

## The Stolen Homeland

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**Anton Flamm, Apatin** p. 43-60

*Two stolen years. Years which you never forget*

In October, 1944 our town Apatin was occupied by the Russian Army and the Tito-partisans. At this time Apatin had a population of about 17,000, of which 95% were German. After the establishment of a Yugoslavian-communist local government we Germans no longer had any good times.

The partisans were given the Okay to spend 24 hours ransacking the town. They entered houses and apartments taking what they wanted. But since the residents suspected something, they were able to hide some of their valuables. At our house they only took my new hunting coat (St. Hubert) for immediate use. One afternoon in late November the town drummer summoned the community asking that all men between the ages of 18 and 45 and all women from 18 to 35 should pack warm clothes, blankets and food supplies for several days and report to the train station. (The only exception was for women with babies less than a year old.) Those choosing not to obey this order would be punished. Everybody was loaded onto cattle wagons and freighted off to work camps in Russia where many perished.

In early January, 1945 all boys born in 1928 had to work at the edge of town chopping wood. On February 1st the commander ordered that all those born in 1929 should report the next morning at 7 a.m. at the Weindel warehouse with sleeping gear, eating utensils and food supplies for several days. When my school friend Klaus and I reported to the gathering crowd, several men over 45 joined the group. The partisans ordered us to form four lines. After a while the camp commander came. He was a Croatian (Schokatz) from Stapar who cynically said: "The good times are over for the Schwaben". He told us that we would be chopping wood in the forest near Doroslovo. Three partisans accompanied us, so we dared not run off because they would shoot immediately. In the afternoon we arrived at a farm belonging to a German, where we had to clean the rooms. Once that was finished we had to make our beds in a corner. There was enough straw to make a solid padding. We had a place mat and a thin blanket along. Placing the mat onto the straw made for a relatively good bed. After that we built a camp fire in the yard in order to melt snow to water. The water from the farm well was no longer suitable for drinking. A cook was appointed to make our sparse meal. In the morning we had roux (flour) soup. At noon we had a thin bean soup, and in the evening we had another thin soup; every day.

The next morning we were in the forest chopping around in the thicket. Two men worked on reducing two cubic yards by chopping it to one nicely-stacked cubic yard of wood. The thicker trunks had to be split. It was a tough job, the food was bad and insufficient. Luckily we had some of the supply we brought from home, even though it didn't last

long. After about 20 days the camp commander came to check on our progress. He spoke with the guards and had us line up in four rows. With a sardonic grin he said that we were done here and would get a new job. The next morning had us packing our things at 6 a.m. and on our way back to the Apatin camp. Once we made it to camp we were then ordered out to the huge fields to harvest the corn which had not been brought in during the fall. We had to begin working right away, and the only food we received was the roux soup with beans. Several women cooked a large pot of corn which tasted pretty good with a bit of salt. After about ten days we were brought back to the Apatin camp again. On the way we passed my house and I saw my mother talking with two of the neighbor ladies. When she noticed me she waved and cried bitterly. I was not able to talk with her.

Two days later three guards escorted us to the Baranja region of Hungary where the Russians took over. With mixed feelings and hanging heads we faced the uncertain. Our quarters were an abandoned sugar factory. The German-Russian front could not be far away because we heard distinct sounds of battle. We again lined up in four rows while the major inspected our columns telling us in Serbian that we would be digging trenches for the Red Army. Before leaving he said: "If it were up to me, you should all be shot." And then we had to go to work. A guard took us to a stream where we had to dig. Our only food came in the morning and evening – a scoop of pea soup and a piece of corn bread. The pea soup was terrible because bugs were swimming around on top; but we were hungry and so we just ate it.

Luckily we had some money, and my friend Klaus was able to buy some eggs, potatoes and bread at a farm. For lunch we built a fire with the plentiful branches near the stream. We packed several eggs and potatoes into the clay and placed these into the embers. We carefully unpacked the clay and enjoyed our eggs with potatoes. This was a feast for us! Klaus went for a look around the factory and returned a few minutes later to get his eating utensils. Half an hour later he returned and his utensils were covered with powdered sugar which he had found in the filling machine. We cracked the eggs into the bowls and stirred them with sugar which tasted unbelievably good. And then the two of us ate pea soup only in the morning.

