

IVO SRČNIK (Slovenia)

CLIP 1

Yes. Well, I come from a tradesman's family. My father was a tradesman, a woodworker, and my mother was a cook. My mother came from Styria and my father from Carniola, so they both met in Ljubljana. I was born 19 April 1924 in Rečica near Savinja. Then we moved. As far as our residence is concerned, or rather the trade, we moved from Šentjanž, Radmirje, Mengeš, Luč and we ended up here in Kropa. I had a sister and parents, but they've all passed away already and so only I remain here on our land. Hitler occupied Slovenian territory in 1941. I was a youth at the time, young and ignorant and I had absolutely no clue about politics. On 10 July 1942, I was mobilized to the German *Arbeitsdienst*, which was a German labor service. I was mobilized into this service, which was a sort of paramilitary type. I was in the *Arbeitsdienst* for six months and then I returned in December 1942. By the time I got home, the call-up for the German army was already waiting for me.

CLIP 2

Nonetheless, we were recruited already while serving in the *Arbeitsdienst*, and I was assigned to the German infantry. By the time I got home in December 1942, the call-up for the German army was already waiting for me, like I said, and I was recruited into the German army, forcibly mobilized. But I was an 18 year old youth at the time, perhaps a month or two more, and I had no idea what the army was or what a weapon was. And that's how I came to the German army at Brno in the Czech Republic; it was called Brünn in German. I was in the army December 1942, and January and February. We had what they call in German *Ausbildung*, which was a drill using German weapons. We were given an assignment of which I knew nothing about: to fight against the Russian soldiers. We were sent in February 1943, which is when Germany was suffering from hard times due to the Soviet troops conquering German troops in Stalingrad, up in Leningrad, and that's when we were sent to the eastern front. I must say that in terms of the life and language, we were lucky to go to the eastern front. Why? Because we could make contact with the people on the eastern front, those who were of Russian origin, Slavic. However, our boys, my age, not younger, but older, were sent to France, or Germany or Africa, and no one could speak our language in those places. Thank God, those of us who arrived ... don't misunderstand me, we arrived to the Soviet Union where a Slavic language was spoken and we could partly understand one another. I fought at Orel; first at Dnjepr Petrovski and then at Orel.

CLIP 3

That's how I came, after some heavy fighting at Dnjepr Petrovski, and at Orel in the hinterland of the German fighting line, to the small village of Balakleja. It was in Balakleja that I came to stay with a family, where the parents had two daughters. One daughter was my age; the other was two years younger. I collaborated well with these two daughters. At the time I knew Slovene and a little Serbocroatian, because we'd learned some in school. So that's how we communicated. One morning the mother brought a picture, an icon of the Mother Mary, and I said *mother* in Russian to her – a little Russian, a little Slovene and a little Serbocroatian and that's how we communicated – and I asked her why she brings this picture in here. I explained that we have such pictures hanging on our walls. And she said that her girls and boys were communists. I knew almost nothing about communism; basically because we never learned anything about it or about various politics and political parties as we know them today. She said at the time *you know, mine are komsomoljki*. The word *komsomolj* was foreign to me. But that's how well we communicated, we worked well together, and we gave food to these girls for their efforts. Once, the younger girl said *Ivo*, she called me by my name, *listen, I have a bomaška for you*. You're probably wondering what's a *bomaška*? It's a quarter piece of paper on which something is written, half in German and half in Russian. *Can you read Russian?* Yes, I said, *so-so*. She asked *how so-so?* And I just said *so-so*. Because the Russian alphabet has more letters than Cyrillic's. But I read it. I knew a little German and a little Russian and a little Serbocroatian and of course a little Slovene; and so I read it. The younger girl, she told me that if I get caught, if I get taken prisoner by the Soviet's, that this *bomaška*, this piece of paper will get me an extra piece of bread.

I had no idea why this *bombaška* and why this little piece of paper were so valuable. At any rate, it's what the younger girl said to me, not so much the older, that when the Russians capture me I must show this piece of paper and I'll receive an extra piece of bread.

