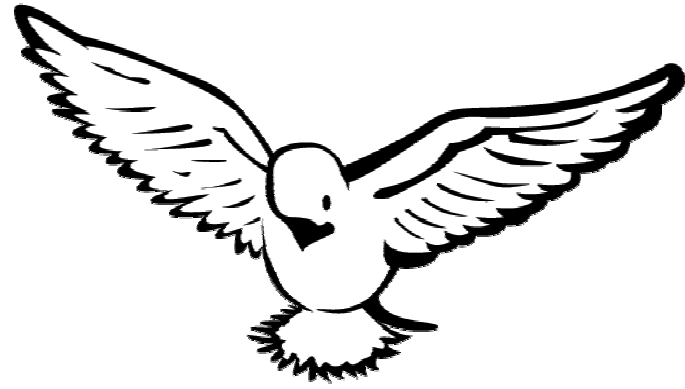


The Six Escapes



Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia - 1958





The Six Escapes

**By
Rafael Augustin**

**Published By
Alexander Kerekes
Carmel, California USA**

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Introduction

Yugoslavia was a former country of southeast Europe bordering on the Adriatic Sea. It was formed in 1918 as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was renamed Yugoslavia in 1929. Communist party control ended in 1990, and four of the six republics, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia declared independence in 1991.

The Six Escapes takes place in 1958 - 1959 and is a true story of Rafael Augustin's six attempts to flee from a tyrannical regime, his capture, imprisonment, and his final miraculous and desperate escape to Germany via Austria to seek asylum for a better life in Canada.

This story is a true testament to the desire of the human spirit to be free.



Rafael and his beautiful lady, Yolanda, living a free and beautiful life in San Pedro de Lagunillas, Mexico

The First Escape - 1958

I chose May 1st for two good reasons. One, it was a national holiday and walking some 20 kilometers to a town near the Austrian border would be less suspicious. Second, one of my technical school colleagues told me that he lived near the Austrian border and that on 1 May many local people would be drinking and celebrating all night at the local restaurant / bar.

My friend Josef and I had a few days to get ready and promised to tell absolutely nobody of our plan. We would travel light and I brought two shirts, a suit, shoes, a raincoat, and a package of ground black pepper mixed with hot red pepper. The pepper was meant for nasty farm and border dogs. Also, I managed to buy on the

black market some Austrian schillings, since the banks weren't allowed to sell foreign money to the general public. Now we were ready for the escape.

We met at 5 p.m. on May 1st at the Orel Hotel in Moribor, and by sundown we began walking toward the border, some 15 kilometers away. The first few kilometers was on paved road, then on a gravelly mountain country road. We passed occasional farms, but soon ascending to the forested mountain. At one time a German Shepard dog attacked us. But, I sprinkled on the ground some of my pepper, which the dog sniffed and then sneezed and ran home. On a few occasions we hid in the forest to hide from the people passing by. Here the people were known to report people to the local

police or the border guards when seeing strangers near the border. At one time we heard a sneaky dog snarling at us, when his owner showed up on a bicycle. The man stepped off the bicycle and asked, "Where are you going?" I said, "To meet my friend and to celebrate May 1st, at the restaurant." He replied, "Oh yes, there are already a lot of people and music." He got on his bike and continued down hill. Walking another 15 minutes, we heard the music. It was about 10 p.m. We observed the place carefully from a distance, seeing people but no border guards. Slowly we approached and walked in while most everybody was dancing. We sat down at a corner table, and ordered a dinner with drinks. Meanwhile, I noticed a uniformed border guard dancing, which made me

uncomfortable. Our plan was to cross the border at 2 a.m. According to our information, it was best time, since the border guards were changing shifts and thus, any noise made by us while crossing wouldn't be so suspicious.

From across the room one of my school colleagues recognized me and came to greet me. We talked about the school, and then I asked him if he lived up the hill closer to the border. I thought this might give me a better idea of the location of the border. He said, "Yes, it's just 10 minutes' walk." After a while he left to visit with some friends. Later, I noticed that he was talking to the boarder guard, who looked at us. I was sure that we were in trouble. I told my companion friend that it would be best if we go through the kitchen and cross the

border immediately, despite the fact that it was now only about midnight.

We discreetly sneaked through the kitchen but once outside, four soldier guards surrounded us. One shouted, "Stop! And hands up." They were pointing machine guns at us. One of them said, "We know you're trying to escape to Austria!" I said, "No, we're just on the way home now." We were frisked now from head to toes, our ID's and documents taken, but fortunately they didn't find my hidden Austrian money, which was sewn into my pants under my belt. Had they found that, we not only would be guilty, but they would confiscate the money. Nonetheless, they interrogated us for an hour, threatening to take us to jail. Then finally they took us back into the restaurant and two guards sat

down with us at a table.

By sunrise, most of the guests had disappeared and so had the musicians. Our conversation and/or interrogation was done in Serb-Croatian, since the border army guards were all from other provinces. In turn the Slovenian soldiers were sent to serve the army to their provinces. In Slovenia, we learned Serb-Croatian, including the Cyrillic writing. The third Yugoslav language, the Macedonian, was an option at schools.

Sometime later a new army guard, with some rank came to our table, took our documents from the two guards, and dismissed them. Once again we were interrogated at length with questions such as "Who do you know in Austria and other

Western countries? Who else is trying to escape with you? How many times before have you tried to escape?" Finally, he said, "OK, I'll walk you part-way down the mountain, then you must go home. After half an hour he handed us the documents and said, "If you try to escape again, I'll personally take you directly to prison." Well, both of us now were greatly relieved, but mad at my school colleague, "the squealing pig." While walking back to the city of Maribor, we decided not to go home, but instead, ironed out another escape plan.



Photograph of my friends and I before my escape. I am seated in the center

Second Escape

We assumed it would be too risky to try to cross the border today at the same location. So, we went directly to the railway station in Maribor. From here, we would take a train heading for Austria, but get off one station before the border at Sentilj, then continue on foot over the mountains.

Sitting and recuperating from our 30 kilometer walking misadventure at the railway's restaurant and waiting for the 8 p.m. train departure, we were being constantly vigilant and ready for an instant getaway, should we be approached by police who may have been informed of our intent. While having dinner, we probably looked like two rabbits eating carrots out in the field, always on a lookout for a predator.

A well-dressed, middle-aged man with a briefcase walked into the restaurant and came directly to our table, asking if he may join us. I said, "Yes, of course." Both of us were apprehensive, but it was too late to run if he was an undercover policeman. He wasted no time in asking me, "What is your date of birth?" I told him, and then he pulled out of his briefcase a sheet of typed paper and handed to me. It was a horoscope; I read it and found many things very agreeable about my life. One quotation struck me most: "Your main goal in life is to go to foreign country." I was now quite puzzled and thought, what in the hell is he up to? Meanwhile he asked my friend for his date of birth and handed him another paper. He too was amazed of many agreeable quotations, but no mention

of foreign country. Then the man asked us to each pay 50 dinars. After we paid, he got up and left. I'd heard of horoscope before, but never had an opportunity to learn about it, since under the Communist regime it was, to say the least, disapproved of and discouraged.

At 8 p.m. we boarded a train bound for Vienna, Austria. As we were boarding I saw a uniformed man boarding the very front car. I assumed it was an immigration officer, so I told my friend and we moved to the very rear car. I thought and hoped he wouldn't have a chance to examine documents before our next station, where we were going to get off. Our move proved to be prudent and we got off at the station before the border. Wasting no time, we headed into the mountains, carefully

avoiding people and farmhouses, mainly by walking across the orchards and vineyards. At one time a huge St. Bernard attacked us. Again, I sprinkled some of my pepper at him, he sneezed and disappeared.

By 11 p.m. we arrived at the top of the mountain, which I assumed to be near the border. We laid down on the damp and cold ground in the forest to wait until 2 a.m. for our crossing. We were dead tired from walking across muddy fields and ascending to the top of the mountain, and fell asleep in no time. We woke up at sunrise (no alarm clock). "Now what?" my friend asked. I said, "We'll try to cross the border regardless of the risk." We walked cautiously down the mountain looking for any border markings or signs, but no luck. By about 9 a.m. we slowed down, thinking

we must be in Austria by that point. Well, we were now somewhat relieved and began walking more casually. After an hour we walked to the top of the hill, where to my surprise, looking down below was a big river. I assumed it to be the Mura; there was also a village nearby. Now we weren't sure at all whether we were still in Yugoslavia or in Austria. In just few minutes our answer came — in a big disappointing predicament. We heard loud noises coming from our left, and looking down we saw was a large building with a Yugoslav flag on it. There were army guards lined up and receiving instruction from an officer. After a few minutes, they rapidly — with their riffles — began scaling the hill toward us. We took off with lightning speed to circumvent them and the army

guards' outpost building. As we were running they shouted, "Stop or we shoot!" We kept running into a thick forest on very rocky terrain. A few shots were fired; I could hear the bullets whistle by. After half hour of running, we came to the river, dove in, and swam across. Now I was sure we were in Austria. Looking back we saw the guards coming to the river, so we continued running but they didn't follow us. We sat down and joyfully laughed, wet and exhausted, with sore and blistered feet.

