

In Memoriam

It was autumn. The physical reality of the unceasing mist well reflected our hopeless state of mind. In my veins there was tension of the war. It was the fall of 1944 – the most dreadful fall of my twenty-three year life span.

In front of me was the River Tisza with her loose marshes, reed swamp and willowtrees. It was the floodfield of the river. I was fastening the leather strap on my battle helmet. My finger was on the trigger of my submachine gun. My battlestation was nested in a haystack with a good vision of our lines. Through the gray vapor-curtin, I could barely make out the silhouettes of the treeline which marked the river. The River Tisza is nicknamed the „Truly Hungarian River.”

„Tisza”. I was murmuring the name. With a painful awareness I realized I was standing guard on the last foothold of Hungary. What was now on the other side of the river, the lakes, orchards, little farms and small towns, was not part of my homeland anymore. That belonged now to a new landlord. It is a ruthless horrifying horde that is now on the other bank ready to engulf us... and now we, a small handful, are here to be a bulwark against the flood.

That realization filled my heart with a mixed feeling of responsibility and pride. With my binoculars I caressed the terrain where my boys, my comrades in this impossible task, were lying in their muddy foxholes. Their uniforms were wet through and through and their helmets looked like gigantic mushrooms. Their old wornout weapons were protected with their coats.

From the canal to the cornfield lies the defence perimeter of the First Unit. I can see them. Steve Csege just lit his cigarette. He took care to be covered from the front. The little puffs of smoke were torn to shreds by the wind.

Further down to the left is Unit Three. Their perimeter extends down to the river.

It is now sunset, the shadows are growing, the darkness is thickening. The whole area is deserted as far as Szolnok, a city some 20 kilometers behind us. We can hear the clatter of heavy armour. In front of us, in our half encirclement, is the village of Toszeg occupied by the enemy. Occasionally, we hear inarticulate shouts from that direction.

As darkness becomes more and more unpenetrable by vision, vigilance is taken over by other senses. We are now conscious of every noise. We hear the rustling sound of the reeds, the rattle of dead leaves...we must be on guard. Nights are frequently disturbed by reconnaissance activities from both sides...we are all ears now.

Suddenly, the crack of a distant explosion signifies that the daily bombardment has started. It is almost ritualistic. Every day, when darkness comes, the Russians say „good evening” by sending a barrage of mines.

„The serenade has started,” says Perina the commander of Unit Two. They are located not too far from my haystack. Everybody lies lower in their dugouts and

with fatalistic indifference we wait the oncoming connoade. The packages are coming at precise intervals. Sometimes the haystack under me sizzles from the shrapnel. Fortunately, the fragments from the mines are spread low and I am up high. In reply, our only anti-aircraft gun punctuates a few holes towards the front of the village. How sad it is to shoot at our own country!

There is no time for sentimentality. I can hear the approaching steps of a messenger despite the noise of the explosions. Still, just for good measure, I release the safty pin of my gun.

„The company commander is requesting your presence at the company headquarters, lieutenant.” I hear the familiar voice of Master-Sargent Kotesi.

„Coming,” I said, sliding down from the haystack. „Corporal Perina, you take over the platoon!”

„Yes sir.”

In the company of the master-sargent, I retreat in the direction of the company headquarters. Having been here for a few days, I can orient fairly well, even in the darkness. The headquarters is a ruined inn near the highway. The mudbrick walls of the building are thick, providing good protection. The greater portion of the roof is gone and the yard is spotted with many craters of various explosions. In one of the habitable rooms I found my commander. He is bent over a map lit by a pocket flashlight. Without a word we shake hands. He is a handsome man, in his mid-thirties, a mature man in comparison to me, the twenty-three year old greenhorn.

„I received a reconnanisance report today. Apparently, one of our comrads lies dead or wounded near the town, you know, near those corn stalks. We must take a look.”

That was all. I understood. I had to lead a patrol between the lines.

„Who reported it?”

„Sargwent Menyhart.”

I knew the plumpish sargent who with his jovial face could sooner be taken for a good-natured barber than a military man...but Sargent Menyhart was a dedicated soldier.

„I would like to talk to him.”

„Sure.”

In a few minutes time the sargent saluted me in a decent way due to the fact I was such a non-battle-hardened young officer.

„I sneaked into the village last night in civilian disguise. A citizen informed me how the village was over run by the partisans. Those are mainly riff-raff recruited by the Russians to be used as shock-troops.

„I know, I know!”

„So, the outpost of the gerdarmerie would have been captured and all of them excuted if one of the soldiers would not have taken up a defensive position with two carbines and plenty of amunition in that cornfield near the houses. He kept the

pursuers at bay until the rest of his comrades were gone. He never came out of that cornstock cover. Most likely he is dead but nobody knows for sure.”

„Do you trust your informer?”

„Well he is a Hungarian.”

When did this happen?”

„A week or so...”

Does this make sense? Risking the life of two or three more soldiers for the one who in all probability is dead by now? This was a question formed in my mind but never said. How could I? That man, who is there somewhere, has he ever asked what the sense is of his self-sacrifice? No! He just acted as a brave man should! I was silenced by my own shame.

„Who are we going with?” asked the sargent in a natural voice which barely disguised my inner fear.

„Corporal Berta and Private Gulyas volunteered.”

„When are we off?”

„At 2:00 a.m. is the most suitable time. We do not want to run into enemy patrols.” answered the captain.

„So long, just rest and relax.”

Rest and relax...words...the four-hour wait was anything but relaxing. The only advantage was that I could spend it in a dry room. October nights are chilly even on the Tisza shore.

When the time for departure came, I realized with apprehension that the rain stopped and a bright moonlight illuminated the night.

„Just when we need the clouds, there aren't any!”

At the beginning of our adventure I was under the influence of my childhood romanticism. As the four of us started our advancement, crawling along the ditch of the highway, the tension slowly evaporated. Instead of tension, I was overwhelmed with a feeling of grim determination. We were nothing but an extension of our vigilant senses which warned us of every noise. We were moving with short swift advances interrupted with long motionless breaks. On the fluorescent plate of my wristwatch, I checked the advancement of time. After about an hour and a half of advancing, Menyhart grabbed my arm and signaled that we must change direction. With hand-signals I ordered the other two to cover us from here while Menyhart and myself burrowed ourselves into the plowfields. Only now I saw how this fat looking man could move on his belly. He advanced steadily and quietly. We could see now the first rows of white houses of the village. I tried to hold back my heavy breathing. The corn stalks were suddenly towering above me and in the moonlight there was the horrible still-life of war. Among the scattered ammunition racks were two silenced carbines and a forever silenced soldier. Menyhart was already trying to drag him out of the hole. As I took the left arm of the dead man, I saw half of his face missing. He must have been hit when taking aim.

We had to hurry. Both of us were dragging the corps by one of his arms. When we reached the highway-ditch, the other two took over the grim duty. It

was well after 5:00 a.m. when we recrossed our lines. Only here I had the first chance to observe the dead soldier by flashlight. There was nothing extraordinary about him. He was just an average Hungarian. Inside his uniform I read his name. „Steve Lovass, Corporal, Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie, Toszeg Detachment.”

Alex Domokos, Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie