SLOVENIA 1945

MEMORIES OF DEATH AND SURVIVAL AFTER WORLD WAR II

JOHN CORSELLIS | MARCUS FERRAR

I.B.TAURIS

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and
Marcus Ferrar

I.B. TAURIS
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Main Characters

Aloysius Ambrožič
Cardinal Archbishop of Toronto. Son of a Catholic Slovene farming family which narrowly escaped wartime Italian reprisals after a Partisan attack. Fled with 18,000 other anti-Communist Slovenes on foot over the mountains to Austria at the end of World War II. Lived in a refugee camp for three years, attending its grammar school. Emigrated with his family to Canada.

Andrej Bajuk
Fled to Austria at the end of the war with his family, who pushed him over the mountains in a pram at 19 months. After three and a half years in a refugee camp, he emigrated with his family to Mendoza, Argentina. After a career with the Inter-American Development Bank, he returned to Slovenia and served as Prime Minister in 2000 and Finance Minister from 2004.

Director Marko Bajuk
Andrej's grandfather. A former headmaster and inspector of Slovene schools. Set up a thriving refugee camp grammar school for Slovene children who had to flee with their families. The cultural leader of the Catholic Slovenes in the camps. Also a musical composer and conductor. Emigrated with his family to Argentina.

Major Paul Barre
Canadian commandant of the camp in Viktring, southern Austria, where the Slovene Catholics first settled after their flight in 1945. Allowed them maximum autonomy, and played a key role in preventing the British military from repatriating 6,000 civilians after *domobranci* (Home Guard) soldiers had been sent back to their deaths in Slovenia.

Jože Jančar
Slovene Catholic student leader who fled to Austria in 1945. Acted as John Corsellis' aide and interpreter in the camps. Helped arrange admission for Slovene refugee students to Graz University. Later became a distinguished psychiatrist in Bristol, England.

Dr Valentin Meršol
Leader of the Slovene community in the refugee camps. Together with Major Barre, was instrumental in saving the 6,000 civilians from being repatriated to Slovenia. In Ljubljana, headed the infectious diseases department of the hospital. Personal physician to Yugoslav King Alexander between the wars. Emigrated to Cleveland, US.

France Pernišek
Catholic social insurance official in wartime Slovenia. Kept a diary of his flight in 1945 and the hard years in the refugee camps. Portrayed the Slovenes' fervent Catholic faith, their bitterness at the British deceit, the despair over hunger, harassment and poverty in the camps, and the joy at making new lives overseas.

Dr Franc Rode
Youngest son of a farming family which fled to Austria in 1945. Schoolboy in the refugee camps, before emigrating with his family to Argentina. Returned to Europe six years later and came back to Slovenia as a priest in 1965. Metropolitan Archbishop of Ljubljana 1997–2004. As Prefect of the Congregation for Religious in the Vatican, he is responsible for monks and nuns around the world.

Preface

… While with the eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

– William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, *1798*

For 30 years, the head of a language school in Britain had been suppressing the memory of terrible deeds he witnessed as a relief worker at the end of World War II. Then, in the middle of the 1970s, a student walked into his office and changed his life forever. It was an innocent query about a work permit. John Corsellis looked at the passport and his flesh tingled. Standing before him was a Slovene who lived in Argentina. John knew why he lived there. He knew only too well.

Back in 1945, John witnessed a deceit which led to the deaths of 12,000 people, and played his part in the rescue of 6,000 others sheltered in a refugee camp. The Slovenes were Catholics who fled their country in May 1945 after losing a civil war against the Communist Partisans. The British sent those in uniforms back to be killed by the Partisans, using a trick to deceive them. The student was one of the civilian survivors.

As they talked, he asked if John had any documents or souvenirs of those days. John went home, rummaged in his attic and found a cardboard box with letters he had sent his mother at the time. He read them through and it all came flooding back. In his late 40s, he was deeply moved at the confrontation with himself at half that age, witnessing a horror he had buried deep in his mind. He tapped out the hand-written letters on a typewriter and kept a carbon copy for himself. Some months later, his testimony was published in an almanac by Slovenes who had emigrated to Argentina.

A year on, John was sitting on the hill overlooking Tintern Abbey in Wales with one of Britain's most distinguished psychiatrists. He was not a Briton by birth: he too was one of those Slovene survivors. When John was caring for the Slovenes as an aid worker in the Austrian camps, Jože Jančar had been one of his closest co-workers. Jože gently took John through the strong emotions he had felt since transcribing the letters.

‘You must write about this,’ said Jože. ‘Let me show the letters to my daughter’s godmother.’ That godmother was Iris Murdoch, the distinguished writer. She too knew all about the Slovenes. She too had looked after them in the Austrian camps, and helped Jože and others get university educations.

‘Fascinating ... most interesting and touching ... splendid text,’ wrote back Dame Iris.[1] She urged him to write the book but said he needed more material. The question was: how? By this time, John knew the book was to be his life’s mission. Grants from Quaker trusts enabled him to reduce his paid work to half-time and travel to interview Slovenes in North America. But many threads of the story remained out of reach. Then one of his hosts mentioned an emigrant had just published his diaries in Buenos Aires. That was his breakthrough.

The diarist was France Pernišek, who wrote about the Slovenes’ flight, bereavement and long years in the camps. Pernišek arranged for a friend flying to England to take John a copy to enrich this book. John tried in vain to apply his knowledge of Serbo-Croat to the Slovene text before him. He could not make it out. Who could translate it?

