

## NARVIK FJORD

Narvik was not a big town, rather a larger fishing village. It probably would have remained so if iron ore had not been found in neighbouring Sweden in the town of Kiruna, about 60 km to the east, which was fateful for the further development of Narvik. Narvik is a port that does not freeze over the whole year, unlike the Swedish port of Luleå, which is located at the same latitude, but does not have the Gulf Stream. That is why it is frozen for eight months a year. Norwegians also call the Kiruna-Narvik railway the Iron Road. The railroad made Narvik a town, but that Iron Road also caused its occupation, although not singlehandedly. On 28 May 1940, the Germans entered Narvik, following the same route that we sailed. With several dozen warships (disguised as tourist ships), they tried to conquer the port of Narvik using cunningness and deception. Their trick was detected. At one hour's sailing to Narvik, the Norwegians with the English and French attacked them, and took them down one by one all the way to Narvik. All the German ships were sunk. The Germans saved themselves by somehow reaching the surrounding hills, resisting the Allies for a month.

After the war, I walked along the road in the direction of the romantic beauty of Rombaksfjord. I noticed a large memorial stone. A kind local stopped the car, and with an expression of reverence and pride, patiently waited for me to copy the French text, letter by letter:

LA FRANCE À SES FILS ET À LEURS FRÈRES D'ARMES TOMBÉS  
GLORIEUSEMENT EN NORVÈGE!

This Norwegian, now a major in the Norwegian army, 20 years old at the time of the invasion, told me that the Germans had been in the hills around Narvik until June. They held them at bay for more than a month and killed many of them, although the fascists had an advantage in both numbers and weapons.

But: — Not the glittering weapon fights the fight, but rather the hero's heart.

After evoking unforgettable memories, he approached the car and opened the door with his left hand. His right hand is missing, because he lost it in this very battle. At that moment, a Mercedes with German number plates passed us. It was headed somewhere to the north. He noticed it and suddenly, as if to himself, said:

— För svarte fan!

He looked at me, trying to "read" from my pupils whether I understood the words. As if by agreement, we laughed, and I replied that we say it the same way, just a little "stronger". We continued our journey and camaraderie. This small digression is necessary in order to better follow the situation regarding the place of our new residence. The ship was slowly entering the port of Narvik. Sailing through the fjord, it seemed to us that we were almost touching the shore in some places. A little later, we had the impression that we were sailing towards the open sea. The ship had to be maneuvered well, perhaps because of the mines, but I would rather say that it was a matter of getting through a lot of sunken ships. The peculiarity of northern longitudes and latitudes is that you can go for days without coming across a larger urban settlement. I was obsessed with that phenomenon. There were at most three or four

houses (farms) in one place. Emptiness again, then the same sight. I thought: Well, our villages are real metropolises compared to these so-called settlements.

— The star shines and shines, but it does not warm well! - said one of our friends about the northern sun.

We assumed it was somewhere around 10 pm. The sun is quite high, but its disk is small. One can freely look at it without fear of being dazzled. It moves lazily along the horizon. We still cannot understand this phenomenon.

The Germans calmed down. They don't provoke us, but we haven't had anything to eat since yesterday.

— You will get it when you get "there".

Not all of us have recovered from that two-day swing across the Atlantic and the ordeal of seasickness. Paleness in the face and physical exhaustion were noticeable on everyone. I was standing at the bow of the ship, next to the fence. I saw us going towards a hill. We could turn both left and right. While waiting to see which inlet of the fjord we were going to go toward, uncle Žare Otoranov started handing out small pieces of bacon.

- I can't!

- You have to! Everyone has to eat! If you don't have bread, you will get it!

I barely took a bite. It was bacon from Kikinda, a bit stale and rancid.

## NARVIK

The bow of the ship drifted slowly to the left, and as it got closer, it revealed house after house, until we saw Narvik, which was situated under a large hill. One of its parts seemed to "spill" towards a small plain.

The twenty-seventh of June 1942. In an hour it will be 28 June. The sun is up and shining. A night without night. Thirty or more masts were sticking out of the sea on the left and right as we slowly entered the fjord. The direction of some masts showed that they had sunk to the bottom, and some, bent, were hugging their "neighbours" with the tops of their radio antennas. Everyone was obsessed with the power of their imagination and conjuring up what had happened there when my friend lost his right hand. On the left side, directly next to the dock, we all noticed a small, flattened hill, which had, at sea level, tunnels of considerable diameter. There were five or six of them. Along the tunnels stood some strange structures of enormous proportions made of steel rails. Someone said they were cranes for lifting submarines.

The first contact with Narvik happened on a quiet white night. We watched it from the deck. Narvik offered us its houses facing the ship. It was as if they were all looking at us. They were colourful, with a ground and upper floor. Although located under a hill, the urban planners made sure to arrange the streets nicely. And you could see them from our ship. We could even count them, because they were coming down gently from the hill. On the right side of the fjord there was a small settlement - Ankenes, with similarly colourful houses, not under the hill, but along the coast of the fjord.

I often came to Narvik after the war and know dozens of warm homes — and

hundreds of even warmer hearts that beat in Narvik and neighbouring Ankenes. They welcomed me, and not only me, as dear guests. I remember all those encounters well, but still not as vividly as the first one, from the haunted "Kerkplein", between 27 and 28 June 1942. I had the impression that the whole town was looking at us with its houses and large bright windows, so characteristic of polar architecture. They have to accumulate a lot of sun in summer, because winter will come very soon, and with it six months with very little sun.

Today is my birthday, seventeenth in order, or disorder, it doesn't matter. Although far from these colourful houses, I looked from window to window, looking for signs of life. In vain. Does anyone look out to see the incoming ship? It is the custom of port places to welcome every new ship.

The sun was shining, but we didn't see it. It went behind the hill, behind the submarine hangar. The rays went high above us. The top of our ship's mast was shining. All of us on deck were silent. Words were on strike. We all seemed to experience nausea the same way.

The ship was approaching the dock. The depression grew with the perimeter of the calm waves of the sea. A terrifying thought and vision! I didn't notice anyone, not a single person, not at the window, not on the hill, not on the street. It was like shooting a movie. Both the first and the second time, someone undesirable, like an intruder, would always appear in the frame and spoil it, and the director wants a deserted city, with a horrible and ghostly appearance. Our ship, and we on it, are the audience watching that great master of horror and dread as he filming a successful shot is right now.

It was around 11 pm. The fjord was quiet, glazed like a mirror. A wide trail was left behind us. The bow of the ship tore the open sea without breaking the grave silence. Only the seagulls flew tirelessly and made shrill voices, wishing us welcome. Only they had the courage to greet the Yugoslavs.

In mid-1958, three Norwegians took Nika Bajin and me and showed us the place where we had once landed. They also showed us the houses from which they had been watching us. They were not the only ones, although it seemed to me that we were alone. I told them: "I like to visit you in Narvik, I also like to visit because my friends are here." So often, with a glass, the conversation would go on and you wouldn't notice the hand on the clock.

On another occasion, I went with a friend to see the other end of this rugged fjord. We went in the direction of Skjomen Fjord. On our way back we passed through Ankenes, a place to the right of Narvik Fjord. He asked me if I would like to go to his aunt's house. He was happy that he could show his aunt a partisan, a Yugoslav, his friend. The house was neat and clean like all Norwegian houses. Their level of housing culture is enviable. His aunt, an elderly woman, welcomed us more than kindly. The house overlooked the fjord. When my friend introduced me, this old woman took me by the hand and led me to a large window that looked out on the harbour, and pointed with her finger.

— There, you landed there! Me and my husband watched them (the Germans) do it!

We talked over coffee and small cookies, which is their custom at this kind of event.

## PARTISANE! KOMMUNIST!

As much army as met us in the port of Narvik, can only be seen when some dignitaries arrive. Meticulously lined up, they waited for the ship to anchor alongside the dock itself. Exactly 4856 km north of Kikinda. When the ship's heavy anchor tore through the grave silence of the fjord, only then did they start yelling at us. Had they waited a bit, they wouldn't have reduced the 900 landed to 115 living after ninety days. We were ordered to go down to the ship immediately, collect our belongings and go out on deck. The torment of Tantalus again. Exhausted men had to descend and carry their belongings back up these long and vertical stairs to the deck. We, who had more strength, helped the others. We carried Gligorin and Maksa Udicki on our backs. They protested, but we were persistent. About three hundred of us, as many as there were in the front part of the ship, went out on deck. Now we just waited for the order to disembark. As before, the people of Banat tried grouping together when disembarking and lining up.

