

The Pit of Kocevje

'We Marxists . . . always knew . . . that socialism cannot be "introduced", that it emerges in the course of the most tense, the most sharp – to the point of frenzy and despair – class struggle and civil war, that between capitalism and socialism there lies the long period of "birth pangs", that violence is always the midwife of the old society, that to the transition-period from the bourgeois to the socialist society there corresponds a special state (that is, a system of organised violence against a certain class), namely the dictatorship of the proletariat.' (V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, xxxv, p. 192)

Among the Domobranci paraded on the morning of 29 May was a twenty-year-old Slovenian lad named Milan Zajec. Like many other village boys in his neighbourhood he had joined the Home Guards in 1943 in response to Partisan atrocities in his locality. At the beginning of May his unit had been defending the town of Kocevje, south of Ljubljana. After a stiff fight lasting most of the morning of 2 May, it was discovered that the German detachment on their flank had decamped without warning, and the Slovenian troops were forced to withdraw to the capital. Assigned temporary guard duty on a hospital train (the patients, as they learned later, were massacred almost to a man by the Communists), they found themselves not long afterwards caught up in the general retreat of Slovenian troops and civilians across the Loibl Pass. In this way Zajec found himself settled with thousands of other refugees in the great camp at Viktring.

For five days the camp had been emptying fast as thousands of its inmates departed 'for Italy'. Now it was Milan's turn. After the customary morning prayer, his company with their horses travelled in a column of trucks accompanied by tanks and jeeps to the station at Rosenbach. Suspicions were suddenly aroused by the sight of a group of Partisans making off into the woods, and by widespread

plundering on the part of their British guards. 'You have no right to take my watch,' complained a Slovenian officer. 'If I don't, Tito will,' the soldier replied bluntly, but returning the watch. Before anyone could reflect on these ominous words, the escorting troops drove the prisoners into the boxcars of a waiting train, locking the doors behind them.

Now, as on previous operations, the British guards withdrew, to be replaced by previously-concealed Partisans. Milan could see everything which passed by means of a small hand-mirror, which he held out of an aperture. Threats and curses came from all sides, and an exultant voice could be heard to declare, 'Now we shall kill everybody!' During the journey in the long tunnel under the Karavanke Mountains Partisan assailants broke into wagons, looting what property remained after the attentions of the British, and beating all who objected. At the first stop on the Yugoslav side these attacks were renewed, after which the train proceeded without stopping until it reached the town of Kranj at about two o'clock in the morning.

At Kranj Station the Slovenians found that the authorities had assembled a large mob, who were permitted to stone and beat the cowering prisoners as they descended and were marched off in column to a nearby camp. There the commandant delivered a threatening harangue: if anyone attempted to conceal property on his person he would be shot. That this was no idle threat was evinced by twenty or so corpses littering the ground; but clearly even this was not considered sufficient warning, and a youth was paraded before the prisoners. He was a seventeen-year-old boy from Ljubljana named Polde Koman, known to many present. The commandant declared that Koman had secreted a revolver; upon which a guard stepped up to the prisoner and smashed in his front teeth with a pistol-barrel. 'Lie down!' came the command. Koman obeyed, and was instantly shot dead with a submachine-gun. At first the commandant ordered the corpse to be thrown into the latrine, but then relented and permitted it to be buried in open ground.

The whole of that day (30 May) groups of Partisans invaded the camp at intervals, interrogating the prisoners and, in many cases, avenging local grievances. Milan Zajec was fortunate in evading attack, but saw many terrible beatings which left people half-dead with shirts stiff with blackened blood. Unconscious, they had buckets of water thrown over them to revive them for a further bout. Next day, 31 May, a car arrived with a delegation of high-ranking commissars who supervised further lengthy interrogations. In the

same camp were five of Milan's elder brothers, including twins. When opportunity offered they gathered together, comforting the young man as best they could. Comfort was also provided by a group of priests who, concealed in civilian attire, moved cautiously about the camp, hearing confessions and granting absolution.

On 1 June the camp inmates travelled by train and on foot to St Vid, on the outskirts of Ljubljana. There the Communists had taken over a large seminary building for their own purposes. This seminary had already acquired a sinister reputation among the population, but for Milan and his companions it was to be a brief stopping-place. That afternoon they were moved into Ljubljana and took their places on another train. Rumours abounded in the cramped confines of the box-cars. Were they bound for Russian concentration camps? But the train began to move on tracks leading south-eastwards, towards Kocevje, where Milan had been stationed with his Domobranci unit only a month ago. Now some people began to declare that they were all about to be killed. The bridge was down over the Ljubljanica river just outside the city, and the prisoners were compelled to descend and cross by a footbridge. As at Kranj, a dense mob had been assembled. They were gratified by the sight of the Home Guardsmen being savagely beaten yet again as they scrambled into a train waiting on the further bank.

The prisoners were confined in this train until the evening, when at six o'clock they heard the familiar sound of the angelus bells ringing out from churches in the countryside around. All prayed fervently. Then, at dusk, the train shuddered and lurched forward on its journey. By a calculation of the units present (mostly Slovenian Domobranci, with a small party of Serbian Chetniks and another of Croatian Home Guards), Milan Zajec reckoned that there were about 2,000 people on board. Trundling slowly through the darkness, the train did not reach the town of Kocevje until the first light of dawn next morning.

The wagon doors were unbolted, and the prisoners descended, blinking in the grey daylight, on to the platform. They found themselves surrounded by thousands of armed Partisans. Formed up four abreast, the captives were marched up the street to the high school which, like most public buildings in the new Yugoslavia, had already found a new purpose. It was crammed with people, even to the attics, where men desperate for air in the crush were knocking bricks out of the walls. Among the milling crowd striving to gain a gulp of the only 'food' provided – pine-needles boiled in water – Milan glimpsed three of his brothers.

Their stay in the high school was not long, however. Milan was among a group of about 200 taken to another large building nearby, formerly housing the local branch of the athletics association 'Sokol'. As they peered about them, bewildered, someone spotted on their right an ominous sight: a pile of clothes spattered with what looked like bloodstains. On the left was a pile of two-foot lengths of wire. Hustled forward by Partisan guards, each man had his hands bound tightly behind his back with this wire, and was then strapped arm by arm to a companion. In some cases, where another was missing, the bound couple was shackled to a third captive.

As soon as this was accomplished, a lorry was backed up to the entrance, and the trussed prisoners were pushed up an improvised log ramp into the back of the vehicle. Six trucks in turn took on their loads, twenty or more prisoners to each consignment. In the rear truck Milan caught a glimpse of his three brothers (the fourth they had left with the main body in the high school, and the fifth was fortunate in never reaching Kocevje). The twins were wired together, and the third to another man.

The convoy moved out on to the highway. To Milan, who had so recently performed his military duties in the neighbourhood, it was familiar countryside. Through Rudnik, Salka Vas, Zeljne: they were travelling north-eastwards up to the huge mountain forest of Kocevski Rog. They had gone about fifteen or twenty kilometres and were passing already among the darkened firs of the forest fringes when another lorry passed them, travelling in the direction from which they had come. Piled in the back was a heap of uniforms. Shortly afterwards a prisoner began to sing a familiar hymn. Silenced by blows from the guards' bludgeons, he joined the rest in recitation of prayers, which were tolerated.

Soon from ahead of them within the forest came disturbing sounds. First they heard the thud of a heavy explosion, followed shortly afterwards by the unmistakable rattle of machine-gun fire. Next came a terrible screaming, accompanied by peals of raucous laughter. There was no time for reflection, for now they had left the road and pulled up in a large clearing. Kicked out in heaps on to the ground, the men had their laces cut and shoes removed.

As Milan and his companion struggled to their feet, they witnessed a scene which might have been taken from a mediaeval representation of the torments of hell. Close beside them was a young prisoner from a previous consignment. Naked, with his hands tied behind his back, he was covered from head to foot with gashes and stab-wounds.

More slashes were being inflicted even at that moment by a fanatical Partisan. From a bare three paces' distance, Zajec saw to his horror that both the boy's eyes had already been gouged out, and blood was seeping from the hollow sockets. The Partisan, ignoring everything else around him, relentlessly sawed away with his knife at what was left intact of his victim's flesh.