Jože warned him about the suggested candidate, Sister Agnes Žužek, a retired Slovene medical missionary living in a convent in the London suburb of Ealing. She had a reputation as a difficult character. But John found her to be ‘sweet and massively generous’. She translated the lengthy document into English in long-hand, sending it in instalments as she gradually worked her way through. She asked for no money. So John had a text in English, but the style remained resolutely Slovene. He sat down, now equipped with a computer, to rework it into idiomatic English.

The diary was a jewel. This was the first-hand evidence he was looking for. He was touched to see himself mentioned as ‘the good Mr Corsellis’. Many of the other references to Britons were bitter and resentful. John realised that his trauma was resurfacing, trauma rooted in guilt for what the British did. As a British witness of the events, he considered it his duty to ensure that the truth about what had happened should be publicly recognised.

Over the next decade, John tracked down and interviewed scores of survivors, of a diaspora spread worldwide from Canada to Argentina. Three years ago, he asked me to work with him as a co-writer. I leaped at the task. I had just left Reuters after a career which included Cold War assignments in Eastern Europe. I was about to marry a Slovene. It seemed an ideal fit. Our mutual friend, Keith Miles, warned me the book had been long in gestation and I risked a long-term entanglement. I took little notice. I was used to investigating a story, writing it, checking it and dispatching it all in the course of an afternoon.

Within months, I too was hooked. Instead of just helping pull his material together, I was off to North America, Argentina and Slovenia to find out more myself. We both wrote large parts of the book, but decided

that John should appear in the third person, since he was a prominent actor in the drama.

As one year passed and then the next, the story settled into my psyche too. It recalled elements of my own life. My mother, who left Germany in 1939 because she fell foul of the Nazis; and my father, who served in the British Army in World War II, with all the accompanying fears, hopes, frustrations and comradeship. I was fascinated by the immense complexities facing human beings in this part of Europe. As I peeled layer after layer away, it became ever more complicated to understand. This was the supreme challenge: to understand.

The refugees were equally moved by telling their stories. Many began their impassioned accounts as soon as one of the authors walked through the door. Their experiences remained etched in their minds. Often the best morsels came after the interview, over drinks and a meal.

Likewise with John. He told me the full story above, after two and a half years' intense collaboration, just a few weeks before going to press.

Marcus Ferrar
March 2005

Prologue

As World War II slumped to a conclusion, the road leading from Yugoslavia to Austria over the Ljubelj Pass, high in the Karavanke mountains, was black with a mass of Slovenes fleeing their homes. Europe's map had been redrawn and vast numbers of men, women and children were taking to their feet all over Europe in the largest migration the continent had ever seen. Although they did not know it, most of the Slovenes trudging up the dirt road to the Ljubelj were to meet their end in mass executions in remote forest pits a few weeks later. Others won a reprieve, literally at the last moment. This is the tale of those survivors – their dilemmas, betrayal, bereavement and neglect – and their determination and solidarity in building new lives thousands of miles away. The background is a civil war between Partisans and anti-Communist Catholics during enemy occupation of Slovenia in World War II. The conflict which led them to flee tore families asunder, and remains alive today in modern Slovenia, which has been independent from Yugoslavia since 1991.

This is therefore more than just a refugee story. It also re-assesses a part of ex-Yugoslavia's wartime history, which has hitherto been largely written from the viewpoint of the Communists. That history simplistically condemns the refugees as traitors, causing resentment not only among those who fled, but also among many Catholics in Slovenia today. Some of the refugees, who eventually had to resettle overseas, are now at the peak of successful careers, at ease in the rough and tumble of a competitive world. Others have arrived at an age at which they can stand back and philosophically accept their lot. Many, however, remain angry and misunderstood. They long for an opportunity to set right what they see as an injustice.

On the other side, the Partisans, who fought under Communist leadership, object that the emigrants belittle their struggle as a selfish grab for revolutionary power. For them, it was a patriotic fight against the German and Italian occupiers.

With the passage of time and the advent of democracy, it should be no problem for new generations to view the events more objectively. But there has been no reconciliation. The post-war emigration and the civil war that preceded it remain an issue around which political and religious disputes swirl anew. As this story unfolds, it delves into a dark side of Slovenia's history. The people we have quoted have a particular point of

view to put across. The authors' aim throughout, however, has been to tell the truth objectively rather than take sides. Where a viewpoint or a fact is contested, the opposing version is also given.[1]

Slovenia has existed as an independent state for little more than a decade and is still unfamiliar to many. It is a beautiful land of Alpine peaks, meadows, forests and a short Adriatic coast. It nestles to the north-east of Italy, is smaller than Wales and has less than one third the population of Switzerland. For the last 650 years, Slovenes have undergone the decisions of others rather than ruling over their own destinies. They avoided much of the prolonged fighting that occurred elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, seceding from the disintegrating federation after a ten-day war in 1991. Slovenes have a disciplined, down-to-earth reputation. They have converted to democracy and built a market economy which, while still poorer than most parts of Western Europe, is the most prosperous of the ex-Communist countries. As they entered the European Union in 2004, foreign commentators remarked how smoothly the process of integration had gone. Yet this tranquil image can be deceptive. Twentieth-century history still casts a long shadow over the Slovenes. Some of the worst slaughters in both World Wars took place on their soil.

