innocent and unsuspecting people to face certain death in their concentration camps.

The biggest and also the most horrible of these camps was located on the island of Rab. There, in the camp, some ten thousand innocent Slovenian men, women and even children were driven to face their death at the hands of starvation, disease and pestilence.

Within weeks of their arrival on the island, young, healthy and strong Slovenian men, women, and children – the pride of the Slovenian nation – were transformed into walking skeletons. They spectre of death cut its swath in the thousands.



Niko Novak

Niko Novak
Born in Preloha Vinica, Slovenia

*Memories of My Year of Internment
in the Concentration Camps of Rab
on the Adriatic Sea, Visco and
Gonars In Italy*

by Niko Novak
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This is the village Preloka in Slovenia from where I was abducted.

F I R S T C H A P T E R

SOME INTRODUCTOR NOTATIONS

”Memories of a Survivor . . . “ is a booklet written on behalf of my daughter in hopes that she will let future generations know about the immense sufferings of our people in the concentration camps during the Second World War. I have tried to describe the tragic fate of some of our young men of Preloka whose lives were spent in those horrible concentration camps.

Fourteen months of hunger and hopelessness separated many of us forever from our beloved homes. For many, those turmoil-filled camps were the last days of their lives. Rab, renown at that time as a prestigious vacation spot on the Adriatic,

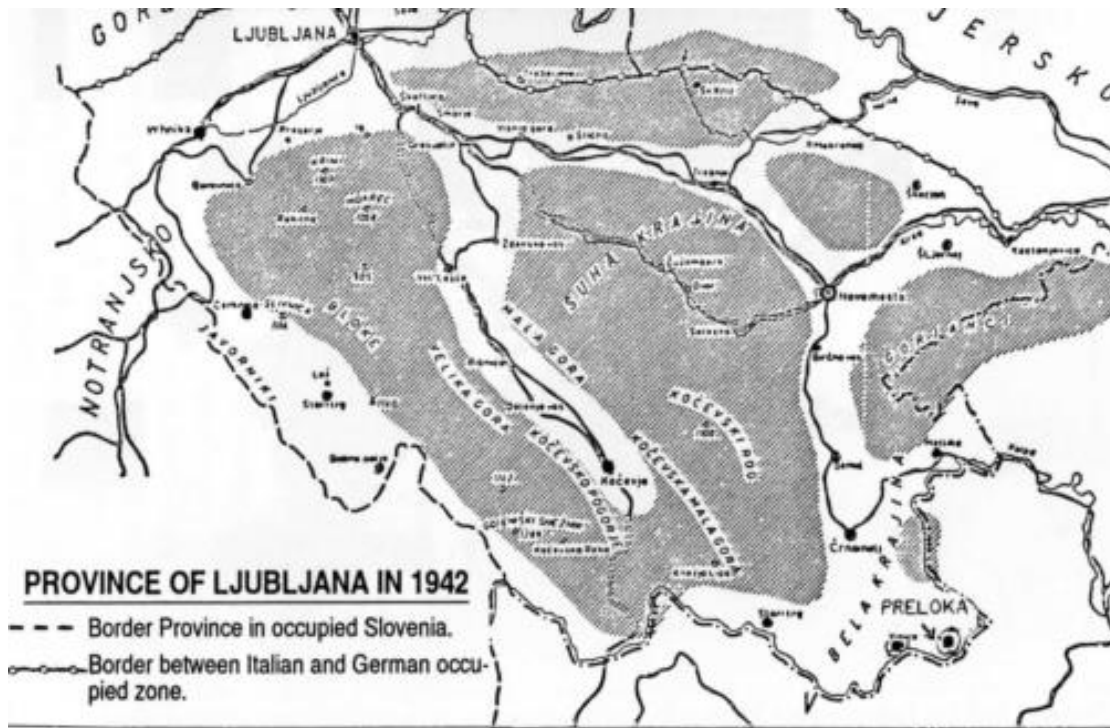
was turned into a “slaughter house” as the song of those interned there says. Certainly, for many of our people, it was the first taste of horrors of life in a concentration camp. After many months of suffering on the island of Rab, some of us were shipped to the other camps. I was sent out on the first transport to military barracks located at Reka. After that, I was sent on to Visco to spend time there, and finally, I arrived at Gonors, where I remained until the collapse of the occupying forces.

Extreme hunger and rampant disease cost many their lives. Where those internment camps once stood, cemeteries now stand and are today’s “living memorials to those terrible times. A great number of our Slovenian young men and fathers are buried in those cemeteries. Among them are many of my relatives and friends. Few and far between were the homes that were not affected by the loss of a loved one.

I hope future generations will come to fully understand the true meaning of war, for war only brings with it suffering and sorrow.



Preloka's Folklore Group visited Metlika in 1940, unaware of the war which was ahead of them.



Slovenia in 1942



The ship which brought me to the Island of Rab in 1942.

S E C O N D C H A P T E R

THE JOURNEY OF TERROR TO THE INTERMENT CAMP, THE YEAR 1942

Preloka is a small village situated on a hill, located on the extreme south end of the border of Slovenia. In the valley below, the river Koplja constantly murmurs, and nestled in the hillside above the river, sits the Church of the Holy Trinity, its spires rising towards the skies. Early in the morning and the late hours of the evening, the harmonious ringing of its bells can be heard.

In the early hours of the morning in that year 1942, when all of Europe was engulfed in war, the bells of St. Trinity were ringing, but their melody was sad, as if they sensed that something terrible was coming.

Preloka happened to be a very lively village, especially on Sunday, our day of rest. There were many young people at the time, and we enjoyed gathering in various groups in the village square or in the local schoolhouse, which today is over two hundred years old. As well, we were very active in our cultural club, where we performed plays, danced in our national costumes and played the tamburista. Often, we would be invited to other locales to perform, and despite the fact we were all self-taught, we met with a lot of success. We were all sons and daughters of farmers and, although tired after a hard day's work, evenings would find us gathered in the village square to sing the night away. Much beloved were the voices of our young men which inspired many a listener and mellowed many a heart.

*I will fence my garden,
I will plant my flowers,
Among them carnations, rosemary,
So I can tease the boys with them...*

The songs of the young men echoed long into the night, and the memories of those hot summer nights were soon to be cherished for time was marching on and war and sadness were on the horizon.

Summer had slowly turned into fall. The field work was nearing completion. From here and there, you could hear the hollow sounds of a hammer striking a scythe as all hands prepared for the last cutting of the hay.

It happened on a morning in 1942. I too had spent the previous day honing my scythe and was ready to cut the last of the stubble. Even though 45 years have passed in the interim, I can still remember my mother preparing my breakfast that morning. As it was still very early in the morning, I rushed through my breakfast to get a head start on the day's work. As any farmer knows, a scythe cuts better on wet, dewy grass. Finished with my breakfast, I left for the fields. I did not have too far to go. About a three minute walk from my home is a little hill Krtinjek. It's a lovely hill that provides scenic vista especially on clear, sunny days. Towards the north, it's possible to see a range of mountains called the "Kaminske Planine" and on the opposite side, you see "Petrove Gore". The heart skips a beat when it sees such breathtaking beauty in nature, and soon, everyday care and hardships are forgotten. My scythe cut through the dewy grass

Effortlessly and my thoughts, like every young man's thoughts, began to wander. Like any other young man, I was busy building castles in the sky.



Lake Bled is the most beautiful lake in Slovenia with a tiny island in the middle and small church standing on it. Behind Lake Bled rise magnificent mountains admired for their majestic slopes. Only a few days before leaving for prison I had the opportunity to ride my bicycle and observe this incredible site.

T H I R D C H A P T E R

THE DREADED MARCH FROM OUR VILLAGE PRELOKA TOWARDS VINICA.

I was taking a brief respite and sharpening my scythe when I thought I heard an unusual call. I looked around but I could see nothing out of the ordinary. Very likely, I thought, it was some bird singing his song or nattering sharply at some unruly female. When you are preoccupied with your work, it is easy to misinterpret the sounds around you.

Hastily, I returned to my scythe and tried to finish the task at hand as quickly as possible. I had a lot of other chores to finish that day. Within moments, I again heard cries, but this time, I realized they were the tearful, trembling cries of my mother calling out to me.

Quickly I threw down my scythe and ran home. In a matter of moments, I reached the first house on the outskirts of our village. From everywhere, all I could hear was the sound of crying. I wanted to find out what was happening so I hurried home. By the time I realized what was going on, it was already too late. The entire village had been surrounded by soldiers.

At that time, I could not understand what was happening and, by the time I reached home, I was at a complete loss. Before I was able to catch my breath, I felt the butt of a soldier's rifle dig into my shoulder blades. His language was foreign to me and with his rifle, he directed me out of my house.

My mother wanted to ask, "where re you taking my son?" and "Why?" but in those terrifying moments, there was no time for questions, let alone answers. There was no talk of any kind.

I had been taken as a prisoner of war in my home. Hurriedly, my mother packed me a piece of smoked meat, put in a bag and gave it to me at the door. This is all I had to sustain me for my journey.

I was ordered out.

Even my own home could not provide sanctuary from the cruel forces at work outside. I turned my head and, in desperation, tried to say a few words, but nothing came out, not even a syllable. I felt as if my whole world was crumbling.

“Would I ever see my home again? My mother? My family?” Forced out onto the road. I felt homeless, abandoned. Tears streamed down my cheeks. There was a lump in my throat. I took in a last glimpse and said, “Goodbye”

They gathered us in the middle of the village near Maricini’s place. Nobody was allowed near to us. We were completely surrounded by these foreign soldiers who aimed their rifles directly at us. Not a word was spoken. All you could hear was suppressed sobbing and the sharp shouts of “order” from the soldiers. Mothers and wives stood by the wayside. They were crying and calling out to their sons and husbands, but in vain. The stern faces of the foreign soldiers showed no mercy. What pain and agony wrenched a mother’s heart as she watched helplessly from the sidelines, wanting desperately to embrace her son for perhaps the last time, but unable to do so. Some minutes pass. I still could not believe that this was happening, but it was. They had gathered all the able-bodied men of the village and now we awaited our fate in despair. Silently, I prayed to God to watch over my mother, my family, and my home.

From all around, all you could hear was the sound of crying. Suddenly out of nowhere, we saw our village priest. What a good man he was and we all liked him very much.

“Boys! Stay here! Don’t go!” he shouted in a loud voice and our hearts jumped with new hope. But foreign soldiers removed him by force and he was never seen again. Our last hope had vanished.

We awaited the future in fear. Something terrible was going to happen to us. We knew, now, we would be forced to leave our home. The thought of that alone filled us with dread, especially for us young men, who were just beginning to make their way in life. Just yesterday, we had led our cows to pasture and played in the meadows. Suddenly, we had been forced to leave that life behind and step fearfully into the unknown, afraid of what was to become of us.

They lied to us on a grand scale saying we were simply being escorted down to the municipal office so that every male could be registered and receive his personal identification papers. It didn't take long for us to figure out that it was a farce, and that this was the easiest way of getting us into their hands. We would not have been so easily deceived had we known the truth, but it did not cross our minds to run away.



The house in which I was born.

Without any resistance, we waited for our departure, but our hearts were full of fear and foreboding.

Mothers and wives brought packages of food and clothing to their sons and husbands, and with tears in their eyes, bid their loved ones goodbye.

The land on which we stood we considered sacred, for this was the land we had crossed thousands of times with our first, childish steps. Now, this same land was

being saturated with our bitter tears, tears of sorrow and despair; tears of helpless people whose brutal fate was punishing them into uncertainty, many of whom were on their way to meet their death.

It was time for our departure.

One of the foreign military officers issued some sharp words of command and beneath the blows of rifle butts, we were quickly formed into columns. For the last time, a mother tried to embrace her son but to no avail. The hard expression on the soldiers' faces did not allow for such sentiments.

There were some more sharp directives issued and the sad troop of prisoners slowly started to move along the cobbled road. Mothers cried more loudly and children had their tear-soaked faces in the mothers' skirts. As if on command, a wind arose and the tops of an enormous pear tree waved in the distance. A few more short glances to say goodbye, and our forlorn column disappeared from view behind the curves of the winding road. The sound of crying ceased. Everybody kept to his own private thoughts as our eyes gazed into the open spaces of our native land.

The branches of an old apple tree were bent from the weight of ripe fruit. The vineyard was full of grapes, the likes of which had never been seen before. Tall grass waved in the light breeze waiting for a scythe; it would not be cut this year.

We could still see the village far behind us. We looked back longingly and our eyes expressed what our voices were unable to say; "Goodbye, loved ones."
"Goodbye, my native land."

