The Life of a Post-war Child

By Sara Bensa

Europe, 9 May 1945: the end of the WW2.
Petrič ek, June 1945: a post-war internment camp for children is set up

Ivan Ott

was born on 24 July 1934 in Zagreb, but adopted by his uncle and his wife in Ljubljana. They were like a father and a mother to him and he also addresses them as his parents. This gentle kid, growing up in the times of war, attended the fourth class of primary school when the WW2 ended. **His only toys were army ammunition.** That is all they had to play with in those hard times.

He was a lively and very smart child. At the age of ten, he and his adopters fled from Ljubljana to Austria (Viktring/Vetrinj) with many other political refugees. When he heard about their withdrawal from the Communist regime he was sincerely excited. Surely, as a child he was not able to understand to what extends the civil war in ex-Yugoslavia (Slovenia) affected him. It was his father's gaze that convinced him that something went seriously wrong and that their getaway would be anything else but a pleasant trip to an unknown future.

On the way to Viktring he and his mother were separated from his father, because soldiers called "domobranci" in Slovenian travelled together. Therefore, Ivan was the only "man" with her. He started to feel responsible for his mother. His thoughts were: **"Suddenly I felt grown up and I became my mother's guardian."** The 10-year-old-boy was now in charge of taking care of food, hygiene and family belongings. However, he felt proud of himself and took the new role seriously. He realized that

complaining about blisters caused by too small shoes was not appropriate anymore. The 10th day in exile remains in his memory as the day on which his mother was no longer capable of taking care of neither her child, nor her husband. She seemed absent-minded, not interested in anything that was going on around her. That put even more pressure on the boy's shoulders.

In the meantime, the group of refugees waited for the transport to Italy, which was organized by British soldiers to bring the refugees to a more secure place. When the day of their departure came, everyone was ready to go to the Italian city of Trieste. They were not prepared to be betrayed by the English and handed over to the Partisans. But this is exactly what happened.

Arrival in Teharje camp

Eventually they arrived at the Teharje camp. Exhausted from the difficult journey, dehydrated and hungry from a long sunny day they were sent to the barracks. The Partisans mistreated especially the Domobranci soldiers, although civilians were battered very badly as well. Ivan was of course aware of that and therefore worried about his father, since he was not with them. He did see him in the camp. **"That was not a hunch, but intuition. That human was *my father*. I recognized him despite of the bloodstains and wounds which he had all over his body."**

He will never forget their last meeting. He hardly raised his head and could not say a word. Just a gaze, full of pain and suffering. Suddenly Ivan felt the strength to resist against the Partisans who held his body. He ran towards his father, screaming **"Leave my father, let him go now!"** But all he achieved was a hard punch in his chest. He fell on the floor and only managed to catch the last glimpse of his father.

It was not long after that, when female Partisans came to make a list of the inmates of the camp. Since Ivan's mother was lost in her distant world and could not communicate anymore, he told them her personal details, too. The next day, the bus came. Every child had to enter the bus immediately. Mothers began to hide their children, but Ivan's mother just did not respond to anything. He took his things, kissed her for the last time and headed for the bus. Sadness, disappointment and a sense of abandonment filled his heart. All of a sudden his mother came to him and gave him the pot of honey, the only food they had, saying that he would need it more than her. He could not be more

proud of his mum. **“She abdicated the only food she had and gave it to her son to save his life.”** Overflown by mixed emotions he was among approximately 40 children and babies taken to the camp Petriček.

Petriček, a Slovenian camp for children

Already on their arrival at the camp, the children were welcomed by a cruel scene. The woman, whom the children named Črna vdova (Black widow), announced that the place would be a re-educational facility for children, and threatened them with physical punishment in case of anyone breaking the rules. **“She held a whip in a hand which I soon got to know very well.”** After that speech, they had to go to the office one by one, where they had to answer questions on their name, surname, place of birth, birth date. Their parents were not even mentioned. Ivan was still carrying his treasure, the pot with honey, but now, he had to give it away. **“I was really sad, because I knew the only thing from my mother would end in those evil persons’ stomachs.”**

Boys were expected to work and to bring water from the river, while the girls’ major occupation was taking care of the younger children. In the afternoon, they had to attend re-educational classes. They were learning about Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Tito and about Bolshevism, Communism, Socialism, Fascism. They could not understand much, they could only memorize the facts. One day they were allowed to draw after the lecture. Ivan dared to draw beaten Partisans. **“That was my ‘revenge’, a child’s wish, from whom everything was taken.”** For that, he was sent to a drying room without food for almost two days.

The situation changed when the Črna vdova was somehow removed. Nobody knows for sure what happened to her. Now, the camp was led by several women. The children were not forced to listen to the lectures like before and they were not punished anymore. The children felt better and almost free. They even performed a play in a theatre. However, days were still monotonous. Therefore, the news that they would soon leave this place quite surprised them.

Drawing away from horror

The new ‘home’ was in fact nice. Gigica, that was the female caretaker, was kind to all the kids. They started to attend school again. However, Ivan was not happy. He felt unaccepted in the society, alone in the world. **“Because I did not feel accepted, I hated everything around me.”** He did not have the motivation for school work, he gave up hope. It was his biological father from Zagreb who saved him and took him home. **“At the age of eleven a child went into exile, at the age of twelve an adult returned home.”**

That is the story of Ivan Ott, the child of post-war massacres, in which around 13,000 Slovenian inhabitants died. In his autobiography he describes his story from his childhood in a perspective of a child and with some additional remarks about historical happenings. The book was published in Croatian, Slovenian and German language. The movie “Children from Petriček hill” was filmed in the 2007 and based on his book.

Sources

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