After about 14 days it was getting close to Easter, and we were taken back to the Apatin camp. We were happy about that because we were afraid we might be taken to Russia. In the camp I ran into my uncle Fuderer who told me that all the Germans had been kicked out of their homes and apartments and sent off to work camps. The older ones and the women with children were sent to the camps in Gakowo and Kruschiwl. The old people died first, and the children were infected with typhus and dysentery. There was starvation and broken hearts. All four of my grandparents died in the camp along with my aunt and her one-year-old daughter. My uncle also told me that my mother was working with other women and men in the hemp factory. We now realized that all of us were now captive: the family, our home and our idea of freedom.

After several days in the Apatin camp we were ordered to get to work, but we were not told where. A few men joined our unit, and the next day we marched off into the uncertain. First to Sombor, then to Novi Sad (Neusatz), and then to a work camp in Zemun (Semlin). This camp was on a hill above the city and was surrounded with a

double barbed wire fence. Wooden towers stood to the right and left of the entrance. Each one had a search light, machine gun and a guard. I mentioned to my friend Klaus: "Hey, I don't think we're getting out of here alive." And he answered: "I was just thinking the same thing." We waited a long time for the partisans to come. They yelled at us to get into four lines and empty our pockets and bag packs onto the ground. Then we were searched, and anyone with anything on him was shot. This process took a while until we could go to the barracks and look for a place to sleep. Klaus and I went into the first best barrack. It had wooden bunk beds with very old straw on them. (We later learned that this was a camp for Jews after the Hitler campaign.) We occupied the upper level and only had our winter coats as a blanket. The next morning at 6 a.m. we were driven out of the barracks to get our breakfast. There was a ladle of onion soup in an old can with a piece of corn bread. We had to slurp the soup because there was no flatware. We walked to the Semlin airport in four rows. There we had to break up chunks of concrete and shovel it into a pile to carry away. While cleaning up the concrete rubble we found cans of fruit and vegetables which we immediately consumed on the spot. Spoons and knives were also in with the rubble so that we wouldn't have to slurp the soup any more. We hid the knives at the airport in order to open the cans. Several days later we were itching all over; the first lice were here.

A nine-year-old boy befriended our guards. He wore a partisan cap and had a rifle which would hang down to his ankles. To amuse the others he would yell and command us around. He screamed at an old man, who responded. The boy then hit him with the butt end of the rifle. The man tried to defend himself, and the rifle fell to the ground. The boy started to yell, and so the other guards came and asked what was going on. The rascal said that the old man tried to take his rifle away. The guards beat the man half to death, tied his hands and locked him in a dark room. He was given nothing to eat or drink. One night we were pulled out of the barracks and had to line up in four u-shaped lines. The square was brightly lit. The partisans dragged out the man who had defended himself against the boy and threw him onto the square and shot him. The camp commander yelled: "Look at that, you dirty Schwaben. That will happen to anyone trying to take a rifle from a partisan." We were brought back to our barracks, but there was no way to fall asleep again. I was so stirred up.

After a while we passed through Novi Sad to get back to Tovarnik, where we set up quarters. We could tell what we would be doing, and this work would be harder than in Semlin. Every few yards there were breaks in the railway tracks. The oak ties were torn. Both sides of the railway embankment had been mined and it was dangerous to walk around there. We had to bring ties to the embankment and set them at the right distance. Others dragged the tracks from the wagons and screwed them onto the ties. A gauge was used to set the spacing. The food was not any better here. There was corn bread and onion soup. In the mine fields there were older storage places from the German army where we looked for food. We found crisp bread and ground peas which we cooked with water to a type of pea paste. They older men warned us about going there, but we went anyway. Though one day a younger lad stepped on a mine and was seriously injured. His roommate George wanted to help him, but was not careful enough and also stepped on a mine. This tore his leg off below the knee, however, he was able to crawl out of the mine field. The men then bandaged his leg above the knee. He suffered terrible pains and cried day and night. After a few days George died.

I got sick and had a fever which is why I was placed with the other sick ones in the horse stable. I made myself a bed with the straw, but on the second day a guard came with a Russian officer and told us to put our shoes on and come along. We rode in a Russian truck which had shovels, crates and tent canvasses. This took us to a corn field where a Russian plane had been shot down. There was a grave mound from which we had to shovel out the two Russian pilots who had been placed there and put them into the crates. The canvasses were then nailed onto the crates. The stench of the cadavers was impossible to deal with. We then rode back to our quarters. The next day we returned to constructing the trails. I had to grit my teeth, but somehow managed.