Europeans today principally remember the civil wars of the 1990s that tore Yugoslavia apart on their doorstep. But the history of violence in Yugoslavia has long roots. When the decline of the Ottoman Empire left a power vacuum in the Balkans in the 19th century, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Germany, France and Britain jockeyed to fill the void, exploiting ethnic tensions and rival local political ambitions that were only too ready to be inflamed. People were treated as pawns to be manipulated, tossed aside and expended at will. This phenomenon hit Slovenia with full force in World War I, when a series of battles was fought between the Italian and Austrian armies in Slovenia's Julian Alps. Casualties were huge, and the emerald green waters of the Soča* (Isonzo) river ran red with the blood of stricken soldiers. Around 300,000 died on Slovene territory. Most were not Slovenes, but a number were. Slovenes fought as conscripts in the Austrian army, and by the time the conflict ended, the nation had lost 3% of its population.

Worse was to come in World War II, when Yugoslavia as a whole lost approximately one million people. While the rest of Europe ended hostilities on 9 May 1945, the war continued in Slovenia for another week. When it ceased, nowhere in Europe was the population so divided as in Slovenia, according to the country's long-standing President, Milan Kučan, the only former head of a European Communist party to continue in power into the 21st century. Scarcely anywhere was the post-war settling of accounts more ferocious.

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* In Slovene pronunciation, č = ch, š = sh, ž = zh, c = ts, j = y.

In May 1945 the British 8th Army was sucked into this turmoil, having just arrived in southern Austria as the occupying force after a victorious campaign up Italy. It was confronted by a challenge it was ill equipped to deal with – the arrival of fleeing troops and civilians, bringing horribly intricate politics in their baggage. The presence of the British Army should have been good for the fleeing Slovenes, but it was not. Most of those making their way over the Ljubelj Pass were sent back by the British into the hands of the Communists, who had embarked on a frenzy of killing aimed at eliminating their remaining opponents and enforcing a proletarian dictatorship. The British military may not have known exactly the fate to which they condemned the Slovenes coming under their protection. The Partisans had been Britain's chosen allies in the war against Nazism. However, a brutal reaction was predictable, in the light of the extreme force used by Communists elsewhere, and the Partisans had scores to settle after a two-year civil war with their anti-Communist opponents. Certainly, the British knew enough to suspect that death was the most likely outcome.

It is easy to jump to moral conclusions. The slaughtered victims belonged to a military force called *domobranci*, set up by anti-Communist Catholics to defend themselves against the Partisans. The Italians and the Germans persecuted many of them as nationalists and Slavs in the early part of the war. But these Catholics also collaborated, first with the Italians and then with the Germans. When they arrived in Austria, they were wearing uniforms supplied by the German occupiers and were armed with German and Italian weapons. It would be all too easy to condemn them as puppets of the occupying powers. However, the objective truth is more complex. This is a story of people caught up in the maelstrom of war. Practically every Slovene of that generation lost a father, mother, son or uncle at the time. People were confronted with difficult moral choices. That some of them erred is not surprising. Amazingly, many ordinary people *did* find the way out of the labyrinth and took humane decisions in almost impossible situations. This is a tale that enjoins humility on those who rush to pass judgment on fellow human beings.

Nevertheless, there *are* lessons to be drawn. Slovenia may be a small corner of Europe, but the story has implications for anybody who wants to evaluate the war in a more objective light. This re-assessment is taking place in one European country after another. The settled images of black and white are giving way to the shaded tones of reality. In Slovenia, the questions of wartime guilt, innocence and heroism are particularly complex. We now know that the Third Reich and its satellites were to collapse. In 1943 or 1944 this was not so clear to those involved. Was it thus better to fight the tyranny of Communism, even at the expense of sidling up close to the enemy occupier? Was collaboration with an enemy occupier always evil? Was resistance always the right course? Were heroic raids by resistance fighters noble if they resulted in lethal

reprisals among defenceless civilians? Was it better to keep your head down, or at least have a go against an enemy occupier? How were the victorious nations to distinguish between friends and foes once the conflict had ended? What were helpless civilians supposed to do in the midst of all this?

And with Europe today confronted with a growing number of refugees and asylum seekers, this story poses questions relevant for those who have to decide what to do with them. The Slovene refugees overcame incredible difficulties, were accepted as immigrants and eventually integrated successfully into their new societies. But during the long course of what in the end was a success story, the key questions of refugee policy were constantly being posed. Are those responsible for refugees primarily there to ease their plight and help them establish new lives? Or is their task to persuade refugees to return home, with whatever hard-line measures work best? The Slovenes underwent both approaches, and represent a case study drawn from human experience.

The Slovenes fleeing in May 1945 were not alone as they struggled up the ever steeper slopes, heaving at their lurching wagons. They had embarked on what they thought would be a two-week absence, but they found the road choked with fellow-travellers – German troops retreating from southern Yugoslavia and Greece; Serb Chetniks, who had been fighting against the occupiers, the Muslims in Bosnia and the Partisans; Croatian Ustashe, who sided with the Nazis in order to suppress minorities and resist Serbia; and anti-Communist Russians and Ukrainians who preferred service in the German military to oppression in the Soviet Union. Slovenia's mountain passes to Austria were the last funnels through which this throng squeezed to reach the Western Allies and escape the advancing Communists.