CLIP 4

Perhaps it was a week or two or three, I don't know, I can't say because we didn't follow calendar days. They didn't even know of calendars in Russia at the time. But I was taken prisoner when I was riding my horses, packed with food, to the front line, to the German front. I swear it was a Russian stallion in the set of horses and I swear, when that stallion sensed the Russian language, I didn't even hear it, he started neighing. I don't know, I guess I wasn't careful; I was taken by surprise. I rode on another few hundred meters and then five or six people, girls too, surrounded me. They said that I was mobilized into the German army. I even said so myself. But I wondered how these people, these strangers could know. One of the soldiers said to me, actually he was a civilian, to show my *bombaška*. How is one to know? ...foreign people, strangers ...show the *bombaška*, show the paper. So I pulled it out of the pocket of my German uniform, up here on the left side we had a pocket, and I took the paper out and handed it over. The leader said *vojta, harašjo*, meaning thank you or good enough that I gave him the paper. They took my horses there, even sooner, when I was surrounded; and I was made to taste some food, to test whether it was really edible. I don't know if later they ate that food or not. They chased me three or four kilometers away. But even before I was taken prisoner, the watch was taken off my hand. That was my first. I remember thinking how it made no difference. When they caught me, they took me to the village called Balakleja and they locked me up in a hen coop. Perhaps it was two by two meters, or one by one, I don't remember anymore. I just know that I was locked up in that hen coop for an eternity, or at least it seemed that way. Then I don't know whether it was afternoon or the next day, I can't remember anymore, but two soldiers came in and asked me if I'm German or not. *No, I'm not, I'm Yugoslavian*. They knew nothing of any Yugoslavians. Then they dragged me, or rather tied me up with some wire and shoved me up to some sort of headquarters. There was a huge, long table in a very large room, and the officers were sitting over there. I don't know what kind of officers they were. They asked me all sorts of things. I don't know, perhaps I'd been thinking about it in the hen coop. I was asked for my surname. I said *Ivan Ivanovič Srčnikov*. That was almost my death, although I didn't know it. And then one of the officers, he says to me in Russian *what's your surname?!* I responded *Ivan Ivanovič Srčnikov*. He said I'm not Yugoslavian, but rather a Vlach. The Vlachs were Russian soldiers who had gone over to the enemy side, or who had been taken prisoner, I don't know, but they had gone over and joined the German army. Then that officer, or whatever he was, said *si čas mi vidjot*, meaning we'll see now, if you really are Yugoslavian. I wondered how he could figure that out over a thousand kilometers away. They shoved me off again, untied me and locked me back in the hen coop. I don't remember how long I was there; perhaps a day or perhaps only hours. Hours were an eternity. Then the same two soldiers came again and tied me up and covered my eyes. I thought: *goodbye Slovenia, Yugoslavia, I'm going to be shot*. I knew that the Russians shot the German soldiers somewhere down there by the plum trees. I was sure that I was going to be shot. The two soldiers tied up my eyes and I was thinking *goodbye parents, I'm going to die now*. We then stepped out of the hen coop and one of them said that we're going to headquarters. When we got there someone asked me my surname. Once more I said *Ivan Ivanovič Srčnikov*. He spoke Russian and said something about some measurements; I didn't understand because he was speaking too fast. He explained to me that I was standing before a table and that something is on the table, but he didn't say what. He said that I would have to show him by the time he counted to ten. I still didn't know what though. My eyes were still tied. He untied my eyes and said that I must show him where Celje is. I forgot to mention earlier that I had said I was from Celje. I had considered the matter and I thought that if I were to say I was from Kropa, they wouldn't know where it was. If I were to say I was from Gornji grad, it'd be even worse. So I said I was from Celje. This man, the one who pulled out the map - I saw then that it was a map - said that if I can show him where Celje is on the map, then I am a Yugoslav. He said by the time he counts to ten; if I can't, then I go to the *šlivenjak*, down by the plum trees. And then he counted *ras, dva, tri, četiri*...and I showed him, *here it is*. He patted me on the shoulder and said *vjod, ti Jugoslav*, meaning: you see, you are a Yugoslav and now you've convinced us.