Fourteen days later we were ordered to go to Apatin because we were needed there. We couldn't believe it and quickly packed our things. We could not take our injured friend along despite his pleas. We spent the night in Mitrovica where we finally received a decent meal – pork goulash with a big piece of bread. Nobody could explain why we suddenly had such a great meal. Could it be May 1st? The next day something terrible happened on the way to Novi Sad. Several men carried their comrade on a stretcher. He was so weak that they gave him a piece of bread to eat lying down. One of our guards saw this and became angry and started beating the man on the head with his rifle making him unconscious. The men put their comrade on the ground where he was shot. Then they placed him in a ditch by the road and covered him with any debris they could find. We then had to move on quickly. Once we reached Sombor we were pushed into a steam bath with some soap to wash our dirty, ill-treated bodies. Our hair was cut very short, and our clothes were deloused. All fresh and with clean clothes we went back to Apatin, where we were taken to the saw mill of the convent. The nuns had cooked goulash for us and gave us a piece of white bread. After the meal the camp commander came and told us that we would be building wooden pontoons across the Danube at Bogojevo and across the Tisza at Novi Becej. We had to make these at the sites. These bridges had been blown up by the Germans, and therefore it was our job to put things back in order. Once this was explained we went to the main Apatin camp in the Brewery Street (Bräuhaus-Gasse). The next morning there was the same roux soup with corn bread which had to last for the whole day. Again we got into four lines and had to count off before walking to the saw mill where the wooden logs were waiting. The poplar wood was 10 to 12 inches thick. First the square beams were cut for the frame, then the planks for the outer walls. Five or six men were there to tell us what to do. They had learned ship carpentry. We were watched from two sides; the one side was the town and on the other was the shipyard.

Once I wandered off to a nearby pond to relieve myself I checked to see how deep it was. It was only to the knee. This gave me the idea of running off to visit my mother in the hemp factory 5 miles away. My confirmation sponsor was Hungarian and did not have to be in the camp, so he would occasionally bring me some bacon and soap. Since it was already mid-May I could go into the Danube during the lunch break and wash myself from head to foot. In the evening I told my friend about my plan to run off for a day. He approved and wished me good luck for the next day. When we arrived at the saw mill I went straight to the pond, rolled up my pants above the knee and waded across the pond to where I could walk along the dam on the other side so that I would not be seen from the saw mill. I rolled my pants down and walked my way like a normal person. But my heart was beating like crazy. Being caught now would mean 30 days in

the cellar with only bread and water. I made it to the hemp factory without any problem. It was such a joy when my mother saw me. And the other people there who knew me wanted to know how things were going. The Hungarian man was a very nice man. He let me stay and talk to my mother for two hours. I even received a lunch. The food was better here because people who knew the factory workers brought by flour, lard and other groceries. Then evening approached and I made my way back arriving with some luck in one piece at the saw mill.

When we had enough pontoons for the bridge in Erdut-Bogojevo we connected them with strong ropes. My friend Klaus and I were allowed to ride along to the construction site at Erdut. We took the Danube downstream and stopped near the Huli fisherman wharf (Huli was a fishing region for Apatin's wholesale fishing industry). When we arrived with the pontoons we saw how many fish there were in some of the boats. We asked if we could have some. Each of us received a fish to fry for lunch and some for the evening, so that we could cook a Hungarian fish soup. The fishermen also gave us some of the other ingredients. This was a feast for us. Once we finished lunch we were able to see the ruins of Erdut on the hill in the distance. After mooring the pontoons we were shown our quarters. Then we began building the bridge. A motorboat took the pontoons to the middle of the river where we anchored them. Squared timbers were placed on them and then nailed with strong planks. The construction of the bridge progressed steadily while anyone with time could shuttle people across the river. One time I took two women with two children across and received 20 Dinar. That was a joy – to have money for a change. When it started getting dark in the evening Klaus and I would sneak up to the ruins and look for cherries. Naturally, we had to be careful. The partisans brought German prisoners of war here to scoop water out of the pontoons when rain and leaks made that necessary. Once we could help no more we were sent back to the saw mill in Apatin to build more pontoons. When enough were completed we left for Novi Becej to build the bridge there. We proceeded as in Erdut and when we finished we returned again to the main camp in Apatin. Here we had various jobs. Usually we loaded goods onto the ships. One time we had to load horse and cow leather hides which smelled brutally.

