

REPATRIATION

With the German defeat, the exile of displaced persons, internees, forced labourers, conscripts, prisoners of war, and other displaced individuals came to an end. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) took responsibility for these individuals on an international level, organizing temporary shelters and assembly centers across Europe, where they awaited their return to their homeland or repatriation. The new Yugoslav government signed an international agreement with UNRRA for their return, and on 12th May 1945, the Slovene Ministry of Social Welfare established a repatriation headquarters to facilitate this process. More than forty reception centers were set up, with one of the larger repatriation centers being in Celje.

The first surviving camp prisoners returned home by the end of May, some even on foot, and in the summer, most of the exiles returned in an organized manner. By September 1945, more than 70.000 displaced and exiled people had returned to Slovenia. Many, especially former conscripts in the German army, returned from captivity much later, even years afterward. The Red Cross of Slovenia assisted people in searching for relatives who had not returned or were missing. Among other services, the Red Cross also provided medical and humanitarian aid and helped meet the most urgent needs of the returnees.

»And so, after a year and a half of absence, I was returning to my hometown. When I arrived from the station at the schoolyard near home, I saw my father there, doing something. I called out to him and rushed over. He hugged and kissed me – the first time I could remember him doing so. Then we went to see Mom, who hugged me too, but immediately scolded me for growing a mustache. By the next morning, I had to shave it off. There was also a heartfelt farewell with my sister Dragica. But we didn't know where my brother Janko was. He didn't return home until mid-August, also from the Marseille camp, where I had been /.../ In the morning, Monti woke me up. His group from Dachau had arrived in Celje at three in the morning. Mom told him I had been looking for him. As soon as he got up, he rushed to me. From then on, we spent all those postwar days together – days that revealed all their beauty, though at times, they were overshadowed by a haze of painful memories.«

(Bruno Hartman, On the road, everything comes your way {Na poti pride vse naproti}, Litera, 2007, pp. 133–134)

Between June and October 1945, most of the more than 650 "stolen" children and adolescents, who had been placed in various German youth re-education camps since 1942, were returned from collection centers via organized transports. Many of them were left orphaned. Of the approximately thirty infants included in the Lebensborn program, only just over half were returned. The search for and repatriation of children adopted by German families was often lengthy, unsuccessful, and traumatic for all involved – especially the children. Some completely disappeared without a trace, while others only discovered their true identity decades later.

"The thought of returning home, to Slovenia, was actually present already at the time of departure – a forced departure. As soon as that truck drove off in the direction of Maribor on the early morning of 12th June 1941, the song rang out: 'Oh, now we go, oh, now we go, but we shall come back.' There was no despair in this singing, rather defiance – or perhaps, I think now, a restrained sadness."

"During the time when we were all still living in Belgrade, my mother's sister Minka Kmecl was on her way home after a long, long journey from the German camp in Belzig, a subcamp of Ravensbrück. She passed through Belgrade but had no idea we were still there. So, we did not meet."

"In July – more precisely, on 23rd July – it was the day of my return to Slovenia. Mom had learned that a service truck with some cargo would be heading to Slovenia and managed to get me a travel permit. Without a permit, traveling was not allowed. /.../ We set off in the afternoon of 23rd July 1945. Driving at night was not allowed, and probably not safe either. /.../ I vividly remember the ride over the bridge – perhaps over the Drava – then uphill, a sharp left turn between houses, and then a fellow passenger said: 'We're already in Slovenia.' At that moment I felt an unforgettable emotion ... A few months later, in my first school essay describing the return, I ended with the words: '... and in my heart rose a thanks to the Eternal One – my God, thank you.' It may sound a bit sentimental, but it truly reflected what I felt at the time."

(Božena Orožen, The Journey Home from Serbia in 1945 {Pot domov iz Srbije leta 1945}, unpublished)