

A DEATH MARCH & MASSACRE

The Bleiburg Repatriations, 1945

At the end of World War II, several hundred thousand people fled communist-zoned Yugoslavia toward the Austrian border. Many were German or NDH (Croatian) soldiers, some of whom who had been responsible for the deaths of 300,000 people in Yugoslavia during WWII, mostly minorities. Some were innocent refugees like Anni and her family, who got swept into the fray. They were all hoping to surrender to British troops at or near the Austrian town of Bleiburg, rather than to the communist Yugoslav Partisans or Soviet troops.

The fleeing soldiers and civilians were turned back at the Austrian border, and forced to be repatriated. In an event which came to be called "The Bleiburg Repatriations" or "The Bleiburg Massacre," soldiers and civilians were marched east. Anni was separated from her family during the march. Communist Partisan forces strafed the columns of marchers with machine guns. Anni was shot by a Partisan spraying the crowd with machine gun fire. Although seriously wounded, her misfortune may have actually saved her life because it removed her from the death march.

Tens of thousands of others were murdered and their bodies dumped in mass graves as they were driven through the fields and forests of Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). Thousands of others were incarcerated in forced labor camps.

The exact number of those who died during this event that started in Bleiburg varies widely. The communist government buried the event for years. Current estimates are between 23,000 and 100,000, with 45,000-55,000 being the most likely, based on archeological evidence, demographic calculations, and eyewitness accounts.



The Barbara Pit Mass Grave in Slovenia holds the remains of around 3000 people killed during the ensuing "death marches."



Anni and her family were among the thousands of soldiers and refugees caught in Soviet-zoned Yugoslavia at the end of World War II, desperate to escape capture by the Soviets.



The crowd at the Yugoslav-Austrian border near Bleiburg were denied refuge in Austria, and turned over to the Yugoslav government to be repatriated as Soviet citizens, according to the Yalta Agreement. They were marched back, brutalized by Partisans all the way. Anni and her family became separated at this time. Old people and children were taken by truck, but Anni was strong and young, and required to walk. This event in May, 1945, came to be known as the **Bleiburg Repatriations**.



Bleiburg-Repatriation refugees spent the night in an open field. Anni didn't want to go further until she found her family, but guards drove the crowd on toward Czechoslovakia.