

ANNI

◆ Stuck in Communist Yugoslavia and a Death March

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Stuck in Communist Yugoslavia and a Death March

When the war ended, Yugoslavia was zoned communist. We knew that we had to get from Yugoslavia to a different zone. We didn't want the communists to capture us. So my mom, my sister Tina, her son Viktor, and I packed up and went with the soldiers. The roads were crowded with people heading for the border on foot, trying to leave the country. There were so many people on the roads that we couldn't move quickly.

When we reached the border, the Partisans (Yugoslavian communist soldiers) wouldn't let us cross. They started driving all the people away from the border. "Young people have to walk back!" they yelled. "Old people can ride in a truck." My mom was put in the truck with Viktor, and Tina and I started walking. Viktor, who was only about six, started to cry. My mom said, "Tina, look after your son!" So Tina jumped onto the truck, and I said to them, "Goodbye, see you tonight." It was mostly to reassure myself, because I thought, "If we get separated, how will we ever find each other again?" And it was true. That was the last time I saw them for many months.

When you see pictures of thousands of refugees walking together, that's what it was like. Guards flanked us on either side so we couldn't go

anywhere. That night, we camped at a big field, almost like a football field. We slept out in the open. I had a blanket and a pillow with me.

In the morning, we had to go on again. I didn't want to go further until I found my family. I told the guards, "I'm not leaving here. I need to wait for my mother and my sister." The guards said, "They're not coming." "Then I'll wait here," I told them. "I'm not leaving." "Oh, yes, you are!" they said, and I had to go with them.

The guards pushed us on relentlessly. I met two girls, and walked with them. We grew so tired. One of the girls couldn't keep up. A guard knocked her down with the butt of his rifle and beat her up. The German soldiers who were walking with us said, "They're not going to do that to the girls anymore." They had us walk in the middle and they flanked us, protecting us.

One of the German soldiers was a medic who carried a little bit of sugar. Whenever we found some water, he would mix it with sugar and give it to us to drink, to keep our energy up. My shoes wore out, and one of the other soldiers gave me a pair of shoes. By this time, I was so tired of lugging my pillow that I threw it away. But I held onto my blanket. The girls and I talked among ourselves. I said, "Once we cross into Czechoslovakia, we won't be able to get out. What shall we do?" But we couldn't escape.



Surrendering soldiers at the Bleiburg Border in May, 1945.