Then I suddenly ran a high fever with the chills in the middle of summer. One day I had the fever, and the next day I didn't, but I was very tired and groggy. Klaus told the guard that I was sick, and so I was able to spend a day resting. I had malaria. When I felt better the next day I dragged myself to work. We were supposed to build stables for the cows, cattle and calves near the brick kilns. And the livestock had to be tended to, so I volunteered for the job because it was near the hemp factory where my mother worked. My friend Klaus liked the dock loading work, so we separated. I reported to the clerk who wrote down my name, and once he had enough people we went to the brick kilns which were about four miles outside of town. A man rode the one-horse carriage while we followed on foot. When we arrived at the brick kilns he introduced himself as Djoko and explained what we had to do. He said we could come to him if we needed anything and that he would try to get us better food. He said that we could move freely in the neighboring area, but that nobody should get the idea of leaving without permission. He had not requested any guards, but there were tight controls everywhere and you could not go far without identification papers. We then entered our quarters which were like barracks divided into small rooms. Each room was for two men and had two wooden

beds, a primitively-nailed table and two stools. There was some straw so we tried to make it as comfortable as possible. We had been in worse quarters. The next day we were assigned to masons who came from Bosnia. We got to work building the stables. I still had malaria, so I asked a man who was sent to town every week for supplies if he could find my confirmation sponsor to get me some medicine. Two days later the good man returned with some quinine which he received from his doctor. I soon got better.

The stables were finished fast and a draw well was set up to provide water for the livestock. In August the cows, cattle, calves, four donkeys and three strong bulls arrived and were driven into the stables and tied. The bulls had their own stable. The next day 50 sheep arrived. An older Serbian took care of them and led them to pasture. Women were brought from the main camp to milk the cows and every day a man delivered the milk to town with a donkey carriage. My boss allowed me to see my mother two or three times a week and we always had a good time.

It soon became colder and we had to start thinking about heating. My buddy sharing the room with me was a bricklayer, so he built us a hearth. I had found a stove plate in a different house and now the winter could come. At night we snuck out to the stable to milk a cow. Each of us had a bottle and a pot. In the morning we put part of our corn bread into milk and cooked it up for a nice cereal. The winter of 1945 continued somehow, and in the spring the livestock was driven out to pasture. I now had to bring the milk into town. Every morning at 7 I would hitch up the two donkeys, lift the milk cans onto the wagon, get the delivery slip from my boss (in case someone stopped me) and drive the milk to the cooperative each day.

In May of 1946 all the livestock, except for the sheep, was given to the new residents. The people now came to the main camp. I was ordered to the old Serbian with the sheep. When I heard that the sheep would also be distributed I told my mother to ask her boss to have the commander sign me up as stoker. And so I made it to the hemp factory, learned the basics of stoking and could finally be together with my mother again. We had it pretty good in the hemp factory, except for being interned. Our Hungarian guard was not as strict as he could have been which allowed us to go for walks on Sundays or to swim in the nearby Danube River.

But even these better times came to an end, and when the raw hemp had been processed, some of us were sent to the main camp while the women and their daughters were sent to the Gakowo camp. My only thought now was to escape. One commander in the main camp was always tormenting the people, as I found out on my second day. A while ago my mother had sewn me a cap out of dark blue cloth like the partisans wore, but their's was a khaki color. The commander called me to him and gave me a contemptuous look. He yelled at me to stand straight, otherwise he'd slap my ear. He took the cap from my head, tore it up and threw it at my face. The cap fell to the ground. Now he yelled even louder. What was I thinking as a Schwabe wearing a partisan cap! When I said that my cap was blue, he continued to yell. I was not to talk back, otherwise he would lock me in the cellar for three days. I should leave, but he never wants to see me wearing the cap again.