The newly-arrived prisoners were formed up into a column and driven forward. Their guards derived amusement from continually making them crouch down and get up. Owing to the wire biting into their wrists and arms, this could only be achieved with considerable difficulty and intolerable pain; but if they were slow to obey they were at once beaten or hacked with the short, crooked knives which the Partisans bore for the purpose. After some hundred yards of this torture the column was halted.

By this time Milan's hands had lost all sensation of feeling, as the wire had bitten through his wrists to the bone. The prisoners' bonds were temporarily unfastened, and they were ordered to strip naked. Despite threats and blows, Zajec clung to the cotton drawers he wore under his trousers. When he left home to join the Domobranci, his mother had tied about his neck a medallion of the Virgin. 'Always keep this on you, Milan,' she had urged, 'and our Holy Mother will protect you.' When he first fell into the hands of the Communists, he had managed to conceal it in a tuck of his underpants, and he was determined whatever befell not to be parted from it. Fortunately the guards overlooked this in the haste of their operations.

Now they were all driven forward in haste, plunging through jagged thornbushes between triple ranks of Communists. The inner line lashed them on with blows from their cudgels, while the outer ranks stood guard with rifles in case by some mischance the half-conscious prisoners suddenly turned on their tormentors. They were careering down a slope when there was a cry of 'halt!' From behind the stumbling figures ahead of him Milan glimpsed for the first time what his enemies had planned for them. Before them in the ground gaped the black entrance to a huge underground pit, in area about the size of a small house. It was all happening so quickly he had scarcely time to register the fact.

Just in front of Zajec a man fell, shot dead, by the edge of the chasm. Two Partisans started forward and began rolling the body over the side into the pit. Another shrieked out a command to Zajec to halt, but ignoring it he rushed on and sprang over the body in his

way. Bullets flew all round him, but he plunged unscathed down into the darkness. He had landed on an untold seething mass of naked bodies. All about him he could hear people crying, moaning, praying. Zajec himself prayed for death. The circle of sky above was shadowed by sheaves of falling bodies, plummeting on to the heap around. It was a scene of unimaginable horror. Zajec shrieked out in vain to the Partisans above, 'Kill me! Kill me!'

As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he was aware of another man lying at the hollowed edge of the cavern, protected by a projecting overhang, who was calling to him. By now Zajec had two or three bodies lying across him, and he was resigned to dying as soon as possible within the swiftly-accumulating heap. However, the sight of one living, friendly face was enough to recover the urge to survive, and he dragged himself out from under the bodies and across to the side. Both men were still bound, and Zajec set to work untying his comrade's wired wrists with his teeth. Eventually, despite having his front teeth badly broken, he was successful. His companion was so enfeebled that some time passed before Zajec himself could be untied.

The two men lay back, exhausted, against the rock. If they thought there was to be any respite, however, they were mistaken. Soon afterwards a small round object dropped into the centre of the cave, followed by another and another. There followed a series of blinding flashes and shattering explosions, the noise being increased a hundred-fold within the enclosed confines of the subterranean cavern. The Partisans were ensuring the efficacy of their work by lobbing in hand grenades, interspersing them with sporadic bursts of machine-gun fire at point-blank range into the still writhing mass of naked bodies.

Ignoring the pain from his splintered teeth, Zajec set to work untying as many as he could of those who appeared still by some miracle to have life in them. He estimates that he managed to free in this way upwards of a hundred Slovenian Domobranci, who lay propped by the cavern wall. This slow and painful procedure continued all that day, with fresh corpses being added continually to the mass already there. All that sustained them in this hour was their religious faith. 'Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do!' Zajec heard one mortally-wounded victim cry, on first being tumbled in – so loudly and clearly that the Communists above heard him. Their response was to hurl in a further succession of grenades, and spray the general area with submachine-gun fire. Still the man

survived. Zajec called softly to him during a lull to join the group of survivors by the side, but he was bleeding profusely, and died slowly and helplessly in the open area.

So passed Saturday, 2 June 1945. About eighty men, most of them dreadfully wounded and losing quantities of blood, were still hanging on to life. But the night was in its own way as hellish as the day. No more victims arrived, but the soft thuds and ensuing detonation of grenades shattered the darkness, as fresh units of Partisans whiled away the long hours of guard duty. Next day, Sunday, passed in the same way as the previous one, with an unceasing succession of bodies hurtling down, followed by grenades and bullets. The moaning and crying continued unabated too, as explosions tore the bodies into a bloodied mess. Zajec and his comrade were protected from the blast and ricochetting splinters by a small spur of rock. Haunted by a continual fear that the guards might decide to descend and finish off by hand anyone surviving, they managed to drag six or seven corpses before them as an improvised rampart. Few of the others survived long. Many had multiple injuries sustained as they were dashed in their fall against the rocky sides of the pit. Continual loss of blood, lack of food or water, and the effects of lying naked in the freezing subterranean cold at night ensured that few were alive next morning.

The first two and a half days saw a virtually unceasing rain of bodies descending into the cavern. At midday on Monday, 4 June there was a pause of about half an hour, but then the process continued as before, with the usual sporadic bombings throughout the following night. On the morning of the fourth day Zajec and his friend began to talk of the possibility of escape. But how? That they had survived at all appeared miraculous, and how could they possibly scramble out in their enfeebled state, let alone get past the guards present in such numbers, and so evidently on the alert? There were at this stage five survivors strong enough to stand upright, and one or two began to express impatience: they would clamber out now. To Zajec this seemed madness; he might well die where he was, but to raise one's head above the rim (assuming it were possible) was to invite instant death. He resolved to wait.

One desperate comrade set himself to scale the overhanging side, and to everyone's astonishment succeeded eventually in painfully dragging himself up and over the edge. A sudden feeling of elation gripped those below. If he could escape, then why not all? The elation was short-lived. From above came a gruff exchange of questions and

answers. No shot rang out, but a moment later the body of their friend was hurled down, stabbed to death by the Partisans' knives. Lying back in the darkness, Zajec saw an exultant Partisan step to the edge and peer down. The sunlight was shining full on his face; the man was grinning so broadly that Zajec could see he had but one tooth in his mouth.

Not long after came a mysterious sound from above. There was a noise of people apparently digging. Then came a prolonged pause and silence, followed abruptly by a tremendous explosion, vastly more shattering than anything that had passed before. Four more followed in succession; the overhanging edges of the chasm mouth disintegrated and crashed down on to the coagulated mass of bodies, now scores of corpses deep. The Partisans were dynamiting the sides of the cave in order to ensure that no one else survived below. What was quite extraordinary, Zajec recalls now, was that after the thunder of the explosions and crashing rocks had died away he could *still* hear groans and sobs from all around. That Zajec and his three companions survived was due to their being sheltered in their narrow recess. Around them lay the many bodies of those rescued earlier at the cost of so much effort and pain – all dead.

As a result of the dynamiting the entrance to the hollow was now greatly enlarged, and into it the Communists began flinging smoke-bombs. This was painful to the eyes and frightening, but served no evident purpose. Perhaps the Partisans were simply using up the allowance of explosives with which they had been so liberally supplied by their allies.

By that evening Zajec had spent four days in the pit of Kocevje. Since they first were handed over to the Partisans they had received minimal food and drink, and now he had survived nearly a hundred hours without sustenance. He was afflicted by an overwhelming desire to vomit, but with nothing in his stomach could only retch painfully. That evening (Tuesday) he fainted and lay unconscious all night long.

By next morning two of his surviving comrades were dead, and one alone besides him remained. The fifth day of their ordeal had begun, and from an early hour the alternating rain of bodies and grenades began yet again. Near Milan Zajec lay three victims more horribly mangled than most; falling rocks had crushed in their chests and left their bodies lacerated and unidentifiable. Zajec's companion, a man forty years older than himself, muttered that it was vital to eat something if they were to continue to survive. In the underwear of

one of the corpses by them they had found a small penknife, and with it Zajec cut out sections of flesh from one of the bodies and proffered them to the other. His friend managed to get down five pieces of meat, but Zajec himself found his mouth had become so dry that he was unable to swallow anything after the first morsel. Despite this, it was his companion who appeared to grow weaker.