We were the first to leave the ship. We stood in files of three and headed towards the city. We thought we were all in line now. We headed towards the main road. We moved 300-350 meters when we were ordered to stop.

The guard was made up of members of the Alpine units. None over 25 years old. The irony on the faces of these Germans was striking, and somewhere in the depths of their eyes there was fear. I guess they were told that "terrible communists, partisans" were coming. Some comrades were made to show their bags. Maybe there's a bomb inside?

— Partisane! Kommunist! Partisane! Kommunist! — shouted the villains.

During these eight days, as long as the journey from Szczecin to Narvik lasted, we all believed that we were the only passengers on the ship (300 of us comrades). It was only when we disembarked that we saw unknown internees coming out of this big ship in large groups. They were stationed at the other end of the ship. We walked slowly along the road. An endless line was formed. We soon came to a crossroads. On the right was the road to Ankenas (at least that's what the signpost said). We went to the left, to Beisfjord. We go along the foot of a high and bare hill on a winding, bad road.

Covered by the shadow of the hills, we had the impression that the first dusk had fallen, although the sun was shining above our heads. It could have been around midnight, or the first hour of 28 June 1942. My gaze stopped at a mountain. What more could I ask for from the Sleeping Queen. At the very top, the contour of a girl's figure took shape: forehead, nose, mouth, chest, knees. All this on an area of several hundred meters.

I asked some comrades, on the way, if they also saw it, if it was not a mirage.

On another occasion, when I was armed with a film camera, acquaintances told me that one of the sights of Narvik was "Sovende Droning" (Sleeping Queen).

- Yes! We have known each other since 1942. — I said a little proudly, while my acquaintances looked at me strangely, not believing that I had the opportunity to meet her.

On the right side of Sovende Droning, at the foot of the hill along which our line is moving, the Beisfjord fjord suddenly widens, and in front of us a large mountain looms in the haze, closing the view.

The mountain, at the foot of which we were walking, had culverts for water every five hundred meters, which fell from the hill and flowed into the fjord next to us in streams. Exhausted from thirst, and believing that water was within reach, one of the comrades from Kozarčani— Kordun, suddenly threw his whole body to the water that was rushing down. He tried to reach for the drops of the precious liquid with his hands. The force of the falling jet was so strong that it pinned him to the permeable channel itself, threatening to carry him into the fjord. A German came by and put him out of his misery with a machine gun. <sup>1</sup>

There is no greenery here. The granite mountains, with their colour, as well as the aforementioned scene, do nothing to spoil the numbed optimism. There are no shadows in the water, as if the granite hills flowed into it. The fjord seems grey and lifeless. Only when I would throw my head back in a fit of curiosity, would I see the eternal Ruler of these, for me, lost places: the midnight sun. It licks the smooth surfaces of the mountains peaks which have been eroded for millennia by northern winds, melting the glaciers that crashed into the fjord. There are traces left, rare white jets that slide from the top down, without much noise, just enough to give voice to the ancient times.

A strange custom. The sun in these summer days, when it rises, never sets. True, it is not silvery and glowing, like here. It is less yellowish, as if it has sunk

deeper into the depths of space.

## GREEN ARCHWAY

We were escorted by a bunch of grumpy guards. They stopped every five to six meters to hurry us with their gunstocks. We almost ran. We didn't know how many kilometres there were from the port of Narvik to the camp in Beisfjord, so we accepted the rhythm that the Germans imposed on us. We somehow managed the first few kilometres, but the further we went, the more we faltered. At the third kilometre, the machine guns went off three times. So a fourth remained. We took turns carrying Đuka Gligorin and Maksa Udicki. They were not the only ones who needed help.

— Lale! Lale! — the other comrades also called us for help, knowing that we were in relatively good shape. Trećakov, Terzin; Stankov and Arsenov were a little behind in the line and looked for those among us who would help their exhausted comrades. And it wasn't as difficult to carry comrades as it was to bear the gunstock blows on the head. A hellish race and a hellish battle for people.

Among these guards who were pushing us along, there were also a lot of Norwegian quislings. I have never seen bigger villains in all my life in the camp. Even the Germans were no match for them in the craft of violence and sadism.

The hill which, at first, was visible as if in a haze was now more clearly outlined. I assumed the camp was nearby. It had already been more than three hours since our march started, I believe it was the largest column that ever went through this fjord.

In this terrible race, twelve comrades remained on the road. Nobody knows their names. Even after the war, I didn't find out anything specific, not even if and where they were buried.

The column finally reached Beisfjord, a settlement of about fifty houses. Before we entered the barbed-wire camp, we passed the well-set up barracks where about 1000 German soldiers were housed. They laughed, cursed and threw stones at us.

At the very entrance to the camp, we encounter irony, so characteristic of fascism. The gate of the camp was in the form of a solemn triumphal arch on which something was written in German. The archway was decorated with greenery, as a "welcome". Comrades later translated the text for us:

"DILIGENT WORK SETS YOU FREE"

The camp we came to was newly built. It was visible from the barracks. We are the first prisoners to arrive here. The camp was built by Russian prisoners, who left here a few days before our arrival.

Beisfjord is about twenty kilometres from Narvik. The fjord is not navigable from Narvik, except for smaller boats, which the locals use for fishing. Even as we approached the camp, we could hear the deafening roar of a waterfall. It was only when we crossed a bridge that we saw, due to the width of the river, that the waterfall

is impressive in its size. The water is clear, fast and cold. This noise bothered us for a long time. We couldn't sleep because of it. In addition, there was also the midnight sun, "master of these lost northern places", which attacked our eyes even when we squinted. It was as if our eyelids were pricked with needles. Nowhere in the world does the sun warm so weakly, nor sting the eyes as much. Neither blankets on the windows nor blindfolds with handkerchiefs helped.

— How can I imagine that it's night, when it's constantly shining, and I can only sleep at night, — said one of our comrades gloomily.

It was hard for us to get used to it. If only that were our only misfortune.

We stayed in one room, 42 of us from Kikinda. Dušan Bogaroški, the collective's unofficial secretary, made the roll call:

1. Milorad Arsenov (KPJ (short for Communist Party of Yugoslavia) member, born in 1918)

2. Slavko Arađanski (SKOJ (short for Yugoslav Communist Youth Association) member, born in 1921)

3. Dušan Bogaroški (KPJ member, born in 1922)

4. Kosta Bendeskov (SKOJ member, born in 1922)

5. Rade Vujin (KPJ member, born in 1913)

6. Đuka Gligorin (SKOJ member, born in 1920)

7. Živica Dokić (KPJ member, born in 1913)

8. Slavko Đomparin (symp., born in 1894)

9. Dušan Živković (SKOJ member, born in 1921)

10. Milorad Jovičin (KPJ member, born in 1916)

12. Veselin Kljajin (SKOJ member, born in 1923)

14. Milo Lješević (SKOJ member, born in 1922)

15. Cveta Markuš (SKOJ member, born in 1922)

16. Živko Milić (SKOJ member, born in 1923)

17. Dragan Mikalački (SKOJ member, born in 1923)

18. Lazar Ostojin (KPJ member, born in 1922)

19. Zaharije Otoran (KPJ member, born in 1910)

20. Kosta Petkov (SKOJ member, born in 1922)

21. Milan Petrović (SKOJ member, born in 1923)

22. Čedomir Perišić (SKOJ member, born in 1921)

23. Sava Rankov (SKOJ member, born in 1919)

24. Vasa Rackov (KPJ member, born in 1907)

25. Radivoj Rotarov (KPJ member, born in 1915)

26. Luka Kosić (SKOJ member, born in 1924)

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27. Rada Stankov (KPJ member, born in 1920)

28. Ivica Stajić (SKOJ member, born in 1923)

29. Ilija Subotički (SKOJ member, born in 1921)

30. Đura Subotički (SKOJ member, born in 1919)

31. Miloš Teofanov (KPJ member, born in 1920)

32. Đoka Terzin (KPJ member, born in 1922)

33. Pera Terzin (KPJ member, born in 1919)

34. Obrad Trećakov (KPJ member, born in 1919)
35. Maksa Udicki (SKOJ member, born in 1920)
36. Voja Čikić (KPJ member, born in 1902)
37. Svetozar Ilijin (SKOJ member, born in 1923)
38. Nika Bajin (SKOJ member, born in 1918)
39. Čedomir Đomparin (SKOJ member, born in 1921)
40. Slavko Vukić (SKOJ member, born in 1923)
41. Stevan Mihajlov (symp., born 1898)
42. Žarko Stojkov (SKOJ member, born in 1920)

It didn't take long for each of us to find our "schlaf" roommate. We already knew who was sleeping with whom. In fact, each of us wanted to find a suitable companion, in terms of mentality, habits or some other lines of affinity. We had a lot in common, but we also differed in some ways.