When the Slovenes made it to Austria, the British Army shepherded them into a field outside the village of Viktring. Exhausted after a week on the road, they lay down among the furrows to pray to the Virgin Mary, ponder what fate held in store for them, and slip into a dazed slumber under the stars.

There they met John Corsellis, one of the authors of this book. A pacifist, he was working for the Friends Ambulance Unit, which was run by Quakers. At the age of 22, he had been caring for refugees in camps in Egypt and up through Italy in the wake of the Allied advance. Slovene refugee accounts recall a tall, gangling young man striding around in shorts, helping them in the desperate months ahead. They remember him as one who cared.

Slovenes at home view this cruel story of civil war, emigration and massacres with mixed emotions. Belief in Partisan heroism still runs deep. Today they find it hard to acknowledge that some of their best people had to flee into exile, while thousands of others were slaughtered by their own countrymen in cold blood. It has not been easy for them to find out the whole truth. The subject for many years remained taboo.

Some are reluctant to confront the dark side of their history because they feel modern Slovenia should turn its face to reconstruction and integration into Europe. They want to avoid the pains that over-vindictive exposures of Communists brought in the Czech Republic. Ex-Communists and anti-clerical Liberals resist historical revisions since they do not want to rehabilitate their Catholic opponents. Some are concerned that returning emigrants might demand trials or return of property. But others feel it is time for the whole tale to be told after years of Communist suppression. They are curious: it is their own history – history that until a few years ago was that of a small federal republic but is now that of an independent nation.

Meanwhile, the Grim Reaper wields his scythe into the ageing ranks of survivors. Classical scholar Justin Stanovnik was in 1945 a *domobranec* teenager whose main concern as he trekked up the mountain was to steal a superior Mauser gun from a German soldier, which he did. Now, 60 years later, he sits in a tenement block in Ljubljana in the chill fog of winter, marvels that he is still alive when he could have died at the age of 17, and muses over the boatman of the Classical legend who rows the dead over the River Styx: 'The boatman is waiting for us all now, and we want the truth to be told before we set out on our final voyage.'

1 OVER THE MOUNTAIN

A wild beast is most dangerous when about to die.

> *Friday 4th May 1945.* The German army is retreating: it has relaxed its combat readiness, but the Gestapo continues with its persecution of our people. The prisons are full of them. A wild beast is most dangerous when about to die. Because of yesterday's proclamation by the [non-Communist] National Committee for Slovenia, the Gestapo surrounded the People's Printing Press, and for two days people have not been allowed to leave. Liberation Front sympathisers in our building are proud of approaching victory and happy. The whole house is full of the smell of freshly made pastries. Their women have been baking all night to be ready for the arrival of the Partisan army.
>
> In our clean, white Ljubljana there is a strange atmosphere. The usually empty streets today are full of people. They gather in small groups and talk in subdued voices. Our people are very worried at news that the international Communist brigade, which goes under the name of the Yugoslav Army, has landed in Rijeka and is advancing towards Trieste and Ljubljana. The Partisans are coming down from the mountains and the first refugees have arrived in Ljubljana.

France Pernišek, a Slovene Catholic community leader, picked up an unused address book and penned these lines in a precise copperplate hand-writing. He was to keep this diary[1] until he arrived in his country of emigration, Argentina, four years later. It is a passionate account of a refugee adrift in post-war Europe.

For three years, a central core of Slovene Catholics had been fighting a civil war against the Communist-dominated Partisans during the occupation by the enemy Italians and Germans. Confronted by a wave

of assassinations by the Partisans, they set up their own Home Guard – the *domobranci* – and accepted arms and organisation from the occupiers to mount military campaigns. Now things were coming to a head, and the Catholics were losing. The Soviet Red Army had captured Belgrade, the German Army was in headlong retreat, and on 3 May the Catholics and other non-Communists convened a Parliament to preside over Slovenia as a reconstituted nation. Franc Kremžar, a deputy in the Yugoslav Parliament of the 1920s, was chosen as its President. The Communist leaders of the Partisans were having none of it. They were on the verge of victory in their revolutionary war, and had no intention of letting others take power. With the Germans pulling out, and the Allies supporting Tito, the *domobranci* had no hope of holding on. The Parliament got a letter off to the Allies but lasted just one day.

Pernišek, a trim, austere figure, was one of the few who sensed that he was abandoning his old life forever. He lived to his nineties, but never returned to his homeland. His daughter Cirila remembers him telling the family: 'We leave for one week, for two weeks or forever.' On 5 May he wrote in his diary:

> The hardest moment in my life faces me: to tell my wife and children that, if we want to stay alive, we must leave home and all our possessions and go abroad to an unknown but terrible future. In resignation I pray for God's help…Our hearts were torn with sadness and fear. I left it to her to decide whether to stay at home with the children, but she said: 'Wherever you go, we all go. Whatever happens to us, we'll be together. If you go on your own, we'll probably never see each other again. And if we die, we'll die together.'