We proceeded across the fields until we came to a stream. We sat down, washed our muddy clothing and shoes, rested for an hour and happily walked barefoot across farm fields and forests, avoiding the people. Late in the afternoon we had no choice but to walk into the village to get

water and food. At the beginning of the village, we approached the house cautiously. A lady was working in the garden. I greeted her; she turned around and greeted me with a friendly expression. I asked her if there was a store nearby where we could buy drinks and food? She replied, "Only in the next village," then added, "Well, please come into my house and I'll give you water to drink." We each drank many glasses, I'm sure she must have thought, where are these two thirsty 'camels' coming from? She looked us up and down and said, "Your feet are full of blisters and sores, I'll bring you some iodine to disinfect." After she asked me if I knew how to fertilize and turn the soil in the garden? I said, "Of course, we are farmers." She then said, "If you do my

garden, I'll pay you." I said, "We'll be glad to do it." Then I asked for the necessary tools. She replied, "First I'll make supper for all of us, then I'll give you the rooms to sleep, and tomorrow morning you can start working." I asked her if she had a family? "Oh yes, but I live alone now." I was glad to hear that, since a jealous husband or somebody else may not be so kind to us and even perhaps report us to the police.

The next morning we began working and the lady was very generous with meals and drinks all day long. By nightfall we completed the garden work, which was about 20 by 30 meters in size. The lady could hardly believe everything we did in one day and thanked us for such a nice work. She then paid us and said, "You're welcome to stay the night here." I thanked

her for her kindness and understanding. I believe she knew from where we had just come, but she never asked us. Early next morning, she made a breakfast for us and sandwiches for our journey to the town of Leibnitz, some 40 kilometers away. I thanked the 'Grand Lady,' she wished us good luck, and then we were on the way barefoot across the fields and forest.

Avoiding the villages and people, by sundown we arrived to Leibnitz railway station. Inside the station there was a policeman reading a local newspaper. Was it his routine? Or was he waiting for us? I was sure the Grand Lady didn't report us, but perhaps somebody else? We bought a newspaper and pretended to read while waiting for the policeman's move. My friend, who didn't speak any German, was

the problem and concern. I told him, "Should the policeman give us any trouble, we'll make a run along the railway tracks towards the city of Graz (Austria)." I was sure we could outrun the fat policeman who was over 50 years old and reach our intended destination.

After a while the policeman disappeared. We walked in and while I was buying the tickets, the policeman returned, asking my friend, "Where are you going?" My friend kept quiet. I turned around and said to the policeman, "My friend doesn't hear well and we're going home to Salzburg (Austria)." Then he asked for the documents. We took off with lightning speed toward the railroad tracks and ran along them. The policeman followed us for about a kilometer, and then he stopped, realizing he was no match. But

we kept running, and the policeman walked back to the station. As luck would have it, a freight train was approaching slowly from behind. We stopped and pretended to be working along the tracks. Then we jumped on the last wagon, hoping the policeman didn't see us, and also hoping that the train would keep on rolling. Soon the train began gaining speed and an hour later we arrived at the city of Graz. We carefully and slowly snuck into the station — with our shoes on. We were trying to conceal the pain of our semi-healed blisters. I discovered that the money we had would take us to Salzburg. As we were discussing our predicament, we walked through that very busy station admiring all those vending machines, which we had never seen before. And, while we were in the photo booth, a middle-aged

man stood waiting outside. He must have heard us talking in Slovenian, because as we stepped out, he greeted us in Slovenian. I asked him if he lived in Graz? He said, "Yes, for many years." Then he invited us to a restaurant for some drinks, where we confessed to him of our intention to go to Salzburg Refugee Camp. He was sympathetic and invited us to overnight at his apartment. I was a bit skeptical, but accepted, with thanks. I boarded a tramway, while my friend had a ride on the man's motorcycle. He lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment and made some sandwiches for us. Soon he began making some sex remarks and some advances; we both realized he must be a homosexual. Both of us were appalled and rejected further advances. He then gave up and

gave us two sofas to sleep on. In the morning he made us breakfast and told us to go to Bruck auf der Mur Refugee Camp instead of Salzburg. Assuring us we would not be deported from there, and besides, he knew we had enough money for the train to take us there. We agreed, although, we never heard of that camp. In the afternoon we arrived at this town with river Mur running through it, the very same we one swam across on our escape at the border. I asked several people about the Refugee Camp, but no one had heard of it. Now we knew that the gay man, the scoundrel, had gotten even with us. We decided to walk back to the railway station, buy tickets onward, to as far as our money would take us, and then walk the rest of the distance to Salzburg.

At an intersection we were approached by a policeman, who greeted us, then asked us where we were from. I said, "From Salzburg." Then he asked to see our I.D.s. I told him that we had forgotten them at home. "Oh so," he replied. Then he ordered us to walk in front of him — and guided us right into the police station. He locked us into a small cell and then demanded that we empty our pockets and hand over the contents to him. He and another officer looked at the Yugoslav documents, but didn't return them. Now that the cat was out of the bag, I told him of our desire to report to the Refugee Camp in Salzburg. Later the officer made some phone calls, and then left us in suspense for hours. Late in the evening I asked for water and food. About an hour later he

returned with water and some sandwiches. I asked him, "How long do you intend to keep us here?" He replied, "Ya, ya tomorrow you'll know."

The next day about noon, we were handcuffed and without any explanation, taken to a local prison. First they made us take a shower, and then we were each given a striped prison robe. We were locked into a large cell, with four Austrian inmates, some serving terms up to ten years. The inmates were not happy about us two — mainly for not having any cigarettes, since neither of us smoked. They were begging the guards for the cigarette butts.

After few days I was able to get information on why and how long we were going to be locked up. The warden said,

"Soon you'll be transferred to the Leibnitz Refugee Camp." I said that we would prefer the Salzburg Camp. His answer was "It's too far." Well, we were kind of relieved but disappointed, fearing being deported from that camp, according to the rumors we had heard back at home.

The inmates were mostly interested in hearing about life in the Communist countries, but expressed some displeasure at the refugees and/or immigrants in Austria. We played cards together and I had a chance to learn the German Austrian accent / dialect. A week later the two of us were handcuffed and taken by police car to the Leibnitz Refugee Camp. It was located on the outskirts of the town, enclosed with high wire fence, and had a locked gate entrance. First we were taken to the

Warden / Camp Director's office. Our documents were handed over, then we were uncuffed and the two policemen left. The Director asked us, "What is your reason for coming to Austria? Did the Communists send you? Who else came with you? Where are the Yugoslav army installations? What country would you like to go to? Do you have any close relatives in Austria or other Western country?" And many other similar questions. After questioning, we were taken to one of the 10 wooden barracks, allocated a double bunk bed, a towel with soap, a dish, spoon, knife and fork. Then we learned the rules of the camp, for example, stay away from the fence; there will be three meals a day, served in the courtyard; wash your own dishes afterward; to leave this camp for any

reason, you'll need a permit from the Camp Director.

Most of the 200 or so refugees were young men, with some young women and a few children. Most of them were from Yugoslavia, some from Hungary, others from Bulgaria and Romania. The rumors among the refugees were that many were being deported lately, but a disturbing bit of information was that everyone under age 18 would be deported, according to recent regulations. The daily life at the camp was quite jovial, but occasionally, rather annoying. Sometimes not only arguments, but actual fights occurred mainly between the Croats and Serbs — carrying on the old disputes and animosity. We, the Slovenians, were trying to keep neutral, but the Bosnians and Macedonians were not

so diplomatic or neutral. I found this rather dismaying, since we were all here in a new uprooted environment, each one hoping and searching for a new or better life in some foreign country, with an unforeseen, unknown, and uncertain future.

Apparently in the past refugees had received some much-needed clothes, but not lately, so when you washed your own clothes and while they were drying outside, you were parading semi-nude. Some refugees had been waiting for months before obtaining the documents / were granted asylum, or deported. One day they found a fellow who was stealing goods in the camp. They blindfolded him, brought him into the courtyard, where a nude refugee judge awaited him, bent over, with his pants down. They stuck the culprit's

nose into his rear end. He was then dismissed. I think the penalty was severe, and it worked.

I was interrogated a few more times during the next two weeks, and told them of my Uncle in Graz and of my brother, who had stayed at this very camp a year before, and who currently lived in Canada. I told them that my brother could send me a 'Bona-Fide' guarantee to immigrate to Canada. They listened, but never asked me to obtain it. I was suspicious and presumed bureaucracy or pretense were the reasons why my friend and I were interrogated several times in two weeks' time.

The official camp translator, a Croatian, approached me and proposed that he and my friend and I escape from the camp and

head for Germany. I asked him," Why would you want to escape?" He said, "I've been here for four months and believe I'll be deported as well." The three of us agreed and made a plan to escape the next evening.

The next morning at about 9 a.m. the police car stopped at the Director's office. Then, on the intercom, my friend's name and mine were called out, telling us to report to the office. As soon as we entered, two policemen slapped handcuffs on us, and then drove us out of the camp and directly to Leibnitz prison. This time it didn't take a genius to figure out who was the "Squealing Pig." When I asked the policemen, "Why did you bring us to prison?" His answer was "Yaaa, soon you'll find out." The prison warden told us to

undress totally, and then the doctor came in and examined us. Unfortunately, we passed the physical test. After a shower, we were given the prison's robe, then taken to a large cell, which was shared with some ten other inmates who were all Austrian. Once again, we were asked for cigarettes and disappointed them. When I asked the Warden, "Why and how long are we to be locked up?" he said, "Soon you'll find out." It was always his answer. So for the next two weeks, I had a chance to improve my German, play cards, and every second day was an hour of courtyard walk (in a line formation and no talking).