The rooms were empty. There were none of those well-known three-storey "boxes". We lay on the floor. I slept with Dragan Mikalački, but this time too, by chance, I found myself with uncle Steva Mihajlov. We spread one blanket and covered ourselves with another. We all had to be satisfied with that.

After that deadly hike, the Germans left us alone for two days without disturbing us. At least that's how it seemed, although we saw that there were always a few SS men in the camp, who were observing something, making arrangements. Some enter, others exit, provoking ominous associations.

We heard that they were looking for an interpreter here as well. Some have even been tested. One had the impression that some comrades were vying for this status. They were mostly people with longer camp experience, who knew that "in certain circumstances" it brings various benefits. We considered that these "certain circumstances" existed here, so we did not squabble over this, nor did we demand that our comrades report for these so-called functions. Apparently, the SS were not very satisfied with the German language tests. They needed a solid translator to convey their orders. And they continued to look for such a person.

We, the people of Banat, were respected by the other comrades in the camp. Back in Gießhübl, even on the ship, those 300 comrades talked about our unity, camaraderie, willingness to help, kind words, and what not. This is what prompted fellow inmates to come to us and ask that Mile Arsenov accept to be an interpreter, trying to convince us that it is extremely important, and that such a position should not be left to "rascals". For us, that matter was not an expression of a longer camp experience, so we did not attach it the proper importance. We figured this out later, but it was too late, especially for us from Kikinda, but for other comrades as well.

#### MILE ARSENOV BECOMES AN INTERPRETER

Two days later, the Germans ordered us all to line up. There was a large field, we called it "plot", in the middle of the camp. Counts were carried out there, arrests made, various announcements issued, inspections, searches, countdowns to the shooting carried out. I have forgotten all the reasons for the mass gathering on the



plot. A small company of SS officers appeared in front of the line. Among them, the highest in rank was a colonel, Dr Martini. We all called him the Russian. He was about 30 years old. He was distinctly dark-skinned, of medium built, and had an Aryan, cold and haughty demeanour. He enjoyed his iron cross hanging around his neck. He would constantly, automatically, throw his head back, fearing, I guess, that his chin would obscure that holy honour. His officer's blouse was decorated with "badges". Slavče from Niš commented on it in his own way:

- Stupid motherfuckers, all die for these badges!

It seems that he was most proud of the medal that showed that he had been on the Russian front. That is why he was regarded by his superiors as a good expert on the "communist issue". He would point that out himself in front of lower-ranking officers, and in front of us. That's why he got the nickname: the Russian.

He stood in front of our line, in which there were about 900 comrades. There were also lower-ranking officers who followed his every move with enjoyment, and, with "suggestive" theatricality he delivered practical lectures, showing how a full-blooded Aryan should and must behave in front of an "inferior race". He marched left and right.

- Interpreter! — he suddenly shouted.

One of our comrades jumped out with unconcealed anxiety, and, when he approached his "highness", he stopped. He began to answer questions in rather poor German. The Russian, unenthused by the conversation, moved away from him and walked the length of the line with his head held high and, devouring us with his eyes, exclaimed violently:

- Let the one who speaks German well come to the front. I know that he exists. And if he doesn't answer, and I find him, he will be shot on the spot.

When he finished his tirade, the frightened interpreter could barely translate the threat. We did not take it tragically, because we had already agreed earlier (the men from Kikinda and the other comrades who came with us) that Arsenov would be the interpreter.

There was silence. We were impatiently waiting for Mile to come up, but he didn't.

"Well, is there no one who speaks German?" — Russian shouted more than asked.

Mile appeared from the right side of the line and walked slowly towards the officers' retinue. I watched him. He had black hair, even blacker eyebrows and an ever-smiling face. He was wearing grey pants, a black jacket and a red shirt. We all followed him with our eyes, as if he were conducting an inspection. He stopped two or three meters away from the Russian who approached him and they started talking.

It was only a matter of seconds before the applause of the line of nine hundred people resounded. We greeted thunderously Mile's acceptance of the duties of interpreter. It was a magnificent image, but also a tragic delusion. If we had any camp experience, we would not have acted like that. If we had thought more, we would have concluded that the Germans don't want the one the inmates want, but another, the one the camp inmates don't want. We should have known that. Remarque probably knew it too, but, surprisingly, he did not impart that experience, that message, in the novel »All Quiet on the Western Front«.

The German officers, who were standing there to greet Arsenov and his "inauguration", apparently stared at each other, and only the Russian laughed, forcedly and unconvincingly. He was aware of our weakness and his power. To such a cunning fox, we threw open cards on the table for him to see.

The Russian spoke to Mile for a long time, and then Mile addressed us, trying to reach everyone with his voice:

- We are now informed about the house rules. We will have breakfast and lunch. We skip dinner, there is none. There will be a roll-call every morning. Each will stand outside the room where he sleeps, and the roll-call will be carried out by the room elders whom we will chose ourselves. No work will be done, except maintaining the camp area.

After the transmitted notification, we were given "at ease". The officers retreated, but Mile remained in conversation with the Russian for some time. We couldn't wait for him to return to the room - so that we can hear the course of the conversation, and how Russian seems to him from "up close".

— Well, he was interested where I had learned the German language and what I did by profession. When I told him that I was a student, he commented: "You students always make us busy!", but he hoped that I wouldn't.

Mile continued to reconstruct the dialogue with the Russian for us, especially emphasising the thanklessness of his role, because the Russian was not satisfied with language assistance only. Mile didn't want to be what he couldn't be. Soon he will have to hand over his "duty" to someone else.

DR MARTINI THE RUSSIAN IS CONFUSED

I remember one of the first roll-calls in front of the barracks where we slept. Cool June morning. We all had to be half naked. The Germans told us that it was in the interest of our health and fitness. We are waiting for the camp commander so that the counting can be done. 900 of us have been waiting for two hours. All eternity. We were cold, and he moved slowly from room to room. This is how the systematic physical exhaustion actually began. Finally, the Russian reached our room. Mile accompanied him. The Russian looked over all of us and asked Arsenov:

—Who are these?

He was amazed by our faces and bodies, because compared to 90% of the inmates, we were in relatively good condition. However, we did not see each other from Kikinda to Baysfjord. This was unusual to the Russian, he wasn't used to having such people in the camp, where he is the commander. He doesn't need those, especially Slavs. He walked slowly from one to the other, taking a good look at each of the forty-two Kikinda men. He reached Živica Dokić, stopped, and seemed to be ashamed of himself for the first time.

— This one is not a Slav. A Slav cannot be so beautifully and harmoniously developed!

Živica was, in fact, a man of exceptional athletic build. It didn't end there. Živica stood calmly, but in such a way that the he emphasized his corpulence more. Then the Russian started to point Živica to Mile with his hands, pointing out that these

parts of the body of the Slavs are not in the same proportion as those of the Germans, and that Živica cannot possibly be a Slav. Theory and practice did not match.

He continued his "racial" inspection and stopped by Duško Bogaroški. He didn't comment, but he couldn't hide his admiration from his eyes. He left, but he remembered us well.

When Mile returned, after the inspection, he was noticeably tired and in a bad mood, which rarely happened to him.

- I cannot do that! I can't! — said Mile, disappointed and from the bottom of his heart, pointing out that Russian demanded too much from him.

His comrades did not allow him to hand over his duty, and I think that at that moment he could not do it, because the Russian would not allow it.