In that dreadful silence, all you could hear was the sound of stones striking beneath the stamp of army boots. The wind blew again and carried with it, from the valley below, the cascading sounds of waterfall, as if the River Koplá wanted to bid us a last farewell.

Oh my beloved Koplá! How many times did we swim in your waters on hot summer days? How often did we fish in your depths. As if in response to my mournful thoughts, the sound from the falls became even stronger. Then, only the stomping of army boots accompanied us. With some bitterness in my heart, I looked around at the green meadows and nicely cultivated fields I had been forced to leave behind. To my right, gazing up into the sky, stood my little hill, Krtinjeek, where my scythe lay abandoned in the half-cut meadow. Only a half an

hour ago, I had been there cutting the grass. God alone knew if I would ever work that land again.

I took one final look back when we were about a good kilometer away from home.

The church tower with its majestic bells dominated the rooftops of the houses. As if on cue, its ancient bells chimed the hour. It was exactly eight o'clock.

Long after they has ceased, I could still hear the ringing of the church bells in my ears.

I wondered if I would ever see the inside of the church again. Very likely, we were all thinking similar thoughts because many a distressed face turned back for a last look at their native village, and the church echoed its chimes in a last salute of farewell.

A few more steps and our dear village disappeared as the branches of high trees obliterated its view.

I already felt an immense homesickness in my heart. I can still picture that heart-breaking farewell scene; the loud cries that filled air; the children's tear-stained faces asking their mothers why and where were they taking their fathers.

Every passing step took us further and further from our homes, from our families and closer to an uncertain fate. There are no words to describe the sadness that we felt as we made our slow, mournful procession down the dusty road towards Vinica. The road led us through villages of Balkovci and Zilje. Many more unfortunate men, who perhaps had initially looked curiously at our strange procession were forced to join our column. Even more mothers and wives cried out as cruel fate suddenly destroyed their happy homes.

From Zilje, the road led sharply down into the valley where the River Kopla danced in the morning sunlight. We continued our march towards Vinica in dead silence.

Vinica was the municipal centre for all the villages located in this particular corner of Bela Krajina. It was also the centre of transportation. Long ago, one of the few bridges leading to neighbouring Croatia was built there.

Arriving at Vinica, we saw many transport trucks standing in the main centre. Never did we suspect that they were waiting for us. These kind of trucks were usually used to transport animals to the slaughter houses.

An officer issued an order and our columns stopped. We waited in fear for what was to come.

It began. Some of us were called out by name and put on the side. A small band of four or five men was lucky enough to be sent home because they were either too old or too young. I still remember how they wished us luck, and somewhat apprehensively, sadly waived goodbye before they disappeared behind some nearby houses.

Again, on the officer's directive, the soldiers began opening the side doors of the transport and ruthlessly shoving us in like animals, (or some heinous criminals). From behind the curtain windows of nearby houses, the local peered out in fear and horror.

From out of the packed throng, you could hear a quiet prayer. A young man buried his face in his hands and wept in despair.

I had a feeling that something was choking me and, despite all my efforts to withhold them, tears trickled down my cheeks. It was not as if I was really crying, the pang in my chest was so unbearable. Now there was no hope of return; that I knew very well.

The soldiers closed the sides of the transport, and I could feel the roar of the engines as we started on our way!

Through the tumultuous din of the motors, you could still hear the sound of quiet prayer. We all prayed. Every moth moved in silent invocation as the trucks slowly moved along the dusty road.

Somewhere, on the road between Vinica and Neraje, shots suddenly rang out. No one had anticipated this. Two soldiers that had been guarding us in the truck's rear, grabbed shovels that had been laying on the floor and covered their faces with them. In all probability, they thought this would protect them from the bullets.

I hoped and prayed that, perhaps, someone had come to rescue us, and we would be returned to our native villages.

It was not to be. The shooting stopped, and our wearisome journey continued. With bruised and numb limbs, we finally reached Crnomelj. People strolling by the roadside looked on in astonishment, at this unusual convoy, as it wound its way to the railway station. The transports stopped and, on the officer's command, we got out but with much difficulty. We began to massage our limbs and other parts of our numb and tired bodies. At the sight of the station, we breathed a sigh of relief. Obviously, we would continue our journey by train and surely, that would give us a chance to rest for a while. Anybody who had travelled by train, at one time or another, knew it was a much more comfortable and pleasant way to travel. The train was already waiting. But, wete we in for a big surprise. In utter disbelief and disappointment, it soon dawned on us that we would be continuing our journey in a freight train. A long line of stock cars waited for their human cargo and, far off, in the distance, the locomotive's chimney spewed out thick, black smoke. They drove us, like a herd of cattle, towards the dark opening of the wagons. We had not yet caught a fresh breath or air since being crowded into the transport trucks, and now we were being crammed into freight cars, to be taken only God knows where. The doors were slammed shut, keys rattled in the lock and, in the distance, came the sound of the engine's whistle. With a sudden jerk and a screech, the wheels of the train started to move.

"Goodbye dear folks home!"

"Goodbye sweet village!"

"Goodbye Bela Krajina!"

"I'll never see my mother, my sister or my home again!" screamed something deep inside me, and my breast seared in pain at the very thought.

In the darkness of the wagon, I looked around hoping to find a place to sit down and rest my tired body a while. The compartment was so crammed, there was barely room enough to move, so I had to forcibly push myself down to sit where I stood, and begrudgingly, my exhausted body gave in to rest. A bit of light found its way through a crack in the roof, so I was able to distinguish one face from another.

The happy, smiling faces of yesterday had transformed into tired, gloomy masks. Soon, the air in the wagon became unbearably stuffy. Whatever little fresh air managed to get through, came from the narrow slats of the roof above us. In a corner of the wagon, somebody tried to figure out aloud where they were taking us. From the opposite side came a whispered reply. More of us ventured guesses, and slowly the whispering spread. From somewhere I heard, “the slaughter house”.

I was stunned.

“Perhaps, they are taking us to our death!”

“Are they going to shoot us?”

For the moment, I did not know what to think. The word “slaughter house” resounded in my ears, in my mind’s eye, I could picture the horror of the scene.

Could it really be possible? Could they line us up against a wall and shoot us, just as easily as that? We had not done anybody any wrong! I just could not imagine this could be possible. I closed my eyes and tried to rid my mind of these dark thoughts. Full of uncertainty and despair, I began to accept my fate. I did not want to think about anything anymore. I hope this was all a dream and that any moment I would wake up and go back to work on my land. But the loud rattling of the wheels brought me back to reality.

The train with its unhappy travellers, hurried on into the unknown, stopping briefly, from time to time, at small stations along its route. To see what was happening, we hoisted each other up so we could peek out through the tiny cracks of the wagon’s roof.

At one of the larger stations, Postojna, the train stopped for a longer period of time. As usual, we helped hoist each other up so we could have a look outside. The station was well known to us, for it was known as a vacation spot. We peered out curiously. We pressed our faces against the small, caged windows of the wagon, so we could see as much as was possible and breathe in some of the fresh air. We looked out on a people enjoying their freedom, strolling carefree along the sidewalks outside the station. Young men and girls with smiling faces hurried by hand in hand. Husbands and wives passed by on their way their evening stroll in the countryside. Children ran about in all directions. I was deeply touched as I watched these people moving about freely. I watched, longingly, as the young men of my age spent their time girl-watching.

Were we not as happy and free not so long ago.

Were we not girl-watching and dreaming of a better future yesterday?

And where were we rushing to now? Where was this steel monster rushing to take us on its steel wheels? Would we ever enjoy the freedom we had but a few hours ago?

There were no answers to these questions. With tears in my eyes, I looked out at the crowd at the station. Some of them raised their hands and clenched their fists and made threatening gestures at us as if we were criminals of the worst kind. What wrong had we done them that they hated us so much?

A new wave of bitter disappointment swept over me, and I did not want to look outside any longer. Silently, I sat down amid the darkness and stuffiness of the cattle air.

“Animals!”

In reality, we were like animals. They had driven us into the freight wagons, like cattle to the slaughter. Like animals, we had no freedom, no hope.

The train slowly moved and the station was left behind. In silence, we sat down in our own cramped little spots, each of us lost in our own thoughts. From time to time, somebody helped themselves to their meagre supply of food. From time to time, over the accompanying din of the train's wheels, you could hear somebody quietly, gloomily conversing. The train stopped once more on its route and after many long hours, finally reached its destination. The doors of the freight car opened with a terrible crash. “Out!” yelled a heartless soldier in broken Slovenian. Slowly we came out from the freight car. People emerged from out of other wagons too. Tired and exhausted from the long, painful ride, we stumbled over the railway tracks, no strength left in our limbs. Soon, we caught a glimpse of the sea. We were in a harbour. The word “sea” passed from mouth to mouth. Nobody, at that time, had ever been down to the sea. We had only heard stories about the sea from our older folks and very likely I would have appreciated its unending, shimmering surface under different circumstances. So, our destination really was the island of Rab, as somebody had already previously mentioned. Many ships sat waiting in the harbour. One of them was waiting for us. We boarded a cargo ship. Soon after we set sail.

Standing on the deck we looked back at the land with very different feelings. The waves slapped noisily as they broke on the sides of the great ship. Sea gulls circled overhead, above the sparkling furrows of the ship's wake. Minute by minute, the shoreline grew more and more distant. With each metre, the distance between us and our homeland grew ever wider. It was becoming clear that we had to accept what fate had in store for us. The war had thrown the whole world in turmoil. How could we think that we would be the exception. Everybody went through his own agony. The general consensus was that they would not just line us up against the wall. They had let us live and, although we knew they would make us suffer in the camp, we had a new glimmer of hope. A Middle-aged man, somewhat odd in my opinion, stood admiring the sea and said in a strange way;

“You must never spit into the sea because if you do, you profane it!”

He continued on and we listened in while he recounted some humorous stories. For a moment, our troubles were forgotten. He was one of those who never returned home; he hadn't the strength to overcome the horrors of the concentration camp. I was with him as he breathed his last small, stone hut outside the camp. He could not cope with his life. His body, weakened further by the inhumane suffering, had no more strength to go on living.

Far off, into the distance, we suddenly spied land. The closer we got, the clearer we could see the outlines of the island destined to soon be our home. We stared at its rocky slopes hypnotized. Every face was turned towards the island.

“Are we destined to stay here for whatever life we have left?”

“Oh for my dear, native land!” “Where are your green hills, fields and forests?”

“Where is our dear river Kolpa, with its clear, running waters?”

“Where are our loved ones?”

The emotions that ran through me filled my eyes with tears.

My homesickness was becoming unbearable. I hadn't realized how deeply ran the roots that tied me to my homeland! How deeply I would miss my loved ones, my native village and the green hills around it.

The ship slowly decreased its speed until it reached a small bay. Reels screeched as heavy ropes unwound and dropped the ship's gangway onto the shoreline. I will never forget the moment I made my first steps onto the island. The ship's steel

plank was lifted up, its motors rumbled in ignition and slowly the ship left the bay. There was no way of getting off the island now. Soldier's orders went unheeded as we watched the ship disappear behind the nearest cape. On the horizon you could see the faint outline of land. For out there, somewhere, was our home. The bells of the Holy Trinity would soon ring out their evening song. Tonight, we would not hear them and only God knew when we would hear them once more. Many of us would never hear them again.

A sharp blow on my back started me out of my heavy brooding and brought me back to my senses. Using the but ends of their rifles, the soldiers pushed us into a line oblivious to our painful cries.

We marched along the island's rocky roads going upwards, then down towards the inland. From the top of the rock, you could see that the island was not as rocky and barren as it had first appeared to be from the ship. After all, the island of Rab was known as an international summer resort area, where only the very wealthy could afford to spend their holidays. Everywhere you looked, you could see plenty of small trees and shrubbery, raising above them, small stone houses. There were even meadows and vineyards. Perhaps, under different circumstances, I would have found this landscape beautiful and intriguing. But now I did not feel that way. I felt completely deceived and forgotten, even by God, walking along the dusty road, going to meet my cruel destiny.

“What did I do that was so wrong? What sins had I committed to earn so horrible a punishment?”

I clutched my meagre bag of provisions in my hand. All that my mother had been able to give me, when I left, was a bit of smoked meat. I was hungry. I tore off a tiny piece and stuffed it into my mouth, but there was no taste to it. I was exhausted and all I ached for was to rest my weary bones. I was willing to accept anything at that point, almost eager to reach our destination. Our march continued on for a long time. Then, the head column turned to the right and stopped in front of some huge steel doors. Written on the doors were large letters in foreign script. Later on, I found out what it said. “Victory is ours!” Deep in my heart, I sincerely hoped that that this would never come to pass. A high, iron fence stood on each side of the doors. In front of the doors stood two, armed soldiers who, on command, started to open them. We had finally reached our destination, and when the last of our column stepped over the threshold of the high doors, we would be cut off from the rest of the world. There was no way back. The steel doors

slammed shut. It took a great deal of self-control, on my part, not to cry out at the sight of the high, iron fence surrounding the camp. Our new enclosed home looked very eerie. The camp was full of people. My entire body broke out in a cold sweat.