Looking about them, the two men had become increasingly absorbed by the possibilities of a tree which lay toppled within the pit. When the cave had been mined the previous day the tree had slid down and lay with its trunk projecting over the edge. To those below it represented a ladder to freedom. But the extraordinarily unrelenting efforts of the Partisans to ensure that no one survived made them at the same time preternaturally suspicious. What if the tree were booby-trapped? It was precisely the sort of precaution or malicious deception they might be expected to adopt. Why otherwise would they have allowed it to remain? Determined not to fall into their trap, Zajec made a succession of unavailing attempts to scale the rocky side. But whereas before the sides had been rough enough to offer precarious footholds, the dynamiting had left them relatively smooth. It proved a hopeless venture.

1990 8 All that day sheaves of bodies fell as before, screaming down into the abyss. Further dynamiting took place, perhaps to ensure space for the seemingly endless numbers being butchered. The prolonged echoes which reverberated round and round the narrow place were excruciatingly painful to the ears. So far from becoming accustomed to the horror, Zajec found it still harder to bear. The thousands of bodies were beginning to decay, and the stench and flies grew ever more intolerable. The concentration of so much suffering in one small space was unbearable enough, but as the torture continued each day, doubling, trebling, quadrupling, it grew overpowering. As the enfeebled victims, many still wired together, sought to struggle from beneath the encumbering bodies of their dead comrades, they shrieked out incoherently, coughing up blood and calling upon patron saints or absent loved ones. Groups of priests kept up their prayers as long as their breath allowed. For Zajec there was also the thought that there, somewhere deep down in that pullulating shambles, lay his four brothers.

The evening of the fifth day was drawing to a close, and he resolved at last to make an attempt to escape. Death was drawing ever closer to him. To be shot while escaping would only briefly anticipate what must in any case shortly be a certain end. He clambered over the

shifting sea of dead and dying, and began to scramble slowly and painfully up the fallen tree. His head was filled with a resonant buzzing; at the time he thought it came from somewhere around him, but later realised it must have been the lingering effect of the explosions.

As he emerged into the fresh air of the forest he could not for a while really believe that he was no longer in the pit. The first thing he saw was the moon, in its first quarter, gleaming brightly down. The next object his eyes lighted upon, however, recalled him to reality. It was a body, dangling head downwards from a nearby tree. Fortunately there appeared to be no guards in the vicinity. Zajec set off as fast as his gravely weakened constitution would allow, plunging into the safety of a nearby valley and trudging on all night to put as much distance as possible between himself and the scene of his ordeal. He longed to throw himself down and sleep, but in his ears he could hear an insistent voice, which repeated at each moment of temptation, 'Keep going, Milan, keep going; you must not sleep.' So, pausing only to suck up dew from the long grass, he stumbled on till daybreak.

He knew he was still not safe, and trudged blindly on for most of the next day. For nearly a week his only food had been that single morsel of human flesh forced upon him in his despair, and some bunches of grass. It seemed the ultimate cruelty that, after surviving all the horrors of the pit, it appeared he must succumb to starvation in the open countryside. For even his tough spirit could achieve no more; not one step further could he go. He stumbled to a halt . . . and there, not three paces before him, he saw a patch of wild strawberries growing thickly together as if piled on a dish, in the midst of an open glade. Not one strawberry had he seen in his day's march, and not one was he to see thereafter.

The fruit revived him considerably, and he found himself able to resume his journey. He was in a deplorable state; his leg was badly infected by poisoning from the wire shackles, and he was infested with lice from the rags given him when the Partisans at Kranj had stripped him of his uniform. By the evening he came to the outskirts of the village of Koblerje, near the railway line which had transported him and his 2,000 comrades to Kocevje a week before. But Koblerje was full of Partisans, and Zajec was obliged to hide in the woods outside. Fortunately he came upon an old, overgrown well, and not even the rat he found lurking within could prevent him at long last from drinking his fill.

Night came on, and he ventured to approach a villager he saw

passing near. The old woman took pity on him, and gave him an egg, some milk and a potato. The last his throat was still too constricted to get down, but he felt some enfeebled sense of recovery. Shortly after that his wild appearance (he was clad only in shirt and underpants, both stiff with dried blood, was limping and emaciated, and bore a week-old beard) sent a young girl fleeing in fear back to the village. This in turn frightened him, and he felt impelled once more to seek refuge in the forest. Eventually he learned of another village, Otaoice, whose inhabitants were known to be stalwartly anti-Communist.

Otaoice was some ten kilometres away, and he found his strength fast waning; too fast, he felt, to last the journey. Still, Otaoice was also on the railway line, and this he followed northwards, pausing from time to time to lick the metal track in desperate but unavailing effort to alleviate the pangs of thirst which now tortured him more severely than ever. He found himself once again unable to move one more step. He collapsed to the ground and, to his horror, found his body starting to shake uncontrollably. During his five days in the pit he had marked this as an unfailing symptom of impending death. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he felt himself to be nearing the end of his strength. Starting up, he looked about him desperately, and was greatly surprised to find himself standing before a house he had not noticed a moment earlier.

A light came on at a window that instant, and Zajec lurched forward and knocked at the pane. A woman looked out and asked him who he was. 'I am a Home Guardsman, who has escaped from the massacre in Kocevski Rog,' confessed Zajec. The woman was suspicious, accusing him of being a Partisan. The penalty for harbouring one of the fugitives was terrible: as everyone knew, detection or betrayal would result in the destruction of one's home and death. But eventually Zajec's pleas and his pitiable condition persuaded the woman of the truth of his story, and she burst into tears. Overcome likewise, Zajec fainted; to find himself moments later being helped upstairs to an attic bedroom. He collapsed on the bed and slept for ten hours.

When he finally awoke it was midday. The kindly woman revived him with a glass of spirits, confessing as she did so she had been convinced for a time that he was dead. Zajec stayed in the woman's home, in a secret hideout especially prepared for such a purpose, for five days. It was then she came to him in a state of agitation with the news that Communists were on their way to search the village. The

old woman gave him some clothes and food and escorted him back to the forest, both of them bearing farm implements to explain their journey.

Much refreshed by his rest, Milan made his way to another village, where a relative lived. Afraid for both their sakes to live in her home, he constructed a small shelter out of rocks with a straw roof concealed by pine branches nearby in the forest. He lived in this manner like a hunted animal for nearly a year. The village was frequently visited by detachments from OZNA, the state political police, who searched every house and interrogated the inhabitants. Communist patrols from time to time passed near Zajec's improvised retreat, and on one awkward occasion he was within inches of discovery. But he had supplied himself with a revolver and hand-grenade and was resolved to sell his life dearly, rather than fall into the hands of enemies whose methods of dealing with those they disfavoured he had more reason than any to know.

Eventually Zajec learned through a friend, a priest from Ljubljana, of the existence of a secret route used for smuggling fugitives out of Yugoslavia into Italy. On 6 April 1946 he escaped across the frontier to Gorizia. There he was interrogated by an officer from Allied Military Government, a Captain Bentley, to whom he recounted the whole of his extraordinary story. Captain Bentley was in this way the first Englishman to learn what actions had been performed in his country's name during the days of May and June 1945.

Bentley gave Zajec a pass (still in his possession) to go to a refugee camp at Udine. He stayed in Italy until December 1947, when he migrated to Argentina. The events of his ordeal were burned into his memory, every detail of each of those five days in the pit at Kocevje being as fresh in recollection today as forty years ago. Nor can he forget his brothers Stane, Nace, Tone and Joze who remained behind in the forest charnel-house. Yet another brother, Janez, had been murdered by the Communists in 1944. But despite the sufferings and betrayal, his is a profoundly gentle, kindly, unembittered personality, providing the impression of a man possessed of great reserves of spiritual strength. He, however, is unshakably convinced that his life was saved on successive occasions by the power of the medallion of Our Lady given him by his mother.

'I am as sure as I am sitting here,' he told me; 'for no one else could have helped me in that place.'

It would be a bold person who doubted him.