We still had some food from everything we brought from Kikinda. There were maybe two or three kilos of bacon and ham. We were getting just enough to remember where we came from. Hunger began to corrode us like rust. Slowly we all felt it. It was already ordered that we had to be half naked from morning to bed time. Innocently, a man would say: Well, it's June! But Beisfjord is not Kikinda. We got up at five o'clock, and we could enter the room only at eight in the evening. This torture was becoming more and more dangerous every day. The sun, even when it shined, did not warm our bodies, besides, it quickly set behind the surrounding hills. A shadow would hang over the camp. Because of the cold, we ran to the lee side. We sit next to each other and try to keep warm. Our organism was no longer capable of compensating with the internal heat what was lost due to the low external temperature. We survived the first ten days without any major consequences, and then the stone pressed us too. For many comrades this was fatal. Death went on a campaign.

Days went by. One morning after the roll-call, icy drizzle began to fall on our naked bodies. Comrades were standing on the left and right. They waited for the Russian to come by and receive the report from the room master. We stood for more than an hour, but the SS men did not come. And why would he be in a hurry? When he finally came, in a rubber raincoat, we were all wet and cold. The skin rough, with goose bumps. It didn't help that we were huddled together. We bounced and rubbed each other. Across from us stood people from Kordun, Slavonians and other comrades of weaker physical condition. We knew each other well, they often came to our room to talk, for advice. It was a line of corpses, whose heads were large and everything else was withered and distorted. There were about 200 people between the two barracks, who stood opposite each other. Everyone stood in front of everyone's eyes.

The Germans declared the space between the barracks to be streets. We all had to know which "alley" we were from. The Germans would deliberately stop us and ask us. Woe to the one who did not know.

All heads were turned in the direction from which the Russian was expected. Several comrades fell across the street. We knew what that meant. No one could help there. We didn't dare hold them or bring them into the barracks, and even if we dared, we would hardly be able to, because many had difficulty to stand up themselves. We couldn't wait for the Russian to show up and do the count. After that, we would go down into some kind of shelter and our bodies squeezed tight to each other, waited for 8 in the evening in order to be able go to our rooms and cover ourselves with one flimsy blanket. That's why we pooled resources (blankets) for

sleeping, to try and make the body temperature some degree higher.

We also noticed that after receiving the report and counting, on command, the comrades, who were standing far away from us, took shelter in the barracks, which was not a small "kindness" of this villain. The Russian with two SS men reached our lined up and frozen column. However, we no longer acted like ten days before. Uncle Steva, our room leader, handed in the report:

— Commander, room sixteen has forty-four pieces!

Exactly. Forty-four pieces, not people—prisoners. When one of the SS men met us, he would call us: Häftling (prisoner). That was our first and last name.

Uncle Steva stood at the head of our column. One of the two SS men stopped by him, and immediately also the "gorillas" from the escort. He ordered Uncle Steva to spread his arms. He boasted that he was a specialist who could tell who was "Jude" (Jew) and who was not by the appearance of the hand, the arrangement and size of the fingers, as well as by observing the jaw and the head as a whole. For a long time, Uncle Steva held his arms outstretched. The "expert" stared at the innocent hands and occasionally squinted.

- I'm sure this is a Jew, he said as he left.

Uncle Steva later had a lot of problems with his physical appearance. Although one of these "specialists" claimed that Uncle Steva "definitely had to be German", probably because Uncle Steva spoke German.

We all held out our hands, and the SS man watched each one carefully. If he came across something "suspicious", he would discuss it with the commander and another officer. These, in turn, tried to notice how "the enemies of the human race are revealed on a scientific basis".

You should have seen the faces of these villains, their joy at the practical lessons. We knew what "Juda" meant, "and it didn't matter to us whether now, in addition to all the torments, this one would be added to us."

## DEATH RIDES IN A CART

After the "racial control" we got permission to enter the room. We immediately changed our clothes, dried ourselves from the rain and somehow warmed up a little. However, 80% of the comrades had nothing to wear and nothing to change. When they entered the barracks, they could only take the blanket they were covering themselves with and wrap themselves in it. When it was allowed to move around the camp clothed, many people could be seen with blankets wrapped around them. It was a fortune to have a shirt on. The cold and annoying rain could go on for days. The blankets seemed to be made of some kind of paper fibre. After a few days, they started to tear on their own. Ingenious people patched them up, and some of them had fibres hanging from them. People hardly moved around the camp, they rather sat in their rooms and "saved" calories. No one's hair grew, no one shaved, no one cut their nails. Simple: there was no will and no strength. In four years, I only had one haircut and three baths. The whole time, I was full of lice, which, apart from everything else, became the object of daily care. Taking out lice has its own laws. We

destroyed the big ones first and left the smaller ones. It had to be gradual, because they multiplied too much.

I don't know who and when dug up a large pit that was right next to the wire fence of the camp on the left side, before the eyes of the guard who was watching from the turret (watchtower), armed with two machine guns. The barrels were pointed to the camp itself. It was already the twentieth day, when I noticed that they were taking out dead comrades from a room at the other end of the camp and putting them on wooden carts. Three comrades struggled to push the loaded cart up to the wire fence. At the guard's signal, they would pass the cart through a small opening in the fence and reach the excavated pit, turn the cart around and the corpses would disappear. Startled by this sight, I immediately went up to several men from Kikinda who happened to be in the room.

- Do you know how people are buried here when someone dies? The other day I heard Arsenov say that ten comrades die in the camp every day. I didn't know they were buried like this! I went with a few comrades and showed them the pit.

White nights - were long. Everyone would gather in a room and talk about everything that was happening in the camp. We were also the most informed, because the chief interpreter of the camp was among us. Because of this, Mile had to stand at the main gate of the camp all day long, always ready to meet the commander when he came, or any other senior officer. I'm sure Mile had two versions of the encounters, one for us and one for our illegal committee. As the days went by, Arsenov was more and more worried. He forced a smile on his face. There was no longer the former optimism. When we asked him for something, he used to pat us on the face or shoulder. He did it now as well, but he was silent.

There was no work outside the camp, but other things happened. In fact, the programme of our destruction was taking place. We discovered it only as much as the Germans demonstrated it every day. They started lining us up constantly, twenty times a day. We stood for hours and waited for something. SS non-commissioned officers usually came and bullied us in various ways. Their favourite pastime was to select the weakest people and give them a wooden cart. One would have to sit in them, and the other would push him to the place they would determine. Of course, some fell after a few steps, others could not even start. And, of course: they would kick his weak body with their boots. The blows would strike in deep, and the people, so weak, could not even moan from the pain. Where does life come from in them? These unfortunates would not be in the roll-call next morning. The scene repeated: a wooden cart, three people pulling it, a guard letting it pass. They shake them out and sprinkle them with chlorinated lime. We are waiting for tomorrow to see how many "pieces" less will be on the next roll-call.

These scenes seem to have troubled Arsenov the most. He did not speak about them in front of us. He knew he couldn't change anything.

Did we make a mistake in Gishible? — we all asked ourselves. We refused to work with the peasants, because we didn't want to be separated. We blindly respected the commitment: All for one, one for all! And who can predict anything when it comes to concentration camps? Especially when we are all helpless, mentally and physically destroyed, or on our way to being so. In addition to everything else, we were bound by electric wires, isolated from life. Here, even the slogan: "Save yourself

if you can!" no longer works.

We talked a lot about this, although we never "sat down" to discuss everything. It was obvious that something needed to be changed, but given the tasks and the situation, that was not possible. We had people with whom to work, but nothing to work with. Hence the appearance of a hidden gnawing conscience among those who felt collective responsibility.

## AMBULANCE

I do not mention the food we were given because it was not food, not even its substitute. Just enough to say: at least something. All the green moss that was found in the camp was eaten "to our heart's content".

I watched two comrades sit in the sun. One of them got sunburned, and a blister popped on his shoulder. The other peels off his blister, but instead of throwing away that human skin, he puts it in his mouth. The dawn of cannibalism.

Our condition (physical and mental) was on the way of such delirium. Uncle Steva Mihajlov, normally fat, has now lost so much weight that everything was hanging on him. Other comrades, younger ones in particular, feel: the heart is willing, but the muscles do not obey the command. We go barefoot, but it seems to us as if we were wearing shoes made of lead. Ever since I've known Mile Arsenov, he had prominent cheekbones. Now they are completely sullen. Živica Dokić is no longer Hercules, whom the SS man admired, and was surprised that there were Aryans among the Slavs. Rotarov was lying down and could not move from his uncomfortable bed. We had to hide him so that in the morning he wouldn't go out on a murderous stand for the count. It was the same with Đuka Gligorin and Maksa Udicki. We were all so exhausted we could barely move. We were careful not to be caught in the perimeter by an SS man and forced to push a cart with our comrades. There and back, infinitely.