“Are these real people?” I was horrified.

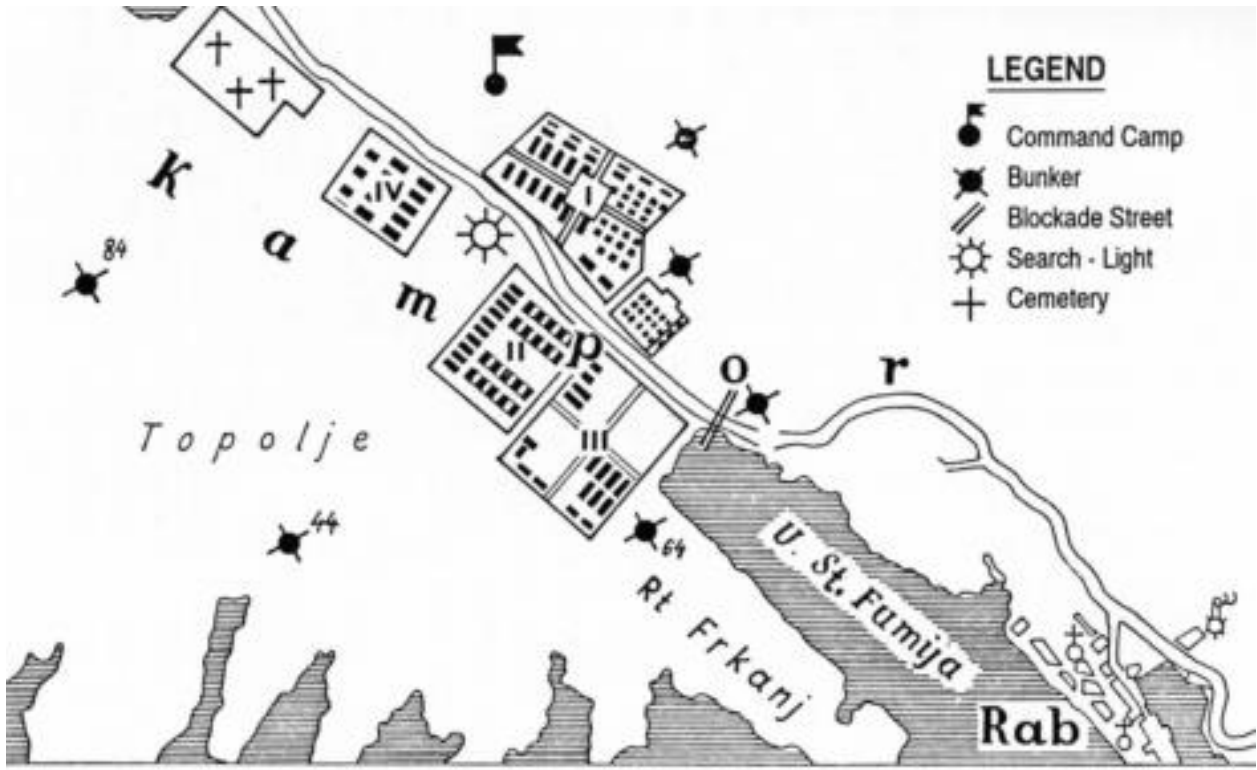
The beings that slowly moved between the tents looked more dead than alive. Thousands of living skeletons stared blankly at us. Their sunken eyes were full of despair and resignation. A deafening silence covered the entire place.

“Oh God,” I had sighed upon seeing these unfortunate creatures. I could not believe that not too long ago, all these people had been healthy and strong. I did not want to believe that I would come to look like these frightening human “cadavers” in a very short space of time. Nobody spoke, nobody questioned, everybody preferred to remain silent. We had all come to the realization that the trials we had undergone until now were nothing but a small portion of the suffering that awaited us in the future. Any questions would have been pointless.

Soon after entering the camp, we were divided into groups of four, five and six men. Every group had to set up their own tent in a designated area and, only after the completion of this work, were we allowed to rest on the hard ground. I fell asleep with thoughts of home.

The next morning, the sound of a trumpet woke me up. Soon after that, the entrance cover was lifted and a soldier pushed us out of the tent. We had to stand in silence in front of our tent until the trumpet, which echoed from a nearby hill over the entire camp, had finished sounding. The camp headquarters was also located there. We learned the first camp rule; we had to salute the raising of the foreign flag on a high steel pole. No matter where we were, we had to stop and look towards the flag, holding our arm aloft in salute until the sound of the trumpet stopped.

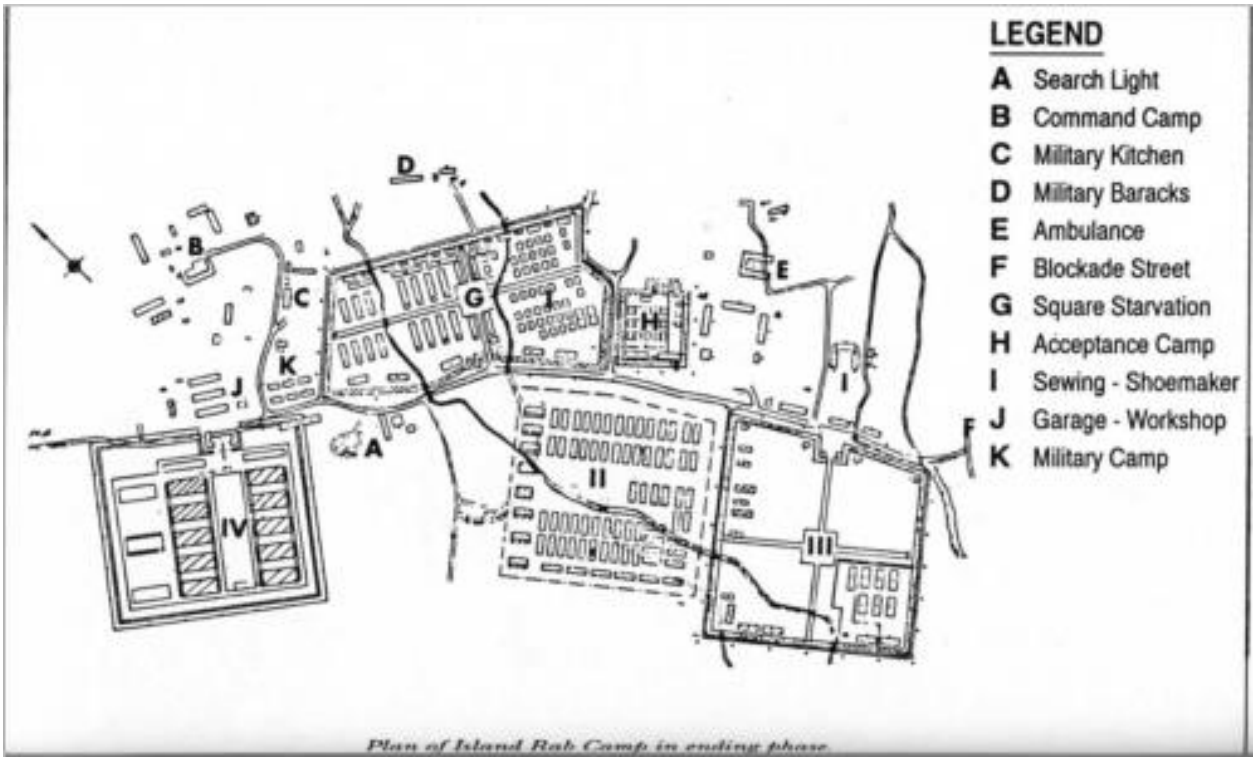
Hunger gnawed at us. We spent the entire day sitting under the tent or searching the campgrounds, hoping to find a bit of something to put in our mouths. Our own food had run out long ago. It was already evening when we were given our meagre first ration. In those first days, we received our so called meals at no set time. The kitchen pots were carried to the other side of the brook, which ran directly through the middle of the camp. When the corporal gave a signal we pushed like a herd of cattle to get to the other side of the brook.



Concentration Camp - Island Rab



Line up for food.



F O U R T H C H A P T E R

MY FIRST MEAL ON THE ISLAND OF RAB

We lined up in front of a huge cauldron and impatiently waited for our aluminum bowls. The cook ladled out the soup which was, more often than not, only water. An occasional piece of macaroni or grain of rice might have been found in it. Only after some days have passed did they start feeding us something more to eat. Three times a day, we lined up for our meagre allotments of food. Breakfast was a cup of black coffee. Lunch was only hot soup. In truth, it was just of grease-laden water with a few floating grains of rice. To this day, I can still remember our first lunch in that camp. Impatiently, I was standing waitin, in line, tossing my aluminum bowl from hand to hand. Finally, it was my turn and I watched the ladle as it circled around the bottom of the cauldron. Finally, it stopped and started to rise toward my bowl, but at that moment, the hot liquid spilled over. Boiling water fell not only in my bowl, but also on my trembling fingers. I could barely keep from screaming as the hot liquid burned my hands. In spite of this, I did not let go of my bowl, even though my fingers throbbed in pain. I ran to the tent and only there, did I put my cup down on the ground. After a while, the pain eased a little. With my sore and trembling hands, I clasped the bowl and slowly sipped the hot liquid. I had no spoon and some days passed before I was lucky enough to get one. Anyway, there was no need for a spoon since there was nothing to put into it. The bottom of my bowl proved to be empty. My first meal was that hot broth with its few floating scraps of macaroni and it had only increased my hunger. If only I had a piece of bread! Late in the evening, my prayers were answered. For supper, we usually got a small bun, and a small piece of meat or cheese. Two bites and the whole thing would be gone. That evening's meal proved to be no different. Supper over, I stretched myself out on the hard cot. I dreamt of a big piece of bread my mother had just sliced off a freshly baked loaf.

Life in the camp was a monotonous rhythm of gnawing hunger and suffering. Our goal was survival, no matter what the price. We had come to look like those hopeless and famished beings we had seen when we first entered the camp. Like living corpses we shuffled about outside the tents from where we could hear the

moans of the sick. Our sunken checks were overgrown with beards. Sanitation, if there was any, was at its lowest level. We tried to keep a little order and cleanliness in our tents, at least, but in those circumstances it was almost impossible. There wasn't much we could do. Lice began to spread through the camp. The disgusting parasites tried to eat what little we had left. Infections took hold in the open wounds left by the constant itching and scratching. Under these conditions, it was impossible to exterminate the disgusting and burdensome vermin, and this only compounded our pain and despair. Even though we carried our blankets out every day and shook them for a long time; even though, every day, we meticulously picked over and tried to keep all our cloths clean, all our efforts were in vain. We had to go along with our merciless fate; only the fact that we were still alive kept us going.

Autumn came. The cold, fall nights worsened an already difficult situation. The blankets we had been given were insufficient protection against the cold. The long, rainy days of fall came in the company of strong, cold winds. Wind blew through every tiny little hole of the tent. Quite a few times, we found ourselves hugging any available side of the tent, for fear the wind would turn it over. As I crouched there hugging the tent, I grew ever more fearful wondering whether I would be able to survive the winter, given the conditions. Even through the winters on Rab were mild and without snow, the cold, winter winds could be tragic for its starved and exhausted prisoners. Nobody talked about moving us! Nobody cared what happened to us! They had looked on, indifferently, at the deaths which had already plagued the camp. Nobody could be bothered to help those of us who were barely surviving, who continued to exist. One after another, we would slowly, painfully die and fill the cemetery of Rab.

Why did they want me dead? Because I wanted the freedom to be able to cultivate my land in peace? Whom had I so horribly wronged that I now had to suffer so much?

At times like this, I would think of my home, my mother and the rest of my family. I remember the countless evenings when the entire family had gathered around the table laden with food and delighted in each other's company. I remembered how I used to head for the fields, all rested in the early morning hours, ready for haying. Now here I was, either in the tent lying ill, immobile, or slowly shuffling about the camp grounds in the hopes of finding a morsel of food for my hunger. At times like this, when the growing hunger became almost to

painful to bare, I would despise the fat, greasy cooks who cut and stole our already meagre rations. The cooks were our people, our very own people. Like all of us they were internes, but fate had dealt them a better hand. Their physical appearance alone was testimony they had an abundance of food to consume and were short of nothing. Their manners towards the rest of us was rude and rough as we waiting in line in front of the cauldrons from which they had already taken the best portions.