I went to Siberia. We went with these German people; they took us to Siberia, where we met up with other Slovenians. All the Slovenians gathered together and we were told that we may each choose our own group. They said for us to establish a group and then once the group was formed we would get our work. That's how we came together; there were ten of us Slovenians, who joined this group. And then we got our tools, saws, axes ... and we were sent into the forest to cut down trees. We were given food there. There was enough food while we were in Russian captivity. Perhaps there wasn't much bread. The Russians up in Siberia, in the taiga, they only cook 'supa' and 'kasha'. I know you're probably wondering what are 'supa' and 'kasha'. 'Supa' is everything that is cooked and still fluid, that's 'supa' for them. 'Kasha' is porridge; everything like mashed potatoes, solid foods. We only got fish food there, which there was enough of, not much bread, but enough. And then after a while, it was still winter, all the Slovenians and also Croatians and other nationalities, we were all together according to our nationalities. Maybe the Slovenians and Croatians were together ...

CLIP 5

...and then the order came, you're going out. I don't know if there was even any guard there or not, after all, where would one escape to anyway? Winter was perpetual, no not perpetual, but the snow... Then they brought us to Moscow, or really it was Krasnogorsk. There was a prisoner of war camp in Krasnogorsk and there were all sorts of nationalities represented there: Slovenians, Croatians, Czechs, Polacks and even French. They sort of trained us in Krasnogorsk. That's what I think and we also debated it among us - we were going to be sent in against Hitler, against Germany. And we all decided that we would do it. So it was in Krasnogorsk, this was also the town where the encampment was, that we were prepared, that they changed us ... it'll sound a bit wicked how I say it ... from Fascism to Bolshevism, or from Nationalism to Bolshevism. That's how we imagined things were at the time, because there was no sentry or guard watching over us in Krasnogorsk. I think we were there in Krasnogorsk, or at least I was, perhaps about one month. Once, Mesić came to visit; by rank he was a general. He was the father of the current Croatian Mesić, the one who is now president or something, I don't know. So his father came to us and said *boys, whoever wants to join the brigade can go and fight the Germans*. It was either to get away from the encampment, or maybe just to get away from being constantly followed by someone holding a gun at us, or maybe even we were fully conscious, but we chose to join the units. I joined the Yugoslav brigade; that's what it was called later, but back then it was still a detachment. At the time I think there were perhaps about 200 of us, or 300, 400 ... I don't know how many. I joined and I don't know if I was weak or not; I probably was. But I came to that headquarters where Mesić was the commanding officer and he said that I'd be going to someone. Who? I didn't know. But that's how it came to be that I went to this man who had been living in Russia since 1918, or maybe even earlier, since WWI. His name was Jevremović. I come to this man wearing a uniform, and I'm speaking Serbian with him, and he tells me that I am going to be with him as his courier.

6.

So we trained there. Initially I was in the company for ties, and then I was a radiotelegraphist. I think it was in September or October of 1943 that we left. We went to the front. We didn't go to the frontline, but we were right behind it. As the Soviet units marched on towards Germany, we cleaned up behind as the German units got dispersed in the forests and so we had to clean them up, so to speak. We crossed Romania, the Carpathian Mountains, and mostly we kept moving at night as well. So that we could get enough sleep at night, the entire company would gather together and a rope would be tied to the cart and horse and then we each tied that rope around our waists, so we walked and slept. You would sleep while walking. If anybody in front of you fell down there would immediately be ten in a pile. That's how we crossed the Carpathians. And then we came to Turnseverin. That was the Romanian – Yugoslavian border at the time. And we crossed the Danube into the former Yugoslavia, or rather, occupied Yugoslavia; we were already liberating them at the time. We then joined in the combat at Čačak. Things were really bad again at Čačak. Up to here the brigade counted 1000 or 2700 men, I don't know now ... 1000, 2700 men. An extravagantly dressed man then came to Čačak, he rode a horse, and said his people, his armed forces – we called them Četniks and that was also their formal name – surrendered to our soldiers. Because we were from all over Slovenia and from Croatia, and