The camp was big. Nine hundred of us (there were less of us every day) did not fill it. What's more, day by day, its capacities increased, while the pit decreased. In one end of the camp, I noticed that two barracks (with 8 rooms, 6x5) were being partitioned from the outside with barbed wire. It was strange: The camp that had already been fenced off, with wire, is now once again fencing off its bowels. - I didn't know what was going on, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be good. One of the comrades said that it would be a clinic for all the sick comrades, so the wire was supposed to be some kind of security, quarantine. At a joint gathering, the Germans told us that everyone who felt sick could go to the infirmary. They should just contact their room masters. As the order and law require.

A guard was posted in front of the infirmary who let everyone in, but no one out. There were not a few who fell for this trick. Visiting your sick comrades meant becoming the burden of the black cart. The clinic was filling up quickly, which was understandable in a way. There were many exhausted and sick people, and the regime in the infirmary was much more tolerable. You didn't have to stand for early morning roll-call and counting, or walk around naked all day. Not to mention the

bullying.

In the evening, in our room, when we were all together, there would be a loud discussion about the ambulance. According to some: you should go there because there is no torture, lying down will relieve physical exhaustion. They would also add some more "advantages", emphasising that "treatment" is salvation. Others said that you shouldn't go there, because no one can say for sure what the Germans really wanted with that infirmary.

Discussions came and went. Everyone had their own opinion. We did not, therefore, come to a common position. One day, broken by the disease (even our medicines could not help), Duka Gllgorin, Radica Rotarov, Maksa Udicki, Kosta Petkov and Miloš Lukin-Liba went to the infirmary. The health condition of these comrades was such that they really could not stay in the room any longer. During the day, the Germans visited the barracks and forced all those who were lying down to go to the infirmary. It was believed, still, that the infirmary was medically supplied and that it would relieve the pain of the totally exhausted comrades as much as possible. The next day, a group left again. In a few days, we were halved.

Except for those from the first group, who really were in need of medical care, all who went to the infirmary were by no means worse off than the rest of us.

But they were gone! In the days of dispersal, one evening, a comrade entered the room and said:

— There's Mile sitting in front of the barracks, covered in blood!

The comrades went outside and brought him inside. He was really all bloody and beaten up. We washed him a little, wiped him off and stopped the bleeding from the face. I just found out that he was no longer the main interpreter of the camp. It wasn't that important, because it was obvious that every day there were more and more risks, and less and less chance that some of our ideas, which Mile fought for, would come to life. The following day I found out what it was about. The Russian demanded, upon the intervention of another SS member, that Mile must carry a club and beat those of our comrades who, due to "laziness" (actually exhaustion) "wouldn't" do what the Germans ask. Mile refused, stating that the cause was not laziness but insufficient food.

-Those who don't lack food can go to the infirmary! — said the Russian.

Mile once again informed the camp commander that he could not and would not hit his comrades. The word "comrades" infuriated the Russian. He ordered two German soldiers to punish Mile, and one needn't waste any words to explain how they do it. The persecution of Mile began the very next day.

— What does that student think that we don't know that he is a communist! - shouted the SS men furiously and ominously.

Two soldiers and a non-commissioned officer attacked Mile, forcing him to push a cart containing one of his comrades for two hours. He did squats until he was exhausted. It was obvious that they were only looking for a formal reason to liquidate Mile. The comrades made a decision and told Mile to take shelter in the infirmary. Steva Mihajlov came forward to speak, advocating that Mile should not go to the infirmary on any account. There was another reason. We were already halved, and it was not at all easy to say goodbye to the remaining comrades now. A larger group, led by Čeda Perišić, was preparing for the infirmary, resisting everyone who said that one should not go there.

- Do you think that the Germans brought us here to cure us, like in an air spa?  
— uncle Steva asked, but also answered.

I made the final decision, although I had not hesitated before, not to leave this room. Whatever happens. It was the most fateful decision I made in those days under the influence of Uncle Steva. At that moment, I was not aware of what it meant for me.

In our mutual relations, us younger men, we referred to comrades who have now gone to the infirmary. We heard a lot of useful advice from them. They were selfless and accommodating. Uncle Steva did not belong to the breed of people who talk a lot. Such was his nature. He would give advice only when someone approached him. This time it seemed to me that, although he was speaking to someone else, he was speaking to me. I listened to him. The group led by Perišić left. They were his comrades from the IV quarter of Kikinda.

- Go on, just hurry up, so they don't close the infirmary! Uncle Steva added wryly.

- You motherfucker, much do you know about it! - snapped Perišić.

Mile could be seen in the half-empty room for a few more days, and then, I suppose, he himself made the decision to go to the infirmary. On the eve of 26 July 1942.

TELL MY MOM...

Dragan Mikalički, with whom I was covering myself under the same blanket, fell ill. He had high fever, was sweating, unable to get up at all. I wet a dirty towel and put it on his head, so that the fever would drop. Anyway, we had agreed to remain together, "whatever happened".

I was inside the camp and I didn't come to my room for two or three hours. A little affected by my carelessness, Dragan said sadly when he saw me:

- Well where are you? I need to get a towel wet. Sit right there, next to me!

Uncle Steva was sitting next to me and he would take every opportunity to say (which was quite unlike him):

- These donkeys, let them go to the infirmary!

He stubbornly did not accept Perišić's decision, looking at our, now almost empty, room. Listening to uncle Steva's indignation, Dragan suddenly started to cry. I tried to reassure him, claiming that the fever would pass, and that everything would be fine. Uncle Steva joined me, but that didn't help, Dragan was still crying.

— Slavko, when you get home, tell my mom that I couldn't stand it. I am very sick! — now already sobbing, Dragan addressed me. Well, now that you go to the infirmary, you'll feel better when you take the medications. -I tried to comfort him, although, looking at him, I didn't believe that we'd ever walk the streets of Kikinda again like we used to.

After Dragan's tears and mournful dialogue, I left the room and did not return quickly. When I came back, Dragan was not there. I didn't know and I didn't ask anyone who took him to his death.



There were only ten of us left. It could have been far more, because in my opinion, there were no more than twelve who were really sick. The others had their own alibi, their own "motive". They wanted to listen to uncle Steva Mihajlov.

I talked to Uncle Steva many times about this, here in Kikinda, after the war.

"What could you do, they all thought they were smart." I told them, and they said: What do you know! — Uncle Steva would say resignedly, evoking the horror of Beisfjord.

## THERE'S MILE!

The twenty-seventh of July 1942. Eight in the evening. The sun was high and the camp was dimly lit. Quiet evening, even warm for Beisfjord. There was not even a breath of wind. The camp was no longer as crowded as in the beginning. People were missing. They were not in the rooms, not even in the camp grounds. Where were they? Weren't they all in the infirmary? There was no answer. The desolation of the camp instilled more and more fear in those who could still be seen there. The Germans didn't come to the camp either. They were gone. That was even more murderous than the storm. Surely they would come up with something terrible!

There used to be only one guard standing in front of the infirmary, now there were many more of them. We didn't see anyone going out. German officers would put some kind of rubber protection on their boots, soak them in some liquid and only then open the door of the infirmary. All access to these barracks was forbidden, and we did not know how many people were in them.

Several guards ran from barrack to barrack and called for a line-up. We lined up. The Russian appeared with a few more SS men. With them came a new interpreter Ale, a Muslim from Bijeljina, Rogatica or Vakuf. I don't remember, but it's not that important. He translated the words of the Russian:

— All detainees will be evacuated from this camp, because spotted typhus has appeared. In order for the rest of us to be saved, we would be in quarantine for six weeks.

At the time of the announcement, the trucks had already arrived, everything was ready for the new transport. Of course, there was no typhus, but this terrifying word was used as an excuse. We were ordered to take our things and stand each in front of our room (barrack). Of the forty-two of us, now only ten stood:

1. Mihajlov Stevan
2. Bendeskov Kosta
3. Subotički Ilija
4. Subotički Đura
5. Bajin Milka
6. Đomparin Slavko
7. Đomparin Čedomir
8. Živković Dušan

9. Stojkov Žarko

10. Vukić Slavko

About ten meters from where we were standing, there was a yard, at the bottom of which was barbed wire. We saw that there are now even stronger guards around the ambulance. We suspected the worst. A column of inmates passed by us. At first, we didn't understand why they were passing this way and where they were going, because there was a camp wire about ten meters from us. A few seconds later we saw a gap in the wire. Comrades passed through it and were loaded into trucks. There was no big rush. There weren't even enough trucks to transport us in one transport to Narvik, where we were scheduled to disembark.