Milan's sufferings seem remote from Harold Macmillan's ornate

salon in the Palace of Caserta. But great interests of state affect very ordinary people, and it would surely be inappropriate to analyse complex diplomatic and military issues without pausing to consider for a space the fate of those whom they were to affect so deeply. There is, moreover, reason to believe that peculiar circumstances attending the slaughter at Kocevje may have reflected not merely the brutality of its perpetrators, but also the interests of those whose decisions were ultimately responsible for the event.

One of the most remarkable factors about the Kocevje massacre was the extent of the precautions taken by the Yugoslav Communist Government to ensure that no one escaped to tell the tale. It seems unlikely that this policy arose solely from that wanton cruelty which was one of the most salient characteristics of the new order. It appears to have been a matter of policy to ensure that the silent glade in Kocevski Rog should preserve its secret. Yet, despite the extraordinarily elaborate precautions adopted, Milan Zajec was not the only person to survive and bear witness to the tens of thousands slaughtered.

Frank Dejak was another twenty-year-old among the Domobranci at Viktring. His story was one familiar enough to Slovenians of the time. His mother, a widow, kept a small bar and grocery. When he was eighteen, at the time of the Italian capitulation, he and other village boys had been kidnapped and forced to serve in the ranks of Tito's Partisans. He escaped once, but was recaptured, and continued with the Communists until May 1944, when he slipped away to Ljubljana and joined the Domobranci. At the beginning of May he was with a unit defending his home town of Ribnica, between Ljubljana and Kocevje; then, with the coming collapse of the Slovenian state, he and his brothers and sisters joined the stream of fugitives who crossed the frontier and passed into the hands of the British on 12 May.

At the end of the month he, too, was despatched by the British authorities 'to Palmanova'; that is, into the hands of the Partisans at Rosenbach Station. At Jesenice, on the Yugoslav side of the tunnel, he saw a dozen British soldiers (presumably members of the undercover 'Sixth Special Force') engaged in assisting the Communists to handle the consignment of prisoners. Their first stay was for four days at the concentration camp at Kranj, where officers and NCOs were screened and segregated, and all were stripped of personal property.

Next they were shifted to the by now notorious diocesan high school building at St Vid. Milan Zajec had spent only a few hours

there before travelling on towards Kocevje, but it seems that the liquidation operation had become clogged already by the huge numbers involved, and Dejak spent nearly a week at St Vid. He was witness to the continual ferocious beatings – with rifle-butts, sticks and belts – with which their gaolers paid off old scores. Fortunately no one recognised him, and he escaped relatively lightly. He was among a group of about 500 crammed into the seminary chapel, so tightly that they had to remain upright day and night. The only food was a bowl of watery vegetable soup served once a day. The heat was intense, at no time was any water supplied, and prisoners were collapsing all around. Only two or three times in four days were they permitted to go to the washroom to relieve themselves.

What neither Zajec nor Dejak knew was that the St Vid seminary had served as a posting-centre for the Yugoslav holocaust even before the arrival of the inmates of the camp at Viktring. Dimitrije Vojvodic, a Serbian Chetnik, recalls his stay in the St Vid concentration camp in the days immediately following the liberation. He had fought for the Yugoslav and Allied cause throughout the war, being severely wounded in battle both against the Italians and Germans, and was promptly arrested by the Communists after their victory. In the second half of May he found himself among some 5,000 Serbian Chetniks and between 12,000 and 15,000 Croats and Slovenes held in St Vid. The yards and buildings were littered with the corpses of victims killed at random by their Communist guards.

About the beginning of the third week in May a commissar announced that the prison was to be evacuated next day, as a fresh consignment of prisoners would be arriving from Austria. Next day Vojvodic and the others were wired together in pairs and driven away in columns of trucks. They were being transported, so they were told, to another concentration camp at Celje. In fact they were taken up into the Kamnik Mountains south of the Austrian frontier, to a place where there was a series of large anti-tank trenches. There the 30,000 or so prisoners from St Vid were slaughtered by machine-gun squads, Vojvodic was among the mass of men herded up to the pits, and saw eighty priests, singing a hymn as they died, cut down in a swathe before him. He himself fortunately managed to undo his bonds and slip away into the forest, preferring a swift death while escaping to lying wounded and suffocating in the trench. Of those he encountered, Vojvodic estimated that nearly thirty escaped at that time. He himself travelled by night through the forests, until on 26 May he crossed over to the British lines. He

was fortunate in being brought before a humane officer who, after listening to his account of events over the frontier, arranged for him to be placed safely in a DP camp near Salzburg.

That this massacre took place by night as well as day, and that a number of prisoners succeeded in escaping, suggest that the operation was conducted in great haste. This confirms what is already known from the British records, namely that it was on 19 May that Brigadier Toby Low informed the Partisan Colonel Ivanovic that '5 Corps will return all Yugoslav nationals now in the Corps area', 10,000 of whom were to be handed over at Rosenbach for transfer to St Vid. It was to clear the camp for these that the men imprisoned with Vojvodic were massacred.

To return to Frank Dejak: on 8 June, a week after Milan Zajec, he left St Vid on the route taken now by thousands before him, through Ljubljana to Kocevje. They arrived at Kocevje Station at one o'clock in the morning, but had to stay locked in their boxcars until daylight. At about 5 a.m. they descended and were driven into the Kocevje high school building. Dejak estimated that there were about 800 in their group. Those to whom he spoke were confident that nothing too dreadful was likely to happen to them. A trial before a People's Court, six months perhaps in prison – it was hard to believe that worse was in prospect. The streets and buildings of Kocevje were as familiar to Dejak as those of his home town of Ribnica, a mere eighteen kilometres away.

From the high school building they were marched to the former blind people's home, where all 800 were crowded on to the first floor. Then they descended again, ten by ten, to be paraded in pairs in a small room, where guards wired their hands behind their backs and tied couples together by their arms. In the truck outside they were compelled to kneel down with heads bent, so as not to be able to know where they were going. But, like Milan Zajec, Dejak had spent some time on police duties in the surrounding countryside, and was able to detect the route. Concealment of the locality of the place of killing was clearly an important aspect of the operation. After leaving Zeljne and entering the forest, the truck suddenly slowed down and drove round twice in a tight circle. The guards then asked the prisoners if they could identify a small church on a hill nearby. Dejak knew it to be the church of St Anne, but remained silent with the others. Evidently the guards wished to be satisfied that the manoeuvre had confused the prisoners, and perhaps it was this consideration that led them to indulge in prolonged beatings and kickings of the heads of the kneeling prisoners.

Now they turned off into the clearing where the massacre was to take place. Their shoelaces were cut away and their shoes removed before they were pushed out on to the ground. Then they were marched barefoot for about ten minutes towards the pit. It was the morning of Saturday, 9 June, and the sun shone warmly down on the dappled green of the forest floor. The men were halted, untied, and compelled to strip off their clothes. The majority were stark naked, but Dejak, like Milan Zajec before him, managed to retain his underpants. Again they were marched swiftly another couple of hundred yards (Dejak noted that their path had led them in a curve back to within two or three hundred yards of the road) to the mouth of the pit. Throughout their short march the prisoners were subjected to ferocious beatings, many being battered to death and left where they fell. Afterwards he saw these corpses hurled into the pit.

At the edge of the precipice a guard halted Dejak and ordered him to look him straight in the eye. A swift interrogation followed, which Dejak realised later was designed solely to check whether he had any gold teeth. For in the pit itself were many men whose jaws were broken and bloodied where their teeth had been wrenched out. He possessed no such prize, and the Partisan raised and cocked his gun. Dejak did not wait for the shot but hurled himself over the edge of the pit. Four days had passed since Milan Zajec had made his momentous escape, and the level of corpses had continued to rise as the daily consignments from St Vid came in.

The Communist's gun went off as Dejak leaped, and Dejak felt a bullet tear through the side of his leg. He fell heavily on to the mass of bodies, and for a moment was unable to see anything in the darkness. Then, as his eyes swiftly became accustomed to the gloom, he was aware of some badly wounded men lying by the side, who called to him to crawl across before further bodies fell on him. He did so, and so was able to survey the scene from the relative safety of the edge. The rim of the cave was about fifteen metres above him; how far down it extended there was no longer any means of knowing.