After two weeks and a day the two of us were handcuffed and led to a waiting van, where three other prisoners were sitting also handcuffed with two policemen. And

without any explanation, we were driven to Sentilj, on the Slovenian Yugoslav border. On our arrival, the Austrian police handed our documents over to the Yugoslav police, who re-handcuffed us with the Yugoslav brand. I asked the policeman, "Where are you taking us?" He said, "No talking is allowed." Our three companion prisoners were Bosnians. In an hour we arrived to Maribor's Court House prison.

Here I was locked up in very small cell, as for the rest I had no idea. The next day I was interrogated, which revealed the other side of the coin. I was asked, "Who was your guide and where did you cross the border?" "How many times before have you escaped?" "Who else was with you?" "Which places in Austria have you seen?" "Where are the army installations?" And

more. Within ten days I was interrogated three times and always by a different officers. I asked about my friend's fate several times, but the answer was always the same: "He is here somewhere." Here the daily routine was reading books, and twice a week a courtyard walk —and no talking to other prisoners. Three meager meals a day, served in the cell, by a prisoner, accompanied by a guard.



On the tenth day I was set free and though I was very happy, I had no money at all. Besides, I didn't want to go home. I wasn't willing to reveal my failure to my friends, and especially not to my parents. But I was curious to find out whether my friend Josef had also been released. So I walked two hours to my village, Dobrovce. I first went to my friend's house. His mother was happy to hear that he was alive and well but said he hadn't come home yet. I presumed he was still in jail. I asked his family not to tell anybody of our misadventure. But they told me there were rumors we both had escaped. I thought sooner or later the cat would be out of the bag, so I went home. My parents were furious, but my brothers and sisters were glad to see me. I asked my father to lend

me some money so I could find a blacksmith job in the city. He said, "There is plenty of work at home," and sent me out to the field to work. Well, it was better than listening to ridicule of my parents at home. Later I worked part-time on a collective farm where at least I was paid, however little. A few days later my friend came home from prison. He too was skeptical about coming home to face his defeat. In a few weeks time I was able to buy much-needed clothes and shoes. My younger brother was the one who was most chased around the courtyard by Father for any infraction he was known to do. Sometimes he would chase him with lethal home tools. Soon my younger brother persuaded me to escape to Austria again. It would be his second escape as

well. I consulted my friend Josef about our next escape, but he was still trying to forget the ordeal that we'd endured and decided not to go. We collected enough money to go by train all the way to Germany. Unfortunately, I was unable to buy Austrian and German money. Nonetheless we decided to go within a week. Before leaving, I went to see my Aunt Angela in the village of Pesnica. She was always fond of me, since apparently I was the only one in our family who resembled my mother and her side of the family.



***Freedom is the right to live as we
wish***

Epictetus

Third Escape

Through my Aunt Angela, I found out that besides our uncle in Graz, Austria, we also had a cousin who lived just 20 kilometers across the border. This, coincidentally, was the region where my friend and I were caught at the border. Then my aunt said, "Don't count on him or your uncle too much for help." I trusted my aunt, since she too at age 16 escaped to Vienna. She worked for a while, but her father made her come back because she was under age. This happened in the year 1920, after the First World War, when so many Europeans had immigrated to the New World of North and South America.

My brother and I gathered enough money for the train fare to take us across

Austria to Germany. Unfortunately I had been unable to change dinars into Austrian and German currencies. The solution for this was to cross the border near my first failed attempt, and then reach my cousin, who would hopefully change our money. This time I made sure we had cotton socks with good, comfortable shoes and lots of hot and black pepper for snarling dogs.

We discreetly departed home at sundown, walking through Maribor and continued on the now-familiar roads into the mountains. Late in the evening it began to rain with thunder and lightning. The dusty mountain road turned to slip-sliding mud. But that was an advantage: fewer people to meet or hide from, including those nasty farm dogs. Once we had to hide and wait in the forest to let by a slow,

oxen-pulled wagon that had a dog, and due to rain the dog didn't see or sniff us out.

At 10 p.m. we arrived at the restaurant where I had been apprehended with my friend during our first escape. This time we carefully circumvented the restaurant, and then found a place to hide and wait until 2 a.m. to cross the border. This time I made sure I stayed awake. The rain and thunder soon ended. After midnight, we heard strange, loud noises coming from the valley below. We tried to figure out what was going on because it sounded like somebody was in pain or being tortured. We were thinking perhaps it was the border and that the border guards were trying the old-fashioned way to obtain a confession from an escapee. After an hour, the noises diminished. We waited a bit longer and,

then started on the muddy, slippery, rocky terrain. Due to rain it made walking quieter than on a dry ground; there was no crackling of dry tree branches and leaves. The flashlight we had brought became very handy for observing our heading on that very dark night. We were looking for the green-colored moss, which is on the north side of the trees, and usually near the ground.

We kept steady, slip-sliding pace on the rugged terrain until sunrise. As we walked through a vineyard, I noticed the grapevines were strung on wires there, rather than attached to wooden sticks, as was practiced in Slovenia. We were greatly relieved and our clothes nearly dry from the rain. In a while we spotted a farmhouse, and approached it very carefully. I asked

my brother to hide in the bushes. He wasn't ugly, but something much worse: he didn't speak any German, should somebody see him and ask questions. I then snuck quietly to the front of the house; a man came out with his German Shepard and proceeded to the barn. That gave me had a chance to note the house plate. Happily, it was in Austrian. My brother and I proceeded toward our cousin's village, passing through vineyards, orchards, and forests. We spotted a family working in the fields and approached them to ask where and how far it was to the village of Leutchach. We told them that our cousin was expecting us. The lady said, "Yes, it's about 10 kilometers and you may walk on a farm road." We continued, but stuck to crossing the fields for safety. By 2 p.m. we

arrived at the village and found the house according to my aunt's description.

Outside the house a young fellow was working. We greeted him and explained who we were. I asked him his name. He told me and then I said, "We're cousins." He replied, "Yaa ah so." He didn't invite us into the house, but continued with his work. I then said, "We would greatly appreciate if you would exchange our money; the dinars to schillings?" "Well, I don't have any money," he replied. He then disappeared behind the house, leaving us standing there for an hour. We decided to give up on our cousin and continued our journey across the fields.

In an hour we came to a village where I went to a general store to buy something to eat and drink. The lady said," I don't accept

dinars." I then offered at half its rate, which she accepted. We proceeded on a dirt road toward the town of Leibnitz some 25 kilometers ahead. After half an hour of walking, we spotted a policeman with a bicycle standing under a tree. We disappeared into a cornfield that was waist high, laid down, and waited for him to disappear. But he came toward us, got off the bike, pulled out his pistol, and shouted, "Come out with your hands up!"

We thought about running, but decided to talk to him instead. I explained that we had visited our cousin, but live in Graz. Because we had forgotten to take along our I.D.s we were trying to avoid the police. He said, "Ah so," then slapped handcuffs on us and told us to walk ahead of him to the next village as he directed us into the

police station. There, another policeman took everything out of our pockets and locked us in a small cell.

Some 40 years later, in 2001, I was invited by my good cousin in Slovenia to a party to celebrate the meeting of all our cousins on Mother's side. The party included both the cousins from Leutschach and Graz, whom I'd visited and who ignored me. During the party both personally apologized to me for their unfriendliness and arrogance.

They soon made phone calls, and later we were escorted into the office and left alone with the door closed. We heard two men talking in the next room, so I said to my brother, "Let's make a run," He agreed, so I opened the door. There was nobody around, so we quietly tiptoed through the

hallway. But as we came out, hell, there was the policeman talking to someone. He shouted, "Stop!" and with his pistol in hand, he placed us back into the cell. Later by evening they put two small cots in our cell with a sandwich and water for each of us.

The next day at noon, they handcuffed us and put us in a police car. Whatever I asked the two policemen they ignored me entirely. In just twenty minutes, we were back to the now-familiar Sentilj Yugoslav border. Again we were handed over to the Yugoslav police, who re-handcuffed us with the Yugoslav brand and put us into a waiting van with four other misfortunate young men. In half an hour we were back in Maribor. But this time they took us into a women's prison and locked us all into a cell that was already full of young men. It was

so crowded, that we could only stand upright. Many of the prisoners were from Croatia; others were from Serbia, Bosnia, or Macedonia.