there weren't any of these locals in our brigade. That's basically how they saved their lives. There were also Partisans from Čačak and they knew these people; but the Partisans and Četniks didn't really get well on together at the time. This man brought some plans to Mesić. Before he got to see Mesić though, he was stripped naked and searched by our guards; we had to make sure he wasn't carrying any weapons or anything else before he was allowed to see our commanding officer Mesić. He handed him a letter. It was written in the letter that on such and such a day our artillery was to fire from such and such a position at particular locations where the Germans were best organized. Furthermore, it was written that the Četniks, the Serbs, would surrender to our unit. Our commanders fell for it, Mesić fell for it; and so our troops began with the preparations and then with the attack on those particular stated locations. Well, there were no Germans there. The Četniks attacked us from behind and they massacred the Partisans, all from behind our line. We lost 700 men in one night and one day in that slaughter. 700 men. When it was all over, I wasn't in the headquarter brigade at the time yet, but I was still in the troop and we had a mobilization in Čačak. Upon our arrival to Belgrade, well we were there for only a short while, we were at Topčinder(?). We were split up in battle and some of us went to Bosnia, some of us went up towards Srem, towards Šid, and we went to Drvar. So then we were on the Srem front, where there was plenty fighting and we headed in one direction once and another direction another time ... slowly, slowly, we moved towards Slovenia. It was 1945 already. We spent the New Year on the Srem front, but we continued heading north and we came to the Croatian – Slovenian border on 11 April. I remember it well; we came to the Sotla River. Sedlarjevo was on the Slovenian side, but I don't remember the name of the place on the other side, it was a small village.

CLIP 7

Our brigade stepped onto Slovenian soil at Sedlarjevo without a fight; the Germans were retreating and we went right on in, let me emphasize, without a fight. Then we came down to Podčetrtek. There were people standing along the road in Podčetrtek; we passed by, I was riding my horse – because now I was already a commanding officer of the 'rear support unit' – so I was riding my horse down the street and there were many people around and then someone calls out *Ivo!* I felt a shudder of fear. I couldn't figure out who could possibly know me here; I had never been to Podčetrtek or anywhere hereabouts. And then a second time *Ivo, Ivo, come here!* I looked around and recognized the girl. She was a former classmate of mine; and she's still alive today. She came to me and invited me to come over to eat; I told her *Thank you, but if I come anywhere near there will be a crawling carpet all over the floor.* Why? I explained to her that I was full of lice; we all were. So then of course we came to Celje on 12 April. And I wondered how could I get up to here. Well, I was the commanding officer of the 'rear support unit', so I went to Mesić and said *družo Mesiće, I'd like to go home.* I spoke in Serbocroatian; we didn't speak Slovene. He asked where I was from. I lied and said that maybe four, five or six kilometers away, and already my heart began to race. We were permitted to take leave for only up to five kilometers. So he of course looks at me and asks again *how many kilometers?* I said five, maybe five and a half, not six, I struck that out quickly. So then he asks how I will go. And I say *on foot.* When I got out of that building, right where the Koper restaurant stands in Celje today, I saw a bicycle right out front. It was a German bicycle, I don't know, maybe someone had left it there, maybe even it belonged to someone in that very building, I don't know. I saw it and I stole it. I actually stole it, truly. It doesn't matter; it was German. So I steal this bicycle and I start riding. It's a little less than 50 kilometers from Celje to here, but I just disregarded that extra zero digit and I said it was only five. So I'd lied again. That's the way I was. I got there, to where my mother lived on the Savinja side; I get to the left bank of the Savinja River and I see that the house is still standing up on the hill. There is still a farm there even today.