By midday Dejak had recovered sufficiently to assess his position. By now some 6,000 bodies had accumulated in the chasm, of whom about a dozen remained alive, crouching by the edge. There was talk of escape, as the men eyed the knotted roots of a tree projecting some five metres up from the side, surviving from one of the periodic dynamitings witnessed by Milan Zajec, during his five days' stay. At another point there was also a small tree trunk, about ten inches in

diameter. That night, about midnight, Dejak scaled this natural ladder without great difficulty and made his way towards the forest. This was presumably the same tree by which Milan Zajec had made his escape.

Over to the right he could see a large fire blazing, at which were gathered about twenty Communist soldiers. Pausing momentarily to recover his strength, Dejak began cautiously moving off under the trees. There was a waxing moon and it was not difficult to find his way, accustomed as he had become to the darkness. Unfortunately he trod on a dry twig, which snapped loudly. Shouts of 'Halt!' came from the sentries, and Dejak froze. Fortunately the guards by their bright fire could distinguish little in the surrounding gloom, and evidently decided that some animal had disturbed their vigil. Their heads turned one by one back to the blaze.

Dejak crawled carefully away for a couple of hundred yards, then made off as swiftly as he could. He walked all that night and the next day, dressed only in his underpants, with his feet wrapped in a shirt taken from one of the bodies. Helped by a village woman he met on the way, he trudged on, plagued by hallucinations that he was surrounded by Partisans. At one point he collapsed for two hours in a faint. Eventually he recovered and reached home. To his alarm his house was deserted except for the family dog, who greeted him ecstatically. He went to bed, full of dread that his mother might have been abducted or compelled to flee her home by the Communists. But at five o'clock in the morning she returned, overjoyed to find her lost son returned. He told her of his terrible experiences, impressing on her the need never to reveal that he was a survivor of the Kocevje massacre.

After two or three weeks lying up in his home, Dejak felt obliged to seek a safer refuge. For almost three years he lived in different places of concealment. During the first six months he was in too weakened a state from the beatings he had received to consider escaping, and after that he and those around him were deluded by hopes that within a short spell of time Tito's primitive dictatorship would be toppled. Eventually he escaped over the mountains to Austria, arriving there on 22 May 1948.

Later Dejak learned that the Communists had somehow discovered that he had escaped, and consequently subjected his mother to a six-months' trial, before sentencing her to three years in gaol. Harsh conditions of confinement caused a breakdown in her health, and she was released after nearly two years. What struck the Dejaks as strange

was the inordinate interest taken in Frank's escape from the pit at Kocevje. Hundreds of thousands of people had been massacred by the Communists all over Yugoslavia after their seizure of power, most of them without any attempt at concealment. Yet time and again Mrs Dejak was visited by high-ranking officers from OZNA, asking repeatedly for details of her son's story. They were clearly desperately concerned to recover him; it will be seen what may have been the significance of this obsessive concern with the particular crime of Kocevje.

To the Communist authorities it must have appeared incredible that anyone could have survived the massacre, and indeed when one considers the survivors' accounts it seems miraculous. Apart from Zajec and Dejak only one other man is known to have escaped and lived to tell the tale. I spoke to him also, and though his story confirms many of the details of the others, the event is so extraordinary, and so important to an understanding of the mysterious conspiracy at Klagenfurt, of which the slaughter at Kocevje was the result, that it is necessary to conclude this chapter by hearing Frank Kozina's version of events.

Kozina (not to be confused with the Kozina whose death is mentioned on p. 27: both Frank and Kozina are common names in Slovenia) was slightly older than the other two escapers, being just twenty-four at the time. His home was in the same district as Dejak's, near Ribnica, where he worked as a labourer on his father's small farm. In 1942 the Italian occupation authorities had removed him to a concentration camp in Italy, from which he only returned in May 1943. Almost immediately afterwards he was abducted by Communist Partisans and obliged to serve with them against his own people. But their effectiveness as a fighting force proved derisory, and his superiors took care that any risk of being harmed by the enemy should be slight. Eventually he ran away home, and in January 1944 joined the Domobranci. He spent some time on patrol duty, guarding trains on the Ljubljana railway line, then for the last three or four weeks of the war was serving in Kocevje along with Milan Zajec and one of Milan's brothers.

When the collapse of Slovenia began, at the beginning of May, Kozina's unit departed northwards, intending to cross by train over the frontier to Austria. But the railway lines were clogged with others similarly fleeing, and they finally found themselves stuck in a line of engines, carriages and trucks which stretched for perhaps twenty kilometres. At Lesce they abandoned their train and set off on foot

over the Karavanke Mountains. Partisan snipers from time to time opened fire at them, but were swiftly chased away by escorting Domobran units.

On crossing the Drava they were received by British troops who, as other Slovenian refugees experienced, immediately set about stripping them of what valuables took their fancy. To Frank Kozina this was a moment of disillusionment: throughout the war it had been a matter of pride that Britain was Yugoslavia's steadfast ally, and that whatever other armies did the British invariably behaved 'like gentlemen'. But in the camp at Viktring he found morale high, with everyone eager to return home and do battle with the despised Partisans.

Then came the welcome news of the transfer to Palmanova, and on 29 May he was among the party which included Milan Zajec handed over to the Communists at Maria Elend Station. A deep fatalism descended on Kozina and those around him when they realised they had been betrayed. With no possibility of escape or refuge, it seemed better to die swiftly. At Kranj he was present at the murder of young Polde Koman, also witnessed by Milan Zajec. Kozina, who knew Koman, was among the party detailed to bury him in a corner of the compound.

Next morning another batch of about 2,000 prisoners arrived from Viktring. The crush in the camp was tremendous. A remarkable aspect of the whole episode was the extent to which familiar faces were continually appearing, a factor understandable among so small a nation as the Slovenes. Kozina knew many of his fellow-prisoners; the fresh consignment included teenage brothers from his own village.

After three days Kozina's section of the Viktring-Kocevje human pipeline was able to move on, and travelled the next stage to the seminary building at St Vid. There he was confined in the chapel. By this time visits to the washroom had become an unbearable ordeal, as Partisans were lying in wait there to beat the prisoners almost senseless. Teams of interrogators arrived, and once again Kozina saw faces he knew. One captain had sat two places from him in school, but possibly from charitable motives affected not to recognise him. Then came a strip search. No sooner was Kozina undressed than his interrogator set about him, lashing him with the buckle end of a heavy belt, and kicking him in the chest with his boots. The other prisoners were suffering likewise, and the whole area was awash with blood. In such a place death did not seem so terrible. Kozina was

young and had no one dependent on him; but he felt pity for an older man nearby, Anton Zidar, who had a pregnant wife waiting at home with two or three children.

But Frank Kozina was young and strong and did not, like so many others, die at St Vid. On the afternoon of 8 June he was taken by train to Kocevje. Journey and arrival were accompanied by yet further brutal beatings; Kozina had lost count of how many times this had happened. In the cattle-truck on the way to Kocevje he caught sight of some young friends staring longingly out of the barred window. To him this was foolishness: better to have done with it all than undergo further suffering before the inevitable end.

Next came the wiring in pairs; men were fainting from the stifling heat in the overcrowded rooms, their hands and arms turning blue as the twisted wire bit into their flesh and prevented circulation. Thrust into the waiting trucks, they were compelled like those before them to kneel and bow their heads. Guards crouched at each corner to ensure that no one glanced up to recognise their route. As prisoners in other convoys had experienced, the trucks turned around twice as they neared their destination, and the men were asked whether they knew where they were. On this occasion they could hear bursts of gunfire a little way off.

'No one said anything,' Frank Kozina recalls. 'We started praying. Before we prayed in whispers, but now we prayed aloud. We knew the people we were dealing with, what they were capable of, and we knew we were finished.'

Kozina was last off his truck. The first sight he saw, as his shoelaces were being slashed and his shoes removed, was a group of Partisan executioners. They were equipped with a remarkable collection of improvised instruments designed for killing and maiming: axes, pitchforks, jagged knives fastened to poles. Among the killers Kozina suddenly recognised a man who had been with him on a Partisan officers' course held on the Slovenian-Serbian border in 1943. He felt a moment of fear, but the man turned away with an unmistakable look of shame on his face.