In about an hour my brother and I were called for interrogation. The questions were now very similar, but unfortunately, the interviewer looked into a large book, and said to me, "Well, you have escaped before, and how many times?" I said, "Once," Fortunately for my brother, he was not in the book. It was actually his second time. Then after an hour of grilling, we were taken to separate cells. I was sharing with another inmate, who was very edgy, noisy, and angry. Because he had already spent many days in the cell alone, he demanded to be released. The Warden showed up, took him out, and said, "Now, you

miserable, you will stay in a basement solitary dungeon." That was the last I saw of him. Within a week I was interrogated several times. One morning I was handcuffed and taken to the office, where two Croatian fellows were handcuffed together. The policeman told us to walk in front of him at all times, and no tricks or talking. We were walking on a busy main street, as "partisans." I was embarrassed and kept my head down in hopes that nobody would recognize me. In fifteen minutes we ended up at a railway station and boarded a train for Zagreb, Croatia. Along the way I was unable to find out from the policeman where he was taking us. After about two hours we arrived at the small town of Brestanica (formerly Reichenburg), which is located some

kilometers before the Croatian border. At this point we got off and walked on a winding dirt road all the way to the top of a pine-forested hill. We were led into a big castle, where we were intercepted by uniformed guards, then walked through a courtyard full of prisoners (mostly young men, but also some women and children). Next we were taken to the second floor and into a large room to share with maybe 15 other inmates. We were given a blanket, and told to sleep on the wooden raised floor, which sloped slightly down from the wall. It took me days to get any sleep on the hard floor. I also had to listen to the other inmates' complaining or telling their escape adventures. Some of them had been caught before; others had been deported from Austria, or Italy.

We were all political prisoners, and from all Yugoslav provinces; Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia Hercegovina, Crna Gora, and Macedonia. Here too, the friction was obvious, mainly among the Croats and Serbs, but the guards were mostly Croats. I was interrogated almost daily by different officers, and in addition to the usual questions they were trying to learn what I had told the Austrians about the Yugoslav's army; they also wanted to know the locations of their armies, etc. By most accounts, as a second timer I was facing up to six months of precious summer time in jail. After few days I was moved to a better accommodation, a room with single beds sharing with some 20 inmates, and with a window overlooking the town below. A day later one of the interrogators came to



***My prison – Castle Reichenberg-
Slovenia***

our room and said, "As of today, Rafael will be your room orderly, and you all must cooperate, with him to maintain the prison's rules and regulations." A Slovenian cellmate asked me to help him to work in a boiler room, mainly to steam/disinfect clothing of the incoming prisoners while

they were taking showers. He confided in me and confessed that not only would I have more and better food, but I could also make some hush money. Some prisoners had but just one good-quality suit on them and would pay him money not to steam and ruin their clothes. Due to the risk, he would accept the money; it would at least be useful to buy extra food. Everybody complained about the prison's meager food.

Of course, there was another exiting advantage: while the women were showering, we had a chance to see them nude, which my good friend cleverly invented a reason for our presence.

Almost daily we had new prisoners coming while others were leaving. The daily life was usually in the castle's

enclosed courtyard, and on the average, there were some hundred prisoners mingling and exchanging stories. Those who were too noisy or complaining were often beaten up by the guards. One day a fellow refused to chop wood for the furnace and was clobbered, then pushed down the stairway. He tumbled into the basement, merely because he told them he'd never handled an axe before, and so for some time the poor fellow was unable to sit down, or walk about. Since it was done in the courtyard in front of most prisoners, it almost sparked a riot.

After two weeks, I was no longer called in for the interrogations, and daily life was taken up by few hours of work, seeing that our large room was neat and clean at all times, arguments or disputes to be kept

under moderation, and cards were played without money bets. Unfortunately there were hardly any books to read. The two of us had food served in a boiler room; we got whatever the guards were served, which was usually some meat, and vegetables. As for the rest of prisoners, it was a rare luxury.

Reichenburg Castle, the prison and the village had a rich historical past; Remains had been preserved from the prehistoric era as well as from the time of the Roman Empire. The Roman road "Neviodunum-Celia" went through this area. Brestanica, the old stone bridge across river Sava, bears witness to that. The castle may have been built by year 838, but was first mentioned in 895 when King Arnolf gave possession to Lord Valtun, thus it is the first

medieval castle in Slovenia. It was demolished and rebuilt between 1131 and 1147 by the Bishop of Salzburg. The family Reichenburg owned the Castle from 1410 to 1570. After that there were many owners, until Trappist Monks bought it from France in the 1880s, who transformed it to a monastery. There were strict rules for the monks: absolute silence, with a principle, "What you need in your life you should make yourself." In 1941 the Germans exiled the Trappists and the castle was transformed into a transit camp. Some 45,000 Slovenians went through this camp, some tortured or killed, and others sent into exile. After the war the Trappists returned, and later in 1947 the order of Trappists was disbanded. Then it became a prison where I was locked in for two months in 1958.

There were stories that many newly born babies had been found buried around the castle after the Trappists left. In 1968 this castle was altered into today's museum e.g., the interrogation room is now a Romanesque chapel.

On my visits in 1999 and 2002, I had to pay an entry fee, but at half price, after I told the kind, sympathetic young lady of my imprisonment here.

In mid-August, I and some 20 other Slovenian prisoners were loaded onto a cavernous, covered truck, and driven for some two hours until we made a stop at some village restaurant where the guards took refreshment. One of our eldest, a one-legged prisoner, asked for water. The guard hit him twice with the club. With tears in his eyes, he said to the guard, "I lost my

leg during the war fighting against Nazis before you were born." It was a hot summer day and we were all dying of thirst but nobody dared to ask for water after that. We continued for another hour. We made another stop; I think it was in the city of Celje. We were all guessing since we could not see out at all. Here some 15 prisoners were taken off the truck. Now only five of us were transferred into a small van without windows or seats. By sundown we were on our way — thirsty, hot, and hungry, we arrived what we assumed to be Maribor. I thought it was Partizanska Road. Here they stopped; the guards got out of the van and disappeared. We were left for at least an hour in a steamy hot van, dehydrated, airless and suffocating. We all concluded that, for all they cared we might

be dead by the time they return. We mutually agreed to brace ourselves against the rear door and force the door to open and escape, with a plan to cross the border to Austria. Just as we were ready to push the guards returned; we all felt stupid for waiting too long. A few minutes later we arrived at the city's courthouse and were individually led into separate jail cells. I was put in a cell to share with an elderly inmate who was awaiting his trial for allegedly defrauding the company as a director while on business in Germany. The cell had two small beds, a latrine, and a small window close to the ceiling, but we were not allowed to be seen looking through it. The meager food was served to our cell by other inmates escorted by a guard. Fortunately I was able to buy extra food with

the money I made by not steaming some clothes at the previous jail. My inmate's wife brought weekly some food to her husband, and often he would share it with me. Here we had books to read, cards and chess to play, plus a half hour walk in the courtyard every second day. I wrote several letters to my younger brother to find out whether he was still in jail or had been freed and was running loose, but to no avail.

Weeks went by and none of us was called for a trial, apparently due to the fact that most judges were on summer vacation. I began thinking; why not create a version of the story for my trial. I could say that my brother and I were looking for a job near the border where someone had told me of a blacksmith's shop that would hire

us. While looking we inadvertently crossed the border, where we asked the police to be allowed to return. My learned, kind inmate thought it to be a good idea, and said, "The judge may buy it, and you will be free." My inmate was a polite man; every time he would sit down on the latrine he covered his face with a towel. When I asked him, "Why do you do that?" he said, "I don't want you to see my embarrassing face." We had our own news reports on daily bases whatever was going on in the prison: by gently knocking on the wall. Every knock meant a letter, for example one knock was letter A, three knocks letter C, followed by a pause, etc. I soon learned all of the alphabet's corresponding numbers by heart. One day I learned one of my village friends was also

serving time for his attempted escape to Austria. Soon, to my surprise, he was serving me food, escorted by a guard. The next day, he placed a note under my plate, and told me that my brother was free and working now. After a while he no longer showed up serving food. I later saw him in the courtyard with shaven, shiny head. Apparently he tried to escape, and that was the usual punishment for it.

In mid-September I was finally slated for trial, and since I was still 17 and under age, they gave me a defense lawyer after a consultation. He skeptically accepted my version, but said, "Your brother and your father will be at your trial as well." That worried me a bit, since my brother didn't know of my new version of our story. I was hoping that I would be the first to testify. As

for father, he knew nothing about the case, so no problem here.

It was a small courtroom with a middle-aged judge accompanied on either side by a lady and a stenographer. There was my father and brother; I was seated beside my lawyer. The judge asked me to explain my story. Then my brother was asked if everything I had said was true. My brother corroborated, but on cross-examination some discrepancies were noted, at which time I was allowed to reprove the errors. Then the judge asked me, "Who did all the work at home, and the farming?" I said, "I, my brothers, and sisters." Then he asked me how many sets of clothing and shoes did I have?" I said, "Only what I have on me, and a set of work clothes, which is at home." "And how many pairs of shoes?"

the judge asked. I said, "Only the ones I have on." I added, "We worked at home, as well as in the fields barefoot unless there was snow on the ground." The judge was interrupted by my father, who said. "The reason he and other children are leaving home or escaping is that they are lazy and don't want to work." Then the judge asked him, "Who does the work now?" Father said the two youngest sons. "And how old are they?" the judge asked. "One is ten, and the other six." That somewhat infuriated the judge, who said, "I will from now on, hear no criticism or any more comments from you." The judge then conferred quietly with both ladies.

After few minutes the judge asked me, "If you were free today, where would you go?" I said, "To my aunt, and start looking

for a job." He asked me to stand up, and said, "You are free as of now." I was relieved, and happy. Then, the judge said with a somewhat whimsical smile, "I do suggest, not to look for a job near the border next time, for there is no blacksmith in that area anyway."