We were the last to leave the camp. Some were using the waiting time to count their Stevas who were traveling. There were about five hundred of us, and nine hundred arrived in Beisfjord.

We waited and watched silently. It was as if we had a premonition that a storm was brewing behind this silence. The premonitions came true. Fifty meters ahead, we saw three guards with machine guns leading four camp inmates in the direction of the river. The barracks obscured our view, so we could not see them from then on. Suddenly machine guns sounded, and immediately after that the guards appeared. They were in a hurry to get new victims. They were usually accompanied by one inmate called Marković. This man from Zagreb spoke German and was in the infirmary. Uncle Steva knew him well. Marković was a merchant by profession and almost the same age as Uncle Steva. They met during the first days of the camp in Beisfjord. As things progressed, we also concluded that Marković served the Germans as an interpreter but also as bait. He took his comrades out of the barracks and took them to the shooting range. The machine guns sounded several times and this Marković always returned with the guards to the infirmary. But he'll meet his doomsday, too.

After that, the next group of comrades was brought out from "infirmary".

— There's Mile! - almost all of us cried out in despair, noticing that Milorad Arsenov was among the four men taken out.

He was wearing a black jacket and a red plaid shirt, which was dirty, but not so much that the colour of the revolution could not be seen. With sad and downcast faces, we were waving goodbye to our Mile. The barracks again obstructed us taking a last look at him. Deadly bullets rang out and for a moment there was grave silence. As far as we could see, the Germans in this first wave shot about fifty comrades. The hot barrels stopped, but just long enough for us, as the last ones, to leave the camp. The music of death then continued.

VAVA

Tragic scenes replaced one another at cinematic speed. Mile is gone. Whose turn was it now? Where did the strength come from to survive even this far? Thoughts were swarming, but they didn't have time to fully express themselves, because a new drama was approaching.

Father and son Đomparin - Slavko and Čedomir, had been with us since the "Curia". Slavko was fifty-three years old. The tragic whirlwind toyed with him like a wheat stalk. While we were still in Kikinda, his wife was shot. He stoically endured the trials of death, hunger, thirst, illness and uncertainty, always ready to make a sacrifice, so that at least his son would survive countless horrors. For a long time he resisted the onslaughts of the indefatigable camp demons. Perhaps he would have survived in that superhuman but also unequal battle with death, if he had not, despite all the hardships, looked at his son every day, at his pallor and exhaustion. It was therefore more difficult for him than for us. He felt powerless to do anything to stop the black wheel of the family's destiny. Numerous mental upheavals, as well as physical exhaustion caused Vava, as we all used to call him, to cross the limit of reason and go crazy. He was constantly shouting, waving his arms uncontrollably and trying to run away.

We were thinking about how to get him out of the camp and take him with us, because the Germans applied a "summary execution" to such people. They didn't take them to the pit, they would shoot them immediately, on the spot.

The guards were standing in front of and behind the wire, and it was hard to assume that they would not discover him. We ourselves did not believe much in Vava's salvation, but we decided to try, thus putting our lives on the line as well. The plan was hatched: two less exhausted comrades would take him under arms, hold him tight, pass by the guards and climb onto the truck, all on the assumption that Vava would "be in the presence of his senses" in those critical moments.

Finally, it was our turn to go out through the hole on the wire. We tried in every way to appease Vava. Somehow we succeeded.

We were loaded into a truck, which had barbed wire instead of a tarp. We had to sit. Every movement was dangerous. Germans with machine guns were standing on the truck's side steps, on both sides. Behind each truck was a motorcycle with a trailer on which a machine gun was mounted. We covered the road to Narvik in about twenty minutes. The bad road caused a bump. Looking at the German guards, I felt, and this impressed me, that they were afraid of us! Two large tugs were waiting for us in the port. They were already packed. Everyone was standing, only their heads were sticking out.

They put us in the back barge. By chance, we found ourselves next to a group of men from Melenci. There were about fifteen of them. We asked about the men from Pančevo, but they couldn't tell anything about them.

-How many of you are there? - asked a man from Melenci.

— Now only nine!

On other occasions, people would be shocked and would curiously ask: How? Why? Where? Did it have to be? Here, it is accepted as normal, as an integral part of life. The fact that you wouldn't be around tomorrow, and someone else the day after tomorrow, excites you only in that someone managed to live a few more days. That's what awaits me, I just don't know when! It is not about obsessing, but about helplessness, not about cowardice, but about apathy and heroism in its own way. The camp knows no alternatives.

## THIRST

We set off into the setting sun. Apart from us and the Germans, there was no one anywhere. Narvik seemed to repeat its silence. The small tug, which was pulling us, was barely moving. At the first moment, it seemed to us that we were going the same way we came, but it was not so, because the landmarks were different. On the decks of the barges stood a German guard with machine guns aimed. On the side of the convoy was a small boat. He carried several German SS officers.

The weather was sunny and warm. On another occasion, one would have enjoyed it. I tried to find that opportunity in my mind, but in vain.

(Twenty-six years later, when I travelled in the same direction with a few comrades from Kikinda, on a yacht in the company of the Narvik mayor, they listened while I was recounting this drama. Their expressions seemed to try to weave themselves into the hours of 8 July 1942).

Maybe two hours had passed since we left Narvik. We sailed into an estuary of the very broad fjord of Narvik. A small tugboat, burdened by the weight of two tugs, was slowly braking with its two-stroke engine, competing with its own sound, which, in the form of an echo, returned to us from the nearby hills. Immersed in thoughts of what we survived less than forty days in Beisfjord (shooting that had just begun, the uncertainty of the journey, preoccupied with nightmarish thoughts that were the result of psychological tension), we did not even notice that the water in the tow reached almost midway up the calves of our bare legs. When I wanted to see where we were sailing, I had to tiptoe around, and even then I could only see the tops of the surrounding mountains, and when I jumped I would see a piece of the sea surface. The third hour was passing. Our legs started to hurt from standing. We had nowhere to sit, because of the water level. We leaned on each other and rested like that. We waited impatiently for the tugboat to pull up to a bank. The mountains follow us, while we sail, or rather caress the surface of the water.

Our old acquaintance, "one of the riders of the apocalypse" — thirst, came up again. We frantically looked down at the barge, at the water, which was already up to our knees. No! — I said to myself, this is sea water, salty and undrinkable. We can drink, yes, but what you say is one thing and what you do is another.

I remember that Pannonian folk saying: "Beggars can't be choosers". We were hungry and thirsty. Thirst overpowered and suppressed hunger.

We all dropped our heads into the water, muddy and dirty from two hundred and fifty unwashed legs and trousers. Just as I convinced myself that the water was not that terrible after all, I remembered that probably one of the comrades at the other end of the barge had urinated. Well, I guess not all of them? Just in case, I "removed" the surface layer with my hands, hoping that it was cleaner underneath. And it was. When I scooped it up with my hands for the third time, I noticed the remains of a large bowel movement floating on the surface. My illusions sank. I firmly decided to bear the thirst. Let it be what cannot be.

My decision did not last long. The thirst was becoming unbearable. How to resist a temptation of the water that offered itself, was there, within reach. I found a compromise solution. I will drink water strained through a handkerchief. I don't even know where I got this piece of cloth from. I turned my head back and held the handkerchief to my mouth. A comrade from Melenci grabbed the water from the

barge with his hands and poured it through the handkerchief. I drank the first sip and "survived". My tongue was running around my mouth. Everyone was watching me curiously.

- How is it? — the man from Melenci asked a little sheepishly.

- Well, it's not bad, you can drink it. — I answered comfortingly, although I still felt disgusted.

Actually, each of us knew that it was a horror, but the "public" would be informed in the style: it's not bad. Exactly as the saying: »Beggars can't be choosers« teaches us.

## BJØRNFJELLET — THE DEATH HILL

The drive took about five hours. We arrived at a wooden quay. A mass of Germans and Norwegian quislings wearing special uniforms awaited us. We were more afraid of these native villains than of the Germans. We had to wait for the comrades from the first barge to disembark, because the quay was too small. We were all near the field up a hill. We sat and waited for the truck transport from the port.

