

FRANCE KOZINA

St. Catharines, Ont., Canada

May 29, 1945: Under the command of Major Hočevár, our Artillery Division rode off together with horses and wagons in the direction of Borovlje. After crossing Drava we turned right towards Podrožica where we noticed that all of the houses had Communist graffiti painted on the walls.

Upon reaching the railway station we were ordered to unhitch the horses and put them into the railroad cars. When we had completed this task we were ordered to board the train. The moment we were on board the train a group of Partisans appeared from the nearby forest. I now thought to myself that we were not going to Italy but were obviously fooled by the British. We were instead handed over to the Communists and were to be taken to Yugoslavia. A frightening cold feeling told me we were trapped. The box cars were latched from the outside, they could not be opened from the inside and therefore there was no escape. The train began to move along the tracks in the direction of the tunnel to Yugoslavia.

As the train entered the tunnel it began to slow then stop. After a short pause our escorts paid us a visit. It was here that we realized our deepest fears that our journey to Italy was obviously a lie and that the Communists would never let us go. They took our watches and other jewelry after which time we proceeded to Jesenice.

At Jesenice the train came to a stop where the guard changed and we were greeted by a large mob of angry people shaking their fists at us in anger. The train continued down the tracks to Kranj where the Partisans from Slovenia were waiting to greet us. They let us know immediately that they would be the masters. As I looked around the station I noticed many flags and banners praising the Communist Party. We were ordered out of the box cars and marched to an encampment on the outskirts of the town. On the way there people would berate and yell at us while others just stood there stoically observing us. The journey to the encampment took 20 minutes, during this time we had no chance of escaping.

The camp was a high barbed wire enclosure, heavily guarded. At each corner of the compound there was a machine-gun nest and every guard had an automatic weapon of some sort which were deadly at short ranges. In the compound were huts filled to capacity with our comrades that had left „for Italy“ the day before and had come to the same fate as ours. We were so crowded and closely guarded that we could barely move

about. If we had to go the latrine we were allowed only under armed escort. If you could sleep you were lucky, lack of room and constant visitors made sleeping impossible.

May 30, 1945: We were visited by the Commander of the city of Kranj and a political Commissar who would give us a political lecture. Instead he turned to cursing and threatening. The Commander then took over. He was a heavy set man, 30 to 35 years of age, wearing a new uniform and carrying a semi-automatic rifle. He ordered us to give up any arms we still might have, since anyone having any weapons of any sort would most definitely be shot. Since we had been searched before none of us had any weapons of any kind on us. The Commander then asked if there was any volunteers willing to be shot right there, by him. Again no one obliged him, since we were all young and had a full life ahead of us, so we thought.

The Commander choose to show his authority in another way, the night before, while searching a group of our commrads, they found 2 or 3 bullets on Polde Koman, a young student. Also found on young Koman was the shell of an Italian grenade which he must have been using as a container of sorts since the shell was harmless. Koman was brought before us under guard and had his hands bound behind him, he was helpless. He had been beaten terribly.

The Commander proceeded to use Koman as an example of what would happen to anyone attempting to hide or use any weapons. The Commander struck Koman with the rifle butt sending the boy backwards. He was then ordered to lay down, where he was kicked. Young Polde fell to the floor on his stomach and the Commander then stepped on his back. The Commander then fired a few shots into the air to show us that the weapon had live rounds in it. The barrel of the weapon was placed against the exposed neck of young Polde and the rifle was fired. Young Polde died almost instantly, so now we were all witnesses to the horrible death of one of our boys. Polde was lucky in a way, his suffering was over and ours had just began. If we knew what was in store for the rest of us, we would prefer to die as young Polde did.

A short time after the horrible event with the death of young Polde, we were ordered to spread our belongings in front of us to be searched. The whole scene looked like an Arabian bazaar, clothes and items everywhere but not for sale but to be stolen. The first items that were taken were those that were missed in the tunnel, watches, fountain pens, and money. The next was what little food we happen to have saved which was earlier given to us by the British. After several hours the search had ended, everything was confiscated.

Our captors then began to sort us into groups, officers and non-coms, members of the old Village watch during the Italian occupation, those who served in any other army, those under the age of 18, and finally those of us who at one time belonged to one or another group of

Partisans but deserted to the Home Guard. We were considered as „double traitors“.

May 31, 1945: Night fell and our group of „double traitors“ was divided into two huts. Both huts were grossly overcrowded which made it impossible to lay down to sleep, and if you could lay down, you could not sleep because of the constant noise from visitors coming to look at us. We felt as though we were animals in a zoo. Animals in a zoo were treated better than we were. When morning finally came we could see that another group of prisoners arrived at our camp. It turned out that they were from 111th and 114th Company. I recognized many of them as from my home village and from surrounding villages. These prisoners were assigned the places that were emptied by those who were taken out of the camp. Some of the prisoners happen to have some food and cigarettes on them which they shared with us.

