

## RETREAT

In May 1945, in the final days of the war, as the occupying apparatus had already collapsed, an unending mass of people streamed through the town and the entire Celje basin. A vast number of heavily armed and intimidating troops were pushing through from the Balkans, aiming to surrender to the Western Allies in Carinthia, Austria. Alongside the Germans, the main armed forces of the Independent State of Croatia, other collaborationist and quisling units, as well as fleeing civilians, were retreating. Local partisan units were far too weak to stop and disarm such a military force, which threatened retaliatory actions and the burning of the town. In the middle of the chaos, the District Committee of the Liberation Front of Celje–City, with the task to assume control, primarily sought to prevent possible incidents, the destruction of the town, and violence against the civilian population.

Defeated soldiers and civilians continued retreating through and past the city even after the official German capitulation and the surrender of the German army to the partisan units, which was signed on the evening of 9<sup>th</sup> May at the headquarters of the 4<sup>th</sup> Operational Zone in Topolšica by Colonel General Alexander Löhr, the supreme commander of the German Army Group E. Members of the National Protection (Narodna zaščita) and stronger units of the Slovenian partisan and Yugoslav armies, who arrived in Celje in the following days, disarmed the defeated forces, directed them toward the Savinja and Šalek Valleys, or confined them in improvised prisoner camps. German prisoners of war were gathered, among other places, at the Westen sports stadium, while Croats were held in Medlog and Bežigrad. A considerable number of Ustaše, in particular – aware of the victors' desire for revenge – refused to lay down their arms and were still prepared to fight their way to freedom. Armed clashes on Slovenian territory continued until 15<sup>th</sup> May, when the World War II in Europe was effectively over.

*"The captured Germans huddled in swarms around small fires on the low hill beneath the manor house – the whole slope was full of them – cooking nettles or whatever else vaguely edible they could find in their aluminium mess kits. They hadn't had a proper meal in weeks, ever since partisan brigades stopped them at the Austrian border and forced them back into the land they had tried to flee – now a land that had barely enough bread for its own people, let alone for defeated foreign armies.*

*I selected a group of ten, choosing by their faces – faces that, I hoped, belonged to men who knew what a book was – and each morning I led them into town, and each evening back to Bukovžlak. A fifteen-year-old boy with a Mauser slung over his shoulder, a member of the National Guard, escorting a group of prisoners of war – such a sight was nothing unusual at the time."*

*(Miloš Mikelc, City by the River {Mesto ob reki}, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, 2008, pp. 87–88)*

*"In the first days of May 1945, an elite SS combat division camped along the road from Imeno to Podčetrtek. They likely occupied additional routes, but this was the part I saw with my own eyes. Nearly the entire month of April, German troops had been retreating along this road from Bosnia and Croatia. Among the Germans were also many Chetniks and Ustaše.*

*At the very end came the 7<sup>th</sup> SS Division Prinz Eugen, composed mostly of Banat and Danube Swabians. Its task was to protect the withdrawal of elite German units.*

*I must admit: all German units were orderly and strictly disciplined. Wherever the Ustaše and Chetniks appeared, it was immediately obvious that they had become a scattered rabble, seeking refuge among the Germans. Entire families were retreating alongside the Ustaše and Chetniks, adding to the sense of disorder and chaos in otherwise tight military columns. But behind the SS men – there was no one left."*

*(Bert Savodnik, My War Against the Germans {Moja vojna proti Nemcem}, MnZC 2015, p. 89)*