Most of the others thought they would return in a few weeks. They believed the British would occupy Slovenia. This was no fantasy, since Winston Churchill did have such a plan, though unbeknown to the refugees it had been abandoned some time ago. Churchill, concerned at the slow pace of the Allied armies up Italy, wanted a landing on the coast of Istria south of Trieste. The invading army would move through the Ljubljana gap on to Vienna. He had tried to sell it to Roosevelt, who vetoed it so as not to offend Stalin. The Slovene Catholics identified with British democracy, fair play and the rule of law, seeing them as bulwarks against social revolution. 'We totally adored the British. They walked on water. They had been fighting the Germans and we did not like the Germans,' says Frank Jeglič.*

The Slovenes were in for a shock. Pernišek was not the only one who never saw his homeland again. The British arrived in Trieste and the Austrian province of Carinthia in time to forestall Tito's plan to grab

* Where not otherwise indicated, quotations are from interviews with one of the authors. See Acknowledgements and Verbal Sources.

both as part of Slovenia, which he intended to keep within Yugoslavia. But the British never came to Slovenia itself.

Word was spreading that it was time to leave. That meant not just political activists. As Slovenia was predominantly a Catholic country, many of those in positions of authority were religious. Catholics were the Communists' main rivals for power and the hearts and minds of the population. Prominent Catholics also had their hands on the levers of the economy. Quite a few of those who left were farming people, but it was also an exodus of the educated, the successful and the qualified. For the Communists, capitalist came to mean collaborator. In the strict sense of the word, of course many had been collaborating – as had practically anybody else in German-occupied Europe who wielded authority or ran a business. Defeat of the enemy, besides raising hopes for social change, was also an opportunity for the ill-willed to exploit personal grudges and seize property. Jealousy, greed and a feeling of inferiority were all pretexts for denunciations.

The Germans had been protecting a nearby paper mill for strategic reasons, so its financial director had to flee. The head of a brush factory had to go too because he once sold a batch to the Italians. He had spurned the love of his secretary, so she denounced him. Another left because he kept his bedding firm solvent by selling mattresses to an Italian military brothel, delivering them clandestinely on a tricycle after curfew. A headmaster had to leave because he once apologised to an Italian Fascist chaplain, in order to save his pupils from expulsion for refusing to say the Lord's Prayer in Italian. A flourmill owner in Logatec southwest of the capital fled after a neighbour threatened to ensure that he and all his family would be executed.[2]

Former Communists today claim many of those who left could have carried on without problems under the new regime. Possibly rumours and fear panicked some people to flee unnecessarily. Nobody seems to have given any order to go. The decision spread like a virus. However, there is little reason to doubt that large numbers were marked men and women. Several had Partisan relatives who tipped them off that they were on lists for liquidation known as 'Black Books'.[3] The trials and executions which followed bear this out. Others saw Partisans and sympathisers waiting outside the homes they were vacating so that they could remove the contents or move straight in – a practice by which Communist regimes across Europe rewarded their supporters. Pernišek put a rucksack on his back, grasped two suitcases, took his children to pray before a small statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and crossed the threshold of his home weeping. Neighbours watched but showed no surprise.

Others hesitated. Milči (née Lekan), future wife of Uroš Roessmann, recalls that her father, the former Director of Utilities in Maribor, refused to leave at first because he was in the middle of planting his peas. The guns on the ramparts of Ljubljana Castle were thundering

over his head, but he kept digging because the garden was his family's means of survival. They were living uneasily on the outskirts of Ljubljana in a block of flats with plenty of Communist sympathisers. Window curtains twitched and doors opened when they went out. Milči said:

> When I ran to inform Dad that some friends were already leaving, I saw a convoy at the military barracks preparing to do the same. It was clear he had no option but to go – along with me and my twin sister – since we were all members of the Catholic Action lay organisation. My Mom and younger sister opted to stay, so we would have a home to come back to. Dad burned a lot of papers which could implicate other people, and Mom used the heat to bake some bread – a rarity since we mostly ate corn mush. The following morning, we left on foot and for good. It was ten years before we saw Mom and the younger sister again.

Paula Hribovšek's family had two hours to decide. Her mother, who had lost a son in the war, said she would go if the neighbours went. But they did not, so she stayed behind with Paula's sister. Within two hours the Partisans occupied their home and sent them to prison for two weeks. By that time, Paula had gone, on her own.