June 1, 1945: This day passed as the one before. Visitors were coming from all over Slovenia and I recognized many of them from my part of the country. They were mostly those who were made to sit in the back of our classes at school, these were the unruly and poor to learn students who cared little for education.

June 2, 1945: The heat in our hut and the others was unbearable and the air was stagnant. We were given some food once a day but then there was the problem of eating it, there were no spoons or forks. Everyone noticed that the population of the camp was dwindling rapidly, this was due to the fact that our captors were taking us out each day to an unknown destination. This was to be our fate also. During our internment, the Communists organized so-called confessions. Actually they were interrogations of sorts. We had to give personal information about our families and about ourselves. This information was recorded by a young clerk. The most common question asked was how long we had been with the Home Guard, and if we were mobilized or volunteers. They asked how many relatives we had, how many brothers and sisters, in what Partisan brigade we were in before desertion, how we deserted, when we deserted, and why we deserted. I answered everything as truthfully as I could remember and added that I was never for Communism.

June 3, 1945: This day was the same as before. Visitors kept coming, some to show off their status or medals. Others were looking for vengeance. That afternoon would be quite different. We were called to the parade grounds, lined up and marched to the railroad station. Along the way we were again taunted by the locals as if we were traitors. We boarded the trains, cramming up to 50 of us per car. When we were all aboard, the train began to move in the direction of Ljubljana. As we approached Škofja loka the train stopped. We were informed that the bridge between Škofja loka and Št. Vid was down but being repaired by German P.O.W.s. We were told to disembark and were led to a pontoon bridge which we crossed and reboarded upon another train waiting for us

on the other side of the river. We were joined in the train by another group of prisoners already on the train. This gave us a total population of over 900 prisoners. Eventually we came to the Diocesan High School at Št. Vid. With such a large number of men one would think escape would be easy but under such heavy guard it was actually impossible to escape.

At Št. Vid we were again divided into two groups of which the larger group was put into the Chapel. I was in this group. We had to sleep on bare cement floors and were given a soup that smelled like soap.

The next morning the visitors came again. They called us „the scum of humanity“. At noon we were fed some soup which the cooks called „officers soup“, others called it „Rupnik's soup“ but whatever it was called it tasted terrible. We were hungry so we ate the soup.

June 6, 1945: On this day another nominal roll of all those present was made, but to me and many others the only reason this was done was to search for certain people that might be among us. During our stay at the Chapel we had duties to perform. Mopping the Chapel floor was one that was never finished. It was mopped constantly and therefore was wet constantly. To go to the latrine an armed escort was provided, but after one trip you did not have the enthusiasm to go again. There was a constant line of visitors streaming through trying to see us or identify us. Each time someone was taken away he did not return again. Food was very poor, no bread and only those who had utensils had a chance to be fed.

June 8, 1945: This morning we were awoken and ordered out of the chapel. We were lined up and ordered out five at a time. They searched everyone and some had to strip. During the search, our captors used rifle butts and whips on us as if we were cattle. During my search I did not fare well at all. Searching me was not functioning to me, when I took my clothes off they found my prayer book with some money in it. I was asked my name and when I told it then guard punishing me got angry. He grabbed a belt and proceeded to flog me till he was exhausted. I was ordered to get dressed again but could not find my own clothes, so I grabbed anything within reach. The rest of the search lasted 2—3 more hours. Early that afternoon they took a count and then we marched to the railroad station. Here we boarded the train and it left in the direction of Ljubljana. The train came to a stop at the main station and through the cracks in the walls of the box car we could see civilians waiting for us. After some 15 minutes or so the train left the station, but soon stopped again. The bridge over the Gruber canal had been destroyed and we had to leave the train and cross a pedestrian bridge. On the other side there was another train waiting for us. I looked around and noticed how heavily the area was guarded. It was impossible to escape unharmed and undetected. The heat in the box cars was unbearable and to make matters worse we had no water to drink. As the train began to

move down the tracks I sat and thought about my predicament. I had been in tough spots before, arrested and jailed by the Italians, I survived the horrors of the concentration camp on the island of Rab. This time, here and now, the only way out was death.