The first comrades were loaded and went somewhere up the hills. There were only four trucks, so we had to wait for them to come back. One young man, a Bosnian, was in the first tow, but he did not make any sound after disembarking. The comrades managed to get him through without the Germans noticing it. We were all sitting down. Suddenly, he stood up and started to lash out at a certain guard. The German did not understand what it was about, routinely and soberly ordered someone else to grab him and take him aside. A replay of the scene from Beisfjord with Slavko Đomparin. Bullets ended the agony of the young man's madness. I don't know what this place is called, but I noticed a hydroelectric power station three hundred meters away.

We sat for a long time and waited for the trucks to return, so we concluded that the quarantine was not located near the disembarking site. They finally arrived. I have never pushed myself to be among the first, so this time I was among the last to board. The truck set off for the unknown hills. A bumpy road led through the open field. There was almost no vegetation, just some poor moss.

It took more than an hour of driving to reach the intersection. The truck swerved to the right. Three hundred meters away, we saw the comrades who had been delivered earlier. They were all sitting or standing on a hill, surrounded by German guards. We disembarked and I started walking towards the hill. That place, from a security point of view, was ideal. After all, that's why it was chosen. There were no living souls around for at least thirty kilometres. There is a cleared area around the hill. The Germans, armed with machine guns, stood hidden behind large stone boulders.

We were saddened by this stinginess of nature. Bare land all around us. There is not even a bird. We would often make friends with the clouds, which knew how to descend to our heads. Hunger and thirst undermined our faith and strength. We were mentally overexerted. Somehow we managed to master the seas, shape up and analyse the new situation with due seriousness. We came to believe: that they were

grinning aggressively. Their boots and leather gloves shone. They just waited to look at the gaping barrels of their machine guns that were waiting for a convenient moment to walk over us.

Ale the interpreter appeared; he was holding a club in his hands (how soon did he find it?). He ordered us all to line up on that rough and mossy ground. Somehow we lined up in a three-row column. "Conscientious" Ale did not miss the opportunity to try out the club, to teach some of his comrades "order". From some kind of valley, quite far from us, the heads of a few SS men began to be seen. One of them went ahead and the others followed him. They were grinning aggressively the whole time. Their boots and leather gloves shone. When they were ten meters from the line, Ale shouted "attention". We did not react in a military sense. Ale turned and walked towards the group of officers to report. They came up and stopped around the middle of the line and that's how they introduced themselves to us.

Among them was the most striking camp commander, Hauptsturmbannführer Seifert (After the war, he was captured and tried as a war criminal in Belgrade, where he was shot). Seifert, with his hundred kilos, seemed terrifying. He wore a monocle with a large dioptré, behind which small squinting eyes peered. He always wore black leather gloves and black boots. The outside of his right boot was all worn out because he was in the habit of always hitting it while walking with the long whip that he carried in his right hand. He covered his head with the cap of the Alpine SS troops. He boasted that Hitler had personally hung an iron cross on his chest.

"Communist pigs, you are here to be quarantined, and if no disease breaks out in six weeks, you will be sent back where you came from." If the disease does break out, you will all be shot. Here you will build a camp (barracks) for yourselves and you will go to work every day. If you work well, you will get better food. — Ale translated Seifert's words of welcome.

After the speech, the officers retreated to that valley and disappeared into the barracks that had been built for them and the guards.

That Death Hill, as we called it, actually Bjørnfjellet (Bear Hill), was about seventy meters in diameter. It was overgrown with moss that was not easy to pull out with bare hands. It would have to be cut and only then pulled away from the stone to which it was firmly clinging.

We had the task of pulling all the moss from this hill with our hands. We didn't have any tools. This was too much effort for our physical capabilities. We worked for two days with our bare hands - and were completely exhausted. The SS men forced us to continue the work we had started by beating us. The tools did not arrive, although it was talked about. We continued pulling out this grass that resembled a turf, about twenty centimetres thick. We worked like that for another ten days, and then the hand tools arrived.

The food in the camp was the same as in Beisfjord (about 700-800 calories per day). Early on, the weather was fine on Death Hill. We believed that sleeping on this soft moss was more comfortable than sleeping on boards. We were mistaken! The moss was damp, and you would feel it if you lay down for a while. The moisture would first penetrate the blanket and continue its course to the bones. So, in addition to all the trouble, we were also wet. It seemed to be taking out its revenge on us because of the operation to clean up the Death Hill. In order to avoid this trouble, Nika Bajin, Kosta Bendeskov and I managed to tear the moss from the place where we slept, with great efforts. Now it's cold stone under us, but at least it's not wet. Each of us will have a blanket. They would put one down, on a rock, and from the remaining two they would make a kind of tent, crawl into it and sleep without any covering. It seems to me that even today I feel the unpleasant perspiration of our bodies in the tent.

The rain started to fall, a boring and long drizzle. There was even snow, although it was July. The nights were very cold. It seemed to us that it would be more difficult to lie down at night than to work during the day and get beaten. We worked out and agreed upon the sleeping technique. As there were three of us sleeping in improvised tents, one had to sleep in the middle, but not always. We changed the "middle" one every night. Namely, they were much warmer than those on the side, because they would get warm from the bodies of their comrades. It would be a great privilege. Those on sleeping at either end woke up after two or three hours (if they fell asleep) and turned around as if on command. It wouldn't matter to the middle ones, but it did matter to the comrades at either end, because their bodies got warm on one side only. There, that is how we fought for life.

I remember getting up in the morning. We would stand up like old men, stiff and numb. We would re-establish the previous anatomy with gymnastics. We now had a few shovels, axes, pickaxes and a few wooden carts, but the work on removing turf advanced slowly, in spite of the bullying by the guards. People simply could not work due to exhaustion. Seifert used to come to the inspection every day and beat us with his whip. He threatened us that he would not give us anything to eat, but in vain. Seifert ordered Ale to choose leaders of the working dozens from among the inmates. That's how we were divided, and those who put in an effort were promised a double portion of food.

Ale selected thirty eligible inmates. Until now, the Germans used to beat us with their butts, and now the leader was doing it with a club, at the request of his teachers.

— There, I have to beat you. You won't work, and the German wants to beat me. I love me more than you - said leader Ibro.

— I'll do like this, and when you come to power, then you do as you want! — Ibro would continue to lay down his principles.

The Germans now demanded from Ale and his leaders that the job of removing the moss be accelerated, because there was also "mechanisation": shovel axes and carts. The sooner we clear the Death Hill, it would be, as they say, primarily of use to us, because the barracks would be erected immediately, and so sleeping outside under blankets would stop. Determined to bring this work to an end, the Germans and the leaders-gendarmes started to "cut heads". The Germans would reward group leaders with bread if they showed good results in the organisation of work, and especially if they denounced one of their comrades for "striking". During those days on Death Hill, I saw for the first time a German throw a club away from the place of work, and order one of the inmates to bring it. The unfortunate man left, but did not reach the club. Shots rang out. Motivation: he wanted to escape. The murdered man lay there for two days, until a larger group of our comrades dug up a large pit about five hundred meters from the camp. The first victim was dragged away in a cart and handed over to the depths of the earth for safekeeping.

Even after two weeks, Death Hill, despite the "mechanisation", was not cleaned of moss. Ober etc. Führer Seifert regularly went out to the work site and frantically beat anyone with a whip. He told the guards to kill every slacker. We worked at least twelve hours a day. Six to ten comrades were shot every day, and four to six camp inmates died from hunger, beatings and hard work. The decimation was sudden and numerous. In one part of the camp there was a "pit" for the dead. When they would line up in the morning for the roll-call, Seifert would come, receive the report and go to the "dump" where the corpses had to be lined up side by side, for him to see them one by one. Then he would return to the line, and on a piece of paper, which he carried in his hand, added Ale and the cooks who were not in the line.

— Ales in ordnung! —he would make a point and only then would we start working.

I believe that here, on Death Hill, there was something unique that needed to be shown to the Führer's henchmen and the crazed Nazi youth. That's probably why the film crew showed up one day. I also remember the sequences. They filmed us standing in line and receiving food, working, etc. Individuals would stand in front of the camera, and I was among them. Seifert went with the cameramen and showed the details that should be immortalised. He was afraid that something would be forgotten, so he ran - left and right, the camera would record his typically scientific approach to work. Perhaps it was precisely this footage - documents that were the most unpleasant for him when he was held accountable for the crimes on Death Hill in Belgrade.