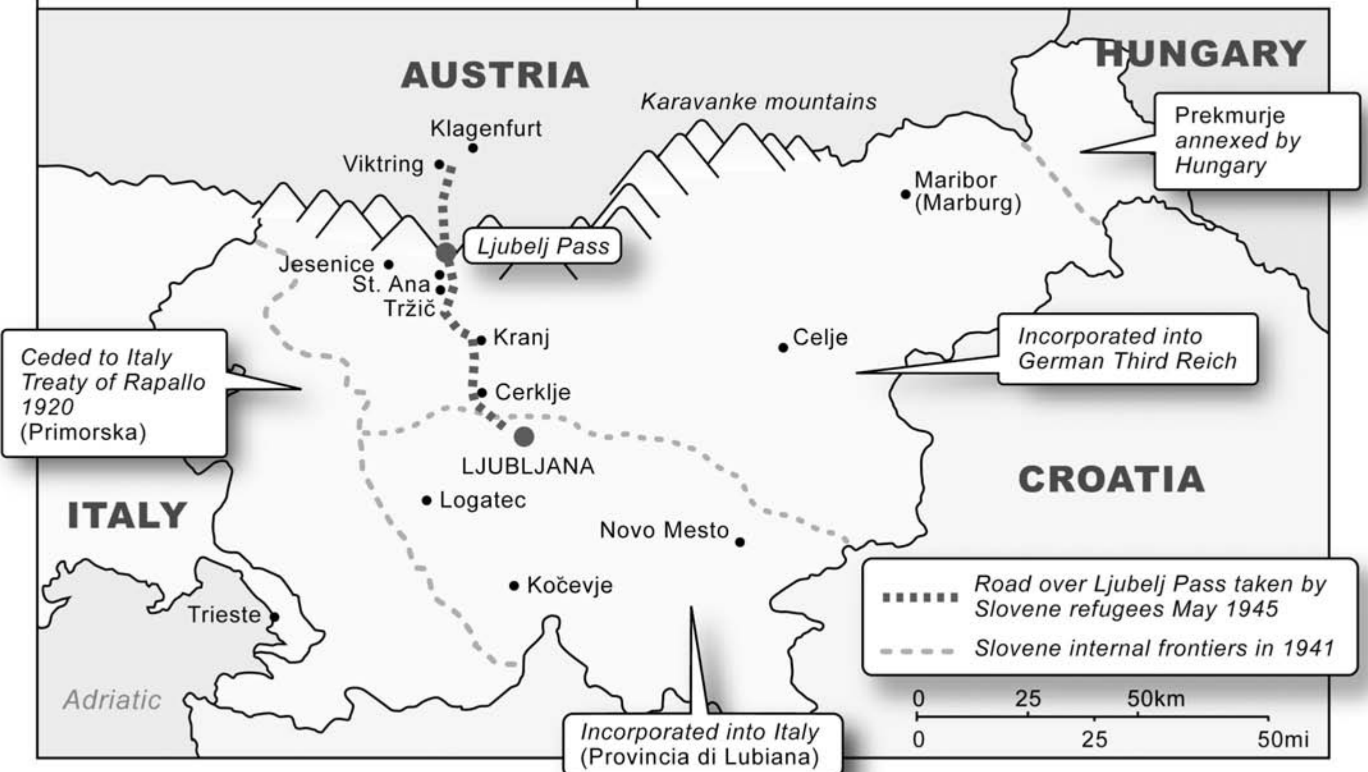
Uroš Roessmann's brother Matej was in the *domobranci* and took a couple of civilian suits with him, just in case. They saved his life. Tine Velikonja, aged 16, who had just joined the *domobranci*, was advised by his father to put on the uniform to be safer. It nearly killed him. Others took with them rolled-up paintings of ancestors or the lake resort of Bled. They now adorn homes thousands of miles away.

Frank Jeglič, whose father was the Director of Slovene primary education, set off with his parents equipped with an identity card around his neck and iron rations taken from their bomb shelter. As an 11-year-old, he was looking forward to the adventure. His American grandchildren now read the diary he kept on the way. The first entry went:

> *Sunday 6th May 1945*: I went to Mass early in the morning. I was in the sacristy when a young lady came to tell me to go home quickly. I learned we were going to Villach in Carinthia. I put my most important things in my knapsack and went to the railway station. We waited in a train until 1.30 p.m. and it did not move. After that we walked until 7 p.m. Then on to Brdo, where we arrived at 9.30 p.m. We are in a little room and there are 11 of us. The Kožuh boys want to have a lot of room. I am going to sleep on the floor, but I am sure I am going to sleep, because I am so tired.

Frank's Sunday excursion ended in America, with a job at NASA on the space programme many years later.

Dr Valentin Meršol, who was to help save the lives of thousands of the fleeing Slovenes, was called into the Gestapo and advised to leave. He had treated German officers for rashes they picked up in Africa. When he got


Flight from Slovenia 1945
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
Karavanke mountains
Klagenfurt
Viktring
Prekmurje
annexed by
Hungary
Maribor
(Marburg)
Ljubelj Pass
Jesenice
St. Ana
Tržič
Kranj
Celje
Incorporated into
German Third Reich
Ceded to Italy
Treaty of Rapallo
1920
(Primorska)
Cerklje
LJUBLJANA
CROATIA
ITALY
Logatec
Novo Mesto
Kočevje
Trieste
Road over Ljubelj Pass taken by
Slovene refugees May 1945
Slovene internal frontiers in 1941
Adriatic
0
25
50km
0
25
50mi
Incorporated into Italy
(Provincia di Lubiana)

up to go, the officer added: 'It was very clever of you to hide those Allied pilots in the hospital.' The *domobranci* had rescued shot-down Allied airmen, and Meršol had concealed them in his infectious diseases department, reckoning no Germans would risk contamination by searching it.

Sixteen-year-old Gloria Bratina's headmaster interrupted her class and told the pupils to go home. Home was an hour's walk away and she ran the whole way, skipping through the doors of a train stranded on a level crossing. Her father rented a horse and cart and they departed immediately, leaving everything behind. On the way out, people gave them soup and food. Two Partisan uncles helped with bread and cheese.

Judge Edvard Vračko, an outspoken anti-Communist, knew he had to leave, but his wife decided to stay as she was sick after an operation. His 16-year-old daughter Majda plucked up courage and said she was going too. She told her mother they would be sleeping outside, so she did not need pyjamas in the rucksack, just food. By the time they set out, ten friends and acquaintances had joined them, one of them blind.