CLIP 8

When I arrived I went and found my mother; and then this man had to bring us across because the bridge was down. It had been burned. So he brought us across and my mother and I, me with my stolen bicycle and she with hers, headed up through the Zadrečka valley. We arrived at Zadrečka valley, it's about eight kilometers uphill. And then the Partisans stopped me and claimed that I was a

German soldier dressed as a Partisan ... that today I'm a Partisan, but really a former German soldier that wants to stay in a liberated Yugoslavia. I said *listen, listen* ... but they pulled out a revolver on me and aimed at me. My mother began to cry. They would have shot me if it hadn't been for her. They claimed that I had killed a Partisan, dressed in the Partisan uniform and thrown away the German one. But it wasn't true. I joined the Partisans in 1943, I had all my documents, and I could prove it. So in the end we made it home. It was the morning of May 16. Or maybe it was afternoon when I arrived here at Kropa. That's just how things were at Kropa after the war; the people were gone. And I went back to Celje too; with the bicycle. Our brigade had left already though. Mesić had said to me – I know, but I can't say for sure – that he had heard we would be moving out of Celje. I said that if they move before I return, for them to leave a message at this woman's house. There was an old woman, perhaps she was in her 60s or 70s. But upon my return with that very same bicycle, I got the message and it wrote *Mali* – that was my Partisan name although I don't know why – *we went to Zagreb, to Maksimir*.

CLIP 9

So I, just as soon as I got to Celje, not to be lazy, went straight on to Kumrovec. I went to Kumrovec from Celje by bicycle. Just before reaching Kumrovec, there were these wooden houses with people living in them. I came up to one of those houses and there was a woman inside. I asked if I could sleep there. *Why? Because I'm on my way to Zagreb*. She asked when I would be leaving. I said early in the morning. She said I could stay. She made a bed for me; it was so puffed with feathers that I was literally covered in them. She asked again when I'd be leaving and I said at dawn. When I woke up, I don't know what time it was, but it was 17 May, perhaps it was five in the morning. There was a huge plate of fried eggs waiting for me on the table. I ate, we said farewell and I continued on to Zagreb. But when I arrived in Zagreb, the brigade was no longer there in Maksimir. I was still on that bicycle. I left the bicycle in front of Maksimir and I went inside to the doorman, although I don't know if he really was a doorman, I don't remember. But when I came back outside, the bicycle was gone; someone else had stolen it. Easy come, easy go. But of course I had a message. *Mali, you must report to general headquarters in Belgrade*. I traveled on to Belgrade; it must have been 10 or 12 days.

Sometimes I was on a train, sometimes I traveled by foot; the routes were in ruins. But that's how I came to Belgrade; I think it was already the end of May. I reported to general headquarters in Belgrade and I spent some time there, a week or two, or even a month, I can't say anymore. Then I was sent to the headquarters of the 1st regiment in Niš. I arrived there and I was in the 'personnel department' and it was my job to question the noncommissioned officers, that is, those who joined the Partisans and became noncommissioned officers. I had to ask them where they had been, I had to thoroughly interrogate them and find out what kind of past they had. We know now what that was all about, so let's let things rest. So that's how it came to be that I was in the 1st regiment up until November 1945.

CLIP 10

Eventually the day came that I was to be demobilized. I received 5000 dinars; that was a lot of money at the time. Earlier, when I was leaving the office of Sekulič, he took hold of my epaulettes, tore them off and stomped on them. These two stars, I had two on each shoulder because I was a second lieutenant, I still have them today. I can show them to you. That's how I was demobilized. I got home and immediately I became a secretary for the Liberation Front (LF). The LF was set up then without districts; there were just the LF's, they had the power. Then there was this man who was the president of it and he was also a Partisan. I was doing woodworking for my father and this policeman comes into the workshop and asks if I'm so-and-so. I said that I'm Srčnik. He tells me to go with him. I ask *where?* He says *you're coming*. So we went out into the road and I then see that another policeman is ushering the LF president. I asked what was going on, what did we do? *Continue! You're not permitted to speak!* So we went on... we didn't live here where we are today, back then we lived a bit higher up... anyway, so we came to this bridge and he said that we're going to that house. Why? Don't ask, let's just go. So we get to that house and a car drives up; it was a German Volkswagen and there were two people inside, however I don't remember whether they were dressed as civilians or not. One of the two entered, while the other stayed outside in the car. He gave the cue to the two

policemen that we should go inside. An examination followed. I won't go into what was found. Enough. I won't describe where it was found. But that's how this civilian life began.

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