I will never forget what happened at the cauldron one particular day. A man in his thirties implored the cook to take pity on him for once and save him a few extra pieces of macaroni. They had been old friends, probably from the same village. The fat cook gave him no reply. With his ladle, he scooped from the very top and only gave him liquid. They glared at each other for a long time and after a long silence, the man threw the bowl, full of hot broth, into the cook's face. The fat, loathsome cook screamed in pain with flailing fists and feet. He started to kick the poor fellow whom nobody was able to help. When they brought him to the tent, he was almost dead. From that day on, I hated that cook even more. We all despised him. Deep in my heart, I hoped a day would come when he too would feel the pain of suffering he inflicted on others. How corrupt must that man's soul have been that he could have been so brutal to his own people.

We had been behind the heavy steel doors of the camp for a few months when the first packages from home reached us. The parcels contained food and that was all we needed, nothing more. It was an especially tasty meal when we had biscuits to crumble into our soup. Even I received a parcel from my mother one day. Inside was a brief letter telling me the news from home. Tears trickled down my cheeks and my hands trembled on reading her words. This parcel had either travelled a long distance, or had been piled somewhere in a warehouse for some time because everything in it was covered in mould. Despite this, I did not throw the parcel away. "Even though it's mouldy now, it will be alright after I boil it" I thought to myself. And this is what I did. But it was not quite like that. Shortly after I had prepared and eaten my first meal, I felt terrible pains in my stomach. For a few hours, I tossed and turned in my bed hoping my pain would subside. The thought of going to the doctor was unthinkable since we had no such privileges. Somebody brought me a few caraway seeds from somewhere. My fellow prisoners had a great deal of difficulty convincing me to try chewing the seeds. My stomach rebelled at the bitter taste, but in the end they did help. The

pains soon diminished and, after a while, completely disappeared. From that day on, I believed in the healing power of natural medicines.

Day followed day, and each succeeding day was harder than the other. Dreadful hunger continued without abating. We considered ourselves very fortunate if we were assigned to join the work detail outside the camp because it gave us the opportunity to pick fruit, forage for carrots and even squash. In truth, you could not call it real work because we simply did not have enough strength. If they thought they could demoralize us still further, they were sadly mistaken. Even though we were exhausted and sickened, the little bit of exercise did us some good. More frequently than not we returned to the camp with fruit bulging inside our pockets and stuffed inside our shirts. But, for most of us, even this did not stop death. Death started to select the first among us (who had arrived at the prison together). A neighbour of mine died in a small stone house outside the camp, on a day we had gone out on work detail. I was present when he collapsed. With his last breath, he murmured something. Sadly, when I looked into his eyes, I saw those of a stranger. This worn body lay still on a temporary bed. His eyes were sunken. A few drops of sweat beaded on his face. "He would never go home again!"

This was not the only heart-breaking incident in my life as an internee. Almost daily something similar would happen. This would awaken in me feeling, and more often than not, tears would well up in my eyes in spite of my self-control. Even now near five decades after that terrible period, memories come flooding back to me as I write this book. Memories that I thought were long forgotten, rise up from somewhere deep inside of me.

Our camp was not the only one on the island. This island hid something far more despicable; there was an internment camp for women and children. The human soul that is able to do something as horrible as this, must indeed be very rotten. Whom had these innocent creatures harmed that they now had to go through this living hell. It's almost impossible to conceive of.

Today however, surrounded by my own family, I can understand a little of the happiness expressed in the shouts of those men who had families in the camp as they went out on their way to visit their loved ones.

"We're off to visit our wives!" "We're off to see our families!"

Their impatient cries echoed throughout the entire camp. Once a week, they were permitted a short visit with their loved ones. We followed them with our eyes as they were escorted by the guards, and went happily on their way. We shared in their joy; but, we were even more thankful and happier thinking of our own loved ones still in the safety of their homes. In moments like these, when I saw the countless difficulties facing these people who were just trying to survive, my own problems seemed less burdensome. Though I often thought about home and family, and homesickness was almost too painful to bear, I considered myself fortunate.

Quite a few months have passed since cruel fate had brought me here to this “island of death”. Starvation and disease were present everywhere. Death was constantly reaping in its victims. We all hoped, but of course nobody could be certain, to escape its grasp. One of our goals for survival was to avoid becoming ill; becoming ill was like a death sentence. There were no doctors, no medication, and of those who did fall ill, only a very few were strong enough to survive. For some, a bit of a sniffle was enough to cause their demise.



Line up for food.



"Square Starvation"
Prisoner's pave main square within camp.

F I F T H C H A P T E R

THE SCENE OF DESTRUCTION LEFT BY THE FLOOD ON ST. MICHAEL'S NIGHT

It was the feast of St. Michael. Rain had been falling steadily for some days. Inside our tent, we huddled together to protect ourselves from the cold. It was around midnight when unbelievable chaos inundated the camp. The entire valley and the better part of our camp lay under water. Some tents had already been carried away. Some bewildered souls tried to get out of the flooded areas. As the water level rose higher, so too did the number of people made homeless by the flood, and who now looked for safer ground wherever they could find it. Nature too it seemed, was plotting against us unfortunate prisoners, as if we had not gone through enough suffering already. All of us were moving about. The water had

yet to reach our tent, but the water level was rising rapidly, and it looked like we too, would soon lose our home. Everywhere you could hear the cries of poor, overwrought souls who had been left completely homeless. “Home!”

How we could call that cramped, stinking home “home” was unbelievable. But that is what it was and, even though it bore absolutely no resemblance by any stretch of the imagination to our real homes, we felt an incredible attachment to that tiny plot of land that lay beneath those washed-out tents. Even I felt the same way as I clutched my belongings and waited and watched in fear as the rising water slowly approached our tent like some monstrous beast. Nobody gave a damn about us poor wretches who were trying to save their accursed lives with their last strength. Only the camp’s search light seemed to be doing double duty that night. Its extra bright light constantly circled the grounds and the fence so that nobody could take advantage of the ensuing confusion caused by the flood and escape. It was well past midnight when the camp commandant appeared on horseback, apparently to assess the situation. He did not stay long. Briefly he looked at the flooded camp, then flicked his horse with his riding crop and left without uttering so much as a word. Nobody else came. No one was sent to help us even though the water continued to rise. It was our tent’s turn now. In silence, I watched as the water edged closer and closer to the lower end of the tent. The rain had slowly started to abate, but the water level was still rising. The moment came when the water brushed our tent. I stepped back as centimetre by centimetre, its grey surface slowly devoured the ground of our home.

“We are not tolerated even here. We are not even worthy of this tiny plot of land. O God, why are we being so tormented?”

As if in answer to my silent prayer, the water slowly stopped. About a quarter of the tent sat in water, but the other three parts were dry. Still, we were far better off where we were because in other sections of the camp, tents were completely flooded. In some places, completely washed away. It was some time before the flood waters slowly started to subside. The water level slowly diminished and in the early morning hours, with dawn approaching, the water finally dissipated. Only the sodden ground and the camp’s total devastation were evidence of the preceding night’s events. A song sung by Rab internes even tells of the incident.

*Oh, there was a flood
on St. Michael's dreadful night
all resort area tableland
felt the water's might.*



Tents In The Camp
6 of us shared a tent such as this one.

This was truly a dreadful night. As a result of the flood, many felt sick and also died. Most of the camp had been completely devastated. Many of the tents had been completely destroyed. Straw from roots lay strewn everywhere about the camp grounds. Of course, it goes without saying we helped each other, and there was a lot of work restoring the collapsed tents. As I remember, our tent which was located on the north side of the camp was not too adversely affected. The day before, we had prepared ourselves. As if we had a premonition of what was coming, we banked soil around the tent. This was not permissible but sometimes we were forced to go against camp regulations. It looked like we did the right thing since our tent remained firmly upright and the only thing we had to replace was some wet straw.

After a few days, everything returned back to normal, only the number of the ill increased. Again, our days were spent wandering aimlessly about the camp site looking for anything to stick in our hungry mouths. Our favourite spot was around the cooking barracks. Nearly every day, we would scrape the sides of the huge, empty cauldrons for a little bit of fat so badly needed by our emaciated bodies. A poked finger circling the pot's circumference would usually be rewarded with a lump of grease. How we licked our greasy fingers in delight! Sometimes, this was more nutritious and filling than the actual meal itself. Of course, you had to be among one of the first in line, when the cooks put the pots outside the barracks right after the meal. Those who were skilful enough were able, on occasion to make off with a discarded bone. The arrogant cooks preferred to throw the bones out into the garbage rather than give them to the likes of us. A few men paid dearly for their audacity, for anyone caught was beaten severely by the cooks. From time to time, I was lucky enough to make off with the bone myself. There was no meat on it, but it was greasy. Sometimes, as I continued to chew and lick at it, I felt I had somehow satisfied my gnawing hunger. If I had the good fortune of boiling it, in secrecy of course since fires were not permissible in the camp, then I was even more satisfied. The resulting broth made such a tasty soup, there was no comparing it to the one the cooks served as meals. In short, it was unique and it was hard to describe other than that, if accompanied by the small bun given to us at supper, it was a veritable feast. It was extremely hard for me to put something aside for later; I was one of those who devoured their meagre ration the minute they received it. But there were a few who tried to save a bit of bread for the next day. Yet, there were also those who stole the bread from the very mouths of the starving. Usually, these were the heavy smokers, who traded stolen bread for cigarettes, or, in other words, life for death, because in most cases, they stayed on the island forever.

It was a Sunday in December of 1942. The sun was shining and it was unusually mild for that time of year. I was sitting outside the tent lost in thought.

“Is it really Sunday today?”

I could not say for certain because this day in no way felt like Sunday.

Like every other day, even on Sunday mornings, we saluted the flag, waited in lines in front of the cauldrons and were burdened by hunger and other troubles. There was no difference between Sunday and any other day of the week. Maybe Sunday left more of a feeling of emptiness than other days.

Back home, in my village, Sunday was always something special. Every day we worked hard, but on Sunday, everything came to a complete stop. On Sunday – scythe, hoe and plough – all had to rest and gather strength for the coming week. On Sunday, the bells of St. Trinity rang out twice, inviting parishioners to morning and midday mass. Young and old, we all gathered, dressed in our Sunday best, and waited by the church walls until the large bell called us in to mass. A feeling of blessed peace filled the heart as the whole church resounded in song. After mass, a festive table laden with food awaited us at home. After all, this was a holiday. In the afternoon, the young people of the village gathered together to sing, play the tamburitas and dance. Children romped and ran between houses. Homeowners sat in front of their houses and talked, perhaps about their crops and the weather. There was nothing like that here. We did have a morning mass nearly every Sunday, but it was very different from the mass in our own church back home. Everything took place in the centre of the camp where there was a large, empty space. This place was not singled out for church services only. It was where we gathered to hear various announcements, and to get letters or parcels. Even the priest looked very different. Usually an abbot, from some local monastery came and put together some Sunday devotions as he wished. As I remember, it was over very quickly and there was no obligation to attend. The camp command neither officially recognized the ceremony nor was it against it. After prayers were finished, we dissolutely returned to our tents. I did not feel that I had attended a Sunday mass, or that this was a holy day. Instead of sitting down to a table laden with food, I usually sat down on the trampled grass behind my tent and thought of home, my family, the festive laden table, and all that I missed so much.

Even this Sunday, I sat alone behind the tent. In my hand, I held a worn out paper which once long ago, had been a letter from my mother. It was in tatters and barely held together. I had read and reread the letter a hundred of times, and even though I had every single word committed to memory, I still read it as if anew. As I slowly devoured the contents of the letter, word for word, I could swear I heard my mother's voice. It was so quiet and so full of sadness, I could picture her, bent over this unfinished letter to her lost son, wiping the tears that streamed down her face with her white handkerchief. I could feel her pain, and tears welled in my eyes as my thoughts drifted over sea and mountains, to where my loved ones resided.

I sat alone for a long time reminiscing.

Christmas was a major feast day. My usual job was to fetch and set up the Christmas tree and gather the moss. My sisters washed and waxed the wooden floors throughout the entire house. By dusk, even all the work in the stable had been completed. Next, we all gathered in the large, warm room to prepare our Christmas tree, under which we put a little hill of green moss with a manger and shepherds. First we would hang decorations on the branches of the tree because we wanted our tree to look beautiful. Finally, we worked on the manger and shepherds, and the three kings had to be included too of course. My mother covered the table with her best cloth and set out her “bozicnike”. Beside it, dishes of corn, wheat and millet. Another bowl contained big red, Christmas apples. The best apples had been saved for this day. We added a jug of wine and our Christmas preparations were complete. We sat on the bench, around our nice warm stove, and said the first of our Christmas prayers. We all looked wide-eyed at the beautiful Christmas tree and the table laid out in its festive style. Dressed in our Sunday best, we talked in whispers, as we waited for the midnight hour. All the houses were lit up for this night and even the church looked festive in its radiant light. A manger had been set up there as well. The altar glowed in the blaze of the hundreds of flickering candles, and when the church multitude sang “Silent Night, Holy Night”, heaven itself must have heard the praise. Blessed peace filled everyone’s heart. Grudging neighbours now shook hands, and any ill-feelings were forgotten. I remembered all this that night before Christmas. My Christmas this year would be completely different.