Brought to the edge of the chasm, Kozina was untied from his partner and compelled to strip to his underwear. He, like Dejak, was to owe his life to the fact that the haste of the operation left him untied. He was thrust further towards the brim. He recognised his executioner, a man named Karel Francu from the village next door to home. Despite this, Francu looked him straight in the face and asked him to give his name and place of birth. Kozina at once guessed

his purpose; at one side he had glimpsed an ammunition box filled with gold teeth, watches and rings. The Partisans wasted no time in despoiling their prisoners: the box was swimming in blood from smashed jaws and severed fingers.

Levelling a shiny new revolver, Francu ordered him to squat down. As he did so the gun roared in Kozina's face. He felt a burning pain across his scalp and instinctively jumped backwards into the abyss. By a fortunate chance the bullet had passed through his hair, grazing the side of his head without inflicting serious injury. As he spun over he grabbed at the bole of a tree lying against the side of the cave, checking his fall a little as he slithered down. Unfortunately his heel was dashed against a sharp projecting rock, which cut through to the bone. He could see the bone through the gash in his flesh. Now he found himself scrambling across the thousands of dead bodies which had been accumulating over the past ten days of killing. Within two hours of death the corpses began to putrefy, the skin appeared slippery and partially detached from the flesh beneath, and a watery secretion oozed out where it was broken. A dense cloud of flies covered the shifting mass. It was bitterly cold. From behind him in the darkness Kozina heard a weak voice urging him to pull himself to the side before the Communists began throwing in bombs. Crawling back, he found a man lying on the edge of the pile of naked bodies. Nearby was another survivor, whose voice Kozina recognised as that of a young student he had known. This boy had already been four or five days in the pit. By next morning he was dead. It was this night, however, which saw the escape of Frank Dejak. He had been in the same truck as Kozina, but neither knew of the other's survival within the gloomy vault.

Frank Kozina managed to drag clothes from the dead to keep himself from the intense cold, and found a damp patch of stone on the side which he licked from time to time in an effort to stave off increasing thirst. By next morning (10 June) he found himself among a group of about a dozen survivors who had succeeded in dragging themselves to the edge. In despair someone suggested that there might be a tunnel somewhere at the side, and some time was spent in dragging aside bodies in this hopeless search.

As the second day wore on Kozina began to think they must all starve to death, trapped as they clearly were. The sides of the hole were higher than a telegraph pole, though the bodies lay piled ten or more feet deep on the cavern floor. Then came the dynamite explosions Milan Zajec had experienced the previous week. Kozina

thought this time his end really had come, as the unexpected blasts left him momentarily shaken and stunned. But once the shattering echoes and great cloud of dust had died away, he saw that the explosion might be set to their advantage, since at certain points the overhanging edges had collapsed on to the bodies beneath, leaving sections of the banks less impassable. The tree down which he had fallen now stood away from the edge, its base upheld by the deep layer of corpses settling about it. The survivors resolved to escape that night. They were possessed by fear that the Partisans might drench them all with petrol and incinerate them.

That night, about two o'clock, they began a concerted effort to climb out at a point rendered less precipitous by the explosions. The first man, Karel Turk, became stuck when halfway up, but a superhuman effort on the part of Frank Kozina, pushing him up from below, enabled him to scramble over the lip. Exhausted, he staggered back, but was soon at work helping up the next man, Janko Sveter. Between them they managed to lodge Sveter on a precarious foothold about halfway up, but there his enfeebled frame left him impotently hanging. Those below urged Turk to go and search for a branch or section of wire from the pile where prisoners were unbound. But before anything could be done the rock face collapsed in a heap of boulders on to the group waiting below, crushing most of the men. Sveter just managed to grip hold and draw himself up to safety.

There was nothing to be done for the mangled dead and dying, and Kozina himself, a man of considerable strength and endurance, finally managed to scale the side. Assisted by Turk, he pulled himself out on to the grass. The first glimmering of dawn was appearing in the clearing, and there was no time to be lost. Together he, Turk and Sveter set off through the forest, suffering frightening mirages of Partisan tanks recurring at intervals. They walked for almost two days and nights until they reached temporary safety at the Kozina home, after which Frank's comrades separated and went their several ways.

Not long afterwards Kozina came across Frank Dejak, who had been thrown into the pit in the same truckload and escaped a night earlier than he. Together they lay hidden in various refuges for nearly three years. During that time, however, they rarely spoke of the pit of Kocevje, so terrible was the memory. When they did so, it was only when they felt temporarily secure enough to allude to their terrifying experience.

Eventually, aided by enterprising sympathisers, Kozina escaped to the safety of Italy. Only later did he appreciate just how fortunate

was his escape. Janko Sveter was later drowned – accidentally, some held, though others laid his death at the door of the dreaded OZNA. Karel Turk was less fortunate. He was picked up and thrown in gaol on some fanciful charge. Repeated interrogations eventually elicited the fact that he was a survivor of the Kocevje massacre.* He was taken back to Kocevje and crucified by the edge of the pit.

The accounts of the three survivors Zajec, Dejak and Kozina are confirmed by a young Partisan, who later defected and set down an account of his experiences in 1953. He was a member of the Eleventh Dalmatian Brigade, which had taken part in Tito's 'capture' of Trieste. On or about 25 May, the day after the Fifth Corps began the mass handovers, his unit was to provide a group of picked men to guard a company of sixty or seventy executioners, commanded by a Captain Nikola Marsic. On 26 May they went to St Vid, where the executioners entered the compound and committed the atrocities already recounted. Nearly a thousand prisoners were taken out next day and slaughtered in a large pit excavated in the countryside just outside Ljubljana.

On the twenty-eighth the executioners and their escort were sent to Kocevje. The young Partisan recalls:

Our job was to guard the prisoners until trucks arrived to take them away from this place, . . . then to load them on to these trucks. During the eight days that we remained at Kocevje, ten or more trains came in on the rail line every twenty-four hours. Each of these trains was composed of between ten and twenty boxcars, all well nailed up and sealed, and loaded with prisoners. The captives came from Ljubljana and other places. Most were men, but there were some women among them. These . . . females were subjected to mass rape as soon as they were brought to the building which we were guarding. There were also many fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boys among the prisoners. I know that the blond-haired Slovene captain saved one of these boys from being shot, probably because he was acquainted with him or his family.

There were more Croats than Slovenes among the prisoners with whom I came in contact. Also there were some Serbian Chetniks brought here. I do not know to what units they belonged. We heard that during our eight-day stay thirty to forty thousand prisoners were slaughtered in two nearby mountain ravines.

On the eighth day . . . a dance was arranged to honour and amuse the 'execution company'. Women were brought for them, and the men

* A woman confined in the same prison who knew Turk learned of his subsequent fate, and later recounted it to Frank Kozina.

swaggered around boasting that they had 'liquidated' thirty to forty thousand people during the past eight days. I judge from the number of prisoners I saw taken out of the building we were guarding that there must have been more than thirty thousand victims. Since we shipped more than twenty railroad car loads of clothes from this place, it would appear that this estimate is not too far off the mark. I saw only about ten or fifteen women among the captives, but there were certainly more who were murdered there. Naturally, I did not see every arrival, since I was not on duty all the time. I know that the women were not stripped of their clothes in the vicinity of the building where we were stationed, but were conducted fully clothed to the place of execution. They were dishonoured again in the ravines close to their final destinations . . .

There were about two hundred boys between fourteen and sixteen years old who wore the uniforms of the Ustasha youth. All of these boys were killed, except for the one spared by the Slovene captain. They kept saying they were innocent of any wrong doing. Many of them cried like the women.

The day on which the final massacre took place was a Saturday [9 June?]; five or six high-ranking Communist officers visited the military building where the prisoners were housed before execution on this day . . . These . . . officers had come to check on how we had packed up the uniforms and valuables of the victims . . .

The inspecting commission spent hardly half an hour in our building. From here they went to the forest to see the mass graves in the ravines. I was told they had come to Kocevje to see how the killings had been carried out and to make sure that all visible signs of the massacres, that is the ravines into which the bodies had been thrown, were covered up. Before they left Kocevje we heard several loud explosions in the forest. We assumed that bombs or dynamite had been used to topple masses of rocks on to the . . . corpses . . .