One day the barracks arrived in trucks. They were unloaded down on the road, about three hundred meters from the camp. We all shuddered at the thought that we were going to carry them around and place them on bare stones.

No one kept record of how many comrades were killed and where. It seems that only our chronicler uncle Steva Mihajlov, who kept the diary, knew that. He also hid it from us men from Kikinda, not because of mistrust, but for reasons of greater security and psychological relief. We later found out about this diary. Many began to



"sweat" and threaten Uncle Steva. The diary was destroyed, and its author barely escaped the worst. It was regrettable that Uncle Steva's diary was destroyed when Ale and his friends were not there. If that document had been preserved, I would now know the exact number of comrades who disappeared while moving the barracks, but I assume that there were a hundred of them.

We called this road from the main road to Death Hill "sunken submarine". When, after hard work, walking and beating, we would return from work tired in the evening, we couldn't wait to see the "sunken submarine" in the distance. We knew that we were putting off fatigue and beating until tomorrow. The "sunken submarine" is actually a single rock about thirty meters long that looks like a submarine, but without a hull! (After the war, I went to Death Hill three times. The first time I discovered it easily, and the following sighting came after searching through the overgrown vegetation. The third trip made me sad. If it hadn't been for the "sunken submarine", the place would not have been known at all, and over two hundred Yugoslavs remained there).

What we had to pay, we paid. The barracks were moved to Death Hill. The assembly has started. I almost believed it was in our best interest. We would not have to sleep outside, we'd be sheltered from the rain and snow, and the shift rotation and the privilege of the man in the middle would end.

After moving into the barracks, the Germans forced us to work on the road. From the place where we disembarked to the "sunken submarine" the road was temporary, it did not go any further. Now we had to continue this way towards the railway line that went from Narvik to Sweden. The route led to the small station of Bjørnfjellet (Bear Hill). Many years later, when I came here, it was clear to me that we had not fulfilled the plan, because we did not reach Bjørnfjellet. We remained on Death Hill exactly six weeks — as much as we were told at the beginning. We worked a little but suffered a lot.

## THE RACE FOR LIFE

It was Sunday. The SS officer on duty on yesterday's route was not satisfied with the performance, so, accordingly, he handed over the report to Seifert when he came to the camp.

We lay and talked a little longer. Nobody dreamed of what was in store for us. Sunday came, and everything seemed normal until noon. Then Seifert appeared with his escort and ordered Ale to line up the entire camp. He was zealous, but he barely managed to gather the inmates who crawled into barracks and lay down, gathering strength for new work trials.

The camp was already surrounded by barbed wire. There were guards standing in three places. Now, when we were all together, Ale began to translate Seifert's "raw thoughts." Among other things, he said that a sports event would be organised. It is no sports event when soldiers and non-commissioned officers with rifles and clubs are positioned around the entire camp from the outside of the barbed wire. They were 10-15 meters away and were waiting for the »Tour de Bjørnfjellet« to

start. - Seifert arrived in front of the line with his bodyguards and tapped impatiently on his right boot with his whip. It seemed to him that Ale was slow in explaining the "rules" to us. Ale continued to translate meticulously, starting almost every sentence with: "Mr. Commander . . . « as if it mattered to us. Besides, he could have communicated something between the lines, because Seifert did not speak our language. But he was and remained Ale, a degenerate and a foul man.

— Everyone will have to run six laps around the camp (one lap could be about 250-300 meters) and beyond. Whoever does not run all six laps will be killed. Mr Commander says that they will be killed because the German army will not feed the lazy and the sick. Mr Commander says that they only the healthy should remain, and running should make the selection — Ale tried to convey the "rules of the game" as faithfully as possible, so that everything would be regular.

It was as if the younger ones had more strength, although we all "disposed" of 38-45 kilograms. Fighting to the last atom was the motto of our barely existing life.

How can we run when we can barely walk? No one believed that he was capable of making even one lap around the camp wire. Now it was quite clear to us what those guards around the wire with clubs were there for. We counted them as hurdles to overcome.

The organiser has prepared everything for the start. We, who were supposed to run this race for life, said goodbye to each other with a glance. The starter was determined, and the referees were in their place, so that no one would get confused and forget some of the laps. We were standing in the camp perimeter in front of the main exit. That was the start line. We were approaching to take the "good" positions. (To be or not to be, that is the question.) This fateful question became the motto of all the inmates present. The race track was about three meters wide, uneven, with climbs and larger stones that had to be stepped on or jumped over. Along the path, barbed wire, and behind it German soldiers with butts and long clubs. Ale and the leaders tried to make sure that we were all at the "start" line. They scattered across the camp and pulled out comrades from some hidden places. The main gate opened and Seifert signalled to Ale for the gladiatorial race to begin.

Seifert grinned, walked left and right, raised himself on tiptoes to see how many of us there were, and had a confidential conversation with his officers. It seems that he expected us to shout: "Viva Caesar"!

Ale stopped in front of us. Silence. The only thing that could be heard was Seifert's hitting the boot with his whip.

— At my signal you will start, and when you go outside, then run to the right around the camp. I won't have anyone not run six laps. Whoever runs all the laps should enter the camp, and the others: they go there! — translated Ale pointing with his hand to a place outside, by the wire.

— Attention, go! - shouted the main interpreter.

We began to cover meters with our shaky knees, taking care to feel as rarely as possible the butts and clubs of the guards who were impatiently waiting for us by the wire. Everyone devised a running plan.

I was eighteen years old and mentally I was ready for trials. The tactic was simple: you need to get past the guards faster, and then suddenly slow down and rest as much as possible. Theory and practice are not the same though. It was necessary to implement the tactics consistently.

Still, I ran. I wanted to live! When I somehow ran all six laps, I entered the camp and found only a few comrades. I placed myself behind some shelter and watched the "finish" of the race. I was 18 years old, that probably saved me. Many were not my age. There were many disabled men. Hunger had been exhausting most of them for months, especially those who came from Jasenovac, Niš, Sarajevo and Zagreb. It was fatal for them. They simply couldn't even flee, walk, let alone run. Warily they made their way past the barbed wire and the raging guards. Seifert took the clubs from his students' hands and waved them furiously at the runners, showing how to treat or cure "laziness".

Some of the comrades would endure one, some two laps of walking around the wire, and then, from the heavy beating, they would simply give up the other laps of life. They would stagger to the place for those who were written off, or as Ale said: "Whoever can't run should stand there!" The Germans also brought some to this place and handed them over to the guard who was guarding these comrades. One comrade fell from exhaustion. Seifert was dragging him along the rocky ground, hooking his right fist with a whip. One of the SS officers ran up and continued to drag him to the place for those written off. Comrades entered the gate covered in blood. Many of them were moaning. Pains could not be hidden, kept to oneself.

The torture lasted for about one hour. About sixty comrades were standing in the place for those who were written off. Everyone had to stand, even the one who was dragged tied to a whip. Seifert first counted them, and then ordered something. The column was about to head towards the pit, which our comrades had dug up, during the first days of their stay on the Death Hill.

I stood with Živković and Bajin. One of them said:

— Well, there's Uncle Steva over there!

We couldn't believe that we were going to say goodbye to such a friend and advisor: The line of people sentenced to death was just about to go to the place from which there was no return. Suddenly, Uncle Steva got out of the line and headed towards Seifert.

— Now they will kill him! - someone said in a trembling voice.

Seifert, seeing Uncle Steva approaching, took his revolver out of its holster. I expected the worst. We didn't hear the conversation, but we saw the epilogue. Uncle Steva left the written-off column. He returned to the camp with his head bowed and directed himself to the barracks. We went after him, overjoyed that he came back. We didn't ask him anything in those moments. When he calmed down a bit, the remaining Kikinda men gathered around him, eagerly awaiting an explanation.

- Now you think that I told him God knows what. I saw what was in store for me, so I used a trick. Well, you see, it was worth it. I got out of the line so that I could impose myself on him, so that he could see me. And you know that Seifert is a bloated frog, primitive and vain, and I told him in German: "Mr Commander, I'm an older man, and if I can't run, that doesn't mean I can't work!", that is all! We even talked. He was surprised that I spoke German so well, but he still snapped at me: "March back to the camp!"

Uncle Steva smiled, pleased with the unexpected turn of events.

- Come on, it will get better! — he ended his story with his favourite saying.