This is the cemetery on the Island of Rab 1943.

SIXTH CHAPTER

CHRISTMAS EVE AND NEW YEAR'E EVE

On that Christmas eve, I sat inside our stuffy tent. Instead of happiness, deep sadness prevailed among us. We all sat silently in the darkness of the tent, everyone remembering their own special Christmas, an evening very different from the one we shared now. There was no Christmas tree, no pleasant aroma of Christmas baking, and instead of peace, dark thoughts entered my head perhaps I would never again be with my loved ones. I lay awake long into the night. When I should have been kneeling at midnight mass in our village church, there I was instead, lying in this dark stuffy tent with a dirty blanket covering my head. It was winter and though there was no snow, it was cold. I was hungry, and thinking about our richly laden, holiday table. This made my hunger all the worse. The free world celebrated but the poor and the hungry in prison camps had been forgotten and left at the mercy of their enemies. They too celebrated and rejoiced at their richly laden tables, while their victims were dying in desperate need of a small crust of bread.

“Would God forgive them this sin?”

That night, I hardly closed my eyes. By early morning, I was up and about. I walked along the dirty road that ran through the camp centre, and tried to forget my gnawing hunger which now had become a painful obsession. I nodded in greeting to a few passer-by who, at that early hour, were like up and lifetime, and now I couldn't about the camp for the same reasons. I spotted an orange peel on the dirty ground. It was all grimy and trampled. In spite of that, I bent down and picked it up. I knew it was not eatable. I had often eaten oranges in my lifetime, and now I couldn't let the pains of my stomach go unheeded. I walked down to the brook and washed it in its cold fresh waters. Never in my life had I tasted such a deliciously sweet orange and this was just the peel; even my stomach did not refuse this tasty morsel. I felt no pain later, and it was a little easier to wait for breakfast. That orange peel was my only gift that Christmas day. Christmas was followed by the New Year, but the emptiness and deeply into my soul. On New Year's eve, I impatiently tossed about, long into the night. New Year's eve was always celebrated in my village. Young and old gathered in the old village school

house, where we put on comedies or light-hearted sketches prepared especially for this night. We were not professional actors but everybody worked hard and performed their very best. “Strength of the Uniform”, “The Linden Broker”, and “The Slovenian Shoemaker”, were some of the many plays performed on New Year’s Eve.

*I am a famous chimneysweep
Black from head to toe.
I clean chimneys, stoves,
in every house, I am at home*

To this day, I like to recall some of those happy songs we recited during those evenings on the school stage in front of a jam-packed audience. Even on that night in 1942, I remembered all those memorable New Years evenings as we waited for the clock to strike twelve. With smiles and happiness, we wished each other the best for the coming new year. This night however, I expressed good wishes to no one and no one remembered to express them to me, even though the majority of us were young, came from the same village, and were imprisoned by the same iron doors. Everyone was too preoccupied with his own private thoughts and simply wanted to be left alone. A year had passed since we last had celebrated and toasted in the New Year.

Christmas and New Year’s holidays went by unobserved, but everyone knew they were behind us and that we had entered into the year 1943.

Then, on the sixth of January, an unexpected order came to move us out. I was included in this order and put on the first transport. I do not know the reason behind the move, nor by what standards they selected us. I only remember that we were loaded into the trucks and driven to the harbour. There was no time to say goodbye; I was only able to wave to my friends and acquaintances. The trip to the harbour did not take long, but it was tiring nonetheless. Since we were half-starved and completely exhausted, we felt ill at every turn and bump in the road. A cargo ship was already waiting for us in the harbour. Many weeks and months had passed since they had brought us to this island in a similar ship, when I had stood in the same harbour and looked back at the ship returning to the coast. After so many months of suffering, starvation, and desperation, I found myself standing in the same spot again. I was not a free man but for a moment, I had a sense of freedom. There was no high iron fence laced with barbed wire within sight. We were loaded onto the cargo ship. Because of the cold, winter wind, we could not stay on deck, so they crammed us down below. If I had previously felt a fleeting

feeling of freedom and hope that they were returning us home , I was sadly disappointed as I stepped down into that stinking hold. The floor of that huge cargo ship was filthy with animal excrement. With a great deal of effort, I was able to clean a little spot where I could sit and look out a narrow peephole on the ship's side, and so stare out at the shore of the island of Rab. In the meantime, the ship had already set sail.

*Island of Rab, summer resort,
flower of the Adriatic Sea,
became a meeting place
for the Slovenian people never see.*

*Everybody is here together,
worker, farmer and lawyer,
here at our graves waiting,
Will spring ever come again?*

*For now, life is hard
starvation is our fate
where are all the good times
enjoyed by young and old.*

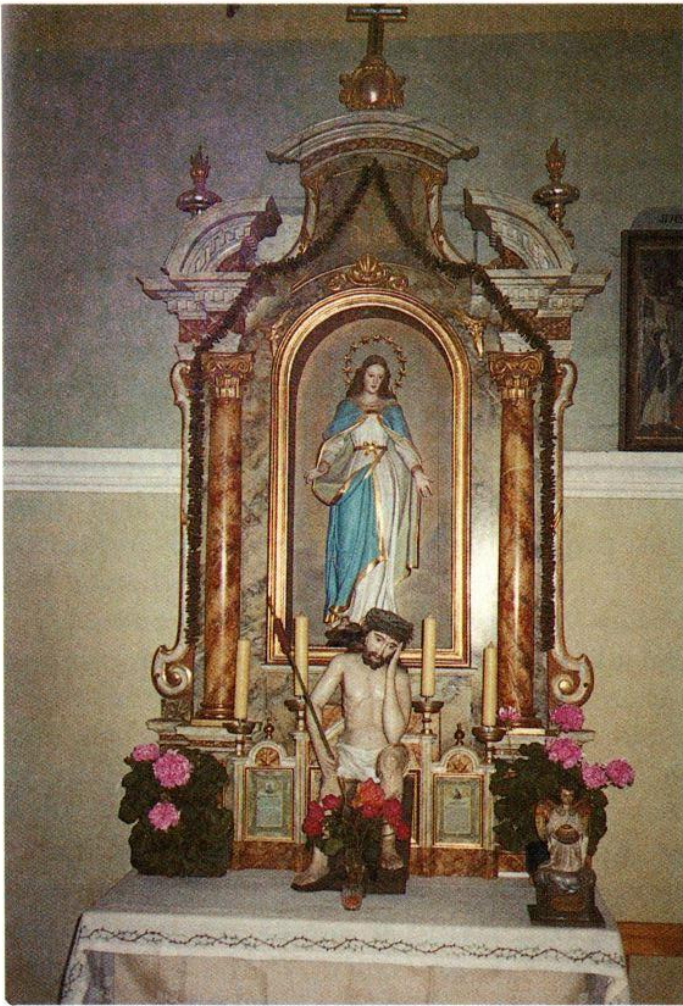
*Alas, there was a flood
on St. Michael's dreadful night,
all resort area and tableland
felt the water's might.*

*Island Rab, summer resort,
in the middle of the Adriatic Sea
turned into a slaughter house
of the Slovenian people never see.*

A stout man, who peered at the island's disappearing shoreline through a neighbouring peephole, murmured the verses of the Rab internee's song. How strangely solemn it sounded accompanied, as it was, by the ship's noisy motor. Even though our destination was unknown and maybe our situation would be worse, a new hope was reborn inside of me, that better times lay ahead. That island of death or that "slaughter house", as so aptly put by author of that song, slowly disappeared into the distance. After a few hours, our ship finally reached its destination. When the doors of its large hold opened, we all pushed towards the exit. Only when I stepped out onto the pier did I breathe a sigh of relief. With the full force of my lungs, I gasped for the fresh, clean, winter air; for the moment, I wanted nothing else. The stench in that hold had taken all the strength out of me.

The surroundings were familiar. I had seen all these cement piers and the blocks of buildings behind them somewhere before. Then I remembered. We were in the Reka harbour from where we had departed six months ago and sailed toward the island of death.

When I realized that I was on the mainland, that home was not that far away and so accessible, hope reawakened in me just as it had a few hours ago.



Church Altar

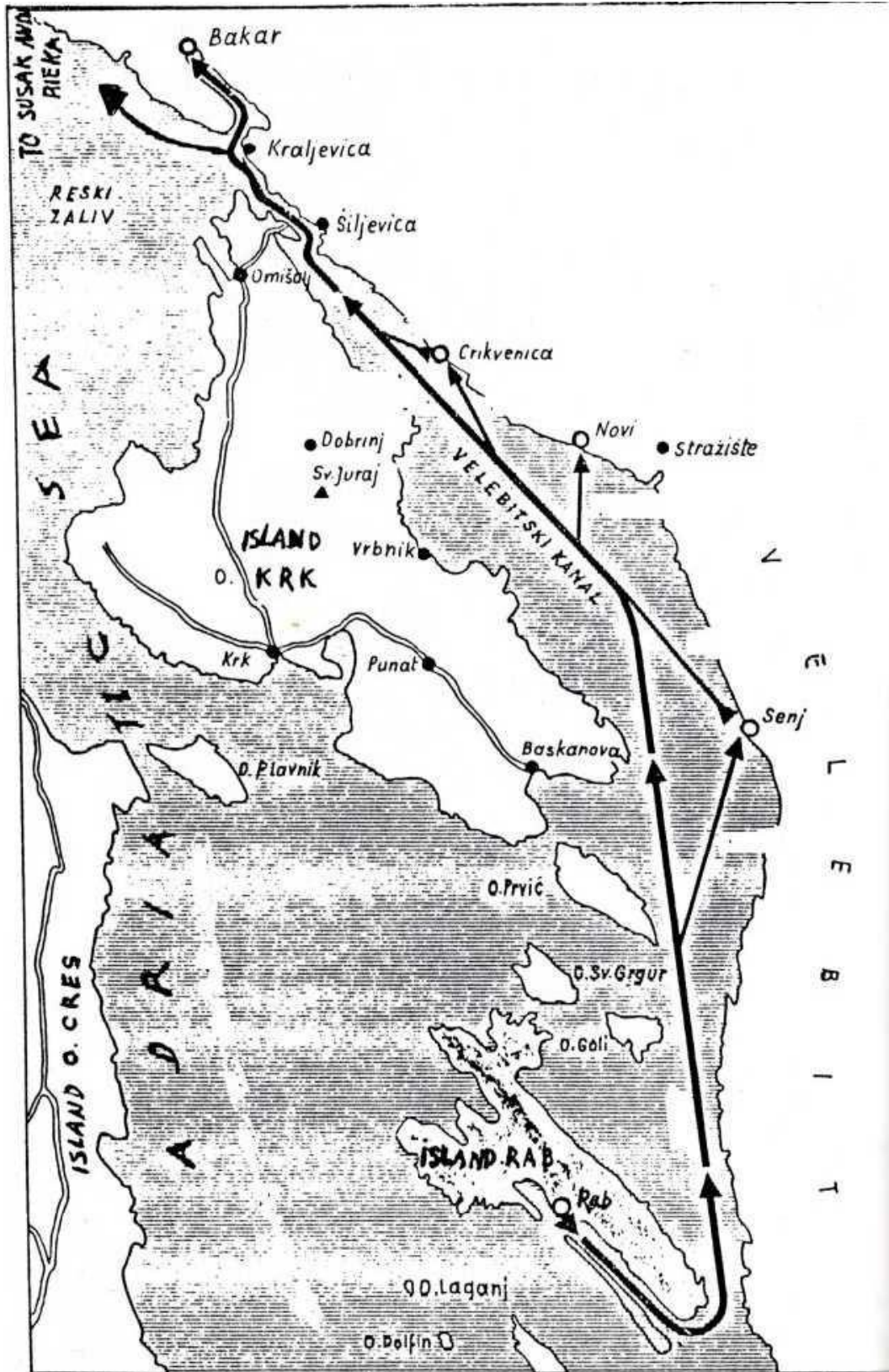
We prayed to God for help during our time of need. Our thoughts returned to Preloka and Holy Symbols such as the Church Altar in the church.