Out in the countryside, Magdalena Šimenc, then eight years old, remembers her uncle coming up from the valley on a sunny morning and telling her family they had to go. Everybody looked at the ground as if there had been a death in the family. The 60-year-old grandfather dragged the big hay-wagon out of the front of the house, and fixed nets to both ends with hay for the oxen. In between, the women loaded bedding, clothes and provisions – flour, a big sack of dried fruit and a barrel of fat. Little Magdalena stood and watched silently, and then went for a few of her own things. The grown-ups were astonished that she knew exactly what to take. Nothing frivolous, just the essentials for a little girl going into exile. They were ready:

> A yoke of well-fed, well-trained oxen was led from the stable, watered and attached to the heavily laden cart. Grandpa knelt, crossed himself with the words 'let us go in God's name' and cracked his whip. The oxen strained as if set to plough. Grandma and the aunts followed in tears, and I with them. Where the track curved we paused to look back – for Grandma the last sight of the farm she'd worked for 35 years. Grandpa went to say goodbye to a family in the next village. By the time they'd 'comforted' him his footsteps had grown decidedly unsure and he had to ride on the cart, while the others walked to spare the animals.

Aloysius Ambrožič, now Cardinal Archbishop of Toronto, escaped with his parents at 7.30 p.m. on 8 May. By 8.45 p.m., the Partisans had arrived in his village and his neighbours could not follow. 'My mother didn't want to leave, but she knew my father had to go. Father said, "It's all or nobody," and that was a blessing as we stayed together and eventually went as a family to Canada.' Joseph Plevnik, now a Jesuit in Toronto, retreated with his *domobranci* unit northwards through Ljubljana when

the sound of guns approached. He wanted to stop at his home to say good-bye, but did not dare.

Jože Lekan, brother of Milči, had just captured military plans and archives of party members from the Partisan 7th Corps in the hills around Kočevje in the south and was taking them back to Ljubljana on a mule.[4] By the time he reached the capital, his fellow *domobranci* were preparing a general retreat. He was among the last to leave, exchanging fire with snipers as he walked down the street. He commandeered a bicycle at a post office and the next thing he knew he crashed into a wagon because he went to sleep pedalling. His hips ached and bled with the weight of a bag containing a Schmeiser machine-gun he had taken from a German, as well as hand grenades and clips of ammunition. 'I was determined to survive even if I had to kill everything around me,' he said.

Jože Jančar rushed to his fiancée Marija Hribar. It was her birthday, but he had not come to celebrate. He was an activist in a Catholic student movement and was in danger. While earlier in an Italian concentration camp at Gonars, Partisan fellow-prisoners told him they had been ordered to murder him in a maize field back at home, but had been forestalled by an Italian patrol. 'Jože had a bicycle, and said to me: "We are going to Austria for a while, until the Americans and British arrive. Do you want to come with us?" I packed a few things, and we left straightaway. We could hear the sound of guns behind us. My birthday was forgotten,' said Marija.

It was soon clear the journey was going to be no picnic. Confusion and panic spread. The sound of gunfire grew closer. Rumours spread that the Partisans were only half an hour away. German soldiers, cars and trucks were all over the place. Trains were no longer running. Many setting out on the 60 kilometres to the frontier were families with children and elderly relatives. A few had wagons, particularly those from the farms. Stane Snoj loaded provisions from his family's village shop on a trolley. Others had bicycles, or just rucksacks and a pair of feet. As night fell, many were tired and hungry and had nowhere to sleep. For some, it would take more than a week to reach their destination. Pernišek, a social security official, wrote:

> Crowds of refugees wait at the station. We wait until a column is formed. Everyone keeps silence, our hearts full of sorrow. There are flashes and the roar of guns from Ljubljana; every salvo increases our fears. We want to move as quickly as possible … It's like a funeral, but this massive cortege has no hearse. The procession is sunk in sorrow and prayer and even the beasts of burden are silent. Ljubljana is left behind and the guns grow fainter.

Twenty-five kilometres north of Ljubljana, the arrival of the dispirited column at the village of Cerklje on a fresh Sunday morning caused a

stir. The whole village had turned out to celebrate the end of the war with pealing church bells and a brass band. Festivities came abruptly to a halt, the bells and music fell silent and people stood around in consternation. The priest appealed to villagers to be hospitable, and the congregation began weeping. It was the same in other villages, where friends and relatives were shocked and incredulous at the headlong flight – though ready with food and a bed of straw for the night. Nobody could take in the scale of the disintegration before their eyes. Enemy occupation was coming to an end, but the old familiar society was crumbling before social revolution.

Slovene Catholics in flight across the mountains to Austria. They thought they were just going for a few weeks, but for many it was the last time they saw their home country.

Some families had to split up on the way. Dr Franc Puc left a four-year-old daughter behind because she was ill. When the rest of the family reached the town of Škofja Loka half way to the border, two children aged seven and nine could walk no further, so they left them with their grandparents. The two parents and their remaining daughter and son set off again, and it was nine years before the family was reunited in Canada.

While adults worried and despaired, many of the children found it exciting. To Milči Lekan, a teenager at the time, it seemed an unreal adventure as she joined a column ten kilometres long. Eight-year-old Magdalena Šimenc, sleeping under the stars in the hay on the wagon, declared: 'So far I'd enjoyed the outing. It was something really new. Normally we never left the farm apart from the Sunday walk to church, an occasional wake and the annual visit to the sewing woman.' Pernišek's children begged to linger in the beautiful countryside they were passing through, and were allowed to play for a few hours by a stream. Majda Vračko debated with university students about Thomas Aquinas before bedding down for the night in a barn. Tear-away young Val Meršol crammed his pockets with ammunition discarded by German soldiers, 'but not for long, as subsequently my mother disarmed me'.