As I stepped outside the courthouse I felt like a million, even though I had not a dime on me. There across the street was parked the horse and buggy with my father and stepmother on board. When they noticed me, father asked me to jump on and come home. I declined, and told them goodbye. They left and I began walking to Pesnica to see my aunt, which is some 10 kilometers from Maribor.

This was the last time I saw my stepmother. In 1969 she committed

suicide. And my father, I didn't see him for 12 years, until 1970. Then I drove him around by car to see places, but his stem, domineering attitude never changed. In 1986 he died due to an accident. May they rest in peace.

My Aunt Angela and uncle were very glad to see me, and said, "You are welcome to stay here, but you're rather skinny and pale." My uncle was now retired. Years ago he had had his own blacksmith's shop before the Communist regime, and after worked for a state company. With his help and influence, I got the job within a week. Aunt Angela also has had a restaurant/bar; both businesses were located at their home, but now she had the fanners milk collection business, besides some five hectares of farmland,

which I was glad to help with after my company's work and on the weekends.

The company was in Maribor manufacturing, repairing train locomotives, wagons, etc. As a beginner I was given the dirtiest and noisiest job, riveting with an air hammer on the inside of the meter-and-a-half-diameter boiler drums. Within few days I lost my hearing completely. My uncle said it is not permanent, as he too had experienced the same when he worked there. Of course he now was hard of hearing. So that was not exactly any consolation. After some weeks I slowly began to recuperate my hearing. (Today I don't hear, only, what I don't want to.)

After a few months I bought my first new bicycle (to commute to work), and some badly needed clothing. Under the

Communist regime the pay was low, but simple — no deductions of any sorts, no papers or files to maintain. Since the two businesses were state-owned, social security, medical, education, etc., were all free of charge.

Once again I had to attend militia training, one afternoon a week. I had a dreary army uniform that I disliked most, especially after my experiences with both the border and the prison guards. Once again I was fined for failing to attend occasionally, with my made-up excuse of having to work overtime. When the fine was mailed to the company's manager, I explained, and got hell for it. But the state company paid for me. Since my overtime job was operating a crane, which nobody else was trained for.

My stay at aunt Angela's place was very pleasant; my uncle, their daughter, son and his wife all treated me very well. My aunt, the sister of my mother, often said. "If your father was not so work-demanding," or more reasonable, "your poor mother would still be alive." May she rest in peace.

In the spring of 1959 I'd received the dreaded army draft notice to begin serving later that year, in September, for the period of two years in the province of Croatia. Besides army training, I would be working in a blacksmith's shop, maintaining army vehicles, shoeing horses, etc. Escape was on my mind again; there was no way I'd waste two years of prime life in some stinky barracks, obeying strict orders that were usually unreasonable, if not stupid (according to the accounts of others who

had already served). On top of that were the overzealous, and pompous officers. Not to mention the principal of the army training: basically, to kill people.

Fortunately I had a few months to plan the escape, but with army draft notice in my hand, should my fourth escape (third by records) be unsuccessful, it meant up to two years in prison, then a direct escort into the army.



Who speaks of liberty while the human mind is in chains?

Fourth Escape

I told my brother of my predicament and intentions. He was not only was ready to escape again, but also said, "One of our relatives' wants to come with us." I was skeptical, but agreed. Meanwhile my aunt's good old friend, who was of retirement age, had lived and worked in Austria for many years. He came back to Yugoslavia, but was denied the passport to return. He was happy to hear of my escape, and asked me to take him along. His pension was due in Austria, he spoke good German, and he had the typical Austrian green clothes, and a hat with a feather. "Well, this would be an advantage to all of you," my aunt concluded. My preoccupation was of his age, his heavy pipe smoking, with frequent

coughing, which could give us up at the border, and also if the guards started chasing us in the rugged mountain terrain. But I accepted. And the plan was in motion. Except for one dilemma: my beautiful girlfriend, who had repeatedly asked me to take her along should I ever escape again. She was only 16 years old, and her family was good friends with my Aunt Angela. I pondered this for a week, wondering what to do. Finally, I asked my aunt for her opinion. She too had no easy answer, since she was also 16 when she escaped, and her father made her come back, due to her age. Above all she was the only daughter. We both came to conclusion that I should not tell or take my girlfriend, but instead, should I be successful, bring her sometime later to join me, wherever,

whenever, and however possible.

This time I managed to change some money into Austrian schillings and German marks. I took three days' vacation from my job. Our plan was to go to Germany, except for the older friend, who would say good-bye to us in Austria.

On a sunny mid-April day we all met at now-usual meeting place, Hotel Orel in Maribor. After a good, good-bye lunch, the four of us started our walking mission into the mountains on that old, familiar road to the border. On my recommendation we all had money well hidden/sewn into our pants, good shoes, a flashlight, and black pepper powder.

Our walking was slower this time due to our old friend, who looked slightly flashy with his Austrian all green outfit. As usual

we had to do some hiding and waiting along the way, not only from people but also from nasty barking farm dogs.

By about midnight we were at the border, sat down, and waited two hours to cross. Because there were four of us, it was hard not to make noise in the forest. By dawn, somehow the others felt I was guiding them into too westerly of a direction, and persuaded me to head for the beautiful valley ahead of us to the left. In about an hour we reached the valley, which had a stream and a farmhouse I told them to wait, hidden, while I investigated whether we were in Austria. I crawled ever so carefully along the fence to the front of the house. I was shocked to see the house's nameplate in Slovenian. I crawled back to tell them the bad news. They were

all very disappointed. I had believed that we were already in Austria, before my friends were fooled by the appealing, easy-to-reach green valley. Now what? Continue? Hide and wait till the next morning? Our old friend confessed that he was too tired to continue at that point. And the nagging, spineless relative was also too tired, and too hungry, to continue. I said, "Fine, we do have something very essential here: the drinking water from the creek." As for finding any food on a farm or in the fields in April, that would be a miracle; it was at least a month too early in the year.

It occurred to me we should circumvent the farmhouse, and instead walk some distance down along the creek. In about 15 minutes we reached the road and I realized

it was the road we came up on. We found a good hiding place on a hill with a good view of the road should somebody be passing by, or looking for us. By noon our spineless relative insisted on going back, and buying sandwiches for everybody at a restaurant that was at least some 5 kilometers away. He promised to be back before 5 p.m. I thought maybe he actually wanted to abandon the escape, and simply go home. I said, "OK, but, if for any reason you aren't back by nightfall, we will assume something went wrong: either you were caught by border guards, the police, or you simply went home." He said, "Don't worry, I will be back."

We sat drinking plenty of creek water, after discovering it was clean and safe because we had no ill effects after the

initial two hours. Seeing several people passing by on the road, I decided we should not wait there, but relocate to the other side of the creek on a hill, which would give us a good view of our present location should the relative be caught and tell them of our whereabouts. That way we would have a chance to escape.

By 5:30 p.m. we spotted a policeman with a bike accompanied by two other men coming up the road. We concluded that our relative had been caught and spilled the beans. The three of us decided that it was too risky at that point to cross the border; instead, we would return home. Should the police be looking for us at our homes, we could simply deny our venture. And in few days, we would try again, at a different region, and without our relative

We were running across the mountains toward Maribor on new terrain, trying to avoid the upcoming road. It took us until midnight to reach Maribor, and I felt sorry for our older friend, who was beat and walking sideways like a crab. Since it was after midnight, we had no choice but to continue walking another 12 kilometers to make it home. The same was true for my brother but he was going in a different direction.

The two of us arrived home at 4 a.m. My aunt opened the door with an expression of disbelief and surprise. She said, "My God, you two must have been through hell." She invited us in, and the first thing she brought us was iodine for our scrapes and bruises. Then we made us a good breakfast. I asked her if any police had come asking for

us. She said, "No." We felt semi-relieved, but realized they may show up at any time yet.

Our old friend was licking his wounds and recuperating until late afternoon before he was able to drag himself home, which was only a kilometer away. And I was waiting for my brother to show up and let me know what had happened to our relative (since he lived in a nearby village, and as I'd asked him to do before our departure at midnight in Maribor).

The next day I visited my old friend who still recuperating and said, "I don't think I'll be ready for the next escape at least for another week." I agreed to wait.

My brother still hadn't show up, which worried me a bit. I wondered what might have happened to either of them. On the

other hand, my brother was not exactly most reliable person with regard to keeping his promises. I decided to go back to work, pretending as if nothing happened.

Nobody but my aunt knew of our misadventure. After work I went to see my brother, who said, "No police visited yet, and as soon as I find our relative I will inform you." And the he added, "Let's wait few weeks before we make another escape."



Fifth Escape

To my surprise, I'd received a letter from Germany; it was from my village friend whom I'd last seen in Maribor's prison with his shaven, shiny head some seven months before. He wrote, "I escaped from Maribor's prison soon after you were released, and later escaped through Austria all the way to Germany, and am presently in a Nuremberg refugee camp awaiting the asylum papers." And continued, "Not only are you my good friend, but also as misfortunate as I was in trying to come to Germany. For this reason I and my friend here, whom you also know from the next village of ours, have decided to come and escort you all the way to here. The only thing that we need on arrival is

our travel expense money, about 15,000 dinars."