“Maybe I would see my village, my mother and the rest of my family once again! Maybe I would get the chance to fulfil the promises I had made to God in those hopeless moments of despair those many sleepless night on Rab!”

Only a few hours separated me from my home and all my dear ones. I felt as if I could run all the way home, if only I had permission to do so. “You can do it!, something inside told me. But sensibility intervened because a starved and and exhausted body would not have been able to endure the slightest effort. With some difficulty, I crawled into one of the transports awaiting its live cargo on the pier.



Fearfully, I waited for our departure because I was afraid of the painful jostling effects of the road. The trucks motors roared to life, and as I had anticipated, the painful jerking started. The smallest movement of the truck was agonizing.



Route to get to and from Rieka.

Luckily, the journey was not long. The trucks veered toward a group of brick buildings that were completely fenced in and very well guarded. They were military barracks. The trucks drove to the entrance, stopped for a moment, then continued on their way inside the fence walls, and finally came to a stop in front of a high building made of stone. Just the look of these new surroundings sparked a new hope in every one of us, that life would be better, though we did not expect them to be comfortable. As I entered the building, I had the most curious reaction: “Are we really going to sleep indoors?”

They scattered us in big rooms that held bunkbeds. For the first time in six months, I lay down on a real bed. “I may have been starving, but at least I slept like a human being. But again, I was mistaken. It was as if everything in the world had turned against us, the hapless, homeless; misfortune pursued us constantly.

On our journey to this barracks, I had felt a strange itching over my entire body. At first, I paid little attention to it because I had become accustomed to itching and scratching. But the itching did not stop and the more I scratched, the worse it became. When I looked around, I realized that I was not the only one with this problem. Almost everybody in this huge dormitory was scratching himself and tossing about restlessly on the bunkbeds. The itching got steadily worse and became all the more unbearable. That night, hardly anyone slept. The scene the next morning was desperate. Whoever I looked at, I noticed they had scratch marks, some had even scratched until they were bleeding. Finally, our jailers realized that there really was something wrong with us. Into our dormitory came a doctor in the company of two male nurses. He walked up and down the dorm, stopped here and there for a moment, and from a safe distance scrutinized the bloody sores left by the constant scratching. He spoke a few words to the attendants and left. This time, they moved quicker than usual. We were informed that we had an infection of some animal origin and that we had to undergo medical treatment immediately. It was instantly clear to us all that we had been infected on the ship, in that filthy cargo hold below the deck where normally animals had been transported. Never before had I seen anything like this, though I had often heard talk about it. Now that I could feel this dreadful pain on my own skin, I truly believed in its horror. I itched everywhere and the more I scratched, the worse the itch became.

SEVENTH CHAPTER

THE PAINFUL AFTERMATH OF THE VOYAGE FROM THE ISLAND OF RAB

The worst itching occurred on the most intimate parts of the body. But wherever their location, one scratched one's skin until it bled. Scabs formed over the newly formed sores, but the resulting scab itched worse than ever.

The two military male-nurses brought in a large container of sulfur which we had to rub over our entire body including our open, bleeding sores. The insane itching was now followed by a searing pain as the sulfur penetrated the wounds. Both of the male nurses warned us to stop our scratching, but nobody obeyed because the itching had intensified. To this day, it is hard to describe. For three days, we underwent this sulfur treatment. In those three days, the sulfur destroyed layers of skin which now began to peel off. After those three days, we all had to bathe. The soap and water may have cleansed the dead skin from our bodies, but the itching did not go away. The scratching continued and wounds re-opened again. Almost three weeks passed before we were finally rid of this terrible affliction. Our soars slowly began to heal, and a few days later, we were divided into groups in preparation for our transfer to other camps. Before coming to the barracks, we had been informed that our stay would be short, so we were not too surprised when they started to prepare us for transfer. Nobody really wanted to leave because life in the barracks was so much better than on the island of Rab. Here we slept on beds, and even the food, though there was never enough, was a lot better than back there. Even the guards treated us much more humanely, and had it not been for the horrible scabies infestation, you could almost say that it was not half bad. True, we were still prisoners and our stomachs were more empty than full, but to someone accustomed only to suffering, the slightest improvement meant a lot.

In those days of my stay in the barracks, I got a pleasant surprise. I received a parcel from home. It contained, as usual, some dried food staples. In between some stale biscuits, I found a package of dried prunes and even a whole piece of smoked meat. Truly, if at that moment I had said my life was lousy, I would have committed a great sin.

Before our departure that morning, we had our last medical examination; it was very simple. The doctor pressed his finger under each of your eyes, and after a good half-hour, pronounced us fit enough to travel. Outside, in front of the buildings, the transport trucks were already waiting for us and we filed onto them in our pre-arranged groupings. When all the transports were full, two armed soldiers boarded each transport and it was not long after that we again were on the road to oblivion. The better living conditions that we had experienced in the barracks gave us a ray of hope that perhaps our future would not be too bad, but there was an overwhelming feeling that this was only the calm before the storm. Later on, our intuitions were proven right.

This journey did not take too long, and soon we found ourselves again inside a barbed-wire enclosure.

“Visco” was the name of our new internment camp in Italy, and it had only recently been built. On the freshly turned earth, there were remnants of the last fall’s harvest. The barbed-wire enclosure an area of land that not too long ago, had been worked by toiling farmers; now in their stead, stood wooden barracks. The biggest building, once a farmer’s home, stood outside the fenced area and had been converted into the camp’s command office. A high wooden tower, which stood adjacent to the fence, had a huge reflector. At night, it illuminated the fence around the camp, and also the entire camp itself. Two guards constantly surveyed the camp from above, and around the fence, foot patrols were on constant alert. Escape was impossible and very likely the idea would never have entered anyone’s mind.

Our suffering, which started on the island of death continued. Already, on the first day, we noticed our meagre rations were smaller; our instincts upon leaving the barracks were being realized. Our rations were just as small as those in the camp Rab, and after a few days, starvation again began. Once more, there was the endless waiting in line in front of the kitchen cauldrons, and the relentless scavenging of the camp grounds hoping to dig up a morsel for our hungry mouths. It was possible to dig up a trifle.

Though last fall’s crops had otherwise been harvested, buried in the trampled ground were beets, carrots and other root vegetables unfamiliar to me. I had nothing to dig with so I tackled the hard ground with my fingers if I suspected anything edible lay buried underneath. I took no notice of my pained and broken fingernails and the blood that sometimes appeared beneath them. The pain in my stomach was far worse. There was no water to wash our dug-out treasures. I

scraped most of the earth off first, then, the rest I rubbed off on my pants or shirt. Back home, beets were considered pig fodder and I never thought the day would come that I would be eating them. Hunger puts a man into a situation where he happily eat the most tasteless food. And I also tried something else which once I would have shunned and thought unthinkable. They were snails. I had heard they were valued as a delicacy but I never imagined that I would be eating them. As I scratched about the earth, I often came across snails and occasionally, I collected a small fortune. In secret, I lit a fire and roasted them over the hot coals. Their aroma reminded me of the smell of home on feast days, and I had to confess, they really were quite tasty.

But the earth's hidden provisions were quickly exhausted. We continued to scratch the earth, digging quite deeply sometimes, but the shouts of joy at uncovering a "treasure" grew rare. Most of the time, tired from our long day's search, we returned in disappointment to the barracks and lay down to rest and wait for our usual daily allotments. Again, hunger reigned supreme over our shrinking stomachs. All this time, new groups of prisoners continued to arrive at the camp, so much so that, there soon was a noticeable lack of space. Again, news started to circulate about another transfer. Sadly, we questioned the motives behind these moves which sapped us of what little energy we had left.

We left the Visco internment camp on an unusually beautiful spring morning. Again, we sat in transport trucks as they rushed us along to our merciless fate. We travelled south. On both sides of the road stretched vast green meadows and fields; already showing were the young shoots of the spring crops. We drove on foreign roads, through a foreign country, and thought of home where it would have been just like this, all green and in bloom.

Our new place was near the Italian city of Udine, the Gonars internment camp. The camp entrance was guarded by two soldiers carrying guns mounted with bayonets. Just the first view and the camp alone aroused fear, and when the heavy steel doors closed behind us, we were once again cut off from the outside world.

The Gonors internment camp was not much different from the other camps. All four sides were surrounded by a high fence that was covered over with barbed wire. In all four corners stood high security towers, and within them, guards with machine guns. Outside the fence were the military buildings that housed the camp's command. The prisoners were lodged in huge barracks that were arranged in straight rows throughout the whole camp except at the front entrance gates. Here

was a large open area to service turning transports or the assembly of a large number of internees. The whole place was quite well organized and even the wooden barracks were in good condition. The floor was covered by huge wooden planks and on them were placed bunkbeds. I was truly surprised at seeing my new home. The impression I got outside had been completely different. I had become accustomed to seeing armed guards. But machine guns on security towers aroused fear and gave the camp a monstrous aspect.

Really, everything was quite the opposite to what I had anticipated on the way to the camp when my mind envisioned a far more horrifying scene. Even the food here was not too bad. Although it was still not enough to keep human being healthy, it was a lot better than at previous camps. For the first time in almost a year of starvation and despair, living on the borderline between life and death, my hope and dreams were fulfilled, at least in part. No, I was not a free man, but, my life was no longer being continually jeopardized.

E I G H T H C H A P T E R

ESCAPE FROM CAMP GONORS THROUGH AN UNDERGROUND TUNNEL

Before our arrival the internment camp at Gonors was almost full. Among the internees were many intellectuals from various Slovenian cities, among them, many who had studied at the University of Ljubljana. From conversing with these people, I learned something that infused me with a great courage and hope. That despite everything, perhaps we would return home. I heard them say that the military might of our oppressors was on the wane on all fronts, and that the day of our liberation was close at hand. To a desperate man who had endured the horrors of an internment camp for over a year, this news was like a balm on an open, bleeding wound. Of course, freedom was still very far off, but for the first time in many long months of hard struggle for survival, my hopes had more of a firm foundation.

Life in the camp continued on, but with a new expectation. Those of us who had recently been transferred from other internment camps, gradually recovered under the improved conditions of this camp. Hunger, that had been our constant daily companion was not as pervasive as before. Food parcels sent to us from home arrived regularly. We had an abundance of free time, so much so, that it got to be quite boring sometimes. In such instances I reread letters from home or watched those who played chess to kill time. Chess was the favoured game among the more intellectual. I myself did not know the rules of the game, but there were some farmers, though few in number, who like to boast they knew how to play chess. For the most part, all they did was move the chess pieces back and forth. A lot of our free time was spent in conversation. The story of Gonor's history were the most interesting and in particular, the story of fifteen prisoners who tried to escape from the camp. The escape, on first appearance, seemed an impossibility; the camp was surrounded by a high fence and was also well guarded. As we heard it told, the escape had been planned for a long time.

In one of the barracks, fifteen internees had been digging a tunnel, for many long months. Around the camp, spreading out far and wide lay fields on which corn had been sown in the spring. The tunnel started below the floorboards inside the barrack and continued on underground, under the barb-wire fence and towards the corn fields where the exit projected. Work was expected to be completed by the time the corn had grown high enough to cover the escapees from the view of the guards. The floors of the barracks were made with large wooden planks that were somewhat elevated above the ground. The planks were not nailed down so they were easily removed. In the empty space below the floorboards, the men worked unceasingly digging out the soil for the tunnel. Obviously, digging was very exhausting and also very time consuming since it all had to be done in complete secrecy. Their plan was in constant danger of being exposed because of daily, random headcount, which was a camp routine. When the headcount order was given, everyone had to be in front of their barrack within a set time. Every late appearance could have drawn suspicion and been disastrous. Therefore they always had to be ready so that when the order was given, they could get out of the tunnel in time. As the tunnel grew longer, the danger became greater and as well, the digging demanded greater exertion. The earth dredged from the tunnel was carried back to the barrack with the help of a system of improvised pulley, over which they had stretched some string. There was also the overriding danger that the tunnel's ceiling might collapse and cause additional trouble. To avoid this from

happening, they collected chairs and other such articles from throughout the entire camp, broke them and built a support for the fragile ceiling. After a while, the camp command started to notice that things were missing and this carefully prepared plan was in danger of collapse. But in spite of greater controls and more frequent headcounts, they could not figure out where the items had disappeared to. We listened to this story about the excavation of the tunnel and the planned escape route with great interest. As the tunnel slowly neared its completion, and the corn was nearing its proper height, another menace presented itself. Rain fell for a number of days and water began to fill the tunnel; this not only made excavating more difficult, it also increased the danger of being discovered. Whoever appeared dirty for the headcount in front of the barracks would immediately fall under suspicion. But even this obstacle was quickly overcome by those undaunted men. When the corn had grown tall enough, the escape route was almost finished. Only the exit was needed. This would have to be hurriedly dug out in the last moments of their escape.