We had to get our food in the women's camp on the other side. I was able to bring the cap to my mother to sew it because I knew that I would still need it. My plan to escape was developing regardless of cost. I told my mother about the plan. She begged me not to go through with it because she knew what would happen if I were caught. 30 days in the cellar with bread and water! I considered two possibilities for escape – either out back through the gardens or in front at the gate to the street. I decided on the second option because I had often seen that the night guard usually remained in the guard hut since it was late January and very cold. I informed my stoker buddy at the hemp factory and asked that he wake me that evening at 11 p.m. because he had a pocket watch. The next evening I was ready. I did not take my clothes off before lying down, and I could not fall asleep because I was too excited. My buddy who wanted to wake me was sound asleep. Time was moving very slow. I went to the toilet, opened the house door a crack and saw that the guard was in his hut. I woke my buddy to ask what time it was. It was a little after 11 p.m. on February 2, 1947. I put on my „blue partisan cap“, shook Jacob's hand, and he wished me well. As I walked through the yard an icy wind was slapping my face, and I hoped that the guard was still sitting in his hut. And so it was. He was singing and kicking his feet from the cold. I slipped out and used the Serbian greeting: „Hello my friend, quite cold here“. He cursed and said: “Yes, very cold.” and continued stomping his feet. My heart was in my throat and I hurried past. Then I took quiet steps to the next corner and turned left into that street. Totally scared I ran for two to three hundred yards before slowing down to a more normal pace into the Outer Row Street where our neighbor, my Hungarian confirmation sponsor, lived. I knocked on the window of the room where he slept. The light went on and he opened the window. Once he saw me he was startled, but let me in through the gate. He told me to come into the living room and asked where I was coming from. His wife and both daughters were now awake, so I told them of my plans to head for the Gakowa camp and then via Hungary to Austria. I told him to give me my father's pocket watch, a blanket, the leather shoes and a few other things. He gave me what I wanted along with a big piece of smoked bacon and bread for the long way. I placed it all into my home-made backpack, put on my winter coat and thanked him for everything he had done for me. At half past midnight I said good-bye to him and his family because I had a long way ahead of me. It had snowed and the moon was bright so I could see well enough. I walked along the train track dam because no trains came through at night. I made an arc around Sombor to get back to the train dam. Meanwhile it was 5 a.m. I had a watch now to know what time it was. By 9 p.m. I was close to Gakowo and could see the outlines of a farm. I walked into the yard and could tell that nobody had been here in a while. I went into the stable to look for a place to sleep. The moon was shining through the window so that I could see there was still some straw in the food trough. I covered my feet with straw and placed the backpack next to me. I left my winter coat on and fell asleep exhausted. At six a.m. I awoke and was half frozen. I quickly got up and roused myself to move on. Outside I could see a light burning at a farm in the direction of Gakowo. The ground was frozen solid making it easy to walk. When I made it to the farm I called in Serbian: “Hello, is somebody there?” A dog started barking loudly and a woman came out and asked what I wanted. I asked if the town up ahead is Gakowo, which she affirmed. In German she asked me to come in. She told me that she was Hungarian and lived alone with her children on this farm. Her husband was with the Hungarian army and still had not come home. She asked why I wanted to go to Gakowo and gave me a cup of milk with a piece of bread. She also advised me to ask the people driving to the camp with the hay and

straw wagon to take me along. I thanked her for the milk and good advice and walked on. After about 5 or 600 yards I saw two horses hitched to two wagons with men loading some hay. I approached them and explained that I wanted to go to Gakowo because I had relatives there and wondered if they might take me along. They agreed and said that I should wait until they were almost finished loading before climbing into the hay. They used the remaining hay to cover me. In no time I was in the camp. When the women from the hemp factory saw me their joy was great. Naturally they wanted to know what I was doing there. I told them my plan and a woman offered me a spot next to her 11-year-old son. Now I had to listen around and find out how best to cross the border to Hungary. After a week I was lucky and there was an opportunity. A family from Apatin needed a man to help them carry their things. They bribed the guards so that we were not held back.

At 10 p.m. that night we crossed the border to Hungary where we were able to stay with a farmer. Since refugees were constantly crossing the border he had straw spread out in a large hall. We did have to pay for this. The next morning we proceeded to Baja and from there we took the train to St. Gotthard at the Austrian border. In order to pay for the tickets we sold some of our things in Baja. I sold my father's silver pocket watch and the blanket. With the remaining money I was able to buy a sausage with bread. The Austrian police then took us to an English reception camp, and then trucks brought us to Strass where we finally had some decent quarters.

I have no words to describe the feeling of sleeping in a bed and being free. To go wherever you want and especially to be freed from the Communist servitude. In the barracks I met several people from Apatin who were waiting to continue their travels to Germany. Styrian farmers came to the barracks looking for farm laborers. After two weeks I went with one farmer to work for him. He registered me and I received ration cards for groceries and cigarettes. The farmer gave me free room and board and a monthly salary which was my first earned money! After two months I went to my uncle in Vienna and within two days I found work with a road construction company.

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