I was very happy to hear that. And immediately wrote back, "I'm very pleased to have such good friend and happy to see you finally succeeded. But I think it would be much too risky for the two of you to return. But indeed I would appreciate it if you tell, or advise me of, where and how did you make it."

A week later he wrote back, saying, "Rafael, don't worry about us, we're coming to pick you up within few days, be ready." Meanwhile my brother wrote me a letter from Canada informing me of the two friends who would help me escape to Germany. I was a bit uneasy about seeing specifics in a letter, since it was not uncommon for the post office to open and

read foreign mail, especially with my past record of escapes.

I informed my younger brother, who said, "Don't leave without me." I said, "OK, be ready, but do not tell our spineless relative." I'd informed my older friend who was still in recuperation mode and who would only go as far as Austria. He told me, "I may after all get pension here, but I need to wait." I agreed, and thought in this case, it would be best for him to stay.

The only other person I'd confided in about my plan was my Aunt Angela. Again I did not mention it to my girlfriend, after all my friends would probably not accept the idea of her coming along.

One early morning during the first week of May there was a knock on a door just as I was ready to go to work. To my big

surprise, the two friends from the refugee camp stood there. They looked cheerful, but obviously exhausted. I invited them in, made a good breakfast for them, and told them to rest, and stay in confidence in our house as long as they wanted. I said "I'll do whatever is necessary outside this house for you to get in touch with your family, friends, or business. Since it's unsafe, and risky for either one of you to venture anywhere should someone recognize you, spread the news and/or report you." They appreciated my gesture, but told me "We have some important matters to do, and only we can do them. Besides, we do want to visit our families before heading back to Germany." I was trying to persuade them, at least not to return to their villages, since everybody there knew them personally. It

was to no avail, and they told me again not to worry. Then they asked me, "Can you get us two bicycles, and the 15,000 dinars for our expenses, so that we can buy something?" I gave them the money (my six months' wages) and borrowed two bikes for them. I asked my company for two days' leave by pretending I had to attend the funeral of a close relative.

The next morning we were off, cycling through Maribor with no problems. But just as we were on the other side of the city, a lady approached us on a bicycle, and my friend said, "It's my wife!" She recognized him and stopped, got off the bike, and angrily said, "What the hell are you doing here?" He was perplexed, and uncomfortable, and all of us were worried as we stepped off the bikes. He said, "I

came to see my children." From across the busy street, she continued saying something about the children. She then got on back on the bike and left. And so did we — in the opposite direction.

Once again I asked my friends not to go on, but instead to let me make the arrangements so they could see their families and friends." Both said, "We'll be careful; after all, we're experts in hide and seek." In few minutes we came to an intersection and agreed that we all would return to my aunt's house by nightfall. I left, taking a road to where my brother was presently working with our relatives on a farm, to inform him of our escape plan in two days' time while my friends continued with their families. My brother was ecstatic to hear the news, and said, "I'll be ready."

As I left, few blocks down the road at main crossroads were two police cars in front of a restaurant/tavern and three policemen talking to some local people. I thought it was very unusual, so I walked into the restaurant to find out what was going on. Inside was another policeman talking to the owner. I sat down and ordered a drink hoping of hearing whatever was knocking. I finally heard the policeman say, "If you see the two fellows, make sure you call me." He left, and I asked the owner (whom I knew personally, but I think he didn't recognize me), "Who are they looking for?" He said, "Two fellows, one from this village, and the other from Dobrovce." Then I asked him, "What happened?" "Well, they are trying to escape across the border." Now I was sure it was about my friends,

and maybe me, and my brother. I rushed back to inform my brother. Meanwhile I came up with a scheme. For me to go and investigate in our village about my friends was now too suspicious, and risky, due to my direct involvement. My brother agreed and was glad to help, since so far he was not suspected. Besides our friend's younger brother was his best friend. Before we parted, I told him I would wait for his news at the nearby village, Miklavz, in the restaurant Lipa.

At 9 p.m. two policemen came into the restaurant. They looked over the few guests, including me (reading a newspaper). They sat down, had a drink, and left — but they remained standing outside for about an hour, as if they were waiting for somebody. Then they left. By

11:30 p.m. my brother had shown up, obviously nervous and worried. He said, "The friend's house was surrounded with many policemen, with guns, and nobody was allowed in or out, but finally my best friend made it out." And he told me, "Soon after you parted in Maribor the police began chasing them into the forest. Many shots were fired. It's when the other friend fell, while my friend kept cycling and made it home. In just 15 minutes police surrounded his house, but he escaped through the back window, and made it into the forest. He is waiting for me there, to bring him the bicycle as soon as the police are gone." And he told me, "You should meet him after midnight at the lake Miklavz." I said to my brother, "We better split. You go straight home and come

tomorrow to my place, but make sure nobody follows you." And I was then carefully on my way to meet my friend at the lake.

I waited until 1 a.m. when I heard somebody slowly coming through the bushes. He whispered, "Are you alone?" "Yes," I said. Then I gave him sandwiches and a drink I had bought for him in the restaurant. He said, "When the police chased us, many shots were fired. Our friend fell, and if I had stopped, I surely wouldn't be here now." I asked him, "Do you think he just fell, or was he hit by a bullet?" "I think he was hit," he answered.

I thought it best for us to go to my place in Pesnica, hoping that our captured friend hadn't told the police about me. We had to cross the River Drava on a bridge. I

thought the two bridges in Maribor might be guarded by that point, so we decided to cross over a bridge in Duplek about 3 kilometers away, on the farm roads, through the fields, and along the River Drava. Thereafter, we would follow along the river again and then onto a country road that would lead us to Pesnica. That way allowed us to avoid the otherwise easier and more familiar way through Maribor.

We proceeded partly walking and cycling on a muddy field road, my friend obviously tired, strained, and worried. Before we arrived to the bridge, I said, "I'll cross the bridge first, while you hide. If I'm not back it means the police are guarding or I'm in trouble, in which case, go along the river. After 8 kilometers you will get to Maribor's

railway bridge. Make sure no train is trying to muscle across at the same time, because it is too narrow for both of you. Then try to make it to my place."

I crossed the bridge and suddenly a policeman appeared and stopped me. He asked, "Your name? And where're you coming from?" I told him my name, and said I was going home from my evening work shift. Then he asked for my I.D.; he looked it over and then let me go. Now I knew it would be too risky to go back. So I cycled on for a few minutes then turned onto a farm's dirt road and made it back to the river to see if the police would disappear. At the same time I was trying to listen should my friend make a move on the opposite bank, as it was too dark to see anybody some 100 meters across the river.

I sat for some 15 minutes, it was all dead quiet except for the river's gentle water flow. All of a sudden I heard two shots, the starting of the jeep and some lights come on across the river. I heard shouting—"Stop! Stop!" Then another shot was fired. I was sure my friend was in trouble, hopefully not caught or dead. I waited a while and then heard some noises from the bushes across the river. I assumed they must be chasing him now by jeep, but I knew that the dirt road ended on the other side after only 50 meters along the river and doubted that the policemen would pursue my friend on foot after that. The jeep had stopped, but the lights were on for some five minutes, and then I saw it turn around, and go slowly back to the bridge. At this point I was not sure whether my

friend was caught or had gotten away. I concluded that there was nothing I could do. Sad and worried, I got on my bike and made my way home at daylight. I went straight to bed.

About noon I got up and told my aunt of the situation. She was sympathetic, and said, "It's terrible, this to be happening to young people." Later in the afternoon my younger brother showed up, and told me, "Our friend is hiding at his younger brother's business place in Maribor, since early this morning. But unfortunately the other friend is in hospital recuperating from a gun wound to his head, and is in critical condition." Then he added, "Did you know that the two friends had made arrangements to take our village neighbor's 16-year-old girl also with us to Germany?" I

said, "No, they never mentioned it to me," Then he added, "Apparently the two have taken other people across the border in the past."

It became clearer why the police were making such an effort to catch them, or us. To visit our friend in hospital would be too risky; with his head wound he may subconsciously reveal our identity. So I told my brother to go to our village and find out whatever he could, and then to return the next day at sundown—possibly with a borrowed bicycle (before the police get hold of his bike as well, and link me to the case).

The next morning I went back to work. When I returned at my usual time, 2.30 p.m., I noticed two men on the bridge over a nearby creek just 100 meters from our

house. They were appearing or pretending to be reviewing the bridge, and had two dark-blue bicycles leaning against the post. I was sure they were plain-clothes policemen, not engineers. I took my bike to the back of the house in case I needed to take off in a hurry.

My aunt said, "The two men on the bridge have been observing our house for the past hour. I think they are the police detectives." I thought it was best for me to disappear and stay with my old escape-mate for few nights. My aunt said, "Yes good idea." As I gathered a few items and got to my bike, one man approached me via the front door; the other came around the back. He asked me, "Is your name Augustin?" I said, "Yes, and who are you?" They never answered, but instead, said,

"We want to ask you a few questions!" I said, "That's fine. Let's sit down, and may I offer you some drinks?" One said, "Yes, just water please." Then he said, "We know of your connection with the two fellows who came from Germany, and we know you also plan to escape to Germany with them!" I said, "This is not true at all. I have no reason: I have a good-paying job and a good place now to live." One of the policemen then asked, "Do you know the two fellows?" He mentioned their names. I said, "Yes, but they now live in Germany." They looked at each other, got up, and said, "We will be back, if any of that is not true."