On Sunday morning at seven o'clock, the 'exterminator company' left by train for a vacation at Lake Bled. I didn't know this at the time, but learned it only much later when these killers rejoined their old companies, which had been sent to Macedonia in the meantime. They told me that as a reward for the massacres they had committed at Kocevje they had received twelve days' vacation on the island of Bled, where they were lodged in a former luxury hotel. They received good food, went swimming, had sail boats at their disposal and saw plays performed for their special benefit every evening by a group of amateur actors provided by the Headquarters of their Division (the Twenty-Sixth Dalmatian Division). In addition, all of the 'exterminators' received two or three decorations from the Tito Government, along with gold watches, cameras and other presents of value.

From Tito's point of view these medals had been well earned. The strain of those days took its toll of even these picked stalwarts: 'I heard that some of them became epileptic later on – perhaps the so-called "partizanska bolest" (Partisan sickness), from which they suffered, was a form of nervous breakdown.'¹ This indeed seems likely; in the Soviet Union the MVD maintained a special sanatorium for officers who were suffering the strain of excessive 'interrogation' duties. As an MVD officer confessed, 'It's been statistically proved that three years' work in the operational organs is enough to turn a man into a chronic neurasthenic.' Regular symptoms were impotence and drug-addiction, principally to morphia and cocaine.²

Another Partisan involved in similar duties confirms this account, adding interesting details:

I do not know exactly how many trainloads of prisoners arrived during the seven or eight days that we remained at Kocevje. Usually these prisoner trains pulled in to the station either late in the evening or just before dawn. The Communist authorities did not want the civilian population of the town to know what was going on. From ten to twenty boxcars were included in each train and the prisoners arrived completely exhausted and almost starved to death. They knew what was in store for them but they were too tired and dispirited to care . . .

I had to escort the prisoners from the train to the barracks and to their final place of detention. Since I did this just one day, I can only guess the number of prisoners who were brought to Kocevje to be slaughtered. From other people who were there, I gathered that as many as twenty thousand may have been butchered. A special company of hardened Marxists was formed for the purpose of carrying out the mass executions. A certain Albert Stambuk was the Assistant Commissar of this unit.³

After the mass executions were over, the mouth of the cave was completely dynamited and filled in. It is likely that many of the last victims were still alive when this happened. Afterwards young larches were planted on the site, in the same way that the Soviets attempted to conceal the scene of their crime at Katyn. Today the whole region is a forbidden area, but a few years ago a Slovenian émigré on a visit to his homeland made his way to the site and took a number of photographs. They show the younger larches standing in clear contrast to the indigenous birch, spruce and larch *in situ* at the time of the slaughter. The spot where the cave entrance lay is still clearly indicated by a shallow depression, where subsidence must have taken place after the original filling-in. On the trees around the visitor saw

signs that surviving relatives continue to risk their lives in calling to commemorate the fallen. Candle-stubs remained standing on surrounding boulders, a rosary hung from a tree, and crosses had been cut on tree-trunks, together with the initials NSD – *Nasha Slovenska Domobranska*, 'Our Slovenian Domobranci'.

Today, the dictatorship finds it is no longer possible to preserve total public silence about the tragedy. Recently the Yugoslav historian Dusan Biber wrote an article (18 October 1984) published in *Knjizevni Listi*, in which he drew attention to the increasing interest in the subject displayed by Yugoslav émigrés and Western scholars.

Next, in an article attacked by government spokesmen, a young Slovenian woman writer, Spomenka Hribar, referring to 'the victims from [Kocevski] Rog', declared:

We have to open our history. But the key to this door lies not in searching for the guilty one, but in a thorough analysis of the historical path of the nation during that epoch. But if we never learn – as a nation – to mourn all our victims, we shall never find this key.

A clear and courageous conscience would be capable not only of admitting to the crime as a crime, but also that these mass graves, wherever they may be, should become hallowed ground accessible to view, if exhumation and decent reburial, appropriate to our civilization and culture, remain impossible. Not because they were Domobranci, but because they were people. The dead are dead, and nothing else can be done for them . . .

In the centre of Ljubljana, in its heart, an obelisk should be erected crying to high heaven the tragedy of a small nation . . . There should be a simple inscription upon this obelisk: 'They died for their country.'⁴

It seems unlikely that any such act of national retribution will occur so long as the present government continues in power. On 20 May 1985 an official ceremony was held at Poljana, the nearest town over the frontier from Bleiburg, from where so many thousands of victims were handed over by the British. Highlight of the occasion was a speech by a high-ranking Slovenian government official, Stane Dolanc. After references to 'Tito's strategy and tactics', which crushed German military might single-handed, came references to the 'new social order . . . which many did not like . . . They did not succeed because political meddlers could not overcome the sincerity and intelligence of the people's masses.' Dolanc continued, 'What should we say, to those who today, forty years later, interpret all these events, tearing them out of the context of the then military,

political and other conditions, individual happenings, certainly among them some very tragic, and try to prove the inhumanity of our Revolution?’

The answer, the orator explained, lay in a forthright rejection of ‘the so-called “national reconciliation”’. This is not only retrogressive, it is a wrong mentality from the historical point of view, without mentioning simple human logic. We shall never agree to a conciliation between revolution and counter-revolution . . . We are being attacked although none of our nations has ever been more free than now and has ever seen such a development in the economy, culture and other fields as during the last forty years.⁵

It was at Kocevje that the majority of prisoners from Viktring Camp delivered by the British to the Communists were massacred.⁶ As the victims’ accounts indicate, OZNA resources were stretched to the limits to effect so massive a slaughter within such a short time, and the human pipeline passing from Viktring to Kocevje became clogged at the transit-camps in Skofje Loka, Kranj and St Vid. Speed was clearly regarded as essential if the operation were to be completed as efficiently and, above all, as secretly as possible. In consequence Toby Low was obliged to arrange for a secondary route, passing via Bleiburg in the British zone of Austria to Celje and Maribor in Yugoslavia. This journey led to a place of execution fully as terrible as the pit of Kocevje.

Janez Dernulc was among the second load of Domobranci who left Viktring for Bleiburg on 28 May. His commanding officer had told him they were bound for Italy, and it was with a feeling of elation that he climbed up into his truck. But it was not long before he began to entertain misgivings. Instead of travelling westwards towards Tarvisio, they appeared to be moving east. At Bleiburg they received a rude shock when they were turned over to the waiting Partisans and taken by train over the frontier to Dravograd. (There was a British liaison officer stationed in Dravograd to ensure that all went as it should.⁷ It seems improbable, to say the least, that he was unaware of the torture and massacre in the town at this time of hundreds of Chetniks delivered by his superiors from Bleiburg.)⁸ At Slovenjgradec, four stations down the line, they spent the night in a school. There they were separated into categories, and suffered ferocious beatings (which Dernulc himself fortunately escaped) in the washrooms.

Next morning they were taken in trucks to the village of Mislinja. The road and railway beyond the village were blocked, so they were

made to descend and march the rest of the way to Celje. Many times the prisoners asked their Partisan escorts what was to happen to them. The guards, who probably knew no more than they, made reassuring responses; but Dernulc reflected on the reign of terror the Partisans had been practising in Slovenia for over two years, and knew that they would receive no mercy from such an enemy. The long march, in columns four abreast, lasted through the ensuing night, which enabled Dernulc and a friend to abscond into the darkness. After a number of narrow escapes, he succeeded in making his way a couple of months later to the safety of Italy.

Dernulc was a lucky man. It was a comrade who whispered, 'Now or never: jump!' But for that, he feels, he would have stayed with the column. Reports have gradually emerged since about the fate of his companions, and of all the others despatched by the same route. Accompanied by the usual beatings and occasional murders, monotonous to describe but horrible enough to imagine, their journey continued to a concentration camp at Teharje, seven kilometres east of Celje. There they were subjected to continual floggings and tortures, while the Communists plundered and interrogated them. About eighty officers were segregated and taken into a yard by the barracks. As a survivor recalled: 'Their hands were tied behind their backs and each one's head was one complete bloody wound. They had been so disfigured by the blows that they were impossible to recognise. Their jaws were battered, their teeth and jaws broken, and blood flowed from their mouths.' They were machine-gunned *en masse* and their bodies thrown into a nearby anti-tank ditch. Presumably because there was no natural ravine capable of accommodating huge numbers of bodies, the massacre at Teharje was much more drawn out than that of Kocevje.

