

04. PROSPECTS IN HAZE

Wednesday, April 18, 1945

This is the third day of our extended stop near the township of Podravska Slatina and less than a week since we left Osijek. We were stationed in a school building where the classrooms had been made into sleeping quarters by pushing the benches against the walls. A large garden and some sort of sports ground were expanding behind the house towards the river Drava only about 14 kilometres away. A road connected Slatina with the two villages Cadjavica and Noskovci close to the Drava River's Shore. The later one was the village mother was born. There was no bridge crossing it as in normal times people used their own boats or the ferry that hung on a wire high above the water.

The last days had been quiet except for a constant stream of troops interspersed with civilian vehicles moving to the west. It looked like a minor migration, and it was soon to become a much bigger one involving a good part of the Croatian populace. I used the break to organize my life and prepare for the fight for survival that I knew to be lying ahead. Zorko's disappearance had caused quite a storm at the battery command, and he was officially declared a deserter. The only one from among the officers, as it was, though with the troops was not quite sure whether the men had deserted or were among the casualties of the air attack. There was no doubt about Zorko, however. They knew he had returned to Nasice that was taken by the Yugoslav army only hours after we had passed through.

I had finally joined up with my unit in the village of Fericanci. I was dead on my feet and must have looked desperate, because one of the cart drivers and his mate handed me some food and drink, when I came up to their ammo carts. Walking 15 kilometres in heavy riding boots after a day of exhausting experiences was enough for any young man of my calibre. I cannot remember what happened during the night that followed. I must have been pretty drunk from all the liquor handed me by the men in my unit. These home made brandies of apricots, plums or peaches were strong but far better than the brews made of potatoes or maize, turnip or sugar beet. Those really were nothing but methyl alcohol and smelt and tasted accordingly. As a nasty side effect, they endangered one's eyesight if drunk over a period of time.

The morning after for me was sometime before sunrise on Sunday, the April 15, as I woke up finding myself huddled on the straw between the ammo-boxes, a place I found convenient as a bed. My head felt like a balloon and my eyes hurt even from the dim light of early morning. Gregl, who came looking for his men, was quite surprised to find me among the ammo-boxes.

"Well, sir, I'm certainly glad to find you at last. We were afraid we'd lost you in the air raid. Where is your horse?" - I thought my head was going to burst from his loud voice so replied: "For god's sake, Gregl, don't talk so loud. I had to shoot Zelenko and I walked all the way from Nasice to Fericanci. I met Zorko somewhere near Moticina who told me that we would be meeting up here. What do you want me to do now? Where's the rest of the battery?"

Gregl grinned saying: "You must have had a hard day, yesterday. As for Zorko, forget him and take his horse. He hasn't returned since last I saw him, and we must get on to

Slatina. We've no time to waste." - Soon we were on the move again, early in the morning to avoid the Russian fighter planes that had a habit of flying so low that it was hard to detect them in time to take cover. Gregl had obviously learned his lesson during the last raid because he distributed his collection of various machine guns and anti aircraft weapons among the cart drivers. As the day wore on, I began to feel a little better. What surprised me was that we didn't hear any more fighting or gunfire. We made a short stop just before Cacinci, an important railway junction that I knew well from our treks into the Papuk Mountains. We then marched on to Mikleus and through Vocin with its famous ruin. The road along the Vocinska River is rather romantic and made me remember the summer of 1941 when I had been there with other students in a Youth working unit lasting long 6 weeks.

All these memories came to my mind as the battery's convoy made its way on the well-known road. To my surprise, we did not turn into the mountains but marched on to the township of Podravska Slatina. There we set up our camp in a sort of ready for fighting position that made me wonder whether we were supposed to ward off the encroaching enemy. Encroaching from where? As it turned out, we spent some restful days here in Slatina that most of us, when not on duty, used for sleeping. Zorko's desertion was a theme we didn't dare talk about and I could only hope that he was well. I was delighted to find that none of the others service men had been killed or injured in the raid, and had my happiest moment when Virag helped me out of my boots after 48 hours of marching.

The restful days at Slatina were used for rearranging the horse teams as we had lost twenty-five horses. Some were replaced by our grooms by "requisitions" made in nearby stables and farms which Gregl's men were combing thoroughly. And I am not sure that the owners always got paid for what was taken. In fact, I rather thought, they were not and therefore they hated the soldiers and us. I was soon to find out that this attitude of saving one's own life and belongings and never mind what happens to others are the worst coming up in humanity in times of war.

The captain joined us the second day of our stay at Slatina, and we were called in for a short but comprehensive briefing. Our orders were to defend the rear frontline while withdrawing westward. The front was somewhere between the Drava River in the north and the Sava River in the south beyond the mountains of Slavonia. There was no clear front line, of course, and there would be many German units intermixed with our troops. Germans, it was expected, would try their best to get as far west as possible to be out of reach of the Russian and Bulgarian forces. These were advancing into Austria by way of Hungary north of Drava's left bank. Why they didn't attack us when we were so close, nobody knew, and so our command's main concern were the partisan groups hiding in the dense forests of Slavonic mountains.

The main enemy, however, was the Yugoslav army pressing down from the east and advancing between Sava and Drava rivers. Also, this Army was pushing west through Bosnia towards the Croatian capital Zagreb. We were ordered to hold our line as long as possible. When retreating we were also to move in the direction of Zagreb, building defence posts whenever possible. It all sounded rather vague to me and with only a dim chance of success.

I was told to look after the guns and ammunition carries that was a stroke of good luck for me. This not only because I knew these men best but also because this way, I would be close to the roads and settlements along it and less exposed to enemy attacks. Did

my reasoning right or just wishful thinking I asked myself as I lay down on the hard floor of the classroom still smell strongly of disinfectant.

The next days were quiet and we spent them waiting at Slatina. Therefore I started some routine training with the gunners, putting the emphasis on the much-dreaded attack by tanks. I made sure every gunner knew how to use the various grenades we had in store, how to aim for the right distance and that there should be at least one box of the special anti armour grenades with each gun. The men were not keen on these training routines, especially as I forced them to make the necessary rampart and trenches for the standard protection of each gun and its crew.

This had become an obvious safety measure whenever we were to stay in one place for any length of time. This we learned some time ago, that is after I joined the Battery in Osijek. There, we were ordered to put the four guns between two railway tracks. A silly thing to do, in my opinion, but I had as yet not say anything in such matters. It was strong winter and we had one old earth made bunker in which an open fire was kept burning. It was sending its smoke flag through the opening on top of the igloo like earthen structure. What more is needed for any good artillery scout than two railway tracks and a constant flag of smoke!

It didn't take long before Bulgarian armoured train sent his first shot right in front of our guns. The men, slowly digging in the hard and frozen soil, were so surprised that they did not realize what happened. Only when the second shot came over our heads, they got the idea what would happen next. The following 150mm grenades came closer to our position and hit into the ice ground all around us. It was a miracle that no one was hurt in this attack. The good thing about it was, that it proved my point of view and started the men digging the ramparts and trenches willingly and speedier.

We sat in Slatina, entrenched and ready for combat when in the late afternoon of April 18th. We received the orders to prepare for departure within next few hours. Why this, we wondered among ourselves, as there were no reports of fighting or did we hear any gunfire.



A Domobran Junior Lieutenant's cloak at left and an officer's belt buckle at right.

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