They left, and I was sure that, so far, they did not know the whole story. About an hour later my brother came, along with

the bike I had borrowed for my now-fugitive friend who was still hiding at his brother's business place in Maribor. The other borrowed bike was still held by the police, we concluded. My brother found out that the police had investigated our neighbor girl, alleging her of trying to escape with my friends. Her older brother had escaped to Germany some months before. I was wondering now just how much, and what she, being young and inexperienced, might have told the police. Before he left I asked my brother to keep his eyes and ears wide open, and to meet me the following day at my company's place in Maribor after I finished work at 2 p.m.

I waited for him the next day until 3 p.m.; he didn't show up so I went home, a bit

puzzled. As I entered the house's hallway my aunt appeared, her finger pressed across her mouth. I knew something was wrong, so I quietly proceeded into the kitchen. All of a sudden I was surrounded by police with guns drawn. Two were holding machineguns, coming from my bedroom in the basement and from the backyard. The one in plain clothes told me to sit down and wait until they finished searching the house, and my bedroom. After a while, he said, "we know you're hiding your friend here, and we also know of your plans of escape with them and other people!" I said, "None of this is true." Then he escorted me into my bedroom, and said, "Now you better show me; where is your correspondence hidden?" Every drawer was opened, my clothing scattered

all over, but one highly visible item on my night table was untouched—my home remedy medicine book. This was where all my letters were tucked carefully between pages; all those of my fugitive friend, and those from my brother in Canada that mentioned the two friends coming to fetch me. If they had found those, I would've been cooked. But they kept grilling me, asking, "If you tell us now, of all those who would escape, we'll not take you to prison." I said, "I don't plan to escape now or in the future, and don't know of anybody else who would escape." I added, "But if you take me to prison, for one, I know I'll lose my job. Then as soon as I'm out of prison, I'll have a good reason to escape."

He thought for a while, and said, "OK, you may visit your friend in hospital, and

you must report yourself every evening at our police station." I agreed, and they left. My aunt said, "You handled them very well." I said, "After all, I'd know by now from experience."



Aunt Angela – Photo taken in 1977 - Without her help I would not have been able to escape

The next day after my work, I was reading the local newspaper while waiting for my brother. I sadly found out that our

friend in the hospital died—just hours before I'd planned to visit him. He was 22 years old, and left behind his wife, and two children. May he rest in peace.

My brother hadn't shown by 3 p.m., so I was on the way home, stopping and reporting myself at the police station, where they also confirmed my friend's death.

The next day, there was more bad news. I learned through the newspaper that our fugitive friend had been captured, and was in jail. I told my brother, "Let's put everything on hold and keep a watchful, low profile for a week or two. And see what action will be necessary for us take, at any given moment."

I not only lost one good friend forever, but my other friend was now set to spend some time in jail. I had also lost my

money, and my friend's bicycle, which was held by the police. And if I should claim the bicycle, that would implicate me in being involved from the very beginning. (A new bicycle in those days cost a year of savings for the average worker; it was the most important, if not the only, transportation for most people.) Still, a more perplexing and precarious matter was my possible forthcoming implication in the case. Because of that uncertainty I decided to sell my bicycle in case it would further implicate me in the case. This would also let me escape in a hurry with some money. After few days I asked my jailed friend's brother to claim the bicycle from the police, under the pretext that the bike was taken from their place of business without his or their knowledge.

It worked. A few days later, I picked it up late one night at his business place and returned it to my old friend, who said, "If you sell yours, you're welcome to use mine, for work, or any time."

After reporting faithfully to the police station on a daily basis for about a month, the police asked me to do so only on Mondays from then on. I guess they got tired of my face. I'd tried to visit my friend in prison, and was told I could but only after his trial. I was hoping he would escape. But with his past record of jail escapes, the chances were slim.

I sold my bike, bought some Austrian schillings and German marks on the black market. I was ready to escape at any moment.

It was in the first week of August when I received a summons to appear in court for my friend's trial on escape number 5, I believe. I was now facing not only the trial and a possible lengthy jail sentence, but I was also being branded to serve two years in the Army, which was scheduled to start the last week September. I had no second thoughts: escape was my solution. Due to my previous experiences, I decided to go alone.



Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give your equality or justice or anything. If your a man you take it.

Malcolm X, 1965

Sixth Escape - Freedom

I went to the library to get detailed maps of the Austrian and German borders, and maps of each country. Studying them well, I noted the villages, especially near the borders, the cities, the country roads, the highways and byways, the railways, the rivers, and the best and shortest route leading to my destination—the refugee camp in Nuremberg, Germany.

On 1 September 1959, at 9 p.m. I was off, with my foreign money well hidden, sewn into my pants. I wore a double shirt, a tie, good shoes, and carried a flashlight, raincoat, and a nice briefcase to look more like a student while walking in a town or city. And of course, last but not least, the black pepper powder mixed with devilishly

hot red pepper.

Walking from Pesnica to the border near Sentilj is about 20 kilometers; about five hours of tracking. I crossed hills that had scattered farms, vineyards, and cattle, then began ascending into the forested mountains near the border. This time I was determined not to make the same mistake as during my second escape, when we walked into the border guardhouse. I knew that when I hit the River Mura, crossed it, and then walked upstream along the river as far as Graz, or even to Bruck auf der Mur, things would be different this time. This was where, on our second escape, we wound up in jail.

It was a very dark, cloudy night, and I avoided farms, people, and dogs very

carefully, and successfully, all the way into the mountains, enjoying along the way my favorite seasonal fruits: grapes, apples, and pears. It was about 2 a.m. when I realized that the border must be near. I sat down. It was dead quiet, except for a night owl. Then I could hear the river flowing; I thought it must be the Mura River. I rested a while and then continued. All of a sudden I fell over some wooden logs, and the logs rolled down the mountain making a hell of noise. About 200 meters away a dog burst into barking; it sounded like a German shepherd. It was followed by a man shouting, "Stop, whoever you are, or I will shoot you!" I thought it must be a border guard, and since it was too dark for him to see me, or even aim at me, I decided to dash toward the river. As I ran, a shot was

fired and soon the dog started closing in on me. I kept running full steam, and then suddenly fell into a steep gorge, tumbling down until I hit the water. I got up and began crossing—it was fast flowing, belly deep, and difficult to resist the current. I stumbled over a rock, and down I went. After drifting for a minute, I got up and crossed the river, which I concluded to be Mura.



And then I was in Austria – Freedom.

The dog kept barking, and the man beside the dog kept telling it to keep quiet. I began running away, upstream of the river

for about an hour, where I sat down, totally wet, but happy nonetheless. The first, and most important obstacle was now behind me. Soon I resumed running, trying to avoid getting pneumonia. By daylight I was dry, and was able to clean off my soiled clothing, shoes, and retrieve my sewn-in Austrian schillings from my pants.

I thought it would be safest to journey to Salzburg, Austria or the German border by foot. It was about 350 kilometers away and would take four to five days of walking. Time was something I had, also the money for food and drink, because I was not spending it on train tickets. It would mean walking on farm roads crossing many fields, rivers, and streams, climbing over many hills and mountains. Walking on or along the highways would be risky because

of police patrols, (except at nighttime, when the advancing lights would give me a chance to hide).

In an hour I came to a small village, went to a general store and bought sandwiches, milk, etc. Fortunately the person working there was a friendly young girl, who asked me, "Do you live here in this village?" I said, "No, in Graz." She said, "That's what I thought." I guess I'd fooled her, sporting my clean white shirt and a tie. I continued walking across the potato, corn, wheat, turnip, and carrot fields. Here and there I walked through orchards, and so was assured of the fruit along the way. Avoiding houses, villages, and towns as much as I could, I kept close to the River Mura. Although my shoes were comfortable, I still walked barefoot most of the time. The first

night I slept from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. near the river in a haystack, covered with my raincoat. I woke up semi-frozen, and immediately began running until I perspired, then had a country breakfast of carrots and turnips. I washed in the river and was ready for tracking till midnight again. I had two things in my favor: having vegetables and fruits in season, and the cool climate, which was perfect for walking—and running (should the farmer object to my self-helping, or should I be the target of some trigger-happy policeman's pursuit). Late in the afternoon I wandered a bit too close to a nasty Doberman dog that was just waiting for prey. He furiously charged, barely giving me enough time to take out my mixed pepper and sprinkle it on his fierce, ugly face. He began sneezing

and shaking his head while I backed off and walked away. At about midnight I found an unlocked tool shed to sleep in.

By 4 a.m. I was on my way, but not far down the road came a police car from around a bend. I had no chance to hide. He slowed down and using hand motions, I pretended I was waiting for someone to return. The policeman looked at me, I smiled, and he drove off.

On the fourth day I had arrived at the Salzburg railway station by 9 p.m. and enjoyed my first good, hot supper in five days.