Each evening for 5 weeks they drove up 8 to 10 big trucks and stacked the tied guardsmen on them. They piled them aboard like cordwood. The victims were already half-dead. They tortured them so much that coming from these covered trucks were heard the actual animal, lunatic sounds of the insane. The Red escorts were jumping on these tortured bodies. This scene recurred each night until they had driven all of them away.

The former prisoner from whose account this is drawn eventually discovered the destination of the departed prisoners:

For a change we sometimes had to cart earth also. From somewhere they pulled out a broken-down German supply wagon. Up to 30 of us would

get around the wagon; some of us pulled, others pushed, but nevertheless it went very slowly because we didn't have any strength. We loaded 3 cubic meters of earth, pulled it uphill, then down again into the valley. This was done many times.

Towards the end of July, we set off with this wagon to the southern side of the camp . . . we were loading earth and carting it to the left side of the main entrance where there had originally been a small ravine; this area was now all dug up and the earth turned over. To this plain we had carted probably more than 200 cubic meters of earth. When we stepped on this area, we had the feeling that everything was over water. The ground gave way so that one's foot sank up to the ankle into something soft and rotten which had been covered by at least 2 inches of dirt. Nobody dared to dig to see what it was underground that made the ground move in such an odd way as if it were alive. We also didn't dare to ask, but we all knew that we were walking over the bodies of the murdered, because there was such a stench in that area that it was hard to bear.

The witness from the description just quoted was released on 18 August, as for some reason the handful left alive by that stage was pardoned and released. Despite this, it is clear that the Communist organisers were as concerned as their colleagues at Kocevje that news of the massacres should not leak out: 'Before they handed out the releases to us, a Communist said to us: "You will now be released to freedom. But – if anyone utters a single word about what he saw and experienced, we will come and shoot him at home."' A group of ten who had escaped earlier and were recaptured were done to death in peculiarly brutal fashion. However, as at Kocevje, there were two or three who escaped miraculously from the pits themselves.⁹

The number of refugees received from the British military authorities in Austria and liquidated at Tito's orders far exceeded the number of Polish officers murdered in the notorious Katyn massacre. On 1 June 1945 the Fifth Corps reported to the Fifteenth Army Group: 'Evacuation of respective nationals to Russians and Jugoslavs continued. 26,339 Yugoslav nationals have now been evacuated from Corps area.' This was broken down as follows: 12,196 Croats, 5,480 Serbs, 8,263 Slovenes, and 400 Montenegrins.¹⁰ These figures may have been considerably underestimated. Slovenian émigré sources, for example, calculate their contingent as having comprised nearly 10,000 Domobranci, accompanied by several hundred civilians.¹¹ Today Slovenian émigrés in the United States are engaged in a determined effort to publish as nearly exhaustive as possible a

memorial list of their compatriots killed in this and other wartime atrocities. So far two volumes of the *Bela Knjiga* have appeared, with another in preparation.

These massacres, carefully planned and implemented on a colossal scale, must by any standard be regarded as one of the most significant factors in Tito's post-war pacification of the country. Understandably, the subject is not considered one suitable for public airing by the present Yugoslav Government. What is much less explicable is the silence on the subject practised by so many Western historians writing about Tito's wartime career and subsequent seizure of power. A respected British scholar, Phyllis Auty, worked during the early part of the war in the BBC Yugoslav Section, and afterwards with the Political Intelligence Centre, Middle East, in 1943-44. She conducted extensive researches both in Yugoslavia and abroad for her well-received biography of Tito, and was even granted an audience with the Marshal himself, who 'answered all questions frankly and fully without hesitation or evasion, giving the impression that he was content to let his record stand up to any examination'.

Auty's account of the 1945 massacres is as follows: 'Known collaborators – and Rankovic's intelligence system had been collecting dossiers throughout the war – were routed out, many were tried, some were killed.'¹² This is an oddly inadequate description of a holocaust which, in the proportion of the population to have suffered, was fully equivalent to the worst comparable atrocities of a particularly inhumane war. Yugoslavs free to discuss the subject tend to adopt a less detached viewpoint. Milovan Djilas was at the time a senior member of Tito's Politburo, and one of his most favoured collaborators. Though at the time not directly involved in the major killings, he has made clear on different occasions his subsequent disgust and indignation. He writes:

Along with the Germans, our enemies who collaborated with the invaders or bound their destiny to the fascist powers – the Chetniks, the Ustashi, Home Guards, and the Slovenian Home Guards – also laid down their arms. Some of these groups got through to the British in Austria, who turned them over to us. All were killed, except for women and young people who were under eighteen years of age – so we were told at the time in Montenegro, and so I later heard from those who had taken part in these senseless acts of wrathful retribution.

These killings were sheer frenzy. How many victims were there? According to what I heard in passing from a few officials involved in that settling of scores, the number exceeds twenty thousand – though it must

certainly be under thirty thousand, including all three of the groups just cited. They were killed separately, each group on the territory where they had been taken prisoner. A year or two later, there was grumbling in the Slovenian Central Committee that they had trouble with the peasants from those areas, because underground rivers were casting up bodies. They also said that piles of corpses were heaving up as they rotted in shallow mass graves, so that the very earth seemed to breathe.

This last detail might appear to be an exaggeration, but is substantiated by first-hand testimony. Stanislav Plesko, for example, was one of the Domobranci handed over by Keightley and Low on 28 May, who spent nearly a fortnight in the notorious transit camp at St Vid. There he suffered the same tortures and starvation as the others, until about 19 June he was fortunate enough to escape being butchered there or at Kocevje by escaping over the wire. He was on the run for three years, before escaping to Austria.

During the first weeks of his flight he was hiding for a while near Brezje, where many of the wounded Domobranci had been taken from St Vid to be killed. There was a heatwave at the time and, as he has recently explained:

there was such a stench that the people couldn't stand it. They didn't know what it was, but it was something terrible . . . There was a big storm, and the waters rose, bursting the cement sealing the mass grave. The drinking water in Ljubljana was poisoned, polluted. After that the authorities got German prisoners to pull all the bodies out of the grave and transport them into the bush several hundred metres away. There they reburied them; and after *that* they killed all the Germans, except one who escaped and related the story.

Apart from acknowledging that the massacres undoubtedly took place, Djilas was also concerned about the question of responsibility:

Who issued the order for this extermination? Who signed it? I don't know. It is my belief that a written order didn't exist. Given the power structure and the chain of command, no one could have carried out such a major undertaking without approval from the top. An atmosphere of revenge prevailed. The Central Committee did not decide that. And what if it had? Doubtless the Central Committee would have gone along with those in power. There was never any voting anyway. And I would have agreed – perhaps with some reservation which would not have threatened my revolutionary resolve, my adherence to the party, and my solidarity with the leadership. As if there were no justice, truth, and mercy outside

the ideology, the party, and an aroused people, and outside us leaders as their essence! We never spoke of it either in the Central Committee or privately among ourselves. Once in a rambling conversation – after the clash with the Soviet leadership in 1948, of course – I mentioned that we had gone too far then, because among the executed also were some fleeing for ideological reasons alone.

Tito retorted immediately, as if he had long since come to a final, though hardly comforting, conclusion: 'We put an end to it once and for all! Anyway, given the kind of courts that we had . . .'¹³

In Viktring Church today may be seen an inscribed memorial set up by exiles from America:

IN HONOREM B. MARIAE VIRGINIS
PROFVGI EX SLOVENIAE, FRATRVM
MEMORES HINC IN MANVS INIMICORVM
A.D. MCMXLV TRADITORVM.
DE TRANSOCEANIS TERRIS RENOVATIONI
HVIVS TEMPLI PARTEM GRATI TRIBVERVNT.

One day, it is not to be doubted, an obelisk will be raised not only in the centre of Ljubljana but above the grave of the fallen in the glade at Kocevje. There, if true justice is done, it will bear the name not only of Josip Broz (Tito), but those of his principal British collaborators, without whose secretive aid the tragedy would never have taken place.