

FREEDOM

On 8th May 1945, members of the District Committee of the Liberation Front of Celje-city, with the assistance and mediation of the German industrialist from Celje, Max Adolf Westen, began negotiations to take over authority in the city. These talks unfolded under dangerous circumstances, during general chaos and the absence of governance. While the Germans were, in principle, willing to surrender, Ustaše forces took control of the Celje town hall and even arrested the partisan negotiators for a time. Although Germany officially capitulated during the night of 8th to 9th May, which accelerated the withdrawal of enemy troops from Celje, negotiations and discussions over surrender and disarmament continued throughout 9th May at the town hall. That evening, part of the headquarters of the 4th Operational Zone and some members of the District Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia (KPS) arrived in the city. The following day, 10th May, a city military command ('komanda mesta') was established. In the afternoon, the first Slovene partisan operational units – members of the Kozjansko Detachment and the Šlander, Zidanšek, and Prekmurje Brigades – began to arrive and march into Celje. That same day, the General Staff of the Yugoslav Army announced in its daily command bulletin that Celje was liberated.

Despite the continued movement of enemy military and civilian columns through and around the city for several days, 10th May 1945 can be considered the date marking the end of the German occupation and the liberation of Celje. In the days that followed, conditions gradually stabilized enough for the new authorities – emerging from the structures of the Liberation Front established during the war – to organize the first major public celebration of liberation on 13th May. An enthusiastic crowd of civilians of all ages, along with soldiers, gathered in front of the town hall, a symbol of municipal power. From its decorated balcony, the city's military and political leadership addressed the assembly, led by Martin Klančičar, the first secretary of the Celje-city District Committee of the Liberation Front, and his successor, Emilija Gabrovec – Lenka, both of whom had already played significant roles in the negotiations and transfer of power.

Fourteen days later, on Sunday, 27th May, a major public demonstration of the Celje district took place in the city. From early morning, crowds from across the region began gathering in front of the town hall. Later, the procession moved to the main venue in front of the railway station, where a ceremonial platform had been erected, and a series of speeches were delivered.

The course of events was described in detail in the first issue of the Celje newspaper *Nova pot*, which also enthusiastically reported on Marshal Tito's first visit to Celje on 31st May 1945.

"Young and old alike rushed to the town hall, the gathering point. There you saw sturdy farm girls cheering alongside grey-haired mothers and fathers who had supported the first Styrian partisans, knowing that this great day would come when they could once again speak their mother tongue. You saw our workers cheering – those who, on the very first day after the occupiers were expelled, began working on volunteer reconstruction projects to contribute as much as possible to the rebuilding of our homeland. In everyone's eyes, you could read the pride of belonging to the Slovenian nation – the heroic nation known throughout the world for its brave fight against fascism."

(Nova pot, 2nd June 1945)

"I walked with ease through the streets of Celje. Everywhere, flags adorned with red stars fluttered—Slovenian and Yugoslav alike, many hastily sewn from whatever fabric was at hand. Scars of war were visible all around, the remnants of Allied bombing. Most poignant was the sight of the collapsed tower of the National Hall and the damaged surroundings of the parish church. Yet this was my town—the place of my birth and upbringing—the town I had carried within me, across Europe, shackled between life and death. Now, I could finally breathe the air of Celje—and the freedom it held."

(Bruno Hartman, On the road, everything comes your way {Na poti pride vse naproti}, Litera, 2007, p. 135)

"Here, among the piles of discarded weapons, unarmed Germans were swarming, all moving toward Ljubljanska street. In this mass of soldiers, our group broke apart, we got separated, and suddenly I found myself alone. I made my way through the streets full of disarmed Germans, heading toward the Narodni dom. From the Narodni dom to the Town Hall, there were more and more armed Croatian soldiers or Ustaše, which did not bode well at all. In front of the church across from the Town Hall, I suddenly felt a strong hand grab me. I turned around and saw in front of me an Ustaša officer, about two meters tall. He ordered me to come with him into the Town Hall building /.../ We agreed that our people at the entry points had to be informed immediately about what had been decided, and they were to be instructed not to cause any trouble for the Croatian army."

(Ivan Grobelnik – Ivo, The Accordion, the Scissors, and 'Stari pisker' {Harmonika, škarje in Stari pisker}, MnZC, 2004, p. 128)