I was ready to proceed across the border to Germany, about 15 kilometers away. At the station there was a policeman walking about slowly, so I went to the tracks and observed the freight train

movement northward to Germany. In about an hour freight train coming from the south and stopped at the station. Most of the train's cars (wagons) were from Germany, so I assumed it would continue to Germany. There were only a few railway workers (wearing blue uniforms) inspecting the wheels and brakes while I snuck onto the train and hid myself between the fruit boxes. After some time, we began moving northward and I thought, it's just wonderful. I went out to stand between the wagons to see where were we going. Soon I could see a lit bridge in front of the train, which slowed, and then came to a complete stop. Below was a fast-flowing, fair-sized river. I concluded it was the River Salzach—and the border. Two uniformed men came out of a small wooden shack and started to

inspect the wagons. I had no chance to hide in my wagon, so I jumped off the train while it was in the middle of the bridge. Slowly I made it to the back of the train and hid in the bushes. I thought that after the checking of the train I'd jump on again. When the inspectors were finished, they waved the flag to go on. The train pulled away, and I had no chance to re-board. The inspectors crossed the bridge and went back into the shack.

I began exploring up and downstream of the river to see if I could swim across. But due to the very strong current and the rugged high cliffs on each side, I decided to walk back to Salzburg to try another train, or try to cross the river the next day at some other location. I walked mostly on the railway tracks back to the Salzburg station,

arriving at about 1 a.m. It was still open, but there were only a few people around, including the same policeman I'd seen before. He now seemed a bit suspicious of me, so I left the station and walked down the street to a restaurant that was still open. I saw four young people drinking at a table. I walked in and sat down, and then heard that they were speaking Croatian. I approached, greeting them in Croatian, and they asked me to join them at their table. Soon I discovered they all were living at the Salzburg refugee camp. I asked them, "What chances for asylum would I have if I report myself at that camp?"

One said, "Lately the chances are you will be deported." Then I asked, "What would be the best way to sneak over the border to Germany?" One said, "No

problem. We know the best location for crossing the River Salzach, and we can take you there—but later, in the daytime, of course. Meanwhile you can come with us to the refugee camp to sleep for a few hours."

It was 2 a.m. We began walking through the city and after 30 minutes we arrived at some buildings. One fellow said, "Let's keep total silence," then he sent one of the fellows ahead to see if the way was clear. In a minute he motioned to us that it was OK, and I assumed that meant there was no guard around. Inside were large rooms with six or eight double bunk beds. Some fellows were still awake and talking. I was given an empty spare bed, and I was dead tired since the night before I had had no sleep at all. I placed my jacket and pants

under my pillow for safety.

When I woke up at about 9 a.m., most of the fellows were already up. I dressed, and discovered that all of my money—the schillings and dinars, had been stolen, but fortunately the German marks sewn into my pants had not been discovered. When I told the four fellows who had befriended me that my money had been stolen, along with my raincoat, shirt, and flashlight, they said, “We didn't take then, and you'll keep your mouth shut about it. If not, we'll beat the hell out of you, turn you over to the guard, and make sure you're deported.” I had no choice but to comply. I walked outside and was surrounded by a bunch of unfriendly fellows who no doubt knew of my predicament. I paused for a while, and then said, “Good-bye.” As I began walking

away, one of the fellows said, “Two of us will walk you to the border. Just wait here for a minute.” I thought they just wanted to see me gone for good, and as soon as possible. We walked for about two hours across the fields, entered the forested hills, and shortly came to the river. Here I could see that it was possible to cross: the river was about 50 meters wide and maybe 2 meters deep. I thanked them for bringing me here.

All of a sudden both of them pulled out large kitchen knives. One said, “We know you've got more money, like German marks, hidden on you, and if you don't give it to us now, we'll kill you here. And nobody will ever know.” I turned all my pockets inside out, and said, “As you see, there is no more money.” Then one said, “We'll find

out!" I knew they meant business, so I said, "Are those your friends behind you?" As they turned to look, I jumped into the river, and made an Olympic record swim across the river. I looked back, and saw the two furiously wielding their knives in the air. ***I was now in Germany*** and I swiftly disappeared into the forest. In an hour I stopped. There was nobody following me, so I sat down and happily enjoyed my sweet, and sour event. I thought, even if the police or border guards caught me here, I would not be deported. I felt a great sense of relief; I did not have the same fate as my jailed, and dead, friends. This time my clothing and shoes were wet, of course, but "river clean." It was a cool, sunny afternoon so I took off my clothes and shoes, and let everything dry until

sundown. Then I continued through the forest, and by about 9 p.m., I came to a small village. I heard lively "umm-pah-pah" music, and as I came closer, I could see that it was a large building full of people dancing to a lively polka, which reminded me of Slovenian music. I recovered my money from my pants, and took a chance on going in so I could buy myself a badly needed drink. I was hungry and dehydrated, and had had nothing to drink or eat since the night before. It was very lively inside the dance hall, and I was not considered a black sheep in the crowd. I went to the bar and bought some nice sandwiches and two large soda drinks. A friendly young lady said, "No beer?" "No thanks," I said and went outside, sat down, and finished my supper listening to music. I

was off again, energized and in good spirits, walking toward the nearest train station, which to my knowledge would be some 5 kilometers. At this point I could afford the luxury of walking on a country's paved road. After an hour a car came from behind, and then slowly along beside me. The driver, a young man, opened the window and asked, "Where are you going?" I said, "To the railway station." "I will take you there," he said. As we were talking along the way he said, "You speak good German, but you are not from Bayern area." I said, "No." Then he added, "It doesn't matter where you're from, I want you to know that I'll take you to the station without any worry. And if you need any further help, just ask me."

We arrived at the station at about

midnight. I thanked the driver and went into the empty, lifeless station to buy a ticket for Nuremberg. The ticket agent said, "There is no train until 6 a.m." "OK," I said, "could I buy ticket now?" He said, "Yes, but you have to change trains in Muenchen."

I went into the washroom and while I was sitting comfortably, somebody locked the washroom door, and then the entrance door. It was dead quiet; I assumed he had gone for the night. It's just as well, I thought, I wouldn't have to look for my sleeping accommodation. Fortunately there was a window for fresh air. Sitting on a toilet, I was asleep in no time.

I woke up at 7 a.m., but was worried that somebody would not come to open before 8 a.m. for my train. By 7:30 the same man opened the door and with a surprised

expression, he said, "How did you get in here?" I said, "Through the window." He shook his head and left, probably thinking, well, in desperation, he just obeyed the truly supreme boss—his body. I walked to the train tracks a bit precarious, but proud of my success. I boarded the train in good spirits and thinking how lucky I was that the toilet incident didn't happen near the border in Austria. That would probably, and ultimately, cost me deportation. I sat next to a friendly young lady, who asked me, "How far do you go?" I said, "To Nuremberg." Then she said, "Don't forget to change the train in Muenchen, because this one goes on to Stuttgart." Then she asked, "How long have you lived in Nuremberg?" "Oh, for two years," I replied. "No wonder, you don't have a Bayern accent."

I arrived in Muenchen by 10 a.m. that morning, had breakfast, and boarded the train for Nuremberg. On arrival, I took a local bus to the refugee camp Valka, hoping to find my home village friend who, according to my two friends, would probably still be there. He was the brother of the young girl from my neighborhood who was supposed to have escaped with us. I just wanted to be completely sure that, from that point, I wouldn't be deported. I found my friend Vili in the refugee's annex camp. I was received graciously with open arms, and congratulated on my success. I was also assured of obtaining my immigrants status, especially with the Army's draft in my hand. I was very happy to know that, should there have been any doubt of my stay in Germany, I would've

continued to France, also a very acceptable place for political refugees.

Vili was sad of the death and imprisonment of our mutual friends, and also of his sister's poor chance to ever join him in Germany. The next morning, he escorted me to the camp's office, where he put in a good word on my behalf. I asked for political asylum. The friendly lady asked me for my documents and assured me that I would not be deported. She said, "Oh du liebe Augustin, alles ist hin." I thought, how appropriate: this is a verse from the famous old German song (Oh, beloved Augustin, everything is gone)

I rejoiced and felt inspired, believing all is behind me now, as the song suggests.

And a new life began here!



*Valka Refugee Camp - I am seated on the right - My friend Vili Magdic on the left
Nuremberg, Germany*



Valka Refugee Camp History: In 1946 on the area of the former prisoner-of-war camp at Nürnberg-Langwasser (which had operated under the German armed forces from 1939 to 1945 near the Reichs Party Congress area), the Americans set up a Displaced Persons (DP) camp under the administration of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) for the accommodation of homeless foreigners. The occupants were mainly Latvian and others from the Baltic states. The large majority of which had emigrated overseas. The camp went by the name Valka Lager. When the International Refugee Organization replaced the UNRRA in 1947, the camp became a major center for homeless foreigners, primarily inhabited by refugees from the Eastern Bloc countries. In October 1951, it housed 4,300 persons from 28 nations and had largest number of DPs in Bavaria.



This photo was taken in 1942, village of Pesnica, and shows the house where my mother was born. I am seated next to my mother on the wagon. My father is wearing a suit and standing at the door.



Rafael has found his Shangri-La in the small town of San Pedro de Lagunillas, State of Nayarit, Mexico. He describes his life as beautiful and his motto is "Simplicity."

Freedom is the last, best hope of earth

Abraham Lincoln



The Six Escapes