The moment of decision had to come quickly because the camp's military command suspected something was afoot. They were preparing to thwart this well-planned escape.

It happened during the night when half of the escapees were already down in the tunnel. The exit was in place when some commotion started in the camp. The order for a head count came at the most inopportune moment and in the resulting confusion, all those who were waiting in the barracks to enter the tunnel ran out in front of the barrack. The soldiers immediately inspected the barracks and any more attempts were prevented. Only half of those who had toiled in the tunnel those many long months were lucky enough to escape. The entrance to the tunnel was soon discovered and soldiers guarded that barrack very well. That night they made a thorough search of all the barracks, and continued to do so well into the future. Even while I was there, they made a complete inspection of the floors of all the barracks three times a week. They lifted the wooden, plank flooring with picks and checked the empty space beneath, just to make sure nothing was happening below.

I do not know what happened later on to the successful escapees. I heard nothing more about them, but I remember the story of these courageous men very well. And they were not the only ones who tried to break out of this camp. One brave young man succeeded in escaping in broad daylight.

It happened during my stay in the camp; I remember well how the news spread of how one of our own got away. I did not know the fellow personally, but I knew some of his friends. Nobody knew how he succeeded in escaping, only later on we did learn that he had hidden himself somewhere beneath a transport that was on its way out of the camp and somewhere on the route, he simply fell down onto the ground. Though every mobile unit was checked upon leaving the camp, luck was with him and he was almost halfway home to Slovenia. But luck did not favour him too kindly because, by sheer accident, he was captured just when he thought that he had made it. Two weeks later, he was returned back to the camp. We had already forgotten the incident, for silently we were praying that he had a safe journey. Someone told us that the same young man now stood tied to the pole at the entrance gates. We all went to visit him and sympathized with him. Every day he suffered in intense heat for four hours tied to that pole. He paid very dearly for his escape attempt, because the torture lasted for several days, and after four hours in that hot, unrelenting sun, he would have been better off dead. His suffering was punishment and at the same time, a warning to us all not to try the same thing.

Despite his failure, this young man was a true hero, and if it had been at all possible, each one of us would have happily helped ease his suffering. After that incident, surveillance over the camp was even tighter than ever, and all vehicles were closely inspected before their departure. The headcounts became more frequent and more precise. I do not remember anyone trying to escape after that. Our way of life did not subsequently change, however continued on in a monotonous daily routine. Our living conditions were far better as compared to the previous places. There was no need to wander about the camp in search of food because our hunger was more tolerable. Also, parcels continued to arrive from home nearly every week. On the other hand, there were others who were not so fortunate to receive food parcels, and as a result, they grabbed every opportunity to steal whatever they could lay their hands on. Those who did not take care to guard their meagre possessions soon had nothing left.

How did we protect ourselves against thieves?

We tried to solve this problem in a very simple manner.

It was necessary to punish the culprit aught doing such a dirty deed as an example to himself and to others like him. For this purpose, we set up our own court, represented by two judges. These two judges were elected by oral vote, and they had the power to pass judgement on the accused as well as punish him. Justice was

severe and simple. Naturally, the punishment consisted of five, ten, fifteen, and in some cases, all of twenty five, heavy-handed strikes to the bare buttocks with a belt, but no matter how many were delivered, it was more than enough.

Only once did I sit in judgement and even though the convicted man deserved his severe punishment, I felt sorry for him. The judges sentenced him to twenty blows, and after the punishment had been handed out, he fell to the ground unconscious. I was one of those that advocated a more humane method of punishment in that instance because on seeing him, I recognized him from the camp at Rab, and I knew all the suffering the unfortunate man had already been through.

Already, almost fourteen months had passed since the day we were forced from our loved ones and had been thrown into the horrors of the concentration camps. Almost fourteen months of suffering in hunger and despair were already behind us and still we were prisoners behind barb-wire fences. In those days there was a lot of talk about capitulation of the occupying forces and we all waited in hope for the day the doors of freedom would open. In these times, I often thought of home and my loved ones. "Maybe soon, I will see them!"

"Maybe soon, I will be able to hug my mother and sisters who have been crying for me for over a year!"

I also thought about my village Preloka, the valley and the clear waters of its river Koplja, and my friends. I thought of all that I had once loved. "Will I ever see my friends again!"

I had no answers to these questions. There had been many of us, boys and young men of Preloka, when they had forcibly driven us from our homes and bolted us shut behind the gates at Rab. Now there was only a handful of us left. The others were scattered somewhere in other internment camps waiting for the day when they too would return home free men.

After fourteen months of suffering, hunger and despair, the day finally came, the day we had waited for so long, our day of freedom. At first, I could not believe that I was truly free. Never before had I felt such happiness as the day when I heard the news about the capitulation of the occupying forces. The guards abandoned their posts and shouts of jubilation echoed throughout the camp. Every face radiated happiness and delight. On everybody's lips was the word "freedom". A song resounded throughout the camp, a happy song sung by happy men. The foreign flag lay tattered and trampled on the ground and the heavy, steel doors had been

left wide open. A crowd had gathered at the entrance because everyone was anxious to breathe in the fresh air of freedom from the other side of the camp's fence. A great number of them did not want to wait and they immediately set off down the road. Everyone was his own master. Everyone made his own decisions and determined his own path. By evening, the camp was half empty. Men were already on their way home. Six of us decided to travel together on our long trip. We decided to spend the night in the camp and leave early the following morning. That evening, we bundled our meagre belongings in preparation for the morning's departure. Before going to bed, we discussed our travel plans. The idea had been to rest for the exhausting journey ahead, but that night I could not sleep. I got up several times and stepped outside the barrack. Thoughts of home so dominated my mind, I could hardly wait for morning to come. I wished I could have left then and there. I gazed at the sky covered with bright stars. All night long, people left in groups through the wide open gates and I wished I could have joined them. As dawn began to break in the east, we were all up. For the last time, we checked over whatever baggage we had. There was nothing superfluous in our wrapped bundles since we did not have much anyway. All our belongings consisted of a few pieces of dried bread for the road, and perhaps a few items of clothing. We were among the last to leave the camp and as we stepped through the big, wide open doors into freedom, we stopped as if on command. We turned and looked back. The huge, wide-opened doors, the high fence overlaid with barbed-wire and the empty guard towers looked eerie in the morning's twilight. Dull, hollow sounds which came from somewhere inside the camp only heightened the ghastly sensation that had been rekindled on looking back at the empty camp. The sun had not yet risen as we started off on our long journey.

The travelling was really very difficult and exhausting. We were in a foreign country and were not certain if we were headed in the right direction. We travelled towards the east for we surmised, our home should lay somewhere in that direction. We stayed clear of populated areas because as refugees in a foreign country, we could be sure to draw curious stares.

We also heard a rumour that the other military units (this would have been the German army since Italy, by that time, had already been defeated) were closing in from the north. We did not want to endanger our lives further by falling into enemy hands. Without a doubt, we would be interned again, suffer more greatly and perhaps, never ever see home again. But, despite everything, we were compelled to go near dwellings. We had completely lost our orientation and were forced to ask

for directions to the road that would lead us home. We observed a settlement for a long time, just in case it might pose some danger and only after that did we approach the nearest house. The settlement was really quite a large village through which ran a wide road. On both sides of the road were densely placed houses, and somewhere towards the centre, the road widened into a large market square.

We approached an immense house that stood on the outskirts of the village and which appeared to be an Inn. We stepped across its threshold and found ourselves in a long corridor. It really was an Inn with enormous rooms. At first we were alone and we began to think the place had been vacated when we heard footsteps. A number of people appeared from out of one of the many doors in the long corridor. In all likelihood, they were the staff who worked at the Inn. They looked curiously at their unusual visitors for some time then. An older gentleman approached us and addressed us in a strange tongue. We understood very little of what he said. We tried to explain who we were, from where we had come and what our intentions were. We were astonished when he began to explain to us, in poor Slovenian, what direction we should take. He also warned us to avoid all large settlements because they had all been occupied by the German army who were attempting to take control of Italy.

N I N E T H C H A P T E R

MIDNIGHT FRIGHT OF BEING AWAKENED BY AN APPROACHING TRAIN

Those people were more than courteous and helpful with their sound advice and extreme generosity. They fed us well and even packed us a lunch for our journey. On our departure, we graciously thanked them for their hospitality and left. The kind-hearted help of these good people was very gratifying. Finally, we set off in the right direction with an even bigger supply of food than when we had first left the camp. We hurried along but were also very cautious. We were forced to make frequent rest stops because we found travelling very exhausting. Sometimes we had to make our way through rough terrain. Often our way was obstructed by brooks or small rivers which we had to wade through.

We ran into our first big obstacle at the banks of the river Soca. Fear gripped us when we saw the depth of the river, so we resisted the thought of swimming across it. On the banks of the river we came across another group of refugees who, like us, were also trying to find a safer place to cross. They told us of one group of internes who tried to swim across the river from some secluded spot. A great number of them drowned in the river's icy undercurrents. Upon hearing this, we definitely decided not to swim across. A bridge was our only answer because the probability of chancing upon some boat or raft was very small. We were not far from the nearest bridge, but it was located right in the middle of a large settlement and it would be impossible to cross over the bridge unnoticed. We had no idea how close the German army was advancing from the north and for this reason, we spent a long time scrutinizing the comings and goings of the bridge. It was not being guarded and a continuous stream of people walked across it. We made our decision,. One by one we crossed over in intervals pausing each time until everyone was safely across. Our clothing alone made us stand out from the rest of the travellers, but nobody seemed to notice and within an hour we were all on the other side of the river. We took the nearest road out of that place and once again, picked up our bearings to the east.

We were already far from any inhabited areas when night began to fall. Night caught us by surprise, out in the open without a roof over our heads. We had not even anticipated sleeping under a roof. It was too dangerous to approach any inhabited area. We were not too eager to lose the freedom we had at long last won. We bedded down for the night, as best we could. In amongst bushes that were grown over with hazel bushes and thorn bushes. Everybody covered themselves with the thin blankets they had taken from the camp and fell asleep. Even though I was exhausted from the tiring journey, I did not sleep very well. I had always been a light sleeper and even that night I was the first to wake up. In the distance, I could hear a hollow sound that was rapidly coming closer and closer with each passing second. The night was black and there was no moon in the sky. The noise kept increasing, and by this time, we were all awake. The sound was like that of an oncoming train, but what would a train be doing out here in this wilderness. I did not know the exact time, but I estimated it was around midnight. The noise was getting closer all the time and in that moment, I was absolutely convinced that it was a train. Soon a light appeared in the distance. There really was a train coming and it was coming directly at us. Surely it will soon veer off somewhere to the left, I thought to myself. The day before we had not seen any tracks anywhere, and

most certainly not in front of us. The train did not veer neither to the left nor to the right. It was heading straight towards our hastily placed camp and its light already illuminated the bushes around us. No this was not some dream, the tracks had to be somewhere but they were nowhere to be seen, and the train almost on top of us. At last second, I caught sight of light reflecting off the rails. The tracks were less than five meters from where we lay. In a flash, the train shot past us and the light that, for an instant, lit up our surroundings, vanished as quickly as it came. The noise slowly ceased and in the end, there was a dead silence. When I again lay down on my temporary bed, it took some time before I was able to fall asleep. The excitement had been too much for me.

We rose before dawn and immediately started on our way as the horizon to the east began to light up. Before our departure, we had a bite to eat and took a closer look around at the place where we had spent the night. Indeed, less than five meters away were railway tracks which we had failed to see in the darkness of the night. Again, we had to make our way through very tough terrain. We still found ourselves on foreign soil and this is why we avoided any populated areas. We chose secluded roadways, but usually they were hard to find. We walked through bush and forest, always in an easterly direction. In the afternoon of the same day, we came to a wide road running north to south. All around and far away, we could find no suitable hiding place where we could cross the road without exposing ourselves to danger. We knew very well that all major roads were under German military control and we did not want to run the risk of meeting up with any army patrol. And so, hidden in the bushes, we watched the surrounding area for a long time. We would have to walk more than a hundred meters in an open, overgrown area, and the only thing shielding us was the tall grass.