June 9, 1945: Sometime after midnight we arrived at Kočevje and at about 6 in the morning the cars were opened. Now we were ordered out and counted. Then we marched into town and they put us in the High School building, the same one where some short time ago the 11th Company was stationed. We did not stay here but instead were sent on through town, past the castle to the Tradesman Hall and assigned us to rooms. Here they tied our hand behind our backs and then they tied two or three of us together. One of the captors that tied us together told us it was necessary for our safety so that no one would commit some „stupidity“ as we were being taken in front of a court. In reality of course we were taken to the courtyard and there we waited for trucks to take us to the place of massacre.

The waiting was really worse than the death that was to follow. The Partisans unleashed their fury against us. They beat us constantly with every possible device or tool available. The wire that bound our wrists would cut into our flesh as we were beaten. The trucks arrived and we had to climb aboard still bound together and were ordered to kneel down. The trucks drove past the castle over the river Rinža towards the village of Zeljne. The ride was not a long one, but when one wishes the end, even a short ride seems like eternity. At one point the truck stopped and made a couple of circles probably trying to disorientate us. The guard asked us if we knew where we were, but no one answered him. Instead we started to pray, at first in whispers then louder till even the guard could not silence us. As we neared our final destination we could hear the faint sounds of gunfire and explosions. As we neared they became louder. The truck stopped, the door of the truck opened and we were ordered out. They took our shoes and made us walk barefoot over spread sharp gravel. I was the last one off the truck and standing nearby was a Partisan whom I knew. As our eyes met I knew there was no conscience or honor left in him. I kept walking and saw left and right some of my friends being tortured and then urged on towards the final resting place. Here the Partisans lined up on both sides of the path, armed with long sticks with knives attached, they used these on us. It was like passing through the gates of hell.

Arriving at a small valley, my comrade marching with me, we were ordered to strip and then we were pushed towards the cave. A Partisan stood there reloading his revolver. Next to him was a wooden box with some valuables in it, obviously taken from his victims. He asked me where I was from and then ordered to squat. Then he placed the revolver to my head and fired. I felt a pressure around my head, but the bullet only grazed me. I did not wait for the second shot. I jumped into the grave,

catching myself on a young beech tree that broke my fall. So I dropped onto a pile of bodies. I suffered only a gash to my thigh. I was still alive yet I longed for death!

I heard a voice from behind a boulder, urging me to move away as other bodies were bound to fall on me, or the Communists would shoot me if they saw that I was still alive. I quickly moved toward the voice. He was from Rakitna and he told me there were others still alive deeper in the cave where we proceeded to go. The cave was pitch black but I could sense people sitting all around. I asked if anyone was still alive and a voice answered „is that you Frank“? Later I learned that he was from Otavice and has been in the cave for five days already. I started to ask him about others, but he turned around and fell asleep. When I got used to the dark I recognized others but they were all dead.

The cave was very cold so I took some clothes from those that had no use for them anymore. I used the clothes to warm myself and noticed some water falling from the roof of the cave wick I used to wet my mouth.

The bodies continued to fall and every once in a while someone would appear still alive. Soon there were twelve of us. We discussed about ways to escape the grave but it seemed impossible. We nevertheless kept looking for other caves leading out but could not find any.

June 10, 1945: The enormous mass of bodies began to settle and almost blocked the access to the lower parts of the cave where we tried to take cover. In the morning they were shooting again but at about noon they stopped. I crawled further out to see what happening as the silence seemed suspicious to me. At the moment the pressure of a large explosion pushed me back and I saw an edge of the precipice fall down onto the bodies. Another even louder explosion followed and everything was silent.

The fallen rocks now started to push the bodies around and it seemed we would be sealed alive in the cave. The beech tree that had broken my fall earlier was still in place. As dusk came we once again tried to find a way out. We tried for a number of hours to pull the tree closer so we could climb out out and we pushed some rocks close to it but to no avail. Finally at about three in the morning I pushed a friend upwards, he took a desperate jump, a pile of rocks fell behind him but he was out. Myself, I was too exhausted to follow and slid back to tell the others that one of us was saved. Another one of us tried the same way but could not make it out. The third one to try came almost to the top but his strength gave out. I assisted him and together managed to push him over the top. Now two of us were saved but then another pile of stones crashed into the cave and most of the others were saved, forever.

The two outside the cave debated whether to leave or help those buried in the cave. I was the only one left alive. Then one of them on the top found a long branch and extended it to me. I grabbed it and they

pulled me out. Free I fell to the ground totally spent and only urging from my friends got me going again.

We moved away from the grave and then decided to rest and wait till the sun came up so we could orient ourselves. At sunrise we took off once more. We wrapped our feet in rags that we found around the grave, then we proceeded through the woods. Our clothing and rags smelled of blood and invited huge clouds of flies that pestered us all the way. We passed some burned villages and a field of the Kočevje Germans. The wells were usable and with the use of some pots and pans we were able to get enough water up to quench our thirst. There were also some wild berries aplenty on the edges of the woods which we fed upon.

