

Excerpt of the biography of Eva Edl:

She Looks Like My Little Girl

By James Johnston

March 15, 1945

Prigrevica St. John, Yugoslavia

Just before Easter of 1945, the partisans returned with weapons to drive us out of our homes and out of our town for good. It was mayhem. There was pure panic on everyone's faces. It was so hard to believe what was happening. The partisans were battle-hardened communist guerillas, and they turned their guns on us. They took ownership of every square foot of Prigrevica St. John and everything we all owned. We were outcasts in our own homes and town.

We were given just a few minutes to gather a few permitted things—a blanket, a dish, and a spoon. We could not take our huge down duvets, which were too cumbersome, so I took my shawl and wrapped it around a small, white-enameled pot with a red handle and a spoon. We could carry nothing else but the clothes on our backs and whatever we could hide on our person. I decided to wear my favorite summer dress and my pretty sandals with a white wedge heel. My Tatti (father) had them made especially for me. They had red, white, and green leather strips interwoven in the front, with a strap around the back. With tears in her eyes, Anna (my older sister) screamed at me to put on some sensible shoes.

My Oma (my grandmother) didn't have to come with us because she was ethnic Hungarian. But she accompanied us anyway.

We couldn't take our dog and cat and were forced to abandon them. Years later, a neighbor told Mami (my mother) that the pets starved to death side by side in my parents' bed.

I also had wrapped a small pen knife Tatti had given me in my shawl. It had white pearl handles and held its edge well. Then I wondered, if they caught me, would they kill me?

We were forced to march out of town with the barrels of guns aimed at us. The eyes behind those gun sites were cold. Hateful. Communist. We were at their mercy. We were not told where we were being driven.

At the back of the line, people who couldn't keep up were shot. Animals that followed their masters were shot. It was so frightening to hear a gunshot in the back of the line and not know if they'd killed a person or a dog. One woman gave birth in the road.

We endured what at least twelve million Eastern Europeans of German descent were experiencing in 1945 and 1946. It was ethnic cleansing at its finest.

Some were simply kicked out of the homes and towns their forefathers had built and told to walk to Germany through the countryside and the war-torn cities with what they could carry. Thousands were packed in closed cattle wagons or train cars without food or water. Rock hard, frozen corpses arrived at their destination in winter, foul-smelling, rotting corpses in summer. Unbelievably, two million perished on the journey. Those who survived the transport to Germany had to try to scratch a living from a decimated, crater-filled, broken nation, with hordes of Soviet troops raping and looting and murdering with impunity over the eastern half of Europe.

As my stomach groaned with hunger and my feet ached on the dirt road, my misery became more intolerable with every gunshot at the back of the line, every screaming wife falling over a slain husband, every desperate mother's cry to God, begging for mercy for her babies.

I meditated on what a nun had taught me in school. She said when you hurt, you should pray for others; instead of focusing on the horror of your circumstances, focus on Jesus.

I prayed for everyone I could think of, for all the people suffering around me—families broken up by the train shipment of workers to Siberia, girls and women limping from their repeated violations, forced to leave their homes and valuables and farms and animals. This helped me get my mind off myself. At least until the thirst set in.

I soon grew so thirsty on the forced march that I couldn't stand it. My thirst was so severe, I felt like it was making me crazy! When no one was looking, with my heart beating out of my chest for fear, I rushed to a ditch beside the road and took several gulps of thick, slimy green water. Oma saw me and urged me back to the group. Careful no one was looking, she gave me a sip from a concealed flask of whiskey to help kill the germs from the drainage ditch water.

We spent two days on the road and one night in a field, frightened and shivering.

April 2, 1945

Filipovo, Yugoslavia

We were taken to a village called Filipovo. They forced the ethnic German people there to take us into their homes. The homeowners resented us being there right before Easter, so it was not a pleasant stay.

Soon the partisans came and took all of us to a field outside of town.

We were separated into three groups: men and boys over twelve, women and girls over twelve, and—the last and most pitiful group—the sick, the elderly, and children twelve and under.

I was confused and scared when they took my brother Josef and placed him with the men. He was shaking and crying. Our eyes fastened, and I wondered if I would ever see him again. Then Anna was taken and put with the older girls and the women. Josef and Anna were in the groups designated for slave labor.

I didn't know it, but I was in the group slated for extermination.

"Be strong, Eva," Oma encouraged me. My Oma was the only relative with me now. Would they take her, too?

Oma disguised herself to look much older and frailer than she was, hunching forward at the shoulders. They let her stay with me. I didn't appreciate then the sacrifice Oma was making for me. She spurned the freedom her Hungarian heritage could have afforded her and instead played the sick, elderly Danube-Swabian (German-speaking Yugoslavians) just so she could stay with me.

There were so many motherless children with us because their parents had been taken like my Tatti to the front lines, to be cannon fodder for the Nazis, or like my Mami to be forced labor for the Red Army. Or they had been shipped on trains to one of the thousands of Gulag labor camps in the Soviet interior. I felt so sorry for all the crying orphans. At least I had my dear Oma.

Seeing my sister Anna and my brother Josef taken away from me so coldly left my heart crushed. I felt numb, like nothing could hurt me anymore. But when they shoved so many people into our cattle car and it was standing room only, I began to despair. Oma tried to calm me. She did not realize that, while the adults could look around at people's faces, I was so small that their bodies pressed in on me, making it hard for me even to breathe.

Soon, someone had to go to the bathroom. I don't remember how, but the one dish that I was allowed to take from my home became the potty. When it was full, someone tried to throw the waste out the window.

No one knew how long we'd be on the train. With the bone-deep thirst and the claustrophobia making the walls close in, the short train ride felt much longer than it was. We arrived at our destination—the village of Gakova. Before the war, this small village had three thousand inhabitants. Now, with the death camp teeming with the enemies of Tito (the new communist leader of Yugoslavia), it had twenty-one thousand.

Someone handed me my smelly, nasty pot, and we got off the train.

What was happening to me and my family was a microcosm of what was happening all across Eastern Europe.

[To read more of Eva Edl's amazing story, visit SheLooksLikeMyLittleGirl.com.]