T E N T H C H A P T E R

LYING BELOW THE EMBANKMENT AS MILITARY CONVOYS RUN BY

The other side of the road had an even greater expanse of open area, which was overgrown as well. For our passage, we chose a small basin though which ran an

embanked road. There lay the safest place to cross the road because crossing from our present location was too dangerous. There was a good possibility that someone might see us from afar. It was too long to wait until dark, so we had to make a quick decision. We descended down the basin and crept up to the embankment. Every few meters we ducked into the tall grass, then rose again to run ahead in quick spurts. Even though, at first glance, the distance appeared not to be too great, our progress was very slow. We were almost near the embankment when we heard a dull sound coming quickly at us from the north. We hesitated a bit too long to be able to return to the bush without being seen. The noise so surprised us, that for an instant, nobody moved. A good twenty meters lay between us and the road. There were absolutely no bushes in the nearby vicinity in which to hide. The best place to be was in the bush we had just left, but it was more than one hundred meters away. Much too far! Crossing over to the other side was unthinkable since the overgrown field on that side was larger still. We were in a complete panic. There was no doubt, these were arm vehicles heading south down the road towards the occupied regions. We did not have much choice. We gathered all our strength and made a run for the embankment, the only place that offered protection in that given moment. The embankment was also overgrown with tall grass and the terrain was quite steep. Despite this, there was every chance of being seen. We dug ourselves into the tall grass and awaited our fate.

I don't know if I ever felt so much fear in all my entire life as in that moment lying there head buried in the grass on that embankment, waiting for the moment when we would be discovered. I had no doubt they would find us and shoot us. They certainly would not bother driving six poor refugees to some internment camp. I buried my face into the earth and waited. My heart beat wildly and my whole body trembled with each beat. What pained me the most was the fact that we had come so close to the Slovenian border, only to meet with such an unfortunate end in a foreign land, and nobody would ever know.

The first vehicles drove noisily over the embankment. From the noise, I figured they must be trucks but I was too afraid to look up.

They continued for a long time, a very long time. One after the other, the vehicles fumed by just a few meters above us, but not one stopped. They did not see us! Almost all eternity passed before the last truck left the embankment, but now came a new, much louder noise. The biggest danger was yet to come. "Tanks!" whispered a voice not too far from me. The roar of the heavy steel monsters came

closer and closer and at the same time grew louder and louder. I felt the earth shake beneath me, yet something else caught my attention. Right above me was the sound of horse's hoofs.

I dug my face deeper into the earth and for a second, A also stopped breathing. All those vehicles were not as great a threat as compared to that of soldiers mounted on horseback who had an excellent view of their surroundings. My breathing was slow, almost inaudible, as I waited for the shooting to begin. A few more times, horses' hoofs clattered right above me on the roadside and, in those moments, something pushed me still deeper in the ground. But even the horsemen passed by without noticing us, and on the embankment, the tanks continued rumbling on. With all the clattering and the screeching of heavy vehicles, it was impossible to hear anything else. The ground shook under its heavy burden as one after another passed over the embankment. Countless numbers had already driven past but I could still hear rumbling coming from the north. Almost half an hour had already passed and still we lay there by the busy embankment immobile, not moving a muscle, while above us, the long column of vehicles kept on coming.

The tanks were followed by another column of trucks, and there appeared to be no end. My entire body already ached from the pain of lying motionless. My arms and legs were numb. A spider crawled over my face but I did not move. I knew that the slightest twitch could have given us away, so I suffered and hoped the vehicles would soon be gone. But an eternity passed before the last vehicle left the embankment. For almost three quarters of an hour, this procession of military vehicles wound its way just above our heads and in all this time, not one of us had moved for fear we would be discovered. As the noise from the vehicles died off somewhere to the south, we remained hidden in the tall grass alongside the embankment and stretched our sore bodies and stiffened arms and legs. It was unbelievable that no one in that long column had spotted us. Really, it must have been a miracle.

We stayed in our hiding place near the embankment for another half hour. Before we decided to continue further on our journey, we scanned the road in both directions for quite some time and carefully listened before venturing out, just in case a new noise arose from somewhere. All was quiet. Everyone checked one side then the other before darting off across the road. We did not wait on the other side either. We had previously agreed that we would not run nonstop all the way to the forest, on the other side of the road. It was a very long run; however, nobody

faltered. Exhausted and all out of breath, we fell to the ground amid the bushes that hid us from the view of the road. We did not dally in this spot for long, for we were too close to the road for our own safety. We did not want any more surprises. After a short rest, we were again on the go. We walked mainly among the bushes and the trees. Late in the afternoon of the same day, we came to another set of railway tracks. This time there were no train, and when we were convinced that it was safe, we crossed over the embankment and continued on our way through a forest. As dusk approached, we were very near the Slovenian border if we had not already crossed it. Again we found ourselves camping under the stars somewhere on a mountainside. The view was far and wide but there were no lights to be seen. Even if there had been some dwelling nearby, it would have been far too dangerous to look for accommodation. Again, we slept under the skies.

That night nothing disturbed us. In the morning we woke well rested and continued on our way well before the sun rose. The previous night our provisions had run short and we had to think seriously about restoring our supply. Whether we like it or not, we would have to pay some habitation a visit. We only hoped that we were already in Slovenian territory. Mid-morning of the same day, we came close to a small settlement. Deep in the valley below lay a little village with all of fifteen houses. For a long time we lay in surveillance of the life below, but we could not decide whether or not to go down to the valley. It was dangerous because the valley was encircled by steep slopes, and in an emergency it would have been very difficult to escape. But our hunger forced us to approach. Despite the danger, we began our descent down a steep slope. In the village, there were no signs of military presence, and so, with greater courage we approached the nearest house. With great elation we discovered that this village was indeed a Slovenian village. At the outset, the people looked at us very distrustingly, but when we told them who we were, and the circumstances of how we got there, all mistrust vanished and we were heartily welcomed. Happily they attended to our needs and when we saw so much food piled in front of us, we realized then how hungry we really were. We stuffed ourselves full of food and only after our initial hunger had been satiated did we begin to eat more slowly and answer their questions. We had questions as well. Namely we wanted to know if we were heading in the right direction and how far into Slovenia had we travelled. We were not quite ready to leave when, on the opposite side of the valley, came that cursed rumbling of army vehicles that seem to be following us everywhere like some nightmare. A German army patrol was approaching. We could not stay any longer. We hastily filled our pockets with food

and ran. The people urged us to stay. But the soldiers would certainly shoot us if they found us in the village. The whole village would be made to suffer the consequence of having helped us if we stayed. Somewhere in the middle of a slope we had to stop. The military convoy was so close that they would certainly see us if we continued running. We threw ourselves flat among the bushes and waited. The same fear I had felt before returned to take over my whole body. A glance sideways told me conclusively that my companions also felt the same way. Fear was written all over their faces. For a long time, we silently watched as the transport trucks and armoured vehicles moved slowly down the road. The road had been built midway along the slopes so that it circumnavigated the whole valley and passed through the village below. We lay scattered and shaking among the bushes, but we had a good view of the activities on the road. Soldiers wearing helmets and toting rifles sat on the transports and armoured tanks. One of the armoured tanks was mounted with a machinegun and the soldiers manning it carefully eyed his surroundings. For some moments, he looked in my direction and for a long time, he did not avert his gaze as if he sensed that somebody was hiding in the bushes. In that instant I feared for my life. Even though quite a distance separated us, I met his stare and felt a cold sweat all over my body.

“Did he see me?” the thought ran through me.

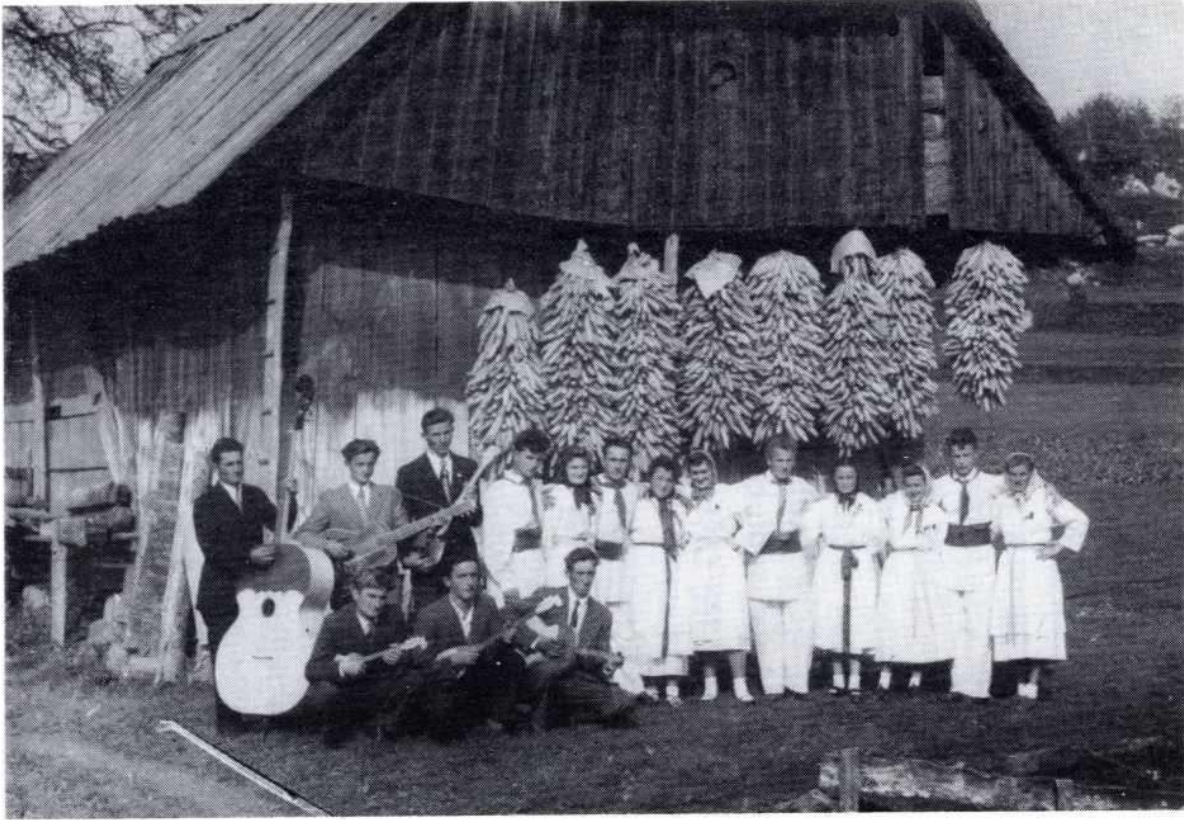
But he had not seen me, for in the next instant, he directed his gaze elsewhere.

We were in the clear. The vehicles slowly distanced themselves from us as they moved towards the east and out of the valley. After some time, only the muffled rumble of the motors could be heard in the distance. The vehicles were headed somewhere to the east. We were going in the same direction and therefore, we knew we would have to take extra precautions from now on.

I took us more than an hour to return to the spot from where we made our descent down to the village. In some places, the terrain was too steep that we had to join hands to prevent each other from slipping backwards. When we reached the top the first thing we did was have a good rest. Then we deliberated over our plans for our continuing journey. We knew that caution was essential, and decided to pick even more obscure routes on which to travel. We waded through brooks and climbed steep slopes. Late afternoon we reached the top of a very high hill from where we could see far and wide. We were already deep inside Slovenian territory and this infused us with more courage to continue our journey.

The next few days we were free of any surprises. The few times we did see army vehicles, they were in the distance and we took care not to put ourselves in any unnecessary danger. Often, we stopped at some of the smaller villages and hamlets along the way. Everywhere people received us warmly. When we left them we were always well provided with food. Everywhere they warned us about the dangers of military patrols and advised us as to which roads would be faster and the safest way to go. Often we were also lucky, when some farmer with a cart and a team of oxen or horses would offer us a lift. We saved many step this way. Finally, the memorable day came when we reached Bela Krajina. It is impossible to describe those moments when we were only half a day's walk from our homes. The feeling of being so close to home gave us added strength, and in the last kilometers of our journey, we hastened our pace. In our thoughts, we were already at home in our dear native homeland with our loved ones. For more than a year we had waited for this moment of reunion, but now we were almost afraid of that very moment. No longer were we those young men of fourteen months ago. From under each brow glared the look of a man who did not know how to cry anymore. With all the dignity we could muster, we marched into our native village from where we had been so shamefully taken more than a year ago. Our villagers greeted us with joy and jubilation and extended their arms in welcome. The reunion with my loved ones was unforgettable. My mother clung to me as if she would never let me go, and tears sparkled on my sisters' cheeks. My mother was crying with happiness, and as I pattered them all together and pressed them close to me in embrace, tears trickled down my cheeks.

I am grateful to my deceased mother who sent me food and spiritual strength innumerable times while in prison. Also my father (who was in Canada at the time), and my older brother who tried to gain my freedom through the international Red Cross unsuccessfully.



We survived to return home and take part in social gatherings and play the tamburits.