Sometime in the afternoon we came upon the village of Stari log where we met an old man working in the field and asked him for some matches. He went to his house and brought them to us. We did not trust him so we left in a direction different from the way we told him we would go. We continued our escape but got lost somehow and ended up at the same spot. We crawled into a gully to spend the night.

June 12, 1945: In the morning we made a fire and baked some potatoes which we got when we visited the old man. After our little meal we moved on westwards. We were all tired and had cramps in our legs but we were alive. „Isn't it wonderful?“ my friend asked and then we laughed and laughed... We avoided villages and hamlets for we did not trust anyone. We stopped again and made a fire and baked some snails we found there. We were losing strenght, the wounds and scratches were begining to fester and our feet were swollen.

Arriving at the village of Struge we stopped at a familiar house. The people fed us and offered us a place to sleep but we refused and kept on going. The night was cold so we moved at daybreak again, reaching the summit of Mala gora just before noon. From here we could see the whole valley ahead of us and we cautiously started to descend. I knew the way well and could find my way home blindfolded. We waited for darkness to fall to cross the railroad tracks and then the main road. Finally we reached my home and my two friends continued on towards their homes. I stayed at my home for the next three years.

Of the two friends I heard that both of them were recaptured. One of them was taken to the same place and killed. The other was captured about a year later but during the questioning he told them that he jumped from the train. They believed his story and was allowed to go. He joined a work brigade building the railroad line Brčko-Banovići. In the spring of 1947 while I was still hiding, he came to see me and we talked a long time about our horrible ordeal. This was to be our last talk together.

In the year 1948 I went to Austria and then to Canada where I met some people who knew him and they told me that he had drowned. I wrote to his mother and she confirmed that indeed he had drowned. She

also sent me his picture. In Canada I met others who went a way similar to mine. The three years I spent hiding were almost as bad as death would have been. There was always the chance that I would be discovered and then my family would be punished. They were indeed punished in one way or another after it became known that I had escaped to Canada.

I write this to honor my massacred friend from the Home Guard and to admonish those who may even today believe the Communist lies.

PRICE

FRANCE KOZINA

St. Catharines, Ont., Canada

29. maja 1945

Pod poveljstvom majorja Hočevarja se je pomikala naša divizija topništva s konji in vozovi v smeri Borovlje. Ko smo prišli čez Dravo, smo se obrnili na desno proti Področci. Tam smo že videli stene skoro vseh hiš zapacane s komunističnimi gesli in znaki.

Ko smo dospeli do železniške postaje, so nam ukazali razpreči kone in jih namestiti v vagone. Ko smo končali, smo dobili tudi mi ukaz za vkrcanje. Ko smo pa bili že v vagonih, se je prikazala tropa partizanov, ki so prišli iz bližnjega gozdiča. Takoj sem spoznal, da ne bomo šli v Italijo in da so nas Angleži prevarili. Že smo bili predani komunistom, da bomo šli v Jugoslavijo. Kar stresla me je ta misel, da smo padli v past. Tovorne vagone, kjer smo bili natlačeni, so zaprli od zunaj; od notranje strani je bilo nemogoče poizkušati odpreti jih, in ni bilo mogoče misliti na kak beg. Vlak se je začel pomikati po progi v smeri tunela v Jugoslavijo. Ko je bil vlak že v tunelu, je začel zmanjševati brzino in je končno obstal. Po nekaj minutah smo dobili obisk. Ta trenutek smo že videli, da je bila laž, da nas bodo peljali v Italijo in da smo, česar smo se najbolj bali, v pasti in rokah komunistov, ki nas ne bodo izpustili. Pobrli so nam ure in druge dragocenosti, vlak pa se je začel pomikati proti Jesenicam.

Na Jesenicah se je pa ustavil. Tu so se izmenjale straže, nas pa so pozdravljale grupe kričavih ljudi in z dvignjenimi pestmi vpile na nas. Vlak je nadaljeval svojo pot do Kranja, kjer so nas slovenski partizani čakali, da nas „pozdravijo“. Takoj so nam povedali, da so sedaj oni, ki gospodujejo. Ko sem se ozrl okrog postaje, sem videl mnogo zastav in napisov, ki so poveljevali komunistično partijo. Izpustili so nas iz vagonov in so nas gnali na neko zbirališče v bližini mesta. Med potjo so nas ljudje zasramovali in vpili na nas; bilo jih je tudi nekaj, ki so nas mirneje opazovali. Pot do zbirališča je trajala kakih 20 minut; med potjo ni