Thirteen-year-old Rudy Kolarič and his family were attacked on the road by Partisans and dropped everything and fled. Together with his mother, uncle, two aunts and three cousins, he took shelter in a roadside tavern, but a bomb injured his mother and a cousin. A passing ambulance picked them up and in the confusion he found himself alone.

'I was petrified, and put a bucket over my head as I walked up the mountain road. There was shooting going on all the time. Once I lifted the bucket a bit and looked around. I saw Partisans to the left and the right, and when I looked back I saw a horse drop dead from a rifle shot. I jammed the bucket back on my head and walked on. I am sure I was protected by Divine Providence,' says Rudy. He eventually found his mother again in Austria.

Fellow-refugees ripped the rucksacks off the daughter and wife of Dr Meršol. Mrs Meršol, a doctor of philosophy and daughter of a famous literary critic, already weak from cancer of the womb, for the rest of her life could never forgive the affront. Rumours spread that Partisans were killing stragglers. Corpses of humans, horses and cows littered the roadside. Everywhere, the refugees mingled with an endless train of German soldiers, cars, tanks and carts – the defeated army, in a hurry, pushing civilians into the ditch, driving over fallen horses, whipping and stealing to get out first.

When Jože Lekan reached the little town of Tržič at the foot of the mountains, he spotted a young man about to be shot by *domobranci* for hiding weapons. Jože recognised him as a boy he used to play with on holiday, and saved him by training his machine-gun on his comrades.

As Lekan left the town with the *domobranci*, they came under shellfire that ripped through roofs and cratered the ground around them. A man fell screaming nearby, cut in half by a shell. A German tank ahead opened fire on them. Confusion was total, and they lay pinned down in a meadow until they could scramble off again at nightfall. Lekan said:

> It was a river of humanity and animals, streaming up into the mountain, where fires were burning in a camp where Germans had housed slave labourers. The whole camp was ablaze and that gave us some illumination, with black silhouettes standing out against the red background. Once I saved myself from falling down a cliff into a river 70 metres below by grabbing the tail of a horse and hanging on. Horses pushed me left and right; there was nothing I could do; I was just a little pebble in an avalanche.[5]

As they moved on up the mountain, underlying mistrust between the Germans and the *domobranci* came to the fore. Until now, both sides had used each other, and the Germans kept the *domobranci* on a short rein. Now the balance of power was shifting. As they reached the village of St Ana, they saw the German tank that had been firing on them blocking the road, with German SS and Gestapo soldiers standing beside it.

'The Germans were laughing at us and thought we were just a defenceless mass of civilians. All of a sudden a Chetnik fighter threw

Refugees on the way to the Ljubelj Pass. Civilians, soldiers, horses, carts, tanks and cars mingled chaotically as they fled from the advancing Partisans.

himself down with a machine-gun and threatened to mow down the entire German staff. We jumped to the left and right of him and aimed our rifles at the Germans. We made clear that we would kill everybody in sight if they did not move the tank off the road. They moved it and the civilian refugees and wagons could resume their climb.'

Lekan and his unit spread around the sides of the congested road and walked into a minefield that blew off the leg of one of his friends. Lekan, near the end of his strength, crawled the last few hundred metres out of the minefield on all fours.

As Uroš Roessmann's *domobranci* unit headed up the hill, Partisan artillery rained shells on them, wounding soldiers, blocking the road and causing panic at the end of the column. 'The company disintegrated, and we never saw our commander again. I got into a strange group of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and we mounted a rear-guard with a heavy machine-gun. Exhausted after three nights without sleep, we were just approaching the pass, when the man in front of me stepped on a mine and was killed.'

Marian Loboda, 14 at the time, described the chaos: 'Now we could only move at night. The nearer the frontier, the greater the crowds. Pauses for rest were impossible. Then the whole mass got stuck with our wagon in the middle, and we were terrified when we heard shots from behind and from the hills. People seized anything they could carry and rushed up the hill, and I was told to hold on tight to a member of the family. The fully loaded wagons were stranded and later taken over by pursuing Partisans or the locals. The valley grew narrower, the path steeper. A munitions truck caught fire and exploded with a deafening report.'

France Pernišek recorded the apocalyptic scene as he and his family headed up from the last village of St Ana:

> The horses whinny, the carts groan, all the men push the carts to help the beasts climb the hill. St Ana now lies far below and the whole valley is lit by a huge conflagration: the camp at Ljubelj is on fire. We are horrified by the dark red flames reflecting like blood on the rocks. The higher we go, the darker and more frightening the sight of the burning valley. We hear repeated explosions. How we'd have suffered if we had still been at St Ana.

Gradually, they struggled up to the two-kilometre-long tunnel that would take them under the Ljubelj Pass to safety in Austria on the other side.

The tunnel was blocked. SS soldiers guarding its opening were only letting German troops through. It had been built by slave labour – French, Polish, Russian, Belgian, Italian and Yugoslav civilians drafted in from Mauthausen concentration camp.[6] Intended to give German armies speedier access to the Adriatic, in the end it only served to facilitate their flight in defeat. Nearby lay